

# Triptych—History of the Church

*Robin Russell*

*Panel I\**

I feel grace descend like whiskey-scented oil poured over me in the upper room on my way to heaven. I dance in the heat of a fire, like ghosts following Sitting Bull to their deaths, pounding the earth as I whirl, feeling the scent move out through my veins, pulled by the dance into my feet and fingers and loins, the beating gyre burning my bones and blood back into the earth, spinning faster, dizzy with peace and the nearness of understanding. One voice sings like a cry thrown out across the crush of the world, like the weeping question of Enoch, or Adam, or Samuel, and the sun turns to snow whiter than noon-day. And in that glow I rest, healed and glistening, warm fatigue where once arose the aroma of belief and the coryphée of hope. And then, as it will, in the dénouement of grace, the dance winds down, becomes a shuffle, and the twirling scent dissipates in the gnawing whisper that is only wind. And I wonder where have we come to in these many years? And where is here? Is this the place, a desert beyond what is known? Now, do we move without the stillness, caught in the rhythm of our own shouts, unable to hear the song cast across our sight like a fleeing bird or an unanswered child? And in the hammering silence I make out no reply, just a kneeling, drunken man unable to rise, his lolling head turning the world back and forth, his yawping gasp a cry that spins us back and starts the scratching dance anew.

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\*Panel I appeared previously as “History of the Church—Part One,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2000):14.

*Panel II*

In the dry places, the chafing, fevered wind cleaves our desert hearts and hardscabble eyes in desiccated, crackling vision, the gnawing revelation a jagged sacrament which does not come softly, but breaks off, the hard intolerant, and you feel every edge of its strength, every point, every angle of its creviced power along your seal-skin smoothness, its trilled blades of bloody belief rough, as the razored lips of its certain promise slice fair-skinned ardent flesh, the puckered aching slit unhealed, a blanched crimson stigmatum leached and pulsing and pliant, puffed and slowly throbbing, a seeping scar of withered intent. In a dirty windblown doorway, a single unsheltered bulb pours a triangle of yellowed light downward like new revelation, and we turn, slowly, its shimmering witness calling, ancient water whispers, rise, take up thy bed, and walk, and in the distance, a sleeping form, Jacob or maybe Joseph, becomes a dusty rider who gathers the reins and mounts the saddled and lathered back of history, turns slowly and fades into the purling furnace of a lustrous, rippling judgment, another voiceless wail scratched across the sky. The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun gives his light by day, and the moon gives her light by night, and the stars also give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God while darkness licks at the edges of our lives.

*Panel III*

He will say, if you bring forth what is in you, it will give you life. But if you do not bring forth what is in you, you will die. Grief soaks your blood dry, your prayers fly up, tied on flagged horns, hemal signifiers of queasy righteous intent. In the afternoon silence, all motion and sound beat to submission by the anviled heat, your hard-straining retches sob into the bright air, the stench of them an oozing soundless splash, decaying sight across the lengths of time and all eternity, chained, fiery laughter soaking your dead filament eyes. In a cracking secret motion, you bend, lift a now-useless leg to a knee-lodged angle, stretched up pant cuffs showing bleached hairless skin like a shark's belly in the kiln fire of noon-day, and you brush your shoe, the tips of your soiled fingers marking flesh-carved canals across your patterned brogues, three graceful, lingering swipes upon the world that compass its lives, its violence and horror, the vengeance and apathy of endless generations, screaming Bosch figures now just dust, brushed off, amerced and wiped clean from your polished helpless anger so you can rest once again, spent, vacant senescence restored to your austere, keening fullness, the forgotten commandment withering in the searing glare. And when he asks you where you are from, say we have descended from light. And when he asks you who you are, tell him, we are its children. And if he asks what is the sign by which he can know that you do not lie, tell him, it is motion and rest. Motion and rest.

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