

NOTES AND COMMENTS

A Sacrament of Stewardship

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Carrol and Edwin Firmage contributed papers to the fall issue that review Mormon history during the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries and scriptural precedent, in an attempt to motivate a Mormon audience toward improved ecological fidelity: Edwin Firmage Jr., “Light in Darkness: Embracing the Opportunity of Climate Change” and Carrol Firmage, “Preserves” (43, no. 3 [Fall 2010]: 100–127 and 128–65).

Readers cannot help noticing in these essays that the Firmages are patient thinkers who allowed the ideas in these essays to germinate and, as a result, have written prose that is moving and rich. The ambitious scope of these papers—scope that provided a stimulating reading experience—brings to the fore methodological considerations that warrant exploration. I offer the following observations for others who might continue to develop these ideas.

Both Firmages write in first person, bringing themselves explicitly into their work by sharing personal anecdotes and declarations about their private spiritual allegiances. The inclusion of personal references has become *de rigueur* in certain kinds of academic writing. Anthropologists, for example, embrace this practice in an attempt to compensate for, and not repeat, the transgressions of their intellectual forebears. This contextualization of their observations can serve the important function of reminding writer and reader that conclusions are always impressions mediated by the mind and emotion of a subjective human being.

By depicting their own thoughts about and interactions with their subjects of analysis, anthropologists offer themselves as objects of study as well. A complex (and not-always-successful) move, bringing attention to observer-writers is ideally an offering of humility, whereby they present themselves as fallible human beings on a par with those they study.

The Firmages write themselves into their texts to a slightly different effect. Their personal references indeed provide context

for their observations and emphasize their subjectivity as writers. In this case, however, where both are trying to convince a specific audience about how better to live, emphasizing how they are different from their readers can undermine their larger objectives. This happens less with Carrol Firmage who, in general, uses personal anecdotes to invoke or engage a tale in which she is inheritor both of a place (Utah) and of agricultural acts (harvesting fruit from desert orchards and preserving the harvest for future consumption).

Carrol feels responsible to the land not only as each person is to the Earth, but because her people—her literal ancestors and their spiritual community—worked this land and responded to a stewardship mandate regarding it. In this context, readers come to understand the nature of Carrol Firmage’s commitment to Utah lands as well as to the roots that nourish and ground that commitment. The occasional statement about her continued allegiance to the land despite her spiritual divergence from the Mormon community is honest and provides important context for readers.

In contrast, Edwin Firmage’s frequent references to himself as heretical or unbelieving tend to undermine the argument he weaves. His allusions to self hint at the forces behind his commitment to Zion and its lands, but more frequently they destabilize his portrait of communal unity. He expounds on the notion of a Zion people and how a Zion people, as interpreted by the Mormons of previous centuries, is one that eschews capitalist norms in favor of an ethic of shared wealth and common prosperity (including the prosperity of Zion’s air, land, and water).

As Firmage states, “Our way today seems to me to embody precisely that worship of the self and of the selfish that is the great sin in biblical thinking” (114). God and His prophets do spend generations—centuries—in the Hebrew Bible trying to engender a Zion people. But the consummate key to their identity as a Zion people is actually not their ability to hold things in common or safeguard the land.

Edwin Firmage shines when he expounds the merits of a communally minded biblical ideal: “*To be meaningful, the biblical ideal of righteousness, of goodness in action, must be embodied in community and not just in individuals*” (114; italics in original). Important as

the concept of community is to the Hebrew Bible, I believe it is trumped by the cause of monotheism: the primary criteria by which people fail or succeed in their efforts as members of Zion.

For example, David is remembered as superior to most of Israel's other kings because of his devotion to God and his reliability in consulting with Jehovah about major undertakings. Even as David suffers the betrayal, insurrection, and loss that are the consequence of his sins against Uriah the Hittite, he relies on God to see him through the toll of his punishment. Both before and after David's great sins, it is his allegiance to God that distinguishes him from Saul and from Solomon. Therefore, when Edwin Firmage speaks of Zion ideals and covenant in the same pages where he declares himself an atheist, his admissions undermine the power of his evidence.

Edwin Firmage briefly mentions his allegiance to the Hebrew Bible as a spiritual guide. Were he to elaborate on how one takes the Bible seriously as a spiritual guide in the absence of religious faith, he might be giving us a reading of value for ecumenically oriented social projects. More specific attention to how he admires the Bible might rally mainstream Mormons to his side. Such a discussion would also enrich ongoing conversations about Mormons who no longer participate formally in the Church but who seek alternative modes of belonging because of the ways Mormonism continues to inform who they are—genetically, culturally, or because of its normative principles.

Another issue of concern in the Firmages' articles is their recording of agricultural history. Edwin Firmage's approach to his topic is mainly conceptual. He analyzes the Hebrew Bible for themes about the ideal of Zion behavior and the practice of contemporary Americans including Latter-day Saints. Carrol Firmage, on the other hand, has written an agricultural history that illuminates both the ideals of past Church leaders and the ecological failures of Church members past and present—though this first installment in a series focuses mainly on the early Utah period.

At times, the sense of change over time becomes muddled in Carrol Firmage's essay, in large part because she insufficiently emphasizes the distinction between a historical ideal and actual historical practice. At some points, she compares the articulation

of a past ideal to current practice. For example, she says Heber C. Kimball taught the Saints to pray for fertile land but that Utahns are now knocking down orchards to build houses, a practice that does not preserve the land: “The path we Utahns are taking now is not the one blazed by Brigham Young, Parley P. Pratt, and John Widtsoe.”¹ This faulty comparison suggests a narrative in which Mormons previously acted as effective stewards of the land while contemporary Mormons do not. But one cannot prudently compare past articulations of ideals to present practice.

Instead, she might compare Kimball’s statement, or one of her intriguing Brigham Young quotations, with the sentiments of a current general conference talk to see how definition of the ideal has changed over time. Because of Carrol Firmage’s conflation of practice and ideal, readers are left to assume that current practice—what she calls, “our heedlessness of take-no-prisoners American capitalism” (148)—is in line with official pronouncements, which is not true. It is true that leaders today do not preach ecological stewardship as fervently as they used to—for example, as when Joseph F. Smith called members to task in general conference for neglecting some of their too-large land holdings.²

But Church leaders today do preach controls against capitalism in a number of ways; they still preach against inequality; they still harbor a communitarian vision. Leaders tell us to leave work at a reasonable hour and spend time with our children or helping the needy, instead of earning more money. In defiance of any god of efficiency, BYU shuts down for a devotional hour each Tuesday to remember the God of love. President Hinckley instigated the Perpetual Education Fund to increase educational opportunities for Saints around the world. Leaders still implore members to pay a generous fast offering. Even as head of an overwhelming bureaucracy, President Monson continues to spend time visiting the sick, the lonely, and the bereaved at private residences, rest homes, hospitals, and funerals.

In addition to differentiating between official teaching and lay practice, Carrol Firmage could also compare practice of the past to current practice, so that we might more clearly analyze the similarities and differences in determining how to proceed and improve—as she vividly convinces us we should. Carrol Firmage does mention failures in the past—the ecological desecration of

Mountain Meadows, for example. But the organization of her information obscures the coherence of the tale she tells and makes it sometimes difficult to draw practical conclusions.

Sometimes it is unclear the extent to which ecologically minded Church leaders led people astray through the ignorant implementation of otherwise lofty ideals (such as Brigham Young's dedication to temporal stewardship that included the importation of noxious plants) or the extent to which leaders' ability to affect members' actions had been circumscribed. Thomas G. Alexander has shown how broader American cultural and political forces during the 1880s and early 1890s forced Church leaders to restrain their oversight of economic matters, eventually coming to focus their teachings on matters of individual morality instead. Church leaders came to limit their direct influence in the operations of local business, including agriculture and grazing practices that were damaging the fragile Wasatch watershed.³ When Alexander defines the ideal, he is careful to distinguish it from lived realities: "In practice, Mormons seemed unable in many cases to follow the dictates of the most environmentally creative tenets of the prophetic teachings of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young: ecological stewardship, sacralized entrepreneurship, and the fellowship of all living things under the fatherhood of God."⁴ Without this distinction, when Carrol Firmage details the habits that destroyed lush meadows in Bluff and Mountain Meadows, readers are left wondering whom to blame—Church leaders or wayward settlers.

In the end, Carrol Firmage concludes that American Indians were more effective stewards than Mormons. Indians certainly preserved water and vegetation more effectively than settlers, but this is an underwhelming conclusion in light of Carrol Firmage's thorough research.

Both Edwin and Carrol Firmage develop an exciting concept of sacrament in their essays, a contribution that I want to explore and highlight. Since Peter Lombard formally defined them in the twelfth century, the seven official sacraments of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have included baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction (ministration to the critically ill), order, and matrimony. Protestants since the sixteenth century generally recognize only two official sacraments: baptism and the

Lord's Supper. However, the notion of sacrament is often expanded to include bringing a sense of divine grace, divine communion, and covenant to more experiences than those listed in the formal sacraments, for example writings about the "sacrament of the present moment."⁵

A key aspect of even expanded notions of sacrament is covenant with the divine. Both Firmages propose expanding participation in sacrament even further. They implicitly suggest that the aspects of grace and community that attend sacraments can be enough to overcome essential theological differences. Edwin Firmage states: "Sacraments not only connect people to God but people to people" [115] "It is in the nature of a sacrament to focus eternity in the present moment. . . . In such a community, day-to-day decisions—like how we build our homes, how we raise our food, how we get about, are sacramental decisions, because they impinge on eternity" (116).

Against biblical precedent (and so many current spiritual practices defy that precedent), the Firmages propose a sacrament inclusive enough for those who covenant with God to enjoy a realm of belonging with those who covenant to principle instead of Deity. As Carrol Firmage writes, "To work the land is a sacrament of continuity and caring that links past, present, and future" (149). Maybe the sacrament of the garden is a place where believer and nonbeliever find common cause and common bond. In such a place, the grace is not just what believers receive from their redeemer, but what idealists working together extend to one another.

The Firmage essays enlighten readers about the interplay of past ideals for a contemporary audience. In their execution, they also bring up methodological issues about the allusion to self in academic writing, writing with the intent to change public behavior, and the telling of religious history. I have focused on suggestions for refining these methods because I, too, believe that a potent ecological mandate resides in Mormonism. I hope we can improve our expressions to communicate that mandate to the body of the Church in a manner that will help members to act on it. Like Joseph F. Smith and other Church leaders, I believe that part of the way we prepare the Earth for Christ's coming is through appropriate stewardship of the Earth itself. As the Firmages suggest,

disciplining ourselves both to discover and to perform appropriate stewardship prepares the Earth, but it is also a spiritual exercise. Responsible consumption of resources and nourishing our bodies in a way that honors the lives (animal, vegetable, and human) that make nourishment possible distills our souls at the same time that it improves the quality of the Earth and others' lives.

Notes

1. Several private Utah County orchards have met their doom in just the past ten years. For those interested in the existence of orchards as part of the Church Welfare program, the Church currently has fifty-six production projects that include seven ranches (one turkey, six cattle) and forty-nine orchards and farms. "Welfare Services Fact Sheet," www.providentliving.org (accessed July 30, 2010).

2. See Donald H. Dyal, "Mormon Pursuit of the Agrarian Ideal," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 19–35.

3. Thomas G. Alexander, "Stewardship and Enterprise: The LDS Church and the Wasatch Oasis Environment, 1847–1930," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 341–64.

4. *Ibid.*, 362.

5. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2010, *s.v.* "Sacrament," http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.bu.edu/cgi/entry/50211501?query_type=word&queryword=sacrament&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&reult_place=1&search_id=e0qD-R6GwFe-2529&hilite=50211501 (accessed July 30, 2010).