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Title Did the Early Christian Church Seek Salvation for the Dead?

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Abstract Review of *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* (2001), by Jeffrey A. Trumbower.

Did the Early Christian Church Seek Salvation for the Dead?

Gaye Strathearn

Jeffrey Trumbower has produced a volume discussing the concept of salvation for the dead in early Christianity that will be of great interest to many Latter-day Saint scholars and informed readers. In October 1840 the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote to the Twelve Apostles, introducing them to baptism for the dead: "I cannot in this letter give you all the information you may desire on the subject; but aside from knowledge *independent of the Bible,* I would say that it was certainly practiced by the ancient churches."[1] Although the prophet's "knowledge independent of the Bible" was revelatory in nature, Latter-day Saint scholars such as Hugh Nibley and John Tvedtnes have found extracanonical texts indicating that the early church performed baptisms for the dead.[2] Trumbower, not a Latter-day Saint, has added to

1. *History of the Church,* 4:231, emphasis added.

2. Hugh Nibley, "Baptism for the Dead in Ancient Times," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 100–167; John A. Tvedtnes, "Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity," in *The Temple in Time and Eternity,* ed. Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 55–78.

Review of Jeffrey A. Trumbower. *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. xv + 206 pp., with bibliography and indexes of ancient sources, modern authors, and general subjects. $49.95.

this corpus, although he has taken a broader approach that examines both vicarious baptism and prayers on behalf of the dead.

The author identifies two stories in particular that were very influential in antiquity in the discussion of posthumous salvation. These stories fascinated him, were the catalyst for his research, and became important threads that he wove throughout his discussion. The first is the story of Thecla (found in the *Acts of Paul*), wherein she offers a prayer on behalf of Falconilla, the deceased pagan daughter of her friend and protector, Tryphaena. Falconilla appears in a dream to her mother, Tryphaena, and says, "Mother, thou shalt have in my place the stranger, the desolate Thecla, that she may pray for me and I be translated to the place of the just."[3] The second story involves a third-century AD woman by the name of Perpetua, a Christian convert who eventually becomes a martyr. While she is in prison she sees a vision of her younger brother Dinocrates, who had died at the age of seven from some form of facial tumor. In the vision he is separated from his sister by a huge gulf. Perpetua sees him coming out of a dark hole. He is very thirsty, pale, and dirty. Although she sees a pool of water nearby, her brother is too small to reach it. As a result Perpetua prays day and night for her brother until she receives a second vision. This time she sees that the tumor on her brother's face has healed and that he is able to drink from the pool of water. Both of these stories support the belief that the prayer of a righteous person can influence the status of people in the afterlife.

Trumbower began his research by asking when and why the Christian Church, primarily in the West, began to see death as such a "sharp boundary" that precluded the dead from participating in salvation. His approach analyzes the "exceptions to this general principle from ancient Christianity," such as the stories of Thecla and Perpetua, and he concludes that "the principle itself was slow to develop and not universally accepted in the Christian movement's first four hundred

3. *Acts of Paul* 23.27, in *New Testament Apocrypha,* ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and trans. R. McL. Wilson (Cambridge, England: Clarke, 1992), 2:244.

years. In fact, only in the West was this principle definitively articulated, due in large part to the work and influence of Augustine" (p. 3).

Rescue for the Dead is divided into eight chapters that discuss the major relevant sources in antiquity: "Greek, Roman, and Jewish Succor for the Dead," "The New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature," "Thecla's Prayer for Falconilla," "Perpetua's Prayer for Dinocrates," "Jesus' Descent to the Underworld," "Posthumous Progress and Universal Salvation," "Augustine's Rejection of Posthumous Salvation for Non-Christians," and "Gregory the Great's Prayer for Trajan."

After examining the relevant texts, Trumbower concludes that the motivations for those who supported posthumous salvation were diverse. They included creating "an alternative 'family' of supporters among the dead," "making sure that Christianity had an ancient pedigree by rescuing long-dead culture heroes," and being "concerned about theological and philosophical issues surrounding the justice and mercy of God" (p. 154). In contrast, the common thread among those who rejected salvation for the dead "was their conviction that if God were to show mercy to non-Christians after death, or if a non-Christian were able to repent after death, then there would be no urgent need to set things right in this life. The church on earth would not be the sole locus of salvation, and moral seriousness might go into decline. . . . The relevance, power, and authority of the church on earth were at stake" (p. 155).

Throughout the book Trumbower does a very nice job of tracing "the history of theological ideas" (p. 9). Both scholars and lay readers can benefit from his collection of the relevant texts and his careful analysis. Perhaps Trumbower's greatest contribution is his discussion of the sociological contexts for the texts. As he notes, "beliefs and practices concerning salvation of the dead can disclose a great deal about the world of the living" (p. 9). For example, Trumbower shows that before he was a bishop, Augustine, when discussing Matthew 5:26, "holds out the possibility . . . for a change of fate after death, an escape from punishment" (p. 129). However, it was during his debate with a young convert named Vincentius Victor that Augustine, now a bishop, solidified his rejection of any posthumous salvation (pp. 133–37). Trumbower argues

that Vincentius Victor's desire for the church to extend its salvation to nonmembers after their deaths "makes perfect sense in a historical context of the transition from a largely pagan culture to a largely Christian one. Divided families [meaning families consisting of both pagans and Christians] . . . and religious ruptures between the generations were the norm. In advocating their merciful position, however, in Augustine's view these people diminished the role and authority of the church on earth" (pp. 139–40).

The author is well aware of the Latter-day Saint practice of performing baptisms for the dead.[4] In his introduction he describes the Shakers and Mormons as "two examples from American history" that "illustrate what it can mean when a Christian community envisions the possibility of posthumous salvation for non-Christians." He incorporates these examples to "help to define some of the issues at stake in the ancient sources" (p. 3). Trumbower gives a fair description of the Latter-day Saint practice, although he does sensationalize it a little when he begins the discussion with the 1995 controversy over whether members should do vicarious baptisms for victims of the Holocaust.[5] He mentions the church's "95-year rule" on doing baptisms for those not in a member's direct line and quotes Elder Monte Brough to the effect that "church officials had directed members to stop baptizing Holocaust victims in 1991, 'but the ban was violated by some

4. Trumbower has a neighbor who is a member of the church and provided him with "some of the resources on Mormon theology found in the introduction" (p. viii). These sources include Doctrine and Covenants 137 (although he knows it from when it was an appendix to the Pearl of Great Price); Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56); M. Guy Bishop, "'What Has Become of Our Fathers?' Baptism for the Dead at Nauvoo," *Dialogue* 23/2 (1990): 85–97; and Grant Underwood, "Baptism for the Dead: Comparing RLDS and LDS Perspectives," *Dialogue* 23/2 (1990): 99–105. He does not seem to be aware of Doctrine and Covenants 138 or of President Wilford Woodruff's 1894 revelation encouraging members to be sealed to their parents: "We want the Latter-day Saints from this time to trace their genealogies as far as they can, and to be sealed to their fathers and mothers. Have children sealed to their parents, and run this chain through as far as you can get it." *The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff,* ed. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969), 157.

5. See Gustav Niebuhr, "Mormons to End Holocaust Victim Baptism," *New York Times,* 29 April 1995, national edition. Cf. the First Presidency statement on the matter published in the *Church News,* 8 July 1995, 3.

over-zealous record gatherers who were motivated by love and compassion after visiting Holocaust museums and memorials'" (p. 5).

Trumbower also gives a brief account of the introduction of the practice of vicarious baptism, including the Prophet Joseph Smith's vision about his brother Alvin, Elijah's bestowal of the sealing keys on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, and references to Malachi 4:6 and 1 Corinthians 15:29. He then notes the contrasts between the baptisms that were performed for "the dead American heroes John Adams, George and Martha Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence" and the fact that the sons of perdition are not eligible for any posthumous salvation (D&C 76:31–36, although he cites it as D&C 71:31–36; p. 5). He also acknowledges that "everyone in the world who is interested in family history and genealogy has benefited from the enormous resources the Latter-day Saints have put into research for saving the dead" (p. 6).

With this background laid, Trumbower makes five references to the Latter-day Saint practice throughout the remainder of his book. First, in his discussion of 1 Corinthians 15:29 he agrees "with Mormon prophet Joseph Smith" that "the grammar and logic of the passage point to a practice of vicarious baptism of a living person for the benefit of a dead person," although he uses the Marcionite model to argue that such baptisms were only performed for those "who had indicated a clear desire to be baptized while still alive" (pp. 35, 36). Second, when discussing the Shepherd of Hermas 9.16 and *Epistula Apostolorum* 27, he draws an analogy between some early Christians' desire to co-opt ancient dead heroes into their new religion with the "early Mormon baptism of George Washington" (p. 49). Third, Trumbower interprets the "nineteenth-century Mormon practice" (p. 86) as a response to the persecutions and family rejection that resulted from the creation of a new religion. He compares it to Thecla's and Perpetua's prayers as a means of "creating a new family among the dead, in part replacing their living families who have rejected them" (p. 86). Fourth, he compares Latter-day Saint practices with the Nag Hammadi text, the *Apocryphon of John,* where there is a clear statement that certain people will have no opportunity to repent in the next life. These are people who "have

turned away" (*Apocryphon of John,* II, 27, 23).[6] Then Trumbower writes, "It is significant that the only souls without hope are those of apostates, strikingly similar to Mormon theology. . . . Leaving the elect group is the only unforgivable sin, quite an effective strategy to maintain group identity, cohesiveness, and control" (p. 112). The fifth and last reference is part of the conclusion.

> Latter-day Saints and Shakers of the nineteenth century revived certain types of posthumous salvation, without necessarily being aware of the earlier history, save the one Pauline passage about baptism on behalf of the dead, 1 Cor. 15:29. This shows that the religious impulse to rescue the dead can arise any time there is enthusiasm for the new activity of God in the world. If the living can share in the new blessings bestowed by God, why should the dead be excluded? If the living can reorient themselves, repent, and/or benefit from the prayers of the living, why not the dead? For the Shakers, Mormons, and Universalists of the nineteenth century, reinterpreting traditional Christianity also meant throwing off traditional Christian restrictions on salvation for the dead. (p. 155)

One place in which Trumbower could have interjected another reference to the Latter-day Saints is in his discussion in chapter 5 of 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6 and of Christ's descent to the underworld, but he does not seem to be aware of Doctrine and Covenants 138 or the importance of these Petrine passages for Latter-day Saint understanding of vicarious baptisms.

On the whole I think that both Latter-day Saint scholars and informed readers will enjoy *Rescue for the Dead.* It does a very nice job of bringing together most of the relevant documents from antiquity.[7] Readers should, however, realize that the author's approach to the

6. Frederik Wisse, trans., *The Apocryphon of John* (II, 1; III, 1; IV, 1; and BG 8502, 2), in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English,* ed. James M. Robinson and Richard Smith, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 120.

7. Some omissions include the Ethiopic materials mentioned in Tvedtnes, "Baptism for the Dead," 55–78.

Latter-day Saints is sociological rather than theological. That has two main consequences for his work: it allows him to give a fair description of our practices, but it also means that his interpretation of those practices comes from the realm of the social sciences rather than from the realm of faith. This colors the interpretation. I think, however, that Trumbower's concluding sentiments are worth noting: "Although I have much sympathy for those in every age who have wished to rescue the dead, it is not the goal of this volume to take sides or to chart a course for Christian theology. Those who take on such a task, however, should be informed of the early history of the question in all its facets, and if this book has shed some light on that history, then it will have achieved its goals" (p. 155). In that aspect, I think Trumbower has produced a very fine volume.