

## *Christ as Center*

*The Mortal Messiah, Book II*, by Bruce R. McConkie. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1980, 413 pp. \$11.95

Reviewed by DANIEL B. MCKINLAY, who is presently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in New Testament Studies at the University of Virginia.

*The Mortal Messiah*, book two, is part of a multiple-volume work on Christ by Elder Bruce R. McConkie. This massive project is referred to by McConkie as "The Messianic Trilogy." The first work in this series is *The Promised Messiah*, which presents a detailed doctrinal discussion of the various aspects of Christ's mission as they were understood by the prophets before his mortal birth. The middle section is comprised of four books which cover the events and teachings of his earthly mission. The book under consideration here is the second volume in this part of the trilogy. The third division in the opus, as yet not published, will be titled *The Millennial Messiah*.

Book two of *The Mortal Messiah* includes the materials in Jesus' mission from the beginning of his Galilean ministry, with his initial call to repentance, to the conflict with the Pharisees about unwashed hands. The sequence of events is arranged according to a convenient scheme, rather than in a strictly accurate chronology, since, as McConkie explains, "... no one is able to make a harmony of the Gospels or list chronologically the events of Jesus' life. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did not do it, and the accounts they have left us do not agree among themselves."

As an author, McConkie acts as our guide or host, and he speaks in the present tense, as if we are present when the various episodes of Jesus' life are unfolding. He often cites the words of Jesus as they are found in the Gospels, by using double quotation marks (" "), and then he follows with his own interpretive

paraphrase by using a single quotation mark ( ' '). The author's approach seems to be a blending of *kerygma* and *parenesis*, that is, the combining of a doctrinal proclamation of the *word* with an emphasis on the expectation of resultant righteousness. The exegesis of the author is based particularly within a Mormon frame of reference, although when they are thought to illuminate certain portions of the narrative, there are frequent blocks of quotations from A. Edersheim, F. W. Farrar and C. Geikie, conservative non-Mormon authors who wrote in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

McConkie accounts for the variations in the sayings of Jesus recorded by the evangelists in a given situation by saying that "... it is natural to assume that he repeated, summarized, paraphrased, and expanded his expressions as the needs of the moment required". (McConkie does make some allowances for slightly different versions of a single saying (for example, p. 318), but the differences only serve to give the reader a more complete understanding of the thought expressed). This proposition contrasts with the presuppositions of the form, source and redaction critics, who assume that the sayings of Jesus, which eventually found their way into the Gospels, went through an evolutionary process: The early Palestinian Church had some traditions about Jesus' *logia*; these in turn were repeated, modified, and embellished as the Church expanded according to the changed circumstances of each locale. By the time these sayings reached the evangelists, they had been crystallized in a set form. The evangelists took the sayings, adjusted them to conform to their own theological point-of-view, and in some cases "added" more sayings of Jesus. But the position recommended by McConkie, that the evangelists selected some of the *many* sayings of Jesus which represented either an accurate recital or one close to it, is in harmony with 3 Nephi 23:9-13, where the

risen Lord commands the Lehite disciples to keep a record of Samuel the Lamanite's prophecies and fulfilment. The whole ministry of Jesus in 3 Nephi attests the importance Jesus attaches to keeping records about him that are reasonably accurate. This is an area that invites further comparisons and research.

In the mind of this reviewer the sections which highlight the book are Jesus' messianic claims at Nazareth, the calling of the Twelve, the Sermon on the Mount and the "Bread of Life" sermon.

There are some assertions which (although briefly expressed) reflect some particularly interesting perspectives from a Mormon viewpoint. For example, in contemporary non-Mormon theology as well as other disciplines, symbols and their functions have received tremendous attention. When placed in the context of the religion of the Restoration, symbols take on profound significance as they relate to Christ and his mission. Thus McConkie, possibly deriving his authority from the Book of Mormon, points out that certain miracles performed by Moses, Elijah and Elisha were "types and shadows" of what the mortal Messiah would do. The physical healings performed by Jesus were a "type and pattern" of spiritual healings made through the atonement. And parables spoken by Jesus were "types and shadows" of spiritual truths. These and similar insights ought to impel us to greater reflection. The paramount importance of types, interspersed throughout the scriptures and inherent in the ordinances of the Priesthood, have proportionately been neglected by most of us. Perhaps McConkie's observations will inspire us to more seriously tap the wealth of symbolic implications in our theology. Hugh Nibley's final comments in his essay "the Expanding Gospel" (in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*) is also an encouraging gesture in that direction.

In his comments on the apostles, McConkie advances some peculiarly Mormon affirmations. For example, he says that the twelve men were fore-ordained to their ministry in the heavenly councils, and that in their association with Jesus they were given the keys to

regulate the affairs of the kingdom. These views correlate with revelatory data given to Joseph Smith, but in light of current biblical scholarship, they would be unintelligible without the clarified dimensions the restored gospel affords.

McConkie's book is not intensely scholarly nor technical, neither is it intended to be. As one of the "special witnesses" of the name of Christ in all the world (D&C 107:23), his aim is to reach as wide an audience as possible, in order to testify of Christ in plainness; therefore it is not his purpose to address many of the issues lodged in New Testament journals for the past several decades. One of these debated questions has dealt with Jesus' messianic consciousness, i.e., did Jesus really consider himself to be the Messiah, or did the Church, based on its experiences with the resurrected Christ, attribute the messianic office to him? In the same vein, some scholars, assuming that it is practically impossible to reconstruct the life of Christ from the Gospels, believing that they are not biographies but theologies about Christ, pose a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The more radical scholars feel that the "historical Jesus" is irrelevant, and that the "gospel" as it is proclaimed from the pulpit is the real gem, so long as it is "demythologized" or divested of its supernatural aspects. Such scholars do not believe that faith in Christ must necessarily be tied down to historical events; faith can simply be translated and adapted into an existential scheme. But Mormons find the concreteness of contact with Christ through the scriptures to be crucially associated with their faith. History does not inhibit but enhances our sense of the sacred, as Truman Madsen points out in the introductory essay in *Reflections on Mormonism*. Thus the testimony that Jesus communed with prophets from time to time, and that he dwelt on the earth and was aware of his origin and identity is not disturbing for Mormons.

To this reviewer the most valuable contribution in Elder McConkie's series is the fact that he emphasizes the central role of Christ. Ill-wishers from the outside (usually of conservative bent) often

delight in claiming that Mormons are not really Christians despite our claims. This is due to the fact that in some points we radically depart from the "orthodox tradition." Actually, the layers of tradition and dogma caked onto the Christian churches through centuries of theologizing are not always identical with New Testament teachings. The "orthodox tradition" is laced with arbitrary teachings and decrees from Church Fathers, Church councils, theologians and Papal bulls.

Other friendlier outsiders sometimes misunderstand us when they hear us speak and teach in church, or read our literature. Because our religion embraces a broad spectrum of religious experience, Christ is seen as incidental, subservient to, or in a juxtaposition with other gospel features. Thus when we expend a lot of energy talking about apostles and prophets, the structure of the Church, missionary work, Priesthood, temple ordinances including eternal family relationships and some praiseworthy moral attributes such as courage and integrity, it is assumed that for us Christ takes a secondary position. This misunderstanding is unfortunate. In the judgment of this reviewer, the genius and beauty of the Restoration consists in the fact that it is Christocentric. The atonement of Christ

revolves everything else we hold dear in our religion.

The effort which Elder McConkie is making in his trilogy (and which he made in his previously published three-volume work, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*) reminds us that there are yet great frontiers to explore in the New Testament. Examples: Nephi claims to see a vision comparable to that of the apostle John (1 Nephi 14:24-25). It would be fruitful to compare the works of both authors who use similar phrases such as "Lamb of God" and "be lifted up." It has long been recognized that the Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus somewhat differently from John. Third Nephi has elements of both as well as some unique material yet it is a coherent whole. It would be worthwhile to demonstrate how 3 Nephi bridges the differences between the first three Gospels and the fourth. There is a great deal of exciting material on the Transfiguration, gathered largely by non-Mormons, that could be especially meaningful to Mormons. Similarly, much research has been done in the last three decades on the title "Son of Man." When combined with Old Testament, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price and apocryphal references, the passages in the Gospels about this figure can carry fascinating emotional impact as well.

## *A Modern Evangelist*

*The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary, Book I*, by Bruce R. McConkie. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979, xix + 517 pp. Footnotes, index, \$12.95.

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One is hopeful, upon reading Elder McConkie's *preface* to his latest volume on the dealings of Christ with mankind, that new ground may be broken for Mormons in the recognition of modern find-

ings and scholarship—the old ground, of course, being James Talmage's *Jesus the Christ*, which has enjoyed near-canonical status in Church circles. Talmage published his study in 1915, before the full impact of the so-called "Quest for the Historical Jesus," and the modern reader finds his style at times ponderous although rich, as well as many of his assumptions and data outdated. Nevertheless, he did a creditable job of incorporating nineteenth century conservative Protestant scholarship into the Mormon view of Christ.

McConkie begins by listing two principal reasons why a "true" life of Christ