

If we ask why a dying god should be chosen to take upon himself and carry away the sins and sorrows of the people, it may be suggested that in the practice of using a divinity as a scapegoat we have a combination of two customs which were at one time distinct and independent.

-THE GOLDEN BOUGH
(Frazer 1963:667)

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INTRODUCTION:

The notion of a proxy is one that has preoccupied peoples throughout history, as is well attested in works like THE GOLDEN BOUGH, the Murdock Files^{1} and Joseph Campbell's writings. Salvation of a nation or tribe depended in their religions on the identification of sacrificial individuals who were then in various manners expended to expiate the sins of the nation or to appease the god in question who held the power of life and death through control of crops, weather, etc. Regardless of the specific technique employed by Egyptians or African or other peoples in such rites, the basic idea remained the same: find a method to appease the god(s) so that the nation or individual would benefit in some manner^{2}.

And that is basically what the LDS concept of temple work consists of. I imagine that some LDS will recoil at this comparison because they might interpret this as putting their lofty faith on the level of some "primitives". However, that isn't my intent. In the first place, one who has looked at a range of the religions of the world can't help but be impressed at their complexity and insightfulness. For example, some of the cosmologies of African peoples are remarkably complex and suggestive. I really don't subscribe to the notion of "primitiveness" of faiths, although material cultures, apart from ethical-moral systems, might be so differentiated along technological lines I suppose. The point I make by showing a relationship between the LDS concept of proxies and the same concept across the world is to show that there seems to be some intrinsic belief in, or acceptance of, or need for such a mechanism in many religions. And then, I suppose this is stretching it a ways, one might suggest that there is something eternal in a concept that appears so frequently. The pattern for this conclusion would be the frequency and similarity of creation

¹For non-anthropologists, this is an enormously large collection of anthropological materials and information that is found only in major universities and libraries. It is as invaluable research resource, and obviously includes information of the type alluded to here.

²An example close to home of something akin to proxies is the Katchina employed by tribes like the Pueblo, Zuni, or Hopi. These role of these dolls, and their representations by men appropriately garbed, is predicated on a fundamental belief in the nature of spirits. Fewkes, in his classic text on Hopi Katchinas, explains the belief this way:

"It would appear, also, that in case of the magic or medicine power of man, there was a universal belief that it existed and was potent after death. The breath-body or spirit of man was believed to have a continued existence after the death of the body, retaining powers of good and bad action, a belief which led to worship." (1985:16)

The use of the katchina in religious festivals depended on this belief in the continuation of spirits after life, and also in the belief in the presence of spirits in all things, animate as well as inanimate. Their role was as a intermediary between mortals and the supreme gods or powers who had control over the particular thing in question, crops, rain, life, thunder, etc.

stories or of trees of life motifs, etc. around the world. {³}
Proxies, too, appear all over the place.

PROXIES:

True, most of these proxies are ones whose function is to save an entire nation, rather than individuals. This makes them akin to the savior, then, who atoned for or saved all mankind. But is not the principle the same, whether it is applied to a nation or to an individual? Someone has to stand in stead of another and perform some rites in order for this second person to be saved or benefitted in some manner? I believe so.

One asks how it is that a proxy process can be efficacious at all, and there is no easy answer. Priesthood is obviously going to be invoked by LDS as the explanation, and it is true that such a power is required for such a process to function. But that really isn't an explanation. Is it possible to come up with any guess about what the actual mechanics of the process are?

BAPTISM:

Let's use the temple ordinances that is alluded to by Paul in one of his notes to the Corinthians{⁴}, take baptism which is done for the dead. This process is performed inside of the temple in almost the same manner as outside the temple. A priesthoodholder immerses the novitiate in water after saying a prayer, though the language of the prayer diverges a bit from that uttered over a live subject.{⁵} So what happens inside the temple that doesn't happen outside?

The basic difference in the two ordinances is that the temple ordinance is being done on behalf of a departed person who no longer possesses a mortal body. And since baptism is one of the key ordinances that must be performed on earth with a mortal body

³ This is precisely the most powerful impact one experiences when reading THE GOLDEN BOUGH or Campbell's work. It eventually becomes abundantly apparent that the ONLY, SOLITARY, ISOLATED thing about SMD that appears to be unique on the face of this earth is its extraordinary claim to have had the priesthood of God restored through heavenly messengers to mortals.

Nothing else is unique. Just take Swedenborg's HEAVEN AND HELL and you will discover a surprising share of the D & C there. How do you explain it? You can't deny it. It must be accommodated, which is most upsetting thing for those who believe in one uniquely true faith. And that, I suppose, is why the leaders urge SMDers to stay away from such stuff.

But that still isn't the right thing. Better to urge us to enter these puzzles and work our way out, learning and understanding things in the end about our OWN faith, such that we are more comfortable and relaxed with alternative perceptions.

⁴ Parenthetically, it's of interest to note something that most people are unaware of, although they have read all of Paul's letters: the actual "First" letter to the Corinthians is missing. We only have the second and third, although they are numbered First and Second. There is a passage in this 'First' letter that refers to a previous letter.

⁵ By itself, this little twist is fascinating. There is such rigidity otherwise about the words for the live ordinances that one would expect that identical words would be required in the vicarious ordinance, but they are not. What's the difference?

in water, everyone who will have lived down here must have access to the ordinance in some manner. So a proxy takes the name of a deceased person with him into the baptismal font and is there baptized on behalf on that person.

Outside of the fact that the proxy REPRESENTS a third party, there is basically no difference between the proxy and the live baptism, at least outwardly. And this brings us to the question, again:

what might happen in the temple, then, that makes the ordinance efficacious for a third party?

Family journals abound with references by writers who claim that while they were undergoing proxy ordinances, they felt the presence of the individual on whose behalf the ordinances were being done. There are even allusions to "whispers" of information sometimes being heard or felt, a "thank you", and "all is well", etc. So one begins to suspect that the third party can personally be present if s/he so wishes. If this is so, then the proxy who is "sensitive" (whatever that means){⁶} to the other presence, will be aware of him or her. In those cases where the departed does not wish to be present, s/he is not bound to be present. There is no compulsion to the ordinance. But apparently once it is done, the ordinance remains in some manner so that the deceased person can take advantage of it later if s/he changes his/her mind.

RECIPIENT OF ORDINANCE:

One other idea comes to mind when considering what happens in this priesthood mediated process where a proxy is performing ordinances for a third person. Is it possible that the departed might actually co-occupy the same three-dimensional space as the mortal body is, thereby being able to personally undergo the ordinance? It is true that the Lord placed enmity between Satan and his followers and mortals, thereby preventing them from occupying mortal bodies, but there is nothing to suggest that followers of Christ are to be prevented from somehow momentarily co-occupying another's body during an ordinance. This is clearly heretical doctrine, but one wonders whether it is not some how possible or probable.

Whatever the actual mechanical truth is, there is some sort of a one-to-one correspondence somewhere between the one who has departed and the one who is standing in as proxy. All things in the POS reduce to mechanical steps and this is no exception I am sure, although we can't fathom them at present.

⁶The state of mind of the subject is the issue here. And note that this reference is to the SPIRIT mind, not the mortal one. If the spirit mind is in a state of humility, is relaxed and open, if it is desirous of hearing something, then, it is at least partially prepared for such an experience. However, there are probably other parameters of the state of mind that must be "in tune" for this rare experience to occur.