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## Discipleship As the World Collapses Around You

Author(s): Loren Spendlove

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## **Discipleship As the World Collapses Around You**

Loren Spendlove

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# DISCIPLESHIP AS THE WORLD COLLAPSES AROUND YOU

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**Loren Spendlove**

Review of Adam S. Miller, *Mormon: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 162 pages. \$9.95 (paperback).

**Abstract:** *Adam Miller has created a thoughtful and enlightening theological study of the book of Mormon. It is obvious from his textual commentary that Miller has given a significant amount of thought and effort into teasing out practical insights from the book's original authors. Except for some clumsy distractions that occasionally appear in his text, I would highly recommend Miller's analysis of Mormon's and Moroni's apocalyptic narratives.*

Adam Miller is a “big picture” thinker, which is evident from this and other books that he has authored. In this latest work, Miller fashioned a creative, refreshing, and insightful treatise in Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> His interpretation of scripture and theological concepts was truly captivating, and his use of words was, mostly, pleasingly poetic. What holds this book back from being truly inspiring, at least for me, was Miller's lack of attention to details. On multiple occasions I found myself intrigued with one of his ideas, only to come to the conclusion, after further reflection and analysis, that the idea was either unlikely or untenable. In general, I would say that I enjoyed visiting the destinations where the book took me as a reader even though I was not always fond of the path that led to those destinations.

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1. Adam S. Miller, *Mormon: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020).

## **The Smooth Path**

As I read and pondered Miller's theological insights I found myself underlining everything that impressed me and scribbling some of my own thoughts in the margins. When I was finished, I determined to create a table of everything that I had underlined, and I was surprised to see the list had grown to dozens of citations. In this review I have chosen to include only the "top 10" from my list. Following that, I briefly outline where the path got rocky for me as a "detail-oriented person."

### **How, in Christ, are we Saved?**

In his first chapter, Miller describes himself as a Christophysicist, a less-than-familiar term for me. From what I was able to glean from the Internet, Christophysics is a theo-scientific approach to theology. In this chapter, Miller wrote, "The urgent question at the heart of my work is always the same: exactly how, in Christ, are we saved?" (8). This, of course, is the primary question that all Christian texts should have at their core. This question does not regularly recur in Miller's book, nor does he come right out with a clear answer, but the entire book can be characterized as orbiting this central concern. As I read and pondered, I found it profitable to relate everything back to this same question: how, in Christ, are we saved?

### **Sacrificing All Things**

"If Christian discipleship sits squarely at the crossroads of a world that imposes the loss of all things and a religion that requires the sacrifice of all things, what does it look like to willingly lose all things? What does it look like to practice that loss as discipleship?" (28). Central to Mormon's short book is the nagging knowledge that for him the world is rapidly coming to an end. A key to understanding the man Mormon, as Miller points out, is that Mormon, as a true follower of Christ, sacrificed all things for his God and for his people. The question for modern Christians is how we can reconcile these two ideas: the absolute certainty that this world will end for everyone — one way or another — resulting in the loss of all things, and the precept that true followers of Christ must willingly sacrifice all things.

For each of us, when the world ends, we are stripped of all our earthly possessions and honors. Given that fact, what holds me back from willingly and even cheerfully releasing my grasp on the things of this world as a witness of a sacrificial life centered in Christ? Why am I more inclined to be like the doomed Nephites who "[hid] up their treasures" (Mormon 1:18) than to be like Mormon, who sacrificed all for the cause of Christ and his

kingdom? These are some of the questions that have occupied my thoughts in profitable ways since reading Miller's short volume.

### **Re/creation**

"If God's ongoing work of re/creation doesn't appear to us to be miraculous, the problem is ours, not God's" (39). Miller explains that the world is "perpetually passing away" while simultaneously "perpetually beginning" (36). This destruction and subsequent new creation — re/creation as he calls it — is a prevalent theme throughout his book. According to Miller, the damned reject this re/creation process while true disciples embrace it and willingly sacrifice to be part of it. Miller describes the passing and recreation of all things as marvelous, miraculous events that witness the hand of God. Only the "willfully blind" (39) fail to observe the divine miracle of re/creation.

### **Sorrowing**

"When Christ's disciples sorrow, they sorrow 'unto repentance' and their sorrow is recast as a constructive form of sacrifice. For the latter, however, for those who sorrow as the damned, the world's inevitable passing is nothing but a curse and a loss" (52). Sorrow can be a productive force in our lives if our sorrowing is a Godly sorrow, one that brings or leads us to repentance (cf. Mormon 2:13, 2 Corinthians 7:10) and toward a willing sacrifice of all things. However, what Mormon witnessed among his people was the "sorrowing of the damned," a sorrowing for the loss of all things.

Again, I found myself looking within to try to understand the hue and texture of my sorrows when they occur. Do I sorrow like the damned or like a true disciple? Do my sorrows bring me down into depression, accompanied by a sense of profound loss, or do they motivate me to do more, to sacrifice all things for the sake of Christ and his kingdom? Do I sorrow like Mormon, or do I sorrow like his beloved, doomed Nephites?

### **Hopeless Love**

"By loving without hope, Mormon is initiated into the 'pure love of Christ' that 'seeketh not her own'" (58). Selfless love is miraculous and marvelous, but hopeless love — love in the presence of absolute hopelessness — epitomizes true Christlike charity. Mormon loved in this way. Even though his people were hopelessly lost and fallen, he loved them "according to the love of God which was in [him], with all [his] heart" (Mormon 3:12). Do I love in this way? Or is my love more practical, reserved for those for whom I can feel real hope? Does my love

falter or weaken when hope evaporates? Miller describes Mormon as one who “will resolutely continue to love, regardless” (57). I need to more fully develop this type of love, one that will continue to love, regardless!

### **Forgiving All Things**

“The work of sacrificing all things shows itself clearly for what it ultimately is: the work of forgiving all things. To sacrifice all things is to forgive all things” (62). The people around us, their imperfections, the world, and the effects of time itself all need to be forgiven. Miller astutely observes that unless we can forgive all things, we will be in no position to sacrifice all things. This world and its inhabitants are full of imperfections and blemishes. Acknowledging and accepting these imperfections is a prelude to forgiving them, and the forgiveness of all things, according to Miller, is a companion to the sacrifice of all things. If we are unable to forgive the “failures, disappointments, and imperfections” (62) of this world, we will most likely come to resent and/or despair at the thought of sacrificing all things.

### **What is Needed?**

“What does it mean to abuse the law and judge unrighteously? It means to use the law to judge what is *deserved*. What, on the contrary, does it mean to use the law to judge righteously? It means to use the law to judge what, in the face of the world’s continual re/creation, is *needed*” (80, emphasis in original). In the margin next to this section I wrote “maybe, but I like it.” Miller, here, is referring the Joseph Smith translation’s rendering of Christ’s teaching on righteous versus unrighteous judgment (see Matthew 7:1–2).

While I may have interpreted these verses a little less dogmatically, still Miller’s point resonated with me. What I learned from this scriptural interpretation was that I need to be far less concerned with what others *deserve* and far more focused on what they *need*. This reformed way of thinking won’t make me less judgmental. Rather, it will reorient my judgment toward charity. King Benjamin would probably agree that unrighteous judgment involves judging what is *deserved*: “The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand” (Mosiah 4:17). But, as Benjamin clearly taught, if we follow this line of judgment we have “great cause to repent” (Mosiah 4:18). Being judgmental in itself is not a bad thing. In fact, it is necessary. What matters, according to Miller (and I would also include King Benjamin) is what criteria I use to judge. Do I judge what is *deserved*, or do I judge what is *needed*?

## Justice

Miller's chapter on judgment and justice had the most profound effect on me.

Justice is poorly defined as the backward-looking business of making sure that people get what they “deserve.” Justice isn't a form of religiously sanctioned vengeance. It isn't a form of revenge dressed up as a divinely endorsed system of prizes and punishments that carves the world up into winners and losers . . . . This way of thinking about justice is a poor fit for a just God bent on creating a new world. It's a poor fit for a just God who loves his enemies. It's a poor fit for a just God who personally sacrifices all things in unforced and self-emptying acts of love that are anything but predetermined by the past (99–100)

As I read, I wondered in what practical ways I could shift my attitudes and behaviors away from this “backward-looking business” to be more closely aligned with this seemingly paradoxical, loving God of justice. Ultimately, the answer must come down to judging what is *needed* rather than what is *deserved*. The truth is that we all *deserve* damnation, and we all *need* grace!

## Consequences

“If hard consequences are needed to express love and fulfill the law, then love enforces hard consequences — but as a form of grace, not as an act of revenge” (110). *Revenge* is not found in God's toolbox, but *grace* is. *Revenge* destroys — it is a sledgehammer — while *grace* — the figurative nail that sealed the atonement of Christ and binds us to God and each other — creates and edifies. Natural and logical consequences are inseparably connected with law and judgment, not as expressions of revenge or hate, but as evidence of grace and love.

## The Law

“The law is of enormous value to those who stop trying to leverage their obedience as collateral against the loss of all things and, instead, enter through the strait gate of sacrifice” (115). God's grace cannot be purchased or earned through obedience to the law, no matter how strict one's observance. Rather, grace must be willingly received on its own terms. “Obedience cannot balance the book! And moreover, to the extent that we use obedience as a strategy for suppressing our dependence on God's grace, obedience itself becomes — ironically — a hallmark of our



sinfulness.”<sup>2</sup> There is no way to work ourselves out of needing God’s grace any more than we can hold our breath sufficiently long that we can claim to be self-sustaining. Grace, like air, is necessary for our very existence.

Once we understand that we cannot replace grace with obedience to the law, perhaps then we can experience a change of heart. Perhaps only then can our knee bend and our tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ. Perhaps then we will be willing to forgive all things and sacrifice all things for Christ and his kingdom. “To practice discipleship is to transfigure the loss of all things by sacrificing all things. And to willingly sacrifice all things is to willingly forgive all things (including ourselves) the necessity of their re/creation” (120).

### The Rocky Path

As stated in the introduction of this review, while I agreed with most of Miller’s theological conclusions, noisome rocks along the path at times caused me to lose my balance. These rocks were distractions to an otherwise commendable read. In this section I briefly describe five of these rocky distractions.

#### Stature

In Chapter 3 — A Narrative Synopsis — Miller wrote the following:

Ammaron’s selection of a ten-year-old boy (however sober and quick to observe) may also be related to the fact that Mormon was “a descendant of Nephi” (Mormon 1:5) and, thus, plausibly enjoyed the kind of social, political, and economic advantages that would account for his literacy and, at least in part, his meteoric rise to command the Nephite armies at the age of fifteen. If so, then Mormon’s being “large in stature” may be as much socio-political as physical (Mormon 2:1). (18–19)

The idea that *stature* could have been a reference to both Mormon’s physical size and his socio-political status is appealing, but untenable. Miller’s suggestion that “large in stature” could have been a nod to Mormon’s socio-political status almost assuredly would have been an anachronism in 1829–1830. A quick search of the history of the term “stature” reveals that its use in relation to a sense of importance “dates from the mid 19th century”<sup>3</sup> and that the “figurative sense” of *stature*

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2. Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Greg Kofford Books: Salt Lake City, 2016), 6.

3. *Lexico*, s.v. “stature,” <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/stature>.

was “first recorded [in] 1834,”<sup>4</sup> four years after the Book of Mormon was originally published. Additionally, neither the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED)<sup>5</sup> nor Webster’s 1828 *American dictionary of the English Language*<sup>6</sup> allow for this “socio-political” understanding of *stature* at the time of the writing and publication of the Book of Mormon. Finally, a quick search of the word *stature* in *Google Books* for the years 1800–1830 revealed only references to physical height and size among the first 30 results. In other words, Mormon was tall, or perhaps stout, or both; either way, he was physically large. And while he may have also enjoyed “social, political, and economic advantages” on account of being “a descendant of Nephi,” the word *stature* cannot be cited as evidence of those advantages.

### Angolah

Also in Chapter 3, Miller referred to one of the cities where the Nephites took refuge as *Angolah* (20), a variant of *Angola* (see Mormon 2:4) as printed in the Book of Mormon published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Interestingly, Miller offers no explanation for this variant spelling to his readers. I assume that he derived it from *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* which advocates for *Angolah* based on the Printer’s Manuscript.<sup>7</sup> If this was his source it would lead one to believe that his other Book of Mormon citations also came from the same text. However, that is not the case. On pages 23–24 Miller cited Mormon 4:21 as follows: “The Nephites were driven and slaughtered with an exceedingly great slaughter; their women and their children were again sacrificed unto idols.” This wording is verbatim from the current Latter-day Saint version of the Book of Mormon. *The Earliest Text*, however, renders the word *exceedingly* as *exceeding*, following the 1830 printing.

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4. Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “stature,” <https://www.etymonline.com/word/stature>.

5. The following definitions are outlined in the OED: “1. The height of an animal body in its normal standing position. 2. Bodily form, build. 3. An effigy, statue. 4. State, condition. 5. The posture of standing.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 16, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1991), s.v. “stature,” 573. With regard to definition 4, it is clear from the examples given in the OED that there is no implied connection to socio-political status.

6. “The natural height of an animal body. It is more generally used of the human body.” Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (S. Converse, New York, 1828), s.v. “stature,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/stature>.

7. *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, edited by Royal Skousen (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2009), 784.

This may seem like a minor detail, and perhaps it is, but as a detail-oriented reader I found Miller's inclusion of *Angolah* to be a distraction from his narrative synopsis. Why bother with this variant spelling without attribution to *The Earliest Text* or without consistently referencing the same source throughout the book, especially when the variant's inclusion does nothing to illuminate the text or inspire the reader?

### Sober and Quick to Observe

Ammaron told Mormon that he was a “sober child, and ... quick to observe.” Miller chose to travel down a lexically troublesome path with these words, in my opinion. He wrote that Mormon’s “lived experience of discipleship hinges on pairing a certain mood (his sobriety) with a certain intensity of perception (his quickness to observe)” (29). Miller called Mormon’s sobriety a type of “divine melancholy” (31) and added that “his melancholy bearing is paired with his intensity of perception” (33).

When I read that Mormon was *sober* and *quick to observe* I immediately envision a serious boy, not given to frivolous flights of fancy, but one who is also a fast learner. *Mood* is a poor substitute for *sober* since *mood* implies a temporary state of mind rather than the characteristic traits of being “regular; calm; not under the influence of passion” or “serious; solemn; grave.”<sup>8</sup> Webster adds that *sobriety* means “seriousness; gravity without sadness or melancholy”<sup>9</sup> — a definition that directly counters Miller’s assertion about Mormon’s mood.

Finally, there is no sense of *intensity* in the word *quick*. *Intensity* is more akin to *strength*, *depth*, or *magnitude*, while *quick*, during the translation of the Book of Mormon as well as today, is aligned with *speed* or *swiftness*.<sup>10</sup> Miller, in essence, transformed the young Mormon from a serious, steady, quick learner into a melancholic-but-deep thinker.

### Cause and Effect

Mormon 8:31 reads in part: “Yea, it [the record] shall come in a day when there shall be great pollutions upon the face of the earth; there shall be murders, and robbing, and lying, and deceivings, and whoredoms, and all manner of abominations.” Two verses later Mormon lamented: “O ye wicked and perverse and stiffnecked people, why have ye built up

8. Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “sober,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/sober>.

9. Ibid., s.v. “sobriety,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/sobriety>.

10. Ibid., s.v. “quick,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/quick>.

churches unto yourselves to get gain?” (Mormon 8:31). Miller, however, restructured these verses to read: “They ‘built up’ lives unto themselves ‘to get gain’ and, as a result, they caused ‘great pollutions upon the face of the earth’ (cf. Mormon 8:33, 31)” (47).

Miller’s inclusion of “as a result” creates a causal link between *getting gain* and *pollutions*: the process of getting gain led to pollutions. A plain reading of Moroni’s words, however, does not arrive at any such conclusion. In my opinion, Miller’s reinterpretation of the text seems an overt attempt to recycle Moroni’s original, ancient paradigm and reweave it into a garment that is a better fit for our post-modern fashions. Miller reconceived Mormon’s or Moroni’s words on several occasions,<sup>11</sup> causing me to wonder about his motives for reinterpreting the text away from its plain meaning.

## Striving

Regarding the Spirit, Miller wrote:

To live without God in the world is to live without the Spirit. It is to live without the constant re/creative push of that spirit “striving” with you. Spirit strives. It pushes and pulls and strains . . . . And, what’s more, this Spirit doesn’t simply strive in the abstract. It strives, Mormon says, “with” us. It invites and calls. It coordinates and cooperates and collaborates. (55)

In this passage, Miller stressed the Spirit’s active role of *striving with us*. This idea of the Spirit striving *with* us is first encountered in Genesis 6:3: “And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive [יָדֹן *yadon*] with man [בְּאָדָם *ba’adam*] (KJV).” The Hebrew root יָדֹן-יָדָן (*d-y-n*) — expressed as the imperative יָדֹן (*yadon*) in Genesis 6:3 — when followed by בְּ (*with*), carries the principle meaning of “to execute judgment” or “to call someone to account.”<sup>12</sup> I believe that this execution of divine judgment, or being called to account by God, is a perfect example of Miller’s idea of a loving God

11. For example, Mormon wrote that the Nephites’ riches “became slippery, because the Lord had cursed the land, that they could not hold them, nor retain them again. And it came to pass that there were sorceries, and witchcrafts, and magics; and the power of the evil one was wrought upon all the face of the land” (Mormon 1:18–19). Mormon established a clear cause and effect relationship regarding the slipperiness of riches: “because the Lord had cursed the land.” However, perhaps due to the physical proximity of the following verse, Miller claimed that “the most obvious reading is that magic made these treasures slippery” (49). It may be an “obvious reading” to Miller, but not to me, nor to Mormon.

12. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2000), s.v. “יָדָן.”

enforcing “hard consequences — but as a form of grace, not as an act of revenge” (110). God’s “striving with us” shows that he cares for us as a loving parent. When the Spirit of God stops striving with us, as Genesis 6:3 clearly asserts that it can, then our destruction is assured (cf. 2 Nephi 26:11).<sup>13</sup> We see this in the biblical account of the flood (Genesis 7), in relation to the Jaredites (Ether 2:15), and with regard to the Nephite nation (Mormon 5:16).

However, with his next breath, Miller reversed the role of the striver; no longer does Miller refer to the Spirit as striving with us, but as us striving with the Spirit:

Striving *with* the Spirit, we no longer live *without* Christ and God in the world. Striving with the Spirit of the Creator, we actively participate in the world’s re/creation. Living without God in the world, the damned are left to themselves. No longer striving with the Spirit, they are left alone to be “driven about as chaff before the wind” (Mormon 5:16). (55)

There are seven passages in the Book of Mormon that mention the Spirit of God striving with us, but none that indicate that we can or should strive with the Spirit. It appears from context that the act of striving (judging/calling to account) in the Book of Mormon is unidirectional; it is the Spirit who strives with us. In fact, in the Bible we are cautioned against striving with or against God:<sup>14</sup>

I have laid a snare for thee, and thou art also taken, O Babylon, and thou wast not aware: thou art found, and also caught, because thou hast striven against the LORD. (Jeremiah 50:24)

Woe unto him that striveth with his Maker! (Isaiah 45:9)

I believe that I understand Miller’s idea of “striving with the Spirit.” It seems that he intended to say that we should *engage* with the Spirit in positive ways and that when we cease this process of positive engagement we are “driven about as chaff before the wind.” However, by choosing to describe this process of *engaging* with the Spirit as *striving*, Miller may have sown seeds of confusion instead.

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13. It is essential to note that Genesis 6 is a prelude to the earth’s inevitable destruction by the flood.

14. The Hebrew verbs in these two biblical passages [התגרית (*hitgarit*) and רב (*rav*)] are not the same verb that is used in Genesis 6:3. However, all three of these verbs can evince “to contend.”

## Conclusion

Adam Miller has authored a commendable theological analysis of the small book of Mormon, and his reading and explication of the text is anything but superficial. Except for occasional rocks along the road, I found his interpretation of Mormon's and Moroni's accounts to be an enlightening and contemplative read.

**Loren Spendlove** (*MA, Jewish Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; PhD, Education, University of Wyoming; MBA, California State University, Fullerton; and, BS, Finance, Brigham Young University*) has worked in many fields over the last 40 years, including academics and corporate financial management. A student of languages, his research interests center on linguistics and etymology

