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A *Communities of Discourse* Approach to Early LDS Thought

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Over a half century ago, Herbert Butterfield (1931, 11–12) composed a classic essay entitled, The Whig Interpretation of History. Therein, he described the distortions that occur when historians impose a rigid point of view on their study of the past. Such an approach, he warned, constrains the historian to be "vigilant for likenesses between past and present, instead of being vigilant for unlikenesses." And it is the elucidation of unlikenesses that Butterfield felt was the chief aim of the historian. Given the nature of Mormon theological claims, it is understandable why many doctrinal treatises tend to be "vigilant for likenesses." Yet, as Butterfield has pointed out, this is not good history, nor is it good theology. If we believe that revelation and understanding come "line-upon-line," then we can expect some unlikenesses with the past. With the aid of a methodological tool known as "communities of discourse" we will examine several unlikenesses. In the process we will gain a more nuanced understanding of Latter-day Saint thought in the 1830s and come to understand how that portrait honors our Heavenly Father.[1]

I am a historian and have a special interest in what the historical profession calls "intellectual history." This is not the history of intellectuals but the history of what comes from human intellects, or in other words, the history of thought. As a cohesive field within academia, intellectual history usually traces its beginnings to Arthur Lovejoy and the Johns Hopkins University–based History of Ideas Club in the 1920s and 1930s. The members of this group were interested primarily in the "great books" and grand ideas that have shaped western civilization. Their work amounted to biographies of ideas with little attention paid either to the personal or social contexts in which those ideas were articulated. In the second half of the twentieth century, such an approach fell increasingly out of favor. It seemed that Lovejoy and the "history of ideas" school viewed ideas as "autonomous abstractions which, in their self-propelled journeyings through time, happened only accidentally and temporarily to find anchorage in particular human minds" (Collini 1988, 106). Leading the revolt against such ahistorical readings were scholars like Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, and J. G. A. Pocock, who argued that to properly understand both the words an author used and what he was using them to say—their illocutionary force—required the meticulous reconstruction of the thought world of that particular time and place. This alone would identify the repertoire of possible meanings which the author could have drawn upon. Elsewhere, the communal quality of communication was being emphasized by sociolinguist Dell Hymes with his notion of "speech community," by literary critic Stanley Fish with his idea of "interpretive communities," and through the concept of "discourse community" recently discussed in composition studies.

Today's intellectual historians have learned from all of this to pay special

attention to historical "communities of discourse." As they use the term, a community of discourse is a group of people who share a common purpose or who confront a common question and who have developed an identifiable set of language conventions for their conversations with one another. A community of discourse does not necessarily imply a shared physical or even social space. The commonality is the shared intellectual concern. In time, an entire language or "discourse" grows up around that particular interest. Examples of communities of discourse relevant to the study of Mormonism would include "millenarianism" and "primitivism" in the nineteenth century, and "success" philosophies and "family values" in the twentieth. To the discerning, the ideals, logic, and linguistic conventions of these "languages" are apparent in Mormon discourse[1] (Hughes & Allen 1988, Hughes 1988, Underwood 1993). Being attuned to the relevant contemporary communities of discourse will not only result in a heightened awareness of how much the Saints shared with the world around them but, crucially, will also lead to a better appreciation of where and how they differed.

Consider, for instance, the relationship between the nineteenth-century "antitrinitarian" community of discourse and early Latter-day Saint doctrine. Prior to crucial clarifications in the final years of Joseph Smith's life, Latter-day Saint comments about the nature of God had much in common with the popular antitrinitarianism of the Stone-Campbell Christian movement, the Hicksite Quakers, and even the Universalists. This particular subset of nineteenth-century Christians was endeavoring to combat the dominant notion of the three-in-one God who is everywhere yet nowhere. They not only argued that God was separate from Christ and the Holy Spirit but that he had his own body. While struggling to comprehend the earliest Mormon views of God, historians have sometimes been tripped up by wording which seemed to anticipate later Latter-day Saint developments but which was actually part of this contemporary popular antitrinitarianism.

The classic case in point is the word *body*. Mormons have long assumed that an affirmation in early LDS literature that "God has a body" implied flesh and bones, but antitrinitarians actually used the phrase to refer to a spiritually corporeal deity. Here are some samples from non-Mormon, antitrinitarian preachers:

> [William] Kinkade has a chapter of fifteen pages to show that God has a body like man. [Jabez] Chadwick says he is "prepared to defend" this sentiment; and Elder G. Fancher says, "God has a body, eyes, ears, hands, feet, & c., just as we have" . . . Kinkade says, "ears, hands, and eyes are part of an intelligent ruler, and if God has none of these he cannot hear, handle, nor see us " (Mattison 1846, 44).

How similar these sound to Latter-day Saint expressions! "A God without body or parts," wrote Mormon Apostle Parley P. Pratt (1838, 31), "has neither eyes, ears, or mouth, and can neither see, hear, nor speak." Therefore, Pratt declared, joining other non-Mormon antitrinitarians in his affirmation, "we worship a God who has both body and parts: who has eyes, mouth and ears, and who speaks when he pleases. . . ."

What is lost on modern Mormons, however, is that these remarks had reference to a spiritual body not a physical body. One prominent study, for instance, quotes the same 1838 statement by Parley Pratt and hails it as "the first printed description in Mormon sources of an anthropomorphic, corporeal God," and by "corporeal" the author means "a tangible body of flesh" (Allen 1980, 50, 48). Upon closer examination, we can see that this is not what Pratt meant. Actually his words reflect a nineteenth-century community of religious discourse heretofore unexplored by Mormon historians.[2] Two

years later in a tract written to defend Mormonism, Pratt declared: "Whoever reads our books, or hears us preach, knows that we believe . . . that the Son has flesh and bones and that the Father is a spirit." Lest his opponent misunderstand, he continued,

> but we would inform Mr. H. that a personage of spirit has its organized formation, its body and parts, its individual identity, its eyes, mouth, ears, & c., and that it is in the image or likeness of the temporal body, although not composed of such gross materials as flesh and bones (1840, 9).

Unaware of early Latter-day Saint participation in this particular community of religious discourse, it is understandable how those accustomed to the fuller understanding that would soon be shared have misconstrued the meaning of 1830s Mormon references to God's "body."

Erastus Snow was another who participated in that community of discourse before the Prophet explicitly imbued the term "body" with fleshly corporeality in 1840s Nauvoo. His 1840 pamphlet-length reply to the Pennsylvania antagonist, Truman Coe, makes crystal clear what early Mormons of antitrinitarian background meant (and did not mean) when they spoke of God having a body. Snow begins his discussion by posing a question that is startling because it is the unambiguous opposite of what modern Mormons would expect him to be asking. "What Mormon, understanding our doctrines," queries Snow, "ever said that God the Father had flesh and bones? It is truly diverting to see you make so much noise, in trying to destroy a building of your own make, and shooting so much at a mark you have set up yourself, but if you had ever read our books it would have saved you all that labor." Snow then quotes from the fifth Lecture on Faith:

> The Father is a personage of spirit, glory and power. . . . Your long bombast about the God of flesh and bones, reminds me very much of my father's old buck making a furious attack upon an old hat, which he supposed contained a man's head. Does it necessarily follow that because God is a spirit, possessing universal knowledge, that spirit has no form, shape, or bodily appearance as you would have it? *Vice versa*: Does it necessarily follow that because, as we affirm, he has a form and bodily parts, that form is composed of flesh and bones? Does not Paul say there is a natural body, and also a spiritual body? According to your logic, because your shadow resembles your body, it must be the body itself; or will you deny the existence of spirit altogether? That God has a *form* is evident from Philip. 2:6; speaking of Jesus "who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God." (1840, 6)[3]

The problem may be that both sides are failing to locate Coe's expression within the community of discourse to which it belongs. "Material" did not always mean "fleshly." An "immaterial being" could also be a spiritual being since "all spirit is matter," an idea not unique to the Mormons. In support of this reading, it is noteworthy that Coe uses the discursively meaningful phrase "body and parts" and comments on the "size and shape" of God rather than on the more radical prospect of a deity "with hair on his arms," which in the eyes of Coe's audience would have made Mormonism appear to be even more the unorthodox "gust of Fanaticism" he claimed it to be. Still, it remains to be demonstrated. If further contextual study does not bear out this reading, then Coe's use of "material" as fleshly should be seen as the same kind of anti-Mormon distortion that Pratt and Snow were combating when they made their comments quoted above. What won't do is to use Coe as the sole contemporary support for the claim that Mormons in the 1830s believed God had a body of flesh and bones. If such were the case, how likely is it that Pratt and Snow, two of Mormonism's best informed advocates, would either be

oblivious to or explicitly opposed to what was supposedly a commonplace Latter-day Saint teaching?

As surprising as such comments seem to Mormons today, we can be understanding of these early convert Saints when we stop to consider the communities of Christian discourse from which they were in the process of emerging. Christianity had inculcated in their minds a respect for Spirit as a celestial substance. From that perspective, to affirm that Heavenly Father's body was composed of such supernal material was to honor him and praise his transcendent power. Traditionally, Christianity associated flesh with mortality and disparaged it for its weakness and imperfection. To envision the perfect and almighty God entabernacled in such a substance was beyond their comprehension.

Only later in the Nauvoo period, when the Prophet was able to lay before this group of converts the grand vision of eternal progression and the glorious truth of how literally and fully humans were children of God with the potentiality of becoming like their Celestial Sire, could the doctrine be comprehended. Perhaps it is the cumulative effect of the subsequent 150 years of rejoicing in this reality, along with years of missionaries combating John 4:24, that makes it hard for us to peel back our assumptions and realize that there was a time before so wondrous a truth was comprehended among the Saints. In the 1830s, however, it was revolutionary enough to argue that God the Father was separate and distinct from the Son and that he actually had a body, albeit Spirit, rather than being the incomprehensible essence or omnipotent force filling the universe that some other Christians assumed. When we pause to consider it, the nature of our Heavenly Father, the God of the Universe, is indeed so awesome that even today who would dare say they have a complete comprehension of his physiology?

Allowing me to offer two other examples of how a communities of discourse approach to Latter-day Saint thought helps us better understand some first-stage understandings among the Saints. Both in the early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants as well as in contemporary church literature, the word "apostle" connotes function more than position. It was in fairly common use prior to the 1835 call of the first Quorum of the Twelve and did not then refer exclusively to that group. In the September 1832 revelation on priesthood (Doctrine and Covenants, Section 84), the Lord addresses not only the Prophet Joseph Smith but also "six elders" present: "as I said unto mine apostles, even so I say unto you for you are mine apostles" (Doctrine and Covenants 84:64). The extended table of contents found in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants references this passage with the words "elders called as the ancient apostles." In the New Testament, based on the Greek verb *apostello* (to send), an apostle is literally "one who is sent," an envoy, a messenger, in short, a missionary.[4] This is the usage that had long been dominant in the larger Christian community of discourse. Not surprisingly, it was the meaning carried into the Church by the first Latter-day Saint converts.

Various contextually sensitive priesthood studies have confirmed this usage for the period prior to the 1840s. Following the Twelve's successful mission to England in 1840–41, the Prophet elevated them to the number two governing body of the Church. Reflecting that enhanced role, the term "apostle" came to be exclusively applied to the Twelve, but such was not the case prior to that time.[5] In the 1830s, the Doctrine and Covenants table of contents entry for Doctrine and Covenants 20:38–44, which describes the duties of an elder, could be worded "duty of apostles *and* elders." The paragraph (they didn't uses verses then) begins, "an apostle is an elder, and it is his calling to. . . ." In the earliest

years the two terms were generally synonymous.

A final example of a communities of discourse approach to early Latter-day Saint thought is the understanding that the first Saints had of confirmation. From the beginning, the Saints were instructed to confirm by the laying on of hands, but the connotations of that act are more fully unlocked by attending to its linguistic context. In two places in the Doctrine and Covenants, the expression "confirming the church(es)" is used. Today Latter-day Saints speak of confirming *members* of the church, but not of confirming *a*, or *the*, church. "Church" is used almost exclusively to refer to the overall organization, not to its constituent congregations. Yet the Lord told Joseph to confirm "the church at Colesville" (D&C 26:1). This actually reflects the older New Testament usage where *ekklesia* or "church" literally meant a congregation or an assemblage. Moreover, the way the early Saints occasionally phrased it mimicked the King James rendering of Acts 15:41 where Paul and Silas travel "through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches."

Additional insight is gained by noting that other translations of the Greek word *episterizo*, rendered as "confirming" in the King James Version, include "strengthening," "establishing," and "consolidating." This hints at a richer understanding of the term "confirm" in the 1830s. To confirm someone was more than to ceremonially affirm their membership in the Church. The link with the New Testament suggests that the 1830s usage retained the rich original connotation of confirmation as a means of spiritually strengthening and establishing the Saints through the conferral of the Holy Ghost. What happened when hands were laid on the head of a newly baptized convert was not the bestowal of two separate gifts—formal membership status *and* the gift of the Holy Ghost—but rather a single gift, which was expected to open the door to spiritual strength and stability.

What this presentation has sought to do is take a closer look at how the beautiful monarch butterfly of the restored gospel gradually emerged from the cocoon of contemporary Christianity. In doing so, the scholarly methodology known as "communities of discourse" has provided a helpful magnifying glass through which to better scrutinize the miracle of divinely guided growth. I wish to close with a few remarks to Latter-day Saints who assume that complete doctrinal understanding was present from day one in the Church, that throughout Latter-day Saint history, church leaders have always said and meant exactly the same things when discussing doctrine. This is neither a necessary nor a particularly accurate model of understanding God's dealings with his children. To modify our metaphor a bit, we can more understandingly praise God's miracle in the creation of human beings by better understanding the details of their embryonic development, birth, and postnatal growth. So it is with the growth of the Church and its doctrinal understandings. We do not expect—indeed much of the wonder of life would be lost if it were so—that humans or the Church sprang full-grown from the hand of God.

Testimony can be deepened by attending to our own Latter-day Saint community of discourse, the "line-upon-line" principle. This valuable insight allows for a gradual unfolding and refining of doctrine based on both human capacity and divine design. The more it is studied, the more we realize the naivete of intersecting our past at any given point in time and expecting to hold the Church accountable for the finality of all views there discovered. Indeed, to pursue Paul's metaphor, the Church is like a body, and all bodies go through successive stages of development from infancy to adulthood. A wise and loving father does not immediately correct all his children's mistaken notions nor attempt to teach them all truth at once. Rather, he

closely monitors their development, adding, subtracting, and refining until they reach maturity. Would a perfect Father in Heaven be less wise? Continuous revelation is merely his method, the "light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

As a Mormon historian who for many years has closely studied Latter-day Saint thought, I am profoundly impressed with how patient the Lord is, how he treats his chosen servants not as puppets or pawns, but honors their agency and understanding and teaches them, according to the Doctrine and Covenants, "in their weakness, after the manner of their language [cultural as well as verbal] that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24). If here and there history isn't quite as neat or dramatic as we may wish it to be, let us be grateful. It is a witness that a loving Lord, as consummate teacher and caring father, has been more concerned with dealing wisely with his earlier servants than he was with how those dealings might later look to some of his children. As we would hope, God places people, his children, above image. Let us be careful that we do not unwittingly cherish, even worship, a particular construct or image of the past more than we do the living Lord, whose historical ways are not always our ways, nor whose thoughts are our thoughts. Let us rejoice in the miracle of growth, spiritual as well as physical.

Notes

1. The influence of relevant communities of discourse on Mormon belief in this century has yet to be teased out though such influences are regularly suggested. Relatively little Mormon intellectual history from any angle of access has been done for the twentieth century. A noteworthy exception is the recent discussion of the influence of Anglo-Israelism on Latter-day Saint view of race by Armand L. Mauss (1999) and Arnold H. Green (1999).

2. Dan Vogel (17–33) cites several representatives of this "community" but neither recognizes them as such nor realizes their relevance for explaining Latter-day Saint understandings of God's "body."

3. In 1836, Truman Coe, a Presbyterian minister and former Kirtland resident, wrote that Mormons believed "that the true God is a material being, composed of body and parts; and that when the Creator formed Adam in his own image, he made him about the shape and size of God himself." See Milton V. Backman (1977). Since Backman reprinted this statement in 1977, it has been interpreted by some as proof that the earliest Mormons knew that God had a body of flesh and bone while others, realizing that the Saints generally did not hold such beliefs until the 1840s, dismissed Coe's statement as distortion. For a view of those among the former, see Backman (1977, 350) and Robert Millet (1990, 223—28). For a view of those adhering to the latter position, see Allen (1980, 49–50).

4. A comprehensive survey of the extensive literature on the meaning of apostolos can be found in Francis H. Agnew (1986).

5. Two recent examples are D. Michael Quinn (1994) and Prince (1995).

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