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Mormonism and the Emotions: An Analysis of LDS Scriptural Texts

Richard N. Williams
Wheatley Institution

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Mauro Properzi. *Mormonism and the Emotions:
An Analysis of LDS Scriptural Texts.*

Vancouver, B.C.: Farleigh Dickenson University Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Richard N. Williams

Any reader familiar with the scholarly endeavors of the relatively new academic fields of Mormon theology or Mormon studies will recognize Professor Mauro Properzi's volume *Mormonism and the Emotions* as a contribution to the knowledge base of these fields. Though Properzi's study focuses on LDS doctrines and global theology, its central new contribution is its particular subject matter, the emotions—a topic of interest to social science and religion scholars generally—as dealt with in the LDS scriptural canon. The volume is informed by the researcher's understanding of general LDS theology, but it also takes a quasi-phenomenological approach to its textual analysis of emotion words in the text of LDS modern scriptures. As such, *Mormonism and the Emotions* is an original first step.

Most readers, particularly those not already engaged in the dialogue surrounding LDS theology, will benefit from spending some time with the introduction to the work. Professor Properzi does a very nice job of summarizing what is at stake in the question of whether or not there is a formal theology or a theological tradition within Mormonism. In providing readers with an accessible account of the viewpoints of proponents on both sides of the question, he brings in such issues as whether the conceptual and philosophical categories of traditional theological approaches really have purchase in Latter-day Saint doctrines and understandings, and the nature and role of theology in a tradition that places much importance on authoritative voices and continuing divine revelation. In the introduction, Properzi clarifies his own view of LDS theology—and the doing of LDS theology—which is quite appealing (10). His view is reasoned, careful, and provides a balanced approach that might serve as a model for other scholars in the field,

particularly young scholars who are still formulating their own principles and approaches.

When Properzi describes the methodology of his study of emotions, he enters the realm where science and religion meet. Most in Mormon studies will brush by this issue, but some will be immersed in the controversies between these overlapping domains of explanation. Even though the topic of emotions does not require a full plunge into the intricacies or the controversies, Properzi rightly acknowledges that his study takes us to the space where science and religion offer different and sometimes competing claims. Again, he locates himself and his work somewhere between the “integration” and “interdependence” of the two fields, while acknowledging that his own study is more theological than scientific (12–13). This position seems reasonable for what the author wants to do in the study of emotions in the LDS scriptures. His intent is not to deal with the emotions as the social, cognitive, or neurosciences would, but there is in his work, under the surface, a definition and classification scheme greatly influenced by the scientific study of emotion. This provides a scaffold for his categorization and an implicit set of assumptions about the nature of emotion itself that—perhaps for better or for worse—put his work in the mainstream of current thinking about emotion.

This very helpful introduction ends with the author’s summary of the content and purpose of the succeeding chapters of the book. Part 1, composed of chapters 1–4, has two purposes. First, Properzi summarizes the present state of the intellectual discourse on emotions from what might be termed a philosophical perspective, and then he organizes emotions into three categories based on essential characteristics of any or all emotions: cognitive necessity, personal responsibility, and developmental instrumentality. This classificatory scheme might indeed help distinguish among emotions, but nothing in the text makes this particular categorization compelling. For Properzi’s purposes, however, it seems useful enough.

Utilizing a philosophical perspective, chapter 3 concentrates more intensely on Mormonism, focusing on dimensions of metaphysics and cosmology. In this chapter, I paid particular attention to the section dealing with the question of agency. The explanation of human agency Properzi offers in this chapter is certainly consistent with what one might encounter within Mormon orthodoxy and establishes the centrality of agency in understanding human nature, the nature and purposes of God, and the purpose of life from within the Mormon tradition.

Properzi suggests that the LDS position on agency is essentially consistent with the classical libertarian notion of freedom of choice (74).

This characterization of an LDS understanding of agency seems sound, if only because there is an absence of a large body of work on agency arguing otherwise. If we grant, however, that Mormonism subscribes to the libertarian notion of free will, we are faced with a number of issues related to the origin, nature, and function of emotions, which have been discussed for centuries. From Plato's metaphor of the charioteer onward, emotions and agency have been intertwined, variously at odds or in harmony with each other. For libertarian agents, emotions serve at once as motivators, sources of interference, and justifications for morally relevant agentic actions. Properzi, however, elects not to explore these interconnections in his discussion of emotions and Mormonism. In chapter 3 there is only one sentence that points to a relationship between human agency, as important to Mormonism, and emotion: "This recognition [of the importance of interpersonal relations] is significant for an LDS theology of emotion because to make room for the 'principles-relations link' is to open the door to complex interconnections between emotional and rational elements in decision making" (78). This observation, undeveloped in the text, seems to be one of the relatively few places where the author clearly brings the principles of Mormonism, laid out in the first four chapters, into contact with what seems to be the central focus of the book—that is, emotions—explicated in the later chapters.

This general pattern of exposition and organization seems to hold throughout the book and may be considered a weakness of the work. It seems very much to be a book of two parts, and many readers will be disappointed that the two projects at the heart of the purpose of the book are not carefully reconciled or harmonized. Having said this, we can grant that such a harmonizing narrative was not one of Properzi's purposes; however, were there more integration of Mormon doctrines, or understandings, with the analysis on emotion, the book would appear much more cohesive and might make a greater impact on the body of scholarship toward which it is aimed.

The last chapter of part 1, chapter 4, focuses on some of the more distinctive doctrines of Mormonism related to the cosmology of the afterlife and the continuation of life and sociality after death (see D&C 130:2) and on how those topics relate to one's comportment in this life and to the nature and importance of family life. This summary avoids laying traditional theological categories and language over top of LDS doctrines and teachings and will thus be welcomed by readers with a

philosophically informed interest in Mormonism but who are not theologically trained. This summary, however, is not obviously or tightly tied to the topic of the emotions.

Part 2 of the book consists of the analysis or, perhaps more precisely, the categorizing of emotion terms in LDS scripture. Judging the contribution of Properzi's study depends to a great extent on two factors: (1) the manner in which the author carried out the study and reached his conclusions, and (2) the validity, adequacy, and conceptual plausibility of the classification scheme of the emotions. In regard to methodology, Properzi's book is not intended to be a research report of the kind expected in an experimental research journal, and therefore, the details and justifications of the methods used, as well as the results of the study in chapters 6 through 11, are not explicit. The reader has to do some work to grasp the method and thus evaluate the product of the study. It would have been helpful for me, as a reader, if the author had located this study within the panoply of recognized and catalogued qualitative approaches to textual research—at least I could not find a statement that offered that context. In chapter 5 of part 2, Properzi does explain that his method and analysis are modeled after a 2005 study by Matthew Elliott, published as *Faithful Feelings: Emotion in the New Testament*.¹ This connection helps to link the earlier chapters on theology to the analysis in the second part, and as such, it would have been helpful to acknowledge the debt to Elliott's study earlier in the book and in more formal terms.

Because I am familiar with qualitative methods as applied in the social sciences, Properzi's textual analysis of emotion language in LDS scripture is recognizable and makes some sense. For me, because the author exclusively engages with the text and its doctrinally guided interpretation, there is a bit of a phenomenological flavor to the textual analysis. I must admit that it took a while, engaged in the book, for me to recognize and understand part 2 of the book as a qualitative study.

Alongside the methodology, much of the success of this study depends on the adequacy of the conceptual classification of emotions—and the general dimensions of emotion represented in that classification. This is, in the mind of this reviewer, more important than how the classification is presented and employed in the text. Once the book has been contextualized as a qualitative study, there are at least two issues

1. See Matthew Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Emotion in the New Testament* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

that are not satisfactorily dealt with or could be considered “soft spots” in the study: the lack of discussion about cultural, historical, and translational issues; and the oppositional dimensions of emotions that form the basis of Properzi’s analysis. These two issues affect the meaning that can be derived from the study and the extent to which that meaning can point to something generally true about emotion and Mormon theology; thus, they affect the overall value of the study and its contribution.

The first issue may seem somewhat trivial, but it bears on what understandings can be drawn about emotions and the humans—and perhaps particularly Mormons—who experience them. Properzi articulates one important difference between his study and that of Elliott (122). Since Elliott dealt with the New Testament, he had to deal with the problem of understanding emotion words that, throughout history, have been translated from Greek into other languages, including archaic forms of English. Properzi seeks to avoid the problems of “cultural-historical analysis” that Elliott had to deal with by confining his study to contemporary English scriptural texts, freeing himself to pursue what he refers to as a “formalist hermeneutics,” which presumably allows him to go directly to meaning without having to consider cultural, historical, and translation problems (120). This is problematic, of course, because of the intimate cocreating relationship between emotions and the words that express them and between emotions and the cultures that help form and enable them. To my mind, this problem is the problem of translation, and it cannot be avoided. The Book of Mormon provides the best examples. Some emotion words in the Book of Mormon come from the language (some sort of Hebrew-Aramaic) of Lehi’s earliest colony and are expressed in a sort of modified hieroglyphic script. Emotion words from later parts of the book will reflect understandings and choices from a different culture. However, even if the entire Book of Mormon text had been directly rendered, without an intermediary translation by Nephite or Lamanite authors, by Joseph Smith, through the influence of the Spirit, into early-nineteenth-century American English, cultural issues would still remain. From the book of Mosiah onward, the words in the Book of Mormon come from texts several hundred years older than Mormon and were influenced no doubt by the language and culture of Zarahemla, perhaps the Jaredites, and any number of unmentioned and unknown cultures.

And then we have the problem of the Spirit’s conveying those meanings to Joseph in ways he could articulate in a cultural milieu nearly two hundred years removed from the present day. This problem, to my mind, deserves a bit more treatment than is given in Properzi’s

text. Properzi's method seems to assume that there is a central core of emotion—or emotions—that are trans-situational and atemporal. This assumption is by no means obviously true. It might very well be the case that Nephites and Lamanites experienced emotions that we do not, and could never, understand. Likewise, we very likely experience emotions that would make no sense to Nephites or Lamanites during any number of periods of their thousand-year history. Furthermore, Properzi seems to imply that emotions are intimately linked to the meaning and processes involved in salvation and sanctification. Therefore, the question becomes whether certain emotions central to salvation constitute solid and transhistorical categories of experience that we must all feel—or something close to them—as we are saved. The other possibility is that salvation is available across a wide range of emotions and emotional understandings. To me, the work Properzi outlines seems to imply the former of these two possibilities. I tend to strongly favor the latter. This latter position takes more seriously the variability, historicity, and linguistic nature of emotion. This issue in and of itself might be a topic deserving of further study.

Finally, it is worth turning a careful evaluative eye toward the structural oppositional dimension of emotions that form the basis for Properzi's analysis. As the literature on and experience with bipolar scales in questionnaires make clear, bipolar opposites that seem obvious to some people are not obvious, or even salient, to others. To apply this notion to Properzi's analysis, I can refer only to my own experience. The opposing emotions of hope and fear, for example, are fundamental to the analysis of Properzi's textual study. However, my immediate response to the word *hope*, in the context of my emotive life, is that the opposite emotion to hope is not fear, but despair. And for me there is an important, discernible, and articulable difference between fear and despair. As a second example, Properzi's analysis contrasts joy with sorrow. For me, again, the clearest and most poignant contrast to joy is not sorrow, but remorse (I think Alma got that one right—see Alma 29:5). And finally, for me, the most relevant contrast to love is not hate but something more like *acedia*—cool indifference. I point these alternatives out here not to argue that I am right and that Properzi is wrong but to suggest that the grounding categories of any qualitative analysis of the sort that we have in *Mormonism and the Emotions* are extremely important. They establish or diminish the validity, generalizability, and value of the study. The book could profit from a broader and finer analysis and

justification of the dimensions used to make sense of emotions within Mormon scripture.

Mormonism and the Emotions is a worthy contribution. It seeks to break new ground, and I hope to see more attention given to the merits of phenomenologically informed textual analysis of our LDS scriptures, building on what Mauro Properzi has done here. I also recommend his reasoned and LDS-centered approach as a contribution to the emerging field of Mormon theology. I hope to see more from this promising scholar.

Richard N. Williams is the founding director of the Wheatley Institution, serving since 2007. From 2001 to 2008, he served as an associate academic vice president for faculty at BYU. He is a professor in the BYU Psychology Department, which he joined in 1981. Williams has authored, coauthored, or edited numerous journal articles and books. He has been a visiting faculty member at Duquesne University and at Georgetown University. He holds an MS and PhD from Purdue University in psychological science and is a summa cum laude graduate of Brigham Young University.