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The Theology of C. S. Lewis: A Latter-day Saint Perspective

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THE THEOLOGY OF C. S. LEWIS: A LATTER-DAY SAINT PERSPECTIVE

Robert L. Millet

Abstract: *In this essay, Robert Millet describes the work and impact of C. S. Lewis as it pertains to the Latter-day Saints. He explores possible reasons why Church leaders have felt comfortable quoting Lewis in General Conference more than any other non-Latter-day Saint writer and provides a substantial list of the subjects for which his writings have had special appeal to the Saints. While acknowledging Lewis' personal faults and the obvious points of difference between his faith and our own, Millet concludes with an expression of gratitude for his "lasting lessons and his noble legacy."*

[Editor's Note: Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.

See Robert L. Millet, "The Theology of C. S. Lewis: A Latter-day Saint Perspective," in *"To Seek the Law of the Lord": Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), 189–208. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

It is an honor to be asked to participate in this festschrift for John W. Welch, and I appreciate the kind invitation. Jack has been a significant voice in Latter-day Saint studies for many years. His work on the Book of Mormon, in particular, has stimulated thousands of minds, fanned the flame of faith already burning in people's hearts, and motivated many

people to turn and return to the scriptural work we know as Another Testament of Jesus Christ.

In this paper I would like to focus on the work and impact of C. S. Lewis, as it pertains to Mormonism. I have personally been fascinated by Lewis's life and stimulated by his writings and teachings for more than forty years. Terry Glaspey observed that, "One of the surest reasons for Lewis's vast popular appeal was his belief that the ultimate truths of life are not hidden only in the minds of the learned, but what is really most important in life is accessible to all."¹ Lewis himself noted: "My only function as a Christian writer is to preach 'Mere Christianity' not *ad clerum* but *ad populum*. Any success that has been given me has, I believe, been due to my strict observance of those limits."² Largely for this reason—his obsession with the fundamentals of the Christian faith, those principles and ideas about which Christians of most all stripes can agree—Latter-day Saint readers have admired him and, for the most part, embraced his teachings.

A Lay Church and Theological Literacy

Although The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a lay church, and sermons in the main worship service on the Sabbath are usually delivered by members of the congregation, a visitor would notice how frequently the talks revolve around scripture and scriptural commentary, with insights frequently drawn from non-LDS thinkers. Jerry Johnston, for many years a writer for Salt Lake City's *Deseret News*, found that C. S. Lewis in particular "had been quoted from the Tabernacle podium almost twenty times in twenty years—more than Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Winston Churchill, Pearl S. Buck—more than any other non-LDS author." He suggested that Lewis's common touch with uncommon ideas is what has endeared him to Mormons. As Johnston put it, Lewis is "the one who leans over and speaks into our ear, the friend we can't help but take into our hearts."³

1 Terry W. Glaspey, *Not a Tame Lion: The Spiritual Legacy of C. S. Lewis and the Chronicles of Narnia* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 1996), 160.

2 C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reunion and Other Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1990), 20; see also C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 6.

3 Jerry Johnston, "Ideally Speaking," *Deseret News*, 28 March 1998, E-1. Proceedings of a conference held at Brigham Young University celebrating the 100th year of Lewis's birth are found in C. S. Lewis, *The Man and His Message: A Latter-day Saint Perspective*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999).

Perhaps a lay church like ours is more prone than a traditionally structured Christian church to adopt and appropriate writings that seek to take otherwise esoteric tenets and reduce them to reachable and memorable concepts. Lewis appears to me to be far more practical than sacramental; far more prone to speak of personal engagement with divinity than to focus on ecclesiastical or liturgical matters. In addition, his popularity in LDS culture, as with a broader Christian readership, is no doubt related to the fact that he does not come across as denominational or wedded to any particular religious persuasion. In his adherence to “mere Christianity,” he is everyman’s preacher, every woman’s exegete. He is the thinking Christian’s supreme apologist. “He was not a theological liberal, but neither did his views square with fundamentalism.”⁴

Of course, Clive Staples Lewis was not a Latter-day Saint, and I have no intention of contorting him into one. I cannot read his mind, nor can I always know assuredly what he meant by what he said. But then, neither can anyone else who reads him, unless they were intimately acquainted with him during his life. It is not even possible to say, “Well, Lewis must have meant this or that, inasmuch as he was an Anglican,” or “Surely Jack intended to convey this or that idea, since he was a defender of the Christian faith.” Why not? Because there are parts of Lewis’s theology that defy rubric, that are not placed comfortably within any particular religious tradition.

This is, in fact, what makes him so very fascinating to me and other Latter-day Saints. For pages on end, Lewis’s insights capture Christians of every denomination, and then—suddenly and without warning, in the next paragraph—he will make this person or that person extremely uncomfortable. This breadth, this inclusiveness, this freshness and distinctiveness—these are the things that endear Lewis to me. In the remainder of this paper I will consider the following five doctrinal items from Lewis’s teachings and comment on how they are viewed from an LDS perspective: (1) The True Myth; (2) Surprised by Joy; (3) The Nature of Fallen Man; (4) Transformation in Christ; and (5) Evil and Suffering. I will delimit my comments by referring to his more theological books and leave a consideration of the doctrine contained in his fictional works to others more qualified.

4 Glaspey, *Not a Tame Lion*, Introduction.

The True Myth

One area of study that has seemed especially challenging to the faith of many young Christians proved, ironically, to be foundational to Lewis's acceptance of Christianity. Central to his conversion was his recognition of similarities between mythical patterns in cultures and belief systems throughout the world. The symbols of descent and re-ascent, the suffering and dying god, rebirth and resurrection—these are, in his words, “derived (through human imagination) from the facts of Nature, and the facts of Nature from her Creator.” Lewis added that “the Death and Re-birth pattern is in her because it was first in Him.”⁵ Lewis called such phenomena “good dreams,” archetypal occurrences all about us, those “queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again, and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men.”⁶ Whereas some persons challenge the uniqueness of Christianity because of the frequent emergence of such myths, Lewis came to acknowledge Christianity as the “true myth”—the myth that became history. That is, “Christians are not claiming that simply ‘God’ was incarnate in Jesus. They are claiming that the one true God is He whom the Jews worshipped as Jahweh, and that it is He who has descended.”⁷

Latter-day Saints believe that a plan of salvation—a system of redemption in which God the Father would send his Beloved Son into the world as a Savior—was known to men and women from the beginning, and that Christian prophets have taught what we might call “Christ’s eternal gospel” and have even administered Christian ordinances since the beginning of time.⁸ In overview, Jesus is truly the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” as the Apostles John and Peter declared (1 Pet. 1:19–20; Rev. 13:8; see also Moses 7:47). The atoning sacrifice is not only timely (for those of us who regularly need its cleansing powers) but *timeless*. Though the act of atonement would not take place until Jesus suffered in Gethsemane and on Golgotha in the meridian of time, earth’s earliest inhabitants were taught from the beginning to call upon God in the name of his Beloved Son. Mormons take literally the words of the Apostle Peter that “To [Christ] give all the prophets witness” (Acts 10:43).

5 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 153.

6 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 54.

7 Lewis, *Miracles*, 151.

8 See Robert L. Millet, “The Eternal Gospel,” *Ensign*, July 1996, 48–56.

Therefore, it is reasonable in the LDS view that remnants of truth, pieces of a much larger mosaic, should be found scattered throughout the world in varying cultures and among diverse religious groups, albeit in some cases in altered or even convoluted forms. President Joseph F. Smith said of those who seek to upstage Christianity: Jesus Christ “is no imitator. He taught the truth first; it was his before it was given to man. ...If we find truth in broken fragments through the ages, it may be set down as an incontrovertible fact that it originated at the fountain, and was given to philosophers, inventors, patriots, reformers, and prophets by the inspiration of God. It came from him through his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, in the first place, and from no other source. It is eternal...Men are mere repeaters of what he has taught them.”⁹

And so as a Latter-day Saint I find Lewis’s discussion of the true myth to be especially compelling. The “doctrine of death” of a god found throughout the world is, in Lewis’s words, “an ‘eternal gospel’ revealed to men wherever men have sought, or endured, the truth: it is the very nerve of redemption, which anatomising wisdom at all times and in all places lays bare; the inescapable knowledge which the Light that lighteneth every man presses down upon the minds of all who seriously question what the universe is ‘about.’”¹⁰

Surprised by Joy

Lewis frequently commented on another divine manifestation in life — the inner longings that men and women so often feel, a sense of divine homesickness, mysterious moments when we feel ill at ease or out of place in this life, not put off by the throes of mortality as much as by mortality itself. He noted that men and women were often “surprised by joy,” startled by moments that matter, brief brushes with eternity. “All your life,” Lewis pointed out, “an unattained ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness.”¹¹ “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy,” he stated, “the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. ...I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must

9 Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971) 30–31, 395, 398–99.

10 C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 92.

11 *Ibid.*, 132.

make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.”¹²

Lewis is speaking, of course, of our longing for heaven and for heavenly things. Latter-day Saints identify with the sentiment because we have, like others, felt the same longings or homesickness. We look at the situation, however, from a slightly different perspective because we believe in a premortal existence—of a life as spirits before we were born, a time wherein we were acquainted with God. These “intimations of immortality,” as Wordsworth called them, also bespeak a memory of what once was, a longing for reunion, re-acquaintance, renewal of association. For us, “homesickness” is not figurative but literal. Our souls pine for the home our bodies cannot remember. As early as 1883, Joseph F. Smith wrote: “Our knowledge of persons and things before we came here, combined with the divinity awakened within our souls through obedience to the gospel, powerfully affects, in my opinion, all our likes and dislikes, and guides our preferences in the course of this life, provided we give careful heed to the admonitions of the Spirit. All those salient truths which come home so forcibly to the head and heart seem but the awakening of the memories of the spirit.”¹³

The Nature of Fallen Man

As a Christian, C. S. Lewis believed in the reality and in the consequences of the fall of Adam and Eve. Because of that fall, death and sin and corruption and decay have entered into the world and encompass us here. Indeed, an acknowledgement of the Fall and of man’s fallen nature is indispensable to an appreciation for the Atonement of Jesus Christ. “A recovery of the old sense of sin,” Lewis observed, “is essential to Christianity. Christ takes it for granted that men are bad. Until we really feel this assumption of his to be true, though we are part of the world He came to save, we are not part of the audience to whom His words are addressed.”¹⁴ In fact, as men and women come unto Christ and surrender their old selves, they begin to recognize more and more their need for redemption and renovation. “When a man is getting better,” Lewis said, “he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him.”¹⁵

So far as I can tell, however, Lewis did not believe that men and women are punished for what Adam and Eve did or that we individually

12 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 121.

13 Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 12–13.

14 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 51.

15 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 88; see also Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 60.

“sinned in Adam,” as the Church Fathers declared.¹⁶ Further, he taught that “The doctrine of Total Depravity—when the consequence is drawn that, since we are totally depraved, our idea of good is worth simply nothing—may thus turn Christianity into a form of devil-worship.”¹⁷ Having discussed the nature of the Fall and of fallen man, Lewis went on to say that he would have been misunderstood if anyone described his views “as a restatement of the doctrine of Total Depravity. I disbelieve that doctrine, partly on the logical ground that if our depravity were total we should not know ourselves to be depraved, and partly because experience shows us much goodness in human nature.”¹⁸ Nor did Lewis believe that the human body was to be denied or despised. “I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex, or the body, or pleasure, were bad in themselves. But they were wrong. Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body—which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body, that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in Heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness, our beauty, and our energy.”¹⁹

President Ezra Taft Benson stated that, “Just as a man does not really desire food until he is hungry, so he does not desire the salvation of Christ until he knows why he needs Christ. No one adequately and properly knows why he needs Christ until he understands and accepts the doctrine of the Fall and its effect upon all mankind.”²⁰ The Latter-day Saints thus view the Fall as a companion doctrine to the Atonement. If there had been no Fall, there would have been no Atonement, and thus the regeneration and glorification that come only through the cleansing power of Christ’s blood could not have been extended to humankind.

Thus, for Latter-day Saints, partaking of the forbidden fruit in Eden brought about a “fortunate fall,” one that opened the way to far more glorious blessings in eternity. As one early Church leader explained: “The fall had a twofold direction—downward, yet forward. It brought man into the world and set his feet upon progression’s highway.”²¹ We teach that even though we are not responsible or accountable for the fall

16 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 62, 76.

17 Ibid., 33.

18 Ibid., 59.

19 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 92.

20 Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1988), 33.

21 Orson F. Whitney, in *Cowley & Whitney on Doctrine*, comp. Forace Green (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 287.

of Adam and Eve, we are certainly affected by it—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. We agree wholeheartedly with Lewis that fallen man is “not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms.”²²

The Book of Mormon contains the clearest statements in LDS literature on the doctrine of the Fall and the plight of fallen man. Consider:

Wherefore, all mankind were in a lost and fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer. (1 Ne. 10:6).

...men drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent. For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord.... (Mosiah 3:18–19)

And since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth... (Alma 22:14)

In addition, Lewis once stated that “To ask that God’s love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must, in the nature of things, be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable.”²³ The Book of Mormon similarly teaches the self-contradiction of God trying to save us in our sins rather than *from* our sins. “What, do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit. If so, God would cease to be God” (Alma 42:25). As Brigham Young declared: “It requires all the atonement of Christ, the mercy of the Father, the pity of

22 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 59.

23 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 43.

angels and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to be with us always, and then to do the very best we possibly can, to get rid of this sin within us.”²⁴

Lewis also taught that because of the Fall we are, in the long run, far better off than if our first parents had not partaken of the forbidden fruit. That is, he believed that redeemed man will rise higher than unfallen man. Jesus Christ, he taught, offered “a deeper happiness and a fuller splendour” than if there had been no Fall. Because man has fallen, he pointed out, “for him God does the great deed.” For man, the prodigal, “the eternal Lamb is killed.” Thus “if ninety and nine righteous races inhabiting distant planets that circle distant suns, and needing no redemption on their own account, were made and glorified by the glory which had descended into our race”—namely Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God—then “redeemed humanity” would become “something more glorious than any unfallen race.” “The greater the sin,” he continued, “the greater the mercy: the deeper the death the brighter the rebirth. And this super-added glory will, with true vicariousness, exalt all creatures and those who have never fallen will thus bless Adam’s fall.”²⁵

Transformation in Christ

There is so much that could be said concerning Lewis’s views on the preeminent place of Jesus Christ. I have been stimulated over the years by Lewis’s discussions of Christ’s suffering and forsakenness in Gethsemane;²⁶ the nature of repentance and how it is that Christ’s “advantage” allows him to “pay the debt”;²⁷ and his provocative and memorable illustrations of how spiritual rebirth entails more than cosmetic or outward changes in behavior.²⁸ The following expression, which Lewis wrote in a letter in 1942, is deeply comforting to Latter-day Saints while at the same time supportive of our emphasis on the need to “endure to the end”: “No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep on picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home. But the bathrooms are all ready, the towels put out, and the clean clothes in the airing cupboard. The only fatal thing is to lose one’s temper and give it up. It is when we

24 Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards & Sons, 1851–86), 11:301.

25 Lewis, *Miracles*, 162.

26 C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1992), 42, 44.

27 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 59.

28 Ibid. 165–66, 169–70.

notice the dirt that God is most present in us: it is the very sign of His presence.”²⁹

C. S. Lewis boldly refused to accept the impotent position of Jesus as merely a great moral teacher. Jesus of Nazareth was either a God, a liar, or a madman.³⁰ “Only two views of this man are possible,” he noted. “Either he was a raving lunatic of an unusually abominable type, or else He was, and is, precisely what He said. There is no middle way. If the records make the first hypothesis unacceptable, you must submit to the second. And if you do that, all else that is claimed by Christians becomes credible—that this Man, having been killed, was yet alive, and that His death, in some manner incomprehensible to human thought, has effected a real change in our relations to the ‘awful’ and ‘righteous’ Lord, and a change in our favour.”³¹

Let me focus briefly on two aspects of Lewis’s treatment of Christ’s redemptive work that particularly appeal to Latter-day Saints: first, the balance between divine grace and human action; and second, the ultimate glorification of man in Christ. From my reading of Lewis, I conclude that there was no question in his mind that salvation was in Christ alone and that the renovation of men and women’s souls was the work of a God. At the same time, he was perfectly clear about the fact that persons who chose to come unto Christ were expected to be more than grateful and passive observers of the changes taking place within them. “We profanely assume that divine and human action exclude one another like the actions of two fellow-creatures so that ‘God did this’ and ‘I did this’ cannot both be true of the same act except in the sense that each contributed a share.” He continued: “In the end we must admit a two-way traffic at the junction....We have nothing that we have not received; but part of what we have received is the power of being something more than receptacles.”³² As Lewis stated elsewhere, “Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads the Christian home is good actions, or faith in Christ. I have no right really to speak on such a difficult question, but it does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary....You see, we are now trying to understand, and to separate

29 *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis; rev. and enlarged ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993), 365.

30 See Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 56; C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 105.

31 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 21.

32 Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, 49–50.

into water-tight compartments, what exactly God does and what man does when God and man are working together.”³³

Latter-day Saints have often been critical of those who stress salvation by grace alone, while we have often been criticized for a type of works-righteousness because we give work any significance at all. For us the gospel is, in fact, a gospel *covenant*. The Lord agrees to do for us what we could never do for ourselves—to forgive our sins, to lift our burdens, to renew our souls and re-create our nature, to raise us from the dead and qualify us for glory hereafter. Whereupon, we strive to do what we *can* do: have faith in Christ, repent of our sins, be baptized, love and serve one another, and do all in our power to put off the natural man and deny ourselves of ungodliness. In short, we believe that more is required of men and women than a verbal expression of faith in the Lord, more than a confession with the lips that we have received Christ into our hearts. Without question, the power to save us, to change us, to renew our souls, is in Christ. True faith, however, always manifests itself in *faithfulness*. Thus, the real question is not whether one is saved by grace or by works but rather, In whom do we trust? On whom do we rely? (See 1 Ne. 10:6; 2 Ne. 2:8; 31:19; Mor. 6:4.)

Mormons feel that few things would be more sinister than encouraging lip service to God while discouraging obedience and faithful discipleship. On the other hand, surely nothing could be more offensive to God than a smug self-assurance that comes from trusting in one's own works or relying upon one's own strength. What is perhaps the most well known passage in LDS literature on this delicate matter is found in the Book of Mormon: “For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Ne. 25:23; see also 10:24; Alma 24:10–11). That is, above and beyond all we can do, we are saved by the grace of Christ; salvation is still the greatest of all the *gifts* of God (D&C 6:13; 14:7). Further, the more we learn to trust the Lord and rely on his merits and mercy, the less anxious we become about life here and hereafter. “Thus, if you have really handed yourself over to Him,” Lewis wisely remarked, “it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way.”³⁴

The second aspect of Christ's redeeming work found in Lewis that I wanted to treat briefly concerns what God eventually intends to do with

33 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 131–32; see also Lewis, *Christian Reunion*, 18.

34 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 131.

us. Lewis wrote in *The Problem of Pain* that “We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character. Here again we come up against what I have called the ‘intolerable compliment.’”³⁵

From *Miracles*: “Christ, reascending from his great dive, is bringing up Human Nature with Him. Where He goes, it goes too. It will be made ‘like him’ (Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:1–2).” Lewis went on to say that eventually those who are redeemed in Christ will have the power to perform miracles, just as Christ did. “Christ’s isolation,” he continued, “is not that of a prodigy but of a pioneer. He is the first of His kind; He will not be the last.”³⁶

From *A Grief Observed*: “Sometimes, Lord, one is tempted to say that if you wanted us to behave like the lilies of the field you might have given us an organization more like theirs. But that, I suppose, is just your grand experiment. Or no; not an experiment, for you have no need to find things out. Rather your grand enterprise. To make an organism which is also a spirit; to make that terrible oxymoron, a ‘spiritual animal.’ To take a poor primate, a beast with nerve-endings all over it, a creature with a stomach that wants to be filled, a breeding animal that wants its mate, and say, ‘Now get on with it. Become a god.’”³⁷

From *The Weight of Glory*: “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.... There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.... Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.”³⁸

And from *Mere Christianity*: “Century by century God has guided nature up to the point of producing creatures which can (if they will) be taken right out of nature, turned into ‘gods.’”³⁹

35 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 38.

36 Lewis, *Miracles*, 178.

37 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1961), 57.

38 Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 39–40; emphasis in original.

39 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 188

Being changed in Christ “is not a change from being brainy men to brianier men: it is a change that goes off in a totally different direction — a change from being creatures of God to being sons of God.”⁴⁰

“The command *Be ye perfect* is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were ‘gods’ and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.”⁴¹

Latter-day Saints teach that all men and women, like Christ, are made in the spiritual image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27; Moses 2:27). Through Christ, our physical selves can also become begotten sons and daughters, and so Latter-day Saints feel it is neither robbery nor heresy for the children of God to aspire to be like their heavenly Father (Matt. 5:48; Phil. 2:6). Transformation comes through the merits of Christ and his Atonement (1 John 5:4–5; Rev. 2:7, 11). Through faith we become heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, the natural Heir (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 4:7), thus inheriting all things, just as Jesus inherits all things (1 Cor. 3:21–23; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 21:7). In that glorified state we will be conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 John 3:2), be made partakers of his divine nature (2 Peter 1:3–4), and become one with him and with the Father (John 17:21–23; Phil. 3:21).

Evil and Suffering

C.S. Lewis was an articulate voice in the centuries-old conversation regarding human suffering and the question of evil. If in fact people choose so poorly, and those choices impact others’ lives as tragically as they do, why should God allow human agency or choice? Lewis answers that for one thing, “free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. ...Of course God knew what would happen if they used their freedom the wrong way: apparently He thought it worth the risk.”⁴² The

40 Ibid., 186.

41 Ibid., 176.

42 Ibid., 53.

inevitable pain and tragedy associated with allowing men and women — particularly debauched and vicious men and women — to exercise their moral agency was less than the evil of denying such agency and thereby reducing us to something less than human beings.⁴³

For Lewis, suffering “is not good in itself. What is good in any painful experience is, for the sufferer, his submission to the will of God, and, for the spectators, the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads.”⁴⁴ Suffering is also God’s way of getting our attention, of focusing us on the things of greatest worth, and forcing us to assess the depth and substance of our faith; only then can we learn something about what we are made of and, like Abraham, discover what God already knows about our integrity. “God whispers to us in our pleasures,” Lewis pointed out, “speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”⁴⁵ Thus, God’s love and goodness to us are eternal in nature and work for the ultimate perfection of our character. That love and goodness may not be readily perceived as kind, for often it is through suffering that the dross is burned out and the soul is refined and purified.

God is not just a “senile benevolence” who delights in everyone moving through life in serene, uninterrupted fashion, void of challenges and absent of irony. Indeed, the Almighty has “paid us the intolerable compliment of loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense.”⁴⁶ The scriptures attest that Jesus learned obedience by the things which he suffered (Heb. 5:8) and that our Lord’s personal engagement with temptation and suffering enabled him to be “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Heb. 4:15). Therefore “if tribulation is a necessary element in redemption, we must anticipate that it will never cease till God sees that world to be either redeemed or no further redeemable.”⁴⁷

Latter-day Saints believe that one of the major purposes of mortality is to learn to overcome, to put things into perspective, to keep our passions and desires within the bounds the Lord has set. Some of the greatest challenges to faith come in the form of pain, abuse, seemingly meaningless suffering, ironic tragedy, and man’s inhumanity to man. It is a tenet of Mormonism that pain and suffering are an essential part of

43 See Lewis, *Miracles*, 234.

44 Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 98.

45 Ibid., 83.

46 Ibid., 35–37.

47 Ibid., 102.

God's plan, not something we seek out, to be sure, but a vital dimension of mortality.

Like Lewis, Latter-day Saints believe that God is all-powerful, that he *could* prevent all suffering, stop all abuse, remove even the possibility of inhumanity, and erase all pain — but that he will not. I hasten to add that Mormonism is not ascetic. Latter-day Saints do not seek out persecution nor glory in pain. “Life is an obstacle course,” Truman Madsen observed. “And sometimes it is a spook alley....And some of our prayers [here in this life] are like the gamblers’, ‘Give me the money I made you promise not to give me if I asked for it.’ What does a true friend do in such a case? God will honor our first request, to let us go through it; and He will provide you with...the way to make it bearable. More, to make it productive.”⁴⁸

Elsewhere Madsen, paraphrasing how Joseph Smith might respond to the problem of evil and suffering as follows: “In [God's] relationship to us, ‘all things are possible’ that are possible. But some things are impossible. We cannot have crucial experience without having it. We cannot unfold into His fullness except in His way. We cannot develop without stress nor be perfected without suffering. The belief that we can write ‘God’ in front of these statements and thus remove the ‘nots’ is an illusion that will only end in disillusion.”⁴⁹

The Fate of the Unevangelized

There is one other dimension of the problem of evil and suffering in Lewis that deserves at least brief mention. It is what some Christian scholars have begun to call the “soteriological problem of evil.” It may be stated simply as follows: If God is good, caring, and omni-loving, how can he allow so many of his children to go to their graves without ever having heard of Jesus Christ, the only name under heaven whereby man can be saved (Acts 4:12)? Some have chosen to take a rather restrictive view of the matter and have concluded that because God is all-wise and all-good, and because no one really deserves to be saved anyway, we ought to be forever grateful that a few, relatively speaking, are saved. Others in a similar camp would simply reply that those who have never heard of Jesus were not elected to do so in the grand economy of God anyway. Still others would swing the pendulum toward a more inclusive

48 “Human Anguish and Divine Love,” in *Four Essays on Love*, Truman G. Madsen (Provo: Communications Workshop, 1971), 59.

49 Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 57.

position and thus open the door to a broader definition of “faith in God” or being in Christ.⁵⁰

Lewis explained that “Those who put themselves in [God’s] hands will become perfect, as He is perfect—perfect in love, wisdom, joy, beauty, and immortality. The change will not be completed in this life, for death is an important part of the treatment.”⁵¹ On another occasion he remarked: “Here is another thing that used to puzzle me. Is it not frightfully unfair that this new life [in Christ] should be confined to people who have heard of Christ and been able to believe in Him? But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him.”⁵²

Further, Lewis also said: “There are people (a great many of them) who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name: some of them are clergymen. There are other people who are slowly becoming Christians though they do not yet call themselves so. There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand. There are people in other religions who are being led by God’s secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it....Many of the good Pagans long before Christ’s birth may have been in this position.”⁵³ I would suggest that Clive Staples Lewis is a classic illustration of this principle, that Lewis was led and directed to speak and write on matters of deep significance to the human family, matters that can only be fully grasped through the lenses of the restored gospel. His elevated perspective reaches well beyond what traditional Christianity offers.

In the closing pages of *The Great Divorce*, there is a fascinating conversation between Lewis and George MacDonald. There Lewis is

50 For a detailed treatment of this challenging issue, see John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992); *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996); Clark Pinnock, et. al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

51 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 177.

52 Ibid., 65.

53 Ibid., 178.

taught concerning Christ's descent into hell and told, "There is no spirit in prison to Whom He did not preach." Lewis then asked: "And some hear him?" MacDonald answers: "Aye." Lewis followed up: "In your own books,...you were a Universalist. You talked as if all men would be saved. And St. Paul too." MacDonald then delivered a rather complex and difficult response, but one in which he seems to be saying, in essence, that everyone who desires to be saved will be saved. Lewis did not attempt to correct MacDonald's doctrine for the reader.⁵⁴

Like Lewis, Latter-day Saints are inclusivists and hold out hope for the unevangelized without giving up the belief that Christ is the only way to salvation. We believe, of course, that every person will have the opportunity, either in this life or the next, to receive the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ and enter into the everlasting covenant. Thus Mormons go into temples, receive the ordinances of exaltation for themselves, and then return frequently to perform them in behalf of those who have died without them. In short, Latter-day Saints are involved in what some Evangelicals have called "postmortem evangelism."⁵⁵

Conclusion

Again, my purpose in this article has been to suggest why Latter-day Saints have such a fascination with C. S. Lewis. The fact is his writings touch on doctrinal matters that are at the heart of much of what we believe. It would not take much effort to explore ideas about which Mormons would take issue with Lewis—the nature of God, *ex nihilo* creation, the Nicene Trinity, and a few others. And there are obviously things about Mormonism that would grind on Lewis, both in terms of doctrine and lifestyle. He once remarked in a letter, for example, that he strongly objected "to the tyrannic and unscriptural insolence of anything that calls itself a Church and makes teetotalism a condition of membership."⁵⁶ But again, that is not the purpose of this article. My whole point is that C. S. Lewis is an important religious figure throughout the Christian world, including the world of the Latter-day Saints, and that his influence may be broader than many had even supposed.

54 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945), 121-22.

55 See Gabriel Fackre, "Divine Perseverance," In *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 71-95; Leonhard Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter*, ed. Ferdinand Hahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 253-65.

56 Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, 447.

C. S. Lewis is a thinking man's theologian; a writer whose views are crisp and sharp and challenging. His presentation is neither syrupy nor sentimental on the one hand, nor tedious on the other. His discussions are both spiritually lifting and intellectually stimulating. He himself once described his task and his achievement: "When I began, Christianity came before the great mass of my unbelieving fellow-countrymen either in the highly emotional form offered by revivalists or in the unintelligible language of highly cultured clergymen. Most men were reached by neither. My task was therefore simply that of a translator—one turning Christian doctrine, or what he believed to be such, into the vernacular, into language that the unscholarly people would attend to and could understand."⁵⁷

And perhaps Latter-day Saints have been drawn to Lewis's version of "mere Christianity" because of the ongoing attacks of those who contend that Mormons are not Christian. Lewis wrote: "It is not for us to say who, in the deepest sense, is or is not close to the spirit of Christ. We do not see into men's hearts. We cannot judge, and are indeed forbidden to judge. It would be wicked arrogance for us to say that any man is, or is not, a Christian in this refined sense....When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say that he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian."⁵⁸ In paying tribute to this gifted Christian thinker, one Latter-day Saint observed wisely: "Lewis was able to deal with fundamentals without being fundamentalistic. He sought to revive Christian belief in the minds of men without being revivalistic....He believed that Christianity met every test."⁵⁹

C. S. Lewis was clearly not a closet Latter-day Saint, nor would he have been completely comfortable sitting in a Mormon pew. Like the rest of us, Lewis was a flawed human being, one whose remarkable life is littered here and there with signs of his own fallenness. But he loved God, trusted in and honored Jesus Christ, and it is to such persons that Jesus Christ extends His divine grace—in some cases magnifying goodness into greatness. Lewis partook of a significant portion of that greatness, and consequently millions of earth's fellow travellers feel a deep debt of gratitude for his lasting lessons and his noble legacy.

57 C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 183.

58 Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 10, 11.

59 William Clayton Kimball, "The Christian Commitment: C. S. Lewis and the Defense of Doctrine," *Brigham Young University Studies* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1972), 208.

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