

Why Are The Mormons Baptizing Dead Jews? And What Should We Do About It?

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Who are the Mormons? And why are they still baptizing dead Jews?

In the last couple of weeks we have read news reports about Mormons who wanted to convert the souls of Jews who have died. They say they are converting them to be followers of Jesus, even after the people have died. Some of them are Holocaust victims.

We learned that someone had recently added to the Mormon database for the deceased the names of Elie Wiesel and his father and maternal grandfather. The people who did this were apparently not aware that Wiesel is still alive. Adding the names to the database is usually an early part of the process leading toward posthumous baptism.

Wiesel held a press conference in which he called on Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney to “speak to his own church” and ask them to stop performing posthumous proxy baptisms on Jews. Wiesel spoke up not only because of his own name and family members being included, but also because members of the Mormon church vicariously baptized the dead parents of famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal.

Romney responded to the criticism by saying that this is a church matter and he does not want to be involved.

What has been motivating the Mormons in this practice? And what do we think about those efforts?

First of all, who are the Mormons?

Mormons are a religious and cultural group related to Mormonism. That is a religious movement that began with the visions of Joseph Smith in upstate New York during the 1820s. Smith had his first vision in 1820, when he was fourteen years old and trying to decide to which church he should belong. He described this vision as two pillars of light that he recognized as God and Jesus. In this vision God spoke to the young man and told him that none of the churches on the earth had the fullness of truth. Smith said that God then led him to an ancient record recorded on gold plates that he was able to translate into English. This record is called the Book of Mormon.

In 1830 Joseph Smith formally organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Smith led the growing Mormon movement until 1844, when he was arrested after the destruction of a newspaper that had criticized him. While he was in jail awaiting trial he was killed by a mob.

The Mormons then followed Brigham Young to what would become the Utah Territory. The center of Mormon cultural influence today is in Utah. The largest Mormon

church is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Mormons dedicate large amounts of time and resources to serving in their church. It is a common practice of Mormons to donate one-tenth of their income each year to the church. Many young Mormons choose to serve as missionaries, working full time to convert others to their church.

Mormons self-identify as Christian, though some of their beliefs differ from mainstream Christianity. Mormons believe in the Bible, as well as other books that they consider to be scripture, including the Book of Mormon. They believe that all people are spirit-children of God.

Mormons believe that the true church of Jesus was restored through Joseph Smith, and is guided by living prophets and apostles. They also believe that returning to God requires following the example of Jesus and accepting his atonement, including through baptism.

So why are Mormons baptizing Jews?

They are not baptizing only Jews. Mormons carry out a practice known as “baptism for the dead” or “vicarious baptism” or “proxy baptism.” These terms refer to the religious practice of baptizing a living person on the behalf of one who is dead. The living person receives the ordinance of baptism on behalf of the deceased person.

The Mormons are the only church that practices baptism for the dead. The practice is forbidden by the Catholic Church, and is not practiced in modern mainstream Christianity, whether Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Protestant.

Those who practice this rite view baptism as an indispensable requirement to enter the Kingdom of God. They practice Baptism for the Dead to give those who have died without ever having had the opportunity to receive baptism the opportunity to receive it by proxy.

It’s important to understand, however, that under Mormon doctrine, this vicarious baptism does not in itself change anything. Rather, the Mormon church teaches that someone who has died and then is baptized by proxy receives a choice, an opportunity, and may choose to accept or reject the baptism done on the person’s behalf.

The Church has been sensitive to the criticism of this practice, so it has tried to limit it. The Church has urged its members to submit the names of only their own ancestors for ordinances, and to request permission of surviving family members of people who have died within the past 95 years. Hundreds of thousands of improperly submitted names not adhering to this policy have been removed from the records of the church.

Despite these guidelines, some members of the church have submitted the names of Holocaust victims. Not only that, but the names of prominent Nazis have also been submitted for vicarious baptism, including Adolph Hitler and Heinrich Himmler.

Jewish groups such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center have previously condemned

the vicarious baptism of Holocaust perpetrators and victims. Understandably the critics consider the practice to be insensitive to both the living and the dead.

This issue surfaced again last month after it was found that the parents of Holocaust survivor and Jewish rights advocate Simon Wiesenthal were added to the genealogical database. Soon after that, we learned that Daniel Pearl, the reporter executed by terrorists in Pakistan just for being a Jew, had been the subject of a proxy baptism. And then it was reported that Anne Frank had been baptized by proxy at a Mormon temple in the Dominican Republic. Not only that. This was not the first time Anne Frank had been baptized by proxy. In fact, it was the ninth time.

Elie Wiesel spoke out against this practice, as have others. Abe Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, said the following: "Holocaust victims were killed solely because they were Jews. And here comes the Mormon church taking away their Jewishness. It's like killing them twice."

Simon Wiesenthal and other prominent Jews have also spoken out against this practice.

But there is another view. That view was expressed last week in a column in the Boston Globe by Jeff Jacoby.

Jacoby called his column, "Outraged by Mormon Proxy Baptism? Not This Jew."

Jacoby said that he once attempted to chart his family tree. Most of his father's family had been killed in Auschwitz. His efforts to trace their genealogy left him, he said, with a family tree that "has stumps where branches ought to be" and "gets narrower, not wider, as it grows."

When he wrote a column about those efforts some time ago, a woman called him in response. She was a Mormon. She wanted to add the names of his father's massacred relatives to the Mormon Church's genealogical archives.

Jacoby told her that he had no objection. Indeed, he welcomed any gesture that might help preserve some remembrance of these family members whose lives had been so cruelly cut short.

At the time of these events, Jacoby said, he knew nothing about "baptism by proxy." When he did learn about it, he was not troubled by it. He reasoned that conversion after death is a concept that has no meaning in Judaism. No such baptism could change the Jewishness of the men, women, children, and babies whom the Nazis singled out for extermination.

Jacoby found the Mormons' belief eccentric, not offensive. He believed that their efforts to make salvation available to millions of deceased strangers were ineffectual. But he also believed that they were sincere, and intended as a kindness.

Jacoby quoted in his column the objections of Abe Foxman and Elie Wiesel.

Jacoby, however, disagreed with them. In fact, he said that their reactions were

unworthy and unfair.

He pointed out that the Mormon church promptly apologized for the listing of Anne Frank and the others, and firmly reiterated its policy: "Proxy baptisms of Holocaust victims are strictly prohibited."

Jacoby thought it was even worse to claim that a posthumous "baptism," to which no Jew attaches any credence, is tantamount to a second genocide, as Foxman claimed when he said, "It's like killing them twice." Jacoby said that, even to the most zealous Mormon, proxy baptism is simply the offering of a choice. The proxy baptism gives non-Mormons in the afterlife a chance to accept the gospel, should they wish to. Jacoby made it clear that he does not accept that theology, but he feels that its message is benign.

Jacoby concluded his column with these words:

Outraged by proxy baptisms? Count me out. As my stunted family tree attests, the Jewish people have very real, very dangerous enemies. Mormons undergoing peaceful rituals in their own temples aren't on the list.

So what do you think?

Is this an outrageous practice? Should we be upset about it, as Foxman and Wiesel and others have been?

Or would you take Jacoby's view? He says that, as Jews, we don't believe that these baptisms in fact make any difference, and even the Mormons believe only that the dead soul is given a choice to accept the baptism or not. So is this really a non-issue for us, as Jacoby argues?

Before I respond to my own question, I want to hear what you think. I'm going to invite you to discuss this among yourselves for a few minutes, then let's talk. Find someone near you to discuss this with. Let's find out what we think about this. Outrageous? Or a non-issue? Or somewhere in between?

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INVITE RESPONSES

Would you like to know what I think?

I think the Mormon church is a complex, international organization that has adopted a policy against this practice and sincerely would like it to stop, but also probably can't do much more to stop its members from violating the policy.

Just yesterday the Globe published a small article on this issue, stating that the church has taken further steps to block access to names of Holocaust victims that may be in its database.

I would not want anyone to offer baptism to my soul after I die. I hope the Mormon

church gets its act together to do a better job at stopping this practice.

But I wouldn't expect Mitt Romney to do anything about it, nor do I know of any additional steps the church can take beyond what it's already done.

Still, I understand the outrage by people like Wiesel and Foxman, and I don't blame them for being upset.

We will turn now to our Musaf service, page 428. Please rise for the Hatzi Kaddish.