Believing Adoption

Samuel M. Brown

> *For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.*
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> —Paul to the Church in Rome (Romans 8:15–17)

At the conclusion of my formal historical work on adoption theology in the earliest Restoration,[1] I felt drawn to reflect as a believer on the meaning of this theological and conceptual system. During my study of the contexts, connotations, and currents of early LDS adoption theology, I experienced what a famed scholar of late antiquity has called "salutary vertigo."[2] The more I investigated, the more I realized that the earliest Latter-day Saints saw the world differently than I do. From this vertiginous vantage point, though, I have gained a greater awareness of the truth, power, and beauty of the earliest Restoration. I present these reflections on adoption theology not as a formal work of philosophy, theology, or history, but as one believer's personal encounter with this set of concepts from the early years of the Restoration.

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1. Samuel M. Brown, "Early Mormon Adoption Theology and the Mechanics of Salvation," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (2011): 3–52; and Samuel M. Brown, "The 'Lineage of My Preasthood' and the Chain of Belonging," in *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 203–47.

2. Peter R. L. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xvii.

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By profession, Samuel Morris Brown is a physician and assistant professor of medicine. By avocation, he articulates the history and meaning of distinctive Latter-day Saint ideas, specifically illuminating the vibrant fabric of what academics call "lived religion." His real-life experiences—with his wife, Kate Holbrook, and children, as well as through attending to critically ill patients—have imbued his academic reflections with considerable real-world insight.

This article explores the possible implications of his two recent publications. In 2011, he wrote a seminal article for the *Journal of Mormon History*, entitled "Early Mormon Adoption Theology and the Mechanics of Salvation"; in 2012, Oxford University Press published his *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death*. "Believing Adoption" personalizes and moves forward his study of LDS adoption theology and divine parenthood.

Readers may also want to review Gordon Irving's article "The Law of Adoption" in *BYU Studies* 14, no. 3, and parts of Douglas Davies's *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (London: Ashgate, 2000). Brown's new work "bonds" with the view, as Davies describes it, that overcoming "death was a crucial factor in the emergence of Mormonism as it also is in its continuing success" (3), all the while revealing layer upon layer of subjects previously treated only on the surface.

Brown's informative and creative material ponders spiritual meanings in realms where answers are not always readily available. Yet as an old proverb rightly says, a good question is half an answer. Samuel Brown asks just such questions. Whether his ideas here should be understood ontologically, soteriologically, or sacerdotally, there is much to be gained by building new theses on old foundations. Like the faithful scribe who brings forth out of his treasury things both "new and old" (Matt. 13:52), Samuel Brown compellingly illuminates and opens the way for much fruitful thought.

—BYU Studies Editors

First, a word about adoption, a theology that has become unfamiliar to many Latter-day Saints. The Apostle Paul, most famously in the epigraph to this essay, taught that Christ could adopt Gentiles into the Israelite covenant.[3] This adoption generally meant two things to antebellum American Protestants: a step on the road to personal sanctification, and entry into the family of God. Joseph Smith appears to have begun his religious career with a reasonably Protestant view of adoption. This view changed dramatically, however, as he struggled prophetically with fundamental questions: How big was the society of heaven? Who could and would join it? What did election mean? What were the mechanics of salvation? What happened to one's offspring in the afterlife? Could their salvation be guaranteed? What role did one's ancestors play in the salvation community? As he answered these questions, Joseph rapidly expanded the notion of adoption to incorporate patriarchal blessings and their associated priesthood, his genealogical revision of the Great Chain of Being, baptism for the dead, the temple endowment, and polygamy.[4] During Joseph Smith's lifetime, the rites of adoption were the seals of the temple, expressed through baptism for the dead and eternal marital sealings. Adoption into the family of God was at once the means and the definition of salvation. Heaven was an interlocking network of people who had committed to God and to each other; the works of salvation were works of connection and building a Zion community. Under Brigham Young, adoption became specific rites called "adoption" or the "Law of Adoption" that ultimately merged back into lineal family sealings in the 1890s under Wilford Woodruff.

This early Mormon adoption theology had important implications. First, Joseph had solved the vexing Calvinist problem of election, framed in early Mormonism as the belief that people could not know whether they had been saved in advance. Second, humans could be

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3. On Paul's theological uses of adoption, see Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), 67–99, discussing a legal metaphor in Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; Galatians 4:5, and Ephesians 1:5. Compare also the image of grafting into the olive tree in Romans 11; see James E. Faulconer, "The Olive Tree and the Work of God: Jacob 5 and Romans 11," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree,* ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1994), 347–66.

4. Samuel M. Brown, "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (2011): 1–52.

surrogate saviors, "Saviors on Mount Zion"; in this role they could seal loved ones simultaneously to salvation and to themselves. This salvation (often called exaltation) was radically, intrinsically collective and communal. The adoption theology of the early Saints served as a dramatic and sustained protest against Protestant theology, the individualism of America's increasingly complex market economy, and the evolving nuclear family of early Victorianism.

Rather than revisit the history of adoption theology in detail,[5] in this essay I consider what adoption theology means to me as an active, believing Latter-day Saint in the early twenty-first century. As I have considered adoption theology from a devotional and practical perspective, I have come to believe that this distinctive legacy of the Restoration informs at least three important questions: spirit birth, the nature of salvation, and the shape of what I term the heaven family, by which I mean the interlocking network of familial connection that will exist in the afterlife. I do not propose this discussion as normative for the modern Church but as a possible voice in our continued thinking about these complex ideas, always guided by the compass of continuing revelation. I do not believe that particular readings of Joseph Smith should be proposed as superior to the teachings of current Church authorities. Our history is littered with the marks of schismatics who believed they saw better than Joseph Smith or one of his successors. I propose these reflections by way of conversation about the rich texture and beauty of the Restoration and the applied meanings of its doctrines. I expect that I will be wrong in places, that much work remains to be done, but I believe this is a conversation worth having.

Spirit Birth

Adoption theology provides an important window on what has come to be called the doctrine of "spirit birth," most commonly associated

5. For thorough treatments of adoption theology, see Brown, "Early Mormon Adoption Theology"; and the expert treatment of the post-Smithian period in Jonathan A. Stapley, "Adoptive Sealing Ritual in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (2011): 53–117. Gordon Irving's useful article, "The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1900," *BYU Studies* 14, no. 3 (1974): 291–314, is now dated and primarily describes the law of adoption in its latter-nineteenth-century version without considering the theology underlying it or exploring its roots in Joseph Smith's teachings. On the historical period generally, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

with Parley and Orson Pratt.[6] By 1845, several Church leaders were arguing publicly that Joseph Smith's divine anthropology[7] required a birth from prespirit into spirit, a transition graphically patterned on the process of gestation and parturition familiar from human biology.[8] There is a relentless, albeit asymmetrical, logic in this attempt to describe the internal workings of the system Joseph Smith had revealed only in broad contours. If parenthood is the central relationship of the cosmos, then the relatively undifferentiated beings who witnessed the rise of Elohim through mortal saviorhood (according to an influential interpretation of Smith's late theology) to exaltation would have become his children, according to Orson Pratt and the others who followed, through a birthing process. They could as easily have chosen the spiritual rebirth of conversion and baptism, or the covenantal fatherhood proclaimed by King Benjamin, or the rebirth of resurrection as the exemplar for the process of premortal birth, but they chose mortal parenthood as their reference point. For over a century, the doctrine of spirit birth has inflamed Christian critics, providing them with scandalous images of pregnant goddesses in togas scattered about the Mormon heaven. Within the Church, on the other hand, this doctrine has become a touchstone for traditional beliefs surrounding the literal, ontological associations between God and humans exemplified by the LDS hymns

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6. I am grateful to Jonathan Stapley and Terryl Givens for conversations on this topic. Stapley and I came to this concept in parallel in 2007 during our research on adoption theology; our collaboration on adoption has been a great boon to me. Givens explores spirit birth in detail in his *The Cosmos, the Divine, the Human,* volume 1 of Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought (forthcoming, Oxford University Press).

7. This is the term I use to describe the teachings of the Prophet Joseph regarding the nature of God and humanity as members of the same species. See Brown, "Divine Anthropology: Divining the Suprahuman Chain," in *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 248–78.

8. Orson Pratt taught spirit birth in a catechism published in summer 1844 in *Prophetic Almanac for 1845* (New York: *The Prophet* office, 1845), 4–5, and William Phelps may have taught something like spirit birth by spring 1845. See Samuel M. Brown, "William Phelps's Paracletes, an Early Witness to Joseph Smith's Divine Anthropology," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 62–82. Lorenzo Snow had speculated about "spiritual births in eternity" as early as 1842. Lorenzo Snow to Elder Walker, February 14, 1842, Lorenzo Snow Notebook 1841–1842, MS 2737, pp. 75–77, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. Private formulations of spirit birth almost certainly began somewhat earlier.

"O My Father" and "I Am a Child of God." Popular beliefs have followed and benefited from doctrinal supports. A variety of authoritative voices from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, including Brigham Young, James E. Talmage, and Bruce R. McConkie, have concurred with such a reading of the process by which we matured before mortality as the children of God.[9]

Spirit birth as traditionally understood is not the only account of God's parenthood, though. I propose, on the basis of extant documents and their contexts, that Joseph Smith probably did not teach Orson Pratt's specific doctrine.[10] Joseph was never entirely satisfied with biology alone—he and Emma suffered three stillbirths before finally receiving Joseph III and adopting the Murdock twins during their bereavement over the stillbirths of Thaddeus and Luisa. The early Saints often experienced the stress exemplified by Jesus's warning that the gospel would "set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother" (Matt. 10:35). However much he cherished his physical offspring, the Prophet created patterns of family life based on choice and commitment more than on the vicissitudes of biology. Relationships would not rest solely, according to Joseph, on the mere happenstances of biological reproduction.

An account of God's parenthood based in adoption fits well in early Restoration scripture. In the premortal world, God desired the further progression, development, and happiness of the intelligent spirits who surrounded him. In an act of intense metaphysical and sacerdotal power, Elohim claimed these intelligences as his own—he "adopted" them, organizing them into a celestial kindred. Recognizing the ontological affinities between himself and the uncreated spiritual beings who became his children, God brought us out of our earliest existence and into the relationship that represented our development as spirit children. Joseph taught that we are all self-existent in some fundamental way but that we are interdependent, and God's great creative act was

9. Givens, *The Cosmos, the Divine, the Human,* discusses twentieth-century beliefs about spirit birth.

10. The evidence that Joseph Smith taught spirit birth is from later reminiscences and does not meet modern historiographical standards. Brian Hales, "'A Continuation of the Seeds': Joseph Smith and Spirit Birth," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 4 (2012): 105–30, recounts later echoes but does not reliably tie the specific doctrine to Joseph Smith. Joseph's use of "seeds" in D&C 132:19 invokes images of Abraham's seed and does not reliably distinguish between spirit birth and adoption.

acknowledging and embracing that interdependence. This seems to be the meaning of Joseph's reference in his King Follett Discourse to the fact that in the premortal existence God, "find[ing] himself in the midst of spirit and glory because he was greater[,] saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself."[11] This language returned to the images of the book of Abraham, in which God "organized" the intelligences about him, a word that evokes a subtle merger of law and agency and community and hierarchy.[12]

The view of God's fatherhood as adoption appears to be the meaning of Brigham Young's sermons and dreams of February 1847. Struggling ardently to understand what Joseph Smith had intended for the rituals of adoption, Brigham preached on the 16th and then had an inspired dream the next afternoon. In his dream, he "went to see Joseph" and told the martyred Prophet, "The Bretheren have grate anxiety to understand the law of adoption or seeling principls and I said if you have a word of councel for me I shall be glad to receive it." Joseph then instructed Brigham to

> tell the Peopel to be humble and faithful and sure to keep the sperit of the Lord and it will lead them right be careful and not turne away the smal still voice it will teach how to due and where to goe it will yeald the fruits of the Kingdom . . . if they will they will find them selves jest as they ware organ[ized] by our Father in Heven before they came into the world. our Father in heven organized the human family but they are all disorganized and in grate confusion, then he shewed me the patern how they they [*sic*] ware in the beginning this I cannot describe but saw it and where the Preast hood had ben taken from the Earth and how it must be joined to gether so there would be a perfect chane from Father Adam to his latest posterity he said tell the people to be sure to keep the spiret of the [Lord] and follow it and it woul lead them jest right.[13]

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11. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph,* Religious Studies Monograph Series, no. 6 (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 360, William Clayton's transcript. The Bullock report indicates that God found "himself in the midst of Sp[irits] & bec[ause?] he saw proper to institute laws for those who were in less intelligence that they mit. have one glory upon another in all that knowledge power & glory & so took in hand to save the world of Sp[irits]." Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith,* 352.

12. See Abraham 3, which combines the Chain of Belonging with cosmogony narratives; discussion in Brown, "Chain of Belonging."

13. Brigham Young Dream, February 17, 1847, Brigham Young Office Files 1832–1878 (bulk 1844–1877), Church History Library.

This dream validated his sermon of the day before, during a family meeting at which he delivered his best-known sermon on adoption.[14] In the sermon and the dream, Brigham made clear that the law of adoption was the method by which the cosmos was to be "organized" during and after mortality; the mortal organization of relational seals solemnized in temple rites reflected the premortal organization. We could see this sermon, in light of Brigham Young's later endorsement of spirit birth, as indicating that we have misunderstood the details of his teachings about spirit birth, or that he felt that adoption mattered most and his spirit birth teachings were a speculation about mechanisms whereby adoption could be effected.

I want to be clear that I reject the caricature of Pratt's spirit birth doctrine as a heaven filled with eternally pregnant goddesses arrayed in celestial harems.[15] Such a view, advanced by partisan evangelicals and some secular critics, is crudely inflected by Victorian ideas about the meaning of sexuality. If indeed generativeness—creativeness, the transition of being from simple to complex, a kind of metaphysical anti-entropy—stands as the essence of afterlife, then why would gestation and parturition not be sacred constituents of that experience? According to one reading of the Hebrew Bible's cosmogony, it was the Fall from paradise that made of gestation and parturition the difficult and uncomfortable processes we know in this life. The mechanisms of creation and "increase" in heaven are likely to be as gloriously superior to what we know after the Fall as the rest of our lives will be. It is a lack of imagination that takes what could be a radically egalitarian, expansive view of the afterlife and turns it into a derisive image of female exploitation. That we humans have not always been righteous in our treatments of sex roles and the social status of women does not mean that heaven will be similarly broken. Gestation and parturition in heaven could easily be the glorious focal point of eternal creation. I do not reject Pratt's elaboration of Smith's theology because I think it is crass or crude or insulting. I believe that in the right context and connotation such a doctrine could in fact be sublime. I am not drawn to spirit birth primarily because I do not believe it accurately reflects Joseph Smith's teachings. In this case, the biological may obscure the meaning of the sacred.

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14. Wilford Woodruff, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript,* ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–1985), 3:127–37.

15. While Orson Pratt did imagine something like the caricatured view, the meaning of his depiction differs from that of critics.

In some respects, the tension between spirit birth and premortal adoption reflects a question of what the metaphysical law of correspondence really means and entails.[16] Correspondence, an organizing principle for natural philosophy from antiquity through Neoplatonism to early modern folk religiosity, maintains that there are parallels between human and cosmic planes of existence. Heaven and earth share structures and meaning; their harmony expresses the divine will and the natural order of things. In one formulation, correspondence means that "as above, so below." In its most basic form, correspondence maintains that similarities between the human and cosmic planes of existence are both meaningful and powerful. In terms favored by learned adherents, the "microcosm" ("small world," representing human life or the human body) parallels the "macrocosm" ("large world," representing the galaxy or universe), and microcosm and macrocosm influence each other. As Orson Pratt expounded spirit birth, he seems to have believed that the microcosm of earthly gestation and parturition defined the macrocosm of eternal increase. He may also have thought that Smith's teachings about a spiritual creation before physical creation (for example, in Moses 3) suggested the need for a spiritual birth before physical birth.

Orson Pratt's choice was not the only one available to the Saints after Joseph's death. An adoptive model of our premortal relationship with God may be every bit as important and binding as the biologically intoned images of spirit birth. An adoptive model also highlights the role of choice in the creation of these relationships. We were not imposed upon God by some accident of celestial biology; in some significant sense, he chose us to be his children. In the adoption account, God's premortal parenthood is directly analogous to his parenthood of

16. On this antique worldview, termed by some the "cosmological," see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (1978; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 132. Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 13–16, 26–27, 59–62, reviews correspondence in American religion, while Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 199, ably conjures that idea world within early Christianity. See Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 8–9, 23, 72, 155–72, for a more general review. Jared Hickman and I incorporate early Mormon ideas about metaphysical correspondence into a work in progress preliminarily entitled *Human Cosmos: Joseph Smith and the Art of Translation*.

us as mortals. The new birth of conversion and belief mirrors the first birth before mortality (see D&C 39:4).

There are several ways to connect microcosm to macrocosm, and the choice between human parturition and sacerdotal adoption is not inevitable. What I believe were the essential characteristics of the generative cosmos Joseph Smith revealed are a sacerdotal power known by various names (most durably "priesthood") and the creation of relationships among eternal beings at various stages of maturation and development. The earthly echoes of this grand, cosmic process are the saving rituals of the temple, inflected by the sacred experience of parenthood. In my view, the beauty and the power of Restoration teachings on God's divine parenthood do not rely on Pratt's formulation. Priesthood was both the sacerdotal authority and the metaphysical power by which adoption occurred.

Understanding as I now do the ways in which Joseph Smith put priesthood to work among the early Saints, I believe that the adoption model of divine parenthood accurately portrays what the Prophet taught in the 1840s. I do not propose this by way of criticizing a popular doctrine or aspiring to an authority that I do not possess. I also recognize that spirit birth has enjoyed substantial support for many decades within the Church. Revelation is a living thing; Latter-day Saints are not bound by every belief of early Church members. Still, adoption theology has the potential to complement the core of LDS doctrines on God's divine parenthood as it draws to our attention crucial documents and contexts from the early Restoration.

Most theologies persist because they fill needs and solve problems. Spirit birth has been important to bereavement and general self-conception for decades. Spirit birth provides the promise that God would honor parents' love for lost children on into the eternities. He himself is a biological parent, and he understands our visceral attachments to our children. It can be difficult to explain to outsiders the power of the image of the physical, literal parenthood of God. There is something unspeakably magnificent about the inevitability of physical parenthood, about the impulses that bind humans to their genetic offspring. The biologically parental is a model for the love of God—many of us seem to worry that a willed love is not as powerful as an instinctual love. We want people to love us not by principle but by passion. Perhaps the miracle of adoption lies in its capacity to transform willed love into inviolable love. Surely that is a miracle that stands at the core

of Christ's being and his Atonement. As he chose to bear our burdens, he nourished a love that will never die. If it is our task to become as God, is it better to ride the coattails of instinct or to apply the power of will? Throughout our lives, God calls us to a love we will, a love we choose.

I think most of us would acknowledge the power of a willed love. Marriage and parenthood are relationships that require both willed and instinctual love. The romance brings us to wedding vows, but the covenant of marriage is also choosing to stay even when the going is tough. The two loves inform each other, and adoption theology offers us a powerful reminder of the meaning of both forms of love: that which we feel and that which we choose. Many theologians rightly draw attention to the fact that will and agency are harder to grasp than we would like, that our instincts and cultural contexts inform what we experience as our will in important ways. I do not require a model of an independent will, unshaped by context or history. Instinctual loves will never go away and should not. Within the theology of adoption, a love that feels chosen can complement and transform a love that feels inescapable. Perhaps that sometimes desperate dance between the chosen and the inescapable is part of the work of making us divine. I think that it probably is.

Some may feel that adoption theology takes away from the possibility that humans and God are conspecific, that they are ontologically similar to each other. It is natural to see references to being the "literal" children of God as requiring a spirit birth model of divine parenthood, but that is not entirely true. While the theology of spirit birth makes it somewhat easier to imagine ontological similarity between God and humans, nothing about adoption requires ontological difference. There is nothing necessary about the connection between spirit birth and ontological identity. In fact, a basic interpretation of Joseph Smith's teachings on this point suggests that God saw entities who were less mature, rather than ontologically distinct, and he sought to enable their greater maturity. I believe that we are, in some crucial way, conspecific with God, and that he has adopted us. We are not just his pets or his creatures; the relationships of adoption are the relationships of beings who share some important level of identity and reciprocity. That relationship is literally real and eternally potent regardless of whether we conceive it as celestial gestation or premortal adoption. The sacred and radical truth at the heart of Mormonism, that we are literally God's family, does not force us to choose between the spirit birth and adoption models to describe our premortal maturation.

Salvation, Agency, and Will

There is in my view a much more complicated theological question related to adoption theology, a topic that deserves careful, thorough, and respectful attention: the relationship between the will and salvation. While this essay can only point toward the general contours of a satisfactory treatment, it seems nevertheless worthwhile to outline a few issues in Joseph Smith's teachings about the nature of salvation. I offer one crucial caveat: I am not a theologian by training or inclination. I am a believing Latter-day Saint, a medical researcher, and a self-taught cultural historian. I write here on the will as a believer rather than as an academic specialist.

The Restoration took place in the early post-Calvinist world of the new American Republic. American Calvinism maintained complex ideas about the relationship between the will and the possibility of salvation, generally couched in terms of the inability of the unregenerate will to choose salvation. In the Calvinist account, humans were so depraved that no exercise of their corrupt will could lead to something as glorious as salvation. The protesting Arminians, mostly represented by the Methodists, believed that the proper exercise of human will was important to salvation. Despite notorious theological differences, Arminians and Calvinists tended to behave in fairly similar ways. Though the logic required some twists and turns, both sides saw behavior as central to salvation. Calvinists famously felt the pressure to behave in order to maintain the hope that they were among the elect. Arminians fought powerfully to avoid "backsliding" into sin. The two groups saw the righteous exercise of will as tied to salvation—they just differed about the direction of the relationship. Universalists and deists—the bugaboos of the Second Great Awakening—mocked Calvinists and Arminians with chants that a loving God would assure salvation for all, regardless of their behavior in this life.[17] Over the course of the nineteenth century, Victorian mores and reform movements tamed the relative dissolution of early American social life, with increasing emphasis on piety as the pathway to heaven.[18]

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17. E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), reviews the history of the relevant theologies of the period.

18. Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), is somewhat dated but correctly draws attention to the ways that religious revival reinforced social order in that period.

Joseph Smith, ever on the margins of established religions, rejected both Arminian and Calvinist rhetoric. The salvation offered by these theologies seemed so fragile, particularly with the omnipresent specter of death stalking believers at every turn. Methodists famously sang and chanted on their deathbeds in hopes of preventing a final act of backsliding,[19] while Calvinists sometimes admitted in the midst of death's agony that they might not be elect. Joseph saw the frantic misery of Protestants and cherished the revelations that showed the Saints the "road between" the "Presbyterian" (Calvinist) and the "Methodist" (Arminian) doctrines of salvation.[20] Throughout the 1840s, Smith gave special instructions to his followers that indicated their happiness in the life to come did not depend as thoroughly on their own piety as they had been led to believe by the Protestant faiths in which they grew to adulthood.[21] In March 1844, Joseph Smith preached a sermon after the burial of his friend King Follett, killed by accidental rockfall while building a well. During Follett's funeral sermon, Joseph made a claim that scandalized some of his listeners. "If you have power to seal on earth & in heaven then we should be crafty: . . . go & seal on earth your sons & daughters unto yourself & yourself unto your fathers in eternal glory: . . . use a little Craftiness & seal all you can & when you get to heaven tell your father that what you seal on earth should be sealed in heaven. I will walk through the gate of heaven and Claim what I seal & those that follow me & my Council."[22] Joseph's phrases are extreme assaults on Protestant ideas about virtue and salvation, reflecting doctrines that continued to cause friction with outside neighbors and conflicted followers like the Law brothers. Joseph evoked in this sermon the image of the Latter-day Saints confronting the Protestant God and telling him that the caprices of election and regeneration were powerless in the face of the temple priesthood.

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19. A. Gregory Schneider, "The Ritual of Happy Dying among Early American Methodists," *Church History* 56, no. 3 (September 1987): 348–63.

20. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 327–32. Joseph Smith had been preaching this "road between" for years. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 62.

21. See Brown, "The 'Lineage of My Preasthood,'" for details.

22. Kenney, *Wilford Woodruff's Journal,* 2:364–65. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith,* 327–36, reprint the entry from Woodruff's journal and add five other sources for this March 10 sermon. Follett died March 9. Eulogies and accounts of the funeral are printed as "Communicated," *Nauvoo (Illinois) Neighbor,* March 20, 1844, 2. This sermon is distinct from the better-known "King Follett Discourse" preached at the Church conference in April, a second sustained reflection on the meaning of Follett's death.

Traditional Christians see these as scandalous phrases, then and now. They seem to indicate that Mormons believed they could control God, bend him to their will. But these need to be understood contextually—Smith was assaulting the Protestant God in caricature. The God Joseph Smith gave his followers power over was a God who elected or damned with perfectly excellent arbitrariness. In his mocking recommendations that his "crafty" children conquer the Protestant God, he was telling his followers that temple seals contained the solution to election. Sometimes the language the Prophet used was intended to shock his audience, to draw out distinctions between the Restored Church and the Protestantism that had lost its way, to caricaturize the God of Calvinism. Joseph was trying to communicate that the God of Calvin and Wesley was not the true God. Sometimes Joseph's rejection of election or Arminian regeneration was hyberbolic, and we should be careful not to overread specific claims about the Calvinist God.[23]

Even after considering Joseph's use of hyperbole, we can be reasonably certain that he taught that the seals of the priesthood and the temple power of Elijah contained the power of salvation. This was a staggering power, the capacity to tell the God of Calvinism who would and would not be saved. This was the promise underlying the great work for the dead. The Saints, as "Saviors on Mount Zion," were to save their deceased kin. In his King Follett Discourse (delivered about a month after the funeral sermon, at the church's annual conference), Joseph taught, in Wilford Woodruff's account, that "any man that has a friend in eternity can save him if he has not committed the unpardonable sin," an image confirmed in Thomas Bullock's account, which recalled Joseph preaching that "every Sp[irit] in the Et[ernal] world can be ferreted out & saved unless he has com[mitte]d that Sin which cant be rem[itte]d to him."[24] George Laub, a rank-and-file Nauvoo Saint whose journal is a treasure trove for historians interested in the theologies of the early Restoration, provided a glimpse of the meaning of this in his Nauvoo journal. The middle child in his family, he wrote, "Since I have Embraced the gospel it ofttimes seemed to me having been Born in the maredian of my fathers family to become a saviour to my Leniage since I cam into the covanant of the celestial Law."[25]

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23. See discussion in Samuel M. Brown, "The Prophet Elias Puzzle," *Dialogue* 39, no. 3 (2006): 9–10 and n. 71.

24. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 346, 353.

25. George Laub, "Reminiscences and Journal," MS 9628, Church History Library, 2.

Often Joseph and his father gave blessings that promised parents that their children would be protected by their righteousness, by the sacred bonds of priesthood, protected to such a degree that even mishaps and indiscretions—short of the sin against the Holy Ghost—could not prevent their children's salvation.[26] When he announced polygamy, the controversial rite that I have framed as spousal adoption,[27] Joseph reminded the Church of the power of the adoptive seals of the temple. The Saints were assured that their salvation was preserved by the sealing power of the temple. According to the 1843 polygamy revelation:

> Then shall it be written in the Lamb's Book of Life, that he shall commit no murder whereby to shed innocent blood, and if ye abide in my covenant, and commit no murder whereby to shed innocent blood, it shall be done unto them in all things whatsoever my servant hath put upon them, in time, and through all eternity; and shall be of full force when they are out of the world; and they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, which are set there, to their exaltation and glory in all things, as hath been sealed upon their heads, which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever.[28]

This concept of assured salvation was unpopular then and now, and it could be quite dangerous in certain interpretations.[29] John C. Bennett famously distorted polygamy into frank sexual predation.[30] This doctrine was not precisely antinomianism, the famous heresy of seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony, by which converted believers stood above the law. One author has called this "institutional

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26. H. Michael Marquardt, comp. and ed., *Early Patriarchal Blessings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2007), 72 (blessing on Joseph Cooper, May 14, 1836), 76 (blessing on Amos Fuller, June 17, 1836), 104–5 (blessing on Joseph Bosworth, probably 1836), 120 (blessing on Allen Gray, probably 1836), and 163 (blessing on Clarissa Perry, May 27, 1837); Lyndon W. Cook, *William Law: Biographical Essay, Nauvoo Diary, Correspondence, Interview* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1994), 121.

27. I describe polygamy as spousal adoption in "The 'Lineage of My Preasthood' and the Chain of Belonging."

28. D&C 132:19.

29. Debates over antinomianism and universalism in early America contain the elements of such concern. Recognizing how close to universalism the Restoration was may provide some insight into this discussion today.

30. Bennett's distinctive life is well described in Andrew F. Smith, *The Saintly Scoundrel: The Life and Times of Dr. John Cook Bennett* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

antinomianism," though this too fails to describe what Joseph was teaching.[31] The Prophet was moving away from traditional Christian ideas about salvation and law. He was saying something about salvation that existed in the creation of durable family relationships. Being bound to heaven meant being bound to other people. True conversion was no isolated encounter between a single penitent believer and the mighty God; it was the creation of or integration into a family.

Joseph was not proposing libertinism among temple-sealed Latter-day Saints, and neither am I. I believe, as I always have, that when we are presented with the option of living our lives well or poorly, we should choose to live well as much as we possibly can. I am proposing, rather, that adoption theology provides a strong and clear mechanism by which our inadequacies and frailties can be absorbed into Christ. By owning us, giving us his name, Christ acknowledges and creates relationships with us. Joseph Smith taught us that the compass of the Atonement could be expanded by our integration into the network of salvation. Our frailties and inadequacies can be absorbed into the loving relationships we create with each other through the power of the sealing sacraments much as they are absorbed into Christ. Through adoption theology, I am more aware of a Savior of those who are tattered and torn, of an Atonement with the magnificent power to save even souls as confused, rebellious, and hard as mine. I am also more aware of the ways in which we tattered and torn Saviors on Mount Zion can carry salvation to each other.

American political and cultural ideology, now centuries old, resists the conclusion that our salvation might rest in our relationships. According to the prevalent culture, we stand or fall on our own; we have no responsibility for the exercise of another person's will, and no one has responsibility for ours. The possibility of communal and adoptive salvation may seem to run afoul of the Restoration's rejection of original sin; we are not responsible for Adam's transgression but for our own sins. This is correct—the Prophet Joseph did reject original sin, the creedal Christian doctrine that humans are inherently depraved as a result of the Fall. He also taught that "all intelligence" is "independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself" (D&C 93:30). Joseph did not thereby exclude the possibility that we as humans could be interdependent in our salvation. We should not let the Prophet's rejection of the Christian

31. John Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 262.

doctrines of original sin and traducianism cloud our thinking about the nature of salvation.

My bishop in college, a brilliant scholar and deeply spiritual man, once used simple mathematical images to illustrate the meaning of the Atonement to me. Any number added to or subtracted from infinity equals infinity, he observed. In mathematical notation,

$$\infty \pm x = \infty$$

Using the actual if dramatic number googol to make the point,

$$\infty + 10^{100} = \infty$$

and

$$\infty - 10^{100} = \infty$$

When we discussed this salvific arithmetic in college, we emphasized the fact that through Christ our failings and our successes were subsumed into his infinite righteousness. However righteous or unrighteous we are (with the strange and poorly understood exception of the "sons of perdition"), our merits are absorbed into Christ's infinite perfection. This was and is a beautiful and inspiring insight, one for which I am grateful to my college bishop.

The adoption theology clarifies the meaning of each of these symbols in a way I did not appreciate when I was a college freshman. The addition and subtraction signs represent the sacraments of adoption, the ordinances by which a sacred transformation occurs. The sign of infinity, ∞, represents not just Christ but the grand family of heaven, the Chain of Belonging which we enter through adoption, and the = sign represents our actual integration into that chain.[32] This is a brief sketch of one possible view into the relational meanings of Atonement, a model of Christ's power that abstracts beyond many of the debates about law or cosmic balance or propitiation or substitution. Whatever ultimate model we believe for the efficacy of the Atonement, I am hopeful that appreciating the relational aspects of salvation will strengthen our understanding of the Atonement.

I do not entirely understand how to square the possibilities of salvation through adoptive seals with the almost mechanistic view of salvation some of us have adopted over the last century. We Latter-day Saints are pilloried and occasionally praised as a people whose yearnings for pious or material success make us a grand hyperbole of Max Weber's "Protestant work ethic," a people whose overburdened women

32. Brown, "Early Mormon Chain of Belonging," 24–31.

reportedly find solace only in pharmaceutical treatments for depression.[33] I disagree with the broad and often malign brushstrokes with which we have been painted (including misleading claims about antidepressants). There is great beauty and power in what we have become as a people. Even so, I see the spiritual trouble that stands behind the phenomena outsiders have been prone to attack. We do sometimes get lost in exclusive rhetoric about obedience; we sometimes seem as legalistic as the Pharisees Christ so roundly criticized. The adoption theology holds out to me the possibility that what matters most are the sacred bonds we create with each other, the spiritual energies we invest in those we care for. I remember the Desert Fathers, the famous first monks of the fourth-century East. As historian Peter Brown has carefully and persuasively demonstrated, the monks' rejection of food and sexuality, the traditional components of asceticism as we moderns have understood it, was only the preamble to the real work of purification: the creation of a heart that could live in interdependence with others.[34]

We will inevitably encounter difficulties living such an approach to salvation. Lives of obedience bordering on asceticism sometimes seem easier than maintaining harmonious spiritual relationships. Relationships are notoriously difficult to maintain successfully. As every parent knows, the agency of each individual belongs to the individual—children often disappoint the aspirations of their parents; spouses squabble; Church members may have radically different ideas about how a ward should operate; neighbors and communities may contest issues of policy or approach, sometimes with great vitriol. But these are the problems that stretch us, that transform us gradually into the divine beings of the Chain of Belonging. Lehi wanted us to understand that there is no salvation without struggle (2 Nephi 2); in the struggles to love and respect and strengthen each other stands the work of salvation.

Perhaps most importantly, these are the problems that will persist forever, no matter how godly our ultimate fate. The scriptures tell us clearly and repeatedly that God and Christ continue to emphasize relationships with all of us. And we are imperfect: we fail, we fight, we commit iniquity. If our fate is to be something like God, we will not be

33. As one example of the common trope that Utah/Mormon women are more depressed (as measured by pharmaceutical prescriptions) than other Americans, see Julie Cart, "Study Finds Utah Leads Nation in Antidepressant Use," *Los Angeles Times*, February 20, 2002.

34. Brown, *Body and Society*, 213–40.

plagued by struggles over issues of personal temptation or addiction. We will, however, struggle and weep, as does God, over the fates of our children, those beings with whom we will in turn enter into eternal adoptive relationships.

The Heaven Family

Many of us in the global West live in a world of harsh individualism, focusing at most on a "nuclear" family in competition with the outside world. When Joseph was restoring the gospel, such an atomistic tradition was only just establishing itself against an older, larger view of how families should be shaped.[35] As Joseph restored ancient doctrines and sacraments for the Latter-day Saints, he set about this work with an eye toward a family structure expansive enough to accommodate everyone. The marvelous society of Zion, a history the Prophet recovered from obscurity in the prophecy of Enoch (now published as part of the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price), represented a society in which community and family were largely coterminous. At times in the early Restoration, the lines between biological and ecclesiastical family blurred so heavily that many participants and observers could not reliably distinguish them. After Joseph's death, the complex merger of biological and ecclesial families continued under Brigham Young's leadership.

As C. S. Lewis has noted (albeit with a sexism unbecoming a spiritual guide of his stature), we are prone to allow our sense of our nuclear family to dominate our encounters with the outside world.[36] This has been a longstanding problem, well recognized throughout human history. Acute awareness of the needs of our own family often pushes us away from awareness of the needs of those outside our family. The tensions between individual and communal needs rocked the early American

35. On the period when this is often felt to have happened, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); compare Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

36. See, for example, C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 395. Lewis proposed maternal protectiveness of children as a reason why women might not be suitable for service in government.

Republic in which the gospel was restored, and they have continued in various forms to the present day.

Joseph Smith sought to teach the Saints how to love the way God loved—expansively. One of the most dramatic and distressing methods by which he sought to teach this lesson was polygamy. While polygamy is long gone (a fact for which I personally am grateful), I believe that we bear the responsibility to stay true to its animating vision, a vision at once more familiar and more difficult than the sensationalistic images associated with plural marriage. I believe that adoption provides some insight into the meaning of that animating, nonsexual vision underlying polygamy. Joseph hoped that we could begin to practice a commitment that is beyond pettiness, a love beyond boundaries, a love that could encompass every living soul. We are too much titillated by the sexuality surrounding polygamy: the core message, one of nonsexual love that stretches us, that expands our vision and imagination, is often lost.

In practice, living Joseph's vision is very difficult. Such commitments do not come naturally to us, particularly when we perceive competition between the broader world and our own families. On the other side, responsibilities to the outside world can become a convenient excuse for a man who thrives on the praise of outsiders and fears his own inability at home. We should beware the invocation of the love of humanity as a cloak to hide the sins of pettiness and selfishness, the inability to relate to those with whom we live directly. The heaven family should be a way to grow one's own family rather than to sacrifice it on the altar of good works. While there is sacred pleasure in a family centered in a domestic nucleus, God has great work for all of us to perform across the boundaries of our biological families.

Adoption theology also provides a sacred exemplar for the human practice of legal adoption. Though narratives about giving bodies to waiting spirits have affected ideas about parenting for many decades, parenthood can matter equally or perhaps more when it is a chosen relationship. While questions of parenting, family planning, and fertility are intensely personal, I believe that understanding adoption theology may comfort Latter-day Saints facing infertility and support those who adopt or serve as foster parents as part of their personal devotions or life's work. Adoption is a central tenet of Christ's work of redemption.

Conclusion

The Prophet Joseph gave clear, strong encouragement to those believers who would seek out their dead. We as Latter-day Saints are part of a

grand adventure that ranges across the entire length of human history. Our work, a work that will continue long after we are dead, is to attach ourselves to each other in limitless networks of belonging. In this regard, we are much like the founding prophet of the Restoration. Adoption theology, a now unfamiliar doctrine of the early Restoration, provides ready access to these inspiring ideas.

Samuel M. Brown, MD MS (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is Assistant Professor of Pulmonary/Critical Care Medicine and Medical Ethics and Humanities at the University of Utah School of Medicine and Attending Physician in the Shock Trauma ICU at Intermountain Medical Center. He majored in linguistics with a minor in Russian at Harvard College and then obtained his medical degree from Harvard Medical School. His primary focus is clinical research to understand variations in patients' responses to life-threatening infection, and on weekends he writes history of culture and religion. He is the author of *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death,* which won the Mormon History Association Best First Book Award. He lives in Salt Lake City with his wife, who is a religious historian, and their young children. He is currently counselor to the elders quorum president and home teacher to two fine families in his ward. He and his family like to read, garden, and cook.