

Paradigms toward Zion: A Reply to Allen Lambert on Zion-building

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I AM TOLD THAT NOT SO LONG AGO church Correlation adopted a policy of discouraging use of the word "Zion" in official publications and discourses. Perhaps they felt that the term created an irrational exuberance about moving to Jackson County, Missouri.¹ However, in a small victory for those who long to keep Mormonism whole, that policy does not appear to have been successful. This may be due in part to the popularity of the term among ordinary Latter-day Saints, including apparently a Brother Gordon Hinckley. One reason for the term's popularity must be its versatility. It is used to describe the center city to be built in the aforementioned Missouri county, the Mormon settlement region in the western United States, even all of the Americas. It can refer to both the institutional church and the Saints generally. It can be a state of being, the "pure in heart" (D&C 97:21).

The word is also used to invoke a state of society. From the beginning of the Restoration, it was clear that all of the concerns of God's children were within the ken of the restored gospel. Numerous early revelations and efforts of the Saints were devoted to implementing a concept of economic righteousness usually referred to by rubrics such as "consecration and stewardship" or the "united order." The concept that the restored gospel addresses social as well as personal righteousness has carried into our century. David O. McKay described the purpose of the church as "first, to develop in men's lives Christlike attributes; and, second, to transform society so that the world may be a better and more peaceful

1. See William O. Nelson, "Refrain from Speculating about Zion," *Church News*, 13 Feb. 1982, 13. Here Zion is narrowly defined to mean only the city to be built in Jackson County immediately prior to the Second Coming.

place in which to live."² Mormons readily understood the intended meaning when a compilation of Hugh Nibley's social and economic criticism was entitled *Approaching Zion*.³

These aspects of the restored gospel have increasing potential importance as Mormonism grows into a religion where substantial numbers of members are prosperous and influential in developed nations but where a majority lives in less developed nations. Much has been written about the economic aspects of the restored gospel from political, Mormon historical, and theoretical perspectives. However, Warner Woodworth, a professor of organizational behavior at Brigham Young University, and I were unaware of any work that addressed the economic aspects of the restored gospel from two perspectives which we felt were important. One was to better understand these teachings by putting the historical and doctrinal analysis in the context of the broader world in which revelations on the topic were given. The second was to look from a practical perspective at what ordinary Latter-day Saints might realistically do to apply the restored gospel's economic teachings here and now. These were our goals in writing *Working Toward Zion: Principles of the United Order for the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1996).

It was therefore with some chagrin that I read Allen Lambert's review of *Working Toward Zion* in the spring 1998 issue of *Dialogue*. One source of chagrin was that substantially the same review had already been published in *FARMS Review of Books* last year. A greater source of chagrin is the extent to which Allen, who we thought would have been sympathetic to our efforts, misread and misrepresented *Working Toward Zion* in his review. Of course, Allen does make some useful comments. In the second printing of the book, we endeavored to update and, I hope, improve Appendix B on worthwhile charitable organizations. Also, we changed the name of the section previously entitled "Bibliography" to the more accurate "References Cited." As Allen notes repeatedly, the absence of any of Allen's own private writings alone requires that we avoid giving the impression that that section is a comprehensive list of works on the united order.

This absence may explain in part the tone of Allen's review. Or, it may be that Allen's negativity reflects more fundamental differences in our approaches to building the Zion society. In either case, I would almost not have recognized my own book from the description in Allen's review. For example, I am at a loss to see how he can describe the book as

2. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals* (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1953), 96.

3. Hugh W. Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, Volume 9 of the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company/Provo, UT: FARMS, 1986). To appreciate just how invested the term has become in Mormon thinking, try asking comparative groups of Mormons and non-Mormons to guess what a book of that title is about.

an "apologia" for modern capitalism (a term used explicitly in the *FARMS Review of Books* review and strongly implied in the *Dialogue* version). Did he not notice pages 5-12, 23-39, 78-82, 102-107, 129-34, 251-55, 258-61, 344-46, and 349-352, where we try to discuss in some detail many of the defects of our modern economic system? He implies that we recommend Nu-Skin as a Mormon corporate culture when that company is never mentioned in the book. He accuses us of focusing on Adam Smith's views on limiting government regulation of the marketplace when the (I believe) very obvious point of extensive textual and endnote discussion in the book precisely is to show that Adam Smith's arguments went far beyond that one point for which he is best known (pp. 62-66, 387-91). And how does one respond to Allen's criticism of the first part of the book when he never really explains what he found so "annoying" and full of "uncritical self-consciousness" (whatever that means) other than that we were too nice to Adam Smith and too mean to Karl Marx.

My overall impression is that this is one of those reviews where the reviewer is negative mostly because we did not write the book that he would have written. I believe that it is not unreasonable to ask reviewers to critique a book on the basis of what it tries to be, and not for not being some other book. However, I sense that Allen's reaction to our book comes from something more fundamental than personal upset that we developed views on consecration and stewardship independent of his. How and why the book we wrote is very deliberately a different book from the book that Allen might have written highlights some important issues to modern Zion-building, and are worth brief elaboration. Although the general *Dialogue* reader may not be familiar with Allen's writings, I believe that it is fair to address them since Allen devoted a considerable part of the review of *Working Toward Zion* to describing his own views.

One fundamental issue is whether building the Zion society is a task for now or later. Is David O. McKay's second great purpose of Mormonism, to "transform society so that the world may be a better and more peaceful place in which to live," a concern of our age or of the post-apocalyptic Millennium? Allen's private writings (at least those in my possession) generally presume that an imminent collapse of the modern economy will clear the way for establishing the complete, self-contained, united order-based economic system which he has theorized. I acknowledge that Allen is far from being the only Latter-day Saint with this apocalyptic world view. However, I believe that we are called to work toward Zion in the muck of the real world now, and not to passively theorize while waiting for an apocalypse to clear it away for us.

Perhaps I am too impatient, but I believe that we are in a unique moment which makes a beginning of real Zion-building not only possible,

but necessary. It is necessary for two reasons. First, the large majority of twenty-first-century Mormons will be from economically disadvantaged circumstances. Second, today, for the first time in history, Zion is physically expanding into and covering the entire world, making all peoples our neighbors. In Brigham Young's works, "Zion will extend, eventually, all over this earth. There will be no nook or corner upon the earth but what will be in Zion. It will all be Zion" (JD 9:138).

This extension also provides the opportunity and possibility of working toward a Zion society, because with expansion comes the possibility of influence. The central thesis of *Working Toward Zion* is that we can do Zion-building *now*. However, this means that it must be done in the midst of a world where most Latter-day Saints are a small minority in much larger host societies and economies. Allen asks whether we ought "to apply United Order principles *within* or *to* the modern world economy." In these circumstances, it is hard to see how modern Latter-day Saints realistically can be expected to do anything in a systemic way *to* these larger host environments.⁴ However, we have a great potential to act as a leaven to promote changes *within* our native societies and economies, to transform them to become better and more peaceful places in which to live. If we are actually to *do* Zion-building rather than simply *theorize* about it, we must find ways of doing so *within* the world as it is, as detestable as that world is to us.

This difference in approaches to Zion-building perhaps explains why Allen so disliked the first nine chapters of *Working Toward Zion*, for they argue that it is indeed possible to apply the restored gospel's economic principles in significant ways in Zion's new modern worldwide setting. Perhaps another reason for his hostility to the first chapters may be that in doing so we attempted to appraise evenhandedly both the positive and negative aspects of our modern economy. As a utopian socialist and ardent environmentalist, Allen may be among those who are loath to admit that there is anything positive about the modern economy. However, for Zion studies to be credible, their critique of the modern free market economy must balance against its admitted social and environmental costs an historic increase in human freedom and decrease in human poverty.

How then does one approach a study of the application of the restored gospel to the modern economy? Allen criticizes us for not undertaking a theoretical critique of capitalism or otherwise creating a formal economic theory of consecration and stewardship. To some extent, this

4. In the last few chapters of *Working Toward Zion*, we do attempt to explore how larger cooperative structures and enterprises might be established and encouraged. However, as elsewhere in the book, we try to limit the discussion to proven real-world cases which do not depend on political intervention.

criticism is essentially the same as that of some very conservative academic economists with whom I doubt Allen would feel he had much in common. However, like them, Allen's writings focus much more on creating an abstract theory than on practical "how-to's."

On the other hand, we are practitioners rather than theoreticians. I am a practicing business lawyer and Warner Woodworth engages in extensive consulting along with his teaching in organizational behavior. We wrote *Working Toward Zion* from the orientation of our disciplines, which look to actual real-life cases more than theoretical constructs. Is Allen arguing that theoretical economic analysis is the *only* way to approach writing on the united order principles in the modern world? If not, I hope that he would acknowledge that our emphasis on actual history and real cases is as valid as, though different from, an approach based on academic economic theory.

We would be delighted if trained economists were to publish work applying consecration and stewardship in economic theory, be it Marxist, Freidmanite, or whatever. Unfortunately, with very few exceptions, this has not happened. I do not believe that even Allen has done so, despite his extensive private writings. Rather than criticizing us for drawing on areas which we have studied, as opposed to venturing into fields where others are far more knowledgeable, I would ask Allen to organize his own material in a publishable form which could finally be made accessible to the wider LDS reading public. Indeed, we hope that one result of *Working Toward Zion* would be to create an audience for the interesting theoretical work of Allen and his colleagues.

I know that Allen will probably not agree with my perception of his work as abstract and theoretical. Perhaps the difference in approaches can be stated another way. I am sure that Allen would agree with us that there is a great chasm in modern economic life between where we are and where we ought to be. A few, including Allen, have devoted their lives to leaping that chasm, and hail us from the far shore. The task of all who seek to build Zion is to try to bridge that chasm. Allen works to build the bridge from the far shore of where we all ought to be, but very few of us are.

In writing *Working Toward Zion*, Warner and I decided to attempt to start building the bridge from the near shore of where most of us really are in our economic lives. Our objective was to write a practical study of the real-world application of the restored gospel's economic principles which would be accessible to a general readership. Thus, rather than describe an ideal, fully consecrated life achievable only by a heroic few, we try to suggest a wide range of possibilities for people in any circumstances for living a somewhat more consecrated life. Our view is that any steps taken on the path toward Zion are worthwhile. In concluding that

Working Toward Zion “makes a modest contribution to understanding possibilities for living a more Consecrated life in this world,” Allen acknowledges that the book achieves its intended purpose. Given the current paucity of reflection and discussion on applying consecration and stewardship in any form, I hope that Allen would see that contribution as worthwhile even if it begins building the bridge only on the near shore.

As Latter-day Saints become more and more mixed into the masses on the near shore, we must also consider how we relate to others in going about the work of Zion. Allen seems to regard our favorable mentions of positive corporate cultures, charitable activities of corporations and the well-to-do, Adam Smith, and the idea of applying united order principles within (rather than against) the free enterprise economy as “stretching to find more goodness and hope than reality warrants.” Certainly we could have devoted much more space in the book to criticizing the shortcomings of modern capitalism and our own behavior in our modern economy. In part, we did not do this because, as noted above, we wanted to produce a book that would start from where we are, and in today’s world we are all capitalists in practice, if not belief.

Beyond that, however, we had certain principled reasons for trying to take a positive, “Big Tent” approach. We are discussing the economic teachings of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe that these teachings yield something greater than socialist politics covered with a veneer of Mormon language. On the surface it is not difficult to equate scriptural and prophetic denunciations of the wicked wealthy with the Left’s traditional cultural hatred of anything connected to business or the free market. However, such an equation is dangerous to a religion that also purports to teach love of one’s enemies. Genuine religious motivation has accomplished enormous social good, from the abolition of slavery to the civil rights movement. But when political agendas drive out the spiritual, religion becomes hollow and churches empty, as has been the case of many of the mainline Protestant denominations.⁵ The challenge is to seek economic righteousness as an integral part of our religious life, not as a substitute for it.

Mormonism is still only beginning its transformation into a truly international faith. We are barely a couple of decades away from being a predominantly white, Anglo church still concentrated in the western United States. We are still deciding how we will interact with the great wide world we are growing into. There are early but encouraging indications that we may be able to engage positively with our new neighbors rather than regard them with the hostility sometimes manifested in our

5. See Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church: Does Organized Religion Matter Anymore?* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 1996).

persecuted past. For example, the Roman Catholic church is no longer the great and abominable church of the devil, but rather a Christian partner in humanitarian and social policy efforts. Can we achieve a similar approach to economic righteousness—can we find a gospel way of promoting economic justice grounded in purifying hearts rather than vilifying those who question systemic changes that we believe are desirable?

There is great pleasure to be found in denouncing the wicked. It is much harder to treat the so-called “wicked” as our potential partners in building a Zion society. Calls to the barricades are exciting, but lovers of Zion are supposed to prefer cooperation to competition. Creating a Zion that can function, and supplant Babylon, in every “nook or corner upon the earth” will require building on others’ good actions and motives, even if they are not as pure as we would like. Reaching out in fellowship will bring more and stronger hands to building the bridge to Zion than beating down our perceived “opponents” with rigid denunciations of their failings or the strident tone so common in academic writing.

Of course, such practical engagement in the world leads us to confront a morally complex reality where individuals do both good and bad for a mixture of motives. In *Working Toward Zion* we decided to focus constructively on the good they do. Thus, we endorse Andrew Carnegie’s example in philanthropy, while fully noting the moral failings of his labor policies (pp. 79-82, 100). The resolution of moral complexities in economic matters is as much a part of our passage in this mortal life as any other exercise of our moral agency. We cite Adam Smith so often in part to remind us that “economics” was once a field for moral philosophers, and to urge that it be so again. It was not until a century after Smith that ethics became separated from economics. We believe that, outside of academic economics, most people will see that separation as unhealthy, and will readily come to an ethically founded view of economic matters if they are not turned off by contentious, Marxist-sounding denunciations of their lives. In this choice of approaches, *Working Toward Zion* may be too idealist and Allen’s adversarial approach the realist. However, in the end, if Zion can not be built on a foundation of love, can it be built at all?