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ADAM MILLER'S NEW HERMENEUTIC?

Robert F. Smith

Review of Adam S. Miller (Collin College, McKinney, TX). Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology. Foreword by Richard Lyman Bushman. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2012. 162 pp., with bibliography and indexes. \$18.95. Paperback and e-book formats.

Whatever else spirit may be, we experience spirit as an interpenetrating weave of thoughts, ideas, judgments, feelings, passions, desires, and aversions. Though rooted in the body, this weave of spirit involves a dimension of looped awareness and reflexivity that is finer and harder to discern than those that belong to the body itself. (p. 42)

Crazy Wisdom

This book is not a novel. It is not the Mormon version of Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*—which may have been a variation on John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*—but one can nevertheless find an echo of the careful wordsmith in each.

In this disparate collection of essays (some previously published), Adam Miller at times virtually sings Walt Whitman's body electric, though mostly eschewing the scat element of his recent interpretation of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.¹

1. Adam S. Miller, "Sitting, Full of ***," *Speculative Non-Buddhism*, 28 July 2012, online at <http://speculativenonbuddhism.com>. In his book, Miller

At other times, he is the virtual alter ego of Baba Ram Dass (Richard Alpert)² or of George Carlin³ through his equally wry and liquid observations on the human comedy. He even seems to follow both George Handley and Jerzy Kosinski on “Being There.” As Handley said, “The body is the cup in which to drink the world.”⁴ Miller allows us to accompany him, as it were, on his voyage of discovery in *Das fliegende Boot*, even invoking Wallace Stegner along with Handley:

If the body is a river, then the soul is a watershed. Like a shirt pulled off over your head, this thesis leaves the soul inside-out and exposed. You thought your soul was a kernel of atomic interiority, your most secret part—but as you stand there, shirt in hand, everyone can see your navel. (p. 50)

Through it all, Miller laughs uproariously and with happy self-deprecation at the entire theological enterprise, even if he at times adopts a moralistic pose and comes up with some darn good scriptural interpretations—maybe even a new hermeneutic. This is a guy you would do well to have lunch with—if you enjoy earnest quips with your burger and fries (animal style) or with your egg foo yung (with mushroom sauce). You pick up the tab. It would be worth it! “The more ordinary the stuff, the

actually cites Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), two brilliant exponents of Buddhism. He also recognizes the “sacred syllable OM” as a “subtext” of theology (Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 1).

2. Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (San Cristobal, NM: Lama Foundation, 1971; repr., Santa Fe, NM: Hanuman Foundation, 1977), especially section 2, which is a free-form collection of metaphysical, spiritual, and religious aphorisms.

3. George Carlin, *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* (New York: Hyperion, 2005).

4. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 52, citing George B. Handley, *Home Waters: A Year of Recompenses on the Provo River* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010), 38; see Jerzy Kosinski, *Being There* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970–71; repr., New York: Grove Press, 1999), a biting satire on American media culture—which, not incidentally, was plagiarized from a Polish novel of the 1920s, *The Career of Nikodem Dyzma* by Tadeusz Dolega-Mostowicz.

more material the objects, the sturdier their composition, the better for theology. You can't build a working machine if you rely too much on supernatural ephemera" (p. xiv).

Miller likes to "get down" and deal with the nitty gritty, even if there is a useless, Rube Goldberg quality to the odd and often intangible results. As a Bengali monk (Swami Chetanananda of Saint Louis) once explained it to me, "A path is not a home," suggesting that the journey which never ends contains within itself the meaning for which we desperately seek, but which we seldom find. Miller does not sit at home. Yet neither does he simply take the path. He *hits the road*! "Good theologians need two skills above all others: they must be shameless packrats and they must be imaginative tinkers" (p. xiv).

Miller thinks outside the box. If you are seeking a paradigm shift, he just might have one for you—as long as you are willing to engage his sometimes unorthodox ways of finding an untrodden path to verisimilitude. Miller can, however, be as serious as well as a laughing bodhisattva, which one can discern in his 2005 interview of Gregory Baum.⁵ As Miller himself says, "non-sequential thinking . . . is a kind of attention that foregrounds an awareness of the present moment as unconditionally present" (p. 9).

For he does take issue with the "explicit valorization of grace" as part of "a strongly sequential . . . theology" enunciated, for example, by Stephen Robinson, because it fails to see that "grace is the unconditional fullness of the present moment."⁶

If we do not find some way to lay down the burden that is our pride and vanity, then our names will not be found in the Lamb's book of life. If we do not choose

5. Adam S. Miller, "An Interview with Gregory Baum: 'Faith, Community, & Liberation,'" *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture* 2/2 (2005): 23–30, online at <http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue2-2/Baum/Baum.pdf>.

6. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 8–9, citing Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 30–34.

to wear out our lives in the service of God and in the service of others, then our names will not be found elsewhere. (p. 45)

The root of every sin: the vanity of pride. (p. 113, citing Ezra Taft Benson)

Anachrony

His musings on the historicity of the Book of Mormon are particularly pointed and focus on the anachronism of it, even leading him to revel in the anachronicity of messianism itself:

The brute material incongruity of an object's continuing subsistence stares back at us in a way that calls into question the hegemony of the present moment. . . . While the universal historian, bent on progress and causally myopic, is only able to look *through* objects, the collector [Mormon] is able to look *at* them and stay with them. (p. 31)

What has always mattered most is that *there is* such a book. Joseph had transcendent visions and midnight visits from angels, but his experiences also produced this brute material thing and its sheer material incongruity is, of itself, incontrovertible. (p. 32)

Nothing is more disconcerting to the historically attuned reader than to find Hebrew prophets predicting with great precision the details of Jesus' life and ministry—except, perhaps, the ways that the Book of Mormon so profoundly and unabashedly employs the theological vocabulary and addresses the religious aporias of nineteenth century rural America. (pp. 33–34)⁷

7. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 33–34, citing Charles Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*”: *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2012).

Miller is not the first to have commented upon the disconcertingly strong and anachronistic “pre-advent Christian message” of the Book of Mormon, which “is manifest both in terms of the details it gives about future events in the life of Christ and in terms of the highly developed Christian vocabulary its sermons use.”⁸ His appeal to the “anachrony” of messianism to explain this problem, however, misses two important points: (1) Jewish scholars have already noted the strongly messianic interpretation of the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah at Qumran,⁹ and (2) the “highly developed” Christian terminology we are all familiar with is largely derived from a 1611 King James Version of the Bible, which was in turn dependent upon the previous translations of Tyndale and Wycliffe.¹⁰ The KJV translation committees, heavily dependent upon this already extant tradition, also employed very different languages: Hebrew for the Old Testament, and Greek for the New Testament. No attempt was made to correlate the parallel, equivalent terms used in both testaments. So the very different English terminology of the two testaments has now been given absolute status by those who know nothing of the languages and of the entirely Jewish tradition from which all New Testament terms were derived. This has led those who do not know any better to speak loosely of the “Christianizing of the Old Testament,”¹¹ which is utter nonsense.

8. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 21.

9. Israel Knohl, *The Messiah before Jesus: The Suffering Servant of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Michael O. Wise, *The First Messiah: Investigating the Savior Before Christ* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1999); cf. Claude G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (New York: Macmillan, 1930; repr., New York: Ktav, 1970); Claude G. Montefiore, “What a Jew Thinks about Jesus,” *Hibbert Journal* 33/4 (1935): 511–20.

10. Brian Moynahan, *God’s Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible—A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003); Jon Nielson and Royal Skousen, “How Much of the King James Bible Is William Tyndale’s? An Estimation Based on Sampling,” *Reformation* 3 (1998): 49–74.

11. Melodie Moench Charles, “The Mormon Christianizing of the Old Testament,” *Sunstone* 5/6 (1980): 35–39, with a response from Lowell Bennion on p. 40; reprinted in *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan

Pure Testimony

Aside from that short trek some distance off the true path, Miller seeks to put first things first (the Atonement) and to puncture some of our most closely held assumptions about the nature of a testimony and of Moroni's promise (Moroni 10:3–5): “Who would be more horrified by the idea of people having a testimony of the Book of Mormon than Mormon?” (p. 65).

Channeling the constant *talib* within him, Miller completely eschews any “testimony grounded in signs” since it “is the perpetual temptation of religion” to “want ‘a form of godliness’ while ‘denying the power thereof’ (2 Tim. 3:5).”¹² Thus, real testimonies do not describe the world as it is, but rather cause us “to surrender [*islam*] our lives to the impossible possibilities [God] offers.”¹³ “Testimonies are essential because they reveal, in light of the Atonement, how things *can* be” (p. 68). And, despite the anachrony, Miller does have a powerful testimony:

Mormonism has . . . been marrow to my bones, joy to my heart, light to my eyes, music to my ears, and life to my whole being. Thus lit up, I woke to find Jesus leaning over me, smiling wide, with the Book of Mormon snapped like smelling salts beneath my nose. (p. 126, citing Parley P. Pratt)

Egoistic Search for Novelty

Miller understands quite well that “life is all nickels and dimes,”¹⁴ that there is not much novelty in “enduring to the

Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 131–42, but with the Bennion response removed. Reviewed by Kevin Christensen in *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 59–90, online at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/review/?vol=16&num=2&id=547>.

12. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 65.

13. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 71.

14. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 122.

end,” and that “shucked bare of hope for something else, [one] is able to invert the nihilism of life’s repetition into compassion only after its rough-edged iteration has worn his heart smooth.”¹⁵ “Novelty is a red herring: the last refuge of that dream that is your ego (pp. 121, 124). Moreover, “Writing is an ascetic discipline. It pares us down” (p. 99).

This is merely the barest of hints as to the deep value of Miller’s meditations. Had he known that this fine and provocative collection would be forthcoming, Eugene England would have waited around a bit longer. . . . As it is, Gene will be waiting (along with Brother Joseph) to give Miller a big hug on the other side.

הנה מזה טוב ומה נעים שבת אחים גם יחד

“How nice it is to sit together with brothers!”

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15. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines*, 123.

