

Vardis Fisher's Mormon Scars: Mapping the Diaspora in the *Testament of Man*

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"Religion is like smallpox. If you get a good dose, you wear scars."

—*Vardis Fisher, We Are Betrayed*

In 1940, Vardis Fisher was one of a handful of writers in the United States rumored to be "important." He had achieved critical acclaim (and modest financial success) in three different areas: his early novels about the Snake River region of Idaho (*Toilers of the Hills*, *Dark Bridgwell*) had been praised as examples of Western regional fiction and compared favorably to John Steinbeck in California and William Faulkner in the South;¹ the four autobiographical novels of his *Tetralogy* were originally grouped with the works of his friend, Thomas Wolfe, as premier examples of the confessional novel;² and his epic novel of the Mormon migration, *Children of God*, had just won one of the most important literary prizes in the country and had established Fisher as a major historical novelist.³ In their 1979 book *The Mormon Experience*, Leonard Arrington and Davis Bitton identified Fisher as "perhaps the most important writer of Mormon background."⁴

Among Mormon literary scholars, Fisher is categorized as one of the principal writers of the "Lost Generation"—a term first applied to Mormon literature by Edward Geary in his 1977 essay, "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s." Geary proposed the term to describe a group of writers from

Mormon backgrounds who rose to national prominence during the middle decades of the twentieth century. This group included Fisher, along with George Dixon Snell, Virginia Sorensen, Maurine Whipple, Richard Scowcroft, Juanita Brooks, Samuel Taylor, Blanche Cannon, Fawn Brodie, and Paul Bailey.⁵ These writers all came from Mormon backgrounds and treated Mormon themes in their work, but none of them felt entirely comfortable with their religious identity, and many of them ended up leaving the institutional Church behind while often continuing to describe themselves as “Mormons” in public settings.

The term “Lost Generation” quickly worked its way into the vocabulary of Mormon literary studies and has become a standard way of referring to this group of writers. The term itself is unfortunate, though, as it frames their work from the very narrow perspective of Utah Mormon culture, which generally saw them as transgressive, disloyal, and hostile. But compared to the overwhelmingly hostile portrayals of Mormonism in American and British literature between 1843 and 1930, these writers were anything but anti-Mormon. Their nuanced, well-crafted narratives convinced millions of readers that Mormonism was more complex than *A Study in Scarlet* and *Riders of the Purple Sage* had led them to believe. And they wrote at precisely the time that the Church was emerging from its cocoon in the American West and renegotiating its relationship with the rest of the world. The writers of the midcentury Mormon diaspora were an important (if often unacknowledged) part of that renegotiation.

During his lifetime, Fisher was the most well-known writer of the midcentury Mormon diaspora, and his 1939 novel *Children of God* was arguably the most influential fictional treatment of Mormonism published during the first half of the twentieth century. A largely sympathetic portrayal of the Mormon migration, *Children of God* became a national bestseller, a Harper Prize winner, and the basis of the major 1940 motion picture *Brigham Young*. In a cover-story appraisal of the book for *The Saturday Review of Literature*, Bernard DeVoto, who a year earlier had proclaimed that there would never be a first-rate novel of the Mormon experience in America, declared himself a false prophet. “It will be read for a

long time," DeVoto exulted, "and Mr. Fisher has proved himself a mature novelist who belongs to the small company of our best."⁶

Though he was the most famous of the bunch, Vardis Fisher was also significantly more "lost"—to Mormonism at least—than most of the other writers in the midcentury diaspora. Born in rural Idaho in 1895, Fisher was raised by Mormon parents in almost complete isolation from other people, Mormon or otherwise. He would recall much later that his family had only one neighbor within ten miles in any direction.⁷ Consequently, he attended no church and did not participate in any religious activities outside of his home. He was baptized into the Mormon Church at twenty years old, while attending school in Rigby, Idaho, but he left the Church after only a few months and never returned—though nearly all of his autobiographical early fiction deals with Mormonism as the context of his upbringing.

The question of whether Fisher can be called a "Mormon writer" in even a limited sense became the subject of intense dispute when early Mormon literary critics tried to claim him for their tribe. A few years before publishing *The Mormon Experience*, Arrington and his graduate student John Haupt presented a paper at the inaugural meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters entitled, "The Mormon Heritage of Vardis Fisher." This paper advanced the thesis that Vardis Fisher's rejection of Mormonism was less complete than critics had previously supposed. Against the common view of Fisher as an atheist who completely rejected Mormonism in his youth, the authors argue that he "was not an apostate," that he "never renounced his religion," and that "his outlook on life and history was religious, definitely Judeo-Christian and . . . definitely encompassing Latter-day Saint belief and practice." The paper was published in *BYU Studies* the next year, where it received modest exposure among scholars of Mormon and Western American literature.⁸

This article attracted the unfavorable attention of Fisher's widow, Opal Laurel Holmes. Convinced that Fisher would one day be remembered as a great American novelist, she felt a keen responsibility to make sure that nothing as nasty and disreputable as religion—especially Mormon religion—sullied his name. Holmes

republished his out-of-print works under her own imprint, and to several of these she appended the statement “Vardis Fisher Was Not a Mormon” and her letter to Spencer W. Kimball demanding that he suitably reprimand anybody who claimed otherwise. In her statement, Holmes declared that “VARDIS FISHER WAS NOT A MORMON; did not have a Mormon indoctrination during his formative years in the home of his father; that he had apostatized from the Mormon Church within a year after his baptism, without ever having followed through on anything that would have qualified him as a Mormon.”⁹ Vardis Fisher may have once written a book about the Mormon migration, she insisted, but he was a freethinker, a seeker of truth, and a genuine intellectual—and definitely not a Mormon.

But one need not go either to his widow or to Mormon historians to answer questions about Vardis Fisher’s early life and perceptions. More than anything else, Fisher was a confessional writer who wrote five thinly veiled autobiographical novels and was always revising his confessions. His four-volume *Künstlerroman*, known collectively as the *Tetralogy*, paints as clear a picture as we might want of his early spiritual life through the experiences of his fictional alter ego, “Vridar Hunter.”¹⁰ Like Vardis, Vridar grows up in Idaho, reads the Bible and the Book of Mormon as a child, and dreams of becoming a prophet like Joseph Smith. Like Vardis, he is attracted to Mormonism the first time he experiences a Mormon community, but he is soon disillusioned with its anti-intellectualism and its dogmatic moralism. He leaves the Church and attends the University of Utah in order to become a writer.

Fisher’s most significant statement of his adult connection to Mormonism, I believe, occurs in his novel *We Are Betrayed* (1935), the third volume of the *Tetralogy*. The statement occurs in a conversation between Vridar Hunter and his Jewish fraternity brother Dave Roth. A deeply cynical man, Roth does not seem like the sort of person to join a fraternity, so the equally cynical Vridar, who is considering quitting, asks him why he joined. “Being in a frat makes it easier for me to get along. I can go to some social flings,” Roth responds. “Now and then a Christian smiles at me. And that . . . is quite a gift to a Jew.” Vridar tries to protest that he

is not himself religious—that he is not a Christian or a Mormon. But Roth stops him cold: “Yes you are. Religion is like smallpox. If you get a good dose you wear scars. You had a good dose.” Vridar does not dispute the conclusion.¹¹

Like Vridar Hunter, Vardis Fisher got a good dose of Mormonism. And like Vridar, he wore scars. In this sense, and perhaps no other, we can legitimately consider Vardis Fisher a “Mormon writer.” For all but a few months of his adult life, he did not believe in, or adhere to, the doctrines of the LDS Church. He renounced those doctrines and ridiculed religious belief throughout his life. But his people were Mormon, including the people he loved the most. And his only first-hand experiences with religious belief, moral guilt, desire for transcendence, and the possibility of revelation—which all became common themes in his writings—came in the context of his Mormon upbringing. Fisher himself was an atheist, or at least an agnostic, from his early adulthood until his death. He was a religious unbeliever; of this there can be little doubt. But Mormonism was the religion that he didn't believe in.

The Testament of Man

Despite his early success, Vardis Fisher did not want to be known primarily as a Western writer, or as an Idaho writer, or as an acolyte of Thomas Wolfe—and he certainly did not want to be known as a Mormon writer. He had bigger dreams to chase. In 1943, he published *Darkness and the Deep*, the first novel in the *Testament of Man*—a twelve-book epic cycle that would consume most of Vardis Fisher's time and considerable talent for the next twenty years. The project was the historical novel conceived on a grand scale. He set out to tell nothing less than the religious, psychological, social, and sexual history of the human race. It was a big job, and, though some of the initial novels sold well, the series itself did so poorly, and caused such controversy, that Fisher had great difficulty finding publishers for most of the later novels.¹² As Fisher's biographer Tim Woodward writes, *The Testament of Man* series “would cost him twenty of his most productive years,

a close friend and publisher, and any hope of maintaining the reputation he briefly enjoyed as one of the nation's up-and-coming novelists." However, as Woodward understands, "he wasn't writing the *Testament* for the best-seller lists. He was convinced he was writing it for the ages."¹³

Unfortunately, "the ages" have been no kinder to *The Testament of Man* than the bestseller lists were. All twelve books have been out of print for decades—and most of them are difficult to find even in libraries and used bookstores. Though the series did provide the subject matter for a few MA theses and PhD dissertations in the 1970s, there has been very little scholarly work on the *Testament* since then.¹⁴ In one of the few recent treatments, written for a centennial celebration of Fisher's work, edited by Joseph Flora and published by the University of Idaho Press, anthropologist Marilyn Trent Grunkemeyer calls the series "a massive exposition of one of the greatest perduring male fantasies of all time," and refers to its capstone final volume as "spiritually exhausting and emotionally toxic."¹⁵ The further we get from Fisher's source material and the time-bound anthropological assumptions that inform his work, the less likely it becomes that *The Testament of Man* will ever experience a massive resurgence in either popular or scholarly interest.

I would suggest, though, that there is much in the *Testament of Man* worth thinking well of. For one thing, most of the novels are pretty good. Fisher was a novelist of ideas, but, unlike most novelists of ideas, he also knew how to tell a compelling story. And in the second decade of the twenty-first century, *The Testament of Man* provides a fascinating glimpse into the state of anthropology and religious studies halfway through the twentieth. In preparing to write these novels, Fisher read thousands of works written from the 1890s through the 1960s, and what he incorporates in the novel represents a good sampling of the state of anthropological scholarship during his lifetime.¹⁶ If it is a failure, it is a noble one—and therefore worth studying as one of the twentieth century's great cautionary tales: the one about the gifted writer whose reach exceeded his grasp.

Perhaps the most important key to reading the *Testament of Man* is to realize that it is ultimately another one of Fisher's autobiographical experiments. This becomes explicit in the twelfth and final book, *Orphans in Gethsemane*, which is a rewriting of the *Tetralogy*. Like the earlier four novels of the *Tetralogy*, *Orphans in Gethsemane* tells the story of Vridar Hunter, the thinly veiled self-portrait of the artist as a young (and very neurotic) man. But really, all twelve books in the *Testament* are autobiographical. Each of the first eleven novels has at least one character who is a recognizable type of Vridar Hunter, and, therefore, Vardis Fisher. Scholars have long recognized the typological nature of the series. "The research behind his books is tremendous," writes Fisher scholar Joseph M. Flora, but the primary strategy of the *Testament* is "to imagine what Vridar would have done in the times Fisher considers."¹⁷ Tim Woodward explains the *Testament of Man* series as "an attempt to rewrite the Vridar story in a way that shed light not just on Vridar, but on all the Vridars—the confused, frightened neurotics whom he presently came to call orphans."¹⁸

The Vridar character in each novel is usually a brilliant social misfit with profound creative energy, equally profound neurosis, and deep doubts about the society that he lives in. In the early novels, which deal with pre-historic times and the earliest Mesopotamian societies, the main characters achieve great cultural power by exercising their intellect and creativity in essentially static societies. As the series progresses, however, the creative impulses of these Vridar/Vardis characters repeatedly clash with the forces of religious fundamentalism: the early Hebrew prophets in the court of Solomon, the ultra-nationalistic Jews during the Maccabean rebellion, the Christian zealots of the Inquisition, and, of course, Vridar's orthodox Mormon family members in *Orphans in Gethsemane*.

Nearly everything about the *Testament of Man* invites us to read it as a sustained meditation on religion. It takes its title from the two Testaments of the Bible, and it clearly mimics biblical structure, beginning with stories of Creation and Exodus and narrating the rise of both Judaism and Christianity. Nearly every book contains at least one character identified as either a priest

or a prophet—and the early books usually contain one of each. While Fisher processed religion intellectually through the thousands of books that he read while doing research for *Testament of Man*, he processed it emotionally through the only religious culture that he ever participated in. And just as the heroes of all twelve books are versions of Fisher himself, the religious forces that they struggle against are all, in some way, versions of the rigid, patriarchal, prophet-driven, sex-denying Mormon religion that he absorbed from his family while growing up in the isolated wilderness of rural Idaho.

We learn from his autobiographical writings that two of the most influential people in Fisher's life were strong Mormon women: his devout mother, with whom he remained close well into adulthood, and his first wife, Leona McMurtrey, whose suicide in 1924—a direct consequence of his own infidelity—haunted him for the rest of his life. Dealing with the Mormon perspectives of those closest to him is one of Vridar's most difficult challenges in *Orphans in Gethsemane*. And two of the other volumes of the *Testament* present fictional accounts of intellectual men interacting obsessively with religious cultures in order to better understand important women in their lives. In *The Island of the Innocent* (Book 7), an educated Greek doctor falls in love with a beautiful Jewish woman and joins the Maccabean rebellion on the side of the Jews. In *A Goat for Azazel* (Book 9), a young Roman intellectual travels throughout the empire trying to understand Christianity after seeing his Christian mother willingly accept martyrdom for her faith.

Both of these characters—like Vridar Hunter and Vardis Fisher—end up being strongly influenced by religious cultures whose religions they do not accept. They are powerful statements about simultaneously being part of and not being part of a religious community by one of the most important members of the mid-twentieth-century Mormon diaspora. Taken together, these two fictional accounts function as a catalog of ways to interact with a religious culture that one does not belong to and to make peace with religious ideas that one does not believe.

Island of the Innocent: Faith as an Intellectual Exercise

The seventh *Testament of Man* novel, *The Island of the Innocent*, takes place in Jerusalem before and during the Maccabean revolt, which began in 167 BCE and is treated in the deuterocanonical books of First and Second Maccabees. In his retrospective overview of the *Testament*, Fisher describes this as a pivotal moment for all of the major themes that he treats. “The extremely bitter struggle between Jews who wanted to Hellenize Israel and those who wanted to preserve it in racial and religious isolation—the struggle between beauty and righteousness—was of transcendent importance,” he notes. “Allergic to women and to practically all pleasures, the lean, shaggy, angry prophets won a second time. The price the . . . Vridars paid for that victory no one, so far as I know, has ever tried to determine.”¹⁹

The two worldviews that Fisher alludes to here—“beauty and righteousness,” or, to use the especially apt Arnoldian terms, “Hellenism and Hebraism,”—conflict constantly throughout *The Testament of Man*.²⁰ The two novels preceding *The Island of the Innocent* represent the conflict allegorically, with paired characters who each represent one end of the dichotomy. In *The Divine Passion*, the priest named Rabi represents the Hellenistic impulse. He is creative, intellectually curious, socially liberal, and anxious to accommodate human nature. The opposite view, the Hebraic impulse, comes in the form of Yescha, the self-declared prophet who believes that women are the source of evil, that sex is inherently sinful, and that humanity can only be saved by rigid adherence to an uncompromising law. In *The Valley of Vision*, King Solomon represents the Hellenistic values of knowledge, experience, and creativity, while the prophet Ahiah represents the Hebraic values of obedience and self-denial.

In both of these earlier novels, the Vridar character is the Hellenist. Rabi and Solomon are simply Vardis Fisher-type characters set imaginatively in different historical periods. The same is true of the main character of *The Island of the Innocents*: a wealthy Greek physician named Philemon. In most ways, Phile-

mon epitomizes the Hellenistic worldview. He is well educated, skeptical, intellectually curious, well travelled, and a confirmed sensualist. However, when he is thrust into the middle of the pre-Maccabean conflict between the Hellenistic Jews and the *Hasidim*, or “pious Jews,”²¹ Philemon chooses Hebraism—not out of any personal conviction or religious devotion, but because it is the only way he can get the girl.

The first sentence of *The Island of the Innocent* introduces readers to the obsessive love at the center of the novel: “He was Philemon, a Hellene, looking for a girl named Judith, a daughter of Israel, and he felt pretty absurd for having come down from Antioch because of an infatuation more than a year old.”²² Philemon had only seen Judith once, by chance in a crowd, when she was twelve years old. As the novel begins, he is returning to Jerusalem to find her—and, in the process, to reunite with his Jewish friend, Reuben, with whom he once studied in Antioch. As soon as he arrives, Philemon is thrust into the conflict engulfing Jerusalem. Reuben is a leader of the Hellenistic Jews and is actively working with Antiochus IV to eliminate Jewish ritual and worship for good. Two of Judith’s siblings—her brother Paul and her sister Angela—are among Reuben’s most loyal followers, while her oldest brother, Hosah, is a leader of the pious Jews. Judith, who is only thirteen years old when the novel begins, is solidly within Hosah’s sphere of influence.

As Philemon searches for Judith, he learns more about her strange and violent religion. Somewhat implausibly, Philemon has read many of the Jewish scriptures in the libraries at Antioch, but he has had little personal experience with the Jewish people. At the end of the first chapter, he watches helplessly as a Jewish crowd stones to death a man who has trespassed on ground considered sacred. He gets a close view of the “religious fanaticism in the seed of Abraham,”²³ and he is repulsed by it—as are many of the city’s educated and secular Jews. Nonetheless, because he loves Judith, he tries to remain neutral in the internecine conflict developing around him. Finally, Judith’s sister, Angela (the Greek name that she uses in place of her given name, Hepzibeth) tells Philemon that his studied neutrality will

soon become impossible. “When the trouble comes,” she warns, “when Jew kills Jew—when brother murders his brother, mother denies her daughter, and father slays his own son—when all that comes—and it’s coming—whose side will you be on?”²⁴

This question initially perplexes Philemon, but, in the end, he answers it by default. When he rescues Judith from the High Priest Menelaus—a Hellenist favorite who intends to rape her—Philemon is imprisoned, renounced by his Hellenist friends, and embraced by the pious Jews, who soften to the idea of his marrying Judith provided he undergo baptism and circumcision and become a Jew himself. By this time, Judith completely returns his affections. However, as Antiochus IV’s persecutions become intolerable, and the Maccabean rebellion breaks out in the mountains, the happy (and the not-so-happy) festivities must be postponed. Through a combination of his passion for Judith and the whims of circumstance, Philemon finds himself a foot soldier in the revolutionary army of Judas the Maccabee. He has become a partisan in support of a religion that he does not accept. And he must fight to the death to support beliefs and practices that he finds reprehensible.

Most of us, of course, will never be in a situation quite like this. But if we take away the elements that make *The Island of the Innocent* a romantic adventure story, we are left with a conflict that many people in religious organizations today will find distressingly familiar. People today affiliate with religions for many reasons that do not include genuine conversion: family obligations, marital accommodation, social expectations, and so on. Many times these other motivations work in tandem with our belief structures. But sometimes—especially in the cultural regions that surround the intellectual diaspora—they do not. And this can produce a profound cognitive dissonance among those who, for reasons that they do not entirely control, find themselves unable to end their affiliation with a religious community whose core beliefs they reject or even despise. For the last third of the novel, Philemon struggles with precisely this kind of cognitive dissonance and works to create a philosophy to reconcile his behaviors and his beliefs.

To accomplish this reconciliation, Philemon reframes his affiliation with Judaism as an intellectual, rather than a religious connection, and he invokes three arguments to justify his participation. First, in an internal monologue, he separates the practical good that Judaism does as a religious community from any evaluation of its truth claims. “There was treasure here,” he told himself while observing a Sabbath meal. “Possibly mixed with it was much that was superstitious and evil; but there was good here and it was this good, this enrichment of hope, patience, and faith that Reuben and Angela would throw away, along with the tiresome nonsense in Leviticus.”²⁵ Second, in a conversation with the Hellenizers, he argues that the unique doctrines of Judaism, while certainly not true, at least provide a better moral framework than other doctrines:

To believe in something higher and nobler than self . . . is to organize some kind of harmony—into an orderly and self-regulating power. It makes no difference at all, as I see it, whether there is a god—and of course there is not—as long as the idea of god serves the interests of harmony and design. All people but Jews have many gods; and they also have confusion, lack of symmetry and design and purpose, which is always found when there is no core, no center of control. Jews, with what seems to be superlative, even if unconscious, wisdom have refused to accept that disorder.²⁶

When the Hellenizers call him out for promoting a religion that he knows to be false, Philemon makes his third major argument: that nothing is actually more true than anything else, so it doesn’t really matter what one believes, as long as it works for the person doing the believing. “Who . . . can say what is false and what is not? Can any man?” he asks his companions before launching into a suspiciously modern defense of moral relativism:

If we wait to be sure that a thing is right before casting our lives with it we’ll never risk our lives for anything. Much of what Hosah believes is ridiculous to me but it serves him. Now he lies a beast in a cave, starving, but willing to die rather

than renounce what is truth for him. And I find that good. Or I'd put it this way. . . . There's no God—we all agree on that; but in every man there is a god. If the man wants to think that his god is a being or power somewhere out in space I can see no harm in it—or if he wants to think it is his own conscience or his own self-consciousness. As long as he has an idea that controls the caprices and tyrannies and impulses that would make him their slave.²⁷

Philemon's moral reasoning here is hopelessly inappropriate for the time and the place of *The Island of the Innocent*. In the first place, the conflict between the Hellenists and the Hassidim is more political than religious. The pious Jews want the right to impose a harsh theocracy on everybody in the community—and the right to stone infidels to death in the public square. The Hellenizers, on the other hand, want to make circumcision a capital offense and place a statue of Zeus in the temple. Philemon's bland moral relativism—what we might today call “Benign Whateverism”—has very little to offer to either side. Philemon has been thrust in the middle of an epic cultural clash that cannot be resolved by simply letting everybody live by the truths that work for them.

But Philemon's program can work for those of us who, unlike Philemon and Judith, do live in pluralistic, secular societies. The basic steps that Fisher outlines through Philemon's intellectual journey—separating a religion's truth claims from its practical value, focusing on the positive social and familial aspects of a religious community, and rejecting the existence of any absolute truth upon which to ground religious belief—have actually made it possible for generations of non-believers to participate in religious communities. They are, I would argue, among the most important tools available for members of an intellectual diaspora (Mormon or otherwise) who want to maintain connections to their religion and its culture, whether through personal participation in activities and rituals, through ties to loved ones and family members, or through public confession in the form of art or literature.

A Goat for Azazel: Religion as Research

The ninth novel of the *Testament of Man* begins on the night of July 19th in the year 64 CE—the night that Rome burned. As the story begins, the protagonist, a fourteen-year-old Roman boy named Damon, has been invited to attend a banquet given by the Emperor Nero. As the banquet progresses, the guests begin to hear rumors of a fire, and Damon rushes out to find his mother, who had converted to Christianity, the strange new religion said to be responsible for setting the fire in order to hasten the return of the Lord. Damon finds his mother dancing ecstatically with other Christians as Rome burns. She is so consumed by spiritual ecstasy that she does not recognize her only son. A few days later, however, his mother is among the Christians arrested for arson and sentenced to burn, and Damon tries, naïvely, to save her life. “What happened then,” Fisher tells us, “he was to spend a lifetime trying to understand”:

She was enveloped in flames! An incredible thing then happened and Damon was to ask himself many times if he saw it clearly. Though the flames had risen to her breast she seemed not to be suffering at all. She was smiling at him. . . . His mother’s whole face seemed to Damon to be radiant, to be suffused with a light not of this world. . . . She made no effort at all to free herself; she kept her gaze fixed on the heavens, looking for her Savior and Lord. This life did not matter, she said. My son, be brave, she said to him. And there she died.²⁸

Thus begins Damon’s lifelong quest to understand the last moments of his mother’s life. “What was it in this new faith that crowned a person with such nobility in her last moments of agony?”²⁹ This quest lasts from the first night of the great fire in the year 64 until his death almost fifty years later, when he is trampled to death by a mob while witnessing the death of another Christian martyr.³⁰ It takes him throughout the Roman world, to the pockets of Christians in Rome, Antioch, Corinth, Athens, and Alexandria. And it introduces him to many of the figures who shaped Christianity during its first and second generations,

including two of the authors of the New Testament: the formidable pedagogue Luke and the venerable apostle John. In each location, Damon encounters interlocutors who are able to discuss Christianity at great length and with perfect objectivity. From the literary perspective, this does not make for a great novel. *A Goat for Azazel* has less plot, and more philosophical discussion, than any other volume of *The Testament of Man*. What little story the novel has serves only as a scaffold for a 368-page history lesson—including more than fifty pages of notes at the end.

Read as a history lesson, however, *A Goat for Azazel* is not without interest. In his fifty years of traveling, Damon encounters two constant themes. First, every group of Christians has its own doctrines and its own distinct understanding of Jesus Christ. Some believe Christ to have been a mortal who became a god, others saw him as a god who became a mortal. Some insisted that he was crucified by the Jews or the Romans just a few years into his ministry, while others believed that he died in bed after living a long and happy life. There is no central authority, no consistent doctrine, no common vocabulary, and no consistent idea of what it means to be a Christian.

The second thing that Damon discovers is that practically nothing that any Christian believes is unique to Christianity. The idea of a Savior-God exists throughout the ancient world. Jesus is a reconfiguration of the Greek hero Jason. The Virgin Mary is based on the Egyptian goddess Isis. The figure of Satan comes from the Zoroastrian counter-deity Ahriman. Much of the proverbial wisdom that Matthew puts into the mouth of Jesus comes from Buddha, Lao Tzu, and the other great sages of the ancient Far East. And the most distinctive Christian doctrine of all—the belief that Christ died to atone for the sins of those who accept him—comes straight from the Hebrew ritual of the scapegoat. In this ritual, which gives the novel its title, the priest designates one goat for the Lord and one for the demon Azazel. The Lord's goat is sacrificed, while the goat for Azazel is loaded with the sins of the people and sent into the wilderness.³¹ As Damon interviews Christian after Christian, he discovers that the only doctrine that

unifies them is that Jesus Christ somehow became the human equivalent of Azazel's goat.

At the end of the novel, Damon settles down to raise a family and write a book about Christianity. Years pass before he hears that Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch whom he had met years earlier, has been arrested and taken to Rome to be tried and (most likely) executed. He decides to follow the soon-to-be martyr to "see if his faith sustains him the way it sustained my mother."³² Damon becomes part of the crowd that watches Ignatius travel from Antioch to Rome in the custody of Roman soldiers, addressing Christians at every stop. He watches as a patient Roman captain tells him that he can go free if only he will swear loyalty to Caesar. When he refuses, he is condemned to die by fire. As Damon watches him burn to death while frenzied spectators cheer, he experiences a sympathetic conversion to Christianity:

Damon could look for only a moment at the horrible sight. The flames had completely enveloped him, There was fire in his hair and beard. He was there, he was not bound and he had not moved. Damon then forced himself to look once again at the faces that were not human and he hated them and he recognized in this moment that he was a Christian, as he would have been a Jew if he had been present when the holy city was sacked; as he would be in any situation of torture what was dearest on earth to the one tortured. Was that not what it all meant?³³

Moments later, the crowd tramples Damon to death while he is pondering his connection to the dying Bishop of Antioch.

The final chapter of *A Goat for Azazel* consists almost entirely of passages from Damon's book about Christianity read by his son. In it, Damon shares the fruits of a lifetime of research. The book documents the rise of Christianity from a "mystery cult, offering salvation by supernatural means" to a "sacramental cult, which then took Greek ideas into its doctrines." It explains how the Christian cult almost immediately fragmented into mutually exclusive regional cults. And it painstakingly traces the pagan myths that became part of the Jesus story: "they have their Lord resurrected from a rock tomb, like Mithra; turn water into wine,

like Dionysus; walk on the waves, like Poseidon; lie in a manger, like Ion; come to birth in a stable, like Horus; and from a virgin mother, as with all the gods."³⁴

We find nothing in Damon's book that confirms his end-of-life affirmation of Christianity—except for the fact that he wrote it, and that he spent most of his life trying to understand Christianity, which is itself an affirmation. And he never comes to a satisfactory answer. His book explains the history of Christianity and the development of its doctrine, but it captures nothing about the extraordinary faith of the Christian martyrs. But Damon is part of an intellectual diaspora precisely because he feels compelled to understand his mother's religion on its own terms—and to comprehend something remarkable about it that he has seen but that he cannot explain away.

And so it has always been with the writers of the Mormon diaspora—those who have rejected much of Mormon doctrine, practice, or culture, but who have been driven to study it and write about it for much of their lives. This includes figures such as Virginia Sorensen, who became an Anglican but wrote a half a dozen novels about both historical and contemporary Mormonism.³⁵ It includes Juanita Brooks and Maurine Whipple, who suffered the ostracism of their fellow Saints for their historical and fictional writings about controversial elements of Mormon history,³⁶ and Samuel Taylor, who wrote such classics as *Nightfall at Nauvoo*, *Family Kingdom*, and *The Kingdom or Nothing* largely to understand the Church that excommunicated his father.³⁷

And it includes Vardis Fisher, who wrote the world's first serious treatment of the Mormon story in fiction—a book that, he would later say, he wrote because he “wanted to come to terms with Mormonism.”³⁸ Until Fisher published *Children of God* in 1939, the Mormon image in American literature consisted of sensationalistic pulp novels and ribald satires.³⁹ And though Mormons condemned Fisher at the time for naturalizing Mormon origins and humanizing Mormon prophets, literary historians now realize that Fisher's novel broke new ground simply by taking Mormonism seriously—and making it possible for others to do the same. Within three years of *Children of God's* extraordinary successful release,

mainstream presses had published no fewer than eight more works of serious, Mormon-themed fiction—including breakthrough first novels by Virginia Sorensen, Paul Bailey, and Maurine Whipple.⁴⁰

Like so many of his creations, Vardis Fisher struggled to understand the religion and culture that produced him and sustained his loved ones. This impulse led to *The Tetralogy* and *Children of God* in fairly obvious ways. But it also led to the *Testament of Man* series that he considered his masterpiece—in which characters such as Philemon in *The Island of the Innocent* and Damon in *A Goat for Azazel* dramatize the central conflict of the Mormon diaspora in the middle of the twentieth century: how can one remain intellectually and creatively consumed by religious beliefs and practices that one has largely, or entirely, rejected? This was perhaps the central question for the Mormon writers of Fisher's generation. And it remains a crucial question for many people in the large and increasingly diverse world of Mormonism today.

Notes

1. See Tim Woodward's *Tiger on the Road: The Life of Vardis Fisher* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1989), 12–13 for a discussion of the early critical reception of Fisher's Antelope novels.

2. For a summary of the enthusiastic critical responses to Fisher's *Tetralogy*, see the unsigned pamphlet *Vardis Fisher: A Critical Summary*, published by the Caxton Printers in 1939, 8–11.

3. *Children of God* was Fisher's first bestselling novel and was awarded the 1939 Harper Prize, given biannually for excellence in fiction, which carried a monetary award of \$7,500 (about \$126,000 in 2013 dollars). In contrast, John Steinbeck, who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the same year for *The Grapes of Wrath*, received \$1,000.

4. *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 330.

5. The term "Lost Generation" was borrowed from the term that Ernest Hemingway used to discuss the American expatriate writers in Paris during the 1920s. Geary's paper was first presented in the second annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters in 1977. "Mormondom's Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s" was published in *BYU Studies* 18, no. 1 (1978):

89–98 and has since been reprinted several times and become a standard starting point for the construction of a Mormon literary canon.

6. Bernard DeVoto, "Millennial Millions" (*Saturday Review of Literature*, August 26, 1939), 14.

7. See John Milton's interview with Vardis Fisher in *Three West: Conversations with Vardis Fisher, Max Evans, and Michael Straight* (Vermillion, S.Dak.: Dakota Press, University of South Dakota, 1970), 1–45; see especially page 4.

8. Leonard J. and John Haupt Arrington, "The Mormon Heritage of Vardis Fisher," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 1 (1977): 28.

9. Opal Laurel Holmes, "Vardis Fisher Was Not a Mormon," press release, Vardis Fisher collection, Boise State University, n.d. (ca. 1979).

10. The four novels of the *Tetralogy* are *In Tragic Life* (1932), *Passions Spin the Plot* (1934), *We Are Betrayed* (1935), and *No Villain Need Be* (1936). All were published jointly by Caxton Printers of Caldwell, Idaho and Doubleday, Doran & Co. of New York, with Caxton serving as the first edition of record. In 1960, he published his fifth autobiography, *Orphans in Gethsemane* (Denver: Alan Swallow), which revises and extends the material in the earlier four. On the off chance that some readers did not find this sufficiently confusing, the paperback publisher of *Orphans in Gethsemane*, Pyramid Books, divided it into two parts: *For Passion, for Heaven* and *The Great Confession*, both published in 1962.

11. *We Are Betrayed* (New York: Pocket Books, 1953), 28.

12. The first five books of *The Testament of Man* were published by Vanguard Press in New York, which dropped the series in 1948 because of its consistently poor sales. The next two books were published by Abelard Press, also of New York, in 1951 and 1952. Though Abelard had originally agreed to publish the rest of the series, they refused to publish the seventh book, *Jesus Came Again*, in 1953, citing fears that a book that explicitly denied the divinity of Jesus Christ was too controversial for them to publish. Fisher approached his friend, Jim Gipson at Caxton Printers, who had published the *Tetralogy* novels when New York publishers had rejected them. But Caxton also refused to publish *Jesus Came Again*. The book languished without a publisher until 1956, when Denver publisher Alan Swallow agreed to publish it and the rest of the *Testament of Man* series. See Woodward, 180–88.

13. Woodward, 160.

14. The Revisionist Press of New York, an academic press that specialized in unrevised dissertations, published a series on Vardis Fisher in the 1970s. Among the titles it produced entirely or partially about *The Testament of Man* are Alfred

K. Thomas's *The Epic of Evolution, Its Etiology and Art: A Study of Vardis Fisher's Testament of Man* (1973); Doris C. Grover's *A Solitary Voice: Vardis Fisher* (1973); George F. Day's *The Uses of History in the Novels of Vardis Fisher* (1976); and *The Past in the Present: Two Essays on History and Myth in Vardis Fisher's Testament of Man* (1979). In addition to these titles, Joseph M. Flora's dissertation at the University of Michigan in 1962, "Vardis Fisher's Story of Vidar Hunter: A Study in Theory and Revision," deals at least partially with *The Testament*.

15. Marilyn Trent Grunkemeyer, "An Anthropological View of the *Testament of Man*," in Joseph M. Flora, ed., *Rediscovering Vardis Fisher* (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 2000), 165–66. The "perduring male fantasy" that Grunkemeyer refers to is "a fantasy that the past was a universal matriarchy that was overcome by universal patriarchy." This transition from matriarchy to patriarchy is indeed an important part of the series, and especially of its third, fourth, and fifth books. However, it is at least arguable that Fisher did not intend to portray either the matriarchy or the patriarchy as "universal"—but to represent, instead, the specific development of the group of people who ended up becoming the Hebrews.

16. Fisher explains his research for the *Testament* in some detail in the essay "Comments on His Testament of Man Series" in his book of occasional writings, *Thomas Wolfe as I Knew Him and Other Essays* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1963), 64–78.

17. Joseph M. Flora, *Vardis Fisher* (New York: Twayne, 1965), 75.

18. Woodward, 161.

19. Fisher, "Comments," 75.

20. In the fourth chapter of *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold describes "Hebraism and Hellenism" as two universal dispositions that reached a sort of perfection in the cultures for which they are named. "The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience." See Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, edited by Jane Garnett (Oxford University Press, 2006), 97.

21. Fisher does not use the term *Hasidim* to describe the conservative Jews in *The Island of the Innocent*. The term, though, is often used in discussions of the period, including Alfred K. Thomas's 1973 study of *Testament of Man*.

22. Vardis Fisher, *Island of the Innocent* (New York: Abelard, 1952), 1.

23. *Ibid.*, 13.

24. *Ibid.*, 96.

25. *Ibid.*, 238.

26. Ibid., 264.

27. Ibid., 266.

28. Vardis Fisher, *A Goat for Azazel* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1956), 22–23.

29. *Azazel*, 24.

30. The text dates Damon's death by placing it "in the Fifteenth Year of Trajan's reign," or approximately 113 CE (*Azazel*, 295).

31. See Leviticus 16:8–10.

32. *Azazel*, 294.

33. Ibid., 299.

34. Ibid., 303.

35. Virginia Sorensen's Mormon-themed books include the novels *A Little Lower than the Angels* (New York: Knopf, 1942), *On This Star* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946), *The Evening and the Morning* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt & Brace, 1949), *Many Heavens* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt & Brace, 1954), *Kingdom Come* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt & Brace, 1960). Mormonism also features prominently in her memoir, *Where Nothing Is Long Ago* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt & Brace, 1963).

36. Juanita Brooks's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950) was the first book-length study of one of the most controversial events in Mormon history; Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), which deals with polygamy, the colonization of Southern Utah, and (tangentially) the Mountain Meadows Massacre, remains one of the most important Mormon novels ever written.

37. Samuel Taylor (1907–1997) was the grandson of John Taylor, the third president of the LDS Church and the son of John W. Taylor, an apostle who was excommunicated in 1911 for continuing to practice polygamy after the Manifesto forbidding it. His historical works include *Nightfall at Nauwoo* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), a historical novel; *The Kingdom or Nothing* (New York: MacMillan 1976), a biography of his grandfather; and *Family Kingdom* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), a biography of his father.

38. *Three West*, 11.

39. For an overview of the Mormon image in fiction before and after 1939, see my "As Much as Any Novelist Could Ask: Mormons in American Popular Fiction" in *Mormons and Popular Culture*, Vol. 2, edited by Michael Hunter (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2013), 1–22.

40. Jean Woodman, *Glory Spent* (New York: Carrick & Evans, 1940); Paul Baily, *For This My Glory* (Los Angeles: Lyman House, 1940); Rhoda Nelson, *This Is Freedom* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1940); Maurine Whipple, *The Giant Joshua* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941); Lorene Pearson, *Harvest Waits* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941); Hoffman Birney, *Ann Carmeny* (New York: Putnam, 1941); Elinor Pryor, *And Never Yield* (New York: Macmillan, 1942); and Virginia Sorensen, *A Little Lower than the Angels* (New York: Knopf, 1942).