

Early Mormon Intellectuals: Parley P. and Orson Pratt, a Response

Parley P. and Orson Pratt were, with the exception of Joseph Smith, the most significant of the Mormon thinkers to emerge during the early years of the Restoration. Not only did the Church develop complex social and theocratic institutions, but Mormonism generated a uniquely sacred body of literature. Within a short period, this continually growing body of divine writ generated a continually growing body of theological commentary and exegesis. As Professors Crawley and Whittaker have amply shown, the Pratt brothers were both, in their own ways, central to the emergence of this essential intellectual dimension of the Mormon faith.

Generally speaking, essays and papers can be classified into one of several categories: (1) those that raise useful and productive questions, but fail in fundamental ways to answer them, thus generating more confusion and less light; and (2) those that, in the process of answering significant questions, go on to raise additional useful and productive questions. Thorstein Veblen expressed this same idea in these words: "The outcome of any serious research can only be to make two questions grow where only one grew before." But, as Hugh Nibley continually reminds us, it is not just the asking of questions but the asking of the *right* questions that is essential to make us keep looking productively. In this sense, history must always remain tentative. As in other dimensions of the historical enterprise, doing intellectual and cultural history is like trying to nail jello to the wall: Having demonstrated your case once and for all, new evidence, new views, new methods, and, more important, the asking of new questions or the asking of the old questions in a new light, leads the persistent to new and enlightened understanding. Viewed in this way, religious history may be neither faithful nor truthful (in the absolute sense of being true). Perhaps it would be best to say that one can only be faithfully true — that is, one can only be faithful to historical method, and not historical assertion. In this sense, history can be seen fundamentally as a body of questions and not a body of answers.

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Regarding Professor Crawley's paper, it might have been entitled: "Parley P. Pratt: The Father of Mormon Intellectuals." His paper argues that historically, Parley P. Pratt — though until now largely overlooked as an early Mormon intellectual — was one of the seminal intellectual figures in Church history. That despite Leonard Arrington's poll fifteen years ago which placed Pratt a distant ninth among intellectuals in Mormon history, perhaps he was the early Mormon intellectuals' intellectual — an assertion which has for all practical purposes been too little noticed among Mormon scholars. Professor Arrington himself recognized that the four paramount innovators and creators of new concepts in the emerging Church were Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Parley Pratt, and Orson Pratt.¹ Having said all of this, what are some of the "new" questions Professor Crawley has raised? Since Pratt certainly became influential for his ideas, I will restrict myself to his cultural and intellectual milieu. First, however, let me review briefly the essential questions and claims considered in Professor Crawley's paper.

Professor Crawley has suggested that Parley Pratt's influence was pervasive and, most importantly, at the foundation of much — if not most — of what was to follow in the development of Church theology. I use *suggested* carefully, since the focus of his paper deals with the impact of Pratt's productive output and not, generally, with specific ideas themselves. With the exception of Orson Hyde's broadside, *Prophetic Warning*, Pratt's *Voice of Warning* (1837) was the earliest published Mormon pamphlet. Significantly, in erecting the standard for all future Mormon pamphleteers, it raised the key doctrinal and intellectual issues which have come to occupy Mormonism almost ever since. Within twenty years of its publication, by 1855, Pratt went on to write his *Key to the Science of Theology*, the first comprehensive synthetic treatment of all the distinctive doctrines of Mormonism.

Having described the nature of Pratt's literary activities, Professor Crawley indicates some of the influence exerted by Pratt's works. With the exception of *Voice of Warning* and *Key to Theology*, most of his works are now virtually unknown. Yet, as Professor Crawley has written, "Many of Parley's arguments and ideas flowed into the works of others and thus were perpetuated as a permanent part of Mormonism's gospel tradition." Interestingly, the most important influence of Parley's work was apparently upon his own brother Orson and the book which came to be known as *Orson Pratt's Works* (1851), containing many of Parley's ideas, was expanded in the systematic and logical fashion which only Orson himself was particularly suited to undertake. And through the pages of *Orson Pratt's Works*, which became the principal inspiration for those who were to write in the twentieth century such as B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and John A. Widtsoe, Parley Pratt's ideas have continued to exert an enormous, direct influence.

Although it has been noticed before, now that Professor Crawley has again emphasized the importance of viewing Parley Pratt in his proper perspective as perhaps Mormonism's earliest creative and original thinker, with the exception again of Joseph Smith, what shall we do? Well, I for one, intend now to read and reread anew Pratt's wealth of material. For purposes of this discussion,

however, there are a variety of issues which we might explore to penetrate deeper into Parley Pratt's own intellectual and religious psyche. For instance, as Professor Crawley has noted, Pratt's 1840 essay "A Treatise on the Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter" put into print some radical ideas, such as: (1) matter and spirit can be neither created nor annihilated, (2) the world was not created *ex nihilo*, but organized out of existing matter, and (3) God is bound by certain overriding laws. Although it was not Professor Crawley's purpose, what we would like to know is the immediate source of these unique — or perhaps not so unique — Mormon ideas.

Let me cite only one example of the context of Pratt's thinking on an issue which has yet to be treated adequately in contemporary Mormon literature, and which illustrates the interrelationship of Pratt's thinking with that of Joseph Smith. Chapters 6 and 16 of Pratt's *Key to Theology* are partially devoted to the idea of multiple inhabited extraterrestrial worlds — a notion more affectionately known simply as the plurality of worlds. This idea was presented by Joseph Smith in three places: the Book of Moses (1830), the Doctrine and Covenants, primarily sections 76 and 88 (both revealed in 1832), and the Book of Abraham (1835–1836). (Joseph's views on astronomical pluralism also appear in several additional sections of the D&C and in some of his writings which appeared later in the Nauvoo *Times and Seasons*.) Though not presented systematically, astronomical pluralism was eventually developed into a coherent structure. Primarily as a result of Joseph Smith's revelations, the concept of astronomical pluralism entered such Church publications as *The Morning and the Evening Star* and the *Latter Day Saint Messenger and Advocate*. It was also widely discussed within non-Mormon sources, however. Nearly every religious thinker and minister at the time held some version of the notion of the plurality of worlds. Moreover, it is to be found in such cultural sources as Tom Paine's widely read deistic tract *The Age of Reason* (1794), as well as, ironically, in the pages of the immensely influential evangelical books of Thomas Chalmers (*Astronomical Discourses*, 1817), Timothy Dwight (*Theology Explained*, 1818), and Thomas Dick (*The Christian Philosopher* (1823) and *The Philosophy of the Future State*, 1828). In addition to other books which also dealt with this otherwise very popular idea, area newspapers occasionally dealt with the plurality of worlds idea, as did farmers' almanacs. What makes Joseph Smith's version of the plurality of worlds idea unique, is that his full development of pluralism went far beyond the thinking of his contemporaries, both inside and outside the Church. Taken altogether, Joseph's ideas on astronomical pluralism evolved into a relatively complex set of inter-related notions. And under the pen of a gifted and articulate Parley Pratt, these ideas were further refined and integrated into an increasingly coherent theological system.

My purpose here is not to lessen the enormous contributions made by Pratt, but only to suggest additional connections, the answers to which will more than likely result in an increasingly complex, though clearer, portrait of a seminal early Mormon intellectual. Parley Pratt was apparently gifted with literary talents not possessed by his contemporary peers and intellectual heirs,

and thus he was perhaps in a unique position to affect the intellectual and theological history of his own Church.

In a letter from Orson to Parley in 1853, Professor Whittaker has shown that Orson understood much of his own intellectual indebtedness to his older brother. Thus despite statements to the contrary by such writers as John Henry Evans and T. Edgar Lyon, Orson Pratt was not the preeminent intellectual leader of early Mormonism, but stood behind Joseph Smith and his brother Parley. As a systematizer and popularizer, however, Orson may have had no peers. If Parley Pratt possessed literary gifts, Orson Pratt possessed unmatched analytic and logical talents. In this sense, Professor Whittaker's paper obviously complements that of Professor Crawley.

The number of studies about Orson Pratt, particularly about his science, is really quite large, but there has been virtually no attempt to understand Pratt's theological and scientific speculations in the broader context of intellectual and cultural history. In this regard, it is indeed refreshing that someone has taken the first step in trying to understand the man and his work by exploring his cultural and intellectual milieu. To grasp the essential nature of Pratt's thought we must know (1) what was his intellectual relationship with Joseph Smith and his brother Parley? and (2) what was the larger underlying set of assumptions which permeated Orson's world? Since Orson Pratt's views on religion and theology, and their connections with the ideas of others, are more fully known, let me focus on his science and the lesser-known relationships within the wider cultural context of the period. To do so, however, will require a brief digression into some of the salient nuances of prenineteenth-century science.

The birth of modern science in the seventeenth century fostered an intellectual climate which favored the growth of natural theology. During this period scientific and religious views complemented and supported mutual intellectual concerns. As the eminent Newtonian scholar Richard S. Westfall has argued, these developments have made it increasingly apparent that the relation of science to religion in the seventeenth century is the *central* question in the history of modern western thought.² Since the seventeenth century, science — or more properly speaking natural philosophy — has increasingly replaced religion as the dominant worldview, and, therefore, despite a sometimes symbiotic relation between the two, science has set many of the major problems faced by religion and philosophy in the last three centuries.

As a study in rational religion, natural theology asserted that the Christian God created a universe in which laws, design, purpose, and harmony were paramount and that the scientist, being a Christian, could find justification for his religious convictions in his scientific studies. The basic premise of natural theology holds that nature contains clear, compelling evidence of God's existence and perfection. In defending Christianity through the tenets of natural theology, Christian scientists prepared the ground for the deists of the Enlightenment. In time a radically different worldview emerged from their writings: the mechanical universe governed by immutable natural laws, the transcendent God removed and separated from his creation, the moral law taking the place

of spiritual worship, the rational man able to discover true religion without special revelation. Remove only the reverence for Christianity that the natural theologians maintained and deism, the religion of reason, steps full grown from their writings. With these developments in the eighteenth century, natural religion (or deism) and natural theology separated and became radically different entities.

Coming after the excesses of the French Revolution, the deism of the Enlightenment, and the subsequent rise of religious skepticism, however, the pre-Darwinian period of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the second great religious awakening. Such nineteenth-century evangelicals as Thomas Chalmers, Thomas Dick, David Brewster, and Hugh Miller all wrote on astronomy and stressed the compatibility of science and religious beliefs. Indeed, natural theology as a program permeated the evangelical Protestant world thoroughly. For instance, the calvinist Timothy Dwight, president of Yale University from 1795 until his death in 1817, delivered a series of 173 sermons to Yale students in a four-year cycle to save them from infidelity, to inspire their morality, and to instruct them in Christianity. During some years of Dwight's tenure, as many as one-third of the undergraduates studied for the ministry. As these men fanned throughout New England and the western territories, no doubt numerous sermons were delivered which asserted the dogma of natural theology. Particularly in the context of Anglo-American developments, science increasingly supported the structure of biblical understanding. Not only was God's word a testament of his continuing interests in human affairs, but also his *works* gave abundant evidence of the nature, power, and majesty of the divine presence. Theologians and scientists alike espoused natural theology in order to substantiate their faith and understanding in the wisdom of the creator.

Thus it should come as no surprise when Professor Whittaker tells us that Orson Pratt, immersed in an environment in which the religion of natural theology was practiced, should deliver a lecture entitled "Is there sufficient evidence in the works of Nature to prove the existence of a Supreme Being?" Before the rise of evolutionary biology with Darwin, astronomy, since the earliest days in Greek antiquity, was considered the preeminent science. Astronomy had always captured the popular imagination in ways which other fields of science were unable to do. Thus we find numerous evangelicals and theologians such as Chalmers, Dwight, Dick, and scores of others writing countless treatises on astronomy and Christianity — and particularly on the doctrine of the plurality of worlds. Orson Pratt very likely imbibed his penchant for both astronomy and natural theology from this incredibly rich and varied background. He expressed this view in his central claim: "The study of science is the study of something eternal; if we study astronomy, we study the works of God." Unlike many of his fellow Christian clergy, however, Orson Pratt, though clearly an amateur scientist, was nevertheless a gifted natural philosopher, possessing a sometimes brilliant speculative mind. We can be grateful to Professor Whittaker for bringing this dimension of Pratt's milieu sharply into view. Now remains the difficult task of *carefully* understanding Pratt's

astronomy and mathematics in light of his revealed religion and this natural theology.

In passing I should note, however, that not all early Mormon intellectuals were as vigorous as Orson Pratt in their use and espousal of natural theology. In fact, some rejected natural theology outright as a program by associating it with natural religion. W. W. Phelps, for instance, writing as editor of the *Evening and Morning Star* in September 1832, noted:

Human reason now lodges itself in new intrenchments, when it refuseth to submit to the faith. It even puts on new armor to attack it, for it hath invented new methods of self defence. Under pretence that natural science hath made greater progress, revelation is despised. . . . We are going to endeavor to prove that revealed religion hath advantages infinitely superior to natural religion: that the greatest geniuses are incapable of discovering by their own reason all the truths necessary to salvation.

Though Orson would not have disagreed with the larger dimensions of Phelps's statement, particularly with respect to natural religion, he surely would have outright rejected any attempts to debunk natural theology.

Professor Whittaker has also asserted that Orson Pratt was some sort of philosophical eclectic, espousing both mechanistic and Romantic views. While there appears to be some truth to this claim, let me underscore the qualification. Concluding his second lecture on astronomy and the nature of the universe, Pratt stated: "Before its potent energies the complex machinery of nature discloses its beautiful harmonies, and proclaims with inspiring tones, the Divinity of its Author." The first half of this statement could have been written by Pierre Simon de Laplace, the principal architect of the dominant model of the universe in Pratt's day. Yet Laplace concluded that the causal theories of celestial mechanics do *not* require, nor do they suggest, the divine presence. One story has it, that when queried by Napoleon as to where God resided in his system, Laplace replied that he had no need for the divine hypothesis. Thus for Pratt, his teleological argument for God's existence was more a condition of his theological commitments than his scientific beliefs; more a statement of natural theology, which Laplace rejected, than of mechanism. Laplace sought for absolute and universal laws also, but he was not motivated by the Romantic impulse.

It may still be the case that Orson Pratt acquired, as Professor Whittaker suggests, "his mechanical view of the universe from Joseph Smith and his organic view from his brother Parley"; but even the terms *mechanical* and *Romantic* need, in the Mormon context, additional qualification. For instance, the central philosophical problem raised by Descartes in the seventeenth century revolves around the relationship between mind and body. Good mechanists reduce mind to body and proclaim the primacy of matter. Romantics, uncomfortable with the implications for God (or spirit) in such a world, reverse the logic and reduce matter to mind (or spirit). Joseph Smith's solution was rather novel: While recognizing the importance of body, and, after 1841, in endowing God the Father with a material tabernacle, Joseph rejected the Cartesian dualism, opted for the primacy of matter, and retained spirit as

some sort of refined material substance (see D&C 131:7-8). Thus it seems that the very terms mechanical and Romantic may not be altogether useful in order to describe and understand complex Mormon theology.

On a larger scale, however, we would like to know how Parley and Orson Pratt helped shape the cosmology or worldview of nineteenth-century Mormonism. One author has recently written that "Mormon cosmology fits readily into the framework of nineteenth-century American science — at least as it was perceived in the popular mind."³ The author means, among other things, that Mormonism was in some respects utilitarian, empirical, and pragmatic, that it dealt with the existential realities of Jacksonian America in which the common man could learn to control his own destiny. In this sense, the Mormon cosmology represented a quest for power by ordinary people. And Parley and Orson Pratt were among the key figures who developed fundamental theological issues out of which the nineteenth-century Mormon worldview took shape.

Recognizing that I may be indulging in numerical mysticism, let me conclude with the following observation. Leonard Arrington's poll of the most eminent LDS intellectuals ranked Orson Pratt second, Joseph Smith third, and Parley Pratt a distant ninth. It strikes me now that close historical work of the kind offered in these two papers reveals a new ordering: Joseph first, Parley second, and Orson third. Professors Crawley and Whittaker have now made their case. It will now be up to their professional colleagues to examine their claims critically and to explore the larger matrix of issues regarding intellectual and cultural connections among those individuals dealt with in these two studies of early Mormon intellectuals.

NOTES

1. Leonard J. Arrington, "The Intellectual Tradition of the Latter-day Saints," *DIALOGUE: A JOURNAL OF MORMON THOUGHT* 4 (Spring 1969): 13-26.

2. Richard S. Westfall, *Science and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973), p. ix. Recently, Professor Westfall was awarded the most prestigious prize of the American Historical Association for his brilliant biography *Never at Rest: A Biography of Sir Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

3. Klaus Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 82.