

*The Redemption of the Dead:  
A Latter-day Saint Perspective  
on the Fate of the Unevangelized*

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Nothing challenges the rationality of our belief in God or tests our trust in Him more severely than human suffering and wickedness. Both are pervasive in our common experience; of this we need no reminder.

Soaked as it is with human suffering and moral wickedness, how is it possible that our world is the creation of an almighty, perfectly loving Creator? So stated, the “problem of evil” poses a puzzle of deep complexity. But the conundrum evoked by our reflection on this question appears to be more than just a paradox; we seem to stare contradiction right in the face. Eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume expressed the contradiction this way: “Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it then contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear and so decisive.”<sup>1</sup>

Christian respondents rightly claim that Hume's formulation of the problem of evil is far too narrow. It fails to take into account the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and His triumph over suffering, sin, and death through His Resurrection and Atonement. Any Christian response to the problem of evil that fails to consider this—Christ's salvific work—will be a pale abstraction of what it could and should be. But ironically, what seems to be our strongest possible solution to the problem of evil—redemption through Christ—understood as some understand it, becomes, itself, part of the problem. How can this be?

### *The Soteriological Problem of Evil*

The difficulty I allude to—sometimes called the soteriological problem of evil—arises out of the apparent biblical teaching that salvation comes only in and through one's personal acceptance of Christ's substitutionary Atonement for one's sins. If this is so, what then is the fate of those who, apparently through no fault of their own, never hear the good news, let alone have a fair chance to accept it? Do they suffer eternally? Are they forever excluded from the joy of communion with God? If so, the evil they suffer is totally incommensurable with any evil sufferable in that "but a moment" we call mortality. But then it seems that our Christian solution to the problem of evil turns out to be the most horrendous part of the problem.

In his book *The Logic of God Incarnate*, Thomas Morris, professor of philosophy at Notre Dame, explains the difficulty (which he calls a "scandal") this way:

The scandal . . . arises with a simple set of questions asked of the Christian theologian who claims that it is only through the life and death of God incarnated in Jesus Christ that all can be saved and reconciled to God: How can the many humans who lived and died before the time of Christ be saved through him? They surely cannot be held accountable for responding appropriately to something of which they could have no knowledge. Furthermore, what about all the people who have lived since the time of Christ in cultures with different religious traditions, untouched by the Christian gospel? . . . How could a just God

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set up a particular condition of salvation, the highest end of human life possible, which was and is inaccessible to most people? Is not the love of God better understood as universal, rather than as limited to a mediation through the one particular individual, Jesus of Nazareth? Is it not a moral as well as a religious scandal to claim otherwise?<sup>2</sup>

Stephen Davis, professor of philosophy at Claremont Graduate University, has expressed similar perplexity. In a recent issue of *Modern Theology*, he put the problem this way:

Suppose there was a woman named Oohku who lived from 370–320 B.C. in the interior of Borneo. Obviously, she never heard of Jesus Christ or the Judeo-Christian God: she was never baptized, nor did she ever make any institutional or psychological commitment to Christ or the Christian church. She *couldn't* have done these things; she was simply born in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Is it right for God to condemn this woman to eternal hell just because she was never able to come to God through Christ? Of course not . . . God is just and loving.<sup>3</sup>

The problem that Morris and Davis state can be expressed in terms of an inconsistent triad, a set of three premises, the conjunction of any two of which apparently entails the falsity of the third:

1. God is almighty, perfectly loving and just, and desires that all of His children be saved.
2. Salvation comes only in and through one's personal acceptance of Christ's substitutionary Atonement for one's sins.
3. Vast numbers of God's children have lived and died never even hearing of Christ or without having had a fair chance to personally accept His Atonement.

Premise (3) seems indisputable,<sup>4</sup> forcing us, it seems, to give up either (1) or (2), both of which seem warranted on biblical authority. So how to resolve the inconsistent triad? The issue is currently receiving much attention from keen and sensitive Christian thinkers, including John Sanders<sup>5</sup> and Stephen Davis. As Sanders has informed us, several different Christian responses to the puzzle exist, ranging from "universalism" on one pole to "restrictivism" on the other. Universalists typically affirm premise 1, compelling them to deny what many see as

an explicit New Testament teaching that salvation comes only in and through personal acceptance of Christ. Restrictivists usually affirm premise 2, concluding that Oohku and millions like her must be lost. But this seemingly leaves *them* at a loss to square their view with premise 1, that is, with God's love and justice. Both of these polar views seem unsatisfactory to many Christians, leaving them to seek for some mediating position somewhere between these extremes.

John Sanders has specifically endorsed inclusivism, while Steven Davis has cautiously explored the possibility of postmortem evangelization. Latter-day Saints stand squarely in the latter camp, affirming that every person who does not hear or does not have a fair chance to accept the gospel in this life will have a chance to hear and accept it after death but before the Final Judgment. Thus, Latter-day Saints resolve the above inconsistent triad by adding a fourth premise to the set: (4) Those who live and die without having a chance to hear or respond positively to the gospel of Jesus Christ will have that chance following death. With this premise added, one can consistently affirm all three premises of the triad. While Latter-day Saints are not the only ones who believe in the evangelization of the dead,<sup>6</sup> we do have distinctive perspectives and practices relating to this doctrine. To clearly explain these perspectives and practices is one of the principal tasks of this paper.

### *Latter-day Saint Perspectives on the Fate of the Unevangelized*

Three preliminaries ensure an accurate understanding of Latter-day Saint perspectives on the fate of the unevangelized. First, as Latter-day Saints, we do not believe our views on the issue to be just one more human interpretation of the relevant biblical texts. No human interpretation, no matter how sincerely and carefully crafted, is ultimately compelling. Rather, we believe our view is based on direct revelation given by our risen Lord to modern prophets.

Let me illustrate the importance of this claim. In 1 Corinthians 15:29 Paul apparently alludes to a contemporaneous Christian practice of living persons being baptized on behalf of the dead. A recent study

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by Mathias Rissi reveals that this verse has been interpreted in over a hundred different ways.<sup>7</sup> What if coming to a correct understanding of the passage (and its referenced practice) were not merely a challenging hermeneutical problem but a matter of life and death? Could one confidently bank on human hermeneutics to solve the problem? How would one choose from among one hundred alternative readings of the passage?

These very kinds of hermeneutical impasses troubled and confused young Joseph Smith in his search for Christian truth and finally drove him to his knees to seek revelation from God. He explained this in the canonized account of his First Vision:

My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least, to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; *for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.*

At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to “ask of God,” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture.<sup>8</sup>

Joseph “ventured” by praying in a grove of trees near his Palmyra, New York, home. In response to that prayer, God the Father and Jesus Christ personally appeared to Joseph, thus initiating a stream of revelations from heavenly beings that served to reestablish doctrines and practices that had not been clearly understood nor taught since the time of the first Apostles.

In setting out the Latter-day Saint view of the fate of the unevangelized, then, I will not attempt to provide one more interpretation of the relevant biblical passages; rather, I will summarize the stream of modern-day revelations that gave rise to present Latter-day Saint belief and practice. The truth of these beliefs and practices does not hinge on the credibility of any biblical exegesis but on the veracity of Joseph’s claim to modern-day revelation.

The second preliminary suggests that while postmortem evangelization is clearly the centerpiece of our Latter-day Saint answer to the fate of the unevangelized, it is not the whole story. Indeed, fully understood, our view could be seen as a comprehensive synthesis of all the major Christian responses to the question, affirming important strands of universalism, inclusivism, and exclusivism, all of which coalesce in the doctrine of postmortem evangelization.

The third preliminary states that what makes this synthesis of otherwise inconsistent ideas possible is our doctrine of degrees of salvation or glory. Joseph Smith reported that on February 16, 1832, he and Sidney Rigdon had a vision in which they saw and conversed with our resurrected Lord. The record of that vision is now section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants. In that revelation, the risen Lord disclosed that heaven, or the abode of the saved, is divided into three degrees of glory, respectively called (in descending order) the celestial, the terrestrial, and the telestial kingdoms. The Savior disclosed that in the *eschaton*, each of us will be judged according to our works, and on

the basis of that judgment all that are saved will take up their eternal abode in one of these three kingdoms.<sup>9</sup>

With these three preliminaries noted, let us look more fully at preliminary number two—that the Latter-day Saint view is a comprehensive synthesis of all the major Christian responses—identifying the universalistic, inclusivistic, and exclusivistic insights that find support in latter-day revelation.

**Latter-day Saint revelation and universalism.** Despite Christian awareness of God’s love for each of us, it may still be surprising for some to learn how deeply and broadly that love is manifest in His salvific work. The Apostle John declared: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that *the world* through him might be saved” (John 3:16–17; emphasis added). And save *the world* He did, not just the elect. Latter-day Saint revelation affirms that the redemptive work of Christ is universally efficacious in at least four ways: (1) Christ saves the entire human family from permanent bodily death; (2) Christ saves, in the celestial kingdom, *all* children and all others who die before achieving accountability; (3) Christ saves all except sons of perdition from permanent spiritual death, or eternal banishment from God’s presence, and (4) Christ saves all except sons of perdition in a heavenly kingdom of glory. Let me expand a bit on each of these.

(1) **Universal salvation from permanent bodily death.** First, revelation discloses that Christ’s redemptive work effected a universal resurrection. As the Apostle Paul explained “For as in Adam *all* die, even so in Christ shall *all* be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22; emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> The Book of Mormon prophet Amulek is even more explicit: “The day cometh that *all* shall rise from the dead and stand before God, and be judged according to their works. . . . Now, this restoration shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous” (Alma 11:41, 44; emphasis added). Numerous other revelations affirm that, through the gracious love of Christ, each of us will be raised with a glorious, incorruptible body.<sup>11</sup>

**(2) *Universal salvation for children who die in infancy.*** Latter-day revelation is explicit that all children who die before the age of accountability will be saved in the celestial kingdom. For instance, the prophet-leader Mormon wrote in a letter to his son Moroni: “And the word of the Lord came to me by the power of the Holy Ghost, saying: Listen to the words of Christ, your Redeemer, your Lord, and your God. Behold, I came into the world not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance; the whole need no physician, but they that are sick; wherefore, little children are whole, for they are not capable of committing sin. . . . But little children are alive in Christ, even from the foundation of the world” (Moroni 8:7–8, 12). Further, in the Doctrine and Covenants it was revealed to Joseph Smith, and he relates, “And I also beheld that all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven” (137:10).

To learn this must have been deeply reassuring to Joseph and Emma, his wife. On June 15, 1828, during the translation of the Book of Mormon, the Smiths gave birth to, and subsequently lost, their first child, a boy.<sup>12</sup> Four of Joseph and Emma’s eleven children, including twin sons, died at childbirth, and a fifth died at fourteen months. How comforting it must have been to Joseph and Emma, and to countless others, to learn of Christ’s tender and salvific love for little children who die before achieving accountability.

**(3) *Universal salvation from the second death, and (4) in a kingdom of glory.*** Both of these points are found in the revelation now recorded as section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants and will be handled together. Here the risen Lord disclosed that through His Atonement, all, except sons of perdition, will ultimately be saved or delivered *from* the second death, or from permanent separation from God, and that they will be saved *in* a kingdom of glory.<sup>13</sup> “And this is the gospel, the glad tidings, . . . that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; *that through him all might be saved . . . except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him*” (D&C 76:40–43; emphasis added).



Therefore, in at least the four ways just mentioned, Christ's redemptive work is universally efficacious. Major strands of universalism then find support in latter-day revelation.

**Latter-day Saint revelation and inclusivism.** Latter-day Saint revelation also significantly supports several inclusivistic insights, including the following: (1) God desires the salvation of all His children and invites every one of them to come unto Him (see 2 Nephi 26:33; Alma 5:33); (2) God endows all of His children with "the Light of Christ,"<sup>14</sup> which enables them to distinguish between good and evil, and which, without overriding their agency, inclines them toward God; (3) in addition, God reveals gospel light to every people—"all that he seeth fit that they should have" (Alma 29:8; see also 2 Nephi 29:12); and, (4) God will base His salvific judgment on how faithfully human beings adhere to the light He sees fit to give them (see D&C 82:3; Alma 39:6).

(1) *God's inclusivistic salvific purpose.* In the book of Moses, God revealed that His ultimate purpose is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39; see also 2 Timothy 2:4). Nephi, a Book of Mormon prophet, explained that God "inviteth . . . all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female, and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile" (2 Nephi 26:33).

(2) *The Light of Christ.* Moroni wrote: "the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; . . . and now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully" (Moroni 7:16, 18). In a revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord taught, "And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world. . . . Every one that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father" (D&C 84:46–47). The Lord, in a later revelation, further said the Light of Christ is "the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings; which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space" (D&C 88:11–12).

(3) **Special revelation to non-Christians.** The Book of Mormon clarifies that God does not confine His special revelation to Christians. Alma once expressed with great passion His fervent desire to bring all persons to Christ, saying, “O that I were an angel and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, and with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!” But, the promptings of the Spirit gave him some pause:

Behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto me.

I ought not to harrow up in my desires, the firm decree of a just God, for I know that he granteth unto men . . . *according to their wills*, whether they be unto salvation or unto destruction.

Yea, and I know that good and evil have come before all men; he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given *according to his desires*, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience.

Now, seeing that I know these things; . . .

Why should I desire that I were an angel, that I could speak unto all the ends of the earth?

*For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have; therefore we see that the Lord doth counsel in wisdom, according to that which is just and true.* (Alma 29:1–8; emphasis added)

In a statement issued in 1978, the First Presidency of the Church officially endorsed the doctrine that God gives special revelation to peoples not only outside the Latter-day Saint faith but to those outside Christendom as well:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals. The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, who should provide salvation for all mankind who believe in the gospel. Consistent

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with these truths, we believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation, either in this life or in the life to come. . . . Our message therefore is one of special love and concern for the eternal welfare of all men and women, regardless of religious belief, race, or nationality, knowing that we are truly brothers and sisters because we are sons and daughters of the same Eternal Father.<sup>15</sup>

**(4) Judged according to one's faithfulness.** Although those who do not hear of Christ or have a chance to accept the fulness of the gospel in this life will have that chance later, their faith and faithfulness in this life, to whatever light they are granted and receive, will profoundly and salvifically impact their status and their receptivity to the fulness of the gospel in the life to come. To those inclined to procrastinate, the Book of Mormon prophet Amulek warned, "This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God. . . . Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis [death], that I will repent, that I will return to my God. Nay, ye cannot say this; for that same spirit which doth possess your bodies at the time that ye go out of this life, that same spirit will have power to possess your body in the eternal world" (Alma 34:32, 34). With God's help, the spirit, nature, and disposition we develop in this life will indeed carry over and constitute who we are in the next. Commenting on Amulek's words, Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet write, "Men and women will not have an immediate reversal of attitude at the time of death. If they have desired evil things; if they have sold their souls for attention and applause and acclaim; if they have craved carnal pleasures alone—if their lives have followed this course, they need not expect to inherit spirituality in the world to come."<sup>16</sup> Our responses to Christ in the life to come will likely mirror our responses to the light God grants us here.

**Latter-day Saint revelation and exclusivism.** Exclusivism also finds support in modern-day revelation. The exclusivistic conditions for salvation in the celestial kingdom are set out clearly in the Doctrine and Covenants:

They are they who *received* the testimony of Jesus, and believed on his name and were baptized after the manner of his burial, being buried in the water in his name, and this according to the commandment which he has given—

That by keeping the commandments they might be washed and cleansed from all their sins, and receive the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power;

And who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise, which the Father sheds forth upon all those who are just and true.

They are they who are the church of the Firstborn.

They are they into whose hands the Father hath given all things—

They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory; . . .

Wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God—

Wherefore, all things are theirs, whether life or death, or things present, or things to come, all are theirs and they are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

And they shall overcome all things.

Wherefore, let no man glory in man, but rather let him glory in God, who shall subdue all enemies under his feet.

These shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever. . . .

These are they who are just men made perfect through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this perfect atonement through the shedding of his own blood. (D&C 76:51–69; emphasis added)

Given the exclusivistic conditions for abode with God in the celestial kingdom, how equitable and gracious is God's love in ensuring that every person, either on this or the other side of the veil, has the chance to satisfy these conditions. This brings us finally to a consideration of the doctrine of the redemption of the dead.

**The doctrine of redemption of the dead.** In considering this, I will not attempt here a systematic exposition of the doctrine, nor an exegesis of relevant biblical and other early Jewish and Christian texts. The latter task, incidentally, has been recently undertaken by Jeffrey A. Trumbower,<sup>17</sup> who has arrived at a number of interesting conclusions himself. Instead I will attempt to illuminate Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice by tracing the sequence of revelations that gave rise to

them. While the Church's practice of baptizing living persons as proxies for the dead did not commence until 1840—ten years after the formal organization of the Church—the doctrine underlying the practice began to emerge in the earliest received revelations.

On the evening of September 21, 1823, the Prophet Joseph asked in prayer for forgiveness of his sins. In response, God sent a messenger, the angel Moroni, who assured Joseph that his sins were forgiven, informed him of the buried record of the Book of Mormon, and gave him instructions as to the divine work God had called him to do. During the course of these instructions, Moroni referred to a prophecy of Malachi recorded in the Old Testament and told Joseph it was soon to be fulfilled. As now recorded in Doctrine and Covenants section 2, the prophecy reads: “Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming.”

Moroni also referred to the first part of Malachi 3, which prophesies that “I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in” (Malachi 3:1). Joseph was receiving what we understand now to be revelations foreshadowing the importance of temples and of genealogy in the latter-day work.

In 1828 Joseph and Oliver Cowdery commenced translating the Book of Mormon. By May 15, 1829, Joseph and Oliver had translated through 3 Nephi, wherein the Savior instructed the Nephites concerning the necessity and the proper mode of baptism: “I give unto you power that ye shall baptize this people. . . . [and] on this wise shall ye baptize them—Behold, ye shall go down and stand in the water, and in my name shall ye baptize them. . . . And then shall ye immerse them in the water. . . . And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God” (3 Nephi 11:21, 23, 26, 33). Thus, Nephi was given the *authority* to baptize, and Christ demonstrated the proper

*method* of baptism by immersion, “that caused Joseph and Oliver to inquire of the Lord about their own baptisms, which prayer was answered by the appearance of John the Baptist,” now a resurrected being.<sup>18</sup> John ordained Joseph and Oliver to the Aaronic Priesthood, “which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins” (D&C 13:1). Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery thereupon baptized each other.<sup>19</sup>

The development of the doctrine of salvation for the unevangelized took large leaps forward with the official organization of the Church on April 6, 1830. In the foundational revelation underlying this organization and known as the Articles and Covenants of the Church (now D&C 20),<sup>20</sup> the doctrine of baptism is affirmed in words that suggest that even premeridian believers will be saved and suggests (without explaining how) that they have been or will be baptized.

Wherefore, the Almighty God gave his Only Begotten Son, as it is written in those scriptures which have been given of him. . . .

That as many as would believe and be baptized in his holy name, and endure in faith to the end, should be saved—

Not only those who believed after he came in the meridian of time, in the flesh, but all those from the beginning, even as many as were before he came, who believed in the words of the Holy prophets, . . . should have eternal life,

As well as those who should come after, who should believe in the gifts and callings of God by the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of the Father and of the Son. (D&C 20:21, 25–27)<sup>21</sup>

In February 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received the revelation known as “The Vision” (now D&C 76),<sup>22</sup> which affirmed the doctrines of universal resurrection and degrees of salvation.<sup>23</sup> But most important for our present purpose, this revelation specifically refers to salvation for “they who are the spirits of men kept in prison, whom the Son visited, and preached the gospel unto them, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh; who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it” (D&C 76:73–74). The risen Lord thus explicitly discloses here that following His crucifixion, He taught the gospel to disembodied spirits of men, allowing them,

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just as those who hear the gospel in mortality, to be judged according to their response to Christ. The Lord again, by modern revelation, resolves another scholarly impasse—this time as to the meaning of 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 1 Peter 4:6.<sup>24</sup>

Another revelation received in that year declares that not only will the elect be led to the gospel by the Light of Christ, but also that the everlasting gospel will be declared unto “all people, both in heaven and in earth, and that are under the earth—for every ear shall hear it, and every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess” (D&C 88:104). Although it is not clear when this declaration of the gospel will be made to all, it does seem apparent that all men and women will hear the gospel and confess that Christ is King. Most important, however, the Doctrine and Covenants provides another intimation of an eschatological evangelization of those who did not have the chance to receive the gospel in this life. Speaking of the order of the universal resurrection, Doctrine and Covenants 88 proclaims: “Then cometh the redemption of those who are Christ’s at his coming; who have received their part in that prison which is prepared for them, that they might receive the gospel, and be judged according to men in the flesh” (D&C 88:99). Finally, on January 21, 1836, in the temple at Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph received a vision of the celestial kingdom in which he saw his deceased and unbaptized brother Alvin.<sup>25</sup> When Joseph marveled at this, God revealed to him that “all who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God. Also all that shall die henceforth without a knowledge of it, who would have received it with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom; for I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” (D&C 137:7–9). Taken by itself, this passage suggests a middle knowledge model for understanding the salvation of the unevangelized, but earlier and especially subsequent revelations flesh out a different and much fuller model.<sup>26</sup>

On March 27, 1836, the Kirtland Temple was dedicated. The dedication was marked by many spiritual manifestations to the Saints, but the most significant of these occurred one week later, on April 3, when the risen Lord appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery and

accepted the temple. The Lord's visit was followed by visits from several heavenly messengers, including the prophet Elijah (see D&C 110), whose coming had been prophesied anciently by Malachi and then in 1823 by Moroni, as previously quoted. Elijah restored the priesthood keys and authority that enabled holders of these keys to perform sacred sacraments, including marriages, sealings of family members to each other, and vicarious ordinances for the dead, all of which would be binding in heaven.<sup>27</sup> But then, perhaps because of the extreme persecution that immediately ensued, no further revelation as to the redemption of the dead was received until 1840, when the Church had reestablished itself, this time on the banks of the Mississippi.<sup>28</sup>

On August 10, 1840, at the funeral of a man named Colonel Seymour Brunson, who had died in Nauvoo, Illinois, Joseph spoke for the first time on baptism for the dead.<sup>29</sup> A witness to the sermon, Simon Baker, recorded that "Joseph singled out Jane Neyman and said he 'saw a widow in that congregation that had a son who had died without being baptized.' Now she could rejoice in performing baptism on behalf of her deceased son."<sup>30</sup> Jane Neyman then performed the first proxy ordinance in the Church, by being baptized for her dead son Cyrus in the Mississippi River.<sup>31</sup>

The doctrine seems to have been one of the most popular of those revealed during the Nauvoo period. The picture we receive from the journals, diaries, and sermons of the day is one of unfettered enthusiasm. A journal entry by Elder Wilford Woodruff is illustrative of the enthusiasm and peace that the doctrine brought the beleaguered yet faithful Saints:

I remember well the first time I read the revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning the redemption of the dead—one of the most glorious principles I had ever become acquainted [*sic*] with on earth. To think that I and these Latter-day Saints could go forth into the waters of baptism and redeem our fathers, our mothers, and those that have gone before us, in the lineage of our father's house, and they come forth and receive a part in the first resurrection! Well might the Prophet say God has fulfilled His promise in the last days He would raise up saviors upon Mount Zion, and the kingdom should be the Lord's. Never did I read a revelation with greater joy than I did that revelation.<sup>32</sup>



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On October 19, 1840, Joseph wrote an epistle to the Twelve Apostles, who were heading the highly successful missionary effort in England. The epistle gives us some insight into Joseph's understanding of the doctrine and its role in the salvation of the unevangelized. He writes that the work for the dead had been introduced, and that "the Saints have the privilege of being baptized for those of their relatives who are dead, whom they believe would have embraced the Gospel, if they had been privileged with hearing it, and who have received the Gospel in the spirt [sic], through the instrumentality of those who have been commissioned to preach to them while in prison."<sup>33</sup>

Not until January of the following year do we have a revelation on baptism for the dead that is recorded and canonized in the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>34</sup> This has come down to us as section 124.<sup>35</sup> In this revelation, the Lord chastens His people for their sloth in building a temple at Nauvoo: "For a baptismal font there is not upon the earth, that they, my saints, may be baptized for those who are dead—for this ordinance belongeth to my house, and cannot be acceptable to me, only in the days of your poverty, wherein ye are not able to build a house unto me. But I command you, all ye my saints, to build a house unto me; and during this time your baptisms shall be acceptable unto me" (D&C 124:29–31). Here the Lord has informed the Saints that, ordinarily, baptism for the dead is an ordinance to be performed exclusively in dedicated temples of the Lord.

April conference 1841 marked another important turning point, this time in the practice of the doctrine. On April 6, 1841, the cornerstones were laid for the Nauvoo Temple<sup>36</sup>—eleven years to the day from when the Lord had promised a small gathering in upstate New York that "all those from the beginning" who "would believe and be baptized in his holy name, . . . should be saved" (D&C 20:26, 25) Both Joseph and Sidney Rigdon brought up the subject of baptism for the dead during their sermons at the conference. That summer, the fervor and urgency of the work for the dead was so great that "the Saints did not wait for the completion of the temple to get such vicarious work underway. Beginning in the summer of 1841, with the consent of the Lord, they commenced baptisms for the dead in the Mississippi River."<sup>37</sup> Six months later, at the October conference of the Church, the

Prophet Joseph Smith announced, “There shall be no more baptisms for the dead, until the ordinance can be attended to in the Lord’s house [the Temple]; and the Church cannot hold another general conference until they can meet in said house. For thus saith the Lord.”<sup>38</sup>

“Shortly after this conference, the Twleve [sic] Apostles sent an epistle to all the saints in America, and as part of it, urged the support of all the people to aid in the completion of the temple so that baptisms for the dead could continue.”<sup>39</sup> This epistle serves as proof of the appeal of the doctrine and of the faith it inspired in Church adherents.

Finally, on November 8, 1841—thirty-six days after the cessation of the work for the dead—the baptismal font, which was located in the basement of the temple, was dedicated by Brigham Young. The work could go forward again. And go forward it did, the work for the dead being done simultaneously with the completion of the work on the upper stories of the temple.<sup>40</sup> The first baptisms for the dead were completed in the Nauvoo Temple on November 21, under the direction of Brigham Young and five other Apostles.<sup>41</sup> One has to think the water would have been freezing cold in that partially completed building when, in the middle of the Illinois winter, in an act of faith and sacrifice, forty persons came forward to perform the work in behalf of their beloved departed.

Doctrine and Covenants sections 127 and 128, received in September of 1842, also deal with baptisms for the dead. Section 127 establishes that such baptisms are to be recorded, and section 128 ties much of the earlier revelations together. In section 128 Joseph refers to 1 Corinthians 15:29 and Malachi 3:5–6 and explains that these verses plainly mean that “the earth will be smitten with a curse unless there is a welding link of some kind or other between the fathers and the children. . . . [This link] is the baptism for the dead. For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect” (D&C 128:18). Soon thereafter, Joseph was shot by a mob at the Carthage Jail, making these the last revelations he received specifically referring to baptisms for the dead.<sup>42</sup>

Following the martyrdom of Joseph and his brother Hyrum, and despite unrelenting persecution, the Saints persisted in their work on and in the temple. They completed the sacred structure and dedicated

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it on April 30, 1846.<sup>43</sup> But temple worship and ordinances for the dead were not to be enjoyed for long. Increased violence against the Saints in Hancock County, Illinois, compelled them to sorrowfully abandon Nauvoo and their beloved temple. Wilford Woodruff wrote at this time, "I was in Nauvoo on the 26th of May, 1846, for the last time, and left the city of the Saints feeling that most likely I was taking a final farewell of Nauvoo for this life. I looked back upon the Temple and City as they receded from view and asked the Lord to remember the sacrifices of His Saints."<sup>44</sup> He and his family went on to meet the Ramus Company, which had already left on May 16 with twenty-five wagons, which means that some Saints were only able to use the temple for as few as two weeks before they were forced to abandon it. Thus began a modern exodus and the subsequent relocation of the Saints to the arid valleys of Utah. After the Saints' departure, the temple was set on fire, presumably by an arsonist, on November 10, 1848, and two years later what remained of the structure was destroyed by a tornado.<sup>45</sup> Not until 1877 would a temple again be available for the Saints to perform the salvific work for themselves and their dead.

The early revelations relating to the redemption of the dead guided Church practice and doctrine until October 3, 1918, when President Joseph F. Smith received his grand vision of the redemption of the dead, now known as section 138 of the Doctrine and Covenants. While President Smith was contemplating the Atonement of Christ and reflecting upon the words of Peter in the third and fourth chapters of his first epistle, the Spirit of the Lord rested upon him and his eyes were opened to a vision of the Savior's work among the spirits of the dead during the interval between the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Robert Millet affirms that the vision "is central to the theology of Latter-day Saints because it confirms and expands upon earlier prophetic insights concerning work for the dead; it also introduces doctrinal truths not had in the Church before October of 1918."<sup>46</sup> The vision of the redemption of the dead offers several key insights into Christ's role in missionary work among the departed spirits and the way in which postmortem evangelization is carried on.

To begin, Joseph F. Smith saw Christ ministering to the "innumerable company of the spirits of the just" (D&C 138:12), an observation

in direct affirmation of the popular Christian tradition. In addition, President Smith saw the disembodied Christ preaching to the spirits of the righteous “the everlasting gospel” and such doctrines as “the resurrection and the redemption of mankind from the fall” (D&C 138:19). Thus the vision teaches that Christ Himself was the initiator of the redemptive work beyond the veil and that this work was commenced while His body lay in the tomb.

Furthermore, President Smith’s vision provides a revealed and thus an authoritative Latter-day Saint interpretation of Peter’s first epistle. That “the gospel was preached also to them that are dead” (1 Peter 4:6) is explicitly confirmed by section 138. The biblical statement that Christ “went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19), however, is a concept that received subsequent clarification in the vision. God revealed that Christ “went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient,” and this because “he *could not go* personally, because of their rebellion and transgression” (D&C 138:29, 37; emphasis added). Instead, Christ “organized his forces and appointed messengers . . . and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness” (D&C 138:30). Thus, Christ personally visited the righteous spirits and there organized the missionary work that was to be conducted among the unrighteous spirits who had remained unrepentant while in the flesh or who had rejected the testimonies of the ancient prophets (see D&C 138:20–21). Nevertheless, the vision still supports the view that Christ preached unto “the spirits in prison” since, as Elder Bruce R. McConkie states, “it is clearly set forth that the whole spirit world, and not only that portion designated as hell, is considered to be a spirit prison.”<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the above insights, President Smith saw that the righteous dead of the current day continue their missionary labors in the world of the spirits after passing through the veil. Not only did he see the prophets of old assembled in the vast congregation, but he also saw his father, Hyrum Smith, the Prophet Joseph Smith, and Brigham Young as they continued to preach the gospel in the spirit world (see D&C 138:38–57). Thus, the doctrine of salvation for the unevangelized became intimately linked with the undeniably strong missionary spirit of the Church.

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Joseph F. Smith's vision of the redemption of the dead, and the Prophet Joseph Smith's earlier vision of his brother Alvin were both canonized at the April 1976 conference. An editorial published in the Church newspaper highlights the general membership's understanding of the significance of this 1976 conference and subsequent developments.<sup>48</sup> It is significant that two revelations were canonized at the April 1976 general conference of the Church. Both dealt with the principle of redemption for the dead. The further hastening of this work was emphasized in a revelation received in June 1978, wherein "every faithful, worthy man in the Church" was authorized to receive the priesthood (Official Declaration—2). Not only did this affect the living, but it also had a great impact on the millions in the spirit world who had been awaiting the full blessings of the priesthood, including those of the temple. This revelation made possible the redemptive work for every man, woman, and child who had arrived at the age of accountability but died before receiving the saving ordinances of the gospel.

Gordon B. Hinckley, whom Latter-day Saints sustain as a living prophet, has inaugurated an era of unprecedented temple building. During his administration as President of the Church, beginning on March 12, 1995, 75 new temples have been constructed and dedicated. Presently there are 130 temples operating worldwide with 10 more under construction. We believe that during Christ's millennial reign on earth we will have access to the names of all those who have accepted the fulness of the gospel in the spirit world. Performance of sacred temple ordinances on their behalf, we believe, will be among the important works to be completed during the Millennium and prior to the Final Judgment. Brigham Young declared,

We are trying to save the living and the dead. The living can have their choice, the dead have not. Millions of them died without the Gospel, without the Priesthood, and without the opportunities that we enjoy. We shall go forth in the name of Israel's God and attend to the ordinances for them.<sup>49</sup> And through the Millennium, the thousands [sic] years that the people will love and serve God, we will build temples and officiate therein for those who have slept for hundreds and thousands of years—those who would have received the truth if they had had the opportunity; and we will bring them up, and form the chain entire, back to Adam."<sup>50</sup>

Proxy baptisms already performed on behalf of the dead number over two hundred million.<sup>51</sup> This immense labor of love was initiated by our Savior immediately following His Crucifixion.

### *Objections to the Doctrine of Postmortem Evangelization*

Believing that the risen Lord Himself has provided clear and definite revelation regarding postmortem evangelization, the correctness of the doctrine and of its related practices is not an open issue for Latter-day Saints. But for those who have yet to accept this modern revelation, it may be helpful for me to address some of the common objections to the doctrine.

In this section, I deal with six objections to postmortem evangelization, none of which seem to be difficult, much less impossible, for Latter-day Saints to overcome. In fact, most of the objections to postmortem evangelization are objections to other faiths' versions of the doctrine that quickly dissolve when applied to Latter-day Saint doctrine. Latter-day Saint doctrine so comprehensively unites the best features of all other soteriological viewpoints that it seems to leave little room for objection.

One principal objection to postmortem evangelization is that, apart from the apparent references in 1 Peter, it is extrabiblical. This claim challenges nothing that Latter-day Saints affirm, for as already noted in my first preliminary, we do not base our doctrine on biblical exegesis but on modern revelation.

A second objection, one used against inclusivists and universalists, is that the Bible apparently teaches that we do not need to explicitly reject Christ in order to be damned; hence, to conclude that no one can be damned without hearing the gospel, either in this life or the next, is unwarranted. Supposedly, the view that we cannot be damned without first hearing the gospel leads to an injunction *against* evangelization—hearing the Word is what makes it possible for us to be damned.<sup>52</sup> The Latter-day Saint view, however, does not require that we explicitly reject the gospel in order to be damned. The Doctrine and Covenants teaches that those who will inherit the telestial kingdom include “liars, and sorcerers, and adulterers, and whoremongers, and whosoever loves and makes a

lie. . . . These are they who are cast down to hell and suffer the wrath of Almighty God” (D&C 76:103, 106). Thus, those who live wickedly according to the light they have received in this life will be damned, whether they reject the fulness of the gospel or not (in fact, there is reason to think that, if offered the chance, these people will reject the gospel; after all, they have already rejected what light they have been given). If, however, we mean by damnation the state of “outer darkness” that will be experienced by the sons of perdition, then it is indeed true that no one can be damned in this sense without first hearing the gospel, but these individuals will likely be so few that hearing the gospel is not a disadvantage—in fact, hearing the gospel may well motivate us to avoid the sins that could lead us to the telestial kingdom.

A third objection, leveled against inclusivists, is that the Bible seems to teach that we must accept Christ in order to be saved; because all have sinned, all those who do not accept Christ will be damned.<sup>53</sup> This objection is certainly not fatal for Latter-day Saints, because all those who are saved in the strong sense of receiving eternal life in the celestial kingdom do so only by accepting the intercessory Atonement of Jesus Christ. Certainly, Christ’s intercession is universal enough to save in the telestial kingdom those who have rejected Him, but in order to be saved in the fullest sense we must explicitly accept Jesus Christ either in this life or in the next.

Fourth, the Bible seems to teach that we are judged for the actions we perform in this life, with death marking the end of our opportunity to repent.<sup>54</sup> Essentially, this objection asserts that postmortem salvation is not only *extrabiblical* but *contrabiblical*. Those who make this objection focus on scriptures that seem to indicate that our condition in the afterlife will be fixed by our actions in this life alone. Particularly prominent is Luke 16:19–31, which contains the story of Lazarus and the rich man. After this life, Lazarus is carried “into Abraham’s bosom,” which is assumed to be heaven, while the rich man is sent to hell. The two of them are thereafter unable to interact because of a “great gulf” that is fixed between them. Similarly, 2 Corinthians 5:10 reads, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he

hath done, whether it be good or bad.” Apparently, we will be judged for what we do while *in the body*, not for what we do after we leave our body. Other scriptures that are used to indicate a similar principle are Matthew 7:13–14, 21–23, 24–27; 13; John 8:21, 24; Romans 2; and Hebrews 9:27.

None of these scriptures, however, teaches either explicitly or implicitly that there will be no evangelization or salvation after death. All that is taught is that we will be judged for the works we have done in this life. Latter-day Saints affirm this point; indeed, this principle is taught much more explicitly in the Book of Mormon than it is in the Bible: “For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold, the day of this life is the day for men to perform their labors. . . . Behold, if we do not improve our time while in this life, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:32–33). All people will be judged by their deeds in this life, but those who have acted righteously in terms of the light that they have received *still need* to accept the intercessory Atonement of Jesus Christ in order to be saved in the celestial kingdom. Either in this life or after this life is over, these people will have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ and to enter the celestial kingdom, but they will still be judged by the deeds that they performed *in this life*. There is nothing in the Latter-day Saint doctrine of postmortem evangelization that is contrabiblical.

A fifth objection to postmortem salvation is that it removes all motivation to perform missionary work.<sup>55</sup> If those who are unevangelized in this life will receive the gospel in the next, why should we bother to share the good news? Certainly, with approximately sixty thousand full-time missionaries currently in the field, Latter-day Saints have had no lack of motivation to perform missionary work. The motivation seems to be that the sooner people receive the fulness of the gospel, the better. In addition, Latter-day Saints understand that salvation involves much more than passively accepting Jesus Christ; it also involves living a Christlike life. Hence, the Latter-day Saint missionary effort is more than just a sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ; it also aims to make people more Christlike.



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The motivation seems to be that the sooner people receive the fullness of the gospel, the better. Indeed, in John 10:10, Christ explains, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” Surely, those who have felt the joy of forgiveness through accepting the Atonement would want others to partake of this gift and feel this joy as soon as possible. Even though postmortem evangelization entails that everyone will eventually have an equal chance to accept the gospel, it seems imperative that Christians extend the proclamation of peace and the abundant life to those who currently stand in need of its solace so that they may “rejoice in [their] salvation” together (Psalm 9:14). To stand by and allow others to continue to suffer in their sins and to justify this inaction by appealing to some future relief appears just as evil as standing by and watching a child suffer, knowing that another will eventually come to relieve her of her pain, while all the time possessing a soothing balm. Finally, Latter-day Saints understand that salvation includes not only justification but also the process of sanctification. Missionary work aims at initiating this process so all might share the joy of Christlike living now.

A sixth and final objection to postmortem salvation has been posited by John Sanders. Essentially, Sanders asserts that the same cultural-linguistic difficulties that prevent people from understanding and accepting the gospel in this life will prevent them from doing so in the next life.<sup>56</sup> “If God,” he writes, “can enable people to overcome cultural-linguistic problems in the next life, why can he not do it in this one?”<sup>57</sup> The answer is a resounding *He can!* Currently, over fifty percent of the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints lives outside of the United States, where the Church originated. Most of them live in predominantly Christian countries, but many live in Eastern Asia and Africa. Latter-day Saints have had considerable success evangelizing (where we are allowed to do so) in non-Christian cultures. God “speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3); certainly He has no problem—and will have no problem in the next life—reaching the righteous, whatever their culture or language. The day

is rapidly approaching in which “every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter, shed forth upon them for the revelation of Jesus Christ” (D&C 90:11).

Latter-day Saint doctrine and practice pertaining to the fate of the unevangelized have been established by divine revelation to living prophets. The theological tapestry that emerges from that revelation includes major strands of universalism, inclusivism, and restrictivism. What holds them all together in a coherent and beautiful pattern is the glad tidings of postmortem evangelization. We know of no objection to this good news that does not dissolve in the light of God’s revelation.

### *Conclusion*

We have come a long distance in this paper. We began by setting out what has come to be known as the soteriological problem of evil, which is expressed in the form of an inconsistent triad: (1) God is almighty, perfectly loving and just, and desires that all of His children be saved; (2) salvation comes only in and through one’s personal knowledge and acceptance of Christ’s substitutionary Atonement; and (3) vast numbers of God’s children have lived and died having never heard of Christ, and without receiving an opportunity to personally accept the salvation mediated through His Atonement.

Latter-day Saints affirm that Jesus Christ Himself is the resolution to this inconsistent triad. Ancient prophets declare, and He has again revealed in these the latter-days that He is not only Lord, but also Savior of both the living and the dead. His arms are extended and His hand is not slackened. Truly, it is He who proclaims to *all people of all times and places* as the Savior of the *whole* world, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty unto the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord; . . . to comfort all that mourn” (Isaiah 61:1–2).

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## *Notes*

Ari Bruening, Jason Scoffield, David VanderBeek, Andrew West, and especially Brent Alvord and Marc-Charles Ingerson, student assistants, have made substantial contributions to the research and writing of this essay.

1. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 66.

2. Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 174–75. Morris is not sure how to resolve the “scandal,” although he offers several solutions, including universalism (176) and inclusivism (177). “I think the most that can be reasonably said,” he concludes, “is that a measure of pious agnosticism is appropriate here” (180). Reflection on the eschatological problem of evil is hardly new in the history of Christianity, as evidenced by Dr. Jeffrey A. Trumbower’s recent work entitled *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

3. Stephen T. Davis, “Universalism, Hell, and the Fate of the Ignorant,” *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (January 1990): 176.

4. Some deny this, however, claiming that every person at the moment of death has a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, who provides them an opportunity to accept His gift of salvation. Most adherents of this view, appropriately known as the “final option theory,” are today found in the Roman Catholic tradition.

5. See John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992).

6. See Sanders, *No Other Name*, chapter 6, “Eschatological Evangelization,” 177–214. See also Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*. Therein Trumbower attests to our assertion when he writes: “There were many contexts in Greek, Roman, and Jewish antiquity where people endeavored to do something to help the dead, usually family members or friends; the stakes grew even higher when the context was one of differentiation of the dead between the saved and the damned. Such differentiation had the potential to undermine the familial piety toward the dead so important in all three cultures, and indeed a debate arose among Jews over the extent to which dead family and comrades could be helped by the intercessions of others” (32). Trumbower continues, there are “a number of contexts in early Christianity in which the issue of posthumous salvation for non-Christians arose. In some cases it was salvation for some of those who lived before Christ, in others it was speculation about the eschatological salvation of all persons, and in still others it was the intercession of

righteous persons for specific damned individuals at the final judgement. The main thing linking these traditions is that they all entail the posthumous salvation of non-Christians, wherein a non-Christian turns toward God after death, or is the recipient of God's mercy after death" (55). Finally, Dr. Trumbower concludes that, "we should not be surprised at the appearance of these [Greek, Roman, Hebrew, and early Christian] traditions, since Christianity was a new religious expression embedded in a culture where the boundaries between the living and the dead were often quite permeable" (34).

7. See Mathias Rissi, *Die Taufe für die Toten* (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962). Thanks to Richard D. Hacken, the European Studies Bibliographer of the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, for his help translating this passage for our use.

8. Joseph Smith—History 1:9–13; emphasis added to verse 12.

9. Joseph Smith linked Christ's statement concerning many mansions in His Father's house (John 14:2) with the different kingdoms of glory, teaching that John 14:2 should be read: "In my Father's kingdom are many kingdoms. . . . There are mansions for those who obey a celestial law, and there are other mansions for those who come short of the law, every man in his own order" (Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 366). Before Joseph Smith, Bible commentator Adam Clarke also interpreted John 14:2 as signifying different kingdoms. He believed the verse spoke of a heaven with "various degrees of glory, suited to the various capacities and attainments of my followers" (Adam Clark, *Clarke's Commentary* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1824] 5:621–22). While Smith and Clarke correlate John 14:2 with different kingdoms of glory, the general consensus among contemporary Bible scholars is that the many mansions refer only to the infinite number of dwelling places prepared for the saved. For example, see interpretations in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995); John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Raymond Brown, ed. *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1980); and Leon Morris, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971).

10. This is not the only place in the New Testament that the Apostle Paul is interpreted as advocating a universalism of sorts. As Dr. Trumbower records, "Paul here [in these scriptures] expresses a notion of universal salvation convincingly explicated by Richard Batey in a 1966 article. Batey documents the tortured exegesis of those who wish to deny that Paul was

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speaking about the salvation of every individual, and he connects Paul's introduction of universal salvation with the apostle's conviction that God's saving purposes cannot be thwarted. Paul indicates that the 'fullness' of the gentiles will enter in, as well as 'all Israel' ([Rom.] 11:25–26), but he does not speculate on precisely how God will accomplish this. . . . Since Paul obviously knows of unbelieving Jews and Gentiles who have died, he can only have in mind here some type of posthumous change of heart and salvation for the 'fullness of the Gentiles' and 'all Israel.' It is possible that the 'fullness of the gentiles' means only the 'full number' of the Gentiles, and not all of them. But a posthumous salvation is still clearly in view with regard to unbelieving Jews, and Paul does assert that God will show mercy to 'all' ([Rom.] 11:32)" (Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 39–40).

11. For example, 2 Nephi 9:22; Jacob 6:9; Alma 40:4–10; 3 Nephi 26:4–5; D&C 29:26; 76:15–85; 88:14–32.

12. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 125.

13. Joseph Smith said of the sons of perdition, "All sins shall be forgiven, except the sin against the Holy Ghost; for Jesus will save all except the sons of perdition. What must a man do to commit the unpardonable sin [thus becoming a son of perdition]? He must receive the Holy Ghost, have the heavens opened unto him, and know God, and then sin against Him. After a man has sinned against the Holy Ghost, there is no repentance for him. He has got to say that the sun does not shine while he sees it; he has got to deny Jesus Christ when the heavens have been opened unto him, and to deny the plan of salvation with his eyes open to the truth of it; and from that time he begins to be an enemy" (*Teachings*, 358).

14. The religious teaching that all people, regardless of the time of their birth in relation to the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Savior Jesus Christ, are able to access the inspiration of Heaven, can be found throughout Christian history. One such example is found in Trumbower's statement that even, "[a]ccording to Justin Martyr (ca. 150 C.E.), Abraham, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others had had a share of the Logos, which was later fully embodied in Christ" (Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 49).

15. Cited in Robert L. Millet, *The Mormon Faith: A New Look at Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 203–4.

16. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 3:256.

17. Dr. Jeffrey A. Trumbower is the department chair and associate professor of Religious Studies at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont

(PhD, University of Chicago Divinity School). Professor Trumbower puts forward a thesis in *Rescue for the Dead* that there is a tradition in Western civilization of not only rites done to the dead but also *for* the dead. According to Trumbower, most of these rites that were done for the dead were not only intercessory in nature, but they show that death was not always the impassable boundary for salvation that it has now become. Trumbower asserts that it was only *after* the martyrdom of the New Testament Apostles that the tradition of work for the dead became a heretical practice. In particular, with the advent of formal theologians, such as Tertullian and Origen, who utilized logic and rhetoric, the idea of postmortem spiritual progress became problematic in light of most of the canonized New Testament texts. Yet, even despite this theological trend toward skepticism regarding postmortem evangelization and salvation that was beginning to become popular among the early church fathers, it was not until Augustine that the possibility of postmortem spiritual progress became an absolute heresy. In light of this ideological transformation in early Greek, Roman, Hebrew, and especially Christian culture and practice, Dr. Trumbower concludes by stating that “rescue for the dead” was not only a viable possibility for these early peoples, but it was quite possibly considered a good and proper practice in behalf of those who had already died.

18. Robert John Woodford, “The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants,” PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974, 1:203–4.

19. “It is important to note, however, that this section was not part of the D&C until the 1876 edition, when it was lifted out of the history of the Prophet and made a part of this book” (Woodford, “Historical Development,” 1:235).

20. Elder Orson Pratt and others believed that section 20 was received on April 6, 1830, immediately preceding the revelation of Section 21, which also occurred on April 6, 1830 (*JD* 22:32). Woodford points out that portions of this revelation had been received as early as the year preceding the official organization of the Church (Woodford, “Historical Development,” 1:286–92).

21. “On June 9, 1830, the first conference of the Church was held as directed by the Articles and Covenants of the Church. The complete Articles and Covenants [section 20] were read in this conference by Joseph Smith as one of the first items of business. This document was then received by the, [sic] ‘unanimous voice of the whole congregation.’ Thus, section 20 became the first revelation of this dispensation canonized by the Church” (Woodford, “Historical Development,” 1:292–93).

22. “Elder Dibble intimated in [his account of the Vision published in the *Juvenile Instructor*, May 15, 1892, pp. 303, 304] that not all Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon saw in the vision was recorded. Joseph later indicated

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that not a hundredth part of it was written. He said: 'I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them.' [HC 5:402] It would be hard at this point to determine if Joseph ever used this additional information as part of other revelations; however, such a supposition is a real possibility. His later writings on the resurrection (section 88), pre-earth life (section 93 and Abraham 3), astronomy (section 130 and Abraham 3), and the degrees of glory within the celestial kingdom (section 131) may all have reflected some of the things he learned in this vision. But his knowledge on this subject was not complete after this vision, for he later wrote [about his vision in which he saw a saved and redeemed brother Alvin]" (Woodford, "Historical Development," 2:927–28).

23. See, for example, D&C 76:48.

24. Numerous interpretations of these verses are found in Peter. They mainly differ on four main topics, as mentioned in the *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1967), 291: the time this preaching occurred (whether preincarnate or after His death), the subject matter of His preaching, the persons that received of His preaching (whether it was only those to whom Noah had immediate contact, or all the wicked before the flood, or even those after who are considered either dead literally or spiritually), and the result of Christ's preaching (whether merely condemning, or preaching posthumous evangelization or salvation). An interpretation that I have found especially interesting is that of Frederic Farrar, who explains that this passage "is one of the most precious passages of Scripture, and it involves no ambiguity, except such as is created by the scholasticism of a prejudiced theology. . . . For if the language have any meaning, this language means that Christ, when His Spirit descended into the lower world, proclaimed the message of salvation to the impenitent dead" (*The Early Days of Christianity* [London: Cassell, 1900], 78).

25. See D&C 138:5, 6.

26. Joseph Fielding Smith is posed the question of middle knowledge vis-à-vis this revelation in these terms: "Knowing that baptism is essential for entering the kingdom of heaven, I assume that it is understood that those who die without a knowledge of the gospel will have to receive baptism, vicariously, before they can inherit the kingdom; but will not those who died in ignorance have to have the gospel taught to them and receive their reward according to how wholeheartedly they accept Christ and his teachings, or will they be rewarded in accordance to the things they would have done on earth, had

they had the chance to do them? It seems that the latter is implied in the revelation [D&C 136].” To this, Elder Smith responded in part, “Baptism . . . both by the water and by confirmation, under the hands of one who holds divine authority to officiate in these ordinances, is a requirement made of every person old enough to be accountable before the Lord. The vision given to the Prophet in the Kirtland Temple in 1836, was one portraying what would be, not that had taken place, for his father and mother were still living. Because Alvin had accepted and approved the mission given to his younger brother Joseph but was cut off before there was an opportunity for him to be baptized, the Lord indicated that he was, through the vicarious ordinances of the gospel when performed for him, entitled to all the blessings of the exaltation which he would have received had he lived to obtain them in person. In his justice our Eternal Father grants to all those who would have received the gospel had that privilege come to them, the same blessings which are received by the faithful who are living. This is done by vicarious work in the temples of the Lord” (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957–66], 46–48).

27. “Elder Joseph Fielding Smith later adds this interesting note concerning the visit of Elijah: ‘It is interesting to know that on the third day of April, 1836, the Jews were celebrating the feast of the Passover, and were leaving the doors of their homes open for the coming of Elijah. On that day Elijah came . . . to the Temple in the village of Kirtland near the banks of Lake Erie, to two humble servants of the Lord who were appointed by divine decree to receive him’ (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation* [Salt Lake City: Quorum of Twelve Apostles [sic], The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949], 84; as cited in Woodford 3:1458).

28. With the possible exception of the July 23, 1837, revelation known as Doctrine and Covenants 112, which reads in part: “But purify your hearts before me; and then go ye into all the world, and preach my gospel unto every creature who has not received it; And he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not and is not baptized, shall be damned” (D&C 112:28–29).

29. See Ivan J. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration: A History of the Church to 1846* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), 488.

30. *Journal History*, August 15, 1840; as cited in Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 488–89.

31. See Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 488.

32. *Millennial Star*, June 29, 1891, 405; as cited in Woodford, “Historical Development,” 3:1675–76.



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33. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:231; as cited in Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 488–90. Again, this may suggest a middle knowledge view of salvation. For notes on middle knowledge, see page 52.

34. “Even though . . . [D&C 127 and 128] give us much instruction concerning this work, neither of them is the revelation that authorized the Prophet to begin the work. Such a revelation has not been identified, but there is good cause to believe that such a revelation was written. Elder Wilford Woodruff recorded: ‘I remember well the first time I read the revelation given through the Prophet Joseph concerning the redemption of the dead—one of the most glorious principles I had ever become acquainted [sic] with on earth. To think that I and these Latter-day Saints could go forth into the waters of baptism and redeem our fathers, our mothers, and those that have gone before us, in the lineage of our father’s house, and they come forth and receive a part in the first resurrection! Well might the Prophet say God has fulfilled His promise that in the last days He would raise up saviors upon Mount Zion, and the kingdom should be the Lord’s. Never did I read a revelation with greater joy than I did that revelation. I have often referred to the course we pursued [sic] in connection with that. Joseph Smith himself (many of you may recollect the time) went into the Mississippi river one Sunday night after meeting, and baptized a hundred. I baptized another hundred. The next man, a few rods from me, baptized another hundred. We were strung up and down the Mississippi, baptizing for our dead. But there was no recorder; we attended to this ordinance without waiting to have proper record made. But the Lord told Joseph that he must have recorders present at these baptisms—men who could see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and record these things. Of course, we had to do the work over again. Nevertheless, that does not say the work was not of God’ (*Millennial Star*, June 29, 1891, 404–5; as cited in Woodford, “Historical Development,” 3:1675–76).

35. “This is another revelation in which Joseph Smith gave no introduction and no background information concerning its origin. Joseph Fielding Smith, however, has pieced together the probable factors that brought it forth in the following: ‘Almost as soon as the Prophet and his brethren arrived in Nauvoo from their imprisonment and persecutions in Missouri, the Lord gave instructions that a temple should be built in Nauvoo. By this time the fulness of the doctrine of salvation for the dead had been revealed and the importance of performing ordinances for the dead was impressed upon the mind

of the Prophet and by him, in discourses and letter, upon the saints. No doubt Joseph Smith had been praying to the Lord on this subject, and this revelation (Sec. 124) is an answer to his pleadings” (Joseph Fielding Smith, *Church History and Modern Revelation*, Fourth Series [Salt Lake City: Quorum of Twelve Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950], 79, 80; as cited in Woodford, “Historical Development,” 1620).

36. See Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 490.

37. Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 118.

38. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:426; see also Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 118, and Woodford, “Historical Development,” 3:1674.

39. Woodford, “Historical Development,” 3:1674; see also Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:437.

40. See Barrett, *Joseph Smith and the Restoration*, 118.

41. Woodford, “Historical Development,” 3:1674.

42. At this point it is important to note some of the secondary literature written on the topic among LDS circles. A comprehensive assessment of the mainstream Latter-day Saint understanding is found in Robert L. Millet, *Life After Death* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999). Several articles from other Mormon authors include M. Guy Bishop, “What has become of Our Fathers? Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23 (Summer 1990), 85–97; Grant Underwood, “Baptism for the Dead: Comparing RLDS and LDS Perspectives,” *Dialogue* 23 (Summer 1990), 99–105; Robert E. Clark, “Baptism for the Dead and the Problematic of Pluralism: A Theological Reconfiguration,” *Dialogue* 30 (Spring 1997), 105–16; and Wendy Ulrich, “Not for Adam’s Transgression: Paths to Intergenerational Peace,” *Sunstone* 15, no. 5 (November 1991), 30–38.

43. “Under date of April 30th, 1846, Elder Woodruff’s journal contains the following: ‘In the evening of this day I repaired to the Temple with Elder Orson Hyde and about twenty other elders of Israel. There we were all clothed in our priestly robes and dedicated the Temple of the Lord, erected to His most holy name by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.’” (Matthias F. Cowley, ed., *Wilford Woodruff, Fourth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964], 247). “It was dedicated April 30, 1846, though certain portions, such as the baptistry, had been previously dedicated and used in ordinance work” (James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971], 12–13).

44. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff*, 248.

45. See B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1957), 3:22.

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46. Robert L. Millet, "The Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," *Hearken, O Ye People* (Sandy, UT: Randall, 1984): 259
47. Bruce R. McConkie, "A New Commandment: Save Thyself and Thy Kindred," *Ensign*, August 1976, 11.
48. McConkie, "A New Commandment," 7–11.
49. One of the many ways that the Church facilitates this great work is through family history geneology. In fact, "on May 24, 1999, the Church announced a new Web site for family history. The interest and activity on this site was phenomenal in the following seven months. Between May 24 and December 30, the site experienced 2 billion hits. The site also has a free, downloadable version of the Personal Ancestral File software. More than 300,000 people have downloaded the software during the last few months. Literally millions of people across the earth have accessed the site. Daily traffic is running at a rate of 7 million hits per day. More than 5 million names have been uploaded to the file. The file now contains 600 million names in all" (Merrill J. Bateman, "The Dawn of a New Millenium," in *Brigham Young University 1999–2000 Speeches* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000], 131).
50. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 404.
51. See Turnbower, *Rescue for the Dead*, 5.
52. See Ronald H. Nash's response to inclusivism in John Sanders, ed., *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?: Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 68; see also 132.
53. See Nash's chapter on restrictivism in Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 107.
54. See Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 133–34; see also G. Frederick Wright, *An Inquiry concerning the Relation of Death to Probation* (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1882), 50–72.
55. See Nash's response to inclusivism in Sanders, *What about Those Who Have Never Heard?*, 68; and Wright, *Inquiry*, 57–59.
56. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 201–2, n 57.
57. Sanders, *No Other Name*, 2002, n 57.