

Soteriology in the Extrabiblical Standard Works of Mormonism

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For many years the proselyting efforts of Mormon missionaries have been a cause for concern and a spiritual hazard in Apacheland. Since the Utah branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints now has more than two million adherents in the United States (and another million elsewhere in the world), it is ever more likely that parish pastors in all parts of the nation will be having firsthand encounters with Mormonism and its ways. About a year ago, this writer was told by a young, well-educated couple who were formerly part of our university congregation at Madison that they had received Mormon baptism. Moreover, they insisted that they never “knew Jesus Christ crucified and risen” (their expression) while attending our services and instruction classes.

Now, that is a body blow! Can it be that Mormons present Christ more clearly, centrally, and compellingly than a Lutheran does? Do *The Book of Mormon, Doctrines and Covenants*, and *Pearl of Great Price* present a more winning Christ than our exegetico-homiletical efforts can draw from the Bible and lay before the church and the world? Are we mistaken and have we been uncharitable in regarding Mormonism as subchristian and even anti-christian? If Luther and other Roman Catholics were brought to know Christ amid the welter of saints, superstition, and spurious doctrines, cannot Mormons be called to saving faith despite the gnostic speculation and anti-trinitarian statements of the Latter-Day Saints? Could it be that baptism for the dead, celestial marriage, and the confusion of the Persons of the Godhead are only excrescences which make Mormonism unattractive without eradicating the central truth concerning salvation in Jesus Christ?

It is the matter of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ with which we are especially concerned, believing as we do that the article of justification is central to all gospel teaching. More general critiques and evaluations, as well as a compend of Mormon doctrine, are available from sources mentioned at the conclusion of this article—among others. We will not concern ourselves now with the origins and history of Mormonism, with the character and source of its sacred writings, or with its entire doctrinal system. Rather, we will search its standard works (other than the Bible) and ask: Who is Jesus Christ? What did He accomplish? For whom did He accomplish this and why was that necessary? How does the individual benefit by Christ’s work? What is the eternal reward of those who are saved and the eternal fate of those who are disobedient?

1. The Person of Jesus Christ

The first reference to Christ in the Book of Mormon (1830) occurs in the eleventh chapter of the first book. Appearing before the Assyrian conquest, an angel points to a virgin and identifies her as “the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh (I Nephi 11:18); and the child is identified as “the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father” (v 21; cp Alma 7:14). He is “the Savior of the world” (I Nephi 13:4), “the great Creator” (II Nephi 9:5), “our God” (II Nephi 10:3; 11:7). The prophecies of Isaiah appear in II Nephi, spoken by an angel, and so Christ is called the virgin-born “Immanuel” (17:14; cp Is 7:14); “Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (19:6; cp 9:6) and “a rod out of the stem of Jesse” (21:1; cp Is 11:1). The remarkable coincidence between chapter and verse numberings in II Nephi and Isaiah should not be attributed to either the Angel Moroni or to Joseph Smith, Jun. They were not inserted into the Book of Mormon until 1879, thirty-five years after Smith’s death at Nauvoo, Illinois.

According to Jacob 7:11 the Old Testament is Christocentric, for “none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ” (cp Mosiah 13:33–35). Regarding the Old Testament sacrifices it is said in Alma 34:14 “And behold, this is the whole meaning of the law, every whit pointing to that great and last sacrifice; and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea, infinite and eternal.” Christ is “the Only Begotten of the Father” (II Nephi 25:12 and Alma 5:48), “the Son (sic) of Righteousness” (II Nephi

26:9), the “Holy One of Israel” (II Nephi 25:29 and Omni 26), and “the Eternal God” (II Nephi 26:12). He is “the light and the life of the world..., the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end” (III Nephi 9:18). Jesus Christ is “the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity” (Mosiah 3:5, *et al.*).

The relationship of the Persons of the Godhead is stated in familiar and orthodox terms quite early in the *Book of Mormon*. Sometime between 559 and 545 B.C. I Nephi 31:21 propounds “the doctrine of Christ, and the only true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end.” However, an evident confusion of Persons appears for the first time in Mosiah 7:27, which states that “...Christ was the God, the Father of all things.” Then, in chapter 15 of the same book we are told (ca. 148 B.C.) that the Christ will be “...the Father and the Son—the Father because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son—And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth” (Mosiah 15:2–4; cp 16:15). This text, of course, was not available to the first four ecumenical councils of the Christian Church as they addressed themselves to the question concerning the distinction of Persons in the Godhead. For this we thank God. On the other hand, many earnest and well-meaning Christians during the first four Christian centuries had similar difficulties in trying to express and formulate the relationship between Father and Son. The point of these last remarks is that in itself this “difficulty” in Mosiah does not make the *Book of Mormon* consciously unbiblical, antitrinitarian, or unchristian.

Unfortunately, the same problem arises in Alma 11:38–39 where we read:

Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father?
And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last.

The difficulty seems to be obviated in v 44 where once more the Persons are distinguished and the Unity is affirmed: “...Christ the Son and God the Father, and the Holy Ghost, which is one Eternal God...” Perhaps the difficult passages ought to be understood in the light of III Nephi 9:15 (we cannot refer to the original language of the original text!): “Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning. I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and in me hath the Father glorified his name.” But this matter will not down! In Ether 3:15 it recurs as the glorified Jesus says: “Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son.”

With all this confusion, we still venture to say that the *Book of Mormon* treats the Person of Christ as well as any of the apocryphal literature of the early church did. It does not stress the divine to the exclusion of the human, as so much of the pseudepigraphical literature did. It certainly does not stress the human to the exclusion of the divine.

But, what of the later standard works? The Book of Moses, which is the first book of the little volume called *Pearl of Great Price* (published 1851, seven years after Smith’s death), involves the Son in the creation of earlier worlds without number. We are reminded of Origen as we read “And worlds without number have I created, and I also created them for mine own purpose; and by the Son I created them, which is mine Only Begotten” (Moses 1:33). In other respects the Book of Moses deals with the Person of Christ in a more biblical fashion—always allowing for the anachronisms in which the doctrine of the Trinity is expounded to Adam and Eve as well as to Moses.

It is in the second book of *Pearl of Great Price* that the purported revelations of God through Joseph Smith, Jun., begin to take on a truly exotic tone. It is here, in the Book of Abraham, that the polytheism of which Mormonism is accused—and which it acknowledges and defends—first appears. “Translating” chapter 4 of an Egyptian papyrus in his possession, Smith recast the creation account of Genesis in terms of a polytheistic “organization” (not creation) of the world. Verse 1 sets the tone: “And then the Lord said: Let us go down. And they went down at the beginning, and they, that is the Gods, organized and formed the heavens and the earth.” By itself, this chapter vitiates and empties of content all the earlier statements of the *Book of Mormon* and the *Book of Moses* regarding the divine uniqueness and power of Christ. Furthermore, the seemingly forthright

statement of the first *Article of Faith* (also included in *Pearl of Great Price*) is not so simple and forthright after all: “We believe in God, the eternal Father, and in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.”

The earlier sections of *Doctrine and Covenants* (published 1833, enlarged 1835) continue, *formaliter*, to describe Christ in biblically orthodox terms. He is “the great I AM” (29:1). A new confusion of Persons appears in 93:26, where the Son says: “I am the Spirit of truth.” The Son is identified by a new name “Ahman” in 78:20. In “Mormon Doctrine,” p 29, Bruce R. McConkie informs his readers that “In the pure language spoken by Adam...Ahman (is)...a name-title having a meaning identical with or at least very closely akin to Man of Holiness (Moses 6:57).” For some reason the frequently occurring “Alpha and Omega” becomes “Alphus and Omegus” in 95:17. What is truly startling and new in this document is the “revelation” granted at Ramus, Illinois, on April 2, 1843: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us” (130:22). Earlier in that same revelation it had been disclosed that “The appearing of the Father and the Son, in that verse (John 14:23), is a personal appearance; and the idea that the Father and the Son dwell in a man’s heart is an old sectarian notion, and is false” (130:3).

The Father and the Son proclaimed in the standard works of Mormonism are not the Father and the Son of the Bible after all.

2. The Work of Jesus Christ

But why did Christ come into the world and what did He accomplish? In what sense can men call Him Savior and why was it necessary for Him to save them? Whom has He saved?

It must be first remarked that, while there is much written about sins and the remission of sins in the standard works of Mormonism, there is a reluctance to come to grips with *sin*. The second of the *Articles of Faith* states “We believe that men will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression.” This might be understood correctly by one who also accepts and understands Paul’s teaching of original sin in Romans 5:12–21 or David’s confession in Psalm 51:5. But Mormonism explicitly rejects original sin. In Moses 5:10–11 (*Pearl of Great Price*) Adam and Eve rejoice in the consequences of their disobedience and the Fall:

And in that day Adam blessed God and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth, saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God.
And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression, we never should have had seed, and never should have known good or evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.

Thus, the Fall is regarded as a fall upward; at least it is not thought of as an unmitigated disaster. This delirious and damnable notion of philosophers appears earlier as well:

And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin.
But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.
Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy (II Nephi 2:23–25; *Book of Mormon*).

If we find that Mormonism does not take the gospel at face value and treasure it, it will be in part due to the fact that Mormonism does not take sin seriously nor regard man’s condition since Adam as that of a lost and condemned creature who hates, hides from, and tries to deny God.

Nevertheless, it was of the utmost importance that a Savior should come, for “save Christ should come all men must perish” (II Nephi 11:6–7). He must come to make atonement, for “if there should be no atonement

made all mankind must be lost” (Jacob 7:12). We read in I Nephi that He was to be “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (11:33) and that He is the “Savior of the world” (13:40). It was foretold that in the fullness of time He would come “to bring salvation unto men” (II Nephi 2:3) by dying “for all men” (II Nephi 9:5). His atonement was to be “infinite for all mankind” (II Nephi 25:16). His work is exclusive for “there is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ, of which I have spoken, whereby man can be saved” (II Nephi 25:20; cp Mosiah 3:17). About 148 b.c. Abinadi prophesied:

And thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, suffereth temptation, and yieldeth not to the temptation, but suffereth himself to be mocked, and scourged, and cast reit, and disowned by his people.

And after all this, after working many mighty miracles among the children of men, he shall be led, yea, even as Isaiah said, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. Yea, even so shall he be led, crucified, and slain, the flesh becoming subject even unto death, the will of the Son being swallowed up in the will of the Father.

And thus God breaketh the bands of death having gained the victory over death; giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men—

Having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing betwixt them and justice; having broken the hands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice” (Mosiah 15:5–9).

He did come in the “meridian of time” (Moses 5:57, *Pearl of Great Price*); and all that the Bible says about His earthly ministry is mentioned in the Mormon Scriptures. In *Doctrines and Covenants* 20:22–24 the Savior’s work is summarized in words almost identical to those of the Apostle’s Creed (which Mormons reject) except that the descent into hell is omitted. In the later books of *The Book of Mormon* the additional work of preaching in America after His resurrection is ascribed to Him.

The Book of Mormon makes it clear that Christ’s redeeming and atoning work was not done for the world but for the faithful only: “For these are they whose sins He has borne: these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions” (Mosiah 15:11–12). The scope is broadened to include the ignorant and little children (15:24–25), but the atonement is limited. The Pauline statement “that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Cor 5:19) finds no echo in *The Book of Mormon*. What could be understood as universal objective justification in I and II Nephi and Mosiah (cf the quotations above) is limited in Mosiah 15:11,12,24,25. The “everlasting gospel” of Mormonism is not the Good News that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” It is rather that He came to save believers, the ignorant, and little children. We shall see later that “the believers” really has reference to “the obedient.” With an expegetical “Yea” Alma 5:48 makes it clear that to take away “the sins of the world” really means to take away “the sins of every man who steadfastly believeth on his name.” Mormonism, of course, is not alone in teaching a limited atonement and a conditional gospel.

But what is man’s final destiny or hope? There are many references to the fact that by Christ’s resurrection death has been overcome. Alma 33:22 foretells that “...he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection that (sic) all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works.” Those who are “found guiltless before him at the judgment day” will “dwell in the presence of God...in a state of happiness which hath no end” (Mormon 7:7). But

...those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him...

...shall go away into everlasting punishment, which is endless punishment, which is eternal punishment, to reign with the devil and his angels in eternity, where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched, which is their torment—” (*Doctrines and Covenants* 76:43–44)

It should be mentioned, in passing, that degrees of glory for those who attain to salvation are discussed in detail in the “revelations” of 1832 at Hiram, Ohio (*Doctrines and Covenants* 76) and Kirtland, Ohio (*Doctrines and Covenants* 88). The “terrestrial” and “telestial” kingdoms or states are reminiscent of the Catholic purgatory and *limbus patrum*.

3. The Appropriation of Salvation

How, finally, can a man receive the remission of sin and the resurrection to eternal life in the celestial glory? Since, in Mormon theology according to the standard works, atonement and redemption were effected for those who believe, is salvation by faith? Yes, but not by faith alone. So, then, not by faith at all. There is nothing esoteric about the Mormon teaching that salvation is attained by works, by obedience.

The concise statement of belief called *The Articles of Faith*, published as part of *Pearl of Great Price*, negates such happy phrases as “salvation is free” (II Nephi 2:4), “They that believe in him shall be saved” (II Nephi 2:9), “those who died in the faith of Christ are happy on him” (Alma 46:41), and “whosoever shall believe in the Son of God, the same shall have everlasting life” (Helaman 14:8). Articles 3 and 4 of *The Articles of Faith* are no subtle synergism which must be ferreted out by testing their content. They are openly Pelagian. Article 3 reads “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.” To paraphrase, salvation is possible for all men who obey the laws and ordinances laid out in Article 4. Article 4 reads: “We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.” The last “ordinance” is also called confirmation (*Doctrines and Covenants* 20:38–43; 33:15).

In Mormon theology, therefore, faith is a principle obeyed rather than a gift of God which apprehends God’s salvation. Repentance is an ordinance to be complied with rather than a Spirit-wrought change of mind and heart. Baptism (by immersion) is an act of obedience rather than a sacrament of God’s grace in which water and the Word are of the essence, Confirmation is a requirement for salvation. To speak of gospel ordinances which must be obeyed is to miss the meaning of *evangel* entirely. Again, not only Mormons have fallen into this error.

We conclude that Mormons are what they have always said they are: separate from the Christian Church, preaching a different “gospel” which is not the gospel preached in Christian churches. It is not “good news” but “new law.” Although their standard works and proselyting approach are full of biblical vocabulary, that form of words has been emptied of its biblical content. Their Christ is a god among many gods, and Mormons do not attempt to deny this polytheism. Although their baptismal formula remains trinitarian, the words of Matthew 28:19 have been emptied of their content. Thus, while the water remains, the Word is not present and there is no valid baptism. Actually, their use of the sheep’s clothing of biblical terms to deceive the simple is easier to recognize than the clever disguises of those wolves in the “mainline” churches of Christendom who likewise empty the Word of its content.

Pray God to preserve our Christian people from Mormonism. May His Spirit fill us to preach the Christ of the Bible so clearly and present His salvation so fully that no one in our care is led by our neglect to regard any “principles and ordinances” as attractive.

Editions of the standard works of Mormonism used in this study

The Book of Mormon. Translated by Joseph Smith, Jun. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1921.

The Pearl of Great Price, a selection from the revelations, translations, and narrations of Joseph Smith. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1965.

The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints containing revelations given to Joseph Smith, the prophet. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1963.

Books recommended for more comprehensive study of Mormonism

Hoekema, Anthony A. *Mormonism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963.

“The material in this book is an updating of material originally appearing in *The Four Major Cults*, Fourth Printing, August 1972.”

McConkie, Bruce R. *Mormon Doctrine*. Second Edition. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966.

A compend of Mormon teaching by a Mormon.

Tanner, Jerald and Sandra. *Mormonism—Shadow or Reality?* Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Company, 1972.

An exhaustively documented expose of Mormonism by a great-great-granddaughter of Brigham Young and her husband. Order from Modern Microfilm Company, Box 1884, Salt Lake City, Utah 84110.