

We're all mad here . . .

POW! ZOT! AMEN!

MORMON THEOLOGY

IN MICHAEL ALLRED'S *MADMAN*

By Theric Jepson and Stephen Carter



IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT: YOU'RE WALKING down the street when you impulsively slip into a comic book shop, something you may not have done since you were fifteen. Upon entering the shop, you notice not the large-bosomed, life-sized plastic sculpture of the heroine du jour, but a comic book cover advertising a garish male figure wrapped in a white bodysuit, a jagged red exclamation point slashed across his chest. The guy at the counter scratches himself and says in a nasal voice, "Oh, *Madman*—good stuff. That Allred. . . ." So you pick it up and open to a random page where you see a tree full of cows, a crowd milling recklessly beneath it. You read the dialogue.

LARGE, SHIRTLESS, LAVA-LAVA-ED MAN: Mahana, you ugly thing. Get out of that tree!

HIPSTER DUDE: Poor guy! His wife turned into those cows up there.

WOMAN WRAPPED IN BANDAGES: You mean. . . ?

GIRL WITH PONYTAIL: Yes. He now has a seven-cow wife.

BIG BLUE ALIEN: What's a mahana?

DOUBLE-CHINNED, GEEKY FELLOW: I dunno. I don't speak the lingo, Johnny.¹

At this point, obviously, you have no choice but to pony up the cash and dive into the extraordinary Mormon comic-world of *Madman*.

MICHAEL ALLRED IS probably best known in Mormon circles for *The Golden Plates*, his graphic-novel adaptation of the Book of Mormon. But much of his worldly fame arises from his comic character Madman, a reanimated corpse who interacts with aliens, changelings, a man made of vomit, and a scientist who grows himself a giant brain by repeatedly injecting a serum into his tongue.

If you think this milieu sounds like a great environment in which to play with Mormon theology, you would be absolutely right. To the initiated reader, *Madman* is a kind of

Mormon Wonderland where LDS doctrines and stories take on bizarre shapes and work strange wonders. During an interview with Theric Jepson, Allred has explained, "Over time, Frank Einstein [Madman's normal-guy name] has become me, or at least my filter to express myself. And so he often becomes my sounding board."²

At first, it isn't easy to identify *Madman's* Mormon underpinnings. After all, the hero starts the series by eating a guy's eyeball. Cutting off arms, heads, scalps, and foreskins we Mormons can understand, but eyeballs? Though Frank displays spiritual propensities early on as he reflects on the existence of God, the first unmistakable hint that a Mormon is at the story's helm is the appearance of a fellow who calls himself "Nephite."

In fact, three Nephites appear at various points in the story. The first Nephite, who could pass as Legolas's older brother, shows up in a jungle-marooned temple to save Frank and his buddies from an army of "Lamanites" and introduce them to the alien they're supposed to be rescuing. While Frank explores the Wee Isles, the second Nephite, a Quasimodoesque character, stumbles out of an alley to warn Frank that an attempt will be made on his life. The third Nephite, a young Clint Eastwood, drops the recently shrunken Frank into a well (a baptism metaphor?), bringing forth a full-sized hero.

However, the Nephite characters are only surface manifestations of the series' deeper Mormon currents. Indeed, Frank Einstein's very existence is an exploration of one of Mormonism's foundational doctrines—the premortal life.

Frank is often horrified by how fluidly he can carry out violent acts (the eyeball incident is only the beginning). He can't remember much about his pre-reanimated self, but he has a feeling that he wasn't very nice, possibly even evil. He worries about how his former life affects him not only physically but spiritually. "If I kill someone . . . do I go to hell? Forever?" he asks after he has killed at least two people (not to mention the many in his previous life).

Most Mormons have probably had a few similar thoughts. "What kind of spirit was I in the pre-mortal life? Was I valiant?"

Was I a fence-sitter?” Since Satan was able to entice one third of the hosts of heaven to support his plan, it seems that spirits were capable of making bad choices, of hurting themselves and others. In other words, we were capable of sin then, just as Frank was in his former life. Do those sins carry over to our mortal life? How much of who we are and how we act is a result of actions from a time we can’t remember, and how much of that will we be held responsible for?

While on tour with a circus in *Madman Comics #4*, Frank gets caught up in a fight with a skinless strongman. As they battle their way through a cruise ship, Lehi’s famous utterance, “It must needs be that there is an opposition in all things,” takes center stage as Frank poses questions about the eternal nature of conflict that the Church curriculum department might do well to include in the next Gospel Doctrine manual.

“If good wins over evil once and for all, or vice versa, what then? Where’s the conflict? Where’s the challenge? Doesn’t adversity lead to appreciation? But then, a world without ugly horror would be terrific, wouldn’t it?”

Allred says that he often puts ruminations like these in *Madman* because “it’s a terrific way to get people talking and asking questions. Theology is in almost all entertainment. I want my beliefs to be reflected in my work.”³

Frank provides a full-color example of one reason you should follow the prophet’s counsel to keep a journal. A lovely girl named Joe, who doesn’t seem to mind Frank’s blue skin, falls in love with him while reading his ruminations.

But as with any superhero’s love interest, rocky times lie ahead. In *Madman Atomic Comics #7*, as Joe descends in a bubble to congratulate Frank on saving the universe, some bad energy, floating around from a recently defeated villain, gathers together and destroys her. Devastated, Frank takes off in his rocket ship and crashes on a Dune-like planet. He heads off alone into the extraterrestrial wastes with a gas can and a mute robot in tow, only to be eaten by a giant sand worm—which promptly explodes.

After many pages of wordless wandering, Frank meets a used-spaceship salesman and is about to close a deal on a vessel resembling George Jetson’s car when a flying saucer beams a woman down. Frank gasps: it’s Joe! No, wait. It’s Luna, a member of the Atomics who tried to save Joe. The figure’s appearance shifts from one woman to the other as it approaches until Frank embraces and then kisses the *femme amorphous*. The used-spaceship salesman marries the pair in a ceremony in which Frank and Joe/Luna kneel across from each other at an altar; then the happy couple flies blissfully away in a spacecraft.

In the following issue (where words finally re-appear), we learn that Luna had gathered Joe’s life essence into herself, becoming two females in one body while still managing to look great in a Spandex costume. Thus Frank becomes the world’s first polygamous superhero. “Another example of how my interests are filtered, although hopefully subtly, through Frank,” says Allred, who is descended from the second wife of Mormon polygamist Reddick Allred.

Sometimes Allred’s Mormonism is not so subtle. As Frank wanders through his childhood home in *Madman Atomic Comics #11*, a disembodied voice gives a speech that seems lifted straight from the fourth lesson of the old missionary discussions. “We all lived as spirit children before we were sent to this Earth to receive bodies and gain individual experiences,” it says. “With death, our spirits temporarily leave our bodies and go beyond the Veil to the Spirit World, which is divided into Spirit Prison and Spirit Paradise.” When Frank gets to the attic, he meets a male-ish being with purple skin and red hair. The being introduces himself as Zacheous. “We were the best of friends in the pre-existence,” he says, both of them being spirit “children of heavenly parents who live in glory on the celestial planet of Golob.” Zacheous is busy administering to those in Spirit Prison, but the veil is particularly thin at this moment, allowing him to tell Frank that he has his own special mission (to save the universe again, in case you were wondering).

Upon hearing news from beyond—that both his predeceased earth parents and his heavenly parents love him and are proud of him—Frank can only reply, “You’re blowin’ my mind, man!”

SO THE NEXT time someone asks you about Mormonism, maybe you should open the “King-Size Super Groovy Special Issue” of *Madman* and show him or her the first page, where our hero battles a giant robot.

“That’s what we do every week,” you can say.

“You fight robots at church?” your interrogator may exclaim, “That’s so cool. Where do I sign up?”

Depending on how hard up your local missionaries are for baptisms, you may or may not turn your conversation partner over to them at this point, suggesting that they make a few cybernetic additions to their lessons. Or you can be honest and say, “Actually, take a look at the little blue text boxes on the page.”

“Who am I?” reads your victim. “Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? What is it all about?”

“That’s what we talk about every Sunday,” you explain. “In the fun wards, anyway.”

As Allred says, “Most of my closest friends in the Church are up to discuss pretty much anything.”⁴

Then turn to the second-to-last page where Frank gets blasted by dynamite set off by a fish-skinned mad scientist. “Progression is the key to all existence,” Frank reflects as he careens through the air. “We are all, in fact, eternal beings. Our souls lived before this mortal realm. But we *must* progress.”

Mormonism in a nutshell from a Madman.

NOTES

1. J.L. Allred (w) and Nick Dragotta (a), “Find a Penny Pick It Up.” *Madman Comics #8* (May 2008), Image Comics.

2. Interview with Michael Allred, *Thmazing.com*, http://thmazing.com/allred_interview (accessed 7 September 2010).

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*