Help for the Troubled
“Young Mormon”

Stephen O. Smoot
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This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com
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Adam S. Miller has recently made a name for himself in Mormon intellectual circles by publishing a number of books in theology and philosophy.\(^1\) Miller, who holds a PhD in philosophy from Villanova University and is currently a professor of philosophy at Collin College in McKinney, Texas, adds to his list of publications with a new book published by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. This new book, *Letters to a Young Mormon*,\(^2\) is a short volume of some 80 pages that includes Miller’s ruminations on the following topics: agency (9-12),\(^3\) work (13-16), sin (17-23), faith (25-29), scripture (31-35), prayer (37-41), history (43-49), science (51-56), hunger (57-60), sex (61-66), temples (67-71), and eternal life (73-78).

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3  All of the in-text page citations are from *Letters to a Young Mormon*. 
The book itself is something of an oddity. It consists of a series of letters—each just a few pages long—from Miller ("A.") and his anonymous, hypothetical (and presumably troubled) young Mormon correspondent ("S."). What makes the book an oddity is that it seems to be an attempt to synthesize a number of different stylistic approaches. It is part homily, part personal/anecdotal reflection, part theological exposition, part philosophical expounding, and part practical advice. Because Miller is writing to “a young Mormon” (I like to imagine Miller writing to a young Mormon either about to leave on or just returning from his or her mission), the book never becomes a scholarly treatise on any of the subjects being addressed. Although it isn’t thoroughly scholarly, Letters to a Young Mormon is also not the sort of ubiquitous, fluffy, and often vacuous “self help” book that is all too common in American (including Mormon) bookstores. The book strikes a good balance. It is engaging and intellectually stimulating but not overwhelming. As such, it performs well what it sets out to accomplish.

Although there are many parts of Letters to a Young Mormon that I considered discussing in this review (as there are many parts of the book that I enjoyed), I shall focus my attention on just two topics. Miller’s views on the importance of science and how scientific knowledge converges with the scriptures (51-56) are refreshingly pragmatic and inviting. Miller does not hash out the finer points of this or that scientific theory and how it may converge with the scriptures but rather expresses his positive attitude toward both spiritual and scientific routes to knowledge while encouraging S. to be open-minded about the marvelous things science has revealed. “God is prying open our eyes and ears,” Miller writes to S. after listing many truly remarkable scientific wonders. “Who has ears to hear it? God speaks both scripture and science. Listen for his voice”
Miller thus understands science as one of God’s ways of communicating with us.

As with scriptural knowledge, Miller believes that God imparts scientific knowledge according to our capacity and willingness to receive it. “As a rule,” Miller writes as he cites Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, “God works with whatever small knowledge we’ve already got” (52). Miller offers Genesis 1 and ancient Israelite cosmology as an example.

The Hebrews, as was common for their time and place, thought that the world was basically a giant snow globe. When God wanted to reveal his hand in the creation of their world, he borrowed and repurposed the common-sense cosmology they already had. He wasn’t worried about its inaccuracies, he was worried about showing his hand at work in shaping their world as they knew it. (53, emphasis in original.)

Miller’s view of the creation account in Genesis actually accords very nicely with what other Mormon and non-Mormon scriptural commentators have said on the topic. For example, in 1931 Elder James E. Talmage implored Latter-day Saints to “not try to wrest the scriptures in an attempt to explain away what we can not explain. The opening chapters of Genesis, and scriptures related thereto, were never intended as a text-book of geology, archaeology, earth-science or man-science…. We do not show reverence for the scriptures when we misapply them through faulty interpretation.”

More recently the evangelical biblical scholar John H. Walton has written two books on biblical cosmology that convincingly argue that modern readers should not expect

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Israelite cosmology to fully accord with modern scientific cosmology, as biblical cosmology is not primarily concerned with reporting a scientific understanding of the universe. This is not to say, Miller notes, that the biblical depiction of creation is a worthless Iron Age fable, but rather to stress that a better understanding of Genesis 1—including an understanding that doesn’t myopically focus on how to smash square pegs into round holes by attempting to (awkwardly) force Genesis 1 to accord with modern science—may help us better discern the spiritual truths being conveyed in the text.

The world given to us is not the world given to [the ancient Israelites]. We have two worlds here. But though our worlds diverge, it is the same God peeping through. Believing that the God of their world is just as surely the God of ours doesn’t commit us to believing in their version of the world. Rather, it commits us to believing in a God whose grace is full enough to fill them both. (54)

Similarly, Miller’s thoughts on the importance of history (43-49) were also some of my favorite. As a student of history myself, I read with great interest Miller’s attempt to instill S. with a sense of the importance of knowing our immediate and distant past. Miller’s chapter on history has two main points that are both insightful and timely. First, Miller urges S. not to slip into the “false comfort in consoling ourselves with the idea that, while our days are evil, the world was once good” (46). Using Nephi’s lament over the wickedness of his own day, and his desire to go back to the “good old days” of his forefathers

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(Helaman 7), Miller admonishes S. that such “modest comfort slides easily into excuse or recrimination” (46). We should not, in other words, romanticize the past.

Nor should we try to cover up the imperfections and flaws of our historic heroes, which brings us to Miller’s second point in this chapter. The admonition to be honest about history, according to Miller, “applies to our own church history as much as it does to stories from places long ago and far away” (47).

It’s a false dilemma to claim that either God works through practically flawless people or God doesn’t work at all. The gospel isn’t a celebration of God’s power to work with flawless people. The gospel is a celebration of God’s willingness to work today, in our world, in our lives, with people who clearly aren’t. To demand that church leaders, past and present, show us only a mask of angelic pseudo-perfection is to deny the gospel’s most basic claim: that God’s grace works through our weakness. We need prophets, not idols. (47)

I say this approach to history (especially to our own LDS history) is timely because of President Dieter F. Uchtdorf’s recent remarks during the October 2013 General Conference of the Church. President Uchtdorf commented, “To be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine.” President Uchtdorf then explained, “I suppose the Church would be perfect only if it were run by perfect beings. God is perfect, and His doctrine is pure. But He works through us—His imperfect children—and imperfect people make mistakes.”

7 Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join With Us,” Ensign (November 2013), 22. Incidentally, lest there be any unnecessary hype, this is not the first time a General Authority has expressed this sentiment. See the comments assem-
Not to belabor the point, but the Church’s recent series of articles addressing sensitive issues related to Mormon history is likewise good indication that Miller’s thoughts on how to tactfully and productively engage our history, especially the controversial aspects of our history, should be welcomed by members of the Church. I believe this is especially true for younger members of the Church (like Miller’s young correspondent) who are widely exposed on the Internet to information (of varying degrees of quality, mind you) about the Church’s history.

Although I think Miller had many insightful things to say in *Letters to a Young Mormon*, there are a few things that Miller says in his book that left me confused. For example, his chapter on sex (an obviously very personal and touchy subject), while frank and mature, is somewhat confusing.

Listen, practice prayer, and let your hunger teach you. When you are alone and feel, as you often will, a growing hunger for sex, don’t always run away. Don’t automatically distract yourself from it or automatically lose yourself in it. Rather, try doing the one thing we’re often most afraid to do: pay direct attention to the hunger itself. Just watch. Acknowledge the hunger’s weight, autonomy, and reality. Notice that there is a difference between the images, fears, and fantasies that

fuel the hunger and the physical sensations proper to the hunger itself…. Don’t pour fuel on the fire by entertaining your fantasies, but don’t try to put out the fire either. Just watch the flames as they burn, on their own, back down to coals. (65)

What, I wonder, is the average young, hormonal, teenage Mormon to make of this counsel? It is certainly well articulated and thoughtful but also terribly vague. At least it is to me. What does Miller mean by “just watch…. don’t pour fuel on the fire by entertaining your fantasies, but don’t try to put out the fire either”? Does he mean do not act on sexual impulses but neither pretend they do not exist, as doing so can easily lead to unhealthy behavior? If so, I think this is wise counsel, but the way Miller says it here is confusing.

The other instance of something that I thought was confusing is in Miller’s chapter on science. Drawing an analogy between unearthing the truths of human biological history and Mormon history, Miller speaks of the “hard and often uncomfortable work” of “own[ing] up to the prickly aspects of our history,” including “seer stones, racism, and polygamy” (55). Does Miller think that Joseph Smith’s use of a seer stone in the translation of the Book of Mormon and the early Mormon practice of plural marriage is comparably as unfortunate as the regrettable racism of past Church members? Or does he think that we need to “own” these aspects of our history in the sense that they are facts we shouldn’t ignore? Miller says that “we can’t afford to play games whitewashing Brigham Young” (55). I agree with this sentiment and hope that this is what Miller meant, but again, he isn’t very clear.

But these two examples of problematic aspects of *Letters to a Young Mormon* do not drastically detract from the overall quality of Miller’s book. I would recommend *Letters to a Young Mormon* to any young Latter-day Saint who is interested in a thoughtful and engaging monologue on Mormon life and belief.
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