

Good Literature for a Chosen People

By Eugene England

This essay is England's call to Latter-day Saints to be not only "chosen" but to also have the sense of being "called" to lead out as examples of God's highest ideals and therefore bless the world. It then uses examples from LDS literature of ways Mormon writers can assist in fulfilling this mission.

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VERY EARLY IN our history, we Mormons began to identify ourselves symbolically with ancient Israel as a *chosen* people. We too, we believed, were heirs to the covenant and blessings of Abraham because of God's restoration, through the Church, of the ancient order of salvation. As we were driven from place to place, finally from our city beautiful, Nauvoo, across a river into the wilderness, the identification became very literal.

When ancient Israel, under Moses, camped near Sinai after crossing the Red Sea and prepared for their journey through the wilderness to a promised land, the Lord declared, "If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine" (Ex. 19:5–6). In October 1845, just after Brigham Young, faced by increasing mob activity, committed the church to leave Nauvoo by spring, he and the Twelve wrote to the church in the name of the Lord, "The exodus of the nation of the only true Israel from these United States to a far distant region of the west . . . forms a new epoch"¹ and on the morning of February 16, 1846, when he rose in his wagon to address the assembled Saints who had crossed the river with him the day before, he cried with a loud voice, "Attention! the whole camp of Israel."

We still see ourselves that way, and my concern in this essay is to describe what might be a good, even great, literature for a people who see themselves as modern Israel—chosen by God, called and set apart from other human beings for a special mission, anointed inheritors of special blessings and responsibilities.

To Moses God said, explaining why he was giving him the law, including such things as dietary restrictions and payment of tithing, "For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God, and the Lord hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth" (Deut. 14:2). Clearly there is a strange complexity, even paradox, in being chosen. It means, as Lehi, another Israelite, told his sons, being "a choice and favored people of the Lord" (2 Nephi 1:19), but it also means, as God explained to Moses, being required to live God's law, to meet a higher ethical standard. The complexity is increased when we listen to the implied *reason* for God's choosing a people: To Abraham God said, "I will

make of thee a great nation . . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:2). Here being “chosen” seems not so much being *choice*, better than others, but rather being *called or selected* and then asked not only to live better than all the others, but to try to be a blessing to all those others too.

The Israelites had trouble with this complexity. They liked the *choice* part of chosen and often forgot the *called* part. Thus, John the Baptist rebuked the Jews: “Bring forth . . . fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Luke 3:8). To the Pharisees Jesus said, “If ye were Abraham’s children ye would do the works of Abraham” (John 8:39). Perhaps the central burden of the so-called literary prophets of the Old Testament is to remind Israel that they are chosen by God in order to serve him in a special way so they can bless others, that rather than favoring or excusing them, he holds them especially accountable.

The classic example is Amos, a “herdsman” from the hills just south of Jerusalem, who about 750 B. C. was called by God as a prophet to preach repentance to the Israelites, the chosen people. He went to Bethel in the Northern Kingdom, whose people thought themselves, because chosen, not only superior to the non-Israelites, but also better than their cousins, the people of Judah in the south. In what might be called the “Amos strategy,” the Lord through his prophet uses the people’s pride in being chosen to set them up to be especially affected by his message of repentance. God first condemns the *Gentiles* for their idolatries: “For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof” (Amos 1:3), he declares, and then he continues the refrain to condemn all the Israelites’ pagan, idolatrous neighbors, Gaza, Ammon, Tyre, Moab. We can imagine the crowd murmuring its agreement: “Amen, brother Amos, amen.” Then the Lord condemns their neighbor *Israelites*: “For three transgressions of *Judah*, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they have despised the law of the Lord, and have not kept his commandments.” We can imagine the shouts of assent at the threatened punishment of their hated relatives: “I will send a fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem.” (Amos 2:5)

But now the prophet, at the height of the chosen people’s self-satisfied judgment of others, turns the judgment of God on *them*: “For three transgressions of *Israel*, and for four, I will not turn away the punishment thereof; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes; That pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor” (2:6–7).

Isn’t that a remarkable image of insatiable exploitation by the rich of the powerless poor, not leaving them shoes, not even the dust on their heads? And now God points out why the sins of Israel are worse than those of others: “Hear this word that the Lord hath spoken against the children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt [Here the Lord is reminding the northern Israelites that both they and their southern neighbors of Judah are part of the chosen people, one family which he brought out of Egypt, and he says to both nations], You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (3:1–2).

Being chosen, in this view, means being the ones known and taught by the Lord and, thus, the ones most responsible to keep his commandments and to be punished if one does not. It does not mean being better than others, by definition more righteous and blessed. It does not even mean simply knowing the correct forms of worship and having special priesthood power to perform them as the core of one's religion. The Lord makes this painfully clear by saying, through Amos: "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offering, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take you away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. . . . Woe to them that are at ease in Zion . . . That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall . . . but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (5:21–24; 6:1, 4, 6). In other words, religious worship, even in the approved forms and with authority, is an offense to God if it is not accompanied by intense social morality—that is, by aggressive caring for justice and mercy in society, by compassionate grief for the afflictions of the poor and exploited.

Joseph Smith made this point by playing on the double meaning of "chosen" in his letter from the depths of his own afflictions in Liberty Jail: "There are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen? Because their hearts are set so much on the things of this world" (D&C 121:34–5). God calls many of us, but we usually default on his label of "chosen" because of our selfishness and pride. We are satisfied with the one part of chosen, where, for instance, God calls us "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I . . . am well pleased" (D&C 1:30), but we forget the other part: "Ye only have I known among the nations of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Our best writers, I believe, address themselves to both parts of chosen, our specialness and our special responsibilities. They both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable and, at their best, do the comforting in part to be more effective at the afflicting.

For instance, President Kimball used the "Amos strategy" on Latter-day Israel in what I think was his finest sermon, "The False Gods We Worship," which was actually a personal essay and remains one of the finest pieces of Mormon literature. Its setting was part of the strategy. It was given as the First Presidency Message in the June 1976 *Ensign*, when most Americans, including most of us American Mormons, were quite smugly celebrating our Bicentennial—200 years as a chosen, special, and divinely-favored nation.

President Kimball begins with a very personal and poetic passage that lulls his audience a bit, first by talking about his pastoral childhood in Arizona and the beautiful earth God has given us, then by talking about dark clouds of wickedness that intrude—but clouds that at first seem to be only the wickedness of others and "the general state of wickedness in which we seem to find the world in these perilous yet crucially momentous days. . . . the dark and miserable practices of men . . . vulgarity, stealing, lying, pride, blasphemy . . . fornication, adultery . . . and abuses

of power.”²² We readers, at this point, like the Israelites listening to Amos, tend to nod assent (“Amen, Brother Spencer, Amen!”), thinking about all the evils of the Gentiles. Then President Kimball turns on sinful Mormons, but still Mormons *other* than us readers, we think, because they are committing those same awful Gentile sins: “that such things should be found even among the Saints to some degree is scarcely believable. ... [They have] submitted themselves in one degree or another to the enticings of Satan and his servants and joined with those of ‘the world’ in lives of ever-deepening idolatry.”²³ Well, we know he isn’t talking about us because, though some Mormons might, we don’t blaspheme or fornicate, and we certainly don’t worship idols.

But then President Kimball does turn on us, *all* of us, as Amos did the Israelites: He declares, “I use the word *idolatry* intentionally ... Whatever thing a man sets his heart and his trust in most is his god; and if his god doesn’t also happen to be the true and living God of Israel, that man is laboring in idolatry.” He reminds us of the *called* meaning of chosen: “Where much is given much is expected . . . [the sins of the Saints are] scarcely believable, for these are a people who are in possession of many gifts of the Spirit, who have knowledge that puts the eternities into perspective, who have been shown the way to eternal life.”²⁴ Then he names our two greatest sins, the idolatries of materialism and militarism, emphasizing with the pronouns “us” and “we” that he is talking about us chosen people, not the Gentiles: “I am afraid that many of us have been surfeited with flocks and herds and acres and barns and wealth and have begun to worship them as false gods, and they have power over us . . . forgotten is the fact that our assignment is to use these many resources ... to build up the kingdom of God⁵. . . We are a warlike people, easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord. When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications—and depend on them for protection and deliverance. When threatened we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God; we train a man in the art of war and call him a patriot, thus, in the manner of Satan’s counterfeit of true patriotism, perverting the Savior’s teaching: ‘Love your enemies ... that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.’... Can we not take the Lord at his word ...? Our assignment is affirmative: ... to carry the gospel to our enemies, that they might no longer be our enemies.”²⁶

Just like Amos, this modern prophet has harrowed up our souls by tempting us toward pride and vengeance. He comforts us with reminders of our own special chosen-ness and of the sins of others, and then he points out our own more serious sins, our actual idolatry, worse than that of others *because* we are chosen. It is one measure of our uneasiness with being chosen in the sense of being called to a higher law and special responsibilities that we have utterly forgotten, perhaps even hidden, President Kimball’s sermon. Though it is arguably the greatest prophetic discourse in this century and one of the most skillful and poetic, in the twenty years since it was given, I have never seen or heard it quoted in our Mormon meetings or publications. (On the other hand, perhaps one sign of our maturing towards becoming a genuine world church is that Deseret book re-published this sermon in a small paperback booklet in 1997.)

One of our finest Mormon poems also uses the “Amos strategy” and, thus, sets a standard for what might be good literature for a selfconsciously “chosen” people. “Advent,” by Clinton Larson, lulls us a bit at first, the way President Kimball did. The speaker’s voice is that of all of us chosen people, thinking about how Christ will come in his second advent, in gentle acceptance and reward, to his own people. In fact, he will come just as we have often talked about him coming, when we ask, in lessons and talks, if our homes and our manners are clean and polished to receive and entertain him like an honored dinner guest:

The gentle God is our guest;
His staff will prompt us to the door.
The table is set in the oak-paneled room:
Goblets are rinsed and set out,
The warm vapor vanishing around them;
The silver, withdrawn from felt-lined red mahogany
Is counted and burnished to mercurial white
And set on immaculate linen,
Sleek with crystal and rococo ware.

The table is set for the Guest
Near the imminent door.
The servants stalk
Each gray indiscretion to be rent
On the merciless rack of their decor. ...
The supper will please the gentle God
Who surely comes like the breath on a veil.

Each of us can imagine such a home, where the table is magnificently set and the manners mercilessly polished to receive Christ, where chosen people, certain they are chosen in part because they have been blessed with the riches to set out such a spread, stand with pleased smiles to receive him. Comfortably sitting in my home in Provo, Utah, I can think of certain multi-million dollar homes up in Oak Hills or Indian Hills or on Osmond Lane—or others out in the valley in the new luxurious developments behind locked gates where people’s wealth and orthodoxy make them certain of how and where Christ will come again. And while I’m thinking about the self-satisfied people I know and then realizing the narrator is one of them, the poem—as if in response—abruptly changes direction:

But out of the East the breath is fire!
Who comes with temblor, sound of hurricane?
Who rages on the portico?
Who claps his vengeful steel on stone?

Who comes to dine?
The servants cower like quail in the anterooms
Who blasphemes in the shuddering halls?
Who rends the imminent door?

The surprise, even fear, in the narrator’s questions, his cowering along with the servants, gives way to whining, as in the last line he expresses his complaint that

Christ did not come as he was expected to, did not come as he had the first time:

Our guest is a gentle God, a Lamb.⁷

What do we feel about all this? When I first read this poem I felt elated that a Mormon poet had used Mormon theology to undermine traditional Christian ideas about how Christ would come again. I thought of our hymn that warns, “Jesus once of humble birth, now in glory comes to earth. . . . Once all things he meekly bore, but he now will bear no more.” Then I felt justified in my judgment of many Mormons. They were too materialistic and self-satisfied in assuming that Christ would come to us chosen ones first and that we could best prepare for him with a faultless decor, perfect piety, businesslike order, and discretion in our dress and manners. I imagined Christ not bearing such people any more—partly because I couldn’t bear them. I assumed Larson was exposing “them” to ridicule, and I laughed smugly at the surprised, whining voice at the end that represented them, “But our guest is a gentle God, a Lamb.”

Do you feel some of those same things? Well, after some rereading and reflection, I began to reconsider, and then to realize with shame that Larson had worked the Amos strategy on me. I had been guilty, like the Israelites, of rejoicing in the comeuppance of the Gentiles for their ignorance and unpreparedness concerning Christ’s advent and then of taking satisfaction in the poem’s condemnation of the materialism and arrogance of certain Provo-East-Bench Mormons for being prepared too much and in the wrong way. I had forgotten that my own sins of pride and vengefulness are the most offensive to Christ, certainly as offensive as any sins of those others, and that I have no better idea than they do how and where he will come to judge the world.

And that, of course, is the point. The poem is suggesting that we’ll all be surprised and may whimper in fear and that the best preparation is simple openness, clean hands, and a contrite heart. In fact, read a different way, the last line may suggest Christ really will come in mercy, even to those under- or over-prepared: After all, “Our guest *is* a gentle God, a Lamb.”

So, in our claim to be modern Israel, the inheritors of the label “chosen,” we have inherited both burdens of the label. We are a *choice* people and a *called* people, and our writers, as Larson shows in “Advent,” can use that complexity to work wonderfully textured ironies, even to call us to repentance. But what can such analysis as I have done of scriptures and poetry suggest about some critical tools and ideals for Mormon literature, past and future? Can we see how the complexities of being chosen and writing for a chosen people have enriched our literature, or have I simply created another set of labels with which to pigeonhole what we don’t like, a dichotomy for Mormon critics—and critics of Mormon critics—to argue about? Let me try to move us away from such a temptation. I believe that doing so will require that we accept affirmatively both parts of being chosen and that we learn how each part can be exemplified or promoted in our literature—and finally that we learn how to write and give our highest praise to literature that manages to promote both values in their full complexity and in a variety of ways.

Mormon literary history can, in fact, be imagined as a continual struggle between the two concepts of chosen in literature that encourage one kind of writing at the

expense of the other. One can set the “home literature” of the late nineteenth century, which emphasizes our being choice and favored, over against the “lost generation” literature published with national presses by Mormon authors in the 1940s, which focuses on our failures and need to repent. Or, as I have done, one might devalue the “jack-fiction” of both home literature and lost generation works in comparison to some more recent work which takes our theology more seriously. Recently, BYU Professor Richard Cracroft has set “mantic” literature, which encourages our sense of being uniquely spiritual and focused on “a sense of God in our lives,” over against “sophic” literature, which places us too firmly in the real world around us. Meanwhile, his colleague Bruce Jorgensen’s nearly opposite reading affirms the superiority of a literature that opens up to the sacredness of all people and their experience, capturing differences rather than being focused solely in Mormon essences.⁸ John Bennion, another BYU literature professor, has tried valiantly to value both what he calls “popular” or “faithful” fiction, with Jack Weyland as an example, and what he calls “literary” or “ambiguous” fiction, like that of Maurine Whipple, but he still sees them as essentially different in kind.⁹

Let me try to show how we might value our best literature, without sharp distinctions in kind which tend inevitably to devalue one or the other, by examining how good Mormon literature is informed by the way it handles the matter of chosen-ness. Early Mormons were very conscious of being chosen and called out of the world by their conversion experiences and the literal establishment of a Zion, a promised land with a River Jordan, in Utah. Their diaries, letters, sermons, and hymns capture, sometimes in moving detail and often in homely but spiritually empowered rhetoric, both the costs of discipleship and the experiences and convictions that made people able and willing to pay those costs. My favorite is from the journal of Joseph Millett, who tells of his name being read out as a missionary in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1852, of making his way as a nineteen-year-old, alone and mainly on foot, across the continent to Nova Scotia, learning the gospel and making converts essentially on his own, choosing one of them as a wife and making his way with a group of Saints back to Utah and then on to a colonizing mission in Spring Valley, Nevada. Near the end of the journal, he records a crucial, self-defining experience from the first days in Spring Valley when his daughter had died and many suffered great sickness and hunger:

One of my children came in, said that Brother Newton Hall’s folks were out of bread. Had none that day. I put . . . our flour in a sack to send up to Brother Hall’s. Just then Brother Hall came in. Says I, “Brother Hall, how are you out for flour.” “Brother Millett, we have none.” “Well, Brother Hall, there is some in that sack. I have divided and was going to send it to you. Your children told mine that you were out.” Brother Hall began to cry. Said he had tried others. Could not get any. Went to the cedars and prayed to the Lord and the Lord told him to go to Joseph Millett “Well, Brother Hall, you needn’t bring this back if the Lord sent you for it. You don’t owe me for it.” You can’t tell how good it made me feel to know that the Lord knew that there was such a person as Joseph Millett.¹⁰

This sense of being special, of God knowing us by name, favoring us with his voice and special direction and responsibility, is crucial to the Mormon identity and central to our best literature from the beginning. But in my view, the quality of this passage is more than doubled by the way it opens out to the other meaning of chosen—called out of the world to bless the world. God knew Joseph Millett’s name not because he was partial to him, but so God could, with perfect confidence, tell his neighbor Brother Hall to go specifically to Joseph Millett for help.

I read recently *Behind the Iron Curtain: Recollections of Latter-day Saints in East Germany, 1945–1989*,¹¹ compiled and translated by Garold N. Davis and Norma S. Davis, BYU faculty members who served as missionaries in East Germany in 1989–90. This is a fine example of modern home literature, full of moving accounts of a chosen people suffering for their faith and triumphing with God’s special blessings. Edith Krause tells of the terrible, totally pointless—except as revenge—bombing of her city of Dresden by the allies in February 1945 when the war was essentially over, and of the suffering, miracles of survival, efforts to keep the two branches functioning (even though the *Altstadt* Branch building had been destroyed). She demonstrates in her reminiscence both meanings of chosen:

It was a time of great testimony because the Lord helped us to help one another. Many refugees from the East were passing through Dresden, and we took up to as many as fifteen people into our small... apartment. Everything was shared; many things were sacrificed. Firm friendships were established which still exist today, beyond continents and oceans. We sat in the Church meetings and in the classrooms huddled in coats and blankets . . . but we were thankful and full of hope because the Lord will not forsake his own, which includes all humanity.¹²

Such “pioneer” experiences will continue as the Church grows into new areas and Mormons explore the new territories in their own hearts, especially through the personal essay. The ability to capture the unique warmth and self-sacrifice and determination that come from being choice, favored of the Lord, selected, will always, I believe, give the best Mormon literature its flavor. But the very best will also always be reaching out, as Edith Krause does, to all humanity. Even the first self-conscious effort to create a Mormon literature, the “home literature” movement of the 1880s, which was unabashedly provincial, designed to be written by and for Utah Mormons in order to protect and enhance Mormon values, had as its champion a man who seems to see, though perhaps only intuitively, that larger vision. In the manifesto of the movement, his lecture on “Home Literature,”¹³ Orson F. Whitney set out the highest goal of Mormon literature in a phrase that still rivets us and moves Mormon critics to exalted hope in the future or despair about the present: “We shall yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own.”

What this future apostle may have only intuited, but we must never forget, is that Milton and Shakespeare were in some ways devoted to encouraging and promoting rather small groups of chosen people—Milton the Puritans and Shakespeare the English Anglican Royalists. But they were also, among the world’s writers, two of the most radically subversive of the narrowly partisan values of their

own people and were universalist in their vision. Both of them created Christian literature that was designed not only to teach religious truth, but to actually change their audience of chosen people—to move them to repentance and healing, especially to move beyond their partiality.

For instance, as American literary critic Stanley Fish argued thirty years ago in the monograph that launched what we now call reader-response criticism, “Milton’s purpose is to educate the reader to an awareness of his position and responsibilities as a fallen man, and to a sense of the distance which separates him from the innocence once his.”¹⁴ As the fine young Mormon critic Michael Austin explained in a 1996 essay on our AML-list network, “[According to Fish] Milton created a majestic, articulate Satan who comes closer than any other character in the poem to the classical heroic ideal. But when we as readers begin to sympathize . . ., Milton pulls the rug out from under us and reveals him as a liar and a fiend. [We cannot] blame Adam and Eve for being persuaded by Satan’s rhetoric since [we], at one time or another throughout the poem, were very likely persuaded by it as well. . . . Milton’s way of teaching people about the consequences of Adam’s sin was experiential rather than academic—he made sure that the process of reading *Paradise Lost* would be an allegory of the Fall.”¹⁵ No wonder (as my University of Utah English teacher Jack Adamson put it) that Milton “darkened the Sunday afternoons of generations of Puritan preachers.” If we are to have Miltons of our own, they must have a similar ability to afflict the comfortable, the chosen, as well as to comfort them.

Similarly Shakespeare moves us to identify strongly with funny, beautiful, or witty and articulate characters who have strong justification for wreaking revenge on someone who deserves it. For instance, in *The Merchant of Venice* the romantic Portia disguises herself as a lawyer to save her husband’s friend Antonio from the bloodthirsty Jew, Shylock. Then just as we are caught up in what might be called a “bandwagon effect” of justified anger at the Jew and rejoicing at his defeat by Portia, Shakespeare subverts our identification. He shows Portia to be a racist, like all of the good Christian Merchants of Venice, one who preaches mercy and then shows none as she forces Shylock to become a Christian. At this point we should be moved to powerful shame and a desire to get off the bandwagon of anti-Semitic revenge Shakespeare has tempted us to climb aboard. I believe that experience which Shakespeare often creates of shame and reconsideration, like the one Larson’s Amos strategy induced in me, has a unique ethical and religious power to move us toward repentance.

If we are to have Shakespeares of our own, they must be able to make us feel, through our identification with persuasive characters, great temptations to violence and revenge. They must show us the attractions and easiness of misuse of power—man over woman, white over black, wealth over poverty—and then hold out persuasive hints of alternatives, of the redemptive power of grace, even of worldly foolishness, of sacrificial love, of yielding to each other.

But, like Shakespeare, the best Mormon writers must also do well what those do who write mainly to encourage the chosen in their feeling of being choice and favored. For instance, Gerald Lund, in the first volume of *The Work and the Glory*, is perfectly open about his didactic purpose, aimed directly at our chosen-ness: to

tell “as accurately as possible, the story of Joseph Smith and the rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” to move us to consider “how would I have reacted” had I been there, and to be moved to answer like the heroes of the story, the Steeds.¹⁶ Based on the reports, printed on the covers of subsequent volumes, of those people the first book, *Pillar of Light*, moved to join the Church or to regain their testimonies—and based also on the reactions of most of my students—Lund succeeds very well. I, for one, am certainly moved by his retelling, through the eyes of fictional characters with whom I can identify, of the great events of the Restoration, which reveal God’s special dispensations of power and knowledge to his chosen people. I already believe in the reality of those events, but Lund helps me emotionally relive such experiences as the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Kirtland Temple dedication where I watch with the Steeds, at the end of Vol. II, as angels gather on the roof of the temple.

But Lund is best, I believe, when he moves out a bit from merely reinforcing our sense of being set apart, unique, and blessed, to challenge us implicitly with God’s equal love for all his children. For instance, Nathan Steed repeats to his mother Mary Ann the remarkable story he has just heard from Joseph of the First Vision. She responds with surprising emotion. She tells him for the first time, “For many years I’ve felt like the Bible, as wonderful as it is, is not enough. I’ve felt there has to be more,” and she reveals that the reason she has never joined a church, though she was seeking the right one, is that God had told her what he told Joseph: “I didn’t read James, but I came to the same conclusion. I decided I had to pray. Without God’s help I couldn’t know for sure which one was right. ... I prayed a great deal about it... I never went off into the woods, but hardly a day went by I didn’t ask God the same question Joseph asked him. ... One morning I had gotten up early to pray. ... Thoughts just came into my mind. ... I suddenly felt—very strongly—that for now I was to join one of the churches.”¹⁷ Mary Ann thus shows she is a “Seeker,” one of millions who were touched by the Spirit in the early nineteenth century with a desire for and intimation of the Restoration—only a few ten thousand of whom joined the church, but all of whom were moved toward goodness and truth. For me this is an effective reminder that God was and is working through his grace with all his children to lead them to truth, calling them, and that all who respond, whenever and wherever and however, are thereby chosen.

Just as Lund, a writer in the home literature tradition, focuses on the choice and separate part of chosen with an occasional reach out to the called and universal part, so the best Lost Generation writers, Virginia Sorensen and Maurine Whipple, tend to emphasize the responsible part and God’s universal concerns, but sometimes reach out to emphasize our specialness, even bear testimony of it. In *The Giant Joshua*, Whipple makes clear in her preface her didactic double purpose: “Perhaps ... it is natural for our generation to deify [the Mormon pioneers]. . . . But I believe we detract from their achievement when we paint them with too white a brush. These people ... are my people and I love them, but I believe that what they did becomes even greater when we face the fact that they were human beings by birth and only saints by adoption.”¹⁸

Whipple clearly shows the problems and failings of the pioneer polygamists,

such as abuses of male power and position, tendencies to violence, and mean-spirited jealousies, and she promotes her own liberal ideals, such as the possibility of learning about beauty and non-violence from Native Americans like Chief Tutsegabbet: To keep the protagonist Clory and her friend Pal from running away from the hardship and bleakness of Zion in St. George, the friend's husband David promises to show them one thing of beauty. On the way Tutsegabbett, who is serving as guide, tells them the legend of Neab and Nannoo, two lovers who had tried to stop their people from burying the sick and older Indians in caves to die. When Nannoo becomes sick, the tribe, despite Neab's pleas, takes her to be put in a cave, and Neab goes in with her:

His people begged him to come out, but when the women rolled the boulder back into place, Neab was there to keep Nannoo company. . . . The voice stopped. . . . Tutsagabbett pulled up his pony and waited for the others to catch up with him. . . . [He] spread wide his arms: [God], pleased with his servant, set his footprint before the cave of Neab to show his stubborn people the way.¹⁹

Then he shows them a huge basin in the lava rock filled with sego lillies: "Sown as thickly as a desert sky with stars. Poised like heavenly butterflies there on the grim lava surface as if they needed no roots, would float upward with a breath." Tutsegabbett continues: "The [tribe] resolved never to fight on a battlefield where sego lilies grew: thus the sego lily became an emblem of peace. . . . [God] and his mighty footstep before the cave of Neab. Neab, who did not run away."²⁰

Whipple also praises unstintingly what she calls the (capital I) Idea of Mormonism—in the word chosen by a well-educated, articulate, visiting Gentile: "Togetherness," he says very softly. "You were persecuted because you had *togetherness*, but it also gave you your strength."²¹ Whipple has Erastus Snow review the achievements of living the United Order and praise "above all, something you can't see but is worth much more to a man—a sense of responsibility toward his neighbor, an armor against selfishness and greed."²² In letters to her editor, Maurine wrote of the Mormon idea of brotherly love that she believed would triumph over the success ideal, partly through the influence of her book. But she could also comfort her Mormon readers with a sense of their own special connections to deity. She believed absolutely that God inspired the design of the diversion tunnel system that finally stopped the disastrous flooding of the Virgin River, and she shows that clearly in the novel. And she has the second wife, Willie, as she is dying, tell the story of her heroic crossing of the plains with the doomed handcart companies and finally bear her testimony to Clory in words that I believe reveal Maurine's own heart:

"A voice, not a whisper, but still and low said to me: 'If you will leave your 'ome, father and mother, you shall have Eternal life.'" I 'ave heard the same voice since, not in dreams but in daylight, when in trouble and uncertain which way to go; and *I know God lives* and guides this people called Mormons."

Her eyes, already filled with the mystery of the last long trek, were dark with faith.

“Don’t never knuckle under to life, Clory. Don’t never knuckle under, if you ’ave to crawl—all—the—way!”²³

Since about 1960 there have emerged two generations of writers among whom I find many who can both comfort and afflict us chosen people. They can celebrate our peculiar heritage and unique religious life, which Richard Cracroft is right in calling “full of [the] supernal expectation” of people who “consciously cultivate a sense of God in their lives.”²⁴ And they can also call us to repentance and to the risky openness to strangers, to all of God’s children, that Bruce Jorgensen advocates. These writers that I recommend as models of what good literature for a chosen people can be like often seem to emphasize one pole or the other in the paradox of chosen-ness—choice or called, special or sent forth—but in their best work they combine or relate the two notions in powerful ways.

Orson Scott Card’s essays collected in *A Storyteller in Zion*, his introductions to books published by his Hatrack River press, and his sermons in his *Vigor Newsletter* and to his America Online community sound very much like the preaching of a very conservative Latter-day Saint, intended to comfort the orthodox chosen people and to afflict liberals and academics in and out of the church. And he has created, in his *Alvin Maker* and *Homecoming Series* and in his novels about Mormon experience, moving descriptions of what it might be like to be a prophet or to be chosen for contact with spiritual reality. But in 1985 a remarkable thing happened. Card, already prominent nationally for his science fiction, none of which was obviously Mormon, rewrote his award-winning first story, “Ender’s Game,” into a novel, and the expanded ending made Ender Wiggins into a “speaker for the dead,” a historian and advocate for the alien, insectlike race he had been trained to destroy. Ender tells, imagining it in the old hive-queen’s words, that race’s story—the nature of their intelligence and multiple-staged life, the reasons for their first attack on humans and their desire for forgiveness, their hope to live anew and in peace:

Here are our failures, and here is our greatness; we did not mean to hurt you, and we forgive you our death. ... If only we could have talked to you. ... But since it could not be, we ask only this: that you remember us, not as enemies, but as tragic sisters, changed into a foul shape by Fate or God or Evolution. If we had kissed, it would have been the miracle to make us human in each other’s eyes. Instead we killed each other. But still we welcome you now as guestfriends. Come into our home, daughters of earth; dwell in our tunnels, harvest our fields; what we cannot do you are now our hands to do for us. Blossom, trees; ripen, fields; be warm for them, suns; be fertile for them, planets; they are our adopted daughters, and they have come home.²⁵

That is one of the great moments in Mormon literature and, if Card succeeds in his present project to get *Ender’s Game* into movie form, essentially intact, it may be one of the great moments in American cinema. That new ending, besides changing Ender into a Christ figure, also turned Card himself into a speaker for the dead and the different, an interpreter and defender of little-known and often misunderstood lives, including Mormon lives. With that development in 1985, he moved

firmly into a larger moral and religious context, taking on issues of diversity, unconditional love for the “other,” and thus the possibility of giving and accepting grace in the Atonement—and thus Card came fully into his own and out into the open as a *Mormon* writer.

For instance, Card went on in the Ender series to explore what it could mean to love and to respect the processes of salvation and resurrection developed by hamster-like beings called piggies—as well as to save those intelligent insects called buggers. In *Xenocide*, Card even expands the challenge of love for the “other” to include a being who exists only in the faster-than-light web of connections that make up the intergalactic internet. In the second book of the Alvin Maker Series, *The Red Prophet*, Card transposes to frontier America Book of Mormon materials like the story of the mass slaughter of the Lamanites converted by Ammon, who refused to shed blood to defend themselves and thus destroyed their enemies in the only way that works—in President Kimball’s words, “by taking the gospel to them that they may no longer be our enemies.” He thus speaks for the dead and destroyed native peoples, the “Lamanites,” of America and brings home to Mormons with emotional and ethical power our part in their destruction and our continuing responsibility to their descendants, many of whom are right here in “Zion” and still live dispossessed and marginalized lives.

Just as in *The Red Prophet*, Card tells America’s story from the Lamanite point of view, so in *Prentice Alvin* he tells that story from the point of view of African-Americans—both the story of unimaginable degradation as owners force themselves on slave women, producing children and selling them like cattle, and also the story of courageous endurance and intelligent spirituality as one such product of white sin becomes a younger black companion and mentor to Alvin, the figure based on Joseph Smith. In the third volume *Journeyman Alvin*, Card uses Peggy, the analogue of Emma Hale Smith, to begin to introduce gender issues that come to the fore in the next volume where he must deal with something like polygamy. But he has already explored gender issues with remarkable openness in his *Homecoming Series*, a voyage in space analogous to the Book of Mormon story, where the Lehi and Sariah figures are both powerfully spiritual leaders of rival religious groups and Nephi’s wife is a seer, so spiritually capable that Nephi goes through a fascinating period of male anxiety—fear that his manhood will be at risk in such a marriage! But Card doesn’t stop there, in later volumes exploring even homosexuality with what might seem to some surprising empathy and continuing his examination of the central religious duty to embrace those who are “other,” the aliens. The space voyagers return to earth to find the only intelligent life there in two antagonistic groups evolved from bats and rats. Later volumes, which parallel the Book of Mormon story through Mosiah, create a strong subtext in the slow struggle of the people of Alma to overcome racism and sexism as a condition for the future coming of the Keeper of Earth, who is obviously Christ. Card clearly understands that he is chosen and is using his extraordinary gifts to teach the chosen that what that means is to be a speaker for all the “unchosen,” whom God loves just the same.

There are many others we could discuss with more space. Terry Tempest Williams appears to many to come from the other, more critical view of the chosen,

to push, sometimes punch, Mormons toward greater openness to all God's creation, even to embrace literally the natural world in almost pantheistic adoration. In her national prize-winning bestseller, *Refuge*, she combines the story of her mother's death with an elegy for loss of bird-life and habitat when the Great Salt Lake flooded in the mid-1980s. She also explains, in her own challenging way, the Gospel basis for respect for wilderness:

Wilderness courts our souls. When I sat in church throughout my growing years, I listened to teachings about Christ in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, reclaiming his strength, where he was able to say to Satan, "Get thee hence." When I imagined Joseph Smith kneeling in a grove of trees as he received his vision to create a new religion, I believed their sojourns into nature were sacred. Are ours any less?²⁶

But Williams can also remind us powerfully of our special connections to God as his chosen people. She tells of when her mother first had breast cancer, with only a twenty percent chance of living. At a stake conference to change the presidency, her father, a member of the high council, is interviewed by President Thomas S. Monson:

He asked him, if called would he serve as stake president? My father's reply was no....

"Brother Tempest, would you Like to explain?"

My father simply said it would be inappropriate to spend time away from his wife when she had so little time left.

President Monson stood and said, "You are a man whose priorities are intact."

After conference President Monson calls Brother Tempest aside and says,

"Brother Tempest I feel compelled to tell you your wife will be well for many years to come. I would like to invite you and your family to kneel together in the privacy of your home at noon on Thursday. The Brethren will be meeting in the holy chambers of the Temple, where we will enter your wife's name among those to be healed."

Williams continues:

That Thursday, my brothers and I came home from school to pray. We knelt in the living room together as a family. No words were uttered. But in the quiet of that room, I felt the presence of angels.²⁷

Levi Peterson has a clear, almost didactic, project: to help his fellow Saints overcome the pernicious effects of our frontier past when our isolation in provincial chosen-ness and the very hardships and consequent brutality of our ancestors' lives inflicted on Mormon culture an obsession with God's punishment for our sins and failings and a tolerance for violence that are still with us. He tries to stretch us towards tolerance for ourselves and others, towards grace. But he can also produce the most believable spiritual visions by any Mormon writer, from those that capture Paul in "Road to Damascus" to the one of the Cowboy Jesus, who brings grace and

a thoroughly orthodox Mormon salvation to Frank Windham in *The Backslider*. Despite its unorthodox form, one clearly intended to communicate Christ's willingness to assume various shapes and guises in order to best communicate with each of us in our different conditions, I still believe that vision of the Savior coming as an answer to Frank's wife's prayer for grace, with a "face as kind as an August dawn" to save Frank from his despair over sin, is one of the most lovely and believable epiphanies, not just in Mormon literature but in all literature.²⁸

Margaret Young writes fine home literature, such as her novel *House without Walls*, which is full of spiritual comfort for us chosen people, but she has also afflicted us in her story "The Outsiders"²⁹ with the most complete and devastating examination of the hurt and confusion, the blackness, that was in us Mormons when we did not give Blacks the priesthood—and may still be in us. At the same time she clearly conveys her father's and her own clear faith in the gospel and the church. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Emma Lou Thayne, both national prize-winning writers, have produced a collection of essays together, *All God's Critters Got a Place in the Choir*, that moves easily from the powerfully faith-confirming story of how Emma Lou Thayne's mother got her testimony as she listened to and watched Helen Keller in the tabernacle to Laurel's uniquely Mormon feminism, and it calls to us chosen people to leave behind our "lusterware" beliefs—plaster coated with silver that will break when it drops from the high shelves in the mind. Phyllis Barber has a wonderful personal essay in the fall 1996 *Dialogue* that traces her attempts to walk away from her chosen-ness, her narrow, merely inherited Mormon faith, towards a faith in God that she makes and chooses for herself. It also tells how she continues to feel a stitch in her side that pulls her back to undeniable Mormon miracles and truth, a stitch put there by God, who stitches her both to her own people and to all people.³⁰ William A. (Bert) Wilson, our premier Mormon folklorist, has both preserved and explicated the many tales we tell of God's special providences among us chosen Mormons, from the helpful Three Nephites to appearances by newly endowed spirits in the temples, but he has also done something unique in my experience, criticized his fellow academic folklorists, including himself, for not giving attention, in addition to such dramatic spiritual events showing God's favor, to the stories of acts of simple kindness and love that might best characterize a chosen people.³¹

In his rebuke through the prophet Amos, the Lord was most offended with those of his chosen people who were at ease in Zion, who slept on luxurious beds, partook of the best food and drink, had leisure to listen to music and invent new instruments, wealth enough to perfume themselves and who all the while were not grieved for the affliction of Joseph, the poor and dispossessed. Recent studies show that the United States over the past twenty years, whether led by Democrats or Republicans, has been returning to the huge gap between rich and poor of one hundred years ago. The very rich and very poor are increasing in percentage, the top 1% holding a bigger and bigger percentage of the wealth—and we Mormons are right there in the national point spread with our billionaires and millionaires and our struggling two-job families, desperate single mothers, and elderly. The Lord told Joseph Smith that "it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, where-

fore the world lieth in sin” (D&C 49:20) and that as long as his Saints, his chosen people, were not equal in earthly things, they could not be equal in obtaining spiritual things (D&C 78:6). He revealed that he intended to provide for all his people and that the way it was to be done is “that the poor shall be exalted, in that the rich are made low” (D&C 104:16). These revelations have never been repealed, and though the formal law of consecration, administered by the Church, is in abeyance, our covenants of consecration, made in the Temple, are not—and I suspect that nearly every one of us is in violation to some degree.

Few writers have taken on this particular part of being chosen. Card has written a remarkable story, “Christmas at Helaman’s House,” about a man who is led to consecrate his luxurious home by giving it to the bishop to use for needy families.³² Hugh Nibley has warned constantly that we have caught the Nephite disease—the sick trust that because we are prosperous, we are righteous and that because we are chosen, we will not fall.³³ Eric Samuelson has recently written a play on this subject, called *Gadianton!*, which was performed at BYU in the winter term, 1997. Eric explores what might happen if a Mormon-owned company with a largely Mormon labor force was suddenly sold at a huge profit and then downsized, throwing many Mormons who are barely over the poverty line out of work and facing the Mormon bishop foreman with terrible decisions. It was fascinating to see how a Mormon audience, in a community full of Mormon-owned and occasionally downsizing companies, responded to this excellent play—from demands for censorship to hearty, repentant appreciation.

God seems to me quite clear that he chooses people in very special ways and with direct spiritual outpourings at various times and places, but that he also affirms again and again that this strange choosing does not make him partial. He does not play favorites, does not reward people for their pre-existent or even earthly righteousness with skin color or privileges or wealth, does not favor his chosen people over others. The most important decision we children of God ever made, we made together, in the Great Council in heaven when *all* of us, black and white, man and woman, conservative and liberal, bond and free, Jew and Gentile, future Mormon and future non-Mormon, raised our hands in support of the great plan of agency and responsibility. As a result, as Joseph Smith said in the King Follett discourse, “All the spirits that God ever sent into the world are capable of enlargement and improvement.”³⁴ God treats us all alike, as if we were all capable of godhood, and he expects us to treat each other that way, too, as infinitely precious.

Caught up in our undeniable chosen-ness, we Mormons tend to forget this, but our best writers do not. We tend to forget Richard Bushman’s suggestion nearly thirty years ago that if we want the best model for writing Mormon history we might look to the scriptures, which again and again tell the story of a chosen people, whether the Israelites or Jaredites or Nephites, not as a story of continual opposition between the chosen and the Gentiles, with God on the side of the chosen, but as a constant effort by God to call people and lift them to chosen-ness—thwarted by the chosen people’s constant failures to do so and consequent sufferings and sorrows.³⁵

No Mormon historians that I know about have taken up Bushman’s challenge, including Bushman. But our Mormon writers have. They tell us not only what it

feels like to be chosen, but what our culture looks like when we fail to live like chosen people and how the whole world might look if we accepted the call to bless all nations of the earth with our righteousness.

NOTES

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