

“Godbodied”: A Comparison of Barfieldian and Mormon Texts Regarding the Shared Nature and Role of Divine and Human Matter in the Evolution of Human Consciousness.

A presentation by Julie J. Nichols
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I'm honored and excited to be here with fellow Barfield enthusiasts to look at several texts. Originally I meant to include a number of passages from Rudolf Steiner as well. We know how deeply Owen Barfield was influenced by Steiner, and we know that many, many of Steiner's lecture series begin with discourses on the multiple nature of the human body, in order that the rest of what he describes in those lectures, whether they be on the possibility of a pastoral healing, or education for children, or the nature of Christ, might be more fully understood.

But though I've decided to exclude those texts from this paper simply because of the sheer number of them, even so, it will still be impossible to discuss *all* Barfieldian and Mormon texts about the shared nature of the “matter” of which both divinity and humans are composed, in this process we call the evolution of human consciousness. Focusing on Barfield, I was rather awed, although I should not have been *surprised*, to discover that a great many more of Barfield's works address this topic than only "Philology and the Incarnation" and "The 'Son of God' and the 'Son of Man,'" not least *Worlds Apart*, the text for this society's book discussion on Saturday. Barfield meditates deeply upon this topic almost everywhere in his writing.

As for Mormon texts, these are legion. Scriptures both Biblical and extrabiblical on the nature of the divine and its relationship to the human project, and commentaries on those scriptures, abound (see, for just one example, Doctrine and Covenants Section 93). A non-scriptural, but essential text on this subject is called the King Follett Discourse, delivered in 1844, and I will be quoting from that and from a 2011 consideration of that in particular.

The implications of these texts regarding the purposes and ends of human physicality, human corporeality, are many. Today we are laying a foundation. And, as I say, there won't be time for anything like a full exegesis of all the available texts. But I would like to posit that this is a very good time to make a beginning, because of this society's interest and investment in

Barfield, as well as because of growing popular interest in Mormonism due to Mitt Romney's candidacy for president, as well as the run of the successful (if, I understand, fairly vulgar) show on Broadway called "Book of Mormon."

In this presentation, then, I will summarize and quote extensively from the two essays of Barfield's that I have just mentioned; refer briefly to Steiner on the subject; and draw your attention to two texts, one secondary and one primary, regarding the subject in Mormon doctrine. I believe we will discover some interesting and provocative common threads.

To begin, let us look at Barfield's logic in "Philology and the Incarnation," first published in 1965. Barfield made his first notable scholarly splash (shall we call it?) with *History in English Words* (1926) and *Poetic Diction* (1928), where he introduces his lifelong assertion that not only does the changing vocabulary and grammar of a language reflect changes in the consciousness of its speakers, but also that certain kinds of language do so most intensely inasmuch as their sounds reinforce their meanings. In "Philology and the Incarnation," Barfield restates the case made in his landmark 1957 volume entitled *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* that a whole category of words in English seem to have two meanings, one interior or immaterial, the other material, and that it was the material or "real" meaning that came first. He quotes Jeremy Bentham: "to every word that has an immaterial import there belongs, or at least did belong, a material one," and he points to the etymology of such words as "right" ("straight") and wrong ("twisted") and "spirit" ("wind," "breath [of life]") (265). Barfield then locates the moment of this shift from material meaning to immaterial precisely at the time of Christ. He says:

A crucial moment in the evolution of humanity must have occurred certainly during the seven or eight centuries on either side of the reign of Augustus and probably somewhere near the middle of that period. This...was the moment at which there was consummated that age-long process of contraction of the immaterial qualities of the cosmos into a human center, into an inner world, which had made possible the development of an immaterial language. This, therefore, was the moment in which his true selfhood, his spiritual selfhood, entered into the body of man. Casting about for a word to denote that moment...he would be almost obliged to choose the word 'incarnation,' the entering into the body, the entering into the flesh.... At about the middle of [this] period, a man was

born who claimed to be the son of God, and to have come down from Heaven...spoke to his followers of “the Father in me and I in you”...[and] strove to reverse the direction of their thought—for the word “*metanoia*,” which is translated “repentance,” also means a reversal of the direction of the mind—he startled them and strove to reverse the direction of their thought by assuring them that “it is not that which cometh into a man which defileth him, but that which goeth out of him.” (270-271)

Clearly, for Barfield the “stuff” of which God is made and the “stuff” of which man is made found a crucible in Jesus Christ in a way that had never happened on earth before, and which changed the direction of the evolution of human consciousness forever. Barfield continues this line of thought in another 1958 lecture (reprinted in *The Rediscovery of Meaning* in 1977), “The ‘Son of God’ and the ‘Son of Man’”:

How [are we] to describe the difference between the special relation of Jesus to God and that of all other men to God[?]. . .there seems to be an admitted sense in which man (ordinary, natural, unredeemed man) is also a ‘son,’ or ‘child,’ or ‘descendant’ of God. I cannot believe myself. . .that it entails thinking of man in any sense as a manufactured article. In some sense he, too, [like Christ,] is much more like a son or descendant of God. And this view seems to be confirmed by the Bible itself in many places. . .We must say that man had his origin in the Divine Being. He is a son, or descendant of God. . .he is a ‘descendant’ by virtue of his descent, of his blood, of his history, of all that he carries in his organism of the past, not of himself alone but of mankind as a whole, in a word because of his *heredity*. . . (286-7)

The title of my presentation comes from a chapter from Stephen Webb’s new Oxford University Press volume entitled *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter*. Webb, a professor of religion and philosophy at Wabash College, says that he “set out a couple of years ago to recover an obscure heretical position on the nature of Jesus Christ and ended up developing a deep interest in and admiration for the thought of Joseph Smith [the founder of Mormonism]. . .” (84). In the chapter “Godbodied,” reprinted in *BYU Studies 50: 3*, he contextualizes Mormonism’s doctrine of the embodiment of Jesus Christ by

situating Mormonism both in American history and within the history of Christological theology. He says:

Mormonism can be a controversial topic for many non-Mormon Christians, but I have come to the conclusion that no theology has ever managed to capture the essential sameness of Jesus with us in a more striking manner. At the heart of Mormon cosmic optimism is the idea that the incarnation of Jesus was not an afterthought to creation or a contingent response to an accidental fall of humanity into sin. Christ embodied is the center of the cosmos; he lived as we do before we were created to be like him (83, 85)....

Webb quotes Robert Millet, a BYU professor whose writing convinced Webb that “[family] metaphors dominate Mormon discussions of Jesus, as when Millet calls him ‘the first-born spirit child of God.’ Jesus Christ and humans are members of one family because they are made of the same basic stuff, which is the eternal substance of divinity. Families are meant to be together forever in Mormonism, and there is no greater bond than our familial relationship with Jesus” (87).

Now Barfield suggests that “this [inherited] part of [man] is just the part of which he is *normally unconscious*. It is the part of him *which is as much there when he is asleep as when he is awake*, unlike his personality...” In this essay—and I think we see this also in *Worlds Apart*—Barfield deplores the way in which modern, that is to say early and mid-twentieth-century, writers and artists, separated this unconscious self from the conscious self, assuming that the unconscious self could “fertilize” the conscious self, saving it from its own intellectual “aridity” (288) because “[they] forget...the descent, the heredity, the divine origins of the body itself. They forget the man is, precisely in his physical organism, already a ‘son of God’” (288-9). And he posits that Christ preferred to refer to himself as a “son of man” instead of a “son of God” because the part of man that persists in sleep, the free agent part of man, is the part that Christ, in his Christ-hood, came to help man develop.

Christ also was a son of God in the sense that I have been using the term, as a matter of course, as all men were. But that was not the element in all men he was to appeal to.

There is another element in all men, which is not—or which is no longer—the son of God; but which, in the course of the generations, man himself has been progressively developing for good or ill...

There seem to be two kinds of divine sonship: a direct one...reached, if at all, in freedom, though the Word...[but] Secondly, there is the other kind of sonship...the one from which history really began, and which is by its nature powerful, and also by its nature unfree. This other kind is divine in a quite different way...descended and derived from God, [and] could be perhaps called an ‘archetypal’ sonship...This kind is something which...the pagans really knew far more about than the Christians do today. It ... was at the heart of the ... mystery religions... (291).

Webb does a thorough job of summarizing much of Mormon doctrine about this relationship between the “stuff” of divinity and the “stuff” of the human race, giving credit to another BYU professor, David Paulsen, for explaining Joseph Smith’s “sense of the rhythmic and cyclical movement of spirits from a refined to an embodied state and back again” (91). (I need to insert here that officially, Mormons reject the Eastern concept of bodily reincarnation, the reinsertion of an individual soul into a sequence of earthly bodies intercalated by physical death. But the doctrine of “eternal progression”—see D&C 93:29-36, Moses 1:39, and many other Mormon scriptures—is taught to every Mormon child as soon as she is old enough to learn it, and I do not have time here to examine the subtle and possibly irrelevant differences between the two notions.)

Webb traces the thought of Augustine and Plotinus in regard to the nature of God and declares that “[the] Mormon Church stakes its whole theology on the coherence of the idea that God formed the world from a material substance that is not totally unlike his own divine nature. That makes Mormonism either a religious oddity in Western history or an utterly crucial metaphysical correction to our understanding of the role and value of matter in God’s creation of the world” (95). The culmination of Webb’s summary takes us to perhaps the foremost source of the doctrine of the sameness of the matter of which God and humans are made, a funeral sermon delivered by Joseph Smith in 1844 to comfort twenty thousand friends of an elder named King Follett:

My first object [Joseph said] is to find out the character of the only wise and true God, and what kind of a being he is; and if I am so fortunate as to be the man to comprehend God, and explain or convey the principles to your hearts, so that the Spirit seals them upon you, then let every man and woman henceforth sit in silence...

God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by his power, was to make himself visible,--I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked, and conversed with him, as one man talks and communes with another.

In order to understand the subject of the dead, for consolation of those who mourn for the loss of their friends, it is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how he came to be so...

The Scriptures inform us that Jesus said, As the Father hath power in Himself, even so hath the Son power—to do what? [See D&C 93: 1-20.] Why, what the Father did...in a manner to lay down His body and take it up again. Jesus, what are you going to do? To lay down my life as my Father did, and take it up again...Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kinds and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able...to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power...God, in the last days, while certain individuals are proclaiming his name, is not trifling with you or me...

That was Joseph Smith in 1844, and this is Barfield in 1958:

[An] awakening to, an increasing realization of, this inheritance may be a necessary step towards the attainment of divine sonship in the other [free, willed] sense... those who have become sons of God in the second sense... must have reached a state where... they will have resumed or become aware of, or resumed by becoming aware of, an existing relation. They will find themselves doing the will of God, as the lungs find themselves breathing and the heart finds itself beating, simply because the whole world of nature (I would even say the whole universe) is breathing and beating in them” (293)... I believe that our increasing miseries result from the fact that, ever since we began to create in a feeble way in literature, in art, in science, we have been trying to do so in forgetfulness of our heredity as the sons of God... Man is a being with a past relation and a future relation to God, as I said, but he also has a present relation, which rhythmically links the other two—which indeed is precisely that link....

Now, we know that Barfield read and translated Rudolf Steiner, and although I do not know the exact order of his reading or exactly what he thought when or if he read Steiner’s lectures on the gospels of the New Testament, he surely took in the whole of Steiner’s insistence that through clairvoyance, through “spiritual science,” he saw, and knew, and could do nothing but declare that the “Mystery of Golgotha” was precisely that through Christ, two karmically-prepared beings became one to complete an Initiation process on earth that before him had been only represented—that divinity and humanity came together in a way that would not happen in the population at large for a long time, until more of us were ready for it, but that Christ incarnated to show that it must happen, and how it could. (See *Christianity as a Mystical Fact*, *The Gospel of St. John*, etc.)

There is, as I have said, a great deal more written by Steiner, by Barfield, and by Joseph Smith and their commentators, which we do not have time to examine just now. But I hope I have perhaps ignited your interest in the spiritual facts they all seem to have embraced, in much the same language. I suspect that if either Steiner or Barfield heard about Mormons at all, they almost certainly had no idea that the King Follett Discourse or the *Doctrine and Covenants* existed. But it seems to me that since Steiner gained his understanding of these facts through spiritual science, and Smith his through what he called revelation, and Barfield through intense

logical study that could not deny what he called “the appearances,” surely we can say that they are talking about the same relationship of the divine to the earthly, the spirit to the body, the material to the evolution of human consciousness. It seems to me that according to all three, the evolution of human consciousness is a process the gods themselves participate in. And they need us to participate fully for their own progress. This is a remarkable work we’re part of. That Barfield saw it and confirmed it for himself through his intellectual processes is not only one of the reasons I respond so positively to him, but also a re-cognition for me of facts Joseph Smith taught, and that I have been taught since I was a child. A look at further texts unpacking the implications of these spiritual facts regarding the essentiality of a physical, earthly body for the accomplishing of this work, is perhaps the next step in the process we have begun here.

Thank you.

Work Cited

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Further Reading on Joseph Smith, Mormon doctrine, and Owen Barfield can begin at these websites:

lds.org (the official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

<http://www.davidlavery.net/Barfield/> (the Owen Barfield World Wide Web Site)