

Luke P. Wilson. “Does the Bible Teach Salvation for the Dead? A Survey of the Evidence, Part I,” *Heart and Mind* (January–March 1995): 1–4.

Luke P. Wilson. “Did Jesus Establish Baptism for the Dead?” *Heart and Mind* (January–March 1997): 1–4. Free on request from the Institute for Religious Research.

Reviewed by John A. Tvedtnes

“The Dead Shall Hear the Voice”

Luke Wilson heads up the Institute for Religious Research, which publishes *Heart and Mind*, an anti-Mormon quarterly. In the beginning of 1995, he published the first part of a two-part article on the Latter-day Saint concept of salvation and baptism for the dead. The second part was not published for another two years. Now that we have both parts and have received inquiries about them, it seems appropriate to review them.¹

Book of Mormon Silence

Wilson notes that “the Book of Mormon is silent about salvation for the dead and baptism for the dead” (I.1; cf. II.1) and that “although baptism for the dead is a central teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, according to the LDS church, the Book of Mormon contains no reference whatever to the practice” (II.1). He implies that the Nephite record should discuss the subject because “the Book of Mormon is described as containing ‘the fulness of my everlasting gospel’ (Doctrine and Covenants 27:5)” (II.1). The definition of *gospel* in the Book of Mormon and latter-day revelation is the “good news” of Christ’s atonement, and its first

¹ In doing so, I shall use roman numerals I and II to refer to the two articles, followed by the page number. Thus, I.1 would be page 1 of the January–March 1995 issue, while II.1 would be page 1 of the January–March 1997 issue.

principles are faith, repentance, baptism, and receiving the Holy Ghost.² Since the Book of Mormon contains the most lucid explanation of the atonement of Christ (see especially 2 Nephi 2, 9; Mosiah 15; Alma 34, 42), it clearly qualifies as containing the fulness of the gospel. Because the term *gospel* refers specifically to the atonement, we need not understand it to encompass all truth. The LDS (and evangelical) misuse of the term in this latter sense is no excuse for misreading the LDS standard works.

Since most of the Book of Mormon predates the atonement of Christ, there would have been no valid work for the dead prior to that time, so we should not expect to find baptism for the dead mentioned there any more than it is in the Old Testament.³ When Wilson asks, “Did Jesus Establish Baptism for the Dead?” (II.1), he evidently has in mind the fact that, in the New Testament Gospel accounts, Christ does not teach such a principle. But since

² See 1 Nephi 10:14; 15:13–14; 3 Nephi 27:13–21; Ether 4:18; D&C 3:20; 13:1; 20:9; 27:5; 33:11–12; 39:5–6; 42:12; 76:40–42; 84:26–27; 107:20; 135:3; 138:2–4, 57; JS—H 1:34; Articles of Faith 3–4. Doctrine and Covenants 93:51 speaks of “the gospel of salvation,” while Abraham 2:11 refers to “the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” (cf. D&C 128:5, 17). In Jacob 7:6, the gospel is defined as “the doctrine of Christ,” referring to the doctrine concerning Christ, rather than the totality of Christ’s teachings, since he had not yet been born when these words were uttered (cf. Mormon 3:21; D&C 76:82). Elsewhere, the Book of Mormon equates the “fulness of the gospel” with coming “to the knowledge of the true Messiah . . . their Redeemer” (1 Nephi 10:14; 15:13–14; cf. 3 Nephi 20:30–31; D&C 19:27).

³ There is, nevertheless, evidence that at least some Jews before the coming of Christ believed in work for the dead. Following the battle of Marisa in 163 B.C., it was discovered that each of the Jewish soldiers killed in the fight had been guilty of concealing pagan idols beneath his clothing. In order to atone for their wrong, Judas Maccabaeus collected money from the survivors in order to purchase sacrificial animals for their comrades.

And when he had made a gathering throughout the company to the sum of two thousand drachmas of silver, he sent it to Jerusalem to offer a sin offering, doing therein very well and honestly, in that he was mindful of the resurrection: for if he had not hoped that they that were slain should have risen again, it had been superfluous and vain to pray for the dead. And also in that he perceived that there was great favour laid up for those that died godly, it was an holy and good thought. Whereupon he made a reconciliation for the dead, that they might be delivered from sin. (2 *Maccabees* 12:43–45, KJV)

he had not yet wrought the atonement, we should not expect him to institute a practice that would not be valid until after his resurrection. One could counter Wilson's question with another: "Did Christ establish the office of bishop?" From the testimony of the Gospel accounts, one would have to say, "No." And yet Paul wrote about the qualifications for this office in the early Christian church (see 1 Timothy 3:1–8; Titus 1:6–9). By Wilson's reasoning, shouldn't we reject the concept of a bishop since Christ never mentioned it?

Salvation for the Dead

Wilson suggests that the Latter-day Saint belief in work for the dead comprises "largely interpretations of a handful of Bible passages (two in particular—1 Peter 3:19ff and 1 Corinthians 15:29)" (I.1). But when he begins his discussion of 1 Peter 3:19–22, he says, "as with all biblical interpretation, it is important that we examine these verses in their context, so that our interpretation truly comes *out of* the sacred text (*exegeisis*), in contrast to reading preconceived ideas *into* it (*eisegeisis*)" (I.2). By this, he hints that Joseph Smith read his own interpretation *into* the Bible passage, which contradicts Wilson's earlier assertion that the prophet's interpretation derived *from* the text. Wilson wants it both ways. In any event, his understanding of the passage is at variance with that of the early Christians and most modern scholars.

I was amused by Wilson's conclusion regarding 1 Peter 4:6: "Peter evidently means Christians who are *now* deceased, but who were alive when they heard and believed the gospel" (I.4). "Evidently"? Now, here's a good example of eisegeisis! But Wilson doesn't see it that way. He continues, "This interpretation fits the passage's theme of comforting Christians who are suffering for Christ. . . . On the other hand, the view of D&C 138 that 1 Peter 4:6 is teaching salvation for the dead . . . does not fit Peter's motive" (I.4). He should really read verse 5 again; it speaks of Christ being "ready to judge the quick *and the dead*." In view of those words, verse 6 is a natural follow-on, explaining that the dead must receive the gospel message in order that they can be judged on the same basis as those who are alive (which is what the Greek word behind "quick" means). Wilson's objection that 1 Peter 4:6 can-

not reflect the event depicted in 3:19 because the former reads “for this cause *was* the gospel preached,” rather than “*is* preached” (I.4) is just so much nonsense. By the time Peter wrote his epistle, Christ had already visited the spirit world. Peter was not writing about ongoing preaching in that realm, but about Christ’s one-time visit, which calls for the past tense.

Regarding 1 Peter 4:1–5, Wilson notes that its theme is to encourage persecuted Christians and questions how knowledge that the dead could hear the gospel in the spirit world could help them (see I.4). But he further notes that 1 Peter 4:6 “is in essence a footnote to 4:5” (I.4). Should we expect a footnote to adhere to the main theme? Along the same line, I would say that 1 Peter 3:19–21 is a footnote to verse 18. That’s the reason that Elder Bruce R. McConkie noted that Peter introduced “the doctrine of salvation for the dead ‘*in an almost casual and offhand way*’” (I.3). In other words, this is not Peter’s main theme but, in each case, he adds additional information related to the preceding verse. Perhaps the “footnoted” verses should be set off by parentheses to make the reading easier for all of us.

In order to counter the LDS view that God would not hold accountable those who die in ignorance of Christ, Wilson cites passages from Romans 1–2 (see I.2). However, these have nothing to say about the atonement of Christ, only that nature itself bears witness of the existence of God. Wilson then goes on to declare that “the Bible assures us that where there are truly searching hearts, God providentially provides the light necessary for salvation,” and gives the examples of the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26–40 and the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:1–48 (I.2). Out of the billions of people who have lived in the world without even learning of the existence of Jesus Christ, much less his atonement, Wilson picks examples of two who *did* get the word and accepted the message. From these two examples, he concludes that everybody who seeks truth gets a chance in this life. It is rather like the saying, “All Indians walk in single file—at least, the one *I* saw did.”

Wilson maintains that Hebrews 9:27 indicates that “our eternal destiny is fixed at death” (I.2; cf. II.1). But the passage never makes such a declaration, noting only that the judgment comes at some point *after* death. Wilson also uses Jesus’ parable in Luke 16:19–31 as evidence that “there is no opportunity to repent after

death.” But the rich man in that parable was not ignorant of what God required of him; in life he had “Moses and the prophets,” but did not follow them. In the Latter-day Saint view, only those who did not adequately have the chance to accept the gospel get a chance to do so in the spirit world. If man’s final judgment took place at the time of death, why would Peter say, “For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Peter 4:6)? And why does Revelation 20:11–13 claim that the judgment takes place at the time of the resurrection of men, while Jesus spoke of the future role of the apostles in judging the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matthew 19:28)?

Wilson notes that, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, a “gulf” separates the righteous from the wicked, making it impossible for Lazarus to come to help the rich man (see I.2). That there was such a gulf prior to Christ’s mission to the spirit world is confirmed in various Book of Mormon passages and in Doctrine and Covenants 138. But the latter makes it clear that Christ bridged that gulf, making it possible for the gospel to be preached in the spirit world. At the time Jesus gave the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, he was still in mortality and the gulf had not yet been bridged.

Wilson claims that “the general teaching of the Bible clearly excludes the possibility of repentance after death (as does the Book of Mormon—Alma 34:31–35; 42:4, 13, 28; Helaman 13:38)” (I.2; cf. II.1). He gives no references from the Bible to support this contention and the ones drawn from the Book of Mormon refer only to the very wicked who have already rejected the message in mortality. It is true that some Latter-day Saints have misread Alma 34:34 as meaning that a person’s spirit remains the same from the time of death until the resurrection. But the “same spirit which doth possess your bodies” in mortality, “that same spirit [that] will have power to possess your body in that eternal world,” is not the individual’s spirit, but, as verse 35 makes clear, “the spirit of the devil,” to whom the wicked “have become subjected,” who “doth seal you his” and who “hath all power over you.” So we are dealing here only with those who

have rejected God and opted to follow the devil, not with people who ignorantly sin or who sin but have not rejected God.⁴

Wilson's sequence of events for 1 Peter 3:18–19 is contrived: first Christ is put to death, then is resurrected, and then goes to preach to the spirits in prison (see I.2), making impossible a visit to the spirit world during the time his body was in the tomb. But Peter's addition of Christ's visit to the spirits in prison plays off the words "but quickened by the *Spirit*." This is no more a chronological issue than is the fact that Peter then goes on to describe the "spirits in prison" as "disobedient . . . in the days of Noah" and then speaks of how many were saved on the ark and the symbolism of the flood as a type of baptism (see 1 Peter 3:20–21). All of these are merely digressions, after which Peter returns, at the end of verse 21, to his previous topic, "the resurrection of Jesus Christ," then speaks of his ascension into heaven (verse 22). Were we to follow Wilson's sequence, Christ would be resurrected (verse 18), go to the spirits in prison (verse 19), then be resurrected again (verse 21), and ascend to heaven (verse 22). Wilson's argument doesn't "hold water" and were he called upon to build an ark of such material, it would sink. To illustrate, let us look at John 11:1–2 which, in introducing the story of the raising of Lazarus, notes that Lazarus's sister Mary had anointed Christ and "wiped his feet with her hair." One might think, using Wilson's reasoning, that this event had already taken place. But this would be incorrect. Mary's anointing of Christ and wiping his feet with her hair did not take place until later, as recorded in the next chapter, John 12:1–3. It is clear that John's statement about Mary in chapter 11 is written *in retrospect* since, at the time he recorded his words, both events had already taken place. Peter, too, was writing in retrospect. Ironically, Wilson departs from his "sequence" argument on page I.3, when he suggests that "an alternate interpretation is that the pre-incarnate Christ preached in the Spirit through Noah to his contemporaries." It seems that he will grasp at any straw to deny the LDS interpretation of the passage.

⁴ On page I.4, he cites Alma 34:31–35 and declares that "the Book of Mormon forcefully and repeatedly teaches that the eternal destiny of those who hear and reject the truth in mortality is fixed at death."

Wilson's contention that Christ's visit to the spirits in prison took place after the resurrection rather than during the time his body was in the tomb is at variance with the majority of modern scholars and with early Christian beliefs about the "harrowing of hell."⁵ Several early Christian creeds declare that Christ "descended into hell" after his crucifixion. This is found in the fifth article of the so-called *Apostles' Creed*. It is also found in part 2 of the *Faith of Saint Athanasius*. The Greek word rendered "hell" in English (*inferna* in Latin) is *hades*, the same word used elsewhere by *Peter* to denote the location where Christ went before the resurrection (see Acts 2:29–32). The passage cited is Psalm 16:10, in which the Hebrew word *sheol* denotes the abode of the dead. A number of early church fathers (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Athanasius, and Cyril of Jerusalem) taught that Christ rescued some spirits from Hades.

Wilson objects to the term *descent* in connection with Christ's visit and notes that Peter never uses the word (see I.2). The word, though used in other early Christian literature, including some creeds, is not critical to Latter-day Saint belief, since we consider that the spirit world is in the same physical location as the earth. We don't care whether Christ descended, ascended, walked, or took a cab. It is all irrelevant, making Wilson's argument (to paraphrase Will Rogers) so much applesauce.

At one point Wilson objects that the Greek word used in 1 Peter 3:19 (where it reads ἐκήρυξεν) is not the word one would expect if it referred to preaching the gospel (see I.3). But one Protestant scholar, commenting on this passage, notes that "the word is used throughout the Gospels of *preaching the gospel* of the kingdom (Matt. iv.23), and the glad tidings of remission of sins following upon repentance."⁶ In any event, if Wilson were right that the Greek implied only an announcement by Christ, rather than actual preaching to the disobedient, this would lend support to Doctrine and Covenants 138, which relates that Christ organized the righteous spirits to preach to the disobedient spirits

⁵ See Daniel C. Peterson's insightful discussion of the harrowing of hell in his review of *Die Mormonen: Sekte oder neue Kirche Jesu Christi?* by Rüdiger Hauth, *FARMS Review of Books* 9/2 (1997): 131–37.

⁶ G. F. Maclear, *An Introduction to the Creeds* (New York: Macmillan, 1890), 141, emphasis added.

in prison. One of Wilson's notes also supports this idea. Of Ephesians 2:17, in which Christ preaches to the gentiles, Wilson writes, "This can not mean that Jesus himself literally preached to the Gentiles; . . . rather, his apostles, under his direction . . . carried the gospel to the Gentile world" (I.4 n.5). Why should Wilson deny us the same kind of interpretation for Christ's mission to the spirits in prison.

Wilson demands to know why Peter singles out "Noah's contemporaries" when speaking of Christ's visit to the spirits in prison (I.2). It is a valid question, but one that only Peter could answer definitively. Unlike Wilson (see I.2), I do not view Moses 8:19–24 as evidence that all of Noah's generation rejected his message. How many people could he have reached while, at the same time, constructing an ark? It is unreasonable to expect that everyone then living heard his message.

Wilson argues that "the fact that 2 Peter 2:4ff uses Noah's contemporaries as an example of those being reserved for eternal punishment, poses a major obstacle to the LDS interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19ff as an offer of the gospel to those in the spirit world. Why? Because it would mean there is an outright contradiction between 1 Peter and 2 Peter" (I.3). The fact that Peter is writing two different letters and dealing with different topics hardly makes this a contradiction, even by Latter-day Saint interpretation. Moreover, Wilson's use of ellipsis in his quote of 2 Peter 2:4, 5, 9 gives the impression that Peter only speaks of the wicked of Noah's time when, in fact, he also speaks of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. A careful reading of 2 Peter 2:5–9 shows that Peter is speaking about the rescue of the righteous from earthly destruction (Noah's family from the flood and Lot's family from the destruction of the cities of the plain), coupled with the destruction of the wicked. He is not speaking of the final judgment at all, but of the judgment that befell these wicked people in times past and from which a few righteous souls were rescued by God.

When Wilson protests that the word *spirit* does not "refer to human beings" because "human beings *have* spirits" (I.3), "methinks the gentleman doth protest too much," to paraphrase Shakespeare. So when Wilson objects that 1 Peter 4:6 refers to "them that are dead," he says it cannot refer to the "spirits" of 1 Peter 3:19 (see I.3). While it is true that *living* human beings

have spirits, *dead* human beings *are* spirits. Are there any Christians out there who really disagree with this?

At one point Wilson suggests that Christ's victory was extended to include "the realm of fallen angels," based on 1 Peter 3:22 (I.3). However, the angels, authorities, and powers in that verse are not said to be among the fallen ones; we cannot assume that all the angels fell. But what surprises me most is that Wilson is willing to allow Christ's victory to extend to the fallen angels, but not to dead mortals. Moreover, I fail to see how the fallen angels are a continuation of Peter's theme of encouraging suffering Christians, while a visit to the dead could not be related to that theme, as Wilson maintains.

Wilson does not like Bruce R. McConkie's suggestion that Peter introduced the doctrine of salvation for the dead "in an almost casual and offhand way" (I.3). One wonders how he reconciles similar "offhand" comments in the Bible. For example, how is it that Christ sandwiches his comment about not casting pearls before swine between his admonition to rid ourselves of faults before judging the faults of others and admonishing us to ask, seek, and knock (see Matthew 7:5–7)? I note that, like many anti-Mormon writers, Wilson delights in throwing in a comment by an "LDS apostle" (McConkie, in this case), the alternate term used being "LDS scholar." Somehow, such writers seem to think that if they can find fault with anyone to whom they have attributed one of these titles, their case is stronger.

I note that Wilson brings up the concept of the fallen angels mating with mortal women (see I.3), even referring to the pseudepigraphic *I Enoch*, which gives this explanation for Genesis 6:1–3 (see I: 4 n. 4). Does he—does any evangelical—really believe that angels mated with mortal women, as the Enoch account says?⁷ And if he's going to refer to one pseudepigraphic text to support his point, why does he ignore the dozens of pseudepigraphic texts that speak of baptism for the dead or of the descent of Christ into the world of spirits?

⁷ The book of Moses describes the "sons of God" of Genesis 6 as the righteous among human beings (Moses 5:52–56; 6:1–8, 13, 21–22, 27, 68; 7:1; 8:13), and this idea is supported by some pseudepigraphic texts (*Jubilees* 1:24–25; *Book of the Rolls* f.102b, f.105b; *Conflict of Adam and Eve* II, 11:3–4; 19:8–20:38).

In regard to Christ's visit to the spirit world, I think it appropriate to draw Wilson's attention to another statement made by Peter, i.e., his warning to those who wrest the scriptures (see 2 Peter 3:16). It is not Joseph Smith who was guilty of eisegesis or the imposition of preconceived ideas on New Testament passages. Indeed, Joseph's understanding of this subject was the same as that of the early church fathers and is finding more and more support among Bible scholars. Wilson, on the other hand, is imposing a very late, contrived theology on ancient texts with preconceived ideas about what Christianity should be, rather than what it actually was in the early centuries.

Wilson criticizes Doctrine and Covenants 138 (which he calls "the most detailed explanation of salvation for the dead in Latter-day scripture") for contradicting 1 Peter 3:19–20 by indicating that Christ went to the righteous in the former, to the disobedient in the latter, making Doctrine and Covenants 138 a contradiction of Peter's words (see I.4).⁸ The fact is that, as is always the case when dealing with revelation, later prophets get additional information not revealed to the earlier prophets, or at least not recorded by them. Peter simply wrote about Christ's visit to the spirit world, while Joseph F. Smith experienced a vision of what took place during that visit and hence got more details. I realize that this answer will not satisfy one who believes in the inerrancy of the Bible, but it manifests the same phenomenon as the Bible, in that the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament was incomplete compared with what we have in the New Testament.

Noting that "D&C 138 directly contradicts 1 Peter" on the question of whether the spirits Christ visited were disobedient (see 1 Peter 3:20) or not (see D&C 138:29), Wilson adds a footnote that reads, "Joseph Smith tried to resolve this conflict in his 'Inspired Version' (JST) of the Bible by changing the text of 1 Peter 3:20 to read '*some of whom* were disobedient in the days of

⁸ In II.4 n. 2, Wilson notes that "the 1977 edition of the Topical Guide to the Scriptures does not list Doctrine and Covenants 138:33 under its entry for 'baptism for the dead,' though the practice is explicitly mentioned there." What seems to Wilson to be an oversight is readily explained by the fact that section 138 was not added to the Doctrine and Covenants until 1979, two years after the publication of the Topical Guide to which he refers. It was incorporated into the Pearl of Great Price in 1976, but the Topical Guide had already been completed.

Noah” (I.4 n. 7). Somehow, though, I fail to see how Joseph Smith was trying to reconcile 1 Peter with a revelation (see D&C 138) that would not be recorded until 1918, some 74 years after Joseph Smith’s death! If that’s what he was trying to do, then how could anyone deny his prophetic gift? What is significant in Wilson’s statement is that Joseph Smith’s version of 1 Peter 3:20 *agrees* with the later revelation given to his nephew, Joseph F. Smith.

At this point, it seems appropriate to note a Jewish text that attributes to the Messiah a visit to hell to liberate the sinners imprisoned there:

R[abbi]. Joshua, son of Levi, tells further: “I asked the Messiah to allow me to look into Hell, but he did not allow me, as the righteous should never behold Hell.” So I sent to the angel called *Komm* that he might describe Hell for me. But it was impossible, for at that moment R. Ishmael, the high priest, and R. Simeon, son of Gamaliel, and ten just men were killed, and the news reached us, so I could not go with the angel. I went afterwards with the angel Kipod and the light went with me up to *the gates of Hell, and the Messiah came with me, and they were open. The sinners who were there saw the light of the Messiah, and rejoiced, and said to one another: This will bring us out from here.*”⁹

I find it ironic that a Jewish text could express belief in the Messiah’s visit to the spirit prison that a modern Christian denies.

Baptism for the Dead

In his second article, Wilson maintains that “a single verse in the Bible—1 Corinthians 15:29—constitutes [the] sole mention” of baptism for the dead “in *ancient* Christian Scripture” (II.1). He stops short of accusing Joseph Smith of building the doctrine of baptism for the dead on that verse, though this is what critics

⁹ Revelation of R. Joshua Ben Levi (paragraph 20), English translation by Moses Gaster, “Hebrew Visions of Hell and Paradise,” in *Folklore, Magic, Mediaeval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha, and Samaritan Archaeology* (1928; reprint, New York: Ktav, 1971), 1:148, emphasis added.

usually claim. Latter-day Saints, on the other hand, believe that the Prophet Joseph received that doctrine by revelation and that he would have instituted the practice even had Paul not mentioned it.

It is on this latter point that we find ourselves in agreement with Wilson, who wrote that, in 1 Corinthians 15:29, “baptism for the dead is only *mentioned*, it is not actually *taught*” (II.1). Wilson suggests that “given the scanty nature of the evidence, it is especially important to follow sound principles of Scriptural interpretation in seeking to understand this verse” (II.1). To do this, he recommends “two basic principles” with which Latter-day Saints would agree: (1) to consider a verse “in its *context*” and (2) to “use clear, unambiguous Scriptural passages to interpret what is less obscure or less clear, not the other way around” (II.1).

Wilson tends to break his own rules, as we shall soon see. But he also buys into the false notion that the Bible is complete and therefore lacks nothing. He concludes that because baptism for the dead is not “taught,” only “mentioned,” it must not have been a Christian practice. To me, by contrast, the fact that Paul merely mentions the topic in passing demonstrates that it was so common that he didn’t need to explain it to his audience.

In his examination of 1 Corinthians 15:29, Wilson looks at “the broader context” and “the immediate context” of the passage (II.2). The first is contrived, the second misunderstood. Let us begin by looking at the immediate context, since it is the only one that really bears on the question. We concur with Wilson’s declaration that “the first rule for interpreting any single verse of Scripture is to study it in connection with the surrounding verses,” and that the context in 1 Corinthians 15 is “resurrection, not baptism” (II.2). Wilson agrees with the LDS view that Paul was using baptism for the dead as a point favoring the existence of a resurrection. But he finds it necessary to interpolate the passage: “The *false teachers* who deny the resurrection are inconsistent when they baptize for the dead, for the practice is based on the hope of resurrection” (II.2, emphasis added). He derives the concept of “false teachers” from verse 12, in which Paul notes that some of the Corinthians said “that there is no resurrection of the dead” (II.2). But here his evidence falls apart.

Like other critics of the LDS practice who preceded him, Wilson places stress on the pronoun *they* in Paul’s comments. He

writes, “The fact that Paul’s mention of baptism for the dead is not an endorsement is signaled by the impersonal manner in which he refers to the practitioners: ‘Else what shall *they* do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are *they* then baptized for the dead?’ If the rite was a legitimate part of apostolic teaching, we might have expected the apostle to say ‘what shall *you* do . . .’ or ‘what shall *we* do . . .’” (II.2). By using the pronoun *they*, Wilson declares, Paul “*exclude[s] himself from those who practiced the rite*” (II.2).

However, the Greek original of 1 Corinthians 15:29 does *not* use the pronoun *they*. It says, “Otherwise, what will do *the ones being baptized* for the dead?” The text uses a passive participle form, “the being baptized [ones],” as a substantive (where it is usually accompanied by the definite article). Participles reflect gender, number, and case, but not person. Hence, there is no third-person plural (*they*) in the Greek original. Stressing the pronoun supplied by the English Bible translators for flow in English distorts Paul’s meaning. Being devoid of reference to person, the passage, does *not* restrict the practice to “false teachers” as Wilson contends. So Wilson is patently wrong when he says that “if we ask who the ‘they’ in verse 29 refers to, the context clearly points us back to verse 12. It is those within the Corinthian congregation who are denying the resurrection, and whom the entire passage is written to refute” (II.3). Wilson’s case is made of thin air, nothing more. But since most of his readers rely on the English passage, I suspect that they will be taken in by his arguments.

Anticipating that Latter-day Saints might ask “why didn’t Paul refute the practice?” (II.3), Wilson draws again upon his unwarranted assumption (based upon the nonexistent pronoun *they*) that “Paul has already associated the rite with false teachers. So in this sense, it has no positive standing and needed no special refutation” (II.3).

Wilson cites Tertullian’s interpretation of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15:29, noting his belief that Paul referred to those “who were vainly baptized for the dead” yet didn’t believe in the resurrection (II.3). While it is certainly appropriate to cite Tertullian’s opinion of the passage, in all fairness one must note that his was not the only voice. Dozens of early Christian texts speak of

baptism for the dead and the practice became so distorted by the fourth century that some were baptizing the bodies of the dead rather than using proxies, resulting in the prohibition of such practices at the Synod of Hippo and the third Council of Carthage. But proxy baptism for the dead continued even after that time among the Christians of Egypt and Ethiopia and among the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran, all of whom still continue the practice, albeit on a restricted basis.¹⁰ Wilson may be correct in saying that “the practice of baptism for the dead in fact never became widespread,” but he clearly ignores the fact that it was practiced in early Christianity outside the area of Corinth.¹¹

Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?

I found it significant that, when listing what is required “to receive forgiveness of sins and escape the judgment of God,” Wilson follows the evangelical line that it is necessary only to “believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (I.1). He fails to note that the Bible specifies that baptism is for the remission of sins (see Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38). Jesus indicated that rebirth by water and the Spirit were necessary to enter into the kingdom of God (see John 3:5, 7). According to Mark 16:15–16, his last words to the apostles before his ascension were “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be

¹⁰ Among these groups, baptism is performed only for deceased relatives; no corresponding attempt to do genealogical research is performed. Such was also the earliest LDS practice (in Nauvoo, for instance), until revelation came to Wilford Woodruff and the Genealogical Society of Utah was established, see Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 322–23. A Syrian Orthodox priest informed me that his church also continues the practice, but he has not yet provided me any documentation to support his statement.

¹¹ In a forthcoming FARMS volume on ancient temples (a follow-up to *Temples of the Ancient World*), I discuss the subject at length—with numerous textual examples—in an article entitled, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity.” The article will put to rest any doubts about the widespread belief in baptism for the dead among early Christians. Wilson does note its practice by “the heretical Marcionite sect in the second century and the Ephrata Society, a Christian occult group in Pennsylvania in the 1700s” (II.3).

damned.” This, of course, bears on the question of how the dead can receive this essential ordinance.

Wilson takes exception to Bible passages that mention baptism. For example, after noting that Latter-day Saints cite Peter’s statement in Acts 2:38 (“repent, and be baptized . . . for the remission of your sins”), he adds that elsewhere, in Acts 3:19 and Acts 10:43, Peter speaks of being converted and believing in order to have one’s sins remitted, without mentioning baptism (see II.3). Reasoning that this means that baptism is unnecessary for a remission of sins is simply begging the question. The fact that Peter mentions only one or two principles of the gospel in one place and others in another does not mean that we can exclude any of them. To read the other passages and exclude Acts 2:38 is a mistake. Neither Wilson nor anyone else can, by such reasoning, erase the clear meaning of Peter’s words about being “baptized for the remission of your sins.” Consequently, Wilson is wrong in his dogmatic declaration that “it goes beyond Biblical teaching to say that baptism is an absolute necessity, in the sense of having saving value” (II.4).

His conclusion is based, in part, on the fact that “the New Testament presents baptism as the virtual equivalent of the Old Testament rite of circumcision (Colossians 2:12–13), and it declares explicitly that circumcision did not have saving value” (II.3). However, the Colossians passage is specific that, through the ordinance of baptism, we become “dead in [our] sins,” Christ “having forgiven you all trespasses.” Moreover, verse 11, which Wilson does not cite, makes it clear that Paul was writing of “the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.” That is, through baptism, which is “the circumcision without hands,” we put off sins in the same way that, through regular circumcision, the foreskin is removed from the body. Paul was using a simple analogy and was not equating the saving ordinance of baptism with the nonsaving ordinance of circumcision.

In discussing “the broader context” of Paul’s mention of baptism for the dead, Wilson notes “three other references to baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:14–17, 10:2, and 12:13” and concludes that Paul’s frequent mention of the topic was prompted by the fact that the Corinthians had an “inflated view of baptism”—a

statement that appears twice in his analysis (II.2). From this and from his illogical—and sometimes blind—approach, it seems that it is his religious bias against baptism as a saving ordinance that has most influenced Wilson’s attack on the LDS practice of baptism for the dead.

If there is anything predictable about Wilson’s *Heart and Mind* newsletter, it is that it constantly repeats that “Mormonism” is at variance with “historic Christianity.” Thus, in connection with the topic discussed in this review, Wilson wrote that “salvation for the dead is one of the distinctive doctrines of Mormonism that separates it from historic Christianity” (I.1) and that “proxy baptism . . . is one of the distinctive doctrines of Mormonism that separates it from historic, Biblical Christianity” (II.1). I suppose that, if they are repeated often enough, some will believe these statements, despite the fact that the evidence points in the other direction. A large number of early Christian documents support both the belief in salvation of the dead and proxy baptism for the dead. The historic connections favor the Latter-day Saint position.