

WEeping BY THE WATERS OF ZION



By *Elbert Eugene Peck*

IN THE SUMMER of 1982 I was distressed by the religious and spiritual questions of the “intellectuals” and my mind and heart were called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness. Given the undeniable sway of culture in this very human church, what, in fact, did I now believe, and what was really true? Revisionist history, philosophy, contemporary intrigues, a totalitarian bureaucracy, dysfunctional decision-making, unaccessible leaders, policy-driven inspiration, evolving theology, unaddressed injustices, manicured appearances, and more—all of which had been building for years—wove together in my deliberations to a dramatic crescendo which caused me, reluctantly and sorrowfully, but honestly, to question the teachings, testimonies, and personal experiences of my past. Was everything so culturally conditioned that Mormonism was but a local manifestation of God working among humans? During one reflective walk I remember searching my being to answer “What do I *know* for sure?” I was relieved when I found I could not deny there was a spiritual side to life, but I was scared when I couldn’t say for sure that I believed in Christ (I do now). I could not deny or rationalize away the witnesses of my past spiritual experiences, yet I wasn’t sure my former interpretations of them were accurate. Had I simply assumed that they validated my Mormon worldview because those LDS beliefs were the only categories I possessed with which to analyze and to understand life? And if I was so dependent upon ephemeral culture to know anything, what, then, ultimately, was Truth? My spiritual center was not holding. Come the fall, would I be a Mormon? A Christian? I faced these terrifying possibilities alone, not choosing to burden, or frighten, friends and, correspondingly, I felt increasingly estranged not only from my religious tradition, friends, and personal history, but also from God and from rich attributes which I knew existed in me, and which I celebrated, but which did not animate me now.

After running an errand to BYU, I took an introspective journey around the campus, recollecting my simpler, believing college days. Although it had just been a few years since I was an undergraduate there, I felt like Gene in John Knowles’s *A Separate Peace* returning to Devon School fifteen years after World War II. Every site I glanced at reminded me of warm conversations with friends and professors, classes which had inspired and challenged me, idealistic forums and private hopes, prayers for friends and personal revelations. I recalled a late-night disordered exit from the MARB after viewing for the first time *It’s A Wonderful Life*, and then, while kneeling in a snow-covered Kiwanis Park, I prayed to be a “good person.” I relived the daily nature walks with my field botany class where I acclaimed the joy and variety of Creation. I looked up at Y Mountain and thought of the summer night when a group of friends anxiously awaited a full moon-rise. Finally, through the ever-brightening mountain halo the moon popped up, gloriously, some R.M. quoted, “The Church shall come forth out of the wilderness of darkness and shine forth as fair as the moon” (D&C 109:73). I thought about Zion putting on her fair garments. My eyes misted, and I yearned to be a part of the Latter-day pageant. I had very much lived the intended BYU experience. Now it seemed simple-minded and distant. Was this indulgent nostalgic journey an attempt to conquer my doubting side with tender memories? Many former ideals came to mind, most I still affirmed, but my commitment to them was now tentative, lacking the gospel passion which spawned them. They now seemed to float inside me, unconnected, suspended, as if their unifying string had been cut and they would soon drift randomly away with the currents of life.

Eventually I wandered into the Harris Fine Arts Center. It was almost empty on this lazy summer afternoon. I wandered through the KBYU tunnel and looked in the trash bins where Bill Silcock and I used to scrounge for discarded art objects to decorate our V-Hall

dorm room. I replayed a study group discussion with Elouise Bell on spirituality and R-rated movies. I looked at the paintings but didn’t have the interest to explore them as before. I thought of the dates I took to classical events in the deJong Concert Hall. Even these “secular passions” were dulled in the spiritual ecology of my crisis. In the Nelke Theatre I painfully rehearsed my embarrassing Mask Club performance which I had reluctantly acted in to help my home teacher’s directing project. I remembered my film classes there, too, and the ward religious Christmas program I had organized across the hall in the debate theatre. For me, everything then—all activities, joys, and sorrows—had been immersed in religion and Mormonism, and conjuring up their memories also brought twinges of angst.

Finally, I took a complicated route through a maze of secluded stairs and narrow halls to the dimly lit stage of the Pardoe Theatre where my BYU ward had met for several years. After roaming listlessly around the proscenium, eerily punctuated with the echoing clop-clop of my Weejuns on the hardwood floor, I sat on the edge and looked into the dark rows of chairs. I was tired of the day’s fruitless sentimentality. With a sigh of exhaustion, I quoted out loud a personalized revision of the opening lines of Robert Frost’s “Directive” (a poem I had memorized walking to and from classes): “Back out of all this now too much for me, / Back to a time made simple by the loss / Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off.” “Yes, this is all too much for me,” I uttered to myself, as if performing a dramatic soliloquy. “It was so much simpler then.” I stared again into the empty seats and thought of my former BYU ward and the joys I had in that community: our yearnings for Zion and discussions on what it meant to be pure in heart; countless cases of service and care; expressions of love and concern; dances and testimonies and parties. I then thought of the two years I served as elders quorum president in that very theatre. Looking at the empty chairs, I recalled as many men as I could and where they sat and what they were like. I remembered one experience after a sacrament meeting when a friend and I each expressed our mutual love of the gospel and of each other, and I felt that our souls had truly, if briefly, touched and become one. Then we wiped our tears so no one would see. How wonderful it had been to live and grow and serve in that community of love.

Then I began to weep, sensing how far I had journeyed from this pure religion of interconnected love and life which I had

known most of my life. My nugatory answerless doubts paled compared to the complete emotional, social, and spiritual depths I had experienced then. Sobbing and gesturing to the vacant, yet crowded theatre, I recited the last lines of the Frost poem, this time the theatrics were gone. I was bitterly and joyfully acknowledging a re-revealed truth: "Here are your waters and your watering place. / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion." As I navigated my blurry-eyed way to the visitor's parking lot, there began distilling in me a deep, calm commitment to return and drink of living waters from my watering place—my Mormon community.

My commitment to that hard-come revelation has outlasted the confused gladness of the epiphany. This episode has become a personal myth explaining to me my relationship to the Church. Regardless of my intellectual questings and journeys (a genuine spiritual part of me), I choose, at times half-heartedly and reluctantly, to explore them from within an involvement in my religious community where tradition challenges my independent thoughts and actions, where individual Saints elicit service, sacrifice, and moral choice, where I bless and am blessed, and where the real issues of life are raised and fulfilled. It is often not easy to do. I still rigorously question and challenge the customs and assumptions of my culture. I am often sad at the idiocies I see, but I am no longer in a crisis of culture. Religion is not only inescapably bound to culture, religion is culture, since culture is our social lives; it can be shaped and improved but not escaped.

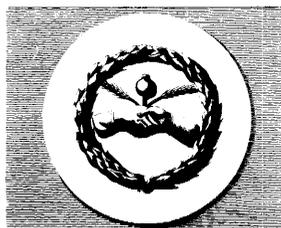
Indeed, Truth (not just religion), for me, is now primarily experiential and social. All intellectual deliberations are, at best, rough approximations, tentative formulations of those "puzzling reflections in a mirror" (1 Cor. 13:12 Revised English Bible). And while thinking and pondering are essential spiritual exercises to grow and to serve God with our minds, Truth is more; it is in being—becoming the attributes in the Sermon on the Mount and Paul's essay on charity. And those cognate "spiritual" attributes are primarily social: patience, long suffering, kindness, selflessness, gentleness, meekness, forgiving, peacemaking. It is in confronting these issues, together—in community—that we will one day be able to see God face to face.

Sometimes I speculate whether the hierarchical Church is as true as the gospel (thank you Gene England), but I believe a ward of imperfect Christians whose crazy lives demand our binding moral responses is more true than any abstract gospel principle. ☺

TURNING THE TIME OVER TO...

Hugh W. Nibley

PRIESTHOOD



EDITOR'S NOTE: Several weeks ago, a friend gave us a copy of this piece, purportedly written by Hugh Nibley. When we read it, it had the feel of Nibley's classic social commentaries but not the look; for one thing, Nibley doesn't use multiple exclamation points. Obviously, ours was an uncorrected transcription from a clandestine recording. After a second person gave us a copy which was given to him by his BYU religion teacher, we contacted Brother Nibley. He corrected our copy and allowed us to publish an "authorized version" of what was originally part of a Sunday School lesson.

THE PRIESTHOOD CEASES to be effective when exercised "in any degree of unrighteousness" (D&C 131:37), but it operates by the spirit, and the spirit is not deceived but is exquisitely sensitive to the slightest color of fraud, pretention, self-will, ambition, cruelty, etc. "When we undertake...to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold the heavens withdraw themselves; and the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or authority of that man" (D&C 121:37). But what about the *righteous* dominion of the priesthood? That can be easily recognized, for it operates "only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love *unfeigned*; by kindness and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the souls without hypocrisy, and without guile . . . with "bowels full of charity towards all men . . ." (121:41ff). Even in the eternities the power of the priesthood flows "without compulsory means...forever and ever" (121:46).

Who can deny such a power to another? No man. Who can bestow it on another? No man. We like to think that the Church is divided into those who have it and those who

don't have it; but it is the purest folly to assume that we can tell who has it and who does not. God alone knows who is righteous and how righteous; yet "the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven," and those "cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principle of righteousness" (D&C 121:35ff). The result is, that if there is anyone who really holds the priesthood, no one is in a position to say who it is—only by the power to command the spirits and the elements is such a gift apparent. But as far as commanding or directing other people, there every man must decide for himself.

One valuable hint the Lord has given us, however, namely the assurance that of all those who "hold" the priesthood almost *none* really possess it. "That the rights of the priesthood . . . may be conferred upon us, it is true," making us formally priesthood holders, "but when we undertake to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in *any* degree of unrighteousness" the priesthood is void. And this is how it is in "*almost all*" cases in the Church: "We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of *almost all men*, as soon as they get a little authority, as, they suppose, they will *immediately* begin to exercise unrighteous dominion. Hence many are called but few are chosen" (D&C 121:39-40).

What does one have to do to be chosen?

First, one may not set one's heart upon the things of this world (121:35)—so much for the priesthood as something to show off; then, one may not aspire to the honors of men—so much for the priesthood as something for prestige. One cannot exercise any power of the priesthood in *any* degree of unrighteousness—this in full recognition of the fact that "it is the nature of *almost all men*" to do that very thing as soon as they

think they have power and authority.

This leaves a few humble, unpretentious, and unworldly people as the sole holders of a valid priesthood. It is the "few humble followers of Christ" who are the strength of the Church throughout much of the Book of Mormon history.

What irony. As far as the whole world is concerned, the priesthood is a thing of value which is cruel to withhold from anyone, because it enhances one's status and dignity among his fellows, whether inside the Church or outside. And yet the one thing that renders that priesthood completely null and void is to treat it as something to aspire to among one's fellows. Priesthood is strictly an arrangement between the individual priesthood holder and his brethren in the eternal worlds, as personal and private as anything can be.

We might as well recognize the fact that whatever we say and do in righteousness is going to be misinterpreted. The only way we can make things easier for ourselves in the world is to go the way of the world. It would be hard to deny that the peace and prosperity of the Church in the past years has been largely the fruit of willingness to go the way the world goes.

Where all truth is encompassed in one great whole to raise one question is to raise many others, and any issue relevant to the gospel inevitably leads to a discussion of the whole thing.

Is not the priesthood everything? Not on this earth. On this earth it is nothing, and as soon as we try to use it for any kind of status, power, rule, or authority, it automatically cancels out.

TO repeat, as we are prone to do for lack of wit, for those who hold the priesthood on this earth, it is, the Prophet Joseph said, "an onerous burden," not a prize. One cannot give orders to another by the priesthood. One cannot use it to acquire prestige, fame or wealth. Far from impressing one's fellow men, it is held in derision by them. The moment one tries to make honor or glory or exercise dominion by the priesthood "amen to the priesthood of that man"—it automatically becomes null and void. What good is it then? Over whom does it exercise dominion? Over the spirits and over the elements—but not over one's fellow-men, who cannot under any circumstances be deprived of their complete free agency.

Though some may find it hard to believe, I find no cause for boasting in my priesthood—nothing is easier than confer-

ring it upon one, but that is only the beginning; for it to be a real power requires a degree of concentration, dedication, and self-discipline which few ever attain to, and for the rest priesthood is not a blessing but a terrible risk. The priesthood is not a badge of office to be worn as a feather in a cap.

Do we really believe the First Vision? Thousands of Latter-day Saints attest to it every Fast Sunday; but when the earliest, fullest, and best account of the First Vision, dictated by the Prophet at the age of 26 to Frederick G. Williams, was discovered and published in 1968 it caused not the slightest ripple of interest in the Church. It is enough, apparently, to know that God has spoken again from the heavens—never mind what he said.

The most useful lesson is the silence of heaven on this particular issue in the light of our own woeful ignorance. There is a connection between the two. Where the people do not seek for wisdom and knowledge, God will not give it to them, and so they remain in ignorance, and may not ask for help from above.

Nothing pleases God more than to have his children "seek greater light and knowledge"—it was for that that Adam, Abraham, Enoch, Moses, and Joseph Smith were rewarded with the richest blessings. Nothing displeases him more than to have them "seek for power, and authority, and riches" (3 Nephi 6:15). Through the years the Latter-day Saints have consistently sought not for the former but for the latter. It is only right and proper that we should stew in our own juice for a while.

"I sought for the blessings of the fathers . . . desiring also to be one who possessed greater *knowledge*, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess *greater knowledge* . . ." (Abraham 1:2).

Twice he repeats it—he wants knowledge. Up to the last, even after he had learned all the doctrines of salvation, Adam still "seeks for greater light and knowledge" and for such knowledge we should seek eternally. But what do we hear? A former president of the BYU pompously announced at a convention of educators that we at the BYU are *not* seeking for truth, because we have the truth! This is where we stand today. It is common at the BYU for students to protest against being taught anything they did not know before: "Wherefore murmur ye, because that ye shall receive more of my word? . . . And because that I have spoken one word he need not suppose that I cannot speak another; for my work is not yet finished; neither shall it be unto the end of man . . ." (2 Nephi 29:8-9).

The fact is that the Latter-day Saints "will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be" (2 Nephi 32:7). They simply are just not interested. How little we know about things. How little we want to know. The information is there, far more abundant than we have been willing to realize, if we will only reach out for it. To wait for a revelation on the subject is foolish until we have exhausted all the resources already placed at our disposal.

The strong prejudice has long been extended to the Indians by many Mormons in high position, yet the Mormons alone of all the people in the world believe the Indians to be the true blood of Israel, no less.

Such attitudes are strengthened by the snobbery of American suburbia; the Mormons like to think of themselves as WASPS—yet it was the rural, white, Christian, Protestant Americans upon whom the Lord with his own lips excoriated to the youthful prophet; they are *all* hypocrites, said he: "They were *all* wrong . . . *all* their creeds were an abomination in his sight . . . those professors were *all* corrupt: 'They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me . . . having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.'" (Joseph Smith-History 1:19).

There are those in the Church who would identify Zion with "Executive Meadows, the Exclusive Condominium for the Right People."

REPEAT of repeat: Over whom does it exercise power, then? Over the spirits and over the elements—never over one's fellow men, whose free agency is absolute and inalienable.

Christ commanded the spirits, and they obeyed him; he commanded the elements and they obeyed him, but men he would not command, and rebuked the apostles at Capernaum for suggesting it. "how often would I have gathered you together . . . and ye would not!"

What, then is the priesthood on this earth? It is what Brigham Young and the Twelve wrote in the *Times and Seasons* in 1839, they called the priesthood an "onerous duty," a load to be borne. Very few men on earth, including those in the Church are really qualified. In terms of prestige, status, power, influence, pleasure, privilege, "power, and authority, and riches" (3 Nephi 6:37), the priesthood has absolutely nothing to offer. The world laughs at it, the Latter-day Saints abuse or ignore it, those who take it seriously do so in "fear and trembling." ❧