

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

cannot be written by anyone: sufficient data do not exist, and "no mortal . . . can write the biography of a God" (pp. xv-xvi). Although his first point may seem to recognize the axiom of modern New Testament scholarship that the Gospels are more theological proclamations than attempts at biography in the modern sense, McConkie means only that the Spirit preserved that portion of Jesus' words and deeds suitable to "the unbelieving and skeptical masses of men". He admits that "recognized scholars" cannot agree upon a chronology of Jesus' ministry or a harmony of the Gospels, but this, it seems, is due to their sectarian perversity rather than the actual limitations of the sources. Certainly there is no acknowledgement of any contradictions within or between the Gospel accounts by Elder McConkie. He begins by discarding "almost everything that worldly men" have written about Christ; his aim is to write a "near-biography" using "those slivers of knowledge" preserved about him, combined with latter-day revelation. This, he contends, goes beyond what Talmage attempted, and besides, "I think I hear his [Talmage's] voice, . . . saying 'Now is the time to build on the foundations I laid some seventy years ago, using the added knowledge that has come since by research and revelation, and to pen a companion volume to the one I was privileged to write.'"

But it is hard to detect here the use of much research or revelation written since 1915. The only post-Talmage works in the list of significant references are Joseph Fielding Smith's 1938 compilation of the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (it is not clear whether this should be considered new research or new revelation), the 1948 collection of official L.D.S. *Hymns* and McConkie's own *Mormon Doctrine* and *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*. There are a few footnote allusions to J. Reuben Clark, Jr.'s *Our Lord of the Gospels*, but McConkie's "scholarly" referents are all nineteenth century: principally Edersheim, Farrar and Geikie; i.e., the same ones upon which Talmage relied. In fact, there is only one instance in which he actually takes issue with Talmage: the date of the birth of Christ. Fol-

lowing Hyrum M. Smith (*Doctrine and Covenants Commentary*) and Clark, he does not subscribe to Talmage's view that D&C 20:1 is a pronouncement that the Lord restored his church on April 6, 1830, as an 1830th birthday celebration. As Edersheim explained a century ago, since Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., Jesus had to be born before that date if the birth narratives of both Matthew and Luke are historically valid. Most likely, McConkie believes, Jesus was born in December of 5 B.C. This should reassure Mormons who have been uneasy about celebrating Christmas on the wrong day.

But this instance of deference to established historical data contra received Mormon beliefs is atypical, and relegated to a footnote. McConkie's aim is rather to transcend what he perceives as the limitations of "faithless and uninspired" Biblical scholarship. For a critical reader caloused by the demands of historical objectivity, such an attitude would be cause enough to disregard the book. But the author, consistent with his calling as a "special witness of Christ," claims exemption from these standards. As is the case with the original writers on the mortal Messiah, (see John 20:30-31) the modern apostle's motivation is to lead souls "to love and follow" their Savior, rather than to analyze the data about him. The tone, consequently, is more that of a liturgical celebration than a "near-biography." The rapturous sermonizing reminds one of the style of Augustine's *Confessions*, although the literary quality may not be on that level. This is typified by McConkie's own verse, which ornaments several sections of the book. The first of these begins,

I believe in Christ, he is my King,
With all my heart to him I'll
sing; . . .

Most of the first sixteen chapters—almost 300 pages—is concerned with describing the religious and cultural setting into which Jesus was born. After a recapitulation of the prophecies commented upon in *The Promised Messiah*, McConkie's first volume in this six-part project, we are given strings of quotes, often quite lengthy, from the revelant works of Edersheim. This represents

some of the best scholarship of the previous century, and there are those who will find these passages informative. They are by no means the least entertaining parts of the book. Although McConkie's selections sometimes seem arbitrary and tend to ramble, he has evidently spent a great deal of time poring over these massive early volumes; his own prose is sprinkled with such archaisms as "mayhap," "appertain," and "we cannot but suppose that . . ." The remaining 200 pages deal with "Jesus' Years of Preparation" and "Jesus' Early Judean Ministry," following the chronology used by J. Reuben Clark, Jr. The bulk of this is doctrinal commentary and expanded paraphrase rather than any serious attempt at exegesis, but this is the approach we have come to expect from the author's earlier writings. It is unfortunate, however, that except for an isolated Nibley, Mormon piety seems unable to cope with the methodological tools and insights of twentieth century—historical and literary scholarship.

Although we are not surprised at the neglect of most issues facing Biblical scholars, it is disappointing to see McConkie ignore questions of particular interest to his Mormon audience. Despite his repeated disavowal of speculation, he does not doubt that John the Baptist was himself baptized when he was precisely eight years of age, and that he was "married, had children", and, the author implies, faithfully kept church standards as we know them. But Jesus' marital status is never even raised as an issue, despite the stridency with which this doctrine was thumped from Mormon pulpits in past years.

As any good card-carrying Mormon knows, a person needs no special training to preach, and there are undoubtedly many who will savor this homiletic commentary on its own terms. Certainly there are many approaches to the Gospel narratives, and New Testament scholars have no monopoly on knowledge about Jesus. But it is not necessary to discount the importance of inspiration in the compo-

sition of the New Testament to recognize that the different writers had differing points of view. Paul's epistles were actually written closest to Jesus in time, yet Paul's attitude was that Christ is not known according to the flesh (II Cor. 5:16), and thus he was seemingly unconcerned with the historical details of Jesus' life. For him it is the risen Lord who speaks to the saints through his Spirit. John's Gospel seems to project the characteristics and sayings of the risen, eternal Lord back onto the mortal Jesus. But even the Synoptic writers arranged their narratives and selected and emphasized Jesus' acts and words according to their own theological and social purposes, drawing on traditions and remembrances thirty to fifty or more years after his ministry. They were more concerned with eternal truths about the Son of God than precise historical details of his mortal life. Thus a biblical fundamentalism, which presupposes objective historicity and unanimity in these sources, not only distorts their unique contributions but impoverishes our understanding of the Scriptures. McConkie's aim, to bring his readers to an encounter with the living Christ or enhance their relationship to his Spirit, is undeniably in harmony with the evangelists, but his methodology, attempting to reconstruct a "near-biography" on modern assumptions, merely serves to reinforce the prejudices of his readers that Jesus and his contemporaries really thought and acted as moderns, although disguised as first century Jews.

Three more volumes on *The Mortal Messiah* and a final installment entitled *The Millennial Messiah* are promised to complete the series. Those, who seek a more updated view of the study of Jesus might start with Hugh Anderson's volume in the *Great Lives Observed* series, entitled *Jesus* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967). Written by a committed churchman, it is nonetheless dispassionate and knowledgeable, and will guide the interested reader to further sources of study.



CONGRATULATIONS!

To the Winners of the *Dialogue*-Olympus
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These winning essays will appear in *Dialogue's* upcoming Women's Issue (Winter, 1981). Some twenty-odd additional essays have been selected to appear with the above winners in Olympus Publishing Company's upcoming book, *Mormon Women Speak*. Their authors have also been notified.

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