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# The Heavenly Logic of Proxy Baptism

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# FIRST THINGS

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## THE HEAVENLY LOGIC OF PROXY BAPTISM

*by Terryl Givens*

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By mid-eighteenth century, two religious titans of the Anglo-Saxon world, erstwhile allies, were at loggerheads over the question of just how many people were destined for an eternity in hell. George Whitefield attacked John Wesley in 1740 for asserting “God’s grace is free to all.” Wesley had agonized over “How uncomfortable a thought is this, that thousands and millions of men, without any preceding offence or fault of theirs were unchangeably doomed to everlasting burnings!” Some, like Francis Okely, simply abandoned the restrictive hell: “Neither doeth it damn any Man, that he hath not the Word of God, if it is not given to him.” And some went on trial for so doing: Robert Breck was charged with believing “the heathen who obeyed the light of nature could be saved.”

In 1823, Joseph Smith claimed a visitation from an angelic messenger, who called himself Moroni. He recited to Smith a number of scriptures, one of which bore rich fruit in the early years of Mormonism. The book of Malachi ends with a cryptic prophecy of Elijah’s return to the earth, when he will “turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that [the Lord] will not come and strike the land with a curse.”

Jewish tradition, full of anticipation and yearning, weaves this interpretation: At the coming of the great judgment day, “the children . . . who had to die in infancy will be found among the just, while their fathers will be ranged on the other side.

The babes will implore their fathers to come to them, but God will not permit it.

Then Elijah will go to the little ones, and teach them how to plead in behalf of their fathers. They will stand before God and say, 'Is not the measure of good, the mercy of God, larger than the measure of chastisements? . . . [May they] be permitted to join us in Paradise?' God will give assent to their pleadings, and Elijah will have fulfilled the word of the prophet Malachi; he will have brought back the fathers to the children."

**The beauty of this story is in its intimation that any conception** of heaven worth pursuing is inseparable from reconciliation"not just to God, but also to our loved ones, those of our household and those of generations past. A year before his own death Smith wrote, "There is a thought more dreadful than that of total annihilation. That is the thought that we shall never again meet with those we loved here on earth . . . . If I had no expectation of seeing my mother Brother & Sisters & friends again my heart would burst in a moment."

Smith eventually divined in the words of Malachi a promise of bridging the gulf that separates the dead from the living, in order to unify and bind together in one heavenly family the numberless generations that have peopled the earth. In August of 1840, the last pieces in his project of a universal human salvation came together. At a funeral for Seymour Brunson, he had been reading to the audience from Paul's epistle to the Corinthians on the resurrection, with its reference to baptism for the dead. Then, noticing a widow in the audience who had lost an unbaptized child, and invoking the words of Jesus that "except a man be born of water and of the spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven," he "said that this widow should have glad tidings in that thing . . . . He went on to say that people could now act for their friends who had departed this life, and that the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God."

In other words, Smith believed the same ordinance that connects the deceased to the Lord by baptismal adoption is itself integrally related to the welding together of "children" to "fathers." This is so because, in Mormon thought, there is only one heavenly family, and Christ is its head. The ultimate end of those ordinances is to affect "one eternal bond of kindred affection and association." Too excited to wait

for the completion of the Nauvoo Temple then underway, Mormon elders immediately began baptizing members in the Mississippi on behalf of their deceased ancestors, by dozens and then hundreds. Today, that same work that Mormons see as fulfillment of Malachi's promise is performed in over 130 temples around the world.

The effect of posthumous baptisms is not conversion; only a personal, conscious decision to accept the baptismal covenant, in this life or the next, constitutes conversion. The intention is to provide an opportunity for participation in that "whole and complete and perfect union" of the human family. Certainly the scheme reflects a Mormon vision of the eternities, and many are not happy to be put on a guest list for a party they have no intention of attending. Others, on the other hand, can appreciate the motive if not the substance associated with the ordinance. Krister Stendahl, The Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm and dean of Harvard Divinity School, expressed "holy envy" for a practice so conspicuously rooted in love for one's ancestors. He recognized in this practice, with its hints of ancient origins, acts of devotion performed across a veil of silence, a reaching after our dead in the hope of uniting them to us. And it is these personal ancestors, not celebrities, holocaust survivors, or anybody else, who are the appropriate objects of proxy baptism, as the LDS Church has repeatedly affirmed.

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