

BRENT L. TOP. *The Life Before*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988. xii; 212 pp. \$9.95.

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Brent Top's informative and inspirational book *The Life Before* traces the idea of preexistence from early recorded history through the most current secular and LDS thinking on the subject. From the wealth of quotations alone, the book is a valuable reference book that any student of LDS doctrine will discover worth perusing. In this respect, the author has undertaken a commendable work of compilation and organization of subject matter.

The stated objective of the book is "to provide information that will enlighten the mind and prepare the heart for the inspiration that can change our lives and buoy us up spiritually as we pass through this second estate" [x]. The book succeeds in this regard by providing a positive and reaffirming witness of the doctrine.

The first chapter and a half, comprising twenty-three pages, gives a historical overview of the doctrine, presenting both ancient and modern beliefs, including glimpses of early Jewish and Christian teachings on preexistence. While most of the quotes bear directly on the subject, some have dubious relevancy, such as Herman Hesse's notion of our inherited "ancestral past" of "slime and eggshells," or M. Scott Peck's related concept of "collective consciousness" that is the "inherited wisdom and experience of our ancestors."

The remaining 176 pages of the book are devoted to expounding major LDS themes related to the doctrine of preexistence. Topics are treated on a level suited to a general Mormon audience and are kept well within the bounds of accepted LDS orthodoxy. Nearly every aspect of the doctrine is presented, with only a few topics omitted such as the origin of the sexes and the actual location of the preexistent spirit world.

Readers will find the author's personal musings stimulating, such as the thought-provoking probe into the Father's motive in asking "Whom shall I send?" knowing full well he had already chosen his firstborn. The war in heaven is especially well treated, with a comprehensive and thoughtful analysis of the issues involved.

The author broadens our perspective of the doctrine of foreordination by presenting numerous possible instances in which the doctrine applies. One aspect of foreordination does appear problematic, however. The author declares, "Among those

foreordained to the house of Israel were those who were further ordained to specific callings as ministers in the kingdom of God” (159). But if, as the author claims, no one receives the priesthood in this life unless he was foreordained to do so, and if those who are foreordained are among the most elect of those born into the house of Israel, then one is left wondering why the Church’s current policy is to ordain individuals to the priesthood regardless of lineage.

Overall, the book is well written, but there are a few aspects of the treatment of preexistence that caused me a bit of concern. The author sometimes lacks objectivity in treating issues and makes several blanket statements that are not well supported. For example, in spite of the numerous quotes from modern Christian thinkers in support of the doctrine of preexistence, Top insists that modern Christianity “vehemently” rejects the doctrine. Yet no evidence at all is presented to warrant this assertion. Further, the author accuses the Christian world of either ignoring or grossly misinterpreting New Testament teachings on preexistence.

This indictment seems a little harsh, especially in light of what is offered as being the “correct” interpretation of these teachings. On page 28, for example, Top presents Paul’s references to Christ as the “firstborn,” then asks, “How can Paul be referring to anything other than Christ’s preeminent role as firstborn of all of God’s spirit children?” Actually, it is quite possible that Paul may be using the term figuratively as he often did. For example, in Colossians 1:18 he refers to Christ as being “the firstborn from the dead.” By saying that the Savior was “the firstborn of every creature” (Col. 1:15), Paul may be merely calling attention to Christ’s preeminence as the first of the creations of the Father. (After all, if the statement were taken literally, all of God’s creations would be begotten, not just human beings.) The author himself points out later that the Hebrew word translated as “firstborn” actually means “preeminent one.”

Even if Paul did intend to convey that Christ was literally the firstborn of the father in the spirit, it does not necessarily follow that others were born as spirit children of God. To the contrary, Paul teaches that one reason we know that Christ was the firstborn is that everything else that came afterwards was created by Christ (Col. 1:15–16). Furthermore, Paul explicitly states that the way in which Christ becomes “the firstborn among many brethren” is through the righteous being adopted into the family of God (Rom. 8:29).

On page 31 and again on page 55, the author uses Romans 8:16 as evidence that we are the spirit offspring of God. Careful reading shows that this passage clearly refers to the adoption of the

righteous as children of God. In examining this passage and others referring to God as our Father (such as those cited on pages 26 and 27), it is interesting to consider the following observation made by Bruce R. McConkie:

Few doctrines are better known by members of the true church than the doctrine of preexistence. . . . What is not so well known is that nearly all the passages of scripture, both ancient and modern, which speak of God as our Father and of men on earth being the sons of God, have no reference to our birth in preexistence as the children of Elohim, but teach rather that Jehovah is our Father and we are his children.¹

The point to be made is that most of Paul's teachings that are cited by Top provide neither obvious nor conclusive evidence of a spirit birth and certainly do not warrant dismissing alternative scholarly interpretations as being gross misinterpretations.

Even some modern scriptures and teachings are used as proof texts by the author in an attempt to provide added support for the doctrine of preexistence. The doctrine of a literal spirit birth, for example, is represented as being consistently and "emphatically" taught from the time of Joseph Smith to the present. To say that Joseph Smith emphatically taught the doctrine is a bit of an overstatement since no recorded teachings of the Prophet exist wherein he taught that God is the literal father of our spirits. The two references that are cited (55) are at best tenuous as a support for spirit birth. The first reference, for example, is D&C 76:23–24, which has been interpreted by many authorities (not to mention the interpretation given in the subject matter summary at the beginning of the section) as having reference to spiritual *rebirth*, not premortal spirit birth. The second quotation attributed to Joseph Smith is actually the Prophet quoting Paul (Rom. 8:16) with apparent reference only to the doctrine of adoption and not to spirit birth.

I raise these objections, not to disprove Top's thesis, but only to express disapproval of the methodology in which such tenuous evidence is used to strengthen the support for the doctrine of preexistence. There is ample evidence of scriptural and authoritative support for preexistence without the need to reach for questionable evidence.

One of the more interesting discussions in the book is on the nature of intelligence. Unfortunately, the labels given to the two schools of thought on intelligence are too restrictive given the references cited. Top's obvious intention is to discuss whether we had a beginning as individuals or whether we always existed individually. The label he gives to the first school of thought, however, is "Intelligence, the Primal Element," which does not

represent the full range of beliefs cited in the quotations on intelligence. While some references do equate intelligence with spirit element (Bruce R. McConkie and Charles Penrose), others define intelligence as an inherent attribute of primal spirit element (Parley P. Pratt). A third view considers intelligence to be a quickening agent infused into spirit element by God (Brigham Young, Joseph Fielding Smith).

The author admits that the issue of whether or not we always existed as individuals is unsettled, yet the evidence presented is clearly weighted in favor of the belief that individuals were created. Only Orson Pratt and B. H. Roberts (each of whose credentials are undermined) are cited as proponents of eternal individualism, even though it is the only view that has been presented in general conferences in recent years. Despite the author's apparent effort at objectivity, his own bias is apparent.

With respect to premortal progression, the author represents Brigham Young and Joseph Fielding Smith as teaching that differences in the attainment of intelligence are due solely to the exercise of agency. Not represented is the fact that both of these Church leaders also taught that spirits were created with varying capacities and that this also accounts for differences in level of progression.²

In addition to these examples where passages and teachings are not presented as objectively or as completely as they might have been, the book contains several minor errors, such as references to Cicero and Seneca as Greek philosophers rather than Romans. Eliza R. Snow's hymn "O My Father" is also erroneously dated to 1843 instead of 1845, thereby giving the false impression that the doctrine of spirit birth was well established during the Prophet's lifetime.

Overall, the book is much more uplifting than disturbing, and I recommend it without reservation to general LDS readers. If the author's occasional overzealousness can be overlooked, the book also contains many thought-provoking ideas worth examining by the serious scholar. The author has done an admirable job of conveying the spiritual depth and far-reaching impact of the doctrine.

NOTES

¹Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1978), 351–52.

²See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1979), 5:138–139; Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 1:258, 4:268, 6:97.