



**“Thinking Way Back”:
Considerations on Race, Pre-Existence, and Mortality¹**
By Marcus H. Martins, Ph.D., 1999

In May of 1998 an article published in the newspaper *Los Angeles Times* caused a great deal of discussion among Latter-day Saints. The article stated that a number of individuals were asking General Authorities of the Church to disavow certain statements made in the late 1800's and early 1900's concerning the status of the African and other non-white races in the gospel.

Three months later I had the opportunity to present lectures on Official Declaration-2 to about 800 seminary and institute teachers and administrators at the annual symposium of the Church Educational System, held at Brigham Young University. The overwhelmingly positive response I received to those lectures, as well as the responses I received after numerous other presentations made in different parts of the United States, led me to believe that most Latter-day Saints of today find those statements on racial matters of the distant past hard to reconcile with today's understanding of the universal scope of the restored gospel.

I cannot speak for the Church in an official capacity; nevertheless, as one of the Church's high priests I can at least share some of the personal insights I have gained through years of intense study and exercise of faith. From the outset I must make clear that I respect those men who many decades ago proposed ideas that today we find hard to reconcile. They were men of great faith who sacrificed a great deal for this Church, and I also recognize the divinity of their callings. The statements they made on racial matters were a minor part of otherwise powerful and inspiring ministries, and I prefer to dwell on the positive legacy they left us—a legacy of faith, good works, and sacrifice for the kingdom. Because of my desire to follow the Savior's commandments, I feel like forgiving any of those men for possible unkind feelings they might have had for someone like me. As I have said many times, since the Lord has forgiven my shortcomings, who am I not to forgive my brethren's?

So now I want to start by bearing my testimony of the truthfulness of the restored gospel. I know by the power of the Holy Ghost that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the kingdom of God on the earth, led by true prophets of the Most High, holding the priesthood of God, and receiving revelations from the Almighty to guide and bless our lives both in time and in eternity. Our doctrine is sound, and when we focus on fundamental principles derived from latter-day revelations, we find nothing but comfort and continuous affirmation that regardless of any other factors we are all literal brothers and sisters—children of the same God.

A few years ago, after pondering on the restored doctrines about the pre-mortal existence and about the future possibilities available to all humankind through the atonement of Jesus Christ, I realized that because of the so-called veil of forgetfulness we don't remember our true identities. During our mortal experience all we know about our identities deals with who other mortal persons think we are, and who we ourselves think we are.

¹ This is an edited and expanded version of a talk presented at a meeting of The Genesis Group, a branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, held in Salt Lake City, Utah, on August 1, 1999. Some of the insights contained in these remarks were presented in papers and talks as early as March of 1995.

But in this mortal stage we often tend to judge one another based on external criteria. We notice and categorize the physical features of our mortal bodies: color of skin and eyes, type of hair, accessories like clothes, cars, properties or financial holdings, and on more or less intangible features like language, accent, knowledge, insights, professional experience, honors, titles, degrees, etc. In general, these external images, or facades, are all we see in each other and almost always we seem satisfied with that type of knowledge.

The second type of knowledge about ourselves—the one provided by the answer to the question “who we think we are”—seems to me as a better alternative because, if we believe in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, that question allows us to see ourselves within the context of two basic doctrines: our divine filiation and the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our True Identity and Worth

The knowledge of our divine filiation and the atonement have a critical impact in helping us rediscover our true identity. According to these doctrines, all human beings—whether considered Asians, Caucasians, Negroes, Hispanics, or any other possible racial variation or combination—are the offspring of Heavenly Parents, created in their likeness and image. Consequently, within each one of us—no matter who we are, where, or how we live—shines the spark of divinity, in the form of divine characteristics, divine virtues, and unlimited potential.

Regarding our worth, the Lord said: “Remember that the worth of souls is great in the sight of God; For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh.”² Paul taught that Christ purchased us with the price of his own blood³. So, the atonement answers the centuries-old philosophical question about the value of human life. Each mortal person is worth the life of the Savior—and since he is God, infinite and eternal⁴, we can say that each member of the human family has infinite worth.

Based on the fragmentary scriptural accounts available in the late twentieth-century, it appears that for a certain period of time after the Fall of Adam there may have been only one race in the world. Today one can only speculate as to what that first mortal race might have really looked like. In the early days of this dispensation, prophets Joseph Smith Jr. and Lorenzo Snow taught that at a certain season in the eternities God himself inhabited a planet like ours⁵. If we reflect on this teaching for a while, we will conclude that he certainly had a family, a job, a culture, a national identity, and we may also admit as inevitable the assumption that he also belonged to some kind of racial group, unimaginable to us at this stage in time. Which inevitably leads us to the following questions: Could the Lord in his mortal stage of existence have experienced some form of prejudice or discrimination? Could it be that he underwent the same experiences that certain racial or ethnic groups have gone (or are going) through in our planet? If so, could it be that he allowed such things to exist so that we could better understand his background and the extent of his mercy and love?

Unfortunately, at this time we have no definitive answers to these questions; so we will leave them to

2 Doctrine & Covenants 18:10-11

3 New Testament, Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23

4 Book of Mormon, Mosiah 15:1-4; Alma 34:10,14

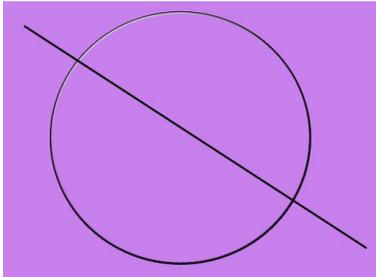
5 Joseph Smith Jr. taught: "... God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth ...," and Lorenzo Snow taught: "As man now is, God once was; As God now is, man may be." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.345; Teachings of Lorenzo Snow, p.2)

future prophetic inquiries. But if those assumptions are true, it is possible to conceive that God’s words for those suffering might very well be:

“My [child], peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; ... Be patient in afflictions, for thou shalt have many; but endure them, for, lo, I am with thee, even unto the end of thy days. ... Be patient in afflictions, revile not against those that revile. ... Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”⁶

Spirits and Glory: Visualizing Life in the Pre-Mortal World

What might have been like to live as a pre-mortal spirit? With the currently available revelations we can’t fully comprehend—or rather remember—our pre-mortal environment because of the temporary physical limitations imposed as a result of the Fall of Adam. In my current opinion, rather than an actual physical veil or curtain, the so-called veil of forgetfulness could very well be just a temporary condition caused by our imperfect mortal minds’ inability to process perfect and immortal information⁷. If that is really so, we have not “forgotten” our pre-mortal life and labors, but instead our mortal brain is just incapable of fully accessing the information permanently stored in our spiritual brain.



Using a rudimentary geometrical analogy, we may say that trying to understand eternal matters using mortal tools might be like trying to connect all the points of a circle with all the points of an inflexible straight line. The straight line would contact the circle in at most two points at a time, and the only way to make a connection with all points would be to slide the line up or down on the circle over time. In other words, connection would all points would only be possible incrementally, but not simultaneously.

But despite this limitation, perfect and immortal knowledge is not entirely inaccessible to mortals. Mortal life is made possible by the combination of fallen corruptible earthly matter and glorified spiritual matter. Through the power of the Holy Ghost one can “feel” the reality of the eternal kingdoms and the truthfulness of heavenly concepts even while temporarily incapable of seeing or fully understanding them. The Lord stated that the elements are the tabernacle of God, and that human beings themselves are the tabernacle of God⁸. Therefore, since our imperfect mortal bodies are made alive by an infinitesimal degree of the divine power, our mortal mind can perceive or feel eternal concepts when it experiences the intimations or impressions from eternity conveyed by the power of the Holy Ghost. The prophet Joseph Smith taught: “All things ... God ... reveal to us, while we are dwelling in mortality ... are revealed to us in the abstract, and independent of affinity of this mortal tabernacle, but are revealed to our spirits precisely as though we had no bodies at all ...”⁹

In another rudimentary analogy, we observe an electric current passing through water. Although the water

6 Doctrine & Covenants 121:7; 24:8; 31:9; New Testament, Matthew 18:7; brackets added

7 Keep in mind that this personal opinion is based on currently available knowledge. Future official prophetic statements will shed more light on this subject.

8 Doctrine and Covenants 93:35

9 Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.355

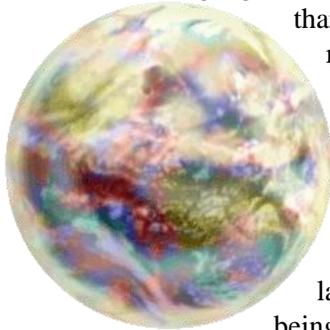
will resist the electric current, the minerals in suspension in the water will still conduct the electricity. The same could be said in relation to the interaction of the Spirit of the Lord with our souls¹⁰. Although the fallen elements of our bodies may resist the power of the Holy Ghost, the spiritual elements of our soul will let the power and its consequent effects—knowledge, insights, and gifts—flow through us, if we use the cleansing and sanctifying procedures and ordinances prescribed by the Lord.

A word of caution may be necessary at this point. When trying to visualize life in the pre-mortal world one must be careful with the utilization of imperfect mortal definitions to explain perfect and immortal concepts. For example, in perfect and immortal spheres terms like: progress; faith; intelligence; nobility; agency; and valiancy, refer to processes and attributes far beyond our imperfect mortal comprehension.

Just as an example, let us consider for a moment the concept of intelligence (defined for the moment as intellect, reason, or erudition) in an immortal environment. One of the early Apostles of this dispensation, Elder Parley P. Pratt, understood spiritual matter as “a substance ... holy ... pure ... endowed with intellectual attributes and sympathetic affections” and that a spirit is “an individual intelligence, an agent endowed with life, with a degree of independence, or inherent will, with the powers of motion, of thought, and with the attributes of moral, intellectual, and sympathetic affections and emotions ... possessing eyes to see, ears to hear, hands to handle; as in possession of the organ of taste, of smelling, and of speech.”¹¹

Another early Apostle, Elder Orson Pratt, believed that spirits possessed intellectual ability far beyond mortal possibilities. He stated:

“In the spirit state, we have reason to believe ... [the] medium of communication will be adapted to the nature and capacity of the mind to grasp in a variety of subjects and digest them all at once. ... [There] is a language in the spirit world that can communicate more to the mind in one minute than could be learned here in a hundred years of intense study and reasoning. There is an eternity of knowledge. There are worlds, as it were, without number; kingdoms without number; personages without number; intellectual beings of all grades and orders without number; and all these have their laws, their governments, their kingdoms, their thrones, their principalities, their powers, all moving and acting in the sphere in which they are placed; ... imperfect things will be done away, and we shall be able by the power of the Holy Ghost to obtain a language by which the angels speak, and by which a higher order of beings speak, and by these means attain to a greater degree of knowledge, that will produce a greater amount of happiness.”¹²”



Based on these statements, the idea that some pre-mortal spirits might have been ignorant, dull-witted, or feeble-minded cannot be supported. Consequently, if certain pre-mortal spirits who chose to follow the Savior had a lesser degree of any pre-mortal attribute or characteristic, we can still say that those same spirits probably had intelligence, might, knowledge, purity, and holiness in greater degree than the most righteous yet imperfect mortal person. Mortals can only be considered superior to spirits in the sense that they possess tangible bodies with their associated opportunities for development and potential for future

10 Let us observe that the term “soul” is defined in the scriptures as the union of an immortal spirit with a mortal body. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:15

11 [Journal of Discourses](#) 1:8

12 [Journal of Discourses](#) 3:101-103; brackets added

glory¹³, all made possible by the Fall and the Atonement.

Therefore, concepts like progress, intelligence, and valiancy, must be used with great care when referring to the corresponding perfect virtues found in eternal worlds. Without proper care, mortal definitions for such concepts may end up being heavily influenced by imperfect (and at times abhorrent) societal biases. The careless use of imperfect mortal definitions for progress, intelligence, and valiancy to explain their perfect immortal counterparts may end up being a futile attempt to imagine prejudicial and damaging systems in spheres where there are no such things.

Coming to Earth: Present Circumstances and Future Possibilities

Having considered a few insights on the pre-mortal environment, we now turn our attention to mortality. In the past some have argued that our circumstances on earth (e.g. nationality, race, health, income, etc.) would have been imposed on us as rewards or punishments for unknown events occurred during the pre-mortal stage of life. While it is true that individuals are pre-ordained (or foreordained) in the pre-mortal world, we must remember that the doctrine of pre-ordination refers to assignments to be performed in mortality, and should not be automatically extended to all other aspects of the mortal experience.



Some authors have used terms like “fortunate” and “less fortunate” to categorize human beings according to their circumstances in this life. I would like to raise another word of caution. What do we mean when we say that another individual is “less fortunate”? The adjective “fortunate” suggests luck, chance, or wealth. If that is so, people have been unconsciously evaluating others solely in terms of material welfare, instead of in terms of faith, charity, kindness, spirituality, and other Christian virtues.

Besides, there are other subtle and perhaps even more serious implications here, these having to do with the logical consequences of the concept of being “more fortunate.” Does that imply that some consider themselves more blessed? More loved? Better (i.e. of superior quality) in comparison with others? Such imperfect mortal categorizations often deny the impartiality of the Lord’s mercies¹⁴. And who said that material comfort and technological advancement would be the criteria to determine either pre-mortal or mortal righteousness or favor?

Comparisons based on mortal criteria (nationality, educational attainment, economic or military prowess, material possessions, physical comforts) are the result of imperfect human (and mostly Western) reasoning, which attempts to understand the world using culture-based categories and scales, which in turn often leads to division into social classes. But the restored gospel teaches that exaltation and eternal life are entirely dependent upon the Lord’s grace following our individual faith and obedience¹⁵, and that salvation is offered to all, regardless of material circumstances. Nephi taught:

“[The Lord] doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him. Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation. ... [For] he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and ... he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his

13 Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, pp.181, 325

14 Psalms 145:9

15 2 Nephi 25:23

goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.¹⁶”

In this dispensation, the Lord said the following:

“And again I say unto you, let every man esteem his brother as himself. For what man among you having twelve sons, and is no respecter of them, and they serve him obediently, and he saith unto the one: Be thou clothed in robes and sit thou here; and to the other: Be thou clothed in rags and sit thou there--and looketh upon his sons and saith I am just? Behold, this I have given unto you as a parable, and it is even as I am. I say unto you, be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine.¹⁷”

Based on passages like these we understand that our potential and likelihood for exaltation and eternal life are not dependent upon events and circumstances of the pre-mortal existence. While it is true that the Lord stated to Abraham that he had chosen his rulers from among the noble and great in the pre-existence, it is clear in the inspired text that choice seemed to refer to specific pre-ordained missions in mortality, not chances of salvation¹⁸. Besides, the prophet Joseph Smith stated that there are no guarantees, not even for those who have been sanctified¹⁹. Being even a General Authority of the Church does not by itself increase a person’s chances of being admitted into the celestial glory. If anything, such high calling only increases the weight of the responsibility placed on that man’s shoulders.

Another question often asked: “Is being born in an active Latter-day Saint family [and/or in an affluent environment] an evidence of pre-mortal faithfulness?” In the past some have suggested that being born under such “favorable” circumstances could be seen as a reward for righteous pre-mortal deeds. But if such idea were true, how could we account for Abraham’s birth in the home of an idolatrous and abusive father? Or how could we account for the fact that among the first 30 or so prophets and apostles of this dispensation none was born in an LDS family? Associating materialistic circumstances with pre-mortal rewards would deny the possibility of the Lord’s pre-ordained rulers being born in all nations and under a variety of social and economic circumstances.

If anything, we may safely state that being born in an active LDS family may only increase the likelihood—but not necessarily guarantee—that one will fulfill certain parts of his or her pre-ordained mission on this earth, and it may have nothing to do with pre-mortal actions or dispositions.

The Heredity of Blessings and Curses

While it is true that at times in the history of the dispensations the Lord cursed certain individuals or groups of individuals, a careful reading of the scriptures reveals two important ideas: First, that curses are as hereditary as blessings. And just as the blessings of the parents are bestowed upon their children only on conditions of individual righteousness, likewise, curses can only be transferred from one generation to the next on conditions of wickedness²⁰. So, instead of lineages and physical features, we ought to look into our hearts to find the Lord’s favored people²¹. Secondly, we observe that crucial details about those

16 2 Nephi 26:24,33

17 Doctrine and Covenants 38:25-27

18 Pearl of Great Price, Abraham 3:22-26

19 Doctrine and Covenants 20:29-34

20 Deuteronomy 24:16; Ezekiel 18:20; D&C 103:25-26; 124:50

21 1 Samuel 16:7

ancient curses have not yet been revealed. The Lord stated that every law (or decree) has “certain bounds ... and conditions²².” We read that such-and-such people were cursed, but often we do not ask for what reason they were cursed, nor under what conditions the curse was imposed, and more importantly, under what conditions the curse might be lifted.

At this point I think it would be wise just to quote the words of the prophet Joseph Smith on the judgments of God compared to men’s:

“... [While] one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard ... and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men ... He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men ... We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah; He will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed, the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information, and His inscrutable designs in relation to the human family ...²³

“All the religious world is boasting of righteousness; it is the doctrine of the devil to retard the human mind, and hinder our progress, by filling us with self-righteousness. The nearer we get to our heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls; we feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders, and cast their sins behind our backs. ...²⁴

“Our heavenly Father is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive; and, at the same time, is more terrible to the workers of iniquity, more awful in the executions of His punishments, and more ready to detect every false way, than we are apt to suppose Him to be.²⁵”

Conclusion

Today there may be a few individuals who would argue that this discussion on race, pre-existence and mortality, is irrelevant, inconsequential, and that should be set aside for good. Unfortunately, the racial tensions and ethnic conflicts present in the 1990's clearly show that we have not outgrown centuries-old feuds and prejudices. So, this discussion is not only worthwhile but also necessary. But rather than relying on academic discussions and propositions, I also believe that only the word of God can heal wounds and influence people to do what is just²⁶. As I mentioned previously, the doctrine of the restored gospel is sound. The requirements for exaltation are simple and unchangeable across cultures, races, or any other mortal variables.

Still, after all these considerations, there may still be those who harbor unkind feelings towards others, who feel uncomfortable with the idea of meeting former members of different national or racial backgrounds in the celestial kingdom, and who would rather exclude them from their fellowship. I would invite these individuals to repent of such feelings, reminding them that Lord and all the heavens weep over the lack of

22 Doctrine and Covenants 88:38

23 Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, pp.217-218

24 *ibid.*, p.241

25 *ibid.*, p.257

26 Jacob 2:8; Alma 31:5

affection in the world²⁷. The scriptures suggest that the gates of the celestial kingdom can only be closed from the outside. Or in other words, only our actions—or our misuse of the free agency—can prevent us from being admitted into the presence of the Lord. Individuals who harbor prejudicial feelings cannot exclude someone like me from heaven without excluding themselves first. Jacob stated: “... the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel, and he employeth no servant there.²⁸” So, if someone can’t bear the thought of being with me in eternity, he or she is welcome to head for another kingdom of glory.

Regarding the statements of the past, I suggest we inspect more closely the track record of the First Presidencies since the Revelation of 1978. Their actions and decisions speak louder than any vague opinions or old interpretations of fragmentary scriptural accounts. Why doubt that the full blessings of the gospel—including exaltation and eternal life—are really meant for the people of all nations in an era when living prophets are directing the building of temples in Africa and Asia at an unprecedented rate?

This is not yet a season to shake off the dust from our imperfect feet—not until we are specifically instructed to do so by living prophets. On the other hand, this is certainly a season to go throughout the world and administer the blessings, mercy, power, and saving ordinances made possible by the atonement of Jesus Christ.

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27 Moses 7:33, 37

28 2 Nephi 9:41