The Mormon Heritage of Vardis Fisher

Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt

Tradition says that Vardis Fisher completely rejected his Mormon background, and that, in turn, he was rejected by the Mormon community. Cassie Hyde Hock, who did the first comprehensive study of fictional works in which Mormons were principal characters, indicates that Fisher was "excommunicated for his frankness in portraying Mormon life as he knew it." With the exception of Joseph Flora, other biographers have dwelt on his early rebellion against a rigid Puritan upbringing and his frequent derisive comments on Joseph Smith and Mormon bishops. Even Flora states that Fisher left the Church at age eighteen and that Mormon authorities "officially repudiated" Children of God.

Certainly there is enough substance in this view to account for its pervasiveness. Fisher indeed had nothing good to say about Mormon bishops, whom he portrayed as opportunists who used their office to swindle a neighbor or to get an arm around the neighbor's wife. If he were to rewrite Children of God, Fisher is reported to have said, he would "show Joseph Smith as a scheming fraud and nothing else." Fisher, as Flora suggests, "loved to outrage"; he

\[\text{Paper read at the annual meeting of the Association for Mormon Letters, 4 October 1976 Salt Lake City, Utah.}]
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\[\text{1Cassie Hyde Hock, "The Mormons in Fiction" (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1941), p. 207.}]
\[\text{2Joseph M. Flora, Vardis Fisher (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965), pp. 18, 132. Also Flora, "Vardis Fisher and the Mormons," Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, 4 (Autumn 1969): 48. Flora's assertion is apparently based on Fisher's own statement that "at about the age of eighteen I left the Church." Vardis Fisher, "Children of God," Oregon Historical Quarterly 41 (June 1940): 126. But Fisher, reeling from the criticisms of some Mormons to his handling of some aspects of Mormon history, was exaggerating the break and the earliness of his disaffection. Some non-Mormons have probably confused the Mormon reaction with that of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Hock (pp. 207-8) quotes the Kansas City Times for 15 April 1940, stating that Dr. Frederick M. Smith, president of the Reorganized Church, repudiated the book in the strongest language.}]
\[\text{3Flora, "Vardis Fisher and the Mormons," p. 50.}]

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delighted in making it difficult for his fellow Latter-day Saints to use him as an apologist, and he succeeded, with considerable help from Mormon readers and non-Mormon biographers, in obscuring his relationship to the religion he had voluntarily espoused.

But an undertone to all Fisher’s outrages bespeaks an attachment which few have acknowledged or recognized. It colors his words as vividly as fear colors those scribbled on a University of Utah copy of Bernard DeVoto’s appreciative review of *Children of God*: “Lies—lies—ask one who knows—not a heretic.” That Fisher permitted his oldest child to become a Latter-day Saint and that his second son is active in a ward in Northern California suggests the basic devotion to Mormonism of an indulgent father.

The actuality is that Fisher never rejected his Mormon background entirely enough that it no longer mattered to him. It was a large enough part of his makeup that he never quite outgrew rebelling against it. His younger sister Irene, a loyal Latter-day Saint, wrote, “Vardis always tormented me in one way or another and yet he loved me very much and I him.” There is a touch of pleasure and need in Vardis’ characterization of his sister as “pious enough for a whole tribe,” as though he were counting on her to arrange that his temple work be done for him after he died (which of course she did).

In this paper, we should like to establish three points: (1) Fisher was not an apostate; he never renounced his religion nor did Mormonism renounce him. (2) Fisher’s outlook on life and history was religious, definitely Judeo-Christian and, as he saw it, broader than the Mormonism he was acquainted with, but definitely encompassing Latter-day Saint belief and practice. And (3) Fisher was a pioneer in applying modern psychology to the Mormon experience, both past and present, and in that sense he is very much a Mormon literary prophet. He foresaw conflicts his people would have, groped with them two generations before they did, and made some progress toward a resolution of them.\(^6\)

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\(^6\)Mead to Arrington, 15 June 1976. Irene stated in a letter to Leonard, 7 October 1976, that Vardis did not wish to be publicly considered an active Latter-day Saint because “he did not wish anything he did or said to reflect with discredit on the church or his parents.”

Fisher's Mormon heritage goes back to 1834, when his great-grandfather, Vardis John Fisher, who had moved from Vermont to New York in the 1820s, was baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.\(^8\) He and his wife had eight children before she died in 1831. Vardis John then married Jane Chapman, by whom he had ten additional children. Not long after his baptism they moved to Ohio, then to southeastern Illinois. Their last child, born in Illinois in 1850, was named Oliver Cowdery Fisher, signifying their continuing loyalty to Mormonism, while the seventh, "our" Vardis' grandfather, was named Joseph Cylvenus Martin Fisher (perhaps named for Joseph Smith). Vardis John finally took his family across the plains to Utah by oxcart in 1855. The mother died of cholera along the trail near Rock Springs, Wyoming, and Vardis John and family settled in North Ogden (then called Weber Valley); he died in Big Cottonwood, Salt Lake Valley, in 1866, at the age of eighty-four.

Joseph Cylvenus, who was twelve when his family crossed the plains, was baptized shortly after their arrival, and grew up in North Ogden. He was married at the age of twenty-six to Lucinda Amelia Cady, a native of Pennsylvania. Although both her parents had died in Pennsylvania, she had migrated, at the age of seven, with another family in 1859, in the company of Captain James Brown. Joseph and Amelia lived first at North Ogden, then in Eden, Ogden Valley, where they lived adjacent to the William Eccles family. They had moved, in succession, to Promontory, Five Mile (now Weston, Idaho), Willow Creek (southeast of present-day Idaho Falls), and finally, in 1879, to Poole Island or Annis, Idaho, about eighteen miles north of Idaho Falls. Church records indicate that Joseph Cylvenus eventually became a seventy and that he and Amelia were active in Rigby Stake, although they did not attend meetings regularly until an LDS branch was formed at Annis.

The eldest of the twelve children of Joseph Cylvenus and Amelia was named Joseph Oliver. Born in Eden, he had experienced the frequent moves of the family and had grown up as a culturally deprived worker. As the father of "our" Vardis, he figured prominently in the autobiographical sections of Vardis' novels. This Joseph, usually called "Joe," married Temperance Thornton, a girl whose parents were also pioneers in southeastern Idaho. Like Joe,
she had Mormon roots going back to the 1830s. Temperance's father, Samuel Thornton, from western New York State, moved his family to Nauvoo, Illinois, and served a mission to Indiana in 1843. He and his wife received their endowments in the Nauvoo Temple in January 1846, but after the Latter-day Saints went west the Thorntons went to Beaver Island, Michigan, to join the Strangites. After Strang was murdered by one of his own disciples, they moved to Council Bluffs, and then to Utah and southern Idaho. Their son William Ezra was the founder of Thornton, Idaho, which is near Annis.

All this suggests that the Thorntons were only peripherally involved with Mormonism. Vardis' sister Irene writes, "Mother [i.e., Temperance] had only a moral training from her parents." She was baptized at the age of ten because her friends in Burton, Idaho (another nearby Mormon village), were being baptized and her father decided, "Let her go; it won't hurt her." Temperance's parents, wrote Irene, "affiliated themselves with no church, but were good people and part of their children grew up to be church members."9

So Vardis' father, an elder from a family with a tradition of being on the fringes, and his mother, a baptized member with little indoctrination or sense of group loyalty to Mormonism, settled a remote farm on the south fork of the Snake River where they raised their children on the fringes of Mormon culture. Joseph read the Doctrine and Covenants to Temperance "a lot," according to Irene, and there was a Bible in the home that Vardis read several times, and that seems to have been the extent of his Mormon training as a boy. When in later years someone asked Vardis' father why he waited so long to have his wife and family sealed to him, he said, "I wanted to see if I could live with her first."10

When Vardis was six (1901), his parents moved into the Big Hole Mountain region on the south fork of the Snake, some thirty miles north and east of Idaho Falls. Across the river from the entrance to Burns Canyon and just west of the entrance to Black Canyon they homesteaded a ranch. They were almost alone in the remote mountain wilderness—the nearest neighbor was across the river some eight miles away. The Fishers always referred to this area as the Antelope District or Antelope Bench, and it became the setting for many of Vardis' novels. It was a world of sagebrush, wind,

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9Mead to Arrington, 15 June 1976.
10Ibid.
coyotes, wolves, mountain lions—and loneliness. The Fishers lived in a log house with a dirt-covered roof and a dirt floor on river bottom land; their food came from birds, wild animals, fish, fruits, dairy products, and what their garden and dry farm would produce; their bedcovers were animal skins. Vardis said that he did not leave the area for five years after they moved there; his mother provided his schooling. Both parents were extremely hard workers; in later years Vardis liked both hard physical and mental labor.

When Vardis was about eleven, his parents sent him to live with his grandmother in Annis, where he attended the Mormon ward school. It was there that he met his future wife. After one year the people in the Antelope region established a ward school at Poplar, some fifteen miles downstream from the Fisher ranch, where Vardis, his brother Vivian, his sister Irene, and about sixty other pupils attended. Here, too, at the age of thirteen, Vardis read "Ode to the Nightingale" by John Keats, and, as he expressed it, became "drunk with the sensuous color and rhythm . . . with the magic of strange lands and seas." The poem was so beautiful that he was moved to tears. Vardis resolved to become a poet. Encouraged by his mother, he read every book of poetry he could lay his hands upon in the school and homes of the area; he scribbled verse by the yard. He says he particularly enjoyed Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Psalm of Life," William Cullen Bryant's "To a Waterfowl," Oliver Wendell Holmes' "The Chambered Nautilus," William Ernest Henley's "Invictus," and poems by Thomas Gray and Edgar Allen Poe.

Along with poetry Vardis also read the Bible—"at least two or three times"—before he reached adolescence. "It frightened more than it edified me," he admitted; "abashed more than it filled. . . . After reading in the book a day or two, I would suffer nightmares."11 Still, it provided the foundation for his Testament of Man novels, and influenced him to identify the Mormons with the people in the Old Testament—with Israelites searching for the Promised Land.

At the age of sixteen, Vardis took his younger brother Vivian, then thirteen, to Rigby to attend high school. There the boys lived in a small concrete hut. They were later joined for a year by their sister Irene. Unaccustomed to being with people, Vardis wrote poetry and

a melodramatic novel like those he had read in his lonely home in the hills. His world was a world of books. He was intellectually curious, had many questions, and was haunted by a sense of sin and guilt. Vardis and Vivian (and later Irene) took this opportunity of going to church and usually offered prayer at their meals. During his last year at Rigby High, at age 20, he submitted himself for baptism. Vivian was baptized at the same time (4 April 1915) and his sister Irene a month and a half later. Probably on Vardis’ urgings, Joe and Temperance then took their three children to Salt Lake City to the temple where the family was sealed. "The boys were ready and willing to be sealed," writes Irene.12 That this religious rejuvenation occurred when Vardis was twenty must have left a lasting impact. Soon afterward it was suggested that Vardis go on a proselyting mission. Vardis declined, whether from fears of being alone and inadequate (as suggested in the autobiographical tetralogy), or his family’s inability to support him, or his and his family’s intense desire that he secure a university education first.

At any rate Vardis entered the University of Utah in 1915, where, says Irene, not having a full knowledge of the gospel, he began to read the one-sided and hostile books available at the time and thus developed intellectual prejudices against Mormonism. As with many in his generation, he was not able, as we are able today, to balance his reading with pro-Church works written with just such intellectually curious readers in mind. Fisher supported himself with part-time jobs, played for the university’s football team, and became a “book drunkard,” as one of his professors called him. After two years he married his childhood sweetheart from the Antelope area, Leona McMurtrey. He served in World War I, but the war ended before he was sent overseas.

With Leona and their son Grant, Vardis then returned to Salt Lake City to work on his B. A. degree, which he completed in 1920. Vardis was praised for plays he had written, and decided to make a career of writing and teaching. He read and wrote incessantly. He then went to the University of Chicago to do graduate work, did a master’s thesis on Daniel Defoe, and shifted his interest from drama to the novel. In 1925 the University of Chicago granted him the doctorate, magna cum laude, for a dissertation on the literary reputation of George Meredith.

Vardis experienced the greatest agony and pain of his life in 1924 when his wife Leona committed suicide; his distress was all

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12Mead to Arrington, 15 June 1976.
the greater because he felt that Leona had done this partly because of his own shortcomings—his failure to make sense of his life. In trying to understand himself in the months and years that followed, he became preoccupied with uncovering men’s excuses and evasions. Vardis’ relentless self-inspection and distrust of easy answers gave him difficulty as a young teacher at the University of Utah, where he taught from 1925 to 1928. He resented what he thought were pressures of the Mormon Church, and he was regarded by many as something of an iconoclast. “In his demand for a pure gospel of truth,” as his biographer says, “he was as rigid a Puritan as his mother could ever have been.” Nevertheless, his son Grant was later baptized and reared to respect the Latter-day Saint way of life.

Vardis resigned from the University of Utah faculty, married Margaret Trusler, a philologist he had known at the University of Chicago, and they went to New York University where he became friendly with Thomas Wolfe. But Vardis did not feel at home in New York, and returned to his wild and beautiful Idaho outpost three years later, in 1931. He built his parents a modern house and farm buildings, and he wrote there from 1931 to 1935.

By the time Vardis returned from New York to Idaho he had written Sonnets to an Imaginary Madonna (1927), a book of poetry; Toilers of the Hills (1928), a novel about life in Antelope Hills; and Dark Bridwell (1931), a brooding examination of the people he had grown up with. Toilers of the Hills initiates a theme which is basic in all his early novels, for each of them represents an attempt to understand his own experiences and the Mormon experience through the study of religion and the human personality. The basic affirmation of this novel, as with those which immediately follow it, is the dignity of the individual—before God and before mankind. The hero of Toilers is Dock Hunter (supposedly Alma Lehi Fisher, brother of Joe Fisher, seventh son of Joseph C. Fisher and therefore “Doc”), who wrings the first bushel of dry-farmed wheat off the parched soil of the Antelope Bench. It is the story of life’s spiritual conflicts intensified by the physical conflicts of survival on the frontier. More than that, it is the story, seen through a wife’s wonderings, of an individual pitted against the ruthlessly indifferent forces of nature.

For most of the book we suspect, with Opal, that Dock is crazy to farm this stupid hill. Dock, with the rest of the characters, is

drawn as "crude and earthy as the land which they worked," in a later book Fisher has his protagonist, Vridar Hunter, promise: "If I ever write novels about country people I'll tell the truth. I won't simper and bellyache over them like a Dickens or a Hardy." And tell the truth Fisher does. Opal has a husband whose hands are gentle only when touching a horse; who's full of empty promises about building her a house with a roof of shingles, not sod; and whom we see throughout the novel as Opal sees him the afternoon of her first look at their new home:

When he came toward her, smiling, brushing his clothes, Opal stared at his teeth. He had two very large teeth on top with a space between, and on either side, not close by, was a small sharp-pointed tooth. Never before had she observed his teeth with such acuteness. She imagined that his ears stuck out farther from his head to-day, that there was more bow in his legs; and when he came near, she saw a drop of water hanging from the point of his nose.

This is before he kisses her with tobacco-stained lips and tobacco juice on his mustache and chin, and long before she learns that he will not be taking a bath for another decade.

Eventually Opal adjusts to his tobacco-quid kisses, though she never quite adjusts to his dirtiness, and her questioning is more significant.

Sometimes when Dock was out on the hills, she would sit where she could watch him and she would wonder at what she saw. For she would see, with an acuteness unfamiliar to her, a thing small and alone moving out there, a tiny thing on a great gray breast and under a wide solitude that knew no sound but the sound of hawks and mighty winds and the sweep of mighty storms. Above him was the great wakeful loneliness of the sky, limitless and gray, and under him were the rolling dry hills with their mask of death or of gray life that was like death, and around him were mountains that walled him in. . . . And it seemed absurd and pathetic that a man should set his puny might against the boundless power of this earth and this sky.

In a crude and only partly satisfying manner, Opal's question is answered when Dock, through all his superstitions, stumbles upon dry-farming techniques. Suddenly their world changes. The hills and sky and winds are no longer malevolent; Dock has tamed

33*Book Review Digest, 1928, p. 252.
35*Fisher, Toilers of the Hills (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), p. 8. We are grateful for the insights of Rebecca Cornwall, Salt Lake City novelist.
36*Fisher, Toilers of the Hills, p. 129.
them, and they bring comfort and culture to Opal. "It was not her way to be happy in a world frozen like stone to its heart," but when the world thaws her despair also melts.38

Mormonism is never mentioned in Toilers specifically, but there is much talk of religion. Dock, Opal, and even Lem, a slippery neighbor, seek answers; they need answers more than most people, for life is harder for them. Frontier religion gave them answers—helped them categorize, organize, put this experience into some kind of understandable order. Fisher does not dismiss these people and their religion as unsophisticated products of the frontier. This is life. The very fact that he chose to write about these people is an initial affirmation that they are significant enough that he need not simper and bellyache over them, but can portray them exactly as they were and still be certain of their worth.

Dark Bridwell, the second novel, is a remarkable book. In the two years after Toilers, Fisher learned a great deal about human character, perhaps partly under the tutelage of his psychologist brother, Vivian, who was writing and practicing in New York during the three years Vardis lived in New York writing Bridwell.39 Here he is still playing with evil, but now the causes of good and evil are not so much in nature as in human nature. Happily, psychological causes are suggested, never stated, and the people in Bridwell are real, with real effects and a residue of unexplained mystery.

Bridwell is a tragedy. Charley "Dark" Bridwell takes his dark-haired wife away from the frenetic, neurotic strivings of civilization to a land where they can live on meat and wild fruit. He weaves a net of deception about the outside world so that she will never leave him. And for years it works; they live contentedly and with little effort off the fat of the land—and when the fat thins he steals from his neighbors, openly and honestly, and they let him because he brings some joy and light into their blighted lives.

But gradually things go wrong. He finds he cannot raise his sons and daughters in isolation. For one thing, he cannot maintain total isolation; inevitably intruders deceive and undo them. But most

38Ibid., p. 207.
39Though he lacked the M. D. degree, Vivian was a psychiatrist of some note. Among other works, he published Auto-Correctivism: The Psychology of Nervousness (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1937); An Introduction to Abnormal Psychology (New York: Macmillan, 1929, 1933); and The Meaning and Practice of Psychotherapy (New York: Macmillan, 1950). Irene said Vardis and Vivian "had many hot arguments" about Mormonism, Joseph Smith, and Brigham Young, and Vardis was a defender of Mormonism and its two first prophets. Mead to Arrington, 7 October 1976.
telling, the seeds of destruction are here, in themselves. There is
the spontaneous restlessness of the oldest son Jed, which combined
with his mother’s hidden ambition and his father’s innocent, animal-
like brutality, turns him into a truly evil character. Jed becomes
almost like the rattlesnakes he traps, finally coming between his
mother and father. 20

Again Mormonism is never mentioned, but the question that
remains dark after the book is closed is who had the most light—
Lela and the civilized society she finally elects to join, or Charley
and his worthless, stagnant, unambitious, joyous ways? The irony
comes from our own experience—for we know Lela is soon going to
learn that Charley had no monopoly on evil, that the respectable
world can be as disappointing and brutal as anything she has seen
—and perhaps not quite so happy. Lela has made the only possible
choice—but she has also lost something—irrevocably.

This is tragedy, of course, but what makes the book remarkable
is that it is also religious parable. It is the story of Adam and Eve.
Fisher is saying something about the work ethic, but also something
about salvation by grace versus salvation by effort. Charley grasped
a truth and lived it to the hilt, representing something his neighbors
needed to be reassured of, while clinging to their own ambitious
ways. Crude and ugly and dirty as he was, Charley Bridwell had
his virtues, and while they did not mesh with man’s need for order
and progress, they could not be entirely denied. Charley said, “Man
is that he might have joy.” Life was not meant to be all tedious and
duty and guilt. Fisher’s description of his alter ego’s father, “Joe
Hunter,” speaks eloquently of the resolute Mormon farmers of the
Upper Snake River Valley: 21

Time built a pioneer and set him down
Upon the grayest waste of Idaho.
He clubbed the desert and he made it grow
In broad and undulating fields of brown.

He laid his might upon it, stripped its frown
Of drought and thistles; till by sweat and glow
He left the aged and barren hills aglow
With color—and its flame was his renown.

Few loved him, many feared, and some would smirk
Derisively, and call his mind untaught;

20This part, of course, is not true of the Fisher family. Vardis’ parents left the
wilderness together sometime after their children were raised.
21Reprinted in Dorys C. Grover, A Solitary Voice: Vardis Fisher (New York:
Of foul speech, and unclean from head to feet,
Who poured his great dream into golden wheat;
Until his gnarled and calloused hands had wrought
A deep and quiet holiness of work.

Dark Bridwell was written in New York, where Fisher was under the influence of Thomas Wolfe and Vardis' brother Vivian, by now a successful New York psychologist. Upon returning to his father's ranch in 1931, a more confident professional, he wrote and published *In Tragic Life, Passions Spin the Plot, We Are Betrayed*, and *No Villain Need Be*, which are collectively referred to as the tetralogy. They are introspective and autobiographical in nature. Their hero, Vridar Hunter, is a thinly disguised Vardis Fisher, and his writing exhibits the rebellious stage through which he was passing. The ideals which he had absorbed in his adolescence seemed now to be impossible in the face of the reality he was recognizing.

One critic, M. C. Dawson of *Books*, called the first volume of the tetralogy, *In Tragic Life*, "almost unendurable." But if it was "abnormal, repellant, [and] unbalanced," it was also, he admitted, "honest, sensitive, heroic and vast. Those who feel the second list of qualities sufficient to outweigh the first, will certainly find that reading it is an experience not to be missed."22 And it is hard to judge whether Fisher could have made the tetralogy more endurable; a reader has accomplished much just to get through them, let alone to go back and criticize them page by page, chapter by chapter.

Only an immensely self-centered person could have written these books, and he must have been very sure somewhere within himself that his center was worth examining and that it would strike notes in other souls. The tetralogy emerges as a personal epic, an intense journey toward sanity through complete honesty and suspension of unreflective belief. And the conclusions that Vridar Hunter finally comes to about complete honesty are of interest to Latter-day Saints. One assumes that much of the tetralogy is autobiographical; unquestionably it captures the tone of Fisher's childhood, and it is a history of two maladjusted family lines coming together. Negativism, pessimism, love always couched in criticism and harshness, tension and denial of emotions and passions—this was the sensitive boy's early emotional food. Both sex and Mormonism were seasoned for him by this emotion-denying heritage, and the tetralogy is the

story of his attempts to extricate himself from this background. He seems to have succeeded with sex, with solid help from his brother’s psychotherapeutic theories, but his religion gave him more difficulty.

The first volume thus is a story of insanity in the making. Vridar’s mother, the daughter of a “stern and haughty Puritan” and made in that image herself, rules husband and sons by guilt. In Vridar’s impressionable young mind, religion and sexuality become inextricable; his mother teaches him that it is “a wicked and shameful thing to show his flesh,”23 and that he must “be a little gentleman in all ways, cherishing women as the sweetest and holiest of all God’s miracles.”24 Material possession and the vision of death are also symbolically linked with religion: Vridar’s saddle nag, the “only thing he owned,” impales itself on the protruding spike of “what is called in this part of the world a Mormon gate.”25

This tyranny by suppression of emotional and sexual expression distorts every personality in the family; in the father (who is a party to it) the distortion comes out in an unpredictable and brutal temper, with sullen silence and ruthless hard work between the spurs. The sensitive young son comes to reject himself, primarily because he cannot refrain from normal boyhood “experiments” which he is told are filthy and evil. During this age—nine to thirteen—Vridar has his first catatonic trances or nightmares.

In his late teens, desperate for a way out of the guilt, Vridar begins attending church for the first time in his life. He is baptized but doubts that “all his sin has been washed away,”26 and the religion he gets in a Mormon ward is unsatisfactory. It “exhorted the people to raise more sugar beets; or to have more babies; or to stop eating pepper or drinking tea; or to go as missionaries to heathen lands. Or it was a thundering denunciation of joy in life.”27 “There was nothing here for him.”28 In fact, there is no hope for Vridar anywhere in the religion of his youth; it would be impossible for him to rid it of all the ugliness on which he was reared; agnosticism is perhaps the only way out for him.

But Vridar never escapes Mormonism. At “Wasatch College” in Salt Lake City his efforts to remain virtuous continue to torture him. He is disillusioned by the college’s “fawning obeisance to

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24Ibid., p. 66.
26Ibid., p. 446.
27Ibid.
28Ibid., p. 448.

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wealth and politics””\(^{29}\) and Mormons and Mormon missionaries take on an increasingly unpleasant color. Something in Vridar yearns still for the ideals of his childhood; he returns to Idaho, marries his sweetheart (Neola, read Leona), and finds at last great meaning in his life. “His desire was to protect her and worship her. She was his god and his hours with her were his testaments and his prayer.””\(^{30}\) His first disillusionment with Neola is his discovery that, while he was torturing himself to remain pure, she had been tarnished—by a Mormon missionary!

In the third volume, *We Are Betrayed* (1935), Vridar is exposed to increasing amounts of truth: “Religion is like small pox,” a friend tells him. “If you get a good dose you wear scars. You had a good dose.””\(^{31}\) He is rapidly shedding the values of his mother in the disillusionment that swept the nation after World War I. Of his mother he says,

> I'm done with your generation and all that it stands for. . . . Your ideals have driven us to ruin. . . . Millions are dead now, buried by these stinking ideals of yours; and yet you sit there in your smug halfwitted Christian piety and tell me not to smoke, not to drink. . . . I hate your way of life. I hate your little pompous religion and your little pompous gods. . . .””\(^{32}\)

Neola’s conservative nature keeps her far behind her rapidly changing husband, although he tries continuously to impose his disillusionment on her: “You’ve got to read this book, Neola. It will knock all that silly Mormonism out of you.””\(^{33}\) He is still interested in religion, but in intellectual analysis of it.

Half-credulous and half-realistic, he is torn asunder by his obsessions and dominates Neola as surely as his mother dominated him. Finally he attempts to leave her and she commits suicide. The final volume, *No Villain Need Be* (1936), finds him blaming himself, then his childhood, finally no one, for what has happened to him. But now he is determined to face himself with utter honesty. After earning a Ph.D. in the Midwest, he returns to Wasatch College to teach and there becomes notorious for his terrible honesty, which extends to other men’s evasions and self-deceptions—particularly Mormonism. The college president eventually calls him in to ask “Have you been telling your classes that

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\(^{30}\)Ibid., p. 161.
\(^{31}\)Ibid., p. 34.
\(^{32}\)Ibid., p. 110.
\(^{33}\)Ibid., p. 153.
Mormonism is nothing but babies and sugar beets?" Vridar's sympathy goes out to the "daughters of Mormons," who must suffer "an ideology of babies and beets and zion, of apostles and priesthoods, of prohibitions against coffee and pepper, whiskey and tobacco, tea and coca-cola"—which the daughters found "a little unimaginative and dull." All his questioning and self-searching is well-intended; and he wants to free Mormons from their self-tyranny as he frees himself. But he realizes in the course that he has become, in his anti-tyranny, as stern and haughty a Puritan as his mother, and he begins to find a middle ground.

There's an honest and decent person in everyone under the pre-tense and sham. Strip the obscene mask away and there he is: a bewildered child in a dark and bewildered world. All of us.

He leaves Wasatch to teach in New York, telling his fiancee:

"Well... I'm on my way out."

"Haven't you known that? And why in the world, Vridar, did you ever come back to this Mormon college?"

"Oh, I thought I could be a liberalizing force."

"And you've made it more hopeless."

"Yes, it seems that way." Eventually he can say, "I have cleaned out of me my shameful guiltiness about sex: what my terrible early years did to me in that respect I have undone." In the end of the final volume, he is drawn from self-analysis to the spiritual dilemma of the entire country:

Under the calm surface coast to coast, this country of his was a seething neurotic mass and out of its buried and distorted life sprang cults and charlatans and pious frauds...

How long... must we be governed by these repressed cowards who try to legislate us into heaven?... Now we have a negative attitude toward love and joy. Now all our laws are don'ts, all our religion, and practically all our culture. What we need today is some great affirmations.

Recently a play by a talented young Mormon writer, Ronald Wilcox, was produced in Greenwich Village; its theme: the effects on a young man of his loss of virginity. Critics found it a compe-

37 Ibid., p. 130.
38 Ibid., p. 174.
39 Ibid., p. 190.
tent play, the writer talented and promising, but the theme, they said, simply had no meaning to this generation. Their judgment needs examining, but if it is true, and the Mormon’s experience is now out of the mainstream of American experience, then Fisher’s tetralogy has also become a peculiar work, of significance only to Mormons and the relatively small segment of society raised on fundamental religion. We suspect it is not true, that the virtue theme is still widely applicable, and that the young playwright’s idea is not outdated, although surely naive to those who are able to avoid self-confrontation and guilt-feeling over this particular human experience.

The tetralogy was a purging saga for Fisher. As he was finishing it, still in the condition of the starving writer, he accepted a position as Idaho’s director of the Federal Writers’ Project and Historical Records Project of the Works Progress Administration. He served in this position for four years, living in Boise. True to the Mormon work ethic, his output was prodigious. In addition to administrative chores and bureaucratic obstacles, he published the Idaho Guide, Idaho Encyclopedia, Idaho Lore, and other smaller publications. Idaho’s was the first guide to be published and is generally acknowledged to have contained more creditable material than was published by any other state except perhaps New York.39

During these years Fisher also wrote two more novels, both far from the violent, heavy mood of the tetralogy and both more mellow in uncovering hypocrisy and sham in small western (presumably Mormon) towns. Critics who had praised the tetralogy found April: A Fable of Love, one of Vardis’ favorites, a weak treatment of themes which had already “elsewhere carved a deep channel.”40 Critics who had not particularly liked the tetralogy found April a compact, artistic evidence that Fisher had “loosened up.”41 No one much liked Forgive Us Our Virtues, a story of a small town populated entirely by neurotics. “About a dozen years ago,” complained the Saturday Review, “Mr. Fisher discovered Sex, but he has not yet got over his naive astonishment at his own discovery.”42

Having studied over a period of many years secular history, the history of the Mormons, and the psychology of personality, Fisher,

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40M. C. Dawson, Books, 14 February 1937, p. 10.
during this same period, also tackled what many came to regard as his greatest work, an historical and interpretive novel about the Latter-day Saints. Published in 1939 as *Children of God: An American Epic*, this novel won the $10,000 Harper’s Prize for the best novel of the year and quickly became a best-seller. The first two sections, “Morning,” and “Noon,” were adapted for publication in the Book Section of the *Reader’s Digest*, and were read by possibly hundreds of thousands of persons.\(^{45}\) It attempted to capture “the Mormon story” in a manner that would help non-Mormon readers to understand the intensity of faith and devotion which accounted for Mormonism’s strength. And whether Fisher intended it or not, the book did produce a number of conversions.\(^{44}\)

Of course, we cannot lodge all the blame for the historical inaccuracies of *Children of God* against Fisher, for unquestionably he wanted to write an historically accurate novel and for that purpose he read everything that had been written about the Mormons and their history both by faithful Mormons and by apostates and unfriendly writers.\(^{46}\) The trouble is that impartial and scholarly historians had not by that time seriously examined Mormon history. Considering the inadequacies of Mormon historiography before 1939, Fisher did remarkably well in getting inside the minds, souls, habits, strengths, and fears of his people. It is clear that he had immense admiration for Brigham Young and his followers; his art enabled him to reveal the essential nobility of Mormonism without hiding the weaknesses of some of its adherents. The reader of *Children of God* cannot fail to be impressed with the patience and

\(^{44}\)See *Reader’s Digest*, April 1940, pp. 137-93 and May 1940, pp. 141-88.

\(^{45}\)We begin with Grace Arrington. The reading of the *Reader’s Digest* condensation drew this North Carolina businesswoman’s attention to the Mormon culture and religion and led her to seek out a Mormon to tell her more. That Mormon happened to be Leonard Arrington, and their meeting eventually led to their marriage and to Grace’s conversion. So one of us has a special reason to be grateful for *Children of God* even though, as a historian, he knows that Fisher’s portrait of Joseph Smith is inaccurate and that many other scenes and interpretations lack historicity. (See David Brion Davis, “Children of God: An Historian’s Evaluation,” *The Western Humanities Review* 8 [Winter 1955-56]:49-56; Ronald W. Taber, “Vardis Fisher: New Directions for the Historical Novel,” *Western American Literature* 1 [Winter 1967]:285-96.) To give a second example, our colleague in the Historical Department of the Church, Richard L. Jensen, served a church mission in Denmark, where he had occasion to work for a week with a native Danish missionary who indicated that in his early youth in the 1950s he had read *Children of God* and, as a result, had gained an interest in Mormonism which led to his conversion. So one cannot always predict the reaction of readers to this kind of book. Shortly after the book appeared, Fisher told reporters of the *New York Times* that at least twelve persons had written to him that they had been converted to Mormonism by reading the book. (*New York Times*, 21 April 1940)

\(^{46}\)Fisher told the *Times*, “From a scholarly standpoint the book is historically correct, even though it may destroy the ideologies of some.” Ibid.
magnanimity with which Latter-day Saints bore their savage persecutions.40

Sensing the greatness of Children of God, Darryl Zanuck, managing director of Twentieth Century-Fox Films, considering it the best story ever written on the rise of Mormonism, employed Louis Bromfield to write a screenplay version. They produced "Brigham Young," a film which is still playing after twenty-five years.

One critic wrote:

Let those who have sampled previous novels by Vardis Fisher and have bogged down or shied away from them not be deterred from reading this book. Hitherto Fisher's fame has been limited to a handful of admirers headed by Van Wyck Brooks, who have regarded him as perhaps the greatest of all American novelists, a more profound delver than Proust into the abysses of the subconscious, an introverted writer with a sensitivity so abnormal as to be the exquisite refinement of genius. But to the average person, reading a Fisher novel is something like having the horrors in a fever delirium.

[Here] there is nothing like that. . . . In a novel that gave him every chance to deal with complexes and neuroses, he has told his story so objectively that you would imagine he had never heard of Freud or the theory of the connection between religion and sex. Although definitely pro-Mormon he has told a grand story in a grand manner.47

Even Bernard DeVoto, who had previously concluded that a good novel could never be based on the "tremendous reality" of the Mormon story, changed his mind when he met Children. He found it objective, factual, undecorated, and "thoroughly alive."48

Fisher himself did not like the book, or professed not to. "I have written many [novels] that have more right to the interest of enlightened minds."49 "Novelists have been notoriously poor judges of their own works," warns Flora.50 But in this case perhaps the novelist is right. Whatever its acceptance, whatever was said by the critics, however satisfying it may be as history and adventure, this is not a satisfying novel. Neither the portraits of Joseph Smith nor Brigham Young are drawn with conviction, although compared with previous fictional and historical portraits they shine with ob-

40Millennial Star, 1 February 1940, p. 79.
44Flora, "Vardis Fisher and the Mormons," p. 50.

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jectivity. Occasional minor characters come to life, but for the most part this book remains an epic—the events are what carry it, and they carry it nobly, but anecdotally.

But *Children* is a fine indicator of Fisher’s attitudes toward Mormonism. Most critics found him definitely pro-Mormon, although he said he had many letters from “the righteous” condemning him for being anti-Mormon. Although his treatment is mainly sympathetic to their heritage, his Mormon readers did not like his “natural” explanation for polygamy, nor his suggestion of “certain neurotic impulses” in Joseph Smith to explain it. Fisher, who had visions and dreams and nightmares as a child and young man, identified ferociously with Joseph Smith during those formative years. And it seems to us that Fisher’s expressed lack of respect for Joseph Smith in *Children of God* is precisely a product of this identification, for his portrait of the Prophet is a projection of his own unloved self. The attacks on Joseph must therefore be seen as Fisher castigating himself. The same fury is not directed against Brigham Young.

Catching a theme they themselves liked, Fisher identifies the Mormons with the ancient Hebrews; or, perhaps, it might be more accurate to say that one suspects the Mormons were to some extent a role model for the Hebrews of his later novels.

... the Hebrews were indeed, if not a unique at least a singular and peculiar people. Their spiritual leaders were solemnly and tirelessly preoccupied, not only with the relations of man to man which absorbed the interest of most peoples, but also with the relations of man to the universe. They were preoccupied with the thing called evil, when evil was not even a word in the vocabulary of some peoples. They were preoccupied with what they called righteousness, which, though sometimes suffocated in its elaborate apparatus of ritual, meant essentially good deeds. In defense of what they took to be the right way of life they had a capacity for suffering and self-immolation that has been quite without parallel.63

The Mormons represent other of Fisher’s values—the gospel of work, the Mountain Man strain of intense individuality, the social strain of cooperation in creating a freer, righteous society in which there are none starving and all have a chance to work. In Brigham Young the selfish and social motives are successfully integrated.

In short, *Children* portrays mostly the Mormon virtues; a people of moral earnestness seeking to serve God. Only Mormons are unable to see this, partly because in the naturalistic frame of the

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novel Fisher has Mormonism decline from visionary idealism at morning, to a vigorous pioneering at noon, to a declining freedom and abandonment of principles at evening.

Would the Mormons, like the Jews, become a wandering and outcast people; or would they mix with the gentiles and yield their principles and traditions one by one until their church was only another abomination in the sight of God? He did not know—or perhaps deep in his heart he knew too well.53

For the Mormon attempt, Fisher had profound respect.

We wish to emphasize that there was no actual parting of the ways between Vardis Fisher and the church he joined at the very outset of his career of writing. He was never excommunicated; the Church did not at any time officially or publicly criticize or repudiate Children of God, although it could also not be said that the Church made a cult of Fisher. In June 1939 the Deseret News ran a five-inch story on Fisher’s Harper Prize, apparently basing the story on a press release from Harper’s rather than on a reading of the book.54 There appeared no subsequent review of the book in Church newspapers and periodicals. Later, in January 1940, a long review of the book appeared in a paper of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, The Nauvoo Independent. The reviewer asserts that the book “ought to be dynamited.” “The noble generation of our fathers,” he writes, “is pictured with gutter ideals and grog shop habits.”55 And if any Latter-day Saints were to reread it today we might be inclined to agree. Nevertheless, there remains the testimony of many that suggests Children of God served in some instances as an effective influence in the spread of the gospel.

In the years that followed the appearance of Children of God Fisher was remarried, this time to Opal Laurel Holmes;56 he built a home in Hagerman Valley, Idaho, and published some twenty books, including an even dozen novels in what is called the Testament of Man series (1943-1960). The latter is a truly remarkable narrative of man’s developing moral consciousness, from the prehistoric past to the present. Fisher’s last novel, Mountain Man: A

53Fisher, Children of God, p. 739.
54“L. D. S. Theme of Prize Book,” Deseret News, 26 June 1939. We assume that galleys proofs of the book were sent to a Church official to read from the presence of a copy of these in the LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City.
55Warren L. Van Dine, in The Nauvoo Independent for 11 January 1940, copied into the Journal History of the Church under that date, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City.
56Fisher and Margaret Trusler were divorced in 1939.
Novel of Male and Female in the Early American West, published in 1965, was later filmed under the title Jeremiah Johnson and has been widely distributed. It is still a popular movie in many parts of the world. At the time of Fisher's death in 1968, at age seventy-three, he was acknowledged as one of the greatest of our national writers.

Fisher's side comments remained, to the end, tart and crusty. In response to our query about his status with the Church, Fisher wrote to us in 1967, "I am, as the simple minds in the hierarchy in Salt Lake could tell you, a member in good standing, but shamefully behind the past fifty years in all assessments." Nevertheless, it is clear that as he grew older he came to a greater harmony with his background. He was able to look at Mormon values and appreciate them. We can be certain of this because the last volume in his Testament of Man series, Orphans in Gethsemane, is a restructuring and rewriting of the Tetralogy—with a mellower look back at his childhood and young manhood, analogous in some respects to the maturation of Plato. The change is not as pronounced as the difference between Plato's Republic of his young years and his Laws of the later years, but it is nonetheless noticeable and significant. Orphans at Gethsemane is an insightful, intelligent, powerful, and moving autobiographical novel of a person of Mormon upbringing, even if its author was only on the fringes of Latter-day Saint culture.

Flora is quite correct in saying:

... Fisher's Mormonism ran deep. It was not merely something that Fisher revolted against; it was also something that helped form his life style and code. Church members may sometimes find Fisher unpleasant reading, but the Mormon apostate is clearly on the Mormon side in Children of God. In a fundamental way, he was on their side throughout his life. Fisher's whole approach to life was religious.

And there is no doubt that Fisher's religion was Judeo-Christian; seven of the twelve Testament of Man novels dealt with Hebrews and Christians. He had remembered and absorbed the deep mean-

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Vardis Fisher, Orphans in Gethsemane: A Novel of the Past in the Present (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1960). Fisher's credo, as expressed in the "word to the reader" at the beginning of Orphans, is worth repeating: "I stand on this that if mankind is ever to build a civilization worthy of that devotion which it seems richly endowed to give, it will first have to accept in the full light of its mind and soul the historical facts of its past, and the mutilations and perversions which its hostility to those facts has made upon its spirit."
ings conveyed to him as he read that monumental heritage of Judeo-Christian civilization, the Bible. He was preoccupied with "the deep and abiding moral earnestness of the Hebrew people, or at least of their religious leaders." Their moral earnestness, he wrote, was "without parallel and apparently without precedent;" it was one of the riddles of history." The great gift of the Hebrews to the Western world, he wrote, lay in their intense stress on personality: "It is that intense stress on personality, on the dignity of the individual before God, on free will and moral choice, that has modified the fundamental difference in outlook [from Oriental peoples]."  

If one reads Mormon for Hebrew in his essay on "My Bible Heritage," written in 1963, one finds Fisher finally at peace with his Judeo-Christian-Mormon heritage. Struggling to overcome his earlier ignorances and misunderstandings, having probed the depth of his own psyche and that of his fellow Latter-day Saints, he was prepared to defend the way of life of a great people. Here are his words; surely they are not the words of a dyed-in-the-wool agnostic nor a man who could not celebrate his forebears:

We should, I think we must, accept the Bible humbly as the noblest effort of our ancient forebears to come to terms with the problem of evil and to overthrow it; and in the present, when the same old problem threatens to overturn our world, many of its pages and many of its beautiful parables still speak to us with a clear strong voice if we would only listen. For when we reject those parts no longer applicable we do not discredit those truths which, if not eternal, are still as eternal as any that man has uttered.  

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69 The quotations are from Fisher, "My Bible Heritage," p. 163. See also Flora, "Vardis Fisher and the Mormons," pp. 51-52.  