



2017

## Postponing Heaven: The Three Nephites, the Bodhisattvaa, and the Mahdi

Spencer L. Green  
*Penn State*

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



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

---

### Recommended Citation

Green, Spencer L. (2017) "Postponing Heaven: The Three Nephites, the Bodhisattvaa, and the Mahdi," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 56 : Iss. 4 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss4/15>

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).

Jad Hatem. *Postponing Heaven: The Three Nephites, the Bodhisattva, and the Mahdi*. Trans. Jonathon Penny. Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015.

*Reviewed by Spencer L. Green*

Jad Hatem teaches and publishes in philosophy, literature, and comparative religion at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, Lebanon. Jonathon Penny, a published poet, has translated Hatem's book into English with helpful and unobtrusive footnotes. *Postponing Heaven* is a comparative look at human messianicity in Mormonism, Buddhism, and Twelver Shiism (a branch of Shia Islam) as seen in the Three Nephites, the Bodhisattva, and the Twelfth Mahdi. In this philosophical examination, Hatem seeks to "underline the specific character and conditions of [human messianicity] and to bring its implications into full flower" (3). While it may not reach full flower for all readers, the book is rich in implications on the significance of human messianicity across religious traditions.

Human messianicity for Hatem is "the disposition to desire to save others" (1), and he sees it as a fundamentally human quality and the ultimate expression of compassion. It has both its ordinary and exceptional examples, and the subjects of this book are the latter. While life, and prolonging it, are usually understood in selfish terms, Hatem argues that human messiahs (not his term despite the subject) forgo death in an act of selflessness because their desire to serve others is so strong. Hatem concludes that their sacrifice allows these figures to become wholly devoted to God or, in other words, subsume being-before-men, being-before-self, and being-before-the-world into being-before-god (65).

In chapter 1, "The Vow," Hatem describes the figures he'll be looking at. In describing the Three Nephites, he compares them to John the Beloved and the biblical and extrabiblical references to his lengthened life and even includes the Apostle Paul's claim that he would be cut off if it would help his people. This impetuosity to do the work of the Lord exhibited by these human messiahs, which Hatem also sees in Joseph

Smith, should spark a host of examples for Mormon readers: Aaron rebuking Ammon for his boasting (Alma 26:10), Alma's critique of his desire to speak with the voice of an angel (Alma 29: 1–3), not to mention Peter's impetuosity in desiring Christ to wash his whole body rather than just his feet (John 13: 6–10).

Next Hatem describes the Twelfth, or hidden, Imam of Twelver Shiism. The Twelfth Mahdi is immortal but hidden, and his existence preserves the world. While the Three Nephites are taken away, or hidden, due to sin in the world, the Mahdi seems to be concealed to preserve his life because, despite not aging, he can be killed. His long life is neither earned nor granted but seems a simple fact.

The bodhisattva, on the other hand, earns his lengthened life that he may continue to acquire merit, which he can then transfer to others (19). The bodhisattva works tirelessly to help others enter nirvana and will be "the last to enter into nirvana" (23).

In chapter 2, "Nistar," Hatem discusses these figures as *homo absconditus*, or concealed humans. He sees the purpose of the Nephites' concealment to be anonymity, though he does not discuss why this is important to them. The Hasidic nistar, which give the chapter its name, are righteous individuals who preserve the world while remaining hidden from it and sometimes even from themselves to avoid vanity. They are, nevertheless, important and fulfill a mission of "existing in truth," the importance of which is unexplored. The Mahdi, somewhat like the Three Nephites, exists in partial concealment to protect himself from his enemies while revealing himself to his followers when needed. The bodhisattva is the least concealed of the three figures but does, by magical means and for purposes of conversion, disguise himself as he works among mortals. Hatem concludes this chapter with Jesus's own messianicity, which, though he is the Twelfth Mahdi in some interpretations, does not make him a mortal messiah, as these other figures are, because in Twelver Shiism he is completely concealed and plays no role until his final appearance.

Chapter 3, "Kerygma" is a short chapter comparing how focused or unfocused the figures are on proselyting: The Three Nephites are hidden and proselyte; the Bodhisattva proselytes, or does his work, through his disguises; and the Mahdi is a nonproselyting messianic figure.

Chapters 4 and 5, "Contemporaneity" and "Nephite-Mahdite Time," tackle the idea of time and these human messiahs' place within it. Where, between the timelessness of deity and the temporality of humanity, do these translated beings fall? Certainly, Hatem argues, they bridge the

two, for these figures are mediums of contemporaneity with deity. If they were present with deity and become present with someone else, that person is brought into closer proximity with God. Hatem views the essential temporal moments as the time of the messiah, which is the short moment when the messiah first appears; then there's messianic time, the expectant time that grows from past to present; and finally Nephite-Mahdi time is a human but enduring time. Hatem differentiates messianic time, or the time between the now and the world to come, from Nephite-Mahdi time, which, due to the concealed nature of the messiahs, further divides the here and now between the "manifest and the hidden" (56). All of this is to reconcile the reality of the Apostasy with the Islamic idea that for God, or Allah, to be "worship-worthy," he cannot have neglected humanity as seems to have been the case during the Apostasy. With the Three Nephites present and doing hidden but real work, the Mormon belief in the Apostasy and the Islamic belief in what constitutes the divine can be reconciled. Hatem's inclination to resolve such disparate traditions in the first place is what makes this book so engaging and valuable.

Finally, in chapter 6, "Lehi's Axiom," Hatem uses Lehi's assertion that "it must needs be, that there is an opposition to all things" to argue for anti-human-messiah figures. He cites the apparently ageless Cain in Mormon folklore as one such figure and notes also the Buddha's conflict with Mara and the Mahdi's with Dajjāl, an antimessiah figure in the Sunni tradition. He ends the chapter speculating about the limits to which "all things" refers and admits that Mormon doctrine does not recognize a God who is both "the Maker and the Unmaker" (63).

The appendices are a nice addition and much lighter reading than the bulk of the book. In the first appendix, Hatem seeks to reconcile Lehi's axiom with Schelling's similar ideas in responding to Sterling McMurrin's argument about the presence of evil in the world. Hatem doesn't agree with McMurrin's resolution for Mormons, but it is refreshing to read a serious philosopher apply his mental tools equally to Lehi and to Leibnitz, exploring how these ideas fit together and hold up under scrutiny. Hatem suggests a satisfying resolution for Mormon theologians on whether God is perfect and thus changeless or whether his perfection depends upon progress and thus change. Hatem favors the latter, arguing that, to my reading, part of God's perfection is his continuing to choose to do only good while the potential to choose otherwise is always present. His outsider perspective on Mormonism is fair and valuable to insiders and interested outsiders of the faith alike.

Hatem knows his topic well, and despite some moments of disagreement with his analysis, I believe his insights should be interesting to scholars of Mormonism, whether cultural, religious, theological, or philosophical. *Postponing Heaven* is a fascinating if uneven read. The length of chapters varies widely, and the main text is dense and difficult, unless the reader has considerable familiarity with philosophy. The appendices, by contrast, are interesting and readable for a less academically trained audience. And though the line of argument is easy to lose among the many examples, for the diligent reader it honors its promise to bring the implications of these figures into “full flower” (3).

---

Spencer L. Green studies children’s and religious folklore, play, and nature. He completed a PhD in American studies at Penn State in Harrisburg with a dissertation on Mormon adolescent folklore. He currently teaches composition at Penn State.