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A Rhetorical Analysis of Satan

The scene is Latter-day Saint General Conference. Tens of thousands of faithful Latter-day Saints crowd the sidewalks of Salt Lake City's Temple Square, heading to and from the Conference Center for the twice-annual conferences. Lining the sidewalks of the Conference Center are street preachers, each holding signs or distributing literature in an attempt to dissuade the Latter-day Saints from their faith and instead embrace Evangelical Protestant Christianity. Many Latter-day Saints gather to try to counteract the street preachers. Some group up to sing hymns, others interact directly with the street preachers to keep them from approaching the masses of Saints coming or going along the sidewalk; however, none are as interesting or rhetorically charged as the Latter-day Saint clothed in bright red, with a device making thunder-like sounds and a huge banner posted proudly, stating in large, bolded text: "**Hi, my name is Satan, these street preachers are my missionaries**" (Curtis).

The primary power of this Conference Satan's rhetoric rests in the framework that he applies to the street preachers. By engaging in ontological and ethical framing, Conference Satan is able to cast the street preachers as related to the mythic Satan in identity and therefore as immoral or even evil. Conference Satan accomplishes this by appealing more effectively than the street preachers to the moral intuitions and held beliefs of the shared Latter-day Saint audience. Though each faith group shares some beliefs, their differences lead the street preachers to

fundamentally misunderstand how to effectively approach the Latter-day Saints; Conference Satan, being a Latter-day Saint himself, uses his knowledge of both the Latter-day Saints and the street preachers to avoid the mistakes that the street preachers make and be the more effective rhetor.

A part of this knowledge of both groups informs Conference Satan's ontological framing, wherein he links the street preachers to the mythic Satan. The mythic Satan, in the eyes of each group, is understood to be an angel fallen from grace—a being (though each tradition differs significantly in their exact ontological beliefs) who was once close to God, who held great power and esteem, and who now holds significant destructive powers among humanity—whose primary mission is to drag as many humans down to Hell as he can. It is this shared view of Satan's mission in the wider scheme of Christian beliefs that enables the Latter-day Saint rhetor to effectively use Satan's identity to counteract on ontological grounds any arguments the street preachers could hope to make, defeating the street preachers' ethos so effectively that the street preachers themselves notice it—on at least one occasion, a confrontation between Conference Satan and another man required police intervention (Curtis).

Turning to content, many of the street preachers' arguments are reliant primarily on one of two things: an appeal to the logos of the Saints, claiming that the Saints' beliefs are incongruent with the Bible in some way; or an appeal to pathos, attempting to shock the Saints into questioning their beliefs (such as hanging a set of temple garments from a sign and yelling at passersby). Neither appeal is particularly effective against the Latter-day Saint worldview, though. The Latter-day Saint worldview holds inherently that the beliefs of Protestant Christianity are fundamentally flawed due to sole reliance on the biblical texts, and the shock value of the temple garments hung callously from a sign is more off-putting than it is

thought-provoking—calling forth disgust at the blatant degradation of something the Saints attribute a great deal of sanctity to. To borrow Jonathan Haidt’s metaphor, the Evangelical street preacher’s appeals deter, rather than convince, both the elephant and the rider; the street preachers improperly account for one of the Latter-day Saints’ most highly-regarded moral foundations (Haidt) in Sanctity/Degradation, and have no awareness of the Saints’ convictions regarding scripture—a fatal flaw in the street preachers’ rhetoric toward the Saints is their presupposition that the Bible alone is scripture, leading to the assumption that appeals to the Bible will be sufficient for a logical appeal.

This rhetorical failure of the street preachers opens a gateway for the mythic Satan-street preacher association to be strengthened in real time, the simple sentence on Conference Satan’s banner a masterful work of epideictic rhetoric. Though a mere sentence, Conference Satan’s banner is effective vituperation when viewed in combination with Conference Satan’s physical presence and costume. Such negative association links well with the latent beliefs of the Saints as expressed in scripture, which tells us that the Latter-day Saints’ inherent view of non-Latter-day Saint Christians is “that all their creeds were an abomination in [God’s] sight; that those professors [preachers] were all corrupt” (Joseph Smith-History 1:19); the audience misunderstanding of the street preachers who target the Latter-day Saints is taken advantage of by Conference Satan, who can draw out this part of the Latter-day Saint worldview and connect these real “professors” of Evangelical Christianity with a visible, tangible Satan, who is himself “the devil ... a murderer ... [who has] no truth in him ... for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44, NRSV). This connection to Latter-day Saint belief through epideictic establishes the ethical framework under which Conference Satan argues, leading observers to feel that there is something morally wrong with the street preachers and their arguments.

The Conference Satan, a Latter-day Saint taking advantage of the existing ethos of Satan, the mythic being, is able to effectively cast an ontological and ethical relationship between Satan and the evangelical street preachers. Conference Satan understands the worldview of the Latter-day Saints as one that is already opposed to that of the beliefs of the street preachers, and he is thus able to effectively cement that belief by appealing to the Saints' existing intuitions, establishing a concrete, visible demonstration of the Saints' underlying worldview right before their eyes. Conference Satan demonstrates that in order to effectively engage in persuasive rhetoric, a rhetor must understand the worldview of their audience and tailor their argumentation to it, rather than be oblivious to or blatantly disrespectful of their primary audience's beliefs and foundations as the street preachers are.

Works Cited

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