

# Gethsemane and Calvary in LDS Soteriology

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IN THIS PAPER I EXPLORE ONE of the key ways in which the idea of salvation as formulated within LDS thought differs from expressions of salvation in other religious groups. I will also raise the question of how this doctrinal configuration—centered on the idea of the Atonement—relates to the wider ethical and ritual dimensions of LDS life. Finally, as a distinctive feature of this all too brief exploration, I will highlight the potential significance of the artistic and aesthetic representation of salvation within religious culture as a whole.

I have already indicated that the major element of the idea of salvation of interest here is that which LDS tradition describes as the event of the Atonement and has come to closely associate with the Garden of Gethsemane. This is a distinctive emphasis, one that distinguishes LDS soteriology from that of most other Christian religious groups. They, for their part, tend to speak of Atonement much more in direct relation to the idea of salvation rooted in the death of Christ through crucifixion upon Calvary. With these emphases in mind, I will refer to Gethsemane and Calvary as symbolic expressions of two different and distinguishable modes of organizing ideas of salvation in relation to the lives of both Christ and the religious believer.

This emphasis on Gethsemane rather than Calvary, on the garden rather than the cross, provides a distinction which is not only related to the practical spirituality of the LDS, but also serves as an important theological boundary marker between LDS and non-LDS groups. I will not deal here with any historical development in this doctrinal scheme, whether in the early LDS movement or in the contemporary church, although I do appreciate that some contemporary trends involve a reconsideration of ideas

of salvation in relation to grace, a topic inextricably part of the logic of my own deliberations. This applies, in particular, to the notion of grace and its practical consequence for committed church members who feel the strain of demands for high levels of religious performance. These issues highlight the way in which ideas and actions are intimately associated with both the history of ideas and with the organization of an institution. They also demand a degree of eclecticism of method for their discussion.

Although I will simply sketch here the implications of the distinction between Gethsemane and Calvary, I have also pursued the distinction at much greater length in my study entitled *The Mormon Culture of Salvation*, and subtitled, "Force, Grace and Glory."<sup>1</sup> So it is that Gethsemane and Calvary, these two sites of salvation—as perhaps we might call them—occupy a significantly different position in LDS thought on the one hand, and in broad Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions on the other.

#### THE ARTISTIC KEY

My approach to this question of distinction begins with art because it was only recently that I became increasingly struck by the way art affords one a key to understanding LDS thought. Perhaps this was inevitable since, for nearly two decades, I had become increasingly interested in the relationship between art and theology, largely through the influence of my former colleague and friend, Dr. Mary Charles Murray, when we taught together at the University of Nottingham. My relatively limited experience of Mormon art began to impress me with the fact that depictions of "Calvary"—my shorthand for art of the Passion of Christ centered on the cross, crucifixion, death, and corpse of Jesus—are extremely infrequent in Mormon art, when compared with the presence of Calvary in most other major Christian traditions given to artistic endeavour. I then became equally astonished by the fact that "Gethsemane" was, in turn, relatively sparsely represented in those major traditions. This led me to ask why the LDS seem to focus on Gethsemane and traditional Christian denominations on Calvary? Since art expresses life, both reflecting and informing its own religious culture, it might be expected to disclose aspects of the dynamics of religious thought and action which would inform a study of LDS culture. Even if we do not wish to see art as being quite that descriptive and prescriptive, we might still find it of real use to illustrate central religious beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas J. Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation* (Aldershot, U.K., and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2000).

<sup>2</sup>John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities* (London: SCM, 1986).

## ATONEMENT AND SALVATION

To begin my interpretation, let me draw a broad distinction between the terms atonement and salvation. In the full scheme of LDS theology and practice, including the rites and ordinances of the gospel, atonement is part of the total scheme of salvation. Atonement is achieved by Christ, removing the sin of Adam so that a moral life may be actively pursued, both in ethics and ritual. Family and social life on the one hand, and the temple on the other, partner each other as the ethical and ordinance foci of action with their mutual goal of exaltation. The Christ who is central to this process is that Christ who is a key agent within the Plan of Salvation, from eternity to eternity. Yet the human agent is also of fundamental importance, in that the foundation of atonement provides the framework for activity, for that family, social, and temple activity which conduces to exaltation. In this complete soteriological process, the work of Christ and the contemporary work of a Latter-day Saint are complementary. Agency is the medium of atonement in Christ just as it is the basis of the exaltation goal of the Saint. Let me relate this to the sites or locales of salvation in terms of what I will call the proactive Christ and the proactive Saint.

In Gethsemane, Christ is proactive in atonement, implementing the decision taken in the heavenly council long before his earthly life. True, he asks that, if possible, the cup be taken from him, but equally, he asks that God's will be done. God's will, as it turns out, is to be achieved through his suffering. So it is that Jesus now engages with the sin of the world. Through what I will call a form of mystical atonement—something which has become a distinctive feature of LDS theology distinguishing it from most other traditions—Christ enters into the sin of the world by a mental act, so much so that he is wracked in body and comes to “bleed at every pore” as D&C 19:18 puts it. This text powerfully echoes the descriptive text (included in only some versions of Luke's Gospel) covering the agony in which he prayed more earnestly, with his sweat becoming “like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:44). In more contemporary, non-theological terms, one might say that the embodied mind was pained with that pain issuing in physical expression. All this was, of course, foretold in the Book of Mosiah, which refers to the Messiah and to his blood that “cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abomination of his people” (Mosiah 3:7).

## THEOLOGICAL COMPARISONS

Much work could be done on the comparative theology of atonement and salvation throughout the history of LDS thought, although it certainly lies beyond this paper. One could, for example, pursue the distinction between LDS and American Protestantism in the 1840s, a period when, as T. E. Jenkins described it, "American theologians across the doctrinal spectrum would have agreed with the Presbyterian Gardiner Spring when he declared in 1846: 'No where is the character of God so fully revealed as in the cross.'"<sup>3</sup> He has shown, for example, that the emphasis of later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theology confronted the apparent weakness of Jesus under suffering, with the implicit assumption that "only weak willed and shallow characters gave passionate vent to their troubles."<sup>4</sup> Here Gethsemane became a moot point. Edwards A. Park, more in sympathy with later LDS authors, though himself an Amherst theologian, identified the suffering of Christ as the outcome of some "secret visual exchange. . . between God and Jesus," as Christ is given "a vision of something that horrified him."<sup>5</sup> The LDS apparently circumvented this problem by elaborating the significance of Gethsemane, turning any notion of weakness into an absolute strength.

The LDS commitment to Gethsemane offers a significant stimulus to wider forms of Christian theology, which has tended to ignore this element of the Passion of Christ. Almost exceptionally, and in a brief passage—practically as an aside—Rudolph Otto brought his idea of the numinous, "with its mystery and awe" to "Christ's Agony in the night of Gethsemane" and did so, so that "we might comprehend in our own experience what the import of that agony was."<sup>6</sup> He wished to explain something, at least, of "this sweat that falls to the ground like great drops of blood." This, he said, was no simple fear of death, for Christ had long confronted that; rather it was "the awe of the creature before the *mysterium tremendum*" (i.e., before the great mystery). He suggests that this is analogous to Yahweh waylaying Moses by night, or Jacob wrestling with God.

From the Anglican tradition I am reminded of George Herbert's seventeenth century poetic treatment of this theme in *The Agony*:

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas, E. Jenkins, *The Character of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>6</sup>Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, tr. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 88.

Philosophers have measured mountains,  
 Fathomed the depths of seas, of states, of kings,  
 Walked with a staff to heav'n, and traced fountains:  
 But there are two vast, spacious things,  
 The which to measure it doth more behove:  
 Yet few there are that sound them; Sin and Love.

Who would know Sin, let him repair  
 Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see  
 A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,  
 His skin, his garments bloody be,  
 Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain  
 To hunt his cruel food through ev'ry vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay  
 And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike  
 Did set again abroach: then let him say  
 If ever he did taste the like.  
 Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,  
 Which my God feels as blood: but I, as wine.<sup>7</sup>

#### LDS AND GETHSEMANE

Certainly the LDS tradition tends to be very emphatic on this issue. Ezra Taft Benson is quoted by the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* as saying that "modern LDS leaders have emphasized that Jesus' most challenging experience came in Gethsemane. . . . It was in Gethsemane," he says, "that Jesus took on Himself the sins of the world."<sup>8</sup> Similarly in Jeffrey R. Holland's entry on Atonement (with its seven columns, as compared with just over a single column on salvation), he accounts for the voluntary death of Christ who offers his "life, innocent body, blood, and spiritual anguish," as a "redeeming ransom," dealing with the consequences of the Fall. Once more we find Gethsemane the focal site where Christ experienced the "spiritual anguish of plumbing the depths of human suffering," and where he "bled at every pore."<sup>9</sup> But tellingly, perhaps, Holland then adds it was from Gethsemane that Christ begins his "final march to Calvary" where the "majesty and triumph of the Atonement" lies in the appeal "from the cross, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.'" This utterance is interpreted positively, and Holland

<sup>7</sup>George Herbert, *Oxford Poetry Library*, ed. Louis L. Martz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28.

<sup>8</sup>S. Kent Brown, "Gethsemane", in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 542.

<sup>9</sup>Jeffrey R. Holland. "Atonement of Jesus Christ," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 85.

cites John Taylor's words setting the Saviour as the "master of the situation." In terms of my argument, proactivity thus replaces passivity.

Against this background, the suffering of Christ holds considerable potential for LDS spirituality as witnessed, for example, in Stephen Robinson's description of atonement as "the Gethsemane experience." Robinson provides his own commentary on Jesus and his ability to assist the Saint:

He knows the anguish of parents whose children go wrong. He knows the private hell of the abused child or spouse. He knows all these things personally and intimately because he lived them in the Gethsemane experience. Having personally lived a perfect life, he then chose to embrace our imperfect lives. In that infinite Gethsemane experience, the meridian of time, the center of destiny, he lived a billion billion lifetimes of sin, pain, disease and sorrow.<sup>10</sup>

Let me end this briefest of sketches and hint at the continuity of this belief with but a few stanzas of Eliza Snow's well known hymn, often used at sacrament services, which culminates in the phrase "strict obedience," a prime description of the proactive Christ:

How great the wisdom and the love, That filled the courts on high,  
And brought the Saviour from above, To suffer, bleed, and die.

His precious blood he freely spilt; His life he freely gave,  
A sinless sacrifice for guilt, A dying world to save.

By strict obedience Jesus won, The prize with glory rife.  
Thy will, O God, not mine be done'  
Adorned his mortal life.

The expression "Thy will, O God, not mine be done" is, of course, the keynote element taken directly from gospel narratives of the garden of Gethsemane.

To speak, as I do here, of the *proactive* Christ of Gethsemane is to seek to do justice to this very emphatic idea of voluntary involvement with sin. It also contrasts that figure with the more passive Christ of Calvary, where the crucified Christ is a victim, very much the divine-human counterpart of the temple sacrifice of a lamb which underpins Old Testament ideas and, especially, the thinking of the gospels, most particularly that of St. John, who even changes the time of the crucifixion from that of the Synoptic Gospels, so that Jesus dies at the time when the Passover lambs are killed at the Jerusalem festival. It is this image of *passivity* which plays so little a part in LDS iconography or exegetical commentary.

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<sup>10</sup>Stephen, E. Robinson, *Believing Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1992), 123.

## ARTISTIC EXAMPLES

When ideas, especially religious ideas, powerfully penetrate their native cultures, they come to expression in a great variety of ways, not least in art. Accordingly, some examples of Gethsemane paintings illustrate well these points of activity and passivity. The painting of Christ in Gethsemane by Harry Anderson, a Seventh Day Adventist, expresses something of this proactive Christ in an image with which the LDS show a strong elective affinity. It was used, for example, on the paper jacket of Mangum and Yorgason's popular volume *Amazing Grace* of 1996.<sup>11</sup> Jesus kneels against a background of a dark rock and is illuminated by light from above, with hands clasped and an upturned face set in an attitude of determined commitment.<sup>12</sup>

This garden scene is, of course, far removed from traditional Christian portrayals of the crucifixion. Let me refer again to *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, this time in relation to its entry on the "Crucifixion of Jesus Christ." In particular, I note a picture placed alongside that entry, described as "one of the few LDS paintings to treat the crucifixion theme."<sup>13</sup> The picture actually shows two dried palm branches suspended behind what is described as a sacrament table holding bread and water. Painted by Robert L. Marshall in 1983, it portrays no actual figure of Christ, no crucified body, no corpse, not even an empty cross. The textual interpretation accompanying the picture speaks of the "dead hanging palms" as representing the body from which life had already passed prior to the third day resurrection.

There seems to be little in this picture that resonates with LDS spirituality, unlike the visions of Christ's garden experience. One of the significant features of the proactivity of Christ is that it can come, most powerfully, to legitimate the ideal-type Latter-day Saint, an activist grounded in the LDS notion of agency and its significance for any life aimed at attaining exaltation. There is a logic to proactivity which is perfectly consonant with family and temple forms of LDS life, and with activity within the church organization. Yet it also poses a problem for people who may feel quite inadequate before the high levels of performance perceived to be required for this way of life. Some LDS authors have explored this concept using ideas of grace and of conversion, such as have, generally, been eschewed in LDS discourse, not least perhaps in order to affirm a difference between the Restoration and Protestant Evangelicalism.

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<sup>11</sup>Donald P. Mangum and Brenton G. Yorgason, *Amazing Grace* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966).

<sup>12</sup>The front cover of this journal reproduces a similar Harry Anderson painting of the same scene.

<sup>13</sup>Merrill, C. Oaks. "Crucifixion of Jesus Christ", in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 733.