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BOOK REVIEW

Trumbower, Jeffrey A. *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity.*

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Hans A. Pohlsander

Latter-day Saint scholars have reason to take note of and to be grateful for this recent addition to the Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. Author Jeffrey A. Trumbower has previously published *Born from Above: The Anthropology of the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992) and is chair of the Department of Religious Studies at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont.

In the introduction to the present book, Trumbower succinctly defines his subject. In Christianity at large, he points out, "belief in salvation for the faithful has usually meant non-salvation for others" (3). But, he notes, exceptions to this general principle can be found in ancient Christianity, and "the principle itself was slow to develop and not universally accepted in the Christian movement's first four hundred years" (3). Two of the ancient exceptions, recorded in the Acts of Paul and Thecla and in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas, are briefly mentioned in the introduction and are discussed in depth later in the volume. Posthumous salvation, Trumbower is well aware, was allowed for in modern times in Shaker theology and practice and is an important, while sometimes controversial, part of Latter-day Saint belief and practice. He acknowledges that Latter-day Saints are motivated by love and compassion and a belief in God's justice in giving everyone a chance; "no doubt," he says, "these factors apply as well in the early Christian contexts" (7). He also remarks that "everyone in the world who is interested in family history and genealogy has benefited from the enormous resources the Latter-day Saints have put into research for saving the dead" (6).

In chapter 1, Greek, Roman, and Jewish traditions are examined to show "the wide range of cultural options open to early Christians concerning

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succor for the dead" (11). Archaeological, epigraphical, and especially literary evidence is adduced, the latter from the Homeric epics, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Plato's *Republic*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and the books of Tobit and 2 Maccabees. Republic 365 and 366A, supported by an Orphic gold lamella (a small metal tablet), lead to the conclusion that "some people participating in the Orphic salvation movement wished to extend the benefits of the salvific rituals to those initiates already dead" (26). Even more interestingly, 2 Maccabees 12:43b–45 provides for posthumous atonement and for intercession by the living for the dead. But 4 Ezra 7:82, two centuries later, decidedly takes the opposite view.

"The general thrust of the New Testament and early Christian literature," Trumbower writes in chapter 2, is "that death is a boundary beyond which salvation may not be procured" (33). Again, however, he can cite exceptions: Romans 11:32, by implication, speaks of universal salvation; 1 Corinthians 15:29 of baptism on behalf of the dead; and 1 Peter 4:6 of the gospel being preached to the dead. In noncanonical literature, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Sibylline Oracles provide additional examples. Regarding 1 Corinthians 15:29, "enormous vats of ink have been emptied" (35) in largely vain efforts to interpret this passage. Another New Testament scholar writes in reference to this crucial text, "The ingenuity of the exegetes has run riot."[1] Trumbower feels certain "that the grammar and logic of the passage point to a practice of vicarious baptism of a living person for the benefit of a dead person" (35). He thinks, however, that the Corinthians limited this practice to those who had died in the faith but without baptism. Vicarious baptism was also practiced by the heretic Marcionites, mentioned again in chapter 5, and by the equally heretic followers of a certain Cerinthus.

Chapter 3 offers a good account of the textual history of the Acts of Paul and Thecla and its place in the larger but now fragmentary Acts of Paul. This is followed by an equally good account of the circumstances under which Thecla successfully intercedes for Falconilla, the deceased daughter of her pagan friend Tryphaena, and secures her salvation. The important point is that Falconilla "is the recipient of posthumous grace procured for her by one of God's heroes" (70), but other aspects of the story, such as the role of dreams as a form of religious expression and the role of women in the Church, are not neglected.

While Thecla is a fictional person, Perpetua, discussed in chapter 4, was a real person mentioned in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas. She was a young Christian woman who was arrested and suffered martyrdom in Carthage in 203 (her feast day is observed on March 7). While in prison, she was moved upon to pray intently for a younger brother, Dinocrates, who

had died at the age of seven. In one vision, she then saw her brother suffering, and in a second, she saw him delivered from his sufferings, which demonstrates the efficacy of prayer for the dead—a non-Christian, as was Falconilla. "Both Thecla and Perpetua," Trumbower holds, "engage in a process of creating a new family among the dead," and, he continues, "one sees this process at work also in nineteenth-century Mormon practice" (86). More than two centuries after Perpetua's martyrdom, her visions of Dinocrates were used by a North African Christian (more specifically, a Donatist) named Vincentius Victor "to justify his view that Christian prayer for the unbaptized dead was a good and necessary activity" (89). Augustine's view on the matter was, predictably, quite different.

In chapter 5, the author discusses the numerous passages in the New Testament and other early Christian literature that deal with Christ's descent to the underworld (also known as "the harrowing of hell"). Some might take offense at Trumbower's referring to the event as a "myth" (92) and might even question the relevance of some parallels adduced from Hellenistic mythology. He distinguishes between those texts that limit the beneficiaries of Christ's visit to "the holy ones" of the Old Testament and those that hold forth a more "general offer of salvation" (95). Among the latter, he counts 1 Peter 4:6 (possibly), the apocryphal Gospel of Peter, and three of the beautiful Odes of Solomon. He concludes:

> The question of who was saved at the descent was not settled in the first four centuries of Christianity, though Augustine and Gregory the Great were highly influential in making normative, in the West, that a person's actions *in this life only* [italics added] are determinative. For them, repentance or receiving God's grace for the first time in the afterlife was, is now, and ever shall be, impossible. (108)

By "universal salvation," discussed in chapter 6, Trumbower means "the salvation of all individual beings who have ever lived, not a universal *offer* of salvation" (109). Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, he argues, all had strong universalist leanings. Clement and Origen also spoke of posthumous progress. Origen believed, Latter-day Saint readers will note with satisfaction, in "each individual's responsibility, God's justice, and each human being's freedom of choice to reject or turn toward God" and in the concept that "each person's soul existed long before coming into the body, and it will continue long after it leaves" (114). Origen rejected determinism, predestination, and reincarnation. He did not know whether the punishment of the damned lasts forever, but he was of the opinion "that a temporary, remedial punishment is more in line with God's mercy" (117). He even interpreted "eternal" as meaning only "a very long time" (117). Anyone will find comfort in Origen's conviction "that

death is not a firm boundary of salvation, and that the love and mercy of God will triumph in the end" (119).

Universalism became even more pronounced, more confident, and more systematic in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, Origen's admirer and one of the three Cappadocian Fathers. To Gregory, too, "eternal" may mean "for a long time" (122). Even Jerome, before he became an anti-Origenist, upheld a position of universal salvation. Opposition was to be offered by Epiphanius of Salamis and John Chrysostom. Eventually the writings of Origen were condemned by a decree of the emperor Justinian in 543 and by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553. Gregory of Nyssa escaped such condemnation.

In chapter 7, the pertinent views of Augustine, views very different from those of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, are discussed. Even before Augustine, some Christian writers had emphasized the need to earn one's salvation in this life. Hippolytus of Rome held that each person is judged already at death, and Cyprian of Carthage taught that "in the grave there is no confession and the rite of reconciliation cannot take place there" (127). But no one developed this principle more fully or more clearly than Augustine, whose views became universally accepted in the West. Augustine's views evolved over many years as he responded to questions from friends or to attacks from enemies and as his thinking was stimulated by the Pelagian controversy. "In the mid-420s, he had formulated the clear position in the West rejecting *all* forms of posthumous salvation" (126; italics added); On the way to this position, he had worked out his own interpretation of Jesus' descent to hell and had rejected the ideas of Vincentius Victor. He came to see God's mercy on all (Romans 11:32) simply as mercy on "all those from among the Gentiles as well as those of the Jews whom he predestined, called, justified, and glorified" (*City of God*, 21.24).

Trumbower does not systematically extend his study beyond the parameters of early Christianity and might have concluded it with the chapter on Augustine. But fortunately, he devotes chapter 8 to the salient role of Pope Gregory the Great in the further history of posthumous salvation. Already at the end of chapter 7, readers learn that "Gregory the Great repeated Augustine's formulations about the impossibility of posthumous salvation for the unbaptized" (140). But Gregory did have faith in the efficacy of masses and prayers said on behalf of Christian sinners and in the possibility of their posthumous salvation. Trumbower next examines a curious text that purports to record a tearful prayer said by Gregory on behalf of the emperor Trajan, who, of course, was not only an unbaptized pagan but also a persecutor of Christians. The anonymous text probably dates from the seventh century and is extant in both Latin and Greek versions of the eighth century, with some variances between them. The East

and the West differed also in their interpretation of this text, which is not surprising, given, among other things, the high esteem in which Gregory of Nyssa was held in the East. The Eastern interpretation allows greater openness to the idea of prayer for the dead in hell.

The final sentences of the author's conclusions deserve to be quoted in full:

> For the Shakers, Mormons, and Universalists of the nineteenth century, reinterpreting traditional Christianity also meant throwing off traditional Christian restrictions on salvation for the dead. Those Christians, like Augustine, who reject posthumous salvation find themselves in the paradoxical position of affirming the continued existence of the personality after death, but rejecting the idea that the personality of the unbaptized and grievous sinners might grow or change as they did throughout life. Although I have much sympathy for those in every age who have wished to rescue the dead, it is not the goal of this volume to take sides or to chart a course for Christian theology. Those who take on such a task, however, should be informed of the early history of the question in all its facets, and if this book has shed some light on that history, then it will have achieved its goals. (155)

A rich bibliography, in which both classicists and theologians will meet many familiar names, and detailed indexes conclude the book.

Professor Trumbower is to be congratulated on a fine achievement. His book ranges widely across the cultures, through a vast body of primary sources and secondary literature in several languages, and through the centuries, yet never loses sight of its central theme; it is to be recommended to readers of any persuasion for its meticulous scholarship, clear style of writing, and scrupulous objectivity. Latter-day Saint readers will, additionally, appreciate the respectful references to and considerable support for their own beliefs.

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1. Hans Conzelman, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 276.