



10-1-1980

*Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* Truman G. Madsen, ed.

Scott Kenney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Kenney, Scott (1980) "*Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* Truman G. Madsen, ed.," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 20 : Iss. 4 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol20/iss4/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

MADSEN, TRUMAN G., ed. *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, 1978. 245 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Scott Kenney, Ph. D. candidate in American Religious Studies, Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, Cal., and a member of the Utah Symphony Orchestra.

The idea was exhilarating. Twelve of this country's most renowned scholars in religious studies presenting a "Reflections on Mormonism" Symposium at Brigham Young University. With allowances for the hyperbole of a dust jacket, it truly was "a dazzling array of talent and expertise," with all the ingredients for "the watershed event of the decade." Never before had an LDS-affiliated organization invited so many eminent scholars to address themselves so directly to Mormon themes. Truman Madsen is ever to be congratulated for cracking the Mormon reputation of provincialism and anti-intellectualism with this symposium. And BYU's Religious Studies Center is to be congratulated for sponsoring the event and then publishing the papers in their entirety.

This book is a must for any serious student of Mormonism, not only for its contents but for the promising precedent it sets, none of which seems to have been lost on the book-buying public. Little more than a year after *Reflections on Mormonism* appeared on the shelves, the first printing of 6,000 copies had been sold out and a



second run of 3,000 was being prepared. Now, two-and-a-half years after the papers were first presented, is an opportune time to assess the symposium's impact as well as its content.

As for the papers themselves, *Reflections* is a mixed product. Most of the papers fail to deal in any substantive way with the Mormon perspective in their various topics. With three or four notable exceptions, the authors selected themes from their respective fields, developed them with non-Mormon sources, and concluded with a few obligatory glances, however oblique, at Mormonism. Consequently, there is little reflection on Mormonism. The parallels are often vague and tentative. Thus, after nineteen pages of Jewish and Hellenistic sources, David Winston concludes some Mormon concepts of the preexistence may be found "in one form or another" in ancient writings, while others may be "partially paralleled," and still others are "completely incongruous." Readers may enjoy reading what Winston's post-Biblical writers thought of "preexistence," but they will have to sort out what it means for themselves. Winston offers no evaluation, no reflection.

Jacob Milgrom makes a greater effort to show how his topic, temple purification, functioned in the religious life of ancient Israel. But he so limited the subject—"one ingredient, of one ritual, of one sacrifice: the blood of the *ḥattā't* on the horns of the altar"—(p. 58) that any significant parallel with Mormon temple worship seems highly improbable. "The Temple in Biblical Israel: Kinships of Meaning" is a misleading title, and the paper disappointing.

Similarly, James H. Charlesworth has to stretch to find parallels in "Messianism in the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon." He offers two—one based on a far-fetched interpretation of a single verse (2 Nephi 6:14), and the other (redaction techniques in the Pseudepigrapha and Book of Mormon) provocative but undeveloped.

Abraham Kaplan was apparently so averse to treading on unfamiliar ground that he made not a single reference to Mormonism, yet his paper fairly screams out for a Mormon response. In "The Meanings of Ritual: Comparisons," Kaplan discusses the polarity of "medical" and "spiritual" justifications of dietary laws, the "fallacy of supposing the origins determine validity" (p. 40), and the distinction between religious and magical invocations of power.

David Noel Freedman read the Book of Abraham and confessed, "I learned some things I did not know before concerning the tradition of the sacrifice of Abraham" (p. 68). What did the Mormon scripture tell this renowned Old Testament scholar about Abraham? What did he think of the Book of Abraham? He gives us not a word.



Instead, Freedman recounts the 1975 discovery of the Ebla tablets. On the basis of a translation (which a footnote acknowledges is faulty) of one tablet, he proclaims the historicity (which few Mormons would have had cause to doubt in the first place) of five cities connected with the Abrahamic tradition in Genesis 14. A golden opportunity is lost to open a meaningful dialogue on a significant theme of mutual interest.

Equally disappointing is Robert Bellah's "American Society and the Mormon Community." The great exponent of American civil religion is content to reiterate the well-worn Mormon/Puritan parallels and take a nostalgic trip back to his field study of a small rural Mormon community twenty-five years ago. Bellah thinks nineteenth-century communitarianism might provide solutions for what ails America today, but he offers no advice as to how they might be resuscitated and adapted to modern conditions.

It may well be, of course, that some speakers purposely skirted relevant issues so as not to seem ungracious or critical of their hosts. Bellah's most salient point comes in the final paragraph and is undeveloped: "Mormons often criticize the larger society in which they live. . . . How many of them realize that their own current social, economic, and political views and actions may contribute to the wasteland they see around them, or that their own experience as a people might suggest a very different course for America today?" (p. 11). Similarly, Ernst Benz ("Imago Dei: Man in the Image of God"), in spite of his grasp of Mormon and early Christian teachings on human deification, fails to adequately contrast the two similar but distinct traditions. The crucial difference is only indirectly made:

Now, this [gnostic] idea of deification could give rise to a misunderstanding, namely, that it leads to a blasphemous self-aggrandizement of man. If that were the case, then mysticism would, in fact, be the most sublime, most spiritualized form of egoism. But the concept of *Imago Dei* . . . precisely does *not* aspire to awaken in man a consciousness of his own divinity but attempts to have him recognize the image of God in his neighbor. . . . "If thou hast seen thy brother, then thou hast also seen thy Lord." [Pp. 218, 219]

Edmond LaB. Cherbonnier's articulate and entertaining "In Defense of Anthropomorphism" is a polemic on the nature of God that many Mormons will appreciate for its defense of the "human-ness" of God.

But for this reader, the really outstanding contributions of the symposium were made by Jane and John Dillenberger and Krister Stendahl.



Ms. Dillenberger was the moving force behind the first two exhibits of American religious art to tour the country (1972–73 and 1977–78). The first exhibit included the murals of Mormon pioneer artist C.C.A. Christensen, which Ms. Dillenberger discusses in her symposium paper, “Mormonism and American Religious Art.” Clearly and concisely she points out features of Christensen’s works which, for all their technical deficiencies, make them powerful religious statements. As the lay person sees through an artist’s eyes, appreciation of these familiar works is greatly enhanced. From her introductory remarks, it is clear Ms. Dillenberger is familiar with, and perhaps responding to, Elder Boyd K. Packer’s “The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord” (*BYU Studies* 16 [Summer 1976]: 575–88). Avoiding a direct confrontation, Ms. Dillenberger concludes:

Most art historians agree that there is good art and bad art, but not that there is Mormon Art, Women’s Art, Black Art, and so on. This conviction is not a matter of fine argument and distinctions, but conclusions drawn from the evidence. Michelangelo worked almost exclusively for the popes, yet his art could never be confined by the label “Roman Catholic Art.” Rembrandt’s biblical subjects, which come out of a Protestant culture, are as moving to Catholics as to Protestants. Christensen’s significant paintings are as expressive to me as they are to Mormons. Indeed, I believe that I, and the historians of American art, value them more highly than do the Mormon people for whom they were made.

Protestant and Roman Catholic art used for educational purposes is no better than the Mormon art now in the visitors centers. But Protestants and Catholics alike have floundered in their educational efforts whereas Mormonism has a highly developed and effective educational system which brings much emphasis on the visual image. With such a cohesive educational network . . . the opportunity for educating the eye and the spirit through great art and for teaching the great truths through the great masters is limitless. Rembrandt and Michelangelo are as much a part of Mormon history as Christensen’s paintings. [Pp. 199–200]

John Dillenberger’s “Grace and Works in Martin Luther and Joseph Smith” is important not only for the insights it provides into these two men, but even more for the methodological axiom on which it is based: “Nearly opposite expressions frequently, at different historical junctures, may express a shared intentionality. Originally, the trinitarian formulation was meant to express the unity of God in the polytheistic setting of the Roman empire. The unitarian impulse was born when changes in conceptions of personality made the Trinity appear polytheistic” (p. 176). In their contexts, Martin Luther and Joseph Smith, often perceived as the man of grace



without works, and the man of works without grace, shared several key “intentionalities” even though their language may have been diametrically opposed. Dillenberger’s logical progressions are so abbreviated, his literary style so highly compressed, that readers will have to proceed slowly, rereading many sections carefully, to gain the full import. But those willing to make the effort will be well rewarded, for Dillenberger’s principle of contextual theology (my term, not his) has sweeping implications for those dealing with the Mormon implementation and abandonment of communitarian economics, theodemocracy, and the practice of polygamy.

Krister Stendahl, dean of Harvard’s Divinity School, may be the first New Testament scholar of world renown to accept the oft-repeated Mormon challenge to investigate the Book of Mormon seriously. Now it remains to be seen how seriously Mormons will take a scholar’s findings. Stendahl confines his investigation to the account of Jesus’ ministry in 3 Nephi, carefully noting the differences in the text of St. Matthew (including the Inspired Version). Going beyond merely noting the textual differences, Stendahl illuminates significant theological implications of the Book of Mormon. For instance, “the internal criticism in the religious community [an element Stendahl finds ‘indispensable’ in the New Testament account] has disappeared”; in its place, “Jesus has also become the founder of a church and the promulgator of its ordinances” (pp. 151, 152). The paper is filled with fascinating comparisons and must be read in its entirety, but basically Stendahl finds that the 3 Nephi version clarifies ambiguities and expands on the New Testament account. In the Book of Mormon he finds a strong tendency, characteristic of pseudepigraphic literature: “the hunger for further revelation, the insatiable hunger for knowing more than has been revealed so far. . . . Perhaps such a comment is irrelevant to those who are gratefully convinced of additional revelation in and through Joseph Smith or otherwise. But as I look at the whole spectrum of God’s menagerie of humankind and its history, . . . I think it is important to reflect on the limits as well as the glories of the hunger for and joy in additional information. . . . For there is sometimes too much glitter in the Christmas tree” (pp. 152–54).

There is much interesting information, and occasional insight, in all of the papers published in *Reflections on Mormonism*. But in the three papers by the Dillenbergers and Krister Stendahl we find reflections of Mormonism which come back to us through the experiences of religious scholars to illuminate the unexplored recesses of our own heritage.