

CELEBRATING *THE BACKSLIDER*

PROPRIETY AND THE COWBOY JESUS

By Neal Chandler

THE LONG-TOOTHED fray over the cowboy Savior in Levi Peterson's *The Backslider* has sometimes been waged among friends around the dinner table in my home. This altercation has not surprised me. It has, on the other hand, disappointed me a little—by its flat predictability, by the equally predictable avenues of complaint into which objections tend to fall, and finally on account of the glibness with which details of the novel are often bulldozed under a long moraine of generalization. In the forms familiar to me, objections to this novel seem to frame an argument not so much about the Cowboy Jesus, nor about the characters or setting or plotting of the book, as about a wider preoccupation with theological decorum. We are engaged in a kind of Sunday School Board squabble over what kind of dress and behavior is to be permitted in this church—even to the almighty Lord of Hosts—and what kind decidedly is not.

Let me concede from the outset what is perhaps already apparent: that I belong to the admirers of the novel. I am greatly moved by the redemption scene at the end of a difficult journey. I have read it several times and have never failed to be touched, to choke up, and to wish that First and Last things were really, finally just like this. It is not easy, however, to tell you exactly what the “this” in that statement means. In part this is true because I do not believe that being moved is a reliable indication of merit or authenticity. After all, I have also often been moved by AT&T and by Folger's Coffee commercials. After all, I have sometimes fallen fast asleep during teary, heartfelt affirmations in testimony meeting. After all, I have witnessed powerful stump speakers from Brigham Young University's traveling Education Week tear-up and cry on cue, like a good actor in an anniversary performance, primed and honed to portray yet one more time a bosom freshly burning. As a

touchstone of conviction, emotions compel even me, but I also know they are nothing if not dangerous. What draws me back to this scene in *The Backslider* is beauty—beauty of a rare religious kind that neither contradicts the fallen world nor transcends it but instead holds it very, very close in a forgiving embrace. And the emotions this engenders, unlike the push-button emotions of commercials and spiritual stump speeches, are both involuntary and hard-won.

The Backslider is not an easy read. With the exception of Marianne, Frank Windham's Lutheran bride, the central characters of the novel—Frank, his mother, his brother Jeremy/Alice—are painful and embarrassing embodiments of human extremity, who fall well outside the safe, suburban spheres of measure and niceness and conservative accommodation which are home to most of contemporary American Mormonism. In company with a Medea or a Raskolnikov, a Captain Ahab or a Faustian Adrian Leverkühn, they stray far beyond the norms of the culture that produced them. They are over-the-top, a little or a lot crazy. And because Mormonism is central to the novel, is right up front onstage, for Mormons these over-the-top characters are as unnerving as rogue relatives who have gone fundamentalist, have taken extra marriage partners to their pious bosoms, have taken assault weapons and distilled water, camouflage gear and excessive stores of chemical fertilizer into their basements. To read about such people is not unlike listening to public discussions of Danites and blood atonement, of political kingdoms of God and theocratic monarchy, of secret, wildly polyandrous polygyny. All of these extremes are historical varieties of Mormon wildness to which you and I have been far too religiously domesticated, not to say house-broken, ever to be party.

I know that many believers are concerned

about spiritual propriety.¹ They are offended by a heavenly vision emergent from the rushing waters of a urinal. It is no surprise that many cannot abide a deity who curses and breaks the Word of Wisdom. I would also guess that—though this remains unspoken—most do not much like his wearing a Stetson either or riding a sleepy-eyed roan. The truth is, we like our Jesuses the old-fashioned way: white-robed, sandal-clad, and Scandinavian. This vision is fixed in our religious art, our publications, our movies, our minds, our mythology. Even a Jesus in a dark general authority suit and red tie with male pattern baldness would—surely—seem embarrassing.

The Jesus of the New Testament, a man certain to have had far more Mediterranean coloring and Semitic physiognomy than would do for a visitors' center movie,² hung out with street rabble and sinners and the excommunicated agents of foreign tyranny. He cheated the Sabbath and also certain dietary laws, profaned Deity with outrageous kinship claims, and mostly ignored the oppressions of the occupying Romans. Jesus of Nazareth was no patriot. He was, in fact, a thorn of embarrassment to those stalwart persons who would gladly have embraced a proper, decorous, and suitably commanding Messiah. When you think about it, this same New Testament Jesus has caused some embarrassment for Latter-day Saints, who have had to turn his six miraculous pots of wine at the wedding in Cana miraculously back into grape juice in order to rehabilitate the miracle worker for our Doctrine and Covenants.

The truth is, we want our Christian Gods narrowly Hellenic, which is to say Platonic and traditional, which is to say we want them pure, free of all idiosyncrasy, failing, or foible, any taint of experience, any and all suggestion of personality. We do not want a personal God to embarrass us by getting or being personal.

Even some friends of the Cowboy Jesus see his personal qualities as a kind of playful de-certification. He becomes a specifically fictional creation, a good and perhaps useful thing but something altogether different from and not to be confused with a heavenly creator. Hobbled by personality, he becomes all-too-human. Sort of like Samson with his hair cut. Engagingly muscular and entertaining, he is also temporarily harmless and, therefore, a disarming come-on for “non-members.” The famous milk before meat. The savory bait that may precede an enlightened switch to a more meticulously flavorless deity.

Where, however, in all of this is the God become truly human who also remained



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God? And in what sense human? Did he ever sweat? Deal with acne or hair loss? Or, like Frank Windham, struggle with lust? Did he touch himself and long after girls? After boys, for that matter? Did he sometimes lie awake at night feeling alienated, resentful, and failed? The questions seem nearly unspeakable (I myself have resorted to euphemism), but where, then, do we look for the God revealed to Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail who had descended below all of Joseph's trials and failings and deeply compromising, all-too-human experience?

LEVI Peterson has written of the novel that its turning point hinges on unconditional grace and that this is implicit when the Cowboy Jesus asks Frank Windham, who has begun to flagellate his body and brood over blood atonement, why he can't let Jesus' blood alone suffice for his sins. That, however, is the only formal gesture at soteriology in this scene. Otherwise, Jesus speaks neither of condemnation nor of redemption. He neither requires behavior nor absolves Frank from the need to change his behavior. Mostly he listens. It's his job. He empathizes. Makes suggestions. He speaks as someone who knows sorrow and tragedy and craziness and personal error. He is sorry. He doesn't fix things, clean them up, justify or explain them. He is just trying to help Frank rise above them, trying to be a friend, a counselor, a brother. For me, the astringent requirements of perfection, degrees of moral tidiness, seem as relevant here as a recipe for Lysol or instructions for achieving laboratory asepsis. Is it so beyond imagination that the God of this world should be deeply, inextricably, even embarrassingly caught up in it?

The Cowboy Jesus advises Frank to enjoy his wonderful wife, good food, his deeply physical life as best he can, to help his offended mother-in-law, to forgive God the heartbreak and the craziness in his family, and forgive Him as well the terrible allure and beauty of the world. If you can think of better, more spiritual, more deeply Mormon advice, I would like to hear it. This is perhaps not the omnipotent, world-renouncing voice of Pauline Christianity, nor is it the spare, angry voice Frank Windham had expected to hear, but rather the world-wearied, world-invested, powerful yet bounded voice of King Follett theology. What could be more Mormon?

WHEN I was a missionary in Hamburg, Germany, I was cornered one day by a beautiful

young woman, a neighbor to a woman we were already teaching, who had suddenly seized upon the notion that these foreign missionaries and this new religion might be her salvation. She sat us down and told us what to me then was a harrowing story. She was, we learned, a kept woman—kept, in fact, by two or even three men. I could not get the count straight. These were, as you might suspect, married men of means, and they were also the entire source of support for her and her five-year-old son. She was stunning to look at. Far too lovely, I suppose, ever to have had to rely on anything beyond beauty for her livelihood. She lived comfortably, but she was not comfortable. She was frantic and deeply damaged. Her life arrangements had wounded and embittered her lesbian lover, the love of her life, as she told us, the only lover who had not purchased nor ever tried to exploit her. The circumstance was tearing her apart, and her desperation spilled over in what seemed clearly an unhealthily physical and obsessive relationship with her little boy.

I was twenty years old. My companion and I dutifully gave her the lessons, but she seemed somehow beyond consternation over the unfortunate multiplying of Christian denominations in the world or even over the loss of a foundation of prophets and apostles in the primitive church. The oh-so-carefully veiled admonishment to chastity in the sixth and final lesson seemed to affect her as I imagine a puff of nasal spray might affect a blazing forest. She was desperate, burning.

We were out of our depth, out of resources.

I called and asked the mission president for advice. He listened and then instructed us, soundly no doubt, to run, not walk to the nearest exit. And so we did. We fled—or did we abandon?—that desolate, exquisite woman, her extremity and her insatiable vulnerability. I was struck then and have sometimes since been struck by the fastidious timidity of my one-and-only true religion in the face of enormous pain, human extremity, and collective evil. This too has been a source of some embarrassment. I wish today that, instead of me and my companion and six memorized lessons, that desperate young mother in Hamburg had encountered something much more like Levi's novel. What she got was good intentions and sound, safe, correlated doctrine. What she needed was a Cowboy Jesus. 

NOTES

1. In a fleetingly famous devotional speech given at a twelve-stake fireside in February 1976, Apostle Boyd K. Packer identified an "unusual sense of spiritual propriety" as the touchstone of truly great and surpassing religious art. See *Arts and Inspiration*, ed. Steven P. Sondrup (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 3–21.

2. It was, for example, with a note of awe that Kieth Merrill, director of *The Testaments of One Fold and One Shepherd*, the Church's big-screen, two-continent saga of Christ's sojourn on earth, reported that the First Presidency had extended the casting process for Jesus of Nazareth well beyond his own timetable and casting criteria until, at last, in Denmark, an appropriate-looking actor was found for the role.



"Dear Lord, Our Heavenly Father, Our Master, Our Savior,
Our Chairman of the Ethics Committee. . ."