

# INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 8 · 2014 · Pages vii-xxi

## **A Plea for Narrative Theology: Living In and By Stories**

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Offprint Series

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# A PLEA FOR NARRATIVE THEOLOGY: LIVING IN AND BY STORIES

*Louis C. Midgley*

*Abstract: The following are reflections on some of the complicated history, including the abuses, of what is commonly known as theology. The Saints do not “do theology.” Even when we are tempted, we do not reduce the contents or grounds of faith to something conforming to traditional theology. Instead, we tell stories of how and why we came to faith, which are then linked to a network of other stories found in our scriptures, and to a master narrative. We live in and by stories and not by either dogmatic or philosophically grounded systematic theology. Instead, we tend to engage in several strikingly different kinds of endeavors, especially including historical studies, which take the place of (and also clash with) what has traditionally been done under the name theology in its various varieties, confessional or otherwise.*

In 1992, I published an essay in which I pointed out the word “theology” and how much of what it describes originated with Plato, Aristotle, and the Orphics. The word is not found in the Bible or other LDS scriptures. It was borrowed by Origen (185-254) and developed by Augustine (354-430);<sup>1</sup> it was a late introduction from pagan sources. What I did not point out is that for Plato it consisted of the noble (and not base) lies told by poets to children and childlike adults. For Augustine, following

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1 Louis Midgley, “Theology,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1475.

the academic philosopher Marcus Terentius Varro (116-26 BCE), theology was not seen as the words of God to human beings, but rather the crude civic cult or bizarre spoofing of such beliefs in the theater or the product of unaided human reason—that is, what philosophers say about divine things.<sup>2</sup>

Given the enormous influence of St. Augustine on the Roman Catholic Church and in different ways on the Protestant Reformation, Christians have been anxious to fashion rational proofs where God is pictured as an unembodied, simple, utterly impassive First Thing that caused, moved, and determined everything, including time and space.<sup>3</sup> Latter-day Saints clearly challenge this theological first principle of classical theism. One can trace this rejection of the theological impulse to the founding event of the Restoration of the Gospel. When Joseph Smith went into the Sacred Grove and asked which church he should join, he was told that he should join none of them.

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having the form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19).

Among other crucial differences, God is not to be understood by the Saints as a First Thing that created everything, including both time and space, out of nothing. Classical Christian theism presumes an infinite qualitative difference between the

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2 Louis Midgley, “The Utility of Faith Reconsidered,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 141-144.

3 The usual formula is “without body, parts, and passions.”

Absolute, Infinite, Unconditioned creator and all merely finite, existing things. For the Saints, God and other divine beings are still encountered from time to time by seers and prophets.

The scriptures are presented in narrative and dramatic form rather than as theological treatises. They tell stories instead of analyzing logical proofs. The narrative form is necessary because it relays to us those events that mark God's peculiar dealings with his children as well as the covenants they enter into as they wander on the path to return to Heavenly Father. But these narratives are not just stories. They convey hope to us as we see God reaching out to prophets and apostles, providing forgiveness as we repent. Through these stories we see how God acts and how revelation is given to us as a community of believers.

### Competing Stories

In assessing the primary difference between the faith of the Saints and that of the other versions of Christianity, Lutheran historian Martin E. Marty argues that the Latter-day Saint version of Christian faith is deeply “rooted in narrative,” whereas Protestant theologies tend to “combine the language of the Hebrew scriptures with mainly Greek philosophical concepts as filtered through academic experiences in Western Europe, most notably Germany.”<sup>4</sup> I believe he has identified a difference that makes a difference.

Marty also argues that the existence of the faith of Latter-day Saints, which is both constituted by and consists of stories—that is, historical accounts or narratives—should remind other Christians (despite the long tradition of creeds, confessions,

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4 Martin E. Marty, “Foreword,” to a collection of essays edited by Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen, entitled *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), p. vii. Something similar, he pointed out, is true for Roman Catholic theology, except that its European geographical location is different.

catechisms, catalogs of dogma, frozen abstractions, and dogmatic and systematic theologies) that their own faith is also “born of story and stories.”<sup>5</sup> Christian faith is generally, despite the heavy hand of classical theism, still necessarily rooted in a master narrative in which God once became human to reconcile his estranged children to himself.

### **An Essential Historical Grounding and Content**

Even the most careful efforts to set out the core of the Christian faith in the tight formulas of creeds and confessions (thereby shutting the door to further divine special revelations) have necessarily been tied to accounts of historical events. Such singular historical detail as “under Pontius Pilate” is, for example, present in the so-called Apostles’ Creed as well as the amended version of the Nicene Creed promulgated at the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

Why is this so? Even the great ecumenical creeds and confessions would be empty and pointless without the crucial historical foundation—that is, some version of the story of God becoming a mortal and then winning a stunning victory over the death of the body (and the soul) when he rose from the dead after an unjust, vicious death. Of course, this key, essential story—the master narrative—also includes a network of stories reaching back into the past and, for Latter-day Saints, into an even deeper past prior to the peopling of the earth.

Without the crucial founding events as more than merely legends, tall tales, or wishful thinking, Christian faith in all its varieties has little or no meaning other than as a bit of nostalgia or sentimentality that offers no genuine hope. Latter-day Saints are thus not alone in both wanting and needing the founding and sustaining stories to be simply true. This is also the reason

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5 Marty, “Foreword,” p. vii.

history is always the point of attack for secular critics of all versions of Christian faith (as well as its most attractive feature).

Elsewhere Professor Marty argues that individuals also live by stories.<sup>6</sup> Our memory of who and what we are is our own story. In addition, our identity (or struggle for a stable identity) necessarily involves a bundle of shifting and sometimes hastily contrived and often even deceitful, conflicting, and competing stories. Put another way, our own stories involve various degrees of self-deception as we manage appearances for various, essentially selfish reasons. Much of this is described as sin in our prophetic warnings. From my perspective, our task while here on probation is, through genuine repentance and unfeigned faith (and only through the refining work of the Holy Spirit) to have our story eventually fit snugly within the larger story found in our scriptures, consonant with the terms of the covenant we have made with God.

According to Professor Marty, most Christians in much the same way also “live by story. They see God’s activity in the events, words, works, circumstances, and effects of Jesus Christ and tell the story of his death and resurrection as constitutive of the faith that forms their community.”<sup>7</sup> Christian faith thus comes in various large, competing varieties, each of which privileges its own special version of the common founding story and supporting stories.<sup>8</sup>

Again, according to Professor Marty, standing behind Jewish communal identity is the story of “how this God chose Israel and covenanted with the nation. This was a moral God, whose judgments were to fall on Egypt and Assyria,” though divine judgments often “fell most strongly on the chosen and

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6 See Martin E. Marty, “We Might Know What to Do and How to Do It: On the Usefulness of the Religious Past,” *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 27-44. Subsequently cited as “On the Usefulness of the Religious Past.”

7 Marty, “On the Usefulness of the Religious Past,” 34.

8 For details, see Louis Midgley, “Telling the Larger ‘Church History’ Story,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 157-171.

covenanted people.”<sup>9</sup> This story and the vehicles through which it is preserved (even for many who now tend to explain away the very idea of God “as a projection, an illusion, an invention to fill social needs,”<sup>10</sup> lifting explanations from Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx and their many disciples) still provide a foil against which individuals form and reform their Jewish and Christian identities. Something like this also holds true for both Shi’ite and Sunni Muslims who live by and for their own competing versions of their founding story, which likewise has biblical roots.

In each case, history and sacred books with historical origins and contents ground the faith of often vastly different peoples. To grasp what these peoples believe and why they do so, one must enter sympathetically into their story and stories.

Throughout Latter-day Saint history there have been some Latter-day Saints who insist we must produce a “real” theology, one that can compete with the theologies of traditional Christianity. They search the scriptures, looking for isolated passages to be used in theological speculation. One example of this approach is the attempt to portray the faith of the Saints as a materialist theology. Here key passages from the Doctrine and Covenants are used to underwrite a doctrine of materialism in spite of the narrow and elliptical nature of these passages. But there is another form this theological approach takes. It looks to contemporary scholarship for methods and frameworks within which to cast the faith of the Saints. The aim of such speculation is to provide theological common ground for an exchange of views between our faith and that of other Christian sects, but such ecumenical theology risks sacrificing what makes the Restored Gospel unique—that the heavens are again opened and God speaks to His children through prophets today.

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9 Marty, “On the Usefulness of the Religious Past,” 33.

10 Marty, “On the Usefulness of the Religious Past,” 33.



## Some Personal Background

My first real encounter with what is now commonly known as theology came when I studied in great detail the writings of then-famous German-American theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965), whose religious socialist views led to his being the first non-Jewish university professor fired by Adolf Hitler and who then shifted to the Union Theological Seminary in New York. Tillich published at least four hundred books and essays and delivered hundreds of lectures and sermons. He became a popular figure in American intellectual life. His crowning work was a massive, three-volume *Systematic Theology*.

Even as a university student in Germany, Tillich had begun to argue that Christianity would be false if it rested on the truth of stories about Jesus of Nazareth and not on what he called concern about the meanings that such stories have very imperfectly come to suggest. The reason, he claimed, is that God is Being-Itself and not an existing being alongside other beings. It is flatly false for Tillich if faith (understood as concern) rests to any degree on persons and events in human history.<sup>11</sup> His views were attractive to those who were looking for reasons to brush aside all divine special revelations and hence the vast network of stories upon which Christian faith rests.

Tillich's radically secularized understanding of Christian faith can be contrasted with that of Karl Barth (1886-1968), the even-more-famous Swiss-German scholar who managed to blunt the then-dominant continental version of liberal or cultural Protestantism and who revived a version of Protestant orthodoxy before and after World War II. Barth set out in four million words what he called *Church Dogmatics*. This work argued that the death and resurrection of an historical Jesus

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11 For details, see Louis Midgley, "Religion and Ultimate Concern: An Encounter with Paul Tillich's Theology," *Dialogue* 1/2 (1966): 55-71.

was central to authentic Christian faith but suffered from being muddled together with some alien philosophy in efforts to fashion a theological system—and to engage with the very long and controversial history of Christianity. Whereas Barth saw the Bible as containing the Word of God for those moved by the Holy Spirit, Tillich saw it as merely the words of muddled humans about divine things. This distinction clearly manifests an ambiguity in the word “theology.” Does that label or its adjective “theological” identify God’s words to human beings or merely what humans have fashioned for various reasons about divine things?

Put more bluntly: do human beings merely invent the God(s) to suit their own private interests, needs, or passions, or to serve some political purpose? An affirmative response to these questions clearly makes theology a strictly earthbound and merely human invention in much the same way that religion has often been seen as a self-administered narcotic to ease for a time the utter meaninglessness and suffering in an otherwise forlorn, disconsolate world. Much of what is written about religion—including some, but not all, of what goes by the name of religious studies—dances close to the rim of this abyss, though still striving to keep an academic straight face.

### **Some Possible LDS Kinds of Theology**

Whatever the jaded history of the term “theology,” we are for better or worse stuck with it just as we are with the word “religion.” Can we fashion our own, special understanding of theology by looking at how Protestants who were contemporaries of Joseph Smith, following in the footsteps of the Reformers, were busy hammering out and then preaching the contents of sophisticated dogmatic theologies?

Protestants tended to fashion theologies presumably derived from the Bible, understood as the thoroughly sufficient, final, infallible, inerrant Word of God. From the Bible alone it

was and still is believed possible to set out a compendium of authoritative theology. However, the community of Saints had its roots in much different soil.

Those early Saints saw the Book of Mormon as a sign the heavens were again open and that God could and would reveal more, thereby moving us beyond sectarian controversy over the Bible. Hence they were pleased when Joseph the Seer provided them with additional histories of ancient covenant peoples. They were open to living oracles and to further evidence of a genuinely passionate divine care for human beings. This interest in additional sacred history does not seem to have been a casual matter for the first Saints. Instead the opening of the heavens through revelations to Joseph Smith constituted their new community. This also helps explain why, under very difficult circumstances, much effort was made by the first Saints to record, preserve, and publish their own history for future generations.

This literature is, of course, filled with details of follies and failures but also of God's providential care for his covenant people. It thus contains talk about God and reflections on his dealings with human beings. In that sense, of course, even though it consists of historical texts, it could be seen as a kind of theology. It both records and reflects on divine special revelations, but it differs from traditional theologies in some crucial ways. If one insists on using the word "theology" (except perhaps in the case of the Lectures on Faith, which have a Protestant sectarian form and substance), what I am identifying is not typical of sectarian dogmatic theology; it is neither an inclusive, tight system nor cast in the categories of some philosophical culture. Instead, it is a kind of narrative theology in which the teachings have a story-like structure as well as an historical setting or are largely historical. I have no objections to efforts to mine this literature if that mining is both carefully done and sensitive to the circumstances, including

time and place, in which it was recorded. In my lifetime I have witnessed huge advances in writing about the Latter-day Saint past, which pleases me.

But there is also another kind of necessary LDS theology. The Saints are admonished in our scriptures to defend their faith by giving their best reasons—that is by testifying—and they have responded more or less as they felt comfortable (or inclined) in what is clearly a necessary and mandated apologetic endeavor—that is, in a defense of the faith and the Saints.<sup>12</sup> Providing the best explanations of and reasons for the faith of the Saints is a necessary endeavor.

### **The Dangerous Longing for Order and Certainty**

Latter-day Saints should see the dangers inherent in attempts to fashion a systematic theology grounded on a currently fashionable brand of philosophy. I see no need to tidy up and improve on the historical accounts of God's merciful care for human beings found in our scriptures. But what of those who eschew such systems and yet for various reasons engage in the kind of sophisticated hairsplitting that goes into fashioning tight catalogues of beliefs similar to traditional Protestant and Roman Catholic dogmatic theology? Do we become and remain faithful Latter-day Saints by having books on the shelf containing dogmatic answers to all our questions?

Neither our scriptures nor certainly our history constitute tight systems in either of these ways. Instead they are mostly narratives in which we can, if we care to, begin to enter the charmed world of earlier encounters with divine things as we each struggle as best we can to grasp all the metaphors used to

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12 See D&C 123, where the Saints are told to collect the criticisms of their faith and to prepare responses because otherwise the honest in heart may not be able to find the truth they are prepared to receive. The primary meaning of the Greek *apologia* is defense, as in a court of law, for a position and against false charges.

set out genuine encounters with God. Among other things we find in both our scriptures and ritual lives covenants grounded in theophanies and hence codes or commandments we agree to obey. Our scriptures are packed with historical illustrations of the consequences of a covenant people turning away from and ceasing to remember and keep their covenants. Faithful obedience is what God seems to desire, not a demonstration of our ability to order or speculate about divine things. Our task is to remember and hence faithfully submit to the terms of the covenants we have made. Our words and deeds must match, and hence our own story and the stories found in our scriptures must, I believe, mesh together into faithful obedience expressed as faith, hope, and love.

One inadequately articulated but controlling assumption held by some of the Saints is that our scriptures should be flattened out, harmonized, and woven into a dogmatic system—despite the fact that these scriptural texts consist largely of historical accounts, sometimes written over long periods in sometimes vastly different cultures and languages by unknown authors, and redacted and preserved in various ways. Some may even feel a need to fashion more satisfactory explanations of matters mentioned in our scripture. I am satisfied with the host of narratives packed with wonderful and yet also imprecise and perplexing metaphors which are found in our scripture. This creates a kind of openness I have come to relish. I also find no pain in a huge number of questions for which I have no answer. I am more and more focused on what can be said about the one known as Jesus of Nazareth and his reconciling and redeeming endeavors, especially his victory over death in all its ugly forms.

The effort to fashion a dogmatic theology when we are confronted with narratives and hence histories of different and often little-understood places and peoples may not take the ambiguity of the past with sufficient seriousness, nor does it

deal with historical events in their own terms and settings. In addition the scriptures are sometimes turned into a resource book for figuring out a series of pat answers to questions neither asked nor answered in those texts—or answers sometimes quite contrary to the meaning found in the scriptures about questions we think necessary to get sorted out lest our relationship with divine things be less than it should be.

I have to admit admiring the intellectual gifts that yield both dogmatic and systematic theologies, but as a believer I don't wish to live by displays of mere human ingenuity. Instead I put my trust in the master narrative about the victory of Jesus of Nazareth over death—a narrative that is supported by a network of amazing stories of his mercy and providential care for those who love him.

### Looking at the Generative Events

The fledgling Church of Christ began with the recovery of the Book of Mormon, which is a long, detailed, tragic history of a previously unknown covenant people guided by God to somewhere in America. Its prophetic tradition is set out primarily by Mormon, for whom the book is named. He was, of course, the principal editor, redactor, and author of the Book of Mormon, but the final charge in this book, as a people came to a crashing end, is in the last words of the lonely Moroni, the son of Mormon. He made this bittersweet history available to Joseph Smith—and hence to us here and now.

Even before its publication, the Book of Mormon was controversial.<sup>13</sup> Joseph was pictured as a mere juggler and his endeavor portrayed as fraudulent or the work of insanity

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13 The plates came with “interpreters” (two seer stones) that were used by Joseph Smith to “see,” in some sense of the word, the English words that he dictated to various scribes.

or even demons.<sup>14</sup> It amused and angered those impacted by Enlightenment skepticism about divine things, especially by what was considered superstition and humbug. It also challenged and annoyed sectarian preachers. It remains controversial to this day. This can be seen in both secular and sectarian versions of anti-Mormonism. It must be defended but cannot be proven true by ordinary scholarly endeavors.

The Book of Mormon, along with the eventual recovery by Joseph Smith of other ancient texts, resulted in a radical difference between the faith of Latter-day Saints and that of sectarian Christians, who objected to the audacious enlargement of the canon of sacred scripture by an unlearned farm boy. In addition to the Bible, the faith of Latter-day Saints is thus grounded in substantial additional historical texts, some of which are canonized. In addition, a host of other textual materials provide the context of divine special revelations to the one often known to his first followers as Joseph the Seer.

### **The Power of Stories**

Under Joseph Stalin the Soviet regime sought to secularize society and erase the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. In spite of whatever secularizing efforts took place, Stalin's efforts to erase Russian Orthodoxy in the old Soviet Union failed. Here we have powerful evidence of the holding power of stories. An important aspect of what maintains faith in the face of secularizing forces is a rich combination of artifacts and stories, including related texts, that keep alive or make faith possible especially in the face of radical persecution.<sup>15</sup>

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14 See "19th-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829-1944)," a searchable digital collection of everything published during Joseph Smith's lifetime on the Book of Mormon, available through the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. See <http://lib.byu.edu/digital/bompublications/>.

15 In 1949 it is estimated that there were less than four million Christians in China. But today, despite efforts to purge Christianity from China beginning in 1966, there are perhaps as many as a hundred million Chinese Christians. See

For Latter-day Saints the shared story is how Joseph Smith came to be a Seer and Translator and then Revelator and Prophet, presiding over a new community with Priesthood keys and so forth. That story helps form the grounds of the faith of the Saints, which also includes more than the story of messengers from another world, metal plates, seer stones, and a 500-page book, ending a few short years later in a lynching in Carthage, Illinois. This story and the larger network of stories puts the Saints in touch with God here and now and also in our imaginations in the deep past and the remote future. This is not theology in the traditional sense, nor is it merely traditional secular history. It is instead primarily or essentially another larger story (and stories) beginning with a council and war in heaven prior to our mortal probation. There, after this world was organized and readied, Adam (understood here as each member of humankind) made the choice to undergo a difficult and demanding probation, with an understanding that the needed sanctification and redemption would be available. (We also would need scolding, comfort, and direction.) In this story, one of those in the heavenly council ended up tending this place from a distance, and eventually he was born as a mortal being who walked and taught and ate. He was killed, then seen again after being stone cold dead for three days; he even turned up somewhere in America. And this story also includes references to remnants of Israel in other places, to other worlds, and to a future beyond the mess we currently experience here below.

In discussing whether or not there should be a Mormon theology, it is important to remember the account of the First Vision. In many ways it sets out the challenge that we face as Latter-day Saints. Our task is to take up the narratives in the scriptures and share them with others, extending the scope of scriptural stories. Doing this we give people hope and make

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Louis Midgley, "Christian Faith in Contemporary China," *Interpreter* 2 (2012): 35-39, for a brief survey of sources.



them part of an ongoing story in which they join with God in changing lives. Now, this emphasis on sharing stories runs contrary to the desire of people who call for a dogmatic Mormon theology, who view the Restored Gospel more in terms of a graduate seminar on systematic theology, or who see Mormonism as a belief system that ties together all the disparate doctrines one encounters in Latter-day scriptures.

For those who want tidy beliefs, loose ends harmonized and nailed down, such stories may seem the wrong way to go. Hence the effort to turn messy stories into theology and to invent or discover answers to all the questions these stories don't seem to answer. Instead, I am pleased to have a store of stories from several parts of the world over long periods of time. I don't long for a finished Mormon doctrine. I rather like the incompleteness, the unfinished character of stories such as those found in our scriptures and elsewhere. I am neither offended nor troubled by their messiness or openness.

Our founding story invites and demands that we enter the same world occupied by Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon—a world pulsing with powers both good and evil, one in which we struggle to keep commandments and find favor in God's sight, where sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in our souls. These stories are rough, unpolished, and unfinished. They are set out in the worldview, languages, and metaphors of those who experienced and crafted them. I believe these stories invite each of us to live in a world filled with wonders, with very real temptations and dangers but also with genuine hope.

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