INTERPRETER

A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship

Volume 36 · 2020 · Pages vii - xiv

A Democratic Salvation

Daniel C. Peterson

Offprint Series

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org. You may subscribe to this journal at InterpreterFoundation.org/annual-print-subscription.

A Democratic Salvation

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *Over the centuries, many religious thinkers — precisely because they are religious thinkers — have put a premium on intellectual attainment as a prerequisite for salvation. This has sometimes yielded an elitism or snobbishness that is utterly foreign to the teachings of the Savior. The Gospel as taught in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints values education and knowledge, certainly. But not unduly. Intellectuals, while heartily welcome among the Saints and, when faithful, much appreciated for their potential contributions to the Church, have no claim on any special status in the Kingdom simply because of their (real or pretended) intellectuality, whether here or in the hereafter.*

A recurring theme in the texts that I read with my Islamic philosophy class during the coronavirus-truncated Winter 2020 term at Brigham Young University — particularly, I think, in the *Faṣl al-Maqāl* ("The Decisive Treatise") of Ibn Rushd and in Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* ("Alive, Son of Awake") — is the notion that the full theological and philosophical truth should be restricted only to the elite. It should, so these two twelfth-century Andalusian texts argue, be carefully and deliberately withheld from people disqualified by their (presumably inferior) natures from being able to deal with it. In some interpretations, Ibn Rushd may even have argued that only intellectuals of the most rarified class — and, really, only their intellects, not their emotions or individual personalities — would attain immortality or eternal life.

I'm afraid that intellectuals are *often* prone to elevate themselves among the *electi* and to look down from that lofty perch upon the mere *auditores*.[1] Ancient Gnosticism, for instance, which took its name from the Greek word γνωστικός (*gnōstikós*, "having knowledge"), was all

1. I borrow the terms *elect* and *auditors* from ancient descriptions of the Iranian religious sect Manichaeism, which, for a while, was a serious rival to

about what and how much one *knew*. Consider this passage, from the Gospel of John:

> So the people were in two minds about him — some of them wanted to arrest him, but so far no one laid hands on him.
>
> Then the officers returned to the Pharisees and chief priests, who said to them, "Why haven't you brought him?"
>
> "No man ever spoke like that!" they replied.
>
> "Has he pulled the wool over your eyes, too?" retorted the Pharisees. "Have any of the authorities or any of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, who know nothing about the Law, is damned anyway!" (John 7:43–49, J. B. Phillips translation)

What about the masses? Who cares?

Such dismissiveness is not confined to scriptural stories of long-gone peoples. Decades back, I sat in a seminar room in Denver where a presenter at an academic conference was setting forth her reading of James W. Fowler's fairly well-known 1981 book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. In that book, Fowler (1940-2015), an American theologian affiliated with Emory University, distinguished seven stages of spiritual growth. I remember the thought crossing my mind that the characteristics of the highest stage of Professor Fowler's seven levels were curiously similar to the views and attitudes of, say, a professor of theology at a liberal Protestant divinity school.

There seems a powerful tendency among people who theorize about God — perhaps particularly in the absence of contradicting experience or revelation — to imagine Him in their own image. And this occurs even among those who try hard to avoid what they consider "crude" or "vulgar" or "primitive" anthropomorphism.[2]

Consider this passage, for example, from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which, according to that truly great early thinker, God spends His time (or, perhaps better, given Aristotle's view of the nature of God, *Its* time) like a philosopher — indeed, and not coincidentally, like Aristotle himself. Famously, Aristotle's deity is the Unmoved Mover, which does

---

ancient Christianity and then to classical Islam. But similar distinctions between two tiers of adherents have been common in many religious movements.

2. I've long wanted to catalogue the negative adjectives that commonly accompany the word *anthropomorphism* in theological and other scholarly writing. The concept of divine anthropomorphism is apparently so threatening to some writers that it seldom stands alone, without receiving a defensive kick.

not act but, rather, thinks high thoughts and contemplates the loftiest of subjects:

> The nature of the divine thought involves certain problems; for while thought is held to be the most divine of things observed by us, the question how it must be situated in order to have that character involves difficulties. For if it thinks of nothing, what is there here of dignity? It is just like one who sleeps. And if it thinks … [d]oes it matter … or not, whether it thinks of the good or of any chance thing? Are there not some things about which it is incredible that it should think? Evidently, then, it thinks of that which is most divine and precious … Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things).[3]

In Aristotle's conception, God's sole activity is a philosopher's dream. God is "thought, thinking itself" (*noesis noeseos*), contemplating the only thing in the universe worthy of His attention, namely Himself.

According to some of the classical rabbis, God spends his time like, well, like a rabbi. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (*aka* Judah the Prince, ca. AD 135–217), for example, held that God's day is divided into four portions of three hours each. During the second period of the divine day, God judges the world. During the next three hours, He sustains the world and everything in it, "from the horns of wild oxen to the eggs of lice." During the fourth and last period, He sports with Leviathan. But what of the first three hours of each day? Those are devoted to studying the Torah.[4]

According to the Babylonian Talmud, study of the Torah is equal in value to all of the *mitzvot* or commandment obligations to honor one's parents, perform deeds of loving kindness, and bring peace between one person and another.[5] In fact, since it is one of the few commandments for which a person is allowed to move far away from his parents without their permission, it may be considered to be, in one sense, even greater than the honoring of father and mother.[6]

---

3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, 2 vols. (1924; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), see esp. book 12, part 9, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.12.xii.html.

4. Avodah Zarah 3b in The *Babylonian Talmud*, trans., Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino Press, 1948), https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Talmud. Compare Gittin 6b.

5. Shabbat 127a in *The Babylonian Talmud*.

6. Megillah 16b in *The Babylonian Talmud*.

Notably, the rabbis — descendants, in an important sense, of the Pharisees of the time of Jesus — value their occupation of studying the law more highly than the activities of their historic priestly rivals, represented in the New Testament by the Sadducees.

In the rabbis' judgment, for example, Torah study is of more value than the offering of the daily temple sacrifice.[7] Indeed, according to one tractate in the Babylonian Talmud, the Lord told King David that "A single day in which you sit and engage in Torah is preferable to Me than the thousand burnt-offerings that your son Solomon will offer before Me on the altar."[8] "Even a gentile who engages in the study of Torah is like a high priest," declares one Talmudic tractate.[9] In fact, even an illegitimate child of incest or adultery, if learned in the Torah, is of more worth than a Torah-ignorant high priest.[10]

Given such a high valuation of Torah study, Tevye, the milkman protagonist of *Fiddler on the Roof* who lives in the small rabbi-led Jewish *shtetl* of Anatevka in Tsarist Russia, makes perfect sense. He daydreams about what life would be if he were a wealthy man, singing

> If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack
> To sit in the synagogue and pray,
> And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall.
> And I'd discuss the learned books with the holy men,
> seven hours every day.
> That would be the sweetest thing of all.[11]

Taken to its extreme, the view that intellectual study of the scriptures is equal or superior to living the commandments or engaging in the rituals of worship is a dramatically undemocratic and elitist point of view. It is also one that is quite foreign to most Christian sensibilities and, in fairness, to mainstream Islam and probably to most Jews. The Sermon on the Mount has absolutely nothing to say about intellectual attainments or cultural sophistication.

Classical philosophers, extremely devout rabbis, and modern academics are certainly not alone in fashioning God in their own image. If God is fashioned after such lofty individuals, then we are, indeed, left with the same questions: What about the masses? Who cares?

7. Eruvin 63b in *The Babylonian Talmud*.
8. Shabbat 30a in *The Babylonian Talmud*.
9. Avodah Zarah 3a in *The Babylonian Talmud*.
10. Horayot 13a in *The Babylonian Talmud*.
11. Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock, "If I Were a Rich Man" from *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964).

God cares! He has given us a Gospel that is sufficiently profound for the deepest thinkers but simple enough for children and the unlearned.

> For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."
>
> Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? … For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.
>
> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Corinthians 1:19-20, 25–29, NIV)

It should not be controversial to note the obvious — that Jesus, the twelve disciples, and certainly Joseph Smith had more in common with the masses than the academic aristocracy.

Many, many years back, among the men who sometimes worked for our family's southern California construction company, was a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He wasn't a well-educated man. His grammar was poor, and I have sometimes joked, in recalling him to my wife and kids, that he had no idea at all where to locate 2 Nephi in the Old Testament. But even as a rather young boy, I noticed that he was the first to arrive at service projects and the last to leave, and that he was at every single such project in which I ever participated and probably a great many besides. If there was a widow's house to be fixed, he was there. Sometimes I was, too, but I had little to offer. I realized then that, while he was far from sophisticated or urbane and while I aspired in those days to be at least somewhat more sophisticated and urbane than I then was, he was worth at least two of me. I was convinced then and am confident now that he will occupy a wonderful place in the Celestial Kingdom.

Years later, but still a long time ago, I was driving my youngest son and one of his friends to a preschool class. They were in the back seat, chattering away. I was scarcely listening.

Suddenly, one of them observed that their preschool teacher was "really, really hard." The other agreed, and then added "But I've heard that kindergarten is even *worse*."

I think that I laughed aloud. They had no idea what was coming their way in the future: American history, algebra, biology, trigonometry, calculus, physics. Homework. Term papers. Class presentations. Heck, *Mr. Clark* was still ahead of them.[12]

I hadn't been thinking about religion or doctrine at all, but the thought came to me, unbidden, that my overhearing their naïve but confident declarations must be rather like the way our Father listens to us as we talk about doctrine. The image came to my mind of the Father, seated in heaven, contemplating the world below Him. Suddenly, He calls to the angels who surround the throne: "Come over here! Quickly!" And He gestures for them to look down with Him. "The High Priests are speculating again. Aren't they cute!"

It occurred to me that the distance between a small child and even the wisest and most intelligent adult (don't worry, I'm not assigning myself to that class) is far less than the distance between the wisest, most intelligent and learned of us and God.

"For now," wrote the learned apostle and prophet Paul, who had seen so much, "we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe puts it in the Prologue to his *Faust* (Part One):

> *Das Alter macht nicht kindisch, wie man spricht,*
>
> *Es findet uns nur noch als wahre Kinder.*
>
> Old age doesn't make us childish, as is said.
>
> It simply finds us still true children.[13]

And if God cares about ordinary people, so should we. Not least because we are, all of us, among those ranks.

A beloved passage from C. S. Lewis occurs in a sermon, entitled "The Weight of Glory," that he delivered in the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, on 8 June 1941:

> It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you

12. See Dan Peterson, "The passing of a truly remarkable Latter-day Saint," *Patheos* (blog), December 27, 2017, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/danpeterson/2017/12/passing-truly-remarkable-latter-day-saint.html.

13. The English translation is mine.

> saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations — 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 — immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.[14]

So, does God care about intellectual prowess? I am sure that He does, in much the same way that He cares about skill and craftsmanship and administrative ability when they are devoted to doing good and building His kingdom.

A motto prominently associated with Brigham Young University, where I have spent by far the largest portion of my life, declares that "The Glory of God is Intelligence." This is scriptural, and true. And I hope that it urges both faculty and students on to the accumulation of knowledge and insight. But we misunderstand it profoundly if we imagine that it is only or even primarily about academic achievement or cleverness. We need to read the passage in its context:

> The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth. Light and truth forsake that evil one. (D&C 93:36–37)

Plainly, the "intelligence" spoken of here is not ethically neutral fact or technique. It has a moral and spiritual dimension. It is oriented toward God, and away from darkness. It might more aptly be compared to wisdom than to the kind of knowledge that one can get simply by learning formulas or dates or atomic numbers.

I close with the near-death experience that Hugh Nibley had as a young man in southern California in 1936, complete with the famous postmortem tunnel (decades before Raymond Moody wrote about it in his bestselling book *Life After Life*). Decades later, Nibley recalled that:

> Not only was I in all possession of my faculties, but they were tremendous. I was light as a feather and ready to go, you see, and above all I was interested in problems. I had missed out

14. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, rev. ed. (1949; repr., New York: HarperOne, 1980), 45-46.

> on a lot of math and stuff like that … Well, five minutes and I can make up for that …
>
> So that gives me a great relief. So that's why I don't take this very seriously down here [on Earth]. We just are sort of dabbling around, playing around, being tested for our moral qualities — and, above all, the two things we can be good at, and no two other things can we do: we can forgive and we can repent.[15]

That is the intelligence that God seems to value. And it is available to all. Even to the elite.

Daniel C. Peterson *(PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author of, among other things, a biography entitled* Muhammad: Prophet of God *(Eerdmans, 2007).*

15. Boyd J. Petersen, *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life* (Sandy, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2002), 115-16.