

The Zion/Babylon dualism in Mormonism and Anarchism

Jason Brown

2008

Contents

The Dualisms of State	3
Zion	3
Babylon	4
Labor and Property	4

What sets the anarchist critique of society apart from other political projects is the view that, because the state is as an inherently hierarchical, and therefore oppressive institution, the project of human liberation must necessarily do away with all forms of economic and political oppression, not simply attempt to reform them or mitigate their damage. This critique of society can be easily compared to the Zion/Babylon dualism found in Mormon scripture and as elaborated by Hugh Nibley in his seminal and radical work *Approaching Zion*.

The Dualisms of State

I have often wondered, as the Mormon folk-belief goes, that if communism is Satan's counterfeit for the United Order, what is capitalism? Hugh Nibley believed that Satan's greatest trick was to take us down the wrong road and then present us with a fork—it doesn't matter which way we go from there, we are still going down the wrong road. Indeed, the 20th century has been marked by a battle between the false choice of state communism and "free market" capitalism; both of which are rejected by anarchism (and in my opinion should also be rejected by Mormonism). In their book *Working toward Zion*, LDS authors James Lucas and Warner Woodworth outline the struggle between these two narrow economic ideologies and argue that those of us who are truly working toward a Zion society will seek the total liberation and dignity of all of humanity through cooperative principles such as unity, equality, and participatory democracy. Though they are not advocating an anarchist revolution, they state that: United order principles encourage equality by entrusting economic resources and possibilities to the people, not to the state or a wealthy elite. It gives 'the little man,' not a state bureaucrat or wealthy capitalist, the freedom to control his destiny. It gives to every child of God the freedom to make his or her own freely chosen contribution to the work of God.

In *Approaching Zion*, Nibley's scathing critique of capitalism, communism and "Babylonian" economics could, without much exaggeration, be considered anarchist. In a series of essays delivered at Brigham Young University, Nibley eloquently fleshes out the scriptural concepts of Zion and Babylon, their place in biblical history and Mormon theology. He draws numerous parallels with contemporary North American society and harshly renounces our fixation with wealth, competition, property, and the ecological destruction these obsessions produce.

Zion

Zion is most commonly referred to in contemporary Mormonism as "the pure in heart" (D & C 97: 21). We rarely speak of it in terms of a movement, or a community that functions outside the world's economy. The Zion of scripture was a type for the city of God, a place of refuge, equality, and peace; it is "any community in which the celestial order prevails" "the order of Zion is such as will leave the earth as near its primordial, paradisiacal condition as possible," suggesting that it has little to do with the capitalist techno-industrial worldview we have hailed as being God-sent. Zion is a blueprint for a truly Christ-like society and has rarely been achieved. In one such rare occasion, the city of Enoch, described in the Book of Moses, there "was no poor among them" (Moses 7:18). In the communities established after Christ's resurrection and ascent to heaven in both the New Testament and the Book of Mormon, believers attempted to separate themselves from the world by establishing communities in which residents had "all things in common" and

where there were no divisions by class or race (Acts 2:44–45, Fourth Nephi). So, although Zion was and is symbolic of righteousness and purity, it was also a very real socio-economic order, one which the Saints attempted to establish in Utah in the 19th century. Anarchists have also attempted to put their ideas into practice, the Paris commune, Civil War era Catalonia Spain, and the Zapatistas in Chiapas Mexico, are but a few examples of communities that have attempted to live without hierarchy and class. In Catalonia, peasant communities lived for three years outside of formal state jurisdictions and implemented cooperative factories, farming, and free health care and education.

Babylon

Beyond the Old Testament Empire, Babylon is a symbol in the scriptures for the dark center of Satan's power, the culmination of political might, a filthy place of dog-eat-dog survival of the fittest where everything is for sale and intrigue and corruption flourish. Babylon has two objectives: power and gain. It is not a far leap, to connect Babylon to the individualistic, profit seeking, *laissez-faire* ideologies of capitalism which promise perpetual growth and accumulation and an endless supply of goods and services. Both Babylon and capitalism thrive on the stratification of society into economic classes. The earth and its riches are seen as raw materials for the generation of cash, or as one author puts it, "for economic growth to continue there must be a constant conversion of things that have no money value into things that do. Human labor and land are commoditized, money becomes the universal standard of value and nothing escapes its potential appraisal. Although state communism was an attempt to mitigate the inequalities created by such a mind set, it did not stray far from the basic premise of capitalist production as a conversion of raw materials into wealth. The difference was, that in the former case the means of production was owned by a capitalist elite, and in the latter, a government bureaucracy. Zion and Babylon are thus irreconcilable entities and economies. God warned the prophets of old and Joseph Smith in the Doctrine in Covenants that "Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom" (D & C 105:5). In other words, Zion is to be built according to the purest of Christian principles and cannot tolerate even the slightest corruption. As Nibley observes, "when we try to mix Zion and Babylon, Babylon has already won the game." This uncompromising purity resembles the anarchist rejection of political reform, which is tantamount to mixing Zion with Babylon. Anarchism has consistently broken rank with progressive movements as soon as they became too comfortable in the halls of power. Such was the case with state Communism in the USSR, and the labor movement in the United States. This uncompromising commitment to virtue has necessarily alienated both anarchists and religious communities. The Essenes of Christ's time, the Mormon pioneers, the Amish and other utopian communities of the 18th and 19th centuries refused to participate in "the world" and separated themselves from it, literally fleeing from Babylon.

Labor and Property

It would seem then, that both the anarchist and Mormon view of the world, though framed in different terms, would espouse similar values. Leo Tolstoy, the Christian anarchist was adamant that "living off the labor of others" was not justified by Christian doctrines. D & C 42:42 states

that, “He that is idle shall not eat the bread...of the laborer” to which Nibley comments, “hailed as the franchise of unbridled capitalism, is rather a rebuke to that system which has allowed idlers to live in luxury and laborers in want throughout the whole course of history.” Tolstoy states, “If the laborer has no land, if he cannot use the natural right of every man to derive subsistence for himself and his family out of the land, that is not because the people wish it to be so, but because a certain set of men, the landowners, have appropriated the right of giving or refusing admittance to the land to the laborers.” D & C 49:20 proclaims that “But it is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin,” and as Nibley writes “the old Jewish teaching that Adam had a right only to that portion of the earth that he “quickened” on which he labored by the sweat of his brow” in other words, money has nothing to do with our rights to the land and its produce. Again from Tolstoy, “The laborer of today would not cease to suffer even if his toil were much lighter... [f]or he is working at the manufacture of things which he will not enjoy,...working to satisfy the desires of luxurious and idle people...for the profit of a single rich man, the owner of a factory or workshop in particular.” In Nibley’s practically anarchist critique of capitalist exploitation, his essay ‘Work we Must, but the Lunch is Free’ is a heretical idea in capitalist ideology. In this essay, Nibley gives the example of a man who gains control of the earth’s bounty or “lunch” by hard work. He then considers himself benevolent for allowing those he has denied access to this bounty to work for him to get it back (and to make him money in the process). According to Nibley, the bounty of the earth is a free gift, and each of us has a right to “lunch” regardless of class, race, or disposition. This analogy is squarely in line with anarchist and radical environmental critiques of capitalist notions of private property, means of production, and commoditized labor. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the famous French anarchist, famously wrote that “property is theft,” referring not to property in a general sense, but to capitalist ownership of the means of production. This idea is mirrored by Nibley’s assertion that the root of the words “private” and “property” have the same meaning “what is *privatum* or *proprium* is therefore peculiar to one person alone (not a corporation),” and refer instead to things essential for one’s survival. “One may not accumulate property, for then it ceases to be property and falls into the forbidden category of power and gain. Oil under arctic seas or mahogany in unexplored jungles can be neither private nor property, save by a theory of possession cultivated in another quarter” i.e. Babylonian economics.

From the above citations, it would seem that Hugh Nibley, Leo Tolstoy, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Joseph Smith were reading from the same celestial cliff notes. Humans have no right to exploit one another just because of the artificial power of capital. And though I make no claim that the similarities between anarchist and Mormon thinkers overlap in all areas of theoretical discourse, the above statements illustrate that to a remarkable degree, we are all working toward the same society: one where there would be no wage labor (living off the labor of others), hierarchical economic or political institutions, private property, or classes; a world where the human family holds all things in common.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Jason Brown
The Zion/Babylon dualism in Mormonism and Anarchism
2008

Retrieved on May 26, 2025 from <https://themormonworkerdotnet.wordpress.com/past-issues/mw-issue-3/the-zionbabylon-dualism-in-mormonism-and-anarchism/>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net