



VARDIS FISHER AND THE MORMONS

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The *New York Times* article reporting the death of Vardis Fisher in 1968 said, predictably, that Fisher was "perhaps most widely known as the author of *Children of God*, a historical novel about the Mormons."¹ None of Fisher's works, except possibly the Vidar Hunter tetralogy of the thirties, has received the attention of the 1939 Harper prize-winning *Children of God*. No other work of literature has presented the Mormon story more forcefully to the non-Mormon world.

Not surprisingly, however, Mormons have never made a cult of Vardis Fisher. Reared a Mormon, Fisher at age eighteen had already abandoned the church of his fathers to go his independent way. Yet Fisher's Mormonism ran deep. It was not merely something that Fisher revolted against; it was also something that helped form his life style and code. Church members may sometimes find Fisher unpleasant reading, but the Mormon apostate is clearly on the Mormon side in *Children of God*. In a fundamental way, he was on their side throughout his life. Fisher's whole approach to life was religious. It was not idle fancy that caused him to embark in mid-life on his *Testament of Man* novels, a series of twelve novels which traces the path of Western man's moral consciousness from the earliest times to Fisher's own. Fisher defined his religious position as agnostic and sometimes as atheistic, though I doubt he ever wore that label easily.

William York Tindall is fond of calling the renegade James Joyce the great Roman Catholic novelist. Certainly Catholicism and Ireland formed the axle around which Joyce's autobiographical hero turned, and Joyce never wrote a non-Irish, non-"Catholic" book. We might similarly call Vardis Fisher the great Mormon novelist. To the end of his life Fisher was a maverick whom the Mormon ought to be able to understand and to sympathize with. Fisher is to Mormonism as Joyce is to Catholicism. A thematic and stylistic gulf separates the two writers. Joyce's work is pervaded by old world fatigue and paralysis. Fisher is all energy and impatience. He insists on solutions and the possibility of a better world. Joyce believed in neither and could therefore devote himself to perfecting his craft. Fisher, although his writing is frequently forceful and moving, retained throughout his career the rough edges that mar his structure and style.

Shortly before his death, Fisher and his wife published a non-fiction book on Western mining life. In *Gold Rushes and Mining Camps of the*

Early American West (1968), the old pioneer is, typically, not reluctant to present the reader with his moral convictions. Indeed, he is frequently a quite vigorous preacher. For example, he addresses himself to the question of Calamity Jane's morals: "If she yielded because she liked to, or to please them [soldiers and teamsters], or for any other reasons besides pay, she was no more a whore than the men who asked her to, and not half the whore that a lot of Hollywood characters are, whom Madison Avenue elevates to the level of national heroines" (pp. 223-34).

Incidentally, Fisher's views on proper conduct were in most regards conservative, even Puritanical. Despite the fact that the autobiographical Vridar Hunter frequently harangues against the Puritans in *We Are Betrayed* and *No Villain Need Be*, Fisher believed increasingly in the old virtues. He praised his parents often as he grew older — and for the old virtues. In his tetralogy, Fisher presented prostitutes as more sinned against than sinning. Vridar called for the sexually obsessed person to think sex, to talk sex, to act sex — to get the obsession out of his system and find some healthy attitudes. There is none of this glibness in the revised tetralogy, *Orphans in Gethsemane*. Vridar's mother (symbol of Puritanism in the tetralogy) would hardly have been more disgusted with the sexual license of our time than Fisher was in *Gold Rushes and Mining Camps* in which he holds a whore a whore. No less than George Romney, Fisher might be called a square, a straight arrow.

Gold Rushes presents the part of the West that was settled by those who were little concerned with the Kingdom of God. Shelley wrote: "Gold is a living god, and rules in scorn / All earthly things but virtues." The Fishers' book — as well as Vardis' novel of Virginia City, *City of Illusion* (1941), which though inferior to *Children of God* should be viewed as a companion novel to it — catches the zest with which many Americans pursued this god. As these "pilgrims" sought their riches, they paused along the way in the Salt Lake Valley to stare at the Mormons, the queer sect of which they had heard so many bizarre tales.

Fisher takes no other note of the Mormons in his last book. But, of course, he had in his *Children of God* presented an inside picture of just what the discovery of gold in California meant to the Mormons. The Mormons had gone to the desert to remove themselves from the gentiles in the East, who had persecuted them almost incessantly. With the gold discoveries came the gentile multitudes. The gold and silver discoveries in the West, following so closely the great Mormon migration, might suggest that a master dramatist was at work to emphasize the bifurcation of the American soul. The hordes missed the irony though the Saints did not.

I think for large numbers of Americans the Mormons have remained what they were to many of the gold seekers and adventurers (of whom Mark Twain is the classic example) — a curiosity of our history and not in the main stream. Twain missed some truths of the Mormon story that we might have expected the famed defender of the underdog to find. It remained for the

¹The *New York Times*, July 12, 1968.

son of Mormons, Vardis Fisher, to give our literature the essentials Twain missed. Rereading *Children of God*, I am newly impressed with its force and timeliness, with the justness of Fisher's subtitle "An American Epic." The book is grandly American in its portrayal of the best of the American dream and in its portrayal of the realities that mocked the dream.

Fisher himself disparaged *Children of God* and said it was one of his weaker novels.² Novelists have been notoriously poor judges of their own works, and Old Irascible, as Fisher has sometimes been called, may be especially suspect on the matter. Hadn't the public been wrong about him all along? Surely in this instance, too . . . etc. And Fisher loved to outrage. If he were to rewrite *Children of God*, he later said, he would show Joseph Smith as a scheming fraud and nothing else. Such declarations require the proverbial grain of salt, for at the time when Fisher was steeped in his Mormon researches he did not so hold the Prophet. True, there is something of the fraud in Fisher's Joseph Smith, but there is a good deal that is other.

A portrait of the Prophet is not easy, and Fisher's is mainly sympathetic. Fisher obviously held Brigham Young a greater man, partly because he found so much of himself in Joseph Smith. As the compelling autobiographical novel *In Tragic Life* (1932) attests, Fisher had an early and rather lengthy identification with him. In that novel, Vridar Hunter is born with a caul, a sure sign, his relatives said — and Vridar believed — that he would become a prophet. Vridar has trances such as the Prophet has in *Children of God*. He acts out many of the Old Testament stories in his daily play. Fisher, speaking in his own voice in 1953, wrote:

I was an abnormally terrified, serious, and studious child. Living far from human settlements and not entering school until I was about twelve, I learned to read at a very early age, and read everything that our impoverished home afforded, including the Bible. I read that book at least two or three times before I reached adolescence. Looking back, I'd say that it frightened more than it edified me, abashed more than it filled. . . . In our copy were illustrations — of Samson tearing down the pillars, of David slaying the giant, of Noah offering thanksgiving; and though the physical feats caught my fancy, the deepest impression on me was made by the faces of the great prophets, admonishing, exhorting, or denouncing their people. They were fearful faces to look at (and are in many of the celebrated paintings of them), the faces of very strong and very angry men, invoking the wrath of God upon the wickedness of his children.

After reading in the book a day or two, I would suffer nightmares. If ever a child thought he was doomed, that child was I, listening while lying awake at night to the awful fury of a great river, hurling its forces against the stone walls of its deep gorge, and seeing almost as plain as if he stood before me the angry face of a prophet, as with clenched hands and enraged eyes he denounced the evils among his people.³

²See my *Vardis Fisher* (New York, 1965), p. 132, and Vardis Fisher, *God or Caesar?* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1953), pp. 241-42.

³"My Bible Heritage," *Thomas Wolfe as I Knew Him and Other Essays* (Denver, 1963), p. 161. First published in *The American Zionist*, November 5, 1953.

Fisher even gives to Joseph Smith some of Vridar's agonizings over masturbation. Several of Fisher's *Testament of Man* novels (especially *The Divine Passion* and *Peace Like a River*) confirm the judgment that Fisher was accustomed to empathizing with a prophet.

Fisher's ideas of the Bible and Mormonism may have been different had his family been less isolated and his reading of the Bible supplemented with regular instruction. Doubtless, Fisher's life pattern would have been different. But I am struck by the quite exclusive Old Testament flavor of Fisher's and Vridar's Biblical experiences. The comfort of the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world never mellowed Vridar's or Fisher's agonies. Fisher puzzled over Jesus; the reader should see especially his *A Goat for Azazel* (1956) in this connection. But emotionally Fisher's identification was with the Old Testament.

Mormonism in *Children of God* emerges as a religion that owes more to the Old Testament than to the New. The recovered books that Joseph presented to his followers support the accuracy of Fisher's presentation. The Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians more habitually interpreted the Old Testament in light of the New. The New Testament may not have exactly replaced the Old, but it certainly took precedence. The Protestant denominations tended to be metaphorical in their view of much of the Old Testament, at least as it pertained to Christian times. The Mormons were literalists. The defense of Blood Atonement as it is presented in *Children of God* (pp. 477-79) is fiercely of the Old Testament. Plural wives could be accepted only by a people who believed that the Old Testament order had not been replaced. Then, too, the Mormons had cause enough for special identification with the Israelites. Their history is epical in ways that call for numerous comparisons with the children of Israel. They had marched through the wilderness to find a promised land. God had given them prophets in the literal Old Testament manner. The new church of Joseph Smith was a restoration of Old Testament orientation. Or, as Mormons would say, the whole gospel was restored to man.

Three of the *Testament of Man* novels treat the ancient Hebrew people. Fisher has been challenged on the propriety of giving the Hebrews this much attention as well as giving four novels to the Christian world. Fisher admitted that his proportions might be wrong; but if he exaggerated the Bible's influence in the Western world, he did so because of the book's profound influence on him. Probably he did not exaggerate the Bible's influence on America.

As Fisher explored Biblical scholarship for his *Testament of Man*, he became increasingly impressed with "the deep and abiding moral earnestness of the Hebrew people, or at least of their religious leaders." He found their moral earnestness "without parallel and apparently without precedent" and called it "one of the riddles of history." He concluded that the great gift of the Hebrews to the western world lay in its intense stress on personality: "It is that intense stress on personality, on the dignity of the individual before God, on free will and moral choice, that has modified the fundamental dif-

ference in outlook [from Eastern peoples.]"⁴ Therein Fisher also placed one of the deepest influences of the Bible on him.

Of course, this deep influence came to him with a marked Mormon coloring. And as Fisher talks of the Hebrew people in his essay "My Bible Heritage," the reader of *Children of God* cannot help reading *Mormon* for *Hebrew*; for example:

The Hebrews were indeed, if not a unique at least a singular and peculiar people. Their spiritual leaders were solemnly and tirelessly preoccupied, not only with the relations of man to man which absorbed the interest of most peoples, but also with the relations of man to the universe. They were preoccupied with the thing called evil, when evil was not even a word in the vocabulary of some peoples. They were preoccupied with what they called righteousness, which, though sometimes suffocated in its elaborate apparatus of ritual, meant essentially good deeds. In defense of what they took to be the right way of life they had a capacity for suffering and self-immolation that has been quite without parallel.⁵

In this light Fisher presented his Mormon heritage in *Children of God*.

No matter what the specific nature of Joseph Smith's visions, the people who followed him came to have an increasingly moral earnestness. The earnestness was heightened after Brigham Young became leader, and it is in such terms that Fisher made a defense of plural marriages. One of Fisher's chief means of portraying the earnestness is through creation of a three-generation Mormon family, the McBrides. The McBrides admirably sum up the best qualities of the Mormons as they seek to serve God; through focusing on them in the final third of the novel Fisher impresses on his readers the undaunted faith of the true Mormon.

As a peculiar people, the Mormons were exercising freedoms they thought were theirs in a country that prided itself on being a free society, an open society. Fisher examines plural marriages from a rational point of view. He suggests certain neurotic impulses in Joseph Smith that accounted for the peculiar Mormon institution; he indicates practical reasons for it in a frontier society with many women; and he portrays it as a very burdensome institution for the Mormons to live with. But he is completely sympathetic with the right of conscience that the Mormons claimed. On trial for violations of the Edmunds Act, Nephi McBride of *Children of God* (the third generation of the faith) declares before Governor West: "May I remind you that the Constitution of this country guarantees to us freedom of conscience?"⁶ At the end of *Children of God* the McBrides migrate to Mexico rather than become part of a capitulation to the federal government. Vardis Fisher, with the McBrides, is saddened by the fate of Zion. For him they were not, in this crisis, enough like the Jews. Nephi ponders: "Would the Mormons, like the Jews, become a wandering and outcast people; or would they mix with the gentiles and yield their principles and traditions one by one until their

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶*Children of God* (New York, 1939), p. 736; page numbers refer to this edition.

church was only another abomination in the sight of God?" Fisher answers: "He did not know — or perhaps deep in his heart he knew too well" (p. 739).

The Mormon story in *Children of God* is so pointedly an American epic because it challenges us precisely at the point of freedom of conscience. The Mormons claim only the religious freedom an "open" society professes to offer. Put to the test, the society is fearfully closed. The Mormons are accused of treason and are persecuted across a continent. Under their great leader, the Mormons seek to establish a freer, more righteous society than they left. They seek, in fact, the American ideal of a free society. Fisher says that Brigham

was impelled by a great vision. He felt that this journey fed from the eager and searching millenniums in the remote background of human striving: it was more than desperate flight from enemies: it was a pilgrimage toward freedom, toward a fuller and richer destiny for the entire human race. In all its suffering and patience and courage, it was a mighty symbol of that struggle for perfection and peace that had been the heritage of humanity for centuries. He was fighting for a society that would be charitable and righteous and free. (p. 427)

Vardis Fisher has been impelled by the same vision. Through his many books he also "was fighting for a society that would be charitable and righteous and free." Like the Biblical prophets and the Mormon prophets, he zealously cried out against those who would deny this ideal.

Fisher has sometimes been criticized for having too strong a social emphasis in his works. Young Vridar Hunter is greatly concerned with social justice. The Mormons had been very practical about many of the things that bothered Vridar. The United Orders had their high moments of success. On a tour of Mormon settlements, Brigham Young finds "no social caste or arrogant pride, no attempt on the part of any man to exploit the labor of another" (p. 593). Fisher held no stock in socialism after he passed his teens, but he found much to admire in the cooperative efforts of the Mormons. This people learned to work together. Controversy over the causes for and solutions to poverty presently reverberates throughout America. Fisher wrote frequently on the topic in his lively newspaper columns. His position remained the one espoused by his Brigham Young:

An individualist himself, he believed in personal initiative and competitive practice; but he also believed in collective community enterprises. He was aware of the wide range in human intelligence, talent and ambition: there could never be a utopian society in which everyone could share equally; but there could be an order in which none needed to starve. The old, the sick and the poor must be taken care of. Above all, every person should have the right to work and to find work to do. (pp. 587-88)

Fisher stresses the nobility of labor throughout *Children of God*. Neither Brigham Young nor he believed in the dole. Brigham tells a wife: "It was poverty . . . that produced most of the ills of the world; it was a want of pride, a sense of meaninglessness, of futility, that drove men to crime" (p. 594).

Men need work that they can take pride in, Brigham feels. From his Mormon parents the work ethic passed wholesale to Fisher. He was no defender of the New Deal! Like the early Mormons, Fisher had an abiding distrust of federal intervention. He found obvious pleasure in identifying with the Mormon individuality.

While the latter sections of *Children of God* will likely cause contemporary readers to reflect on the present turmoil over poverty, the earlier sections have a special timeliness because of the current rhetoric over "Law and Order." The Mormons heard much of it long ago. On the day that a major from the United States Army asks Brigham Young and John Taylor in Nauvoo how long they intend to resist the majesty of law, Taylor explodes:

"Talk about law! Sir, I stand before you, a victim of law! I have seen my best friends shot down! Was I not shot down too in the Carthage jail when two hundred murderers came upon us? Where is our governor, where are our generals, our judges? What are all these men but a pack of scoundrels? Are we beasts? I tell you, sir, hereafter I will protect myself, law or no law, judges or no judges, governor or no governor! I will not be murdered by scoundrels; and if I have to sell my life, I'll sell it for all I can! If you put me in jail, you will put me there dead!" (p. 324)

As Brigham observes, Nauvoo itself was a monument to the Mormons' "patriotism, industry, uprightness of purpose and integrity of heart, and as a living testimony of the falsehood and wickedness of those who charge us with disloyalty to the Constitution of our country!" (p. 325).

When Fisher wrote *Children of God* he felt himself back into our history. Thirty years later, most of it has a very relevant ring. The streak in Fisher that was a mountain man could view the arrival of the Mormons in the far West as a sign of the ending of the life of intense individuality and freedom that the mountain man represented for him. But while Sam Minard of his last novel, *Mountain Man*, is writ larger than life, Vardis identified also with the manly Brigham Young and understood his rage for order. If Fisher's first choice of the free life would be that of the mountain man, it is by no means inconceivable that he might have made his second choice a part in the great Mormon pilgrimage. Hear the twentieth century renegade, for he had not rejected all of his religious heritage:

We should, I think we must, accept the Bible humbly as the noblest effort of our ancient forebears to come to terms with the problem of evil and to overthrow it; and in the present, when the same old problem threatens to overturn our world, many of its pages and many of its beautiful parables still speak to us with a clear strong voice if we would only listen. For when we reject those parts no longer applicable we do not discredit those truths which, if not eternal, are still as eternal as any that man has uttered.⁷

Vardis Fisher celebrated his Mormon forebears as he celebrated the ancient Hebrews. The Mormons enacted on American soil what Fisher saw

⁷"My Bible Heritage," p. 166.

as the essential of the Hebrew experience. He found in both peoples heroic fortitude in the drive for individual freedom in a free society — a society that also concerned itself with a secure life for all its people. And Fisher not only wrote about these brave people, he also strove to mold his own life on their highest ideals. He wanted no compromise with himself. He was unmerciful with himself for evasions and hypocrisies he might catch himself at. And he was scornful of the weaknesses of those he thought intelligent enough to know better than to take refuge in easy self-delusions. Having looked so penetratingly into himself (and I think few persons have looked as hard at themselves as has Fisher), he could usually see through the defenses of others. He was also sympathetic with the weak and sought to protect them from the scheming around them. Like the Hebrew and Mormon leaders, Fisher was driven by a fierce opposition to evil. Like them he was intensely individual. He wanted above all free choice and a free society. Few have more bravely sounded a determined personal declaration of independence. He is one of the most genuine individualists of our time. Austin Warren has canonized some Americans in his book *New England Saints* (1956). It is time to add a Westerner to the company of American saints. Vardis Fisher, of course. For he more than any other has defined in his life and works the Western style of that breed.

