

**“Have Reference to a Personage like Adam:”**  
**Literal and Figurative Interpretations of Adam in Early Mormonism**  
by Jacob Rennaker

“In order to prove anything from scripture, it is highly necessary in the first place to lay down some certain, definite, infallible rule of interpretation, without which the mind is lost in uncertainty and doubt... The neglect of such a rule has thrown mankind into the utmost confusion and uncertainty in all their Biblical researches. Indeed, while mankind are left at liberty to transform, spiritualize, or give any uncertain or private interpretation to the word of God, all is uncertainty.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the hallmarks of early Mormonism was the specificity with which church leaders addressed issues such as the origin and destiny of humanity. Along with this emphasis on specificity came a very literal interpretation of scriptures and their associated doctrines, as evidenced by the previous quote. Such a tendency was an affront to Protestant Christianity’s preoccupation with the “mysteries” of the Divine, serving to differentiate Mormons from those Christian neighbors who had a tendency to “spiritualize.” In the case of the biblical figure Adam, early Mormons discussed his nature and role in the cosmic drama of humanity with a literalness and a specificity unknown to contemporary Christianity. On the other hand, early Mormons sometimes interpreted Adam figuratively, despite their literal and historical understanding of the human patriarch. An examination of how early Mormons interpreted the figure of Adam demonstrates that he was viewed not only in a very literal and specific way that far surpassed other Christians; he was also viewed figuratively in very unique ways that ultimately served as a means for early Mormons to understand the nature of God and the human.

For Mormons, the story of Adam began much earlier than contemporary Christianity had supposed. Joseph Smith’s literal interpretation of Genesis 2:7 required an antecedent for Adam’s physical existence. He said, “How does it read in the Heb[rew?] that God made man & put into

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<sup>1</sup>Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning* (New York: W. Sanford, 1837), p. 12.

it Adams Spirit & so became a living Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> For Joseph, God’s act of animation in the creation of man required a pre-existent animating element. This element was identified as Adam’s spirit, which must have existed prior to this act of physical creation. An enigmatic song in the Kirtland Revelation Book 2 echoed this sentiment: “He [Enoch] saw the time when Adam his father was made and he saw that he was in eternity before a grain of dust in the ballance was weighed he saw that he emenated [*sic*] and came down from God.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Adam existed “in eternity” as a distinct entity before the creation of the earth. Such a view not only affirmed the historical nature of the man Adam; it affirmed the pre-historical nature of Adam’s spirit and his relationship to God.

This pre-mortal existence of Adam was given greater specificity when he was identified as the archangel Michael.<sup>4</sup> As such, Adam became a hero even before his earthly sojourn. A champion against the forces of evil, Michael / Adam led the hosts of heaven and thrust out the devil and his angels prior to the creation of humanity.<sup>5</sup> In equating Michael the archangel with the historical Adam, a once shadowy biblical figure became at once recognizable and central to the story of humanity. Michael / Adam was seen as being so significant in that pre-mortal realm, in fact, that he was described by Joseph Smith as holding a position of priesthood authority prior to his mortal existence on earth.<sup>6</sup>

The physical creation of Adam was also interpreted in a hyper-literal sense. Genesis 1:26 records God as saying, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” A literal reading of

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Bullock Report, 7 April 1844, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), p. 352.

<sup>3</sup> “Sang by the gift of Tongues & Translated,” Kirtland Revelation Book 2, February 27, 1833, pp. 48-49.

<sup>4</sup> D&C 27:11; 107:54; 128:21; Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, pp. 8, 13.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Rev. 12:7; D&C 29:36-37.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Smith stated, “The Priesthood was, first given to Adam: he obtained the first Presidency & held the Keys of it, from generation to Generation; he obtained it in the creation before the world was formed as in Gen. 1, 26:28,— he had dominion given him over every living Creature. He is Michael, the Archangel, spoken of in the Scriptures” (Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 8).

this passage resulted in a radical anthropomorphism. Joseph Smith was reported as saying, “God himself...is a man like unto one of yourselves...If you were to see him today you [would] see him a man for Adam was a man like in fashion & image like unto him[.] Adam wa[lked] talked & con[versed] with him as one man talks...with ano[ther].”<sup>7</sup> Because Joseph viewed Adam as a literal, historical figure, the scripture stating that God made man in his image was naturally interpreted literally as well. This established an ontological relationship between Adam the created and God the creator, setting forth a very literalistic interpretation of each.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to being a literal, historical figure, Adam was seen by early Mormons as having spoken a very particular language. Mormon scripture stated that among the first generation of humans, “a book of remembrance was kept...in the language of Adam...a language which was pure and undefiled.”<sup>9</sup> This “pure” language of humanity’s patriarch received special attention in an item recorded in the Kirtland Revelation Book.<sup>10</sup> Entitled “A Sample of pure Language, given by Joseph the Seer,” this discussion of the “pure language” spoken by Adam had an embedded theology. The name of God was given as “Awman,” which was defined as “the being which made all things in all its parts.” The human family was given the name “Sons Awman,” which “signifies...the greatest parts of Awman.” This detailed discussion of Adam’s “pure” language served to further legitimize Adam as a historical figure and associated him with a particular theological outlook concerning the nature of God and humanity.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Bullock Report, 7 April 1844, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 349.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel W. Richards articulated this point in his notes from the same sermon. His brief notes read, “God: a man like one of us, even like Adam” (Samuel W. Richards Record, 7 April 1844, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 361).

<sup>9</sup> Moses 6:5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Kirtland Revelation Book 1, circa March 1832, p. 144 [verso].

Beyond establishing a language among his posterity, Adam also served as their great patriarch. In Genesis 5:5, Adam's age at death was given (930), but the record was remarkably silent about the hundreds of years following his first few children. However, a revelation received by Joseph Smith stated that Adam was very active in this period, ordaining and maintaining a priesthood community.<sup>11</sup> Then, "three years previous to the death of Adam," this literal patriarch called together the righteous residue of his posterity and gave them "his last blessing."<sup>12</sup> The Lord appeared, declaring, "I have set thee to be at the head; a multitude of nations shall come of thee, and thou art a prince over them forever."<sup>13</sup>

Adam's authority as a "prince" over his posterity was viewed in very concrete terms by Joseph Smith: "He, (Adam) is the Father of the human family & presides over the Spirits of all men."<sup>14</sup> The nature of this presiding had to do with the order of the priesthood and its administration of saving ordinances. This was clarified elsewhere by Joseph in the following:

Adam who was the first man...the first and oldest of all, the great grand progenitor...was the first and father of all, not only by progeny, but he was the first to hold the spiritual blessings, the plan to whom was made known the plan of ordinances for the Salvation of his posterity unto the end, and to whom Christ was first revealed, and through whom Christ has been revealed from heaven and will continue to be revealed from henceforth.<sup>15</sup>

This age-old position of authority held by Adam was to be reaffirmed in a very specific ceremony. According to Joseph, the historical scene of Adam gathering his posterity before his death was to be repeated prior to "the coming of the Son of Man." At this point, "Adam delivers up his Stewardship to Christ, that which was deliver[e]d to him as holding the Keys of the Universe, but retains his standing as head of the human family."<sup>16</sup> According to this

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<sup>11</sup> D&C 107:40-50.

<sup>12</sup> D&C 107:53.

<sup>13</sup> D&C 107:55.

<sup>14</sup> Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 9.

interpretation, Adam has continued to be a literal patriarch for his posterity throughout the ages, and in the end, will retain this literal position of authority eternally.

This trend of extreme scriptural literalism and historical expansion was paradoxically contrasted in early Mormonism by figurative interpretations of Adam. One of the best examples of such figurative interpretation was a revelation given in September 1830.<sup>17</sup> This revelation utilized the story of Adam as a backdrop in order to discuss the nature of human agency. The discussion began: “Verily I say unto you, that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal, neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam your father, whom I created. Behold I give unto him that he should be an agent unto himself.” At this point, the Devil and his role as a tempter were introduced into the narrative, providing a brief sketch of this sinister character’s origin.

The subject of the revelation then shifted in the following lines: “& it must needs be that the Devil should tempt the children of men, or they could not be agents unto themselves, for if they never should have bitter, they could not know the sweet.” The earlier description of Adam as “an agent unto himself,” combined with the similar description of humanity as “agents unto themselves” suggests that Adam was functioning here as a representative or “stand-in” for the human family. The remainder of the revelation repeatedly shifted from Adam’s experience in (and expulsion from) Eden, to humanity’s experience in the world.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that throughout this discussion, no mention was made of Eve’s role in the Eden episode. This is significant, given the fact that Eve was prevalent in both the Genesis

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<sup>17</sup> This revelation must have been viewed as being particularly significant, as evidenced by its printing in one of the earliest issues of the *Evening and Morning Star* (Vol. 1, No. 4, September 1832) (=D&C 29).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Smith uses a similar figurative shift in his King Follett sermon. According to Thomas Bullock’s report, Joseph stated that “God made man & put into it Adams Spirit & so became a living Spirit—the mind of man—the mind of man is as immortal as God himself” (Thomas Bullock Report, 7 April 1844, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 352). Once again, a discussion of Adam immediately launches into a discussion of humanity in general. This suggests that Joseph did not infrequently interpret the figure of Adam figuratively.

and the Book of Moses accounts of this event.<sup>19</sup> Such an absence of Eve suggests that Adam was not being used in a strict, historical sense in this passage, but was instead being used figuratively to explore the principle of humanity's agency.

In certain instances, it appears as though both literal *and* figurative interpretations were employed by early Mormons. One such intriguing example concerning Adam appeared in the writings of Parley P. Pratt.<sup>20</sup> In addressing the physical creation of the first human, he described Adam as “formed of noble principles, and bearing in his godlike features the emblems of authority and dominion.” This description of Adam’s “godlike features” continued: “he was placed on the throne of power, in the midst of the paradise of God, and to him was committed power, and glory, and dominion, and the kingdom, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven.” Such language emphasized Adam’s literal divine heritage as one who was “fashioned in the express likeness and image of the Father and the Son.”

However, Pratt went on to describe the creation of woman using terminology that appears to be figurative: “From the bosom of this noble being, or rather from his side emanated woman.” When viewed in light of the earlier reference to Adam’s pre-mortal “emanation” from God, this use of the term “emanation” in the creation of Eve is striking. Was Pratt suggesting that Eve literally “emanated” from Adam in the same way that Adam “emanated” from God? Perhaps Pratt described the creation of Eve *figuratively* in order to create a very specific analogy between the creation of the human soul and the creation of the human body. That is to say, just as Eve was created (or “emanated”) from pre-existent material (Adam), so Adam was created (or “emanated”) from pre-existent material (God). If such was the case, then it appears as though

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gen. 3:1-24; Moses 4:6-31; 5:11.

<sup>20</sup> Parley P. Pratt, *Millennium and Other Poems: To Which is Annexed, A Treatise on the Regeneration and Eternal Duration of Matter* (New York: W. Molineux, 1840), pp. 114-115.

early Mormons could interpret Adam both literally *and* figuratively in order to better understand the nature of God and humanity.

A final example from the prophet Joseph Smith serves to demonstrate this ambiguity with which Adam was interpreted in early Mormonism. Following a discussion dealing with the heavenly responsibilities of God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost, Joseph stated: “The Great God has a name By w[h]ich He will be Called which is Ahman—also in asking have Referance to a personage Like Adam[,] for God made Adam Just in his own Image[.] Now this a key for you to know how to ask & obtain.”<sup>21</sup> The use of the name Ahman for God was clearly a reference to the aforementioned “Sample of pure Language” where the name for God is given as Awman.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the unique title “the Great God” used here by Joseph alluded to the description of God in the “Sample of pure Language.” According to this earlier discussion of Adam’s language, God “is the being which made all things in all its parts,” among which the human family are “the *greatest* parts of Awman.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, he could appropriately be referred to as “the Great God,” a title seldom used by Joseph Smith.

This usage of Adam’s “pure” language demonstrates that early Mormons believed they had received a literal sample of an ancient language spoken by the father of the human family. Because the name “Ahman” was used by Adam in this original language, that became an appropriate name for addressing God. This relationship between God and Adam was developed

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<sup>21</sup> McIntire Minute Book, 9 March 1841, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> John Whitmer was the scribe for “A Sample of pure Language,” where the name “Awman” is introduced (circa March 1832). Whitmer also served as scribe for a revelation received March 1, 1832, now known as D&C 78. One of the final phrases of this revelation originally read, “Wherefore, do the things which I have commanded you, saith your Redeemer, even Jesus Christ, who prepareth all things.” W.W. Phelps later revised this to read, “Wherefore, do the things which I have commanded you, saith your Redeemer, even **the Son Ahman**, who prepareth all things.” This revision is not dated, but it is clear that he was familiar with equation of Jesus Christ with Son Ahman / Awman, and perhaps its associated theology regarding the “parts” of creation. This alternative spelling (“Ahman” instead of “Awman”) also appears in the manuscript of a revelation given June 1, 1833 (=D&C 95:17), of which John Whitmer was also a scribe.

<sup>23</sup> Kirtland Revelation Book 1, circa March 1832, p. 144 [verso], emphasis added.

in the subsequent phrase: “in asking [God,] have Referance to a personage Like Adam[,] for God made Adam Just in his own Image[.]” In a sense, reflecting upon Adam enabled an individual to reflect upon the God who literally made Adam in his own image. Thus, in considering Adam’s literal creation in the image of God, he functioned as a sort of “doctrinal icon;” a means for focusing the mind of a worshipper on Deity, and capacitating individuals to “ask & obtain” from God in prayer.<sup>24</sup>

However, there is another way to read this passage. If the phrase “have Referance to a personage Like Adam” suggested that worshipers identify themselves with Adam figuratively (a sort of *imitatio Adam*), individuals could expand the view of their own personal histories to encompass the pre-mortal, mortal, and post-mortal realms of existence. Those who comprehended the scope of Adam’s history, in a sense, would be able to catch a glimpse of their own history and potential. The specificity with which the pre-mortal Adam (the heavenly Michael) was described, the detail given to his mortal life, and the vividness with which his post-mortal ministry was depicted allowed early Mormons to grasp the grandeur of their own extensive existence.

Joseph Smith once said, “I am going to tell you the des[igns] of God to the human race & why he interferes with the affairs of man[:] God himself who sits enthroned in yonder Heavens is a man like unto one of yourselves.”<sup>25</sup> In light of this statement, the same expansive conceptualization that applied to Adam and humanity could also be applied to God. Perhaps Joseph was suggesting that the key to “ask & obtain” *from* God is to realize that Adam and his

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<sup>24</sup> Along these same lines, Joseph Smith later explained that “having [a] knowledge of God we know how to Approach him & ask & he will answer” (Wilford Woodruff Journal, 7 April 1844, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 345). It was through a contemplation of Adam that such knowledge was attained.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Bullock Report, 7 April 1844, in Ehat, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 349.

posterity are fundamentally similar *to* God.<sup>26</sup> Humanity could then approach Deity with a sublime confidence unknown to other Christians. Only an extremely literal interpretation of Adam could have allowed for such a profound figurative understanding of humanity, as well as their individual relationship to God.

These several statements demonstrate the ambiguous nature of Adam in early Mormon thought. In the case of Adam, early Mormonism went beyond traditional literalism, adding a level of specificity unknown to contemporary Christianity. On the other hand, this extreme literalism allowed early Mormons figurative views of Adam in a way that went beyond the “spiritualized” readings of Adam among other Christians. Understanding this complex interplay between the literal and the figurative in early Mormonism may open further avenues of research. For instance, later “Adam-God” speculation may have resulted from a confusing of these literal and figurative interpretations of Adam, but only further research would be able to tell. This small sampling of the interaction between the literal and the figurative in early Mormon interpretations of Adam suggests that explanations of Mormonism’s literal-mindedness need to be more nuanced. Only in appreciating these many facets of early Mormon scriptural and doctrinal interpretation can scholars come to understand the minds of Mormonism’s first generation of theologians.

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<sup>26</sup> This ontological equality of God and humanity squares neatly with the Adam-related doctrines presented in the “Sample of pure Language” (Kirtland Revelation Book 1, circa March 1832, p. 144 [verso]) and “Sang by the gift of Tongues & Translated” (Kirtland Revelation Book 2, February 27, 1833, pp. 48-49), both discussed above.