1-1-2016

Samuel Morris Brown, In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death

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Elbowing its way smartly into a dense historiographic field, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth* treats Joseph Smith as a supremely creative theologian whose doctrines dealt with a central conundrum unsolved (to his mind) by the prevailing religious culture of his day: how to conquer death. Early nineteenth-century American Protestants confronted life’s end with a complex routine that Samuel Brown denominates “holy dying,” a multifaceted performance that included the dying person accepting death in front of an attentive audience (thereby demonstrating his or her salvation) and mourners certifying that claim through proper expressions of grief in hopes they would all meet again in heaven. However consolatory in theory, this complex practice left souls sensitive to its underlying tensions unable to gain assurance of a blessed eternity. What if the dying or the living failed to act out their parts, thereby bringing the salvation of the departed or the faith of the bereaved into question? Mainstream Protestant theologies, whether Calvinist or Arminian, only aggravated such doubts since the former made election arbitrary while the latter premised the possibility of backsliding.

Like others of his day, Brown holds, Smith was further vexed by providentialism’s inherent conundrum. On the one hand, if God does indeed govern the world perfectly, how can he value the close attachments human beings make, since he wantonly dismembers so many of them? Conversely, if he does indeed value them, why does he terminate so many prematurely? Whereas many scholars have pointed to the multiple, discordant truth claims voiced by antebellum sects as the fundamental problem that Smith aimed to resolve, Brown identifies a different prophetic concern: surmounting death and creating “transmortal”
communities in which human beings live with their loved ones forever. Mormonism, he posits, emerged via Smith’s constant negotiation with “the inevitability of death, the intensity of human revulsion toward it, and the inscrutability of God’s Providential will” (p. 35).

Part 1 of In Heaven as It Is on Earth rehearses the personal and cultural sources of Smith’s particular preoccupation with overcoming death and details his evolving response. His peculiar urgency to avert the grave’s terror issued from his inability to dispel the shock of his eldest brother’s premature death coupled with his highly original interpretations of cultural commonplaces like the cult of the corpse, treasure seeking, and contemplating the Indians’ fate. In the shadows cast figuratively by Alvin Smith’s demise and palpably by ancient burial mounds strewn across a sacralized landscape, Joseph’s sorties to burrow for gold or unearth skeletons had, Brown asserts, an ulterior, ultimately religious purpose: to disinter knowledge about and from long-deceased ancestors. Encountering angels and their sacred hoard in upstate New York focused this habit into the construction of a religion premised on linking the quick and the dead. Part 2 exposits this new faith’s dogmatic and ritual underpinnings. Experiments already under way in Kirtland culminated at the Nauvoo Temple in rites like adoption, patriarchal blessings, baptism for the dead, and celestial marriage that Smith theologized through reconfiguring Plato’s Great Chain of Being and instantiated in a sacramental cultus unlike anything ever dreamt in Rome or Geneva. Obeying these rites assured Latter-day Saints that they would enter heaven, an abode neither of single souls praising God in hierarchical array nor of nuclear families sentimentally celebrating their reconstituted domesticity, but a place where individuals already translated to eternal life and those still slogging through their mortal coils formed a single united family whose relationships had been permanently secured by a cosmic genealogy that was perhaps Smith’s most radical postulate. Where Protestants spoke of joining the divine family metaphorically, Smith perceived an ontological continuity between (im) mortals that grounded the “literal family connectedness of humans and God” (p. 278). Mormons would conquer death because they were the stuff that gods are made of.
Conceptualizing Smith’s theology as a holism opens important new perspectives on a variety of historiographic debates. Joseph’s treasure hunting, Brown avers, should be understood neither as irrelevant to his later career (contra some Mormon apologists) nor as opportunistic fortune hunting that discredits the Book of Mormon (pace some debunkers), but as early efforts to disinter the secrets of the dead, an impulse that the more mature Smith—seer and prophet—would elaborate. Early Mormonism borrowed from Masonry, but the Nauvoo Temple was no ersatz lodge; Smith translated Masonic imperatives to gain esoteric knowledge and achieve immortality into a ritual cultus that linked living and dead within a sacerdotal community sealed to enjoy everlasting life collectively. Polygamy was most radical not in its threat to conventional morality but as part of a larger, full-fledged assault on Protestant familial arrangements and the version of eternity they postulated. Smith’s “heaven family” consisted of a “pan-human allegiance” (p. 242) constituted through a “new and everlasting covenant” in which plural marriage was only one element creating a “heavenly network of belonging” (p. 243) that would endure forever. Aggregating these insights argues against positing Smith as preeminently a magus, a post-revolutionary prophet, a quondam Mason, a sexual communitarian, or a specimen of spiritual flotsam queer even by the standards of upstate New York’s burned-over district. Each accurate to a degree, none of these characterizations do him full justice; in Brown’s rendering, the Prophet was greater than the sum of his parts.

Brown’s intense focus on Smith’s theology as ultimately a means to conquer death obscures other ways of conceiving it. The “conquest of death” is a heuristic device activated by Brown’s invocation of sociologist Peter Berger’s judgment that a religion’s credibility lies in how it prepares people to die; hence there is something circular about taking Berger’s remark as a normative valuation of what religion is only to announce that, lo and behold, early Mormonism precisely fits the bill. If one starts with the similarly defensible assumption that religion constitutes a highly effective means for creating social cohesion, one might with justice argue that Smith was reacting less to his society’s culture of
holy death than to its perceived dislocations, including stresses on traditional family life and the multiplication of religious truth claims—in which case his theology might be understood as an exercise in family reconstruction.

I wish that Brown had come to terms with Smith's profound preference for straightforward exegeses, a quality that Brown rightly emphasizes, albeit sometimes in expressions—for example, Smith was “assiduously” (p. 91) or “marvelously” (p. 124) literal—whose qualifiers go annoyingly unexplained. Smith's meanderings into translating Egyptian papyri and rewriting the King James Bible bespeak a capacity for imaginative hermeneutics, but his theological genius issued from a default literalism—witness how he arrived at what Brown calls his “divine anthropology”—that deserves thorough scrutiny. Nonetheless, Brown has accomplished a brilliant and coherent excursion of Smith's theology that forefronts his originality by fully contextualizing him within the wider religious culture of antebellum America, whose culture of consolation and Protestant divinities, both Calvinist and Arminian, Joseph found inadequate. Whether seer or charlatan, prophet or con man, Smith was foremost a folk intellectual who refashioned conventional materials, religious and secular, in strikingly novel ways. Brown demonstrates that Smith challenged Protestant doctrine and worship to provide Latter-day Saints with a sacred surety that loving human relationships outlast death if one performs the right ritual regimens. This accomplishment warrants Smith more serious consideration as a first-rank theological mind than he generally receives.