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Robert L. Millet, *By Grace Are We Saved*

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Title

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Abstract  Review of By Grace Are We Saved (1989), by Robert L. Millet.

Reviewed by John Gee

The publication of Robert Millet's book fills a long felt need for a work on grace for the Latter-day Saints which is balanced but not polemical. Millet has done us all a favor for which we should be grateful.

What qualifies Millet's work for review in this publication is not so much that it is a book about the Book of Mormon but that it draws heavily on the Book of Mormon. Millet uses the Book of Mormon as much as the New Testament, and in many cases his points are best made and his conclusions often clinched by quoting the Book of Mormon. He also uses the Joseph Smith Translation both extensively and well. His wide use of both of these sources, as well as of several quotes from Joseph Smith, is what gives this discussion of grace a distinctively Latter-day Saint hue. *By Grace Are We Saved* contains a discussion of grace which is thoroughly grounded in the scriptures. Millet's thought seems to be so permeated with the scriptures, in fact, and with statements of certain of the leaders of the Latter-day Saint Church that at times he seems to quote them unknowingly. Therefore, the following might be noted where he has omitted a reference or two:

- On page 8, line 19, change "Nephi" to "Jacob" and add the references "(Isaiah 55:1; 2 Nephi 9:50-51)" at the end of the sentence, line 21.
- On page 14, line 20, add "(Mosiah 16:4-7; 2 Nephi 9:7-9; Alma 11:40-41)" at the end of the sentence.
- On page 15, line 1, add "(JST, Matthew 5:6; 3 Nephi 12:6)" at the end of the first partial sentence.
- On page 34, line 10, add "(see Lectures on Faith, 3:3-5, in Lundwall, *A Compilation Containing the Lectures on Faith...*, p. 33)" before the dash.
- On page 38, line 23, add "(JST, Matthew 5:6; 3 Nephi 12:6)" at the end of the paragraph.
- On page 52, line 8, add "(Acts 4:12; Mosiah 3:17; Moses 6:52)" at the end of the sentence.

On the whole, Millet is to be commended for his fair and balanced approach to the subject of grace; he cites both General Authorities and non-Mormon writers with about equal
frequency. Most noteworthy is Millet’s care in avoiding two of the major pitfalls in discussions of grace: “(1) either they could come to believe in salvation by grace alone and hence in the irrelevance of one’s obedience and works, or (2) they could come to trust wholly in their own labors and genius, erroneously supposing that what they merit hereafter is a product solely of what they achieve or accomplish on their own here” (p. 4). Both grace and works are necessary but neither is individually sufficient (p. 70; Moroni 10:32 is cited appropriately here). Thus, Millet would have us avoid both the snare of Nehor, who “testified unto the people that . . . the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and in the end, all men should have eternal life” (Alma 1:4), and the delusion of Korihor, who said that “there could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength” (Alma 30:17). Sometimes we are apt to fall into the Zoramite trap: “Holy God . . . we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children” and therefore we need “no Christ” (Alma 31:16), all the while being “puffed up, even to greatness, with the vain things of the world: . . . costly apparel, . . . gold, and all . . . precious things” which we have obtained through hard work (Alma 31:27-28). Alma called such people “wicked and . . . perverse” (Alma 31:24), and Millet’s book serves as an antidote for such thinking.

There are a few matters which Millet has wisely left alone. For instance, he does not get entangled in a discussion of the meaning of the Greek word charis, which is traditionally translated “grace.” His one foray into a discussion of the meaning of Greek words, an etymology of metaphysics that occurs in the context of a discussion of metanoeō as a term meaning ‘repentance’,” is only partially successful. Meta does mean “after,” but it does not mean ‘‘above’ or ‘beyond,’ as in the word metaphysics” (p. 37). The term “metaphysics” comes from a book by Aristotle entitled Metaphysics because, in the canonical order of his works, it came after (meta) the book called

more revelations, additional rites and ordinances, instructions, information, as well as speculation and interpretations, obviously followed the Book of Mormon. Many of these, even those coming directly through Joseph Smith, must be read as constituting a radical shift in perspective, and are inconsistent and discontinuous with his early theology—that is, with the doctrines taught in the Book of Mormon. After 1835 there was a shift away from an essentially orthodox theology, which was basically drawn from the Protestant sectarian world, to a new “progressive theology,” with a “liberal” rather than pessimistic view of human nature, and a radically different conception of God. Instead of interpreting later revelations as clarifications, elaborations, and applications of the doctrine of Jesus Christ, as plainly and emphatically set forth in the Book of Mormon, a “development of Mormon theology” is postulated which does not rest on “an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency.”

It seems to me that clarity on exactly what has been restored as the doctrine of Jesus Christ (or the fulness of the gospel) by divine revelation, rather than what some of the early Saints believed or attempted to work out as part of their efforts to fashion a creed or do theology, would assist in overcoming the notion that a reconstruction of the doctrine, as set forth in the Book of Mormon, was undertaken by Joseph Smith. I am not denying that additional instructions, information, rites, and even additional ancient texts expanding the memory of the Saints were provided by revelation. Nor am I rejecting the notion that the understanding of the Saints was gradually expanded and modified. But this fleshing out of the core structure was not done in such a way that what came in the later revelations was, as some now claim, discontinuous or inconsistent with the doctrine taught in the Book of Mormon understood as the gospel of Jesus Christ. By failing to clarify exactly what constitutes the doctrine of Jesus Christ, it has been possible for some to assume

10 According to Alexander, “This type of exegesis or interpretation,” that he accuses Joseph F. McConkie of employing, “may produce systematic theology and while it may satisfy those trying to understand and internalize current doctrine, it is bad history since it leaves an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency.” See Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine,” 24, and also n. 1, where specific reference is made to the views of McConkie, who is cited as the example of an author who insists on reading earlier texts through the lens of later dogmas.
that a presumably sectarian Protestant “early theology,” which they strive to find in the Book of Mormon, was later jettisoned by Joseph Smith after 1835, as he began to advance a different set of doctrines which constituted a liberal, progressive theology. “Mormon doctrine” (or theology) is understood in such discussions as whatever the Saints may or seem to have believed at any given point, rather than what the crucial texts mean.

Though Millet is clearly opposed to speculation about a radical “reconstruction of Mormon doctrine,”11 unfortunately both he and McConkie share basically the same understanding of “doctrine” as do the Revisionists, for they also think in terms of a complex network of dogmas answering a host of different questions. They are therefore prepared to say exactly what Mormon doctrine is on the nature of God and man, and numerous other theoretical questions. They differ from the Revisionists by holding that the vast array of statements and beliefs that Latter-day Saints have entertained on various questions must be winnowed, and the doctrines of what they call “true religion” (1:369; 2:102, 107, 115) or even “revealed religion” (1:369; 2:115) then ascertained, harmonized, and taught authoritatively. A commentary thus provides the occasion for setting forth an elaborate and detailed creed, at least partially explicated in terms of categories quite foreign to the scriptures, upon which assent is thought to be mandatory for salvation. Labels like “true religion” and “revealed religion,” like “theology,” are categories foreign to the scriptures, but common to our post-Enlightenment, secularized world. Such categories form the lens through which we tend to view the scriptures, when it is the categories of the scriptures that ought to form the lens through which we view the secular world.

A careful examination of the Book of Mormon, which seems to lack much that is familiar to Latter-day Saints, perhaps because of our neglect, points in a somewhat different direction, with its narrow conception of doctrine. The Book of Mormon, with its strict focus on Jesus Christ, rather than an expansive notion of doctrine composed of a complex assortment of details about the nature of divine and human things, turns our attention away from what are clearly theoretical questions that traditionally have constituted the substance of theology. In our urge for

11 See, for example, Robert L. Millet, “The Ministry of the Father and the Son,” in The Keystone Scripture, 44-72, especially 45, n. 4.
theology we are sometimes disappointed to find how little is said in the Book of Mormon that helps us fashion a system of doctrines that deal with the nature of God, or the Godhead, the Holy Ghost, original sin, the nature of man, and so forth, about which it is sometimes thought that Mormons have or at least should have detailed doctrines.

The Book of Mormon focuses our attention, when read carefully, on essentially practical issues centered on the consequences of repentance and believing in Jesus Christ, of trusting God, keeping the commandments, building Zion, avoiding the works of darkness, and so forth, which relate us to eternal life in the presence of God as that is made possible by Jesus Christ as set forth in the doctrine of Christ. I am not persuaded that anything that came in the later revelations to Joseph Smith was anything more than an elaboration and clarification of the core message contained in the initial founding revelation. And I flatly reject the now popular notion that there is a discontinuity and inconsistency between the earlier and later revelations. Nor do I think that we do the Kingdom a service by attempting to harmonize or winnow the various attempts to fashion a Mormon theology with the contents of the Book of Mormon and later revelations. Those who postulate an inconsistency between the Book of Mormon and what was taught by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo begin with the assumption that they are dealing with theology—man’s words about God. But what we are dealing with is divine revelation—God’s words to man, and quite a different thing than theology. (Plato gave us the world theologia, from which we derive our “theology,” in the Republic [Bk II, 379a] to describe the tales appropriately told by poets in a well-ordered regime.) Whenever we attempt to do theology, or fashion a system of doctrines, we end up in contention and disputation, for the entire enterprise is an exercise in arrogance and pride, against which the Book of Mormon warns.

But even as an elementary and informal account of Mormon beliefs, Doctrinal Commentary is flawed, since it is brief, sketchy and necessarily a random rather than an orderly or even historical explication. The end result is, for the most part, a series of didactic discourses, little sermons, or homilies prompted by phrases in the Book of Mormon, which may have little or nothing to do with the meaning of the passage or even the phrase which functioned as the trigger. These homilies tend to opine about words or phrases, but they seldom probe for the
Charis also has a prepositional meaning: (35) on behalf of, because of (the equivalent of *heneka*),37 (36) paralleling,38 (37) by means of.39

Finally there are a few instances where *charis* is used as a proper name: (38) the Greek goddesses, the Graces: Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and Thalia;40 (39) a type of tree, either the myrtle41 or (40) the cypress;42 (41) the name of an Attic naval vessel;43 (42) the name of a Parthian city;44 and finally (43) the name of a river.45

If simply looking at a few dictionaries will produce such a wide variety of meanings, a detailed word study would likely only add to the confusion. Some of the particular meanings, such as “the Graces” and “atonement,” could profitably use close attention by themselves. For example: The pagan Hesychius of Alexandria46 mentions the peculiar “thank” offering of three round bread loaves (*popanôn*)—some of which looked like *plakountes* (a type of flat bread)—which is very similar to the thank offering of the Law of Moses which consisted of “round unleavened [and therefore flat] bread loaves moistened with oil and thin unleavened cakes anointed with oil and mixed wheat groats, round loaves moistened with oil, and upon the round loaf, a loaf of leavened bread [which] he shall offer for his thank-offering upon the altar” (Leviticus 7:12-13), which the Israelites could only partake of in the sanctuary under the supervision of the priests.47 The Septuagint does not use the

39 Ibid., 9:1335.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
47 See David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature*, vol. 101 of
word *charis* for this offering, but the two “thank” offerings are strikingly similar and remind one of the bread in the sacrament, which the Greek-speaking Christians call the *eucharistia*, another Greek word for “thanks” which comes from *charis*. Though such an analysis might not have been without interest to many Latter-day Saint readers, to go into such detail would have defeated Millet’s purpose of providing for the general reader a “perspective on what the Lord has done and continues to do for us” (p. vii). A specialized study might profitably treat this material, but such esoterica would likely confuse the average reader.

Millet has rightly drawn our attention to what it means to sing the song of redeeming love, a subject that deserves attention. There is, however, nothing that prevents us from taking the song of redeeming love literally; something Millet does not do. When Millet claims that “To sing the song of redeeming love is to joy in the matchless majesty of God’s goodness, to know the wonder of God’s love. It is to sense and know, by the power of the Holy Ghost, that the Lord is intimately involved with his children and that he cares, really cares, about their well-being; it is to relish and cherish that fruit which is most joyous to the soul” (pp. 106-7), he is describing not the song of redeeming love, but what it is to “have felt to sing the song of redeeming love” (Alma 5:26). The song and what motivates us to sing it are two different things. Millet has given us an excellent description of the latter while leaving the former untouched. Much work still remains to be done on this long-neglected subject, but Millet, at least, has given us something.

For the most part, the preceding has been mere straining at gnats. All books have flaws, and any author should feel fortunate to write a book which has as few as Millet’s. His book is one of the better Latter-day Saint discussions of grace available, and we do both the author and ourselves a great disfavor if we do not use what has been offered us.

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