

association with sin, purifying it, making it itself a redemptive force. Her collection is not merely an assortment of nice poems but a stunning theological statement.

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## Lessons in Scriptural Origami

James Goldberg. *Remember the Revolution: Mormon Essays and Stories*. Self-published, 2019. 161 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1695244900.

James Goldberg. *The First Five-Dozen Tales of Razia Shah: and Other Stories*. Self-published, 2019. 148 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1695025226.<sup>1</sup>

*Reviewed by Chad Curtis*

I first discovered James Goldberg when a friend from my mission shared a blog post from the *Mormon Midrashim* entitled “Explanation, Justification, Sanctification.” In it, the author shares some profound theology with his ten-year-old daughter in a way that she could readily understand through the genre of children’s post-fighting storytelling:

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1. All citations in this review refer to the location number from the e-book editions.

[A]n explanation is not necessarily a justification. A justification has to do with whether something is wrong or right. Understanding how your brother's actions made you want to hit him is not the same as making it right for you to hit him. . . . Explanation is about why you did something, justification is about whether it's right, and sanctification is about whether it makes you holy.<sup>2</sup>

My first thought after reading this was, *Does this guy have a book?* I didn't follow up on the thought, and I later found myself trying to hunt down that long-lost blog post to no avail. Goldberg popped up again when my elders quorum president and fellow book enthusiast recommended I read Goldberg's novel *The Five Books of Jesus* and even lent me his copy. This book is also deeply profound, though in a less directly didactic way. It paints an image of Jesus through his interactions that you may not get through Church manuals or *Come, Follow Me* lessons. Going back to his blog post, a lot of what Goldberg shares is wisdom: "Most of what I will give my daughter is not conscious. Things like my belief in the strengthening and healing potential of humor aren't talks or lessons, they just leak out of me in my day to day responses to the world."<sup>3</sup> In short, James Goldberg is a mystic—a mystic for Mormons. I don't mean that what he has to say is mysterious or purposefully arcane. What he does is help you find the profound in the everyday and reexamine what you thought was a given.



In 2019 Goldberg published two anthologies of short works, the mostly nonfiction collection *Remember the Revolution* and the short story collection *The First Five-Dozen Tales of Razia Shah: and Other Stories*.

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2. James Goldberg, "Explanation, Justification, Sanctification," *Mormon Midrashim* (blog), Jan. 24, 2015, <https://mormonmidrashim.blogspot.com/2015/01/explanation-justification-sanctification.html>.

3. Goldberg, "Explanation, Justification, Sanctification."

*Remember the Revolution* is Goldberg's rallying cry for a distinctly Mormon art and literature. The title comes from an essay of the same name where he makes this statement: "Now I want to say this: hip or not, in my heart of hearts, I think Mormonism is the Revolution. And I wish that instead of talking about how we're bored with the politics of the Intermountain West, or how we can't stand the conformity and social pressure, we'd take the time to articulate in our generation's language the reason for the hope that is in us" (loc. 2007).

What is Mormon literature? Is it more than just being written by a Mormon? Does it have to be theological in nature? Is there a connection between Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, Brandon Sanderson's *Stormlight Archive*, and Chris Heimerdinger's *Tennis Shoes Among the Nephites*? Perhaps that isn't the most diverse list of books to include under the genre of Mormon literature, and to be honest, my idea of Mormon literature was very limited in scope before encountering the broad vision of Goldberg. For Goldberg, Mormon literature should engage with both Mormon myth and audience. He outlines a few ways authors can achieve this in his essay "Wrestling with God: Invoking Scriptural Mythos and Language in LDS Literary Works," my favorite example being what he calls "scriptural origami." Here, Goldberg quotes and comments on Sarah Page's poem "Coring the Apple":

Instead of the thorn  
 hast thou found honey  
 I would like to ask Eve someday  
 what she saw in the apple

Extra meaning takes place when the author's text makes itself a literary link between the two [scriptural references], folding one scriptural passage onto another. I call this mode of folding together multiple allusion "scriptural origami" (loc. 1108).

Goldberg is an expert at this, as we see in his collection of stories *The First Five-Dozen Tales of Razia Shah*, specifically "multi-mythic

origami,” the “folding together [of] scriptural and non-scriptural myths” (loc. 1231).

In the conclusion of the same essay, Goldberg reflects on the sad prospects facing Mormon writers, despite the rich source material available to them:

Mormons who choose to write for Mormon audiences don't always feel lucky. In addition to the usual challenges of writing, they face culturally specific challenges such as handling exceptionally delicate audience sensibilities and finding their niche within a fairly small market with limited publishing and distribution capacity. But Mormons who choose to write for Mormon audiences are lucky because their audience has a fairly large body of literary knowledge and investment to tap into, raw materials for story building that the world's best writers would be jealous of if only they knew about them. (loc. 1241)

It is in this way that Goldberg reveals both his project and his craft in *Remember the Revolution*. But even as I've focused on the “container” of Mormon literature in this review, Goldberg provides a lot of good content as well, such as this reflection and reimagining of a pronouncement from President Wilford Woodruff through the words of Teancum Singh Rosenberg (the name itself is multi-mythic origami!): “The Prophet can never lead the church away from the Lord because a Prophet can never escape the Lord. As it was in the days of Jonah, so it is in the last days: even a disobedient Prophet does not cease to be a Prophet, and even his rebellion is swallowed up into the purpose of Ha-Shem. A prophet is bound to the Lord, even cursed with Him: as it is written, ‘the burden of the word is the Lord’” (loc. 1772). The original quotation from Wilford Woodruff has always made me cringe a little bit because it seems to invite Church members to be unapologetic for historical wrongs. But Goldberg has woven it as a story of God's grace.



The stories in *The First Five-Dozen Tales of Razia Shah* are not as explicitly Mormon in character as some of Goldberg's other work, although there are some exceptions such as "Tales of Teancum Singh Rosenberg." But even though Mormonism takes a back seat for most of these stories, the tales are a compelling mix of different religious backgrounds and traditions. And Goldberg has a lot to work with, as evidenced from his bio: "Goldberg's family is Jewish on one side, Sikh on the other, and Mormon in the middle" (loc. 2426). "Sojourners" is a collection of *very* short stories of migrants, as told through the Jewish liturgical calendar. In quick succession, you get a collection of varied backgrounds—Indian, Latino, Iranian—all with themes drawn from Jewish festivals. For me, many of these stories were strange and unfamiliar. But rather than becoming disengaged, I felt like I was treading on holy ground, a stranger allowed to share in something sacred. These tales are a lot less straightforward than the essays in *Remember the Revolution* because they are less an explanation and more an experience. Each reads like poetry. Reading Goldberg is like reading Isaiah: you can't always be sure you understand exactly what's going on, you feel like you're eavesdropping on a conversation you don't fully understand, and there are moments of profound beauty throughout.

There is a bittersweet element woven throughout each tale. You can tell that the author has included an element of his own pain. In the essay "Dealing with Darkness," Goldberg relates his own experience with cancer:

I remember one night in the hospital during my cancer treatment. I had neutropenic fever, which is how your body responds to an infection when you've got a severely compromised immune system, at the same time I had a bunch of other uncomfortable chronic symptoms. I felt like my body was falling apart and I remember thinking, "OK, Lord. I know and I've accepted that life is supposed to be difficult, but how difficult? I can accept some eggs have to get broken to bake a cake,

but it's getting hot in here and I'm pretty sure you're gonna burn this one." (loc. 2342)

I recalled Goldberg's struggle when I read the story of the prince in "The First Five-Dozen Tales of Razia Shah":

So they locked the prince high up in a tower, far away from the living world. And in the tower, he drank poison each day to fool death into thinking he was already its own.

The poison was thick and bitter: it burned his throat and rotted away the lining of his stomach, but each day the prince thought of the distant world and he drank. He drank, and he retched black vomit, and he lost all the hair on his head, his face, his chest, his arms, his legs. He lost the hair up his nose and the hair of his eyelashes and he sat in the tower and he drank poison alone alone alone. (loc. 609)

These stories require effort to engage with, and I wish I had the background to fully appreciate the work Goldberg has done here. But to me, his writing is a promise of what Mormon literature can be. Mormonism isn't limited to white middle-class suburbia in the Intermountain West. Here I think back to Elder Ulisses Soares's recent general conference talk:

My home country of Brazil is very rich in natural resources. One of them is the famous Amazon River, one of the largest and longest rivers in the world. It is formed by two separate rivers, the Solimões and Negro. Interestingly, they flow together for a number of miles before the waters blend, due to the rivers having very different origins, speeds, temperatures, and chemical compositions. After several miles, the waters finally blend together, becoming a river different than its individual parts. Only after these parts merge, the Amazon River becomes so powerful that when it reaches the Atlantic Ocean, it pushes back the seawater so that fresh water can still be found for many miles out into the ocean.

In a similar way that the Solimões and Negro Rivers flow together to make the great Amazon River, the children of God come together in the restored Church of Jesus Christ from different social backgrounds,

traditions, and cultures, forming this wonderful community of Saints in Christ. Eventually, as we encourage, support, and love each other, we combine to form a mighty force for good in the world. As followers of Jesus Christ, flowing as one in this river of goodness, we will be able to provide the “fresh water” of the gospel to a thirsty world.<sup>4</sup>

I find this to be a beautiful endorsement of diversity in the Church, exemplified by Elder Soares himself, the first apostle from South America. Goldberg is engaging in a similar work in Mormon literature, and these two collections are great additions to the expanding canon.

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4. Ulisses Soares, “One in Christ,” Oct. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/one-in-christ?lang=eng>.