

R1, 5 note 6; Jan Shippo and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo: BYU Studies/Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1994), xiii.

10. E.g., a quick review of the religious significance of perihelia would have been helpful to many readers of J2, 314–17. It is also unfortunate that only baptism for the dead is emphasized though it was one of three baptismal rituals performed in the temple font.

## Odysseus in the Underworld

Samuel Morris Brown. *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xii + 392 pp., notes, index. ISBN 978-0-19-979357-0.

*Reviewed by Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp*

In a remarkably deft work of scholarship, Samuel Morris Brown offers a rich and compelling view of early Mormonism's sacramental and theological emergence up to the death of Joseph Smith Jr. This book makes many outstanding contributions to discussions of this foundational period, interventions that extend well beyond the stated framing device of conquering death.

The first half of the book sticks to this theme, reading the rise of Mormon beliefs and practices through the lens of the antebellum "death culture." Brown surveys the ways in which the ubiquitous fact of death and the desire to mitigate its psychic effects shaped all aspects of American life. This was particularly true in frontier communities, where enormous death tolls touched everyone. In this context, Brown explains worries surrounding the material degeneration of the corpse, grave relics, treasure seeking, a preoccupation with the interment of ancient peoples in the earth, and the embrace of seerhood as means by which Joseph Smith Jr. and his followers wrestled with the reality of death and sought to overcome it. The second half explores the various sacramental and theological elements of the community Smith created before his death in 1844 as responses to the desire to conquer death. In viewing Mormon sacramental theology through the lens of death, Brown leads the reader through many of the central and most

highly charged aspects of early Mormonism, including temple rites and their relationship to Masonry, genealogy, polygamy, and the plurality of gods.

One of Brown's many salutary contributions is to situate early Mormons within a broader framework of religious thought and practice. Those who came to embrace Smith's teachings, like other antebellum Americans, faced fundamental questions of the meaning and place of death and suffering. Their concerns may not have been unique, but increasingly their answers were. Living in a culture literally saturated with separation and death, the Smith family endured an endless string of losses of siblings, children, and friends, including the death in 1823 of Joseph's brother Alvin, and the first three infants born to Joseph and Emma. Those not taken by illness or accident were removed by migration, a displacement that often proved permanent. Rejecting some elements of the "death culture" of Protestantism, which focused attention on the importance of a "holy" and salvific entry into eternity, Smith sought to resolve the theological tensions he experienced. Brown is at his most compelling and ingenious as he explains the more unusual facets of Smith's biography, e.g., treasure seeking and claims of plates left by ancient peoples as attempts to mediate between the living and the dead. Early Mormons did not simply live on top of the earth, Brown suggests, they interacted constantly with its many historical and sedimentary layers, living simultaneously in a past and present constituted by a visceral connection to the dead. Overcoming that ultimate separation led them to think about bodies and their afterlife, to worry over the placement of burial grounds, and to see the very ground under their feet as a hallowed mingling of dirt and human remains.

These early chapters are a gold mine of novel thinking about antebellum culture. Brown provides insights that can usefully be applied to other religious traditions, and his reading of Mormonism is, in turn, enriched by his thorough grounding in a broader comparative framework that allows him to suggest the differences between Smith's theology and the Calvinism and Arminianism around him. Refusing to treat Mormonism as *sui generis*, Brown outlines the rich intellectual stew out of which Smith chose freely and eclectically to fashion a radically new understanding of hu-

man relationships to one another and to God. Smith embraced some elements of Calvinist communitarian covenantal theology, rejecting the individualism and anticlericalism of upstart Methodists and Baptists; but he also disputed the Calvinist notion of election, arguing instead for a universalism that would unite all believers in an endless “chain of belonging” (222). This, in short, was his response to the troubling fact of death: through the rites of the temple cultus, and through the sealing of individuals to one another, Mormons would transform human relationships into an eternal web of affiliation.

These were Smith’s distinctive intellectual contributions passed on to his followers: a rejection of Protestant theology, an otherworldliness, a “potent sacramentalism,” and a “simultaneously domestic and hierarchical model” (241) of church governance. Brown is at once both elegant and ambitious in his comparison of Smith to a “Heracles, a Beowulf, a Gilgamesh, an Odysseus,” who sought out the living and the dead in order to place them into family relationships that would link the heavens to the earth (12). The rites of the temple, which by the Nauvoo period came to include baptisms for the dead, eternal and plural marriage, and finally, a divine anthropology that asserted the potential for humans to become gods themselves, all resulted from Smith’s overwhelming desire to unite the ecclesial community in the bonds of eternity, a sacred lineage that would give the lie to the material evidence of the grave. Masonry provided some of the initial inspiration for Smith’s use of the temple, but in Brown’s reading the prophet translated the nascent truths of Masonic rites into a full-blown, coherent theology of salvation.

Brown’s most tenuous claims regard the rationale for polygamy, a doctrine practiced in secret in the 1830s, given theological grounding in the 1840s, and publicly announced by Brigham Young in the 1850s. In its development, marriage diverged gradually from a Protestant model. Smith drew on the rite of adoption as a means of uniting the notion of “sealing” as assured salvation to the concept of a bond between individuals (236); eventually salvation and sealing became inseparable notions in the Mormon worldview. So far, so good. But Brown may be on shakier ground when he links the notion of eternal marriage logically to plural marriage (since any subsequent marriage after the death of an

eternal spouse is, by definition, plural). Brown further suggests that this system demonstrates the ways that Smith was resolving some of the problems of Protestant theology, a tradition that drew on scriptures describing polygamous patriarchs while managing to argue that polygamy was sinful. Smith may well have seen this as paradoxical, but it is doubtful that many Protestants would have thought scriptural polygamy was a problem in need of solving (or, if it did need explanation, they found simpler justifications involving dispensationalism or arguing along with Paul for the new law of love in effect after Christ's resurrection).

In Brown's telling, plural marriage appears as the inevitable outcome of Smith's philosophy. Clearly, the Mormon prophet was relentlessly centripetal, attempting to draw all creatures, including God and humanity, into a sacred center. Yet it has to be said that Smith also risked tremendous alienation from his own followers by chasing this vision of a chain of belonging, and it is never entirely clear why he would risk the love of those he held closest to implement that grander scheme. Over time, he lost as many followers as he gained. From the perspective of the Utah Church, this argument makes great sense, since theirs was the branch that took the ecclesial community to its sacramental extreme. Brown argues that the final battle over Smith's physical remains can best be understood as a standoff between the sacerdotal (and potentially infinite) family he had worked so hard to construct, and the biological domesticated family that mirrored other antebellum understandings. I suspect that the Smith family, not to mention other aspirants to Smith's legacy, understood the theological stakes differently; Emma, too, was a member of the ecclesial family, one who had suffered mightily as her husband expanded his heavenly family. One has to wonder how she might have told this story.

That said, Brown's brilliant analysis provides plenty of fodder for continued speculation and debate. Did Smith himself construe his scattered insights in as coherent a way as later scholars would have it? Like Richard Bushman's and Terryl Givens's compelling renderings of Mormon theology, Brown's elegant exposition leaves one wondering whether Smith ever had as systematic a vision as this book attributes to him. It also cannot explain some

of the rhetorical gaps. Why, for instance, do some doctrinal elements (like the Heavenly Mother) remain a mystery—either for Smith or for Brown? What, exactly, did it mean theologically for early Mormons to consider Smith a “secondary savior”? (297). However one answers these remaining questions, Brown has set a marvelous new standard for work in this area, reframing our understanding of early Mormon ritual life in ways that bring the tradition into conversation with other religious movements of its time. This is surely compulsory reading for any student of U.S. religious life in this period.