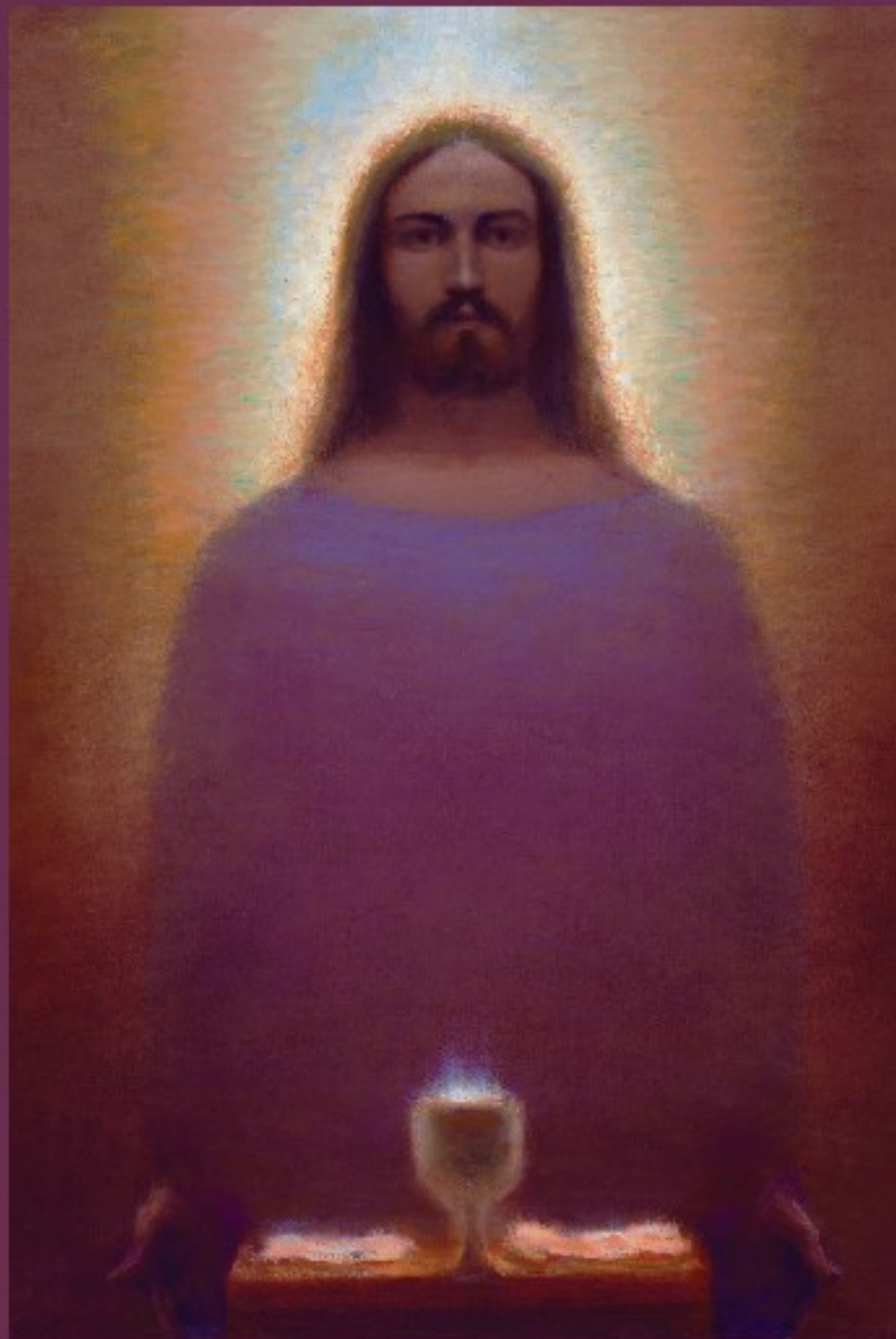


DIALOGUE

55.4 winter 2022



DIALOGUE
a journal of mormon thought

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QUOTED AT THE PULPIT: MALE RHETORIC AND FEMALE AUTHORITY IN FIFTY YEARS OF GENERAL CONFERENCE

Eliza Wells

In her 2020 address to the worldwide membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Primary general president Joy Jones declared, “President Russell M. Nelson taught, ‘It would be impossible to measure the influence that . . . women have, not only on families but also on the Lord’s Church, as wives, mothers, and grandmothers; as sisters and aunts; as teachers and leaders; and especially as exemplars and devout defenders of the faith.’”¹

Though it certainly may be impossible to measure women’s influence on families, it is to some extent possible to measure the influence that leaders like Jones and Nelson believe women have on the Church. Jones’s speech, delivered at the Church’s semiannual general conference, exemplifies a long tradition of Latter-day Saint rhetoric, particularly in her use of quotation. In her eleven minutes at the pulpit, Jones quoted

This research was made possible by a Chappell Lougee Scholarship in summer 2017 and a Major Grant in summer 2018 from Stanford University. I would like to thank Lee Yearley, Kathryn Gin Lum, and Robert Daines for supporting those grants, Tom Bryan for help with the statistics, and Peter Bryan, Anita Wells, Rosalynde Welch, Gordon Blake, Tyler Johnson, members of the Cambridge First Ward Relief Society, and *Dialogue* reviewers for thoughtful comments on various drafts.

1. Joy Jones, “An Especially Noble Calling,” April 2020, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/14jones>.

current Church president Russell Nelson four times, previous Church presidents three times, scripture six times, and a previous apostle once. Additionally, in the middle of her speech, a video played of Nelson speaking to a group of children. In all, though almost one third of Jones's address about women's roles was focused on other people's voices, women were not among her selected sources.²

This article argues such quotation choices reflect Church leaders' views on authority. When the most powerful leaders in the Church use their limited time in the spotlight to highlight someone else's words, they send a signal about how that source should be perceived. The quotation patterns in fifty years of general conference addresses reveal that, despite increasingly vocal commitments from Church leaders to the equal though separate status of women and men, those leaders continue to treat female voices as less authoritative than male ones.³ Church leaders quote men more than sixteen times for every one time they quote a woman. Even taking into account the expected effects of the Church's overwhelmingly male scripture and all-male priesthood hierarchy, women are quoted less, cited less, and acknowledged less than one might expect from an organization whose president recently told women, "We need your voice teaching the doctrine of Christ."⁴ This article contends that their treatment of these voices is indicative of women's status in the Church more broadly.

Background and Research Methods

General conference plays an important role in the Church and in its members' lives. It is frequently the site of development and affirmation

2. A young girl spoke briefly in the filmed meeting with Nelson.

3. Though terms referring to sex (female/male) and terms referring to gender (women/men) are not equivalent, they are used interchangeably in this article.

4. Russell Nelson, "Spiritual Treasures," October 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/36nelson>.

of Church doctrine, policy, and culture. At conference, leaders deliver what are understood to be divinely inspired messages on how members should act and think about their relationship to God. Members are frequently instructed in Sunday meetings in the weeks preceding conference to pray to receive answers to personal questions during conference, with the idea that God will speak to them individually through their highest leaders. Afterwards, the sermons are published in Church magazines and used as the lesson material in local meetings for the next six months, ensuring that what is said in general conference makes its way through the entire Church.

As such, studying conference talks is critical to understanding Latter-day Saint theological and practical beliefs. It is also significant when considering women's place in the Church. While Mormon feminists have worked tirelessly to amplify women's voices, the voices that define the Church and its interests to members continue to be the primarily male speakers in general conference. The status and experiences of women in the Church cannot be fully understood without examining the Church's most powerful men and their messages as delivered in its most influential forum.

In particular, such a study requires paying attention not just to the content of general conference talks, but to how that content is packaged. As sociologists Gary and Gordon Shepherd note in their groundbreaking studies of general conference, meaning is found not just in the content and themes of any given talk but in the "rhetorical *modes* in which themes are expressed."⁵ Women's place in the Church can be understood not just through what leaders say to and about women—and

5. Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, "Modes of Leader Rhetoric in the Institutional Development of Mormonism," *Sociological Analysis* 47 no. 2 (1986): 127, original emphasis. Statistical analysis of general conference rhetoric is becoming more popular: others who have recently engaged on this front include Quentin Spencer and blogger Ziff at *Zelophehad's Daughters*.

they say a lot!—but in how they frame and support what they have to say.

My research explores these questions by analyzing quotation practices in general conference between 1971 and 2020. I read every April⁶ session talk given by a member of the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during those decades. I also read every talk by a female leader given in the April general session during that time period (thus, between 1984 and 2020).⁷ In order to understand how quotation dynamics vary by leadership position, gender, and audience in the modern Church, I also read every talk given by any leader in any session between April 2016 and April 2020. For each address, I documented every quotation,⁸ including what was cited, the number of words in each quotation, and the way the speaker verbally introduced each quotation. This totaled more than 12,700 quotations over 1,100 talks.

The rhetorical practices of general conference, like its format and structure, have changed over time. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century leaders would extemporize for hours; modern translation

6. Though general conference happens twice a year, because of time constraints I chose to only study one session per year. Because the April conference often falls on Easter or the anniversary of Joseph Smith's First Vision, the New Testament and Joseph Smith may be overrepresented in my data. However, my analysis of trends and changes over time should not be impacted, because those events happen every April.

7. In 1984, the recently released Relief Society and Young Women's presidencies were invited to give short farewell talks. This marked the first time women had spoken in the general session in more than fifty years, but women did not become regular speakers until 1988.

8. I only counted direct quotation: ideas that were paraphrased or attributed to a source without actual words from that source were not documented. I also did not count dialogue within narratives, though I did count quotations by characters that explained the "moral of the story," as well as stories that were told entirely in someone else's voice.

and global broadcasting have necessitated timed, prewritten addresses.⁹ This is the backdrop to my choice to focus on the period between 1971 and 2020. Many substantial technological changes happened in the 1960s: conference was first translated simultaneously in 1962,¹⁰ first broadcast to Europe in 1965,¹¹ and first televised in color in 1967.¹² Though speakers were still adjusting to these changes in the 1970s, the era of spontaneity was over, and leaders were aware of themselves as speaking to a much larger audience than those sitting before them. Additionally, transcripts and video recordings of general conference are available for that entire period on the Church's website,¹³ providing definitive sources for those addresses.¹⁴ The quotations used in these

9. The actual process of writing and editing conference talks is opaque. Many people other than the speaker might contribute to any one address. Spencer Kimball's biography, for example, includes a story about Emma Lou Thayne reviewing a draft of his address to the first women's session, where he apparently adopted many of her suggestions. Edward Kimball, *Lengthen Your Stride: The Presidency of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 167. Even potentially ghostwritten conference talks, however, should be seen as written from the position of the speaker's authority.

10. Richard Armstrong, "Researching Mormonism: General Conference as an Artifactual Gold Mine," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 3 (1997): 164.

11. Sheri Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 380.

12. Armstrong, "Researching Mormonism," 164.

13. "Conferences," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/general-conference/conferences>.

14. The audio of the original delivery and the transcript later published in Church magazines will sometimes differ in small and large ways. I chose to rely on the published transcripts, which Church spokespeople have claimed represent the "speaker's intent." See for example "LDS Church Addresses Changes Made to Pres. Packer's Talk," Ksl.com, October 8, 2010, <https://www.ksl.com/article/12749665/lds-church-addresses-changes-made-to-pres-packers-talk>.

carefully crafted speeches for a global audience provide a window into Church leaders' views on gender and authority.

Understanding Quotation: Audience and Authority

Quotation is a common rhetorical practice that serves many different functions: spicing up a narrative, providing exact wording, or lending legitimacy to one's own argument. As every student of high school English literature intuitively knows, this last function is particularly important. Anthropologist Ruth Finnegan writes that quotation "enables a writer to stand in alliance with revered words and voices from the past and . . . endow oneself with something of their authority."¹⁵ Speakers in general conference constantly use quotation in precisely this way, positioning their ideas as (for example) the continuation of teachings from other Church leaders. In general conference, the rhetorical force of a quotation relies on the source of a quotation just as much, if not more, as the content of that quotation.

Scholars have sometimes used quotation in general conference as evidence for which sources general authorities were personally reading.¹⁶ Conference quotation patterns cannot be understood only in these terms, however. This is the case first because of quotation's rhetorical function. With limited time and such a significant audience, conference speakers must be understood as carefully selecting their quotations for both content and source. Indeed, a look at the footnotes reveals that speakers in general conference frequently use sources specifically designed to achieve that purpose. Many draw upon references like *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, which collects acknowledged sources

15. Ruth Finnegan, *Why Do We Quote?* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 284.

16. For one persuasive example of this technique, see Taylor Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

of wisdom like historical leaders or the anonymous proverb.¹⁷ This is one indication that conference speakers look for quotations to include in their talks *as quotations*, rather than, say, encountering those writers during research on some topic.¹⁸ The sources that appear in general conference are deliberately chosen with the spiritual and institutional goals of the Church's highest leaders in mind.

The second reason to understand speakers' quotations as deliberately selected for their audience is that the changes in quotation in general conference over time (see table 1 below) cannot be explained merely by changes in individuals' reading habits. Because apostles and prophets occupy those roles until their deaths, the composition of leaders speaking in conference changes slowly.¹⁹ Even as the membership of this group remains largely the same, their quotation patterns change

17. This practice is much less common now than it used to be, likely in part because of the way the internet has changed source availability. For uses throughout the years, see for example Marvin Ashton, "Roadblocks to Progress," April 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1979/04/roadblocks-to-progress>; Thomas Monson, "Building Your Eternal Home," April 1984, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1984/04/building-your-eternal-home>; James Faust, "The Power of Self-Mastery," April 2000, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2000/04/the-power-of-self-mastery>; Joseph Wirthlin, "The Abundant Life," April 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/04/the-abundant-life>; and Thomas Monson, "Preparation Brings Blessings," April 2010, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/04/preparation-brings-blessings>.

18. One particularly interesting feature of *Bartlett's* is that it is organized by the person who said the quotation rather than topic, so speakers who cited it would have to be looking for the source. However, it is possible that speakers use these collections for citations only, rather than finding quotations within them.

19. For example, of the fifty general conferences in my sample, Thomas Monson spoke at forty-seven of them.

significantly.²⁰ Not only do the same leaders collectively quote different sources over time, but they also frame their quotations of those sources differently for their audience. Though whom leaders quote is indeed an indication of whom they privately take to be authoritative or interesting, it is also a public decision.

Consider the fifteen most frequent sources of quotation from the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency in the 1970s and how that list changed in the 2010s (table 1). Both are clearly a reflection of the sources that matter most to the Church and its members: scriptures and prophets handily top each list. But the changes in these sources' popularity is striking. Quotation of current prophets and apostles, for example, has increased dramatically,²¹ while presidents of the United States have gone from the top ten to zero. These changes in sources can be understood at least in part as a reflection of a change in audience. While general conference's availability in the 1970s was limited beyond the United States,²² it is now internationally broadcast to communities without much besides their Church membership in common. Church leaders and their quotation practices are responsive to their audience.

20. Changes involving a population over time can happen for many reasons. For example, the population might change as it ages, or because the composition of the population changes, or because various events impact all members of the population. I argue that many changes in conference quotation can be attributed to this last source. Again, shifts in conference quotation happen more quickly than cohort changes in Church leaders, and though these leaders are all aging, the age range between the group is often as high as thirty years in the decades covered here. These broad-scale changes in general conference are unlikely to be due solely to changes in private attitudes among speakers.

21. While percentage changes can look particularly dramatic when they are changes in small values, these particular changes are worth noting. For context, between 1971 and 1980, the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency quoted current apostles nine times and the current prophet fifteen times; between 2011 and 2020, they quoted current apostles twenty times and the current prophet fifty-two times.

22. Armstrong, "Researching Mormonism," 164.

Table 1: Change in Most Frequent General Session Citations from Members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, April 1971–1980 and 2011–2020^a

	1971–1980	2011–2020	Net change (percentage points)	Percent change
New Testament	31.5%	23.4%	–8.0%	–25.6%
Doctrine and Covenants	16.1%	16.4%	+0.3%	+1.9%
Book of Mormon	12.6%	21.5%	+9.0%	+71.3%
Old Testament	11.8%	7.4%	–4.4%	–37.4%
Pearl of Great Price	4.8%	4.4%	–0.5%	–9.6%
Past Prophets	3.2%	4.4%	+1.2%	+38.0%
Anonymous Sources	2.9%	0.2%	–2.7%	–94.3%
Past Apostles	1.9%	1.9%	0.0%	–1.8%
Joseph Smith	1.8%	2.8%	+1.1%	+59.0%
US Presidents	1.3%	0.0%	–1.3%	–100.0%
Hymns	1.3%	2.5%	+1.3%	+99.2%
Current Prophet	0.8%	2.8%	+2.1%	+260.3%
The First Presidency ^b	0.6%	0.4%	–0.2%	–39.4%
Current Apostles	0.5%	1.1%	+0.6%	+131.0%
Members of the Church	0.5%	1.5%	+1.0%	+211.8%

a. Total citations for 1971–1980: 1,904; for 2011–2020: 1,832.

b. Speakers will sometimes quote statements put out by the First Presidency (the prophet and his two counselors) as a unit. This is distinct from citations of any one of those members.

While there is much to explore in these trends beyond their application to gender, this article focuses on quotation as a reflection of authority in order to explore women’s status in the Church. Quotation is a rhetorical practice in which speakers reveal beliefs about their audience. When choosing to quote from certain sources, speakers indicate two things: first, that they believe their audience will accept that source

as authoritative, and second, that they themselves support that source's authority.

Broadly, a source is more authoritative to an audience the more that members of that audience would believe a claim or obey an instruction (or seriously consider doing so) because it came from that source, regardless of their prior views about the content of the claim or instruction. Sources can be authoritative in many different ways. Conference speakers must navigate secular and ecclesiastical authority as well as many varieties of spiritual authority.²³ What broad-scale conference quotation patterns demonstrate is how *weighty* these different sources of authority are in their context.

Rhetorically effective quotation requires choosing sources with one's audience in mind.²⁴ The sources that general conference speakers choose, then, reveal features of the Latter-day Saint community, at least as those leaders understand it. A previous United States president might be an authoritative source to Americans, but citing one would not help one's persuasiveness overseas. How often various choices are made reflects the expected effectiveness of those appeals for members.

23. Latter-day Saint thinkers have long acknowledged the different roles played by scripture, prophetic pronouncements, and personal revelation in Church doctrine and practice. See, for example, David Holland, "Revelation and the Open Canon in Mormonism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terryl Givens and Philip Barlow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Other scholars make additional distinctions. Holbrook and Reeder's *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017) notes that women draw on authority from their Church positions, their expertise, their experiences and conviction, and their access to the Holy Spirit. Writing about the early Church, Jonathan Stapley distinguishes between "ecclesiastical authority, derived from Church office; liturgical authority, derived from membership in the Church to participate in general rituals of worship; and priestly authority, derived from participation in the Nauvoo Temple liturgy or cosmological priesthood." Jonathan Stapley, *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 85.

24. Finnegan, *Why Do We Quote?*, 57.

This indicates that the sources cited more are, on the whole,²⁵ considered more authoritative in the Latter-day Saint context, while the sources cited less are less so. For this reason, the term “authority” functions broadly in this article to refer to the weight of a certain source’s status, not the reason for that weight.

Effective quotation must also be balanced by the speaker’s own views about the source. If someone crafting a speech knew that her audience put great trust in, say, mainstream media sources, but she herself did not think that trust was merited, she would not quote that source to bolster her argument even if it would be persuasive. Conference quotation patterns thus reveal both leaders’ beliefs and their hopes about their community. The sources cited most frequently are not only the sources audiences trust but also the sources leaders want their audience to trust. In the mouths of the Church’s most powerful leaders, such support through quotation can even increase a source’s authority.

Because leaders’ use of sources reflects their beliefs about their audience, studying how Church leaders quote women sheds light on how those leaders perceive women’s authority in the Latter-day Saint community. Because speakers affirm authority through quotation, whether and how speakers quote women in general conference is indicative of those leaders’ commitment to women’s authority and equality. In this way, leaders’ treatment of women in their general conference addresses provides a meaningful window into the status of women in the Church more generally.

Why Quote Women?

Examining what conference quotation says about women in the Church is significant for two reasons. First, it is relevant for broader feminist projects involving concepts like equal representation of and

25. Though conference speakers sometimes quote sources in order to disagree with them, this is quite rare.

respect for women. Second, it reflects on the Church's realization of its own values.

This article takes feminist commitments on board, arguing that women's underrepresentation in general conference is a problem to be fixed. Because Church leaders support a different model of womanhood than many feminist and secular sources propose, however, some might worry that it is misguided to evaluate the Church's discursive practices by such standards. But the ways leaders engage with female voices in general conference can also be examined in light of their own stated commitments. Church leaders throughout the years have preached that women and men are equal, though separate. Church president Spencer Kimball told men in 1979, "The women of this Church have work to do which, though different, is equally as important as the work that we do. Their work is, in fact, the same basic work that we are asked to do—even though our roles and assignments differ . . . Our sisters do not wish to be indulged or to be treated condescendingly; they desire to be respected and revered as our sisters and our equals."²⁶ Other speakers throughout the years have mirrored that language and those sentiments, down to Relief Society president Jean Bingham's 2020 declaration of "the eternal truth that men's and women's innate differences are God given and equally valued."²⁷

Quotation as a rhetorical device sends messages, and those messages can reinforce or undermine the actual content of the talks in which they appear. This article will argue that, even if it is not their intention, leaders' quotations of women in general conference marginalize women in the Latter-day Saint community rather than portray them as worthy of respect and value. Insofar as this study shows that

26. Spencer Kimball, "Our Sisters in the Church," October 1979, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1979/10/our-sisters-in-the-church>.

27. Jean Bingham, "United in Accomplishing God's Work," April 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/34bingham>.

conference quotation practices fail to live up to an equal standard with respect to gender—and especially insofar as inequality is not the aim of Church leaders—it provides both an internal and external critique of those practices. If the Church is to live up to its creed, leaders must reexamine which voices they choose to emphasize and how they do so.

It is crucial to note that claims about women's and men's equal value do not translate easily into claims about equal authority, especially in an ecclesiastical setting. Women's ecclesiastical authority in the Church is, of course, limited because they are not ordained to priesthood office. While leaders have recently asserted that women have both "priesthood power" and "priesthood authority,"²⁸ this distinction is contentious, and women's authority is instead most often spoken about (as in the Nelson quotation that began this article) in terms of "righteous influence."²⁹ The source of this influence is attributed to women's caring nature³⁰ and "unique moral compass."³¹ Discussions of these kind emphasize women's spiritual rather than ecclesiastical authority.

Conference quotation, however, is not limited to sources with ecclesiastical authority. If quotation were just about appealing to authorities in some sense higher than one's self, one might expect prophets to quote mostly other prophets and scripture, but prophets also quote current and past apostles, as well as secular poets and historical figures.³² Poet William Wordsworth, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks have all been quoted

28. Bingham, "United in Accomplishing God's Work."

29. "Influence" frames a woman's power as something that manifests in others' words and actions rather than in her own words and actions.

30. See, for example, Gordon Hinkley, "The Women in Our Lives," October 2004, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2004/10/the-women-in-our-lives>.

31. Nelson, "Spiritual Treasures."

32. C. S. Lewis was only quoted seven times in my sample, less than other figures like Alexander Pope, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

multiple times by prophets and apostles.³³ Additionally, because conference addresses focus on how members should live their lives and understand their relationship with God, leaders might have reason to reference other acknowledged sources of spiritual authority, like women. As Bruce McConkie wrote in 1979, “Where spiritual things are concerned, as pertaining to all of the gifts of the Spirit, with reference to the receipt of revelation, the gaining of testimonies, and the seeing of visions, in all matters that pertain to godliness and holiness and which are brought to pass as a result of personal righteousness—in all these things men and women stand in a position of absolute equality before the Lord.”³⁴

These types of assertions should lead to some degree of gender balance in quotations whose sources are not selected for their ecclesiastical authority. Indeed, given frequent conference claims about women’s superior moral sensitivity, one might expect leaders who profess such views to draw on women more frequently than men in some contexts. In a sermon about how to understand one’s relationship with God and live a moral life, the sources of insight McConkie listed ought to be just as open to women as to men, regardless of their ecclesiastical status. Despite this, a righteous woman’s influence is rarely the kind of authority conference speakers are interested in drawing upon.

33. I did not set out to collect data on race, but it is notable and unsurprising that people of color (setting aside questions about race in the scriptures) are referenced in general conference far less than even women. In my sample, of the eighty-one named individuals not in Church leadership who were quoted more than once in the April general session by apostles, only one was not White: Abie Turay, who was quoted in Henry Eyring, “Is Not This the Fast that I Have Chosen,” April 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/is-not-this-the-fast-that-i-have-chosen>.

34. Quoted in Dallin Oaks, “Spiritual Gifts,” March 1986, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1986/09/spiritual-gifts>.

Men Quoting Women

When looking at gender in general conference, the big picture numbers are striking. In April general sessions between 1971 and 2020, members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (hereafter referred to inclusively as “apostles”) quoted specifically male sources³⁵ 3,264 times. This does not include the male-gendered deities, Jesus Christ and Heavenly Father, who were quoted 1,968 times.³⁶ In that same period, female sources were quoted 197 times.

This imbalance is huge, but not surprising—the perhaps natural consequences of an all-male priesthood and hierarchical structure that places over one hundred men at a time in positions more powerful than the most powerful female leader. Latter-day Saint scripture is also almost entirely male: the Book of Mormon has almost 250 named individuals, but only six of those are female, and only two women actually speak in the text. Given the Church’s broader position in a patriarchal society, it is also not surprising that the poets, historical figures, and non-Latter-day Saint leaders they quote would also be overwhelmingly male.

Though it may not be surprising, the lack of female representation is troubling, especially once the trends are broken down further (table 2). Altogether, female voices comprise 2.1 percent of general conference quotations in this sample. Looking only at 2011–2020, this number increases slightly: to 2.7 percent. By the same measure, explicitly male

35. I counted male sources as those that were either gendered male by a speaker’s verbal citation or footnoted citations from men.

36. In what follows, quotations attributed to Heavenly Father or Jesus Christ are never included in the male/female ratios. However, divinity in the Church is not outside of gender. See, for example, D. Todd Christofferson, “Let Us Be Men,” October 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/10/let-us-be-men>. Readers are encouraged to consider the impact of an embodied male divinity on these quotation patterns and on the Church. No potentially quotable texts are attributed to Heavenly Mother or to the male-gendered Holy Ghost.

Table 2: Gendered Citations in April General Session Addresses by Members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and First Presidency, April 1971–2020^a

Total Female	2.1%
Total Male ^b	35.5%
Scripture (Not Gendered)	36.1%
Jesus Christ	20.1%
Male Scriptures ^c	17.8%
Past Prophets	6.1%
Other Male Sources ^d	5.8%
Apostles	3.7%
Church Publications ^e	2.7%
Non-Gendered Sources ^f	2.0%
Current Prophets	2.0%
Other Female Sources	1.7%

a. Total citations: 9,200.

b. Here and throughout, Male totals do not include citations of Heavenly Father or Jesus Christ.

c. A quotation is counted as Male or Female Scripture if the verbal citation attributes the quotation to a man or a woman. “1 Nephi 3:7 reads” would be labeled Scripture, but “Nephi wrote” would be labeled Male Scripture. Scriptural quotations that were not verbally cited are not categorized as Male or Female. The Male and Female Scripture categories do not, however, count the numerous quotations that are verbally attributed to Christ through or to a gendered individual (except for one section in the D&C addressed to Emma Smith, all of those are male); those are categorized as citations of Jesus Christ.

d. Other Male Sources and Other Female Sources include all quotations whose gender can be determined from footnotes or verbal citations that do not fit into other categories. All secular gendered sources are included here, as well as quotations from church members outside of the highest levels of church leadership.

e. The category of Church Publication includes documents like *The Living Christ*, *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, the Handbooks, etc. (mostly written by men). It also includes all songs from the Hymnal and the Primary Children’s Songbook except when the verbal citation references a gendered author.

f. Non-Gendered Sources are all the sources whose gender could not be determined from the footnote or the verbal citation that do not fit into another category. Examples of non-gendered sources include quotes from newspapers and magazines that did not include authors, anonymous sayings, the dictionary, musicals, individuals without names or gender identification, etc.

Table 2 (continued)

God ^g	1.2%
Female Church Leaders ^h	0.2%
Female Scriptures	0.2%
Male Church Leaders ⁱ	0.2%
Couples	0.1%

g. Quotations verbally attributed to Jesus Christ or the Lord were categorized as citations of Jesus Christ, while other citations verbally attributed to divinity, including references that were ambiguous between God the Father and Christ, were categorized as citations of God.

h. Female Church Leaders includes all quotations from women occupying the general presidencies of the Relief Society, Young Womens, and Primary.

i. Male Church Leaders includes all quotations from men who are general authorities or members of the Sunday School and Young Mens presidencies but are not apostles.

voices other than Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ account for 35.5 percent of conference quotations, going down to 31.7 percent between 2011 and 2020. This decrease is entirely due to leaders verbally attributing fewer quotes from scripture to male voices³⁷—if scriptures are excluded, quotation of men goes up from 14.8 percent over fifty years to 18.1 percent of all quotations in the final decade of my sample. Examining only quotations from specific people, removing quotes from scripture³⁸ and not clearly gendered sources,³⁹ reveals that more than nine out of ten of the individuals quoted in general conference are men.⁴⁰

Women's absence becomes even more visible in quotations from sources with high-level Latter-day Saint ecclesiastical authority.⁴¹ Of

37. Even with gender-neutral verbal citations, the scriptures quoted continue to have been almost entirely written by men.

38. This includes God, Jesus, Male Scriptures, Female Scriptures, Not Gendered Scriptures.

39. This includes Non-Gendered, Church Publication, and Couple.

40. Women make up 9.73 percent of 1,801 total citations.

41. This includes Past Prophets, Current Prophets, Apostles, Male Church Leaders, and Female Church Leaders.

those, female leaders of the Church make up 1.9 percent of quotations. Ninety-eight percent of the leaders that apostles quote in general conference are men. This amounts to a mere twenty-one citations of female Church leaders by its highest authorities; ten are from Eliza Snow, and six of those are her hymns. In this sample of five decades of talks, a current female leader of the Church was only quoted to an audience that included men once, when apostle Dallin Oaks quoted Relief Society president Linda Burton in the 2014 priesthood session.⁴² In fifty years, an apostle never quoted a current female leader in an April general session. Current male leaders, meanwhile, were quoted 257 times in that same period. It is worth noting, however, that male leaders who are not apostles (such as members of the Seventy) have been quoted even less frequently than female leaders (thirteen times as opposed to twenty-one).⁴³ Apostles' quotational emphasis on the authority of the institutional Church is entirely on its highest level—the level they themselves occupy. Because women are entirely excluded from that level, they are also excluded from consideration as ecclesiastical authorities.

It may seem that the gender imbalance in general conference is thus a result of women's limited ecclesiastical authority. However, as discussed above, there are many other kinds of authority on which conference speakers draw, and leaders frequently make claims about women's moral and spiritual authority. Though women are excluded from the most important leadership roles, Church leaders have encouraged them to be "contributing and full partner[s]" with men rather than

42. In that same talk, Oaks also quoted three past Church presidents, three apostles (two living), *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, the D&C, and Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. See Dallin Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," April 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood>.

43. Current non-apostle male leaders have, however, been quoted in the general session three times.

“silent . . . or limited partners.”⁴⁴ Outside of leadership roles, then, one might hope for gender parity.

However, this is not the case. Even when apostles quote sources who do not have ecclesiastical authority, they consistently prioritize male voices over female ones. Of the individuals quoted in conference who are neither scriptural nor high-level Church leaders, fully 77 percent of them are male. This number is changing over time, but not always equitably: between 2010 and 2015, 58.6 percent of quoted individuals without scriptural or high-level ecclesiastical authority were male; between 2016 and 2020, 69 percent were male.⁴⁵ Representation of women, at least on this measure, has significantly⁴⁶ increased since the 1970s, but this is happening neither quickly nor consistently.

There are two important caveats about these patterns. First, these statistics are the product of hundreds of talks by almost forty different apostles over fifty years. They are not the product of any one person’s conscious decision, and certainly no speaker selects his quotations with these broad patterns in mind. The average apostle quotes eleven times in a single talk, not nearly enough to cover all the categories of sources presented here.⁴⁷ These patterns are also the structural default, the rhetorical norm for conference addresses, and individual speakers are unlikely to choose to deviate widely from them. This, however, makes it even more necessary to examine and bring them to light.

44. Spencer Kimball, “The Privileges and Responsibilities of Sisters,” September 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1978/11/privileges-and-responsibilities-of-sisters>.

45. Out of seventy and sixty-five total citations, respectively.

46. Women are cited significantly more frequently in 2010–2020 than overall (using a one-sided t-test, $p=0.004$). However, women are not cited significantly more frequently in 2016–2020 than overall ($p=0.254$).

47. Some quote far more often than others: Neal Maxwell averaged twenty-four quotations per talk (almost all scripture), while Richard Scott averaged 4.5.

Second, the consistent overrepresentation of male quotations in general conference can be explained in part by the overrepresentation of men in the worlds of ecclesiastical, scriptural, and cultural authority that conference speakers inhabit. The Church's all-male priesthood, male-focused scriptural canon, and patriarchal cultural context all play a role in muting women. The non-ecclesiastical sources cited by speakers include a greater number of well-known male writers and historical figures than female ones because many more men have historically been given the opportunity to become famous. There are also fewer conference talks and books on Church doctrine written by women. When thinking about the available sources leaders have to draw upon, women are consistently underrepresented, though not so dramatically as they are in quotation practices.⁴⁸ In any case, this is only an explanation for these patterns, not a justification of them. The Church consistently emphasizes members' responsibility to choose the right even when "the world" and those around them push in opposing directions. Leaning on excuses about cultural norms is unfair to leaders by refusing them the ability to choose differently.

The persistent failure of apostles to quote women is a persistent failure to acknowledge women as authorities. This tells us something about the way they see their audience: when leaders do not feature women's voices, they indicate a belief that the community they are addressing would not view those voices as authoritative. They also affirm that belief. If the Church truly values women's voices, its leaders must take responsibility to do so themselves. Rather than being contributing and full partners, women are silent in general conference, limited by prophets and apostles. Not only do women speak less frequently in conference because of the restricted leadership roles available to them, but they are heard less frequently because other speakers choose to amplify male voices instead of female ones in their quotation practices.

48. While women make up less than 2 percent of quotations of Church leaders, for example, they make up closer to 5 percent of conference talks.

Women's silence here indicates a broader inability to be heard within the Church.

Women Above the Footnotes

Analyzing not just which sources leaders select but how and where they present those sources is key to understanding quotation's rhetorical role. Even when conference speakers choose to quote women, they engage in rhetorical techniques that further reflect women's lack of authority in the Church. Male leaders minimize women's presence and influence by frequently mentioning their appearance and relationship status and infrequently giving their names.

Conference talks are written to be spoken. Understanding this is essential to understanding conference quotation because listeners, unlike readers, depend on authors to include information about when and who they cite in the body of the text rather than leaving it to parentheticals and footnotes (many readers may not scour the footnotes either). Embedded quotes go unrecognized by conference listeners unless speakers make a deliberate effort to frame them by changing their tone of voice or giving a *verbal citation* that provides an introduction to the quote. "1 Nephi 1:1," "a young woman," "it is said," and "our beloved prophet, Russell M. Nelson" all function as verbal citations when spoken during an address. These citations can serve not just to indicate the source but to add to or explain its credentials: the common "our beloved prophet" preface does precisely that, as do additions like "prominent writer," "one of my eminent business associates," or "faithful wife and mother." Verbal citations provide the information a speaker thinks the audience needs to understand and respect the source of a quotation.⁴⁹

49. One initial difficulty with using verbal citation to assert women's authority is the lack of authority titles for women in the Church. Though there has been a recent push to refer to female presidents as presidents, women were not referred to as "President X" in my sample.

1. Acknowledging and Anonymizing Women

If the source of a quotation plays a significant part in its selection, speakers are likely to verbally cite as fully as possible the sources that they take to be most authoritative. To see how women are acknowledged beyond the footnotes, each gendered non-scriptural quotation can be sorted into one of three categories based on the way a source was verbally cited: *complete*, *incomplete*, or *none* (table 3). A *complete* verbal citation indicates a specific individual. Both partial and full names were counted as completely verbally cited: “President Spencer W. Kimball,” “Bishop Williams,” and “Liz” are all complete. An *incomplete* verbal citation indicates only that the speaker is quoting someone. All quotations that were verbally cited but had no name attached counted as incomplete. “The poet,” “a dear sister,” and “a business executive” are incomplete verbal citations. The *none*s are quotations that were not verbally indicated at all by the speaker.

The data on how different sources are verbally cited aligns with expectations in terms of the Church’s most authoritative sources. The current prophet is completely verbally cited 94 percent of the time, and past prophets are verbally cited nine out of ten times. Similarly, apostles are completely verbally cited almost eight out of ten times, and non-apostle leaders are completely verbally cited six out of ten times. Female leaders of the Church, though rarely quoted, are completely verbally

Table 3: Completeness of Gendered Verbal Citations of Different Sources in General Session Talks by the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, April 1971–2020

	Prophet (558 total)	Apostle (338 total)	Current Prophet (184 total)	Male (530 total)	Female (155 total)	Female Leader (21 total)	Male Leader (15 total)
Complete	90.5%	79.3%	94.0%	62.5%	51.6%	95.2%	60.0%
Incomplete	1.8%	6.2%	0.5%	24.9%	42.6%	4.8%	33.3%
None	7.7%	14.5%	5.4%	12.6%	5.8%	0.0%	6.7%

cited 95 percent of the time: when speakers cite female leaders, it seems that they do so deliberately and want their audience to know.⁵⁰ This suggests, interestingly, that female Church authority does have weight in this context despite its infrequent representation.

However, the opposite is true with women outside of Church leadership positions. Whereas non-leader men are completely verbally cited 62 percent of the time, non-leader women are only completely verbally cited 51 percent of the time, the lowest of any of those categories. They are also by far the highest, at 42 percent, of any group for incomplete citations. Between 2016 and 2020, women were quoted as named sources outside of narrative contexts only six times in front of men. In contrast, forty men who held no position of high-level leadership in the Church were quoted and named in non-narrative contexts in that time period, thirty in the general session. Non-leader men are significantly⁵¹ more likely to be completely verbally cited than non-leader women. These numbers demonstrate how men and women with the same level of ecclesiastical authority—local or none—are treated differently in terms of their authoritativeness for Church members. Not only do leaders quote women much less frequently than men, they often minimize their presence even when they do quote them.

50. One additional way to determine the authority of a source is to look at the average length of quotations from that source. In a quotation from an authoritative source, what matters most is the presence of the source, rather than what is said. This is borne out by the data, as the current prophet has the lowest average word count of all non-scriptural sources. (In part because of a frequent conference pattern of weaving short phrases from scripture into one's talk, scriptural sources had the lowest average word count of all sources.) Non-leader women have the highest average word count of all groups. This indicates that when women are quoted, they are quoted for content—meaning, again, that they are not quoted for source. The average length of quotes from women is also in part because of the frequency of narrative quotes from women.

51. Using a two-sided t-test, $p < 0.0001$, $t = 4.902$.

Again, part of this is due to the fact that more of these non-leader men than women are famous historical figures. However, speakers are more likely to name men than women even when those men are not well known. When quoting family members, regular church members, or writers who are not household names, speakers frequently name their male sources while leaving out the name of their female sources. These trends occur side-by-side, often in the same talks. In his 2015 address, apostle Quentin Cook quoted a woman, Carla Carlisle, and described her as “one of my favorite writers” without naming her or revealing her gender through pronouns in the talk itself—while naming and quoting several men in the same talk.⁵² Even though Cook seems to personally admire Carlisle, his reluctance to reveal her name or gender compared with his willingness to name and gender male sources suggests that her gender might decrease her legitimacy as a source.

2. Quoting Beautiful Wives and Mothers

The content of incomplete citations also reveals a great deal about women’s authority. Incomplete verbal citations have to do all the work in describing the credentials of a source. All the audience knows about the source comes from that verbal citation—they can’t bring in any background knowledge about the individual involved. It is telling, then, that speakers treat men differently than women in this sphere as well, tying women’s authority to their relationship status or their physical appearance.

Table 4 shows the incomplete verbal citations from apostles in the general session in 2017–2020. These years are a microcosm of a pattern that is consistent through the last fifty. Women are most frequently cited in their capacities as relations, with more than one out of three of all incomplete verbal citations referring to a woman’s relationship or family status. Men’s relationship status, meanwhile, is only mentioned

52. Quentin Cook, “The Lord is My Light,” April 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/the-lord-is-my-light>.

Table 4: Incomplete Verbal Citations from Members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency, April 2017–2020

Female	Male
A faithful wife and mother	One observer
Two LDS women	One writer
A dear sister	A fourteen-year-old boy
A single sister in her mid-40s	One friend of nearly 20 years, whom I admire greatly
A beautiful, vibrant young wife and mother	A temple president
A beautiful young returned sister missionary	One frustrated writer
Their precious mother	One historian

in 8 percent of incomplete verbal citations, all in their capacity as fathers. Their calling in the Church is mentioned with about the same frequency (7.6 percent), while their employment status is used as a credential 41.7 percent of the time. Verbal citations recognize women's careers only 6.2 percent of the time—not a surprise for an organization that was still frequently preaching against women's employment into the 2000s—and their Church calling only 1.5 percent of the time. These numbers are particularly striking given that these sources are already anonymous. Evidence has already been presented that conference speakers are more likely to name men than women: the actual number of men who are cited in their capacities as local Church leaders, for example, is even higher.

In these incomplete verbal citations, and elsewhere in conference talks, women are also far more likely to be the subject of adjectives such as “dear,” “precious,” and “beautiful,” as seen above, as well as “lovely,” “wonderful,” and “sweet.” In verbally citing the women they quote as beautiful and lovely, speakers connect to a tradition of conceptualizing female spirituality through the lens of female attractiveness, implicitly—and explicitly, in the form of the speaker—evaluated by men. Just like a Hollywood movie where the main character is gorgeous and the villain is inevitably scarred or ugly, in conference talks, righteous

women are beautiful women. None of those adjectives (or correlates like “handsome”) are regularly applied to men, who are instead more likely to be described as “wise” or go without evaluative adjectives entirely in favor of authoritative credentials in the form of careers or Church callings:⁵³ consider Gary Stevenson’s story about “a beautiful, vibrant young wife and mother [who] was a scrappy Division 1 soccer player when she met and married her dental student husband.”⁵⁴ Women are specifically described as “young” fully three times as often as men, further depriving them of authority by minimizing their life experience. If anything, these trends have increased over time, particularly the use of “beautiful” to describe anonymous women. These verbal citations further undermine women’s ability to stand as equals in their community. By contrast, men occupy a variety of positions in and outside of the Church and have a range of authoritative credentials available.

Conference quotation practices serve to diminish female authority.⁵⁵ Not only are women quoted significantly less frequently than men, but the ways in which women are quoted serve to further mute

53. It is worth noting that leaders have become more reticent about using career status as a credential over time.

54. Gary Stevenson, “A Good Foundation Against the Time to Come,” April 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/28stevenson>.

55. These patterns are present in many elements of conference talks besides quotation: leaders often tell stories that consistently mention women’s appearance, feature them only in their familial roles while men are discussed in a variety of settings, anonymize women even when they are the main characters of the story, and so forth. One memorable example was Cook’s 2011 talk, “LDS Women are Incredible!” (taking its title from a Wallace Stegner quote), which told the story of Young Women’s leaders digging through a young woman’s purse and finding items inside that demonstrate her spirituality, attention to personal hygiene, craft-making creativity, and ability to be “a **HOMEMAKER!**” Quentin Cook, “LDS Women are Incredible!,” April 2011, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2011/04/lds-women-are-incredible> (original emphasis). Such a story would never be told about a man.

their voices. Women are anonymized and described with diminutives rather than with authoritative credentials. They are included as the wives of husbands while men are the leaders of organizations in and outside of the Church, despite the fact that conference speakers frequently encourage men to be good family members⁵⁶ and women to step up as community leaders.⁵⁷ These quotation patterns play into tropes that undermine leaders' professions of gender equality.

Gendered Audiences and Gendered Topics

The data presented thus far have only been from members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the general session. The general session is open to everyone, but leaders also historically spoke at gender-segregated priesthood and women's sessions each year. When investigating how quotation patterns from the Church's top leaders shift in different sessions, it becomes apparent that these leaders are very aware of gender. Their awareness leads them, however, to continue privileging male voices. What is more, when these leaders are speaking on the topic of gender, they assert male authority more strongly than ever.

56. See for example James Faust, "Father, Come Home," April 1993, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1993/04/father-come-home>; L. Tom Perry, "Fatherhood, An Eternal Calling," April 2004, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2004/04/fatherhood-an-eternal-calling>; D. Todd Christofferson, "Fathers," April 2016, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2016/04/fathers>.

57. See, for example, Dallin Oaks, "The Relief Society and the Church," April 1992, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1992/04/the-relief-society-and-the-church>; D. Todd Christofferson, "The Moral Force of Women," October 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/the-moral-force-of-women>; Russell Nelson, "Sisters' Participation in the Gathering of Israel," October 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/sisters-participation-in-the-gathering-of-israel>; and Henry Eyring, "Covenant Women in Partnership with God," October 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/34eyring>.

In the last twenty years, First Presidency members have used quotation differently when speaking to different audiences (table 5). Looking at quotations across the general, priesthood, and women's sessions, several interesting trends become visible. First, past prophets are a more popular source in the priesthood session than in either of the other two, but the current prophet is cited far more in the women's session (a statistically significant⁵⁸ difference).⁵⁹ Men are quoted more in priesthood (40.6 percent) compared to the general (36.8 percent) and women's (36.6 percent) sessions. However, non-leader men experience a drop of almost six percentage points when speakers are addressing only women.⁶⁰ Similarly, women are quoted less in the priesthood session (1 percent)⁶¹ than in the general session (2.6 percent), and the most in the women's session (3.7 percent).

These numbers are an acknowledgment that the gender of a source matters. If leaders were not aware of the gender of their sources, there would not be this kind of variation between sessions. These numbers are also, then, an acknowledgment of audience. When Church leaders

58. Using a one-sided t-test, $p=0.00001$.

59. Note that women's session data is only from the First Presidency; members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles more frequently quote the current prophet, but they do not speak in women's session and so are not represented here. It might be that citations of the current prophet are lower in the priesthood and general sessions because the prophet usually speaks in those sessions, while he has only spoken at every women's session more recently. This might be part of the story; however, as shall be shown below, there is also a difference in content in the talks given at the women's and priesthood sessions that accounts for a greater number of citations of the current prophet. In the last few years, the current prophet has been frequently cited in the women's session even when he is present.

60. This difference is statistically significant: $p=.02$ using a one-sided t-test.

61. The 0.2 percent appearance of female leaders in the priesthood session is due entirely to a story narrated by Eliza Snow in James Faust, "Perseverance," April 2005, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2005/04/perseverance>.

Table 5: Gender Distribution by Session of Citations in Talks by Members of the First Presidency, April 2001–2020^a

	General Session	Priesthood Session	Women's Session
Total Female	2.6%	1.0%	3.7%
Total Male	36.8%	40.6%	36.6%
Scripture	34.7%	35.1%	28.8%
Jesus	18.9%	16.7%	20.4%
Male Scripture	15.8%	12.5%	16.2%
Past Prophet	5.8%	14.1%	5.2%
Other Male Source	8.7%	8.0%	2.6%
Apostle	4.3%	5.0%	3.7%
Church Publication	3.3%	3.2%	5.8%
Non-Gendered Source	1.8%	3.2%	4.2%
Current Prophet	2.1%	0.6%	8.9%
Other Female Source	2.5%	0.8%	2.6%
God	1.9%	0.2%	0.0%
Male Leader	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%
Female Leader	0.1%	0.2%	0.0%
Female Scripture	0.0%	0.0%	1.0%
Couple	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%

a. Total General Session citations: 726; Priesthood: 524; Womens: 191

speaking to women, they seem to find their audience less willing to take men's voices seriously without high-level Church authority; hence the drop in quotations of non-leader men. However, when the Church's highest leaders speak in the general session, they appear to think those male voices will be almost as respected as with an all-male audience. This indicates that men are still in some ways the perceived audience, or perhaps the more important one, in a mixed-gender group. And, as a group, men are perceived to grant female voices significantly less authority than male ones.

The notable increase in citation of the current prophet in women's session by men is almost certainly due to the fact that quotation practices are responsive to topic as well. When discussing the origins of the Church, speakers are more likely to quote Joseph Smith; when discussing the sins of the world, secular news sources are used more frequently. In the women's session, speakers are more likely to discuss being a woman—but they are most likely to quote men, not women, to make their case.

The Church has become increasingly concerned with gender and sexuality as society has become more permissive toward same-sex relationships and less “traditional” models of the nuclear family, both of which (history of polygamy aside) the Church rejects. Speakers often use their time in general conference to address these issues, with growing frequency and urgency. Talks entirely devoted to discussing gender,⁶² from speakers of any rank, have increased dramatically in the twenty-first century. Between 1970 and 1989, which included the contentious period of the Church's fight against the Equal Rights Amendment, ten talks were given solely⁶³ on gender. In the 1990s, there were eight. In the 2000s, there were twenty-three; in the 2010s, there were twenty-five. The pattern appears to be set to continue. Though some leaders are more focused on these issues than others, the high rate of talks about gender is not due to just a few. Every prophet since Gordon Hinckley (who became president of the Church in 1995) has delivered multiple addresses on gender, as have fourteen different apostles.

Every decade, just over half of the talks about gender are given in the general sessions. The rest are usually addressed to women: eight in

62. I use *gender* to cover talks dealing with both male and female gender roles and sexual orientation. Speakers usually tie sexuality closely to gender roles: heterosexual marriage is a key element of required masculinity and femininity.

63. Gender and sexuality were mentioned in more than ten talks: homosexuality and women working outside the home, in particular, made their way onto several litanies of modern-day evils. However, gender was the primary topic of only a few of those addresses.

the 2000s, and ten in the 2010s. Attendees of the priesthood session have been the recipient of talks specifically focused on gender only twice a decade in that fifty-year period.⁶⁴ Though “gender roles” sounds gender inclusive, these conference addresses generally are not. While discussions of sexuality are disproportionately aimed at gay men,⁶⁵ gender is a women’s issue. True manhood will sometimes make an appearance, but good womanhood is the primary focus of these addresses, even when delivered to men. One might assume, then, that this difference between the men’s and women’s sessions would be due to female leaders’ focus on gender roles, but this is not the case. Only four of the eighteen talks about gender in the women’s session between 2001 and 2020 were given by women. The rest were given by the First Presidency. This is not to say that women do not speak often about gender roles; women gave eleven of the twenty-six talks about gender in the general session in that time period. But the prophet and apostles speak on these topics far more often than any other group, and it is notable that they do so far more to women than to men. Male conference speakers who are not apostles almost never devote their talks to the subject.

In the context of authority in the Church, such patterns make sense. Because gender is the subject of developing Church doctrine, only the most powerful leaders have the appropriate ecclesiastical authority to make claims about these issues. When all such leaders are male, this means that discourses on gender are a male domain, regardless of how egalitarian their arguments may be. Quotations in these talks, though small in number (101 in this subset), provide further evidence of this. In talks by the First Presidency about gender between 2001 and 2020

64. I did not count addresses about being good priesthood holders as talks about gender unless the speaker also mentioned maleness. Where leaders have repeatedly insisted that all women are mothers, whether or not they actually have children (see for example Nelson, “Sisters’ Participation”) men’s relationship with the priesthood is not discussed in the same terms.

65. See Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, for a more extensive discussion of this issue.

Table 6: Gender Distribution of Citations in Talks about Gender and Sexuality from Members of the First Presidency, April 2001–2020^a

Scripture (Not Gendered)	25.7%
Jesus	19.8%
Current Prophet	14.9%
Male Scripture	9.9%
Apostle	9.9%
Non-Gendered Source	5.9%
Other Female Source	4.0%
Prophet	3.0%
Church Publication	3.0%
Female Scripture	2.0%
Couple	1.0%
Other Male Source	1.0%

a. Total citations: 101

(table 6), quotes from current leaders are much higher than in the First Presidency’s total average (shown in table 5). Members of the First Presidency quote the current prophet nearly six times more frequently when they are talking about gender (14.9 percent) than they do on average (2.5 percent).⁶⁶ The six total citations from female sources represent a higher percentage (6.0 percent) than elsewhere from these speakers, but female leaders of the Church are not among those quoted. Specifically male voices, in comparison, still make up nearly 40 percent of the total.

It is perhaps surprising that leaders choose to rely so much more heavily on men’s voices when talking to women about how to be good women. This can be seen as both an appeal to established authority and an attempt to establish it. Gender and sexuality are two issues on which church members find themselves most at odds with mainstream Western culture, so leaders must increasingly support their arguments

66. This difference is statistically significant: $p < 0.0001$ using a one-sided t-test.

with the weightiest religious authorities. On the other hand, many church members are also at odds with Church leadership about these issues, with increasing numbers of young people leaving the Church over its position.⁶⁷ In continually emphasizing the current prophet's authority by citing him, these speakers are working in part to maintain the Church's jurisdiction over these topics. Quotation is one tool to enforce male hierarchical church authority when addressing the issues that most threaten it.

This reliance is stronger than ever in the Nelson era.⁶⁸ Oaks's 2019 address at the women's session quoted Nelson eight times out of twelve, along with the First Presidency and past Church president Kimball.⁶⁹ Eyring also used Nelson as three of his five total quotes (the other two from scripture) in his 2019 talk on gender, telling women to "remember President Nelson's perfect description of a woman's divine mission—including her mission of mothering."⁷⁰ Neither speaker drew on women's voices to describe women's divine mission or anything else.

When looking at gender-segregated sessions, it becomes apparent that the gender of both audience and source inform leaders' quotation practices. It also becomes clear that leaders consistently prioritize men. Though conference speakers seem to believe that women see men without ecclesiastical authority as less authoritative than men do, that belief does not impact their quotation practices when men as well as

67. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

68. Citations of Nelson make up 7.7 percent of apostles' quotations in general sessions since his calling as prophet, while the current prophet made up only 2.0 percent of quotations in previous years. Monson, the prophet preceding Nelson, was quoted 2.2 percent of the time. Nelson is quoted significantly more than other prophets ($p < 0.0001$, $t = 11.8$ using a two-sided t-test) and significantly more than Monson ($p < 0.0001$, $t = 8.32$ using a two-sided t-test).

69. Dallin Oaks, "Two Great Commandments," October 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/35oaks>.

70. Eyring, "Covenant Women."

women are in the audience. In this way, they treat their male listeners as more important than their female ones. Though apostles tend to quote women more often when talking to women, they also quote male leaders more often when talking about women. Women's voicelessness elsewhere in the Church culminates in apostles' choices to exclude female voices and prioritize male leaders when talking about womanhood.

Women Quoting Men

In the previous sections, this article has examined quotation patterns only from members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and First Presidency. Women have been quoted less, acknowledged less, and, by implication, seen as less authoritative than men. The highest authorities of the Church have indirectly used their voices in general conference not to elevate women but to emphasize male power, especially in the spaces that impact women most. These patterns also have an impact on how female leaders perceive themselves and their audience. The same analysis of quotation patterns from female leaders' conference talks reveals that women also treat female voices as less authoritative than male ones—including their own.

On average, female leaders spend the greatest percentage of their talks quoting, more than any other group of conference speakers. Between 2016 and 2020, members of the First Presidency spent 15.5 percent of their talks on quotation,⁷¹ while members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spent 18.6 percent of their time quoting. Male leaders in other positions spent 16.9 percent of their time quoting, and female leaders spent 21.4 percent. These differences are both statistically

71. This is measured by dividing the total word count of the address with the total word count of quotations within the address. It may not map exactly to speaking time.

significant⁷² and revealing. When the leaders who spend the most time using their own words are the most powerful, it is telling that the leaders who spend the least time doing so are female.⁷³

Not only do women spend more of their time than male leaders repeating others' words, they also spend even more time quoting male sources than male leaders do. Like the First Presidency, women's talks about gender include a heavy emphasis on quotations from the current prophet and other leaders. The women's talks in the April 2020 session were perhaps the starkest possible example of this pattern: two of the three female leaders spoke on gender roles, and video footage of church president Nelson speaking was also inserted in the middle of their addresses. (Neither of the talks about gender roles given by male leaders had video segments.⁷⁴)

This pattern of female speakers focusing on male voices is not limited by topic, however. Since female leaders began speaking regularly in the general sessions (1988–2020), 5.7 percent of female leaders' quotations in the general sessions were from female sources, while 42.0 percent of them were from male sources (table 7). Between 2011 and 2020, female leaders quoted men 46.6 percent of the time—fully fifteen percentage points higher than the frequency with which apostles quoted men in the general session during that same time period (31.7 percent). Even when they are quoting women, female leaders treat them

72. Women spend a significantly greater portion of their talks in quotation than other groups of leaders ($p=0.002$, $t=11.9$ using a two-sided t-test) and the First Presidency spends significantly less than other groups ($p=0.04$, $t=2.7$ using a two-sided t-test).

73. It may be surprising that apostles quote more than other male leaders, but this can be attributed to other rhetorical differences. For example, male leaders who are not apostles tend to spend a larger percentage of their talks telling stories rather than discoursing authoritatively, which reduces the number of quotations in their addresses.

74. The only other video appearance that conference was in Nelson's address, which was not about gender. He showed a video of himself in the Sacred Grove.

Table 7: Breakdown of Gendered Quotations in April General Session Talks Given by Female Leaders, 1988–2020^a

Total Female	5.7%
Total Male	41.9%
Scripture	28.4%
Male Scripture	12.3%
Jesus	11.8%
Past Prophet	9.8%
Apostle	9.8%
Church Publication	8.6%
Current Prophet	6.8%
Other Female Source	3.9%
Other Male Source	3.2%
Non-Gendered Source	2.7%
Female Leader	1.4%
God	0.5%
Female Scripture	0.4%
Couple	0.2%

a. Total citations: 559

as less authoritative than similarly positioned male sources: female leaders completely verbally cite 68.4 percent of their male sources with no ecclesiastical authority, but only 47.8 percent of their non-leader female sources. This is a greater disparity than in apostles' talks (shown in table 3). In the women's session, where female leaders quote women the most (13.2 percent of the time), they still quote men more than twice as frequently as they quote women (30.9 percent). Between 2016 and 2020, almost eight out of ten gendered quotations from female leaders have been male. By comparison, male conference speakers in other leadership positions⁷⁵ in those years quoted men 40.7 percent of the

75. Members of the Presiding Bishopric, Presidency of the Seventy, Quorum of the Seventy, or presidencies of the Young Mens and Sunday School.

time in the general session and 32.2 percent in the priesthood session, while quoting women 1.9 percent of the time to their mixed-gender audience and not once to their all-male one.

If quotation in general conference is about drawing upon the authority of quoted sources, it might be surprising to see female leaders quoting male sources so often instead of even more authoritative sources like God or the scriptures. Indeed, female leaders tend to quote Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ less frequently (12.3 percent of the time) than apostles do (19.7 percent between 1988 and 2020).⁷⁶ Women are not just quoting any male source, however: they are overwhelmingly quoting male Church leaders in an appeal to institutional authority. This is increasing over time: between 1988 and 2010, 19.8 percent of female leaders' quotations came from male leaders, but between 2011 and 2020, that number went up to 37.5 percent—twenty-two times the percentage of their quotations that comes from female leaders. Of these citations, women are quoting current leaders sitting on the stand behind them fully two out of three times. In this way, at least, women's access to authority is mediated by male priesthood holders rather than coming directly from God.

Comparing this to quotation patterns from male leaders who are not apostles indicates that female leaders' emphasis on apostles' authority is not just due to women's lower leadership positions. Between 2016 and 2020, non-apostle leaders quoted current and past apostles 19.4 percent of the time.⁷⁷ This is more frequent than apostles' own quotations of fellow apostles in this time period (16.5 percent), but far less frequent than female leaders' quotations of apostles (28.2 percent). Of the leaders they quoted, non-apostle men also quoted living apostles less frequently than women did (57.8 percent as opposed to 61 percent). Just because these male leaders are not quoting apostles as often as women are does not mean that they are less comfortable with male

76. This ratio has remained relatively stable over time.

77. Apostles are the only group of leaders that consistently quote each other. Non-apostle men quote each other only 0.2 percent of the time.

authority, however: 95 percent of their gendered citations in the general session are from men, as are 100 percent of their gendered citations in the priesthood session. Where non-apostle men have not quoted a woman once in the April priesthood sessions over those five years, 11.9 percent of their quotations in that session are from men without any ecclesiastical authority. Male leaders consistently treat male voices as authoritative, but they do not draw upon male ecclesiastical authority to the same extent that female leaders do. It appears that even the most powerful female leaders in the Church need to appeal more frequently to ecclesiastical authority because they do not themselves have the same access to it as men.

Female leaders' quotation of apostles and prophets might be seen as their own active affirmation of male authority, deliberately directed at a potentially skeptical female audience. However, it is difficult to imagine that female leaders are even more invested in the maintenance of the prophets' and apostles' authority than those men are themselves—that is, the fact that female leaders quote male leaders more than any other group of speakers (and female leaders only 2 percent of the time) looks more like an attempt to draw on male authority to bolster their own credibility. Instead, female leaders' quotation patterns indicate an investment in promoting female authority: when speaking to an all-female audience,⁷⁸ they quote both regular women and female leaders far more frequently than men do when addressing only women. The drop in quotations of women when men enter the audience, however, suggests that female speakers may not believe they have the power to follow through on that investment in a broader Church setting.⁷⁹ These quotation patterns indicate that the highest-ranking female leaders of the Church continue to rely upon male priesthood authority in order to

78. Excepting, of course, the First Presidency members on the stand.

79. Alternatively, this drop might indicate that female leaders do not believe that female voices should be treated authoritatively by men. This seems unlikely given their presence in general conference and on mixed-gender leadership panels, however limited that presence may be.

be taken seriously, by women and by men. Male leaders' quotation patterns reveal that women lack authority compared to men in the Church; female leaders' quotation patterns are a direct result.

Conclusion

Those concerned with the role of women in the Church can cite a litany of statements from Church leaders over the last fifty years that claim that the Church both empowers women and relies upon empowered women.⁸⁰ In 2015, for example,⁸¹ then-apostle Russell Nelson quoted Boyd Packer's 1978⁸² encouragement to women, saying, "We need women who are organized and women who can organize. We need women with executive ability who can plan and direct and administer; women who can teach, women who can speak out."⁸³ As prophet in 2019, Nelson reaffirmed, "As a righteous, endowed Latter-day Saint woman, you speak and teach with power and authority from God. Whether by exhortation or conversation, we need your voice teaching the doctrine of Christ. We need your input in family, ward, and stake councils. Your participation is essential and never ornamental!"⁸⁴

Intentionally or not, these same leaders consistently engage in rhetorical practices that undermine these stated commitments. The overwhelming imbalance in quoting men and women reveals

80. Whether leaders' views of female empowerment are indeed empowering is another question.

81. See also Spencer Kimball, "The True Way of Life and Salvation," April 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/04/the-true-way-of-life-and-salvation>; and Gordon Hinkley, "Live Up to Your Inheritance," October 1983, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1983/10/live-up-to-your-inheritance>.

82. Boyd Packer, "The Relief Society," October 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/10/the-relief-society>.

83. Russell Nelson, "A Plea to My Sisters," October 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/10/a-plea-to-my-sisters>.

84. Nelson, "Spiritual Treasures."

conference speakers' belief, conscious or otherwise, that their audience respects male voices more than female ones. While much has changed for women in the Church over the last half-century, much remains the same. Women consistently make up less than 3 percent of quotations in general conference. They are still described in terms of their appearance and relationship status; sermons about how they should live are the domain of male authority; their own representatives in the Church spend much of their time at the pulpit repeating male leaders' words. Despite leaders' claims that women speak and teach with power and authority, their quotation practices diminish that authority and frequently deny women the opportunity to speak at all.⁸⁵ Quoting women more is one opportunity for leaders to practice what they preach and affirm female authority to the worldwide Church.

Quotation in general conference matters because general conference matters: it is the most important event on the institutional Church calendar, with millions of members viewing the talks live and many more engaging with them repeatedly in Church magazines and Sunday curricula over several years. Short of small and large changes to the leadership structure of the Church, general conference is one key avenue through which leaders could demonstrate that women's participation in the Church really is essential. Right now, their quotations show, it is not even ornamental.

85. Dorice Elliot, "Let Women No Longer Keep Silent," in *Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 209–11.

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THE PRODUCTION OF THE BOOK OF MORMON IN LIGHT OF A TIBETAN BUDDHIST PARALLEL

Tanner Davidson McAlister

*The American history of Joseph Smith looks for causes: what led Joseph Smith to think as he did? Comparative, transnational histories explore the limits and capacities of the divine and human imagination: what is possible for humans to think and feel?*¹

Drawing on observations and suggestions from scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and Mormonism, this article compares the production of the Book of Mormon with that of the class of Tibetan Buddhist scripture known as *gter ma* (“Treasure,” pronounced “terma”).² In

1. Special thanks to Dr. Dominic Sur for inspiring this article, and Drs. David Holland and Janet Gyatso for hosting independent studies in which I developed much of my ideas while pursuing a master of theological studies at the Harvard Divinity School. Thanks also to Drs. Frank Clooney and Kimberley Patton for allowing me to present an early draft to the Harvard Comparative Studies Doctoral Colloquium.

Richard L. Bushman, “Joseph Smith’s Many Histories,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 11.

2. I am not the first to notice similarities between these two traditions. However, only Donald Lopez has done more than merely note superficial similarities. In his *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), Lopez observed that both Joseph Smith and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*’s revealer, Karma Lingpa (*karma gling pa*; 1326–1386), legitimated their discoveries by posthumously attributing their text’s authorship to an authoritative religious figure after purportedly uncovering them from their

brief, both are said to have been authored by ancient religious figures, buried with the anticipation of future discovery, discovered by visionaries with the help of supernatural beings, and “translated” from an

native lands and translating them from an obscure language by supernatural means. Creating this link to a sacred past, Lopez argues, bolstered the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*'s popularity while leading to widespread suspicion and persecution of Smith, “at least in part, because [he] lived in a chronologically recent and geographically proximate past” (137–39, 148–52). As for other Buddhist studies scholars who have noted the comparison, in chronological order: Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 147; Matthew Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136; Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 503–4; Robert Mayer, “Indian *niddhi*, Tibetan *gter ma*, Guru Chos dbang, and a *Kriyātantra* on Treasure Doors: Rethinking Treasure (part two),” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 64 (2022): 368–69. As for Mormon studies scholars: Grant Underwood, “Attempting to Situate Joseph Smith,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 46; Elizabeth Quick, “Emma Smith as Shaman,” Salt Lake City Symposium, January 1, 2008, Sunstone, <https://sunstone.org/emma-smith-as-shaman/>; Grant Hardy, introduction to *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, edited by Royal Skousen (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), xxv–xxvi; Ann Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” *Numen* 61 (2014): 195n20; Grant Hardy, “Ancient History and Modern Commandments,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, edited by Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brain M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 216n37. Also tangentially related are the comments of Douglas Osto (“Altered States and the Origins of the Mahāyāna” in *Setting Out on the Great Way*, edited by Paul Harrison [Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2018], 196n5) and Daniel Boucher (*Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna* [Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008], xii, xiv) that comparisons with Mormonism could aid in understanding the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Both are drawing on comments from Jan Nattier, who has only briefly made the comparison once herself (*A Few Good Men* [Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003], 170). Robert Mayer has also suggested that cross-cultural comparisons with anthropological accounts of treasure recovery could aid in understanding the origins of the Tibetan Treasure tradition (“Rethinking Treasure [part two], 368–69); “Rethinking Treasure [part one],” *Revue d’Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 52

obscure language into the discoverers' native tongue by supernatural, revelatory means.³

More specifically, this article aims to use a new lens—a *gter ma* lens, if you will—to explore and extend existing theories of the relationship between the gold plates that Joseph Smith claimed to discover and his translation of those plates, the Book of Mormon. Before continuing, it will be important to briefly clarify and justify the use of comparison for the purpose of analyzing these two culturally, geographically, and temporally separate phenomena, and especially the idea that the analysis of one can be used to shed light on the other.

Whereas comparative methodologies were once common to the field of religious studies, they have become increasingly unpopular since the postmodern turn.⁴ One of the persistent postmodern critiques

[2019]: 144–46). Also worth mentioning are Edward Conze's comparison of the Tibetan Treasure tradition and Gnosticism ("Buddhism and Gnosis" in *Le Origini Dello Gnosticismo*, edited by Ugo Bianchi [Leiden: Brill, 1970], 651–67) and Lawrence Foster's claim that Mormon studies scholars "greatest single weakness" in theorizing Smith's translation "has been their failure to take into account comparative perspectives on revelatory and trance phenomena" (*Religion and Sexuality* [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981], 295).

3. Although I have presented these actions in the past tense for grammatical symmetry, it is important to note that Tibetan Treasure discoveries continue in the present day. See David Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body" in *Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet*, edited by Melvyn C. Goldstein and Mathew T. Kapstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 53–94; Holly Gayley, "Ontology of the Past and Its Materialization in Tibetan Treasures," in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, edited by James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 213–40; and Hanna, "Vast as the Sky," in *Tantra and Popular Religion in Tibet*, edited by Geoffrey Samuel, Hamish Gregor, and Elisabeth Stutchbury (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1994), 1–14.

4. For a more thorough summary (and partial rebuttal) of postmodern critiques of comparative religion, see Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, introduction to *A Magic Still Dwells*, ed Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1–22.

has been that the logic of comparative religion rests on the unwarranted assumption that there is such a thing called “religion” that can be compared cross-culturally. Indeed, the concept of religion has been shown to be a modern concept birthed from the rise of, and hence modeled on, Protestant Christianity.⁵ As such, when scholars compare “religious phenomena” they are often imposing anachronistic and provincial categories that distort that which they intend to illuminate.

In light of such critiques, I want to be clear that in using events and ideas located in Tibetan Buddhist history to shed light on Joseph Smith’s translation of the gold plates, I am not arguing that *because* Tibetan Buddhists acted and thought in a certain way, Joseph Smith *must have* acted and thought in a similar way, based on some sort of preposterous organic connection.⁶ Rather, I am arguing that as we attempt to trace associations between Smith’s gold plates and the Book of Mormon, considering how other people in radically different times and places have described structurally similar events can serve to highlight and challenge assumptions previously taken for granted, and introduce new possibilities that would be otherwise indiscernible.⁷

Reading Smith’s interactions with the gold plates alongside structurally comparable events in the Tibetan *gter ma* tradition—as well as alongside how scholars of Tibetan Buddhism have approached those events—highlights and challenges two prevailing paradigms in

5. See Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013); Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2017), 4–10; and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6. This is a paraphrase of Underwood’s comment about comparing these two traditions (“Attempting to Situate Joseph Smith,” 46).

7. This approach takes after Barbara A. Holdrege’s observation that comparison can serve to “test and critique prevailing paradigms, expose their inadequacies, and generate a range of possible models to account for the multiplicity of religious traditions” (“What’s Beyond the Post,” in Patton and Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells*, 85).

Mormon studies and serves to introduce a novel possibility on how Smith experienced his translation of the Book of Mormon. In brief, this comparison first draws attention to problematic assumptions about the nature of human subjectivity in relation to the material world that have fueled longstanding debates that posit the Book of Mormon must be either a translation of an authentic historical document or a fraud. Moreover, although I agree with much of the work of scholars such as Karl Sandberg, Ann Taves, and Sonia Hazard, whose work transcends this either/or binary by showing the gold plates could have functioned as something other than an inert object subject to linguistic translation, I will take issue with their persistent return to Smith's subjective imagination or creativity as one of the (if not the primary) driving source of his "translation."

In light of the *gter ma* tradition, where the discovered material scroll acts as an agent that draws forth the memory of a particular teaching given by the Buddhist master Padmasambhava in a previous life, and where the work of "translation" consists primarily of ritually orienting oneself in relation to its power as to be an effective intermediary for Padmasambhava's message,⁸ I will argue that the gold plates can similarly be thought of as having their own "generative potencies" that acted on Smith in "unpredictable ways."⁹ As such, I will suggest that Smith's "translation" be approached as a set of rituals in relation to an agentive material object that enabled him to act as a present intermediary for past voices crying out "from the dust."¹⁰ I will also contend that

8. As I will make clear below, the Tibetan *gter ma* tradition is around 1,000 years old and very diverse. This is a particular reading of that tradition, the sources for which are discussed in part 2 of this article.

9. These are terms borrowed from Tibetan Buddhist studies scholar James Gentry in his discussion on treasure objects (*gter rdzas*) as agents in his book *Power Objects* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 8, 13, 36. They will be elaborated below.

10. 2 Nephi 3:19 (citations with chapter and verse references refer to the Book of Mormon).

this idea is plausible in light of recent work concerning Smith's use of the term "translation," some of Smith's later theological innovations, and postcolonialist and new materialist theories of subjectivity and agency.

The primary goal of this article is to use this idiosyncratic pairing of Tibetan Buddhist and Mormon modes of scriptural production to help us trace the associations between Smith, the gold plates, and the Book of Mormon in a way that better aligns with the primary sources. To do so, I will begin in part 1 by outlining a set of important functional similarities between the gold plates and *gter mas* within their respective religious traditions. This portion of the article is meant to provide fuller context for introducing my own critiques and theories in part 2, as well as to make a broad case for the comparability of the two traditions that could be generative of future comparative work. Focusing the bulk of the article on their comparability and my own critiques and theories concerning Smith's translation will admittedly leave a number of relevant questions about the implications of this study for Smith's life and legacy unanswered. Nevertheless, I will conclude by briefly discussing two implications of this study, namely around questions of the Book of Mormon's historicity and Smith's later theological innovations on the theme of materiality, which will have to be fully developed elsewhere.

Part 1: Functional Similarities Between the Tibetan Treasure (*gter ma*) Tradition and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

What is particularly interesting to note in this section of the article is how these apocryphal scriptures functioned within their respective traditions, which gives us an idea of the comparability of the activities of Joseph Smith and the Tibetan *gter ma* discoverers (*gter ston*) despite their highly distinctive temporal and geographical contexts. Specifically, Smith and the Tibetan *gter stons* discovered and translated ancient material objects as a means of bridging the religiously

authoritative past with the present to address contested questions of religious authority and national identity amid religious and political paradigm shifts. In doing so, their scriptures posed similar challenges to the received authority of preexisting canonical texts and expanded traditional canonical boundaries beyond their previous geographical and temporal limitations, thereby sacralizing their native lands and contextualizing them within the larger arc of Christian/Buddhist history, as well as authenticating the otherworldly prowess of their discoverers and the contested authenticity of their own traditions.

The *gter ma* tradition can be seen as a mix of native Tibetan traditions of pragmatic treasure burial and Indian Buddhist revelatory traditions that coalesced into a unique response to contested questions of canonical, denominational, and personal religious authority, as well as religio-national identity, amid religious and political paradigm shifts. The *gter ma* tradition emerged within what is now called the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism around the twelfth century,¹¹ during a period denoted by Tibetan historiographers as the later spread of the Dharma in Tibet, juxtaposed to the earlier spread of the Dharma. These two periods of Buddhist transmission are divided by a hundred year “period of political fragmentation” or “dark period,” brought about when the Tibetan central government, and thus imperially sponsored monastic Buddhism, dissolved following

11. Andreas Doctor claims that Nyangral Nyima Özer’s writings in the twelfth century “are the first to show a self-conscious movement” (*Tibetan Treasure Literature: Revelation, Tradition, and Accomplishment in Visionary Buddhism* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2005], 20). However, Hirshberg traces the beginning of the *gter ma* tradition to the thirteenth century when Guru Chöwang wrote his *Great History of the Treasures* (*gter byung chen mo*), since this work marks the first attempt at “deliberate codification” (*Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet’s Golden Age* [Somerville, Mass.: Wisdom, 2016], 85–86).

the assassination of the putatively anti-Buddhist king Lang Darma by a Buddhist monk in the mid-ninth century.¹²

When political and economic conditions restabilized amid a cultural renaissance and religious revival in the latter half of the tenth century,¹³ the authenticity of extant Buddhist scriptures and practices became a

12. Traditional sources depict Darma as a demon-possessed tyrant set on ridding Tibet of Buddhist influences, subsequently murdered at the request of the patron goddess of Tibet, *dPal ldan lha mo*, by the monk Lhalung Pelgyi Dorjé to save Darma from incurring further negative karmic retribution and to preserve Buddhism in Tibet. Jens Schlieter provides an overview of traditional depictions of Darma's assassination in "Compassionate Killing or Conflict Resolution?" in *Buddhism and Violence*, edited by Michael Zimmermann (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2006), 131–58. Scholars have questioned this Buddhist suppression narrative, describing him more as a victim of preexisting clan tensions, which he exacerbated by reducing imperial funding of Buddhist activities, *inter alia*, in response to his brother's—King Ralpacan (806–841)—unprecedented Buddhist patronization, military spending, and altering of linguistic and cultural customs, which had led to his own assassination a year earlier. See Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 64–66; David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet* (Boston: Shambala, 1986), 93–94; and Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 10–12, 52; Per K. Sørensen, *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 423–424n1488. Some have even questioned whether this regicide actually occurred. See Tsultrim K. Khangkar, "The Assassinations of Tri Ralpachen and Lang Darma," *Tibet Journal* 18, no. 2 (1993): 19–22; and Zuiho Yamaguchi, "The Fiction of King Dar ma's Persecution of Buddhism" in *Du Dunhuang au Japon*, edited by Jean-Pierre Drège (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 231–58.

13. The religious revival was spearheaded by two forces: Central Tibetans affiliated with Tridhé—a purported descendant of Lang Darma who sent young men to receive ordination from monastic refugees on the eastern edge of the empire, who subsequently revived Central Tibetan monastic institutions (Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 87–102); and Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) in the west, who initiated monastic revivals and translation efforts with the patronage of Lha Lama Yeshe Ö (947–1019?) (David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* [Boston: Shambala, 2002] 471–72, 477–79; Samten Karmay, "The Ordinance of Lha Bla-ma Ye-shes-'od," in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, edited by Michael Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi [England: Biddles Ltd., 1979], 150–51).

topic of serious concern. Many of the new religious authorities suspected that many, if not all, of the *tantras*¹⁴ said to have been transmitted to Tibet during the imperial age—denoted as Old or Nyingma (*rnying ma*) *tantras*—were not authentic Buddhist teachings but Tibetan fabrications. In addition, individuals associated with the old dark-period religious traditions were charged with engaging in a variety of disreputable activities, implying that they had misinterpreted or deliberately abused these traditionally esoteric teachings and were thus operating within a lineage corrupted by heresy.¹⁵ The only possible solution, it seemed, was to “send young men to India . . . to bring back to Tibet the pure esoteric dispensation,” resulting in a baseline standard of scriptural authenticity defined as texts of Indic origin, transmitted to Tibet post-late-tenth century.¹⁶

14. The term *tantra* refers to texts associated with tantric or Vajrayāna Buddhism (*rdo rje theg pa*), a loose rubric under which an important part of Tibetan Buddhist practice and ritual is categorized. Traditionally, tantric practice and transmission occur within an intimate teacher-student relationship outlined in initiation ceremonies and sealed through a covenant or vow (*dam tshig*). This stringent mode of transmission ensures that the teachings—which often prescribe sexual and/or other transgressive actions—are conveyed accurately and only to those spiritually and intellectually qualified, and thus typically operates under an aura of secrecy—as opposed to the mainstream transmission of Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna *sūtras*, which received little polemical attention in Tibet. During the earlier spread of Buddhism in Tibet, *tantras* even faced heavy regulations by the imperial court, who relegated their distribution to a tight aristocratic circle and even altered or removed entire passages from certain tantric texts. See Jacob P. Dalton, *The Taming of the Demons* (London: Yale University Press, 2011), 56–57; Jose I. Cabezón, *The Buddha’s Doctrine and the Nine Vehicles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–2.

15. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 73–80, 105–7.

16. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 121. Although, Davidson notes that the standard was often selectively applied. Some of the texts and practices revered by the Nyingma but scorned as Tibetan fabrications by their detractors were actually of Indic origins. Similarly, some of the texts considered authentic by the new (*gsar ma*) Buddhist schools were Tibetan/Indian hybrids Davidson calls “gray texts.” See Davidson, “Gsar Ma Apocrypha,” in *The Many Canons of Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Helmut Eimer and David Germano (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 203–24).

Amid this importation of new Indic scripture, new Tibetan Buddhist schools also emerged that articulated their ecclesial authority and authenticity by linking their teaching lineage to current Indic traditions “in the face of the supposed corruption and antiquity of previous Tibetan Lineages.”¹⁷ These previous lineages were subsequently dubbed Nyingma (“old”) in contrast to the new schools. In response, the Nyingma began articulating their own lineal heritage through the Buddhist masters of the imperial period—the ancient Tibetan kings and Indian Buddhist ambassadors who had come to be remembered as great *bodhisattvas* (awakened beings) and who compassionately introduced Buddhism to Tibet between the seventh and eighth centuries CE.¹⁸

It is within these religious paradigm shifts around the turn of the eleventh century that individuals primarily associated with this fledgling Nyingma tradition claimed to discover *gter mas*: heretofore unknown sacred historical, ritual, and doctrinal texts attributed to a Buddhist master (typically Padmasambhava, who will be discussed below) from Tibet’s imperial age.¹⁹ Thus, the Nyingma tradition began to distinguish itself from other Tibetan Buddhist schools over the doctrine of “continuing revelation” against an ostensibly closed canon²⁰ by appealing to discoveries of ancient, buried treasure across a period of perceived religious corruption.

17. Germano, “Re-Membering the Dismembered Body,” 73.

18. Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 33–36, 144–47, 159; see also Gayley, “Ontology of the Past,” 214; and David Germano, “The Seven Descents and the Early History of Rnying Ma Transmissions,” in Eimer and Germano, *Many Canons of Tibetan Buddhism*, 225–64.

19. On the various contextual genres of *gter ma*, see Gyatso, “Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury,” in *Tibetan Literature*, ed. José Ignacio Cabézon and Roger R. Jackson (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1996), 155–60.

20. E. Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts* (Boston: Wisdom, 2001), 15; Robert Mayer, *A Scripture of the Ancient Tantra Collection* (Oxford: Kiscadale, 1996).

Although Nyingma apologists attempted to legitimate their innovations by appealing to similar revelatory precedents in Mahāyāna *sūtras*,²¹ this movement posed a unique challenge to traditional modes of scriptural transmission—known as spoken transmission. By

21. As for *sūtras*, the *Āryasarvapūnyasamuccayasamādhi* mentions treasures in mountains, ravines, and woods and that the doctrine will emerge from the sky, walls and trees. The *Āryadharmasamgītisūtra* refers to concealing doctrines “as treasures.” The *Nāgarājaparipṛcchāsūtra* describes “four great treasures.” The *chu-klung rol-pa’i mdo* refers to doctrinal texts being concealed as mind and earth treasures. The *Bodhicharyavatara* refers to people spontaneously hearing the doctrine, as do a variety of others. See Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, trans. Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein (Boston: Wisdom, 1991), 743–44, 747–48, 928. The *Pratyutpannasamādhi* describes itself being stored in caves, stūpas, the earth, under rocks, in mountains, and into the hands of *devas* and *nāgas*. See Paul Harrison, *The Samadhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1990), 98, 103–4. Gyatso notes that this particular passage has not been noticed by the treasure apologists (“The Logic of Legitimation,” *History of Religions* 33, no. 2 [1993], 105n17), although Mayer has argued that it may have served as the theoretical basis for the entire tradition (“Scriptural Revelation in India and Tibet,” *Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture* 2 [1994]: 533–45). There are also some events described in Mahāyāna history that allude to similar occurrences. It is said, for example, that the Mahāyāna *sūtras* were held hidden in the Dragon World until the appropriate time and that Nāgārjuna retrieved the *Śatasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* from the *nāgas* at the bottom of the sea. Similarly, Dudjom notes that “all the tantrapīṭaka which were reportedly discovered in ancient India . . . were, in fact, treasure doctrines,” for they were hidden until revealed to “accomplished individuals [who] were given prophetic declarations” (*Nyingma School*, 927). Guru Chos-dbang makes a similar point in his *gter ’byung chen mo* (see Gyatso, “An Early Survey of the Treasure Tradition and Its Strategies in Discussing Bon Treasure,” in *Tibetan Studies* 1, edited by Per Kvaerne [Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994], 276–77), as does Tukwan Lobzang Chokyi Nyima (*thu’u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma*; 1737–1802) (translated in Eva M. Dargay, *The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism* [Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1977], 67). There are also a number of *sūtras* held to be canonical by the *gsar ma* schools that came about by similarly revelatory means, listed by Kapstein in *Tibetan Assimilation*, 132–34.

establishing a direct link between the enlightened beings of Tibet's imperial age and the present, the *gter ma* discoverers created a timeless repository of ancient knowledge that turned "the original critique of decline among the 'old school' . . . on its head."²² Whereas the Indian *tantras* brought to Tibet following the close of the dark period in the late tenth century by new school representatives were transmitted from teacher to student for generations upon generations and thus—according to Nyingma apologists—subject to corruption, the *gter mas* shortened the lineage, placing the *gter ma* discoverer in direct communication with an enlightened source.²³ Thus, the Nyingma were able to claim that the *gter mas* were a direct revelatory corrective to gaps, errors, or misinterpretations of the current canon. Moreover, as such had been hidden by an enlightened being with the express purpose of discovery at a precise future date, they were said to be better designed to "suit the mental desires, needs and capacities of people born in those times."²⁴ Thus, the *gter mas* existed in a dialectic relationship to the existing canon, which served as a source of legitimacy, yet in turn was made to appear somewhat obsolete as comparatively more distant and less personalized.

Here, it is worth noting that the Book of Mormon likewise positioned itself both as a corrective to erroneous biblical translations and interpretations across a period of spiritual darkness, and a source of fresh prophetic wisdom designed to uniquely address contemporary

22. Gayley, "Ontology of the Past," 224.

23. Dudjom, *Nyingma School*, 745; Tulku Thondup, *Hidden Teachings* (Boston: Wisdom, 1997), 49; Gyatso, "Genre, Authorship, and Transmission in Visionary Buddhism," in *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, edited by Steven D. Goodman and Ronald M. Davidson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 96–100; Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury," 149–50.

24. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 62–63, see also 150; see also Gayley, "Ontology of the Past," 223–24.

needs amid turbulent times. Moreover, it existed in a comparable dialectic relationship to its own canonical counterpart, the Bible.

Joseph Smith both propagated the idea that the early Christian church had apostatized soon after the death of Christ and his apostles,²⁵ as well as joined a number of marginal voices challenging the cessationist notion that the Christian canon had been sealed with the writing of the New Testament.²⁶ Yet Smith did not only couch his claim in his own words, or even the words of God revealed to him, but in the words of ancient Israelite prophets who—unbeknownst to the rest of the world—had anciently inhabited portions of the American continent. With prophetic foresight, these prophets maintained and ultimately buried an ancient record (the gold plates) that preserved the “plain and most precious parts of the gospel,” which would be taken away from the Bible,²⁷ and which would uniquely speak to the needs of

25. Theodore D. Bozeman offers a robust summary of the varying Protestant and pre-Protestant “primitivist” claims, from the tenth century to the Puritan era (*To Live Ancient Lives* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988], 19–50). On similar strands in Joseph Smith’s religious environment, see Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 26–27.

26. David Holland, *Sacred Borders* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50–53, 84, 97–98, 127, 137–53.

27. 1 Nephi 13:26–40. Smith claimed that the Bible was fully God’s word “as it read when it came from the pen of the original writers.” However, “ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors” (“History, 1838–1856, vol. E-1 [July 1, 1843–April 30, 1844],” October 15, 1843, 1755, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/126>). Thus, Smith wrote: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God *as far as it is translated correctly*; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God” (“The Articles of Faith,” in *The Pearl of Great Price*.)

the latter-day followers of Christ.²⁸ Thus, by discovering and translating the gold plates, Smith could likewise claim direct access to uncorrupted and personalized prophetic wisdom against the comparatively erroneous and provincial Bible.

Yet just as this new scripture challenged the Bible's inerrancy, universality, and soteriological sufficiency, the Book of Mormon's function within the early Mormon movement was most often to signal the impending fulfillment of eschatological and restorationist biblical prophecies, and was itself defended through reference to biblical passages interpreted as prophesying its emergence.²⁹ Many saw in its emergence the fulfillment of a variety of Old and New Testament prophecies that signaled the impending restoration of the primitive Christian church after a period of apostasy, the literal restoration of Israel, and the establishing of God's kingdom in anticipation of Christ's millennial reign.³⁰ Thus, similar to the *gter mas*, the Book of Mormon's meaning and legitimacy was both defined in relation to the rest of the Christian canon while simultaneously rivaling its previously unparalleled authority.

28. On the claimed prophetic foresight of the Book of Mormon authors, see 1 Nephi 13; 2 Nephi 3:19, 27, 29; Enos 1:13–17; 3 Nephi 21:9–11, 23, 26:2, 26:8; and Mormon 5:9–14, 8:26–41. For an analysis of this topic as well as examples of this rhetoric among LDS leaders, see Richard D. Rust, "Annual FARMS Lecture: The Book of Mormon, Designed for Our Day," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 2, no. 1 (1990): 1–23.

29. See note 21 above.

30. Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (1984): 35–74; Phillip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 48; Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 62–88; Steven C. Harper, "Infallible Proofs, Both Human and Divine," *Religion and American Culture* 10, no. 1 (2000): 99–118. As for the biblical references, see Ezekiel 37:15–22; Isaiah 11:10–12, 29:10–14; Daniel 2:34–35, 2:44–45; Joel 2:28–32; John 10:16; and Revelations 14:6–7.

In addition to their role as canonical innovations, the *gter mas* and the Book of Mormon were also important means of legitimating the religious careers of their discoverers, the authority of their associated tradition, and a means of contextualizing those traditions within the larger arc of Buddhist and Christian history. As Gyatso has analyzed in depth,³¹ the *gter ston*'s claiming part in the prophesied discovery and propagation of a *gter ma*—itself a complicated semiotic process consisting of locating oneself in canonical prophecies and interpreting external signs to be discussed below—is “powerfully self-legitimating.” In doing so, the discoverer “accrue[s] to their own person the exalted qualities of that text and its holy origins,”³² and his or her tradition becomes authenticated against its detractors through recourse to a “competing power structure located in the culturally powerful memories of the dynastic period.”³³ Moreover, as this competing power structure consisted of ancient Tibetan voices in the face of a canonical tradition in which “Indian provenance [had become] the sine qua non of religious authority,”³⁴ the *gter ma* tradition not only expanded canonical boundaries past their traditional temporal and geographical constraints but made Tibet “an active partner in the Buddhist cosmos. Instead of being the disheveled stepchild of the great Indian civilization, by means of

31. Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Janet Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9, no. 2 (1986): 7–35; Gyatso, “Logic of Legitimation.”

32. Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 150.

33. Germano, “Re-Membering the Dismembered Body,” 75; see also Mayer, “Rethinking Treasure (part one),” 137.

34. Dominic Sur, “Constituting Canon and Community in Eleventh Century Tibet,” *Religions* 8, no. 40 (2017): 1.

[*gter ma*] the snowy land of Tibet became the authentic ground of the Buddha's enlightened activity."³⁵

Likewise, the Book of Mormon's origin story—both its miraculous translation and what its claimed ancient authors prophesied about this event—served to route the fulfillment of restorationist and eschatological biblical prophecies through the inspired actions of a particular individual—Joseph Smith. As the seer who brought to light this ancient scripture, whose very existence signaled the incipience of the long-awaited “restitution of all things” as prophesied in the New Testament book of Acts,³⁶ Smith went from rural visionary to God's newly called prophet,³⁷ and his movement to the culmination of God's dealings with humankind. Moreover, by placing both the internment and discovery of this pivotal text—with its accompanying mythology of ancient Christian worship and even a visit from the resurrected Christ in the Americas—Smith brought his followers into a new (or restored) Christian teleology in which God's plan had always included, and would culminate with, the prophetic work of his chosen peoples on the American continent.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the role these texts have played within their respective religious traditions, nor is it an exhaustive list of the commonalities between the two. Much could be written, for example, about how this revelatory mechanism enabled these traditions to give modern doctrinal, ritual, and theological innovations a historical guise, and how these texts validated canonical texts whose

35. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 231; see also 243.

36. Acts 3:21.

37. To paraphrase Richard Bushman's apt phrasing of Smith's transformation (*Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* [New York: Vintage Books, 2007], 58).

authenticity was being called into question.³⁸ Nor is it to say that their functionality has not changed over time, as it surely has; although I would argue that the concerns mentioned here have been rather constant.³⁹ Yet, this brief comparison indicates that Joseph Smith and the Tibetan *gter ma* discoverers were—in some important ways—engaged in functionally comparable projects.

38. Germano has written that *gter ma* functioned to “authorize and authenticate the Nyingmas’ religious traditions,” “appropriate and transform . . . new intellectual and religious materials stemming from India without acknowledging them as such,” and to develop unique “theories, practices, and systems” in the form of the Great Perfection (*rdzogs chen*) (“Remembering the Dismembered Body,” 75; see also Janet Gyatso and David Germano, “Longchenpa and the Possession of the Dākinīs,” in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000], 232–39). Similarly, Davidson notes that *gter ma* made apocryphal *bka’ ma* texts with Great Perfection teachings “into true tantric scriptures, for the authenticity of one secured the authenticity of its related works” (*Tibetan Renaissance*, 228). The Book of Mormon has likewise served to authenticate parallel biblical narratives under the same logic (Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 177). Although some have noted that there is not much by way of doctrinal innovation in the Book of Mormon (Hardy, “The Book of Mormon,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Phillip L. Barlow [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 134), Givens has written much on its status as a signifier of the validity of the innovations carried out by Joseph Smith (*By the Hand of Mormon*, 228–39). Further, Gerald Smith has recently argued that the Book of Mormon does in fact carry innovative teachings that contributed to in content, rather than mere sign, to LDS doctrine (*Schooling the Prophet* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 2015]).

39. Doctor, for example, notes that Jamgön Kongrtul issued many of the same defenses against twentieth-century polemics, as did Guru Chōwang in the thirteenth (*Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 38). Although, it is clear that *gter ma* responded to changing religious, social, cultural, and political concerns, as can be seen in the work of the *gter ston* Orgyen Lingpa (*o rgyan gling pa*; 1323–?) (see Giuseppe Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970], 38) and Sera Khandro (*se ra mkha’ gro*; 1892–1940) (see Sarah Jacoby, *Love and Liberation* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2014], 100). For the evolution of Book of Mormon usage, see Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage,” and Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 6–47.

More specifically, this comparison highlights that the ancient artifacts discovered within these two traditions operate in functionally similar ways. In both traditions, a material artifact enables a discoverer to bring to light ancient voices across a temporal divide. This act has dramatic personal implications related to that individual's religious authority and that of their tradition, but those implications are defined by the relationships that the material artifact forges between the discoverer and a variety of other agents. And it is precisely by analyzing how the material artifact is said to do this in the *gter ma* tradition and applying the theoretical possibilities that this analysis opens up concerning what a material artifact can do—rather than merely what it could be or what Smith could be doing with it—to Smith's translation of the gold plates that we can begin to tug at the seams of the assumptions undergirding some of the current theories.

Part 2: The Gold Plates in Light of the Tibetan Treasure Tradition

A serious challenge to reading Joseph Smith's translation of the gold plates in light of the *gter ma* tradition is its sheer diversity. Whereas discoveries of ancient, buried texts as an institutionally recognized means of scripture production in Mormonism begins and ends with Joseph Smith,⁴⁰ the *gter ma* tradition has generated hundreds of dis-

40. There have been other non-canonized and generally uninfluential discoveries within Mormonism, such as James Jesse Strang's *Record of Rajah Machou of Vorito* (see Don Faber, *James Jesse Strang* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016], 58, 65–70) and W. W. Phelps's discovery and translation of some Native American petroglyphs in Utah (see Christopher J. Blythe, "By the Gift and Power of God," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 47). Christopher Smith has recently drawn attention to a heretofore neglected figure, Earl John Brewer (1933–2007), who claimed to have been led by an angle to find hundreds of inscribed plates in Utah, purportedly placed there by the Jaredites See "The Hidden Records of Central Utah and the Struggle for Religious Authority" in *Open Canon: Scriptures of the Latter Day Saint Tradition*, ed. Christine Elyse Blythe, Christopher J. Blythe, and Jay Burton (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2022). chap. 15.

coveries and discoverers since the late tenth century.⁴¹ The origins of the tradition, and what holds it together as a tradition, are ongoing points of debate.⁴² My reading of the *gter ma* tradition draws heavily on Do Drubchen III's (1865–1926) analysis of *gter ma* discovery and translation in his essay “Wonder Ocean, an Explanation of the Dharma Treasure Tradition,” translated and elaborated by Tulku Thondup in his book *Hidden Teachings of Tibet*. I supplement this reading with accounts of *gter ma* discovery drawn primarily (but not exclusively) from the lives of the Tibetan *gter stons* Jigme Lingpa (1730–1798) and Nyangrel Nyima Ozer (1124–1192), as well as broader theorizations about how treasure materials (*gter rdzas*) exert power in ritual contexts by the Tibetan ritual master Sokdokpa (1552–1624).

Thus, my reading is neither comprehensive nor governed by an emphasis on a particular time period or *gter ma* lineage within the Nyingma school. As such, the sources cited below are not to be taken as unilaterally congruent. In addition to spatial restraints, this focus has mostly to do with accessibility to what is still a rather understudied tradition. Yet, by focusing on the few individuals whose treasure discoveries and theories related thereto have been subjects of in-depth analyses by contemporary scholars of religion—Janet Gyatso, Daniel

41. Gyatso and Smith both place the first discovery in the tenth century (Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History,” 30n2; Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts*, 15). It is important to note, however, as observed by Doctor, that “although the Nyingma school traces the beginning of Treasure revelation in Tibet to the master Sangye Lama (eleventh century); Nyangrel Nyima Özer’s writings a century later are the first to show a self-conscious movement” (*Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 20). Although there is no definitive list, Thondup has compiled the names and dates (if available) of 278 known *gter stons* (*Hidden Teachings of Tibet*, 189–201). Dudjom provides short biographies of twenty-four important discoverers (*Nyingma School*, 743–881).

42. See, for example, Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*; Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance*, 210–42; Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 85–140; Robert Mayer, “gTer ston and Tradent,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36/37 (2013/2014): 227–42; and Mayer, “Rethinking Treasure (part one)” and “Rethinking Treasure (part two).”

Hirshberg, and James Gentry, respectively—this study will also provide an opportunity to reflect on how contemporary scholars of religion operating in a different field have dealt with this peculiar revelatory mechanism in relation to scholars in the field of Mormon studies.

I will begin with an explanation of the relatively standard mythology undergirding the tradition. Around the twelfth century, *gter ma*s began to be traced primarily to the eighth-century tantric master Padmasambhava.⁴³ Recent scholarship on Padmasambhava suggests he came to Tibet from present-day Pakistan at the request of King Trisong Detsen to subdue the local deities who were obstructing efforts to build Tibet's first monastery, Samye monastery. Soon after arrival, the earliest sources claim he was expelled from Tibet because his exceptional powers made him a dangerous political rival; although, some scholars have suggested his removal had more to do with the controversial, transgressive tantric teachings he promoted.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, by the twelfth century, a counternarrative arose that has since become characteristic of his representation in the Nyingma tradition and foundational to *gter ma* discovery: after pacifying the opposing indigenous forces and enlisting them in the protection and propagation of Buddhism, Padmasambhava traveled throughout Tibet, teaching his many students and burying his inscribed teachings and other relics in the Tibetan soil for later recovery.⁴⁵

43. Hirshberg has recently suggested that scholars differentiate between pre-tradition *gter ma*—the early *gter ma* that did not operate within a clear taxonomical schema and origins myth—and post-tradition *gter ma*, artificially divided by the first classificatory study on the topic, Guru Chöwang's *Great History of the Treasures* (*gter 'byung chen mo*) written in 1264–1265. (On the topic of earlier vs. later *gter ma*, see Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 15–53.) In relation to this schema, as my focus is on Do Drubchen III's (*rdo grub chen*, 1865–1926), my study focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on post-tradition *gter ma*.

44. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 14; see also Jacob P. Dalton, “The Early Development of the Padmasambhava Legend in Tibet,” in *About Padmasambhava*, ed. Geoffrey Samuel and Jamyang Oliphant (Shongau, Switzerland: Garuda Books, 2020), 29–64.

45. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 1–18.

In conjunction with this narrative, Padmasambhava has taken on the status of “second Buddha” in the Nyingma tradition, remembered as the primary protagonist in Tibet’s conversion to Buddhism, who graciously hid his teachings on account of his prophetic perception of the future challenges Tibetan Buddhist practitioners would face.⁴⁶

The content of Padmasambhava’s teachings that were inscribed as *gter mas* are perceived as scripturally authoritative in part because he preached them, but he is more of a codifier than an author. Like the conventional, spoken transmissions of the Nyingma tradition, these teachings were said to have been first transmitted nonverbally by a buddha in a pure land (“transmission of the realized”), then semiotically by early Nyingma patriarchs (“transmission in symbols for the knowledge holders”), and lastly in conventional discourse (“transmission into the ears of people”), which is where Padmasambhava appears.⁴⁷ Within this last step, the *gter ma* tradition posits its own three-step transmission process. First, through a tantric ceremony known as a “benedictory initiation,” Padmasambhava transmitted teachings and appointed specific students to reveal them in future lifetimes; second, he prophesied their future revelation; and third, he appointed *dākinīs* or Treasure protectors⁴⁸

46. Germano, “The Seven Descents,” esp. 232–37; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 50, 62–63, 150; Dudjom, *Nyingma School*, 744–45; Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History,” 16.

47. Gyatso, “Logic of Legitimation,” 112–15; Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History,” 8. On this process in the spoken transmissions (*bka’ ma*), see Jacob P. Dalton, *The Gathering of Intentions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 3, 13–19.

48. *Dākinīs*—literally “sky-goers”—are described by Sarah Harding as “female deities who . . . clear away obstacles and help bring about wisdom” (*Machik’s Complete Explanation* [Boston: Snow Lion, 2013], 374). Harding describes protectors as “beings or spirits who act to protect a given place or person. Dharma protectors are beings that have been tamed by a great teacher like Padmasambhava and actually serve the best interests of the Dharma” (378). In Tibetan Treasure literature, the terms are used interchangeably (Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 161). For a brief history of their role and development from Vedic religion to Tibetan Vajrayāna, see Jacoby, *Love and Liberation*, 135–37.

to protect the *gter ma* and help the *gter ma* discoverer find them. After, his consort, Yeshey Tsogyal, recorded the teachings on “yellow scrolls.” Finally, the texts were concealed, often in a container with other material objects (*gter rdzas*).⁴⁹

The historicity of this narrative, as well as the claims of discovery and translation by each individual *gter ma* discoverer, have been a popular topic of debate in Tibetan Buddhist inter- and intra-denominational polemics, as well as modern academic scholarship.⁵⁰ Yet, although some scholars have dubbed the entire *gter ma* enterprise a blatant fraud,⁵¹ academic scholarship on the *gter ma* tradition as a whole has been considerably less polarized and more nuanced than studies of the Book of Mormon.⁵² There are myriad potential reasons for this difference;⁵³ yet,

49. Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self*, 159–61; Gyatso, “Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury,” 151; Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History,” 9; Germano, “Re-Membering the Dismembered Body,” 61. Thondup follows a different order and different terminology: (1) “Aspirational Empowerment of the Mind-mandate Concealment” or “Mind-mandate Transmission” in the “expanse of the awareness state or the Buddha nature of the mind”; (2) transcription of the teachings and entrustment to the *dākinīs*; (3) “Prophetic Authorization” (61, 67–70, 84). Further, two additional orderings yet similar descriptions are given in Thondup’s translation of *Wonder Ocean* (104–6).

50. On the pervasiveness of this historical question, see Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 32–44; and Gyatso, “Logic of Legitimation,” 102–6, esp. 103n14.

51. See, for example, L. A. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet* (1894; repr. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1939), 166–67; and Michael Aris, *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988), 96–98.

52. Hirshberg offers an apt summary of the differing views on this topic, as well as his own nuanced position (*Remembering the Lotus Born*, 85–87, 134–139). See also Doctor, *Tibetan Treasure Literature*, 42–51; and Anne C. Klein and Geshe Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, *Unbounded Wholeness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 206.

53. One is that the interplay between the Tibetan Buddhist belief in reincarnation and traditions of pragmatic treasure burial prior to the fall of the Tibetan empire create the social and psychological conditions within which scholars could see one actually finding a buried textual object and connecting it with

what is important to note for our purposes is that among scholars of the *gter ma* tradition there is a tendency to refrain from making comprehensive claims about the plausibility, and thereby historical authenticity, of

a purported memory of a past life in conjunction with the aforementioned narrative (Germano, “Re-Membering the Dismembered Body,” 54; Gyatso, “Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury,” 151–52; and Gytaso, “Logic of Legitimation,” 107–8). In fact, Hirshberg has made this very argument in sympathy with the claims of the first well-documented *gter ston*, Nyangrel Nyima Ozer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*, 1124–92) (*Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 136). See also Kapstein, *Tibetan Assimilation*, 137. Although, it has been noted that Smith lived in a social sphere in which interest in and discoveries of artifacts, even textual artifacts, from indigenous civilizations were common. See Samuel M. Brown, *In Heaven as it is On Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 69–87; and Lester E. Bush, “The Spalding Theory Then and Now,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 4 (1977): 40–69. It could also be said that this is because some scholars have actually found authentic ancient materials in some *gter mas* (although, as we will see below, Book of Mormon scholars have made similar claims). This is particularly true regarding the *bka' thang sde lnga*, whose ancient materials are surveyed by Mayer, “Rethinking Treasure (part one),” 120–33. Donald Lopez, the only scholar to address the question directly, claims that this discrepancy has to do with the general public and academia’s sliding scale for tolerance of and interest in supernatural claims in conjunction with their chronological and geographical context. In his recent comparison of the Western public reception of the Book of Mormon and the famed *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Lopez notes that this *gter ma*’s unique origin story greatly contributed to its mystical allure and widespread popularity, whereas Smith’s similar claims brought widespread suspicion, and even violent persecution, which persists (although generally nonviolently) to the present day. These discrepancies, Lopez argues, have to do not with their respective “intrinsic value, regardless of how that might be measured, but, at least in part, because [Smith] lived in a chronologically recent and geographically proximate past” (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 148). Aris (*Hidden Treasures*, 96–98) and Terryl L. Givens (*Viper on the Hearth* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 83, 90–94) make similar claims not on this comparison specifically but on the treatment of these texts in general. To this possibility, I would also add that the multiplicity of *gter stons* has served to diffuse the perceived religious implications of the veracity of a single *gter stons* claims, thus mitigating against the emic/etic divide obviously operative not only in Mormon polemics but religious studies as well, which seeks for clear either/or answers regarding the Book of Mormon’s origins.

the *gter ma* discoverer's claims. Rather, scholars (especially Janet Gyatso and Thondup) have critically analyzed the phenomenology of *gter ma* discovery and revelation in conjunction with the traditional mythology and claimed material discoveries, shedding light on a complex revelatory interplay between agentive material, human, and superhuman forces, as well as Buddhist theories of reincarnation, no-self, prophecy, interdependent origination, and Tibetan semiotics.

In the field of Mormon studies, there has been a persistent idea that the Book of Mormon's claim to be rooted in "artifactual reality" rather than the "nebulous stuff of visions" automatically shifts the scholarly debate around Smith's claims "from the realm of interiority and subjectivity toward that of empiricism and objectivity."⁵⁴ As argued by Mormon studies scholar Terryl Givens:

Dream visions may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such facile psychologizing. They were, in the angel's words, buried in a nearby hillside, not in Joseph's psyche or religious unconscious, and they chronicle a history of this hemisphere, not a heavenly city to come. As such, the claims and experiences of the prophet are thrust irretrievably into the public sphere, no longer subject to his private acts of interpretation alone. It is this fact, the intrusion of Joseph's message into the realm of the concrete, historical, and empirical, that dramatically alters the terms by which the public will engage this new religious phenomenon.⁵⁵

In accordance with this logic, much of the scholarly debate on Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon has centered around using historical and inter/intratextual criticism to verify the book's internal, historical claims in what are often called the "Book of Mormon wars"—debates over perceived archaisms⁵⁶ vs. anachro-

54. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 12

55. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 42.

56. For two extremely influential works, see Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (1957; repr. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988); and John Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013). Givens

nisms,⁵⁷ evidence of many ancient authorial voices consistent with its internal claims,⁵⁸ or evidence of nineteenth-century interpolations

gives an excellent summary of the many others who have followed the work of these pioneering figures (*By the Hand of Mormon*, 117–54).

57. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1832) 13; Woodbridge Riley, *The Founder of Mormonism* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903); Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (1945; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-Over District* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1950); Marvin S. Hill, “Quest for Refuge,” *Journal of Mormon History* 2 (1975): 3–20; Brent L. Metcalfe, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993); Michael D. Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999); Dan Vogel and Lee Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002); Dan Vogel, *The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004); Clyde Jr. Forsberg, *Equal Rites* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2004).

58. Through computational stylistics, scholars have found over 2,000 authorship shifts between twenty-four unique authorial styles, “consistent to [the Book of Mormon’s] own internal claims.” See John L. Hilton, “On Verifying Wordprint Studies,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1990): 89–108. Skousen has also found evidence in favor of Smith’s claim to have orally dictated the book to a scribe without prior knowledge of its contents or referencing external sources. These include errors reflective of “mishearing what Joseph had dictated” rather than “misreading while visually copying”—such as writing “&” as a mishearing of “an” or consistently misspelling a name that would be phonetically ambiguous—as well as “scribal anticipation errors,” where phrases from later in a sentence would be written and crossed out before their proper place, due to hearing Smith dictate faster than they were able to write (“How Joseph Smith Translated,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 [1997]: 23–31). Moreover, even in sections of the text that seem like obvious plagiarisms—such as when the text quotes verbatim from the book of Isaiah—Skousen has noted the same scribal errors consistent with the oral composition of the rest of the text, unorthodox divisions, and even readings that align not with the King James Bible of Smith’s time but the Masoretic (traditional Hebrew) text and the Septuagint (Greek) (“Textual Variants in the Isaiah Quotations” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, edited by Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch [Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998], 369–90).

interwoven by a nineteenth-century editor.⁵⁹ This information, in turn, is used to make sense of what Smith was doing—whether he was restoring a long-lost scripture as part of his larger Christian restorationist project or deceptively trying to accrue personal power by playing on the religious sensibilities of his time.⁶⁰ In this way, rather than asking what the unique revelatory mechanism that facilitated the book's production reveals about its origins and significance, scholars have focused primarily on what its textual content reveals about its origins and significance. That is, they have conflated the gold plates with the Book of Mormon, creating the logic that the existence of the former can be verified by the antiquity of the latter. And although some have bracketed the question of the gold plates origins, focusing rather on how the idea of the plates influenced Smith's movement, most religious studies scholars and historical biographers make their opinion known on the basis of perceived metaphysical plausibility and/or historical evidence, and proceed to either depict Smith as a rural visionary turned prophet⁶¹ or conscious

59. Two common theories have been that Smith plagiarized from Solomon Spalding's "*Manuscript Found*" and Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*. On the original Spalding hypothesis as first explicated in 1834, see E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, OH: By the author, 1834), 278–88. For a detailed account of the theory in all its expansions, redactions, and challenges, see Bush, "Spalding Theory Then and Now." Bushman also offers a quick synopsis (*Rough Stone Rolling*, 90–91). On that of the *View of the Hebrews*, see Charles D. Tate Jr.'s introduction to the 1996 reprint of *View of the Hebrews (1825 2nd Edition)* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1996), ix–xxii. For a succinct summary, see Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 161–62; and Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 96–97. See also William L. Davis, *Visions in a Seer Stone* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); David P. Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, 157–234.

60. For two paradigmatic examples of these divergent approaches, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 58–83; and Vogel, *Making of a Prophet*, 129.

61. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 58.

(or delusional) deceiver.⁶² This, in turn, has generated a scholarly field sharply divided along emic/etic lines.⁶³

Although we need not discard the possibility that Smith was actually linguistically translating an ancient text, or that he was making the whole thing up, comparison with the *gter ma* tradition demonstrates that this binary is not necessitated by the revelatory mechanism alone. Returning to the *gter ma* tradition, it is interesting to note that although *gter mas* are said to be translated, the material scroll which is “translated” in practice serves more as an instigator and facilitator of revelation. In fact, the content of the core text of a transcribed *gter ma* cycle—the portion of the *gter ma* discoverer’s oeuvre authorially attributed to Padmasambhava—is traced not to the inscriptions on the discovered scroll but to the memory of Padmasambhava’s oral transmission (described above in the first unique step of *gter ma* transmission). At that moment of oral transmission, it is said that the teaching goes from the mind stream of Padmasambhava to the “luminous natural awareness . . . of the minds of his disciples,” which makes the teachings impermeable to karmic forces across the protectors’ various lifetimes.⁶⁴

62. This is a paraphrase of Vogel’s statement that “existence of the Book of Mormon plates themselves as an objective artifact which Joseph allowed his family and friends and even critics to handle while it was covered with a cloth or concealed in a box . . . [is] compelling evidence of conscious misdirection” (*Making of a Prophet*, xi).

63. This is perhaps most evident in that one of the few etic scholars who has taken their existence seriously, Jan Shippo, has been since dubbed an “insider-outsider” (Shippo, “An ‘Inside-Outsider’ in Zion,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 [1982]: 139–61; Bushman, “The Worlds of Joseph Smith” in *Believing History*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth [New York: Columbia University Press: 2004], 10). On the pervasiveness of this divide in the field, see Jan Shippo, “The Prophet Puzzle,” *Journal of Mormon History* 1 (1974): 19; Bushman, “A Joseph Smith for the Twenty-first Century” in Neilson and Woodworth, *Believing History*, 262–78; Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 183–87.

64. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 106.

According to Thondup, this act of embedding a particular teaching in the recesses of a future revealer's mind, known as "Mind-mandate Transmission," is the defining feature of a Nyingma *gter ma*.⁶⁵

In fact, the material scroll often contains no more than a couple of characters or a brief phrase which may or may not be thematically related to the teaching itself. Moreover, the scroll is encoded with a secret script and often written in a secret language,⁶⁶ hindering attempts at conventional translation. The scroll's function is not to preserve the teaching itself, but to awaken the memory of its being taught to the *gter ma* discoverer in a previous lifetime. The contents of this memory are subsequently transcribed by the *gter ma* discoverer (or a scribe), yet authorially attributed to Padmasambhava. Some who receive Mind-mandate Transmission even reveal *gter mas* by accessing the memory without a material support, known as mind *gter ma*.⁶⁷ I will focus here on the revelatory mechanics of earth *gter ma*, as this revelatory mode best aligns with the Book of Mormon, but that such a genre exists serves to accentuate the unique mnemonic and revelatory character of *gter ma* production, and carries interesting parallels with some of Joseph Smith's other revelatory activities.⁶⁸

65. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 61.

66. This is often a form of *ḍākinī* script (*mkha' 'gro brda yig*) and symbolic language of the *ḍākinīs* (*mkha' 'gro brda skad*), although Gyatso and Thondup mention myriad other protential scripts and languages (Gyatso, "Signs, Memory and History," 12, 18; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 69–70).

67. Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 61–62, 64–66, 85–90, 102–7, 125–35, 159.

68. For example, the seventh section of the Doctrine and Covenants claims to come from a "record made on parchment by John [the apostle of Jesus] and hidden up by himself," not physically discovered by Smith but revealed by him. The "Book of Moses" in the *Pearl of Great Price* claims to be a revelation of historical events in the lives of the Old Testament prophets Moses and Enoch, the latter of which Smith alluded to being from the prophecy of Enoch mentioned in the book of Jude in the New Testament (Jude 1:14; "History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1 [December 23, 1805–August 30, 1834]," December 1830, 81, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history>

Although there is much to elaborate here, allow me to briefly return to Joseph Smith and the gold plates to consider what is known about the gold plate's role in the production of the Book of Mormon. Smith was rather quiet on the specifics of the translation process. Most of what scholars now believe about the mechanics of translation come from his scribes and other eyewitnesses. From Smith's recorded statements about the translation between 1830 and 1843, it can be gathered that he felt "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon,"⁶⁹ but that "by the gift and power of God"⁷⁰ he "translated the Book of Mormon from hieroglyphics"⁷¹ with the "spectacles" that the "Lord had prepared."⁷²

-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/87). Again, Smith never claimed to recover a physical manuscript. In a similar mode, verses 6 to 17 of the 97th section of the Doctrine and Covenants are cast as a revelation given to the apostle John. Smith described Doctrine and Covenants section 76 as a "transcript from the records of the eternal world" ("History, 1838–1856, vol. A-1 [December 23, 1805–August 30, 1834],” January 25–February 16, 1832, 192, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/198>). The "Book of Abraham," also contained in the *Pearl of Great Price*, claims to be a translation of a set of Egyptian papyri which Joseph purchased in 1835.

69. "Minute Book 2," October 25–26, 1831, 13, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/15>.

70. Joseph Smith Jr., preface to *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, N.Y.: E. B. Grandin, 1830).

71. "History, 1838–1856, vol. E-1 [July 1, 1843–April 30, 1844],” November 13, 1843, 1775, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/147>.

72. "History, circa Summer 1832," The Joseph Smith Papers, 5. For all other accounts not cited above, see "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1," The Joseph Smith Papers, 9; "Elder's Journal, July 1838," The Joseph Smith Papers, 43; Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents* 1 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 17; "Journal, 1835–1836," The Joseph Smith Papers, 26; "Letter to Noah C. Saxton, 4 January 1833," The Joseph Smith Papers; "Minute Book 1," The Joseph Smith Papers, 44; "History, 1838–1856, volume C-1," The Joseph Smith Papers, 1282; and "Times and Seasons, 2 May 1842," The Joseph Smith Papers, 772.

Smith worked on his translation of the gold plates periodically between October 1827 and late June 1829 with the help of eight different scribes.⁷³ Here, I will quote at length from the most detailed account, that of David Whitmer:

Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated by Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear.⁷⁴

Whitmer's comments about a "spiritual light," that "something resembling parchment would appear," and that the translation proceeded one character at a time may be his own suppositions as they are not mentioned by anyone else. However, all eyewitness accounts are remarkably consistent in stating that Joseph Smith would put either the spectacles he found buried with the plates or a "seer stone"—a circular, chocolate-colored stone that Smith had found in 1822, through which he could reportedly see hidden objects⁷⁵—into a hat, and then dictate the words

73. These are Emma Smith, Reuben Hale, Martin Harris, Samuel Smith, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Christian Whitmer, and David Whitmer. See John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," in *Opening the Heavens*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 83–98.

74. Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ* (Missouri: By the author, 1887), 13.

75. On Smith's seer stone and its use before his translating the gold plates, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 48–52; and Richard V. Wagoner and Steve Walker, "Joseph Smith: 'The Gift of Seeing,'" *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 2 (1982): 53–62. How much Joseph Smith used the spectacles buried with the plates, and how much he used the seer stone, is still debated; see James E. Lancaster, "The Method of Translation of the Book of Mormon," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 3 (1983): 62–63; and Michael H.

of the Book of Mormon to his scribe a couple of sentences at a time, pausing to spell out peculiar proper names and large words,⁷⁶ and to check that it was transcribed correctly by having the scribe read the text back to him. Emma Smith, Joseph's wife, and others also make clear that during the process he did not consult the plates, as they "lay on the table . . . wrapped in a small linen tablecloth" while his face was buried in his hat.⁷⁷ Nor did he consult any other external source. In fact, Emma reports that he never even consulted the English translation as he went along: "and when returning from meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having a portion of it read to him."⁷⁸

Scholarship on how Smith experienced his translation of the gold plates has generally operated under the assumption that Smith was in fact translating an ancient document. The debate has centered around what this translation looked like as it passed through Smith's seer stone—did Smith see actual words in the seer stone as David Whitmer reported? Or did he receive images or ideas that he then explained in his own language?⁷⁹ Those who advocate the former position point out

MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process," in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dennis L. Largey et al. (Provo: Brigham Young University, 2015), 68.

76. On spelling out proper names and large words, see Emma Smith's description from her 1856 interview with Edmund C. Briggs: Briggs, "A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856," *Journal of History*, October 1916, 454.

77. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *The Saints' Herald* 26, no. 19 (1879): 289–90. For what other scribes and eyewitnesses reported, see Wagoner, "Gift of Seeing"; Lancaster, "Method of Translation"; and MacKay and Dirkmaat, "Firsthand Witness Accounts."

78. "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 289–90.

79. Skousen groups the possibilities into three categories: iron-clad control (the seer stones ensured that Smith nor the scribe could make any errors); tight control (Smith was revealed words and tasked with reading them to a scribe); and loose control (where Smith was impressed with ideas). See "How Joseph Smith Translated," 24.

certain archaisms and scribal errors that they take as evidence of a literal word-to-word translation.⁸⁰ Most, however, have opted for a form of translation in which imagery or ideas were presented by the stone that Smith then elaborated.⁸¹ This theory is backed by an exuberant number of awkward “corrective conjunctive phrases”—phrases such as “or rather” that aim to clarify the meaning of a particular passage—that some claim signal Smith’s grappling with the meaning of an idea or image in a way that the original authors presumably would not have, especially considering that they were inscribing hieroglyphs into gold plates.⁸² This theory also accounts for anachronistic elements reflective of Smith’s nineteenth-century environment, especially the obvious contextual and grammatical influence of the King James Bible on Smith’s translation,⁸³ and the fact that, in addition to grammatical changes,

80. For just a few influential examples, see Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft Publishing Co., 1952), 184–89; John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969): 69–84; and Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated,” 28–31. Skousen has also made this argument based on certain scribal errors that he claims indicate Smith spelled out complicated proper names to his scribe and had access through the seer stone to about twenty words at a time (Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated,” 27).

81. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 183–95; Samuel M. Brown, “Seeing the Voice of God,” in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 144–46; Blake T. Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 1 (1987): 104; Michael D. Quinn, L. Mayer, D. Young, “The First Months of Mormonism,” *New York History* 54, no. 3 (1973): 321; Stephen D. Ricks, “Translation of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 201–6.

82. Gerald Smith, however, has recently studied the corrective conjunction phrases and noted that “over time and across editions the Prophet chose to retain the original translation of corrective conjunction phrases, including seemingly obvious errors and mistakes,” meaning that perhaps they were in fact part of the original text (*Schooling the Prophet*, 38–39).

83. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible*, 28–33.

Smith did make a few substantive contextual changes to the text of the Book of Mormon between the publications of the 1830, 1837, and 1840 editions.⁸⁴

Yet the inescapable problem here is that Smith did not look at the gold plates while “translating” them. Although most note but then ignore this fact, two have suggested that perhaps their purpose was simply to reassure Smith and others that the words he dictated came from the plates.⁸⁵ However, this supposition relies on an excessively narrow plausibility structure, and seems to be a last-ditch effort to ground Smith’s work in an empirically verifiable activity contra the eye-witness evidence. What is clear from the primary sources is that Smith discovered a set of gold plates and that he orally dictated a narrative about ancient Israelites in the Americas with his head in a hat looking at seer stones while the plates were nearby. That the role of the gold plates was to provide the content of Smith’s dictation is only surmised by the term “translation” and reinforced by the dominant empiricist/historicist stance discussed above. How do we understand Smith’s production of the Book of Mormon as a “translation” of gold plates if the plates seem irrelevant to the production process? Here is where notions of agentive material objects as gleaned from the *gter ma* tradition are quite useful to think with.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the transmission of tantric teachings from master to disciple coincides with an initiation ceremony known as an empowerment. The empowerment mediates the flow of power from master to disciple, which enables the disciple to both intellectually grasp the teaching and put it into practice. This empowerment is

84. On these substantive changes, see Royal Skousen, “Changes in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 169–72. For all textual variants in the various additions, see Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 739–89.

85. Wagoner, “The Gift of Seeing,” 53; MacKay and Dirkmaat, “Firsthand Witness Accounts,” 71–72.

also associated with a particular set of vows that bind the initiate to a strict set of ethical imperatives, as well as to the master in what is often compared to a father-son bond.⁸⁶ To qualify for initiation, the prospective student is required to demonstrate competency in maintaining preliminary vows, as well as undergo rigorous intellectual training accompanied by spiritual realizations, which demonstrate that he or she can comprehend the intricate tantric ceremonies and rituals, and possesses the emotional commitment necessary to maintain the vows.⁸⁷

It is in this context that *gter ma* “translation” and the role of agentive material objects therein can be understood. As elaborated by Gentry in his study of the writings of the Tibetan Buddhist ritual master Sokdokpa (1552–1624), treasure objects (*gter rdzas*) are regarded as the material embodiment of Padmasambhava’s ancient tantric vows with his now reincarnated students.⁸⁸ As such, they are treated as “receptacles of blessings and power, [whose] transformational potency poises them to variously act upon persons, places, and things.”⁸⁹ According to Gentry, they have “the particular feature of binding those who encounter them via the senses to . . . all the masters, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and deities who were once in contact with [the objects],”⁹⁰ as well as the capacity to act “as mediators, which variously embody, channel, and direct the transition of power and authority between persons, things,

86. Tsele Natsok Rangdröl, *Empowerment and the Path of Liberation* (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe, 1993), 17–23; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 45; Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 44–45.

87. Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambala, 1998), 143–45; Jamgön Kongtrul, *The Teacher-Student Relationship*, trans. Ron Garry (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999), 139–43; Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, *Guru Yoga*, trans. Matthieu Ricard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999), 57–61; Rangdröl, *Empowerment and the Path*, 33, 35–37.

88. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 10–11.

89. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 13.

90. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 11.

[and] communities.”⁹¹ The role of the *gter ma* revealer, then, is to “[give] presence to Padmasambhava’s distributed being in ever-new contexts,” by serving as an effective medium in cooperation with a force that acts on the revealer both sensually and mnemonically, rather than just as a linguistic medium.⁹²

Here, it is important to note that a few scholars in the field of Mormon studies have also treated the gold plates as more than an inert linguistic medium. Ann Taves, for example, has analyzed Smith’s translation of the gold plates through a comparative, phenomenological lens that depicts Smith as neither literal translator nor fraud, but creative agent who expressed his subjective vision of an angel and gold plates through a material object he created.⁹³ For example, Taves suggests that Smith’s presentation of the gold plates may be comparable to a Catholic priest’s consecration of the eucharist: just as the priest takes a mundane wafer and calls upon the Holy Spirit to transform it into the body of Christ, perhaps “Smith viewed something that he made—metal plates—as a vehicle through which something sacred—the ancient gold plates—could be made (really) present.” She also suggests that it could be similar to a placebo: just as placebos mimic therapeutic treatment in a way that has demonstrable positive effects, perhaps Smith had “eyes to see what could be (a non-pharmacologically induced-healing process) and the audacity to initiate it.”⁹⁴

Karl Sandberg, drawing on both Jungian theories of how extreme focus on material objects can provide access to the unconscious as well

91. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 26.

92. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 52, see also 49.

93. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation”; see also Ann Taves, “Joseph Smith, Helen Schucman, and the Experience of Producing a Spiritual Text,” in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 169–86; and Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016).

94. Taves, “History and the Claims of Revelation,” 195, 202.

as theories of performativity in which savants tap into a seemingly independent guiding force through a combination of action and material instruments, has suggested that Smith's seer stones acted as a "catalyst—because of his belief in the stone and his attunement to the world of the numinous, or the unconscious, where unseen powers moved, collided, contended, danced, and held their revels, the stone became the means of concentrating his psychic energies and giving them form."⁹⁵ Sandberg has also pointed out that a similar process seems to be operative in Book of Mormon accounts of translation, where "seers" do not "go from document to document" miraculously interpreting characters,⁹⁶ but use stones which "magnify to the eyes of men the things which [they] shall write."⁹⁷ And although I am not convinced that we should take statements about translation within the document that Smith translated to be speaking directly to the means by which he translated it, Sandberg's argument (most recently also made by Hickman)⁹⁸ does demonstrate that the Book of Mormon's internal narrators' focus on maintaining a linguistically accurate record for future generations does not imply that Smith was necessarily engaged in an act of literal linguistic translation.

Most recently, Sonia Hazard has argued that Smith's so-called gold plates were actually printing plates that he either found or encountered in a printing shop and then constructed himself. Hazard draws on an impressive body of research to argue that nineteenth-century printing plates align with the descriptions in the witness accounts in a variety of ways and offers three reasonable scenarios within which Smith

95. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 4 (1989): 22–24.

96. Sandberg, "Knowing Brother Joseph Again," 20–21.

97. Ether 3:24.

98. Jared Hickman, "'Bringing Forth' the Book of Mormon," in MacKay, Ashurst-McGee, and Hauglid, *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 78–80.

could have encountered them.⁹⁹ More important for the purposes of this paper, Hazard suggests that as a “starting point for understanding creativity and change” we should not assume that the gold plates were solely products of Smith’s mind or cultural milieu, but “an assemblage of ideas and concrete material things.”¹⁰⁰ As such, Hazard emphasizes that Smith’s production of the Book of Mormon began as an encounter with what to him could have easily appeared to be an otherworldly object. Hazard explains:

to encounter something or someone—whether an object, a space, a person, a mood, and so on—is to enter into the other’s “field of force” (to borrow a phrase used by Charles Taylor) and, thus, to assemble with the other, be made vulnerable to change in oneself, and become different. Such encounters expand the field of what was before possible. They rescript future events. This is what I have in mind when I say that the materiality of the printing plates mattered, in the sense that Smith’s encounter with them changed his course and continued to direct that course in particular ways.¹⁰¹

Thus, although Hazard makes clear that Smith’s imagination, social relationships, and “surrounding cultural and religious imaginary” certainly played an important role in the Book of Mormon’s production, these are merely one part of a broader assemblage that not only includes but was instigated by, “the powers of material things.”¹⁰²

Of the three scholars surveyed above, Hazard’s notion of “encounter” draws the closest to Sokdokpa’s ideas on materialist agency. Illustrating where Sokdokpa diverges will be helpful to further shed light on the questions and challenges the *gter ma* tradition poses to our analysis of Smith and the gold plates. This becomes most clear in

99. Sonia Hazard, “How Joseph Smith Encountered Printing Plates,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 31, no. 2 (2021): 150–178.

100. Hazard, “How Joseph Smith Encountered,” 140, 146.

101. Hazard, “How Joseph Smith Encountered,” 148.

102. Hazard, “How Joseph Smith Encountered,” 180–81.

Gentry's discussion of Sokdokpa's responses to critics who interpret sacred material objects as symbols, instruments, or mnemonic cues. According to Gentry, Sokdokpa makes clear that, through these objects, "the transformative powers of subjective qualities" of past Buddhist masters are materialized to the extent that, "by way of physical and existential connection," they "have the capacity to bring forth the presence of past masters and timeless buddhas and bodhisattvas."¹⁰³ This is not to render the agency of the humans who encounter such objects mute; Sokdokpa concedes that the ability of the object to affect people is "based on the individual's respective level of spiritual development" as well as the successful ritual treatment thereof.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, one's spiritual development does not just make one more vulnerable to personal transformation within the objects sphere of influence; it enables him or her to function as a medium for the presence of a past master.

This interplay between preparation and ritual action in relation to bringing forth past voices is especially operative in the *gter ma* discovery and translation process. The process of discovering a *gter ma* typically begins with the discovery or reception of a prophetic guide, often through a supernatural agent such as a manifestation of Padmasambhava or a *gter ma* protector. Although its contents vary, their most significant feature is a prophecy, couched in the words of Padmasambhava, which addresses the prospective *gter ma* discoverer by name, or clearly alludes to the circumstances of his or her own life. As such, the prophetic guide serves as proof of one's identity as a reincarnation of one of Padmasambhava's students, contextualizing them within a providential narrative that qualifies him or her for the task of *gter ma* revelation due to their having received a particular teaching and commission to reveal it in a past life.¹⁰⁵ This pivotal event, in turn,

103. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 299–303.

104. Gentry, *Power Objects*, 246, 310.

105. Janet Gyatso, "The Relic Text," (unpublished manuscript), 7–12; Thondup, *Hidden Teachings*, 72–76; Jacoby, *Love and Liberation*, 142.

sets off a series of arduous tasks, ranging from mastering particular ritual practices prescribed in the prophetic guide, appeasing the *gter ma* protectors through propitiatory rites, and discerning external signs which reveal when, where, and with whom to uncover the *gter ma*.¹⁰⁶

Once removed from its burial place,¹⁰⁷ the process of cracking the *gter ma*'s "code" begins. As mentioned above, the scroll serves as the signifier of the signified encoded teaching implanted in the mind stream of the future revealer, functioning both as a tool of secrecy by making the teaching legible only to the appointed revealer, and a type of revelatory mnemonic device. However, awakening the memory is no easy task. Often, the discoverer is required to enter that same deep level of consciousness within which the original teaching was implanted through meditative practice.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the text is often subject to spontaneous change, and stabilizing it requires aligning oneself again with the right people, at the right place, at the right time, and often requires engaging in sexual yoga with a karmically aligned tantric consort.¹⁰⁹ After the text stabilizes, the *gter ma* discoverer may be able to perceive its decoded form spontaneously through exposure to an external stimulus, by repeatedly analyzing the scroll, by merely glancing

106. Gyatso describes the semiotic process by which one determines the necessary conditions for revelation in detail in her study of the *gter ston* Jigme Lingpa (Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 162–81) and elsewhere ("Signs, Memory and History," 22–27; see also Drubchen, *Hidden Teachings*, 130).

107. For detailed examples of *gter ma* discovery, see Hanna, "Vast as the Sky"; Germano, "Re-Membering the Dismembered Body"; Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self*, 161–74; and Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, (96–139).

108. Germano and Gyatso, "Longchenpa and the Dakinis," 242.

109. Thondup describes the consort as one who "helps to produce and maintain the wisdom of the union of great bliss and emptiness, by which the adept attains the ultimate state" (*Hidden Teachings*, 82–83; see also Gyatso, *Apparitions of Self*, 173, 194–97). Elsewhere, Gyatso explains this as facilitating the "breaking of codes (*brda grol*), here a metaphor for the loosening of the psychic knots that bind the *cakras*, necessary for the mature rendering of the full Treasure scripture in determinant form" ("Signs, Memory and History," 22).

at the scroll, or even through an alphabetical key that accompanied the discovered *gter ma*.¹¹⁰ Once decoded, the all-important memory comes forth. However, that memory may need to be translated out of a secret language (not to be confused with the secret script) and the *gter ma* discoverer must come to comprehend its contents and/or learn to effectuate its rituals before transmitting it to others. In all, this process, which must be kept secret from those not directly involved, can span years.¹¹¹

Yet, despite such active engagement in decoding the scroll, claims of agency are consistently mitigated and ultimately authorial identity is shifted to Padmasambhava. As Hirshberg has observed in the case of the *gter ma* discoverer Nyangrel Nyima Ozer (1124–1192), “the consistent use of intransitive sentence constructions [is used to mitigate] his agency. He is literally omitted from the action and is merely the one present to directly receive the treasures when the time has come for them to emerge on their own.”¹¹²

Of course, none of this need imply that Smith experienced his translation of the gold plates in a way directly comparable to the Tibetan *gter stons*. But it should give us pause to rethink—taking after Bruno Latour—where in Smith’s account we may have “invented believers” instead of tracing the agents (human and nonhuman) that make these so-called believers act.¹¹³ I agree with Hazard’s turn to take Smith’s material encounter with the gold plates seriously rather than (*pace*

110. Although Gyatso is sighting Drubchen (*Hidden Teachings*, 124–135), her systematic outline of this process is quite helpful (see Gyatso, “Signs, Memory and History,” 17–22).

111. Jigme Lingpa’s revelation of the *Logchen Nyingtig* (*klong chen snying thig*) for example, took seven years (Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self*, 168).

112. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born*, 133.

113. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 234–37.

Taves) “as a materialization of an idea into a material thing.”¹¹⁴ This option both transcends the problematic dichotomized prophet/fraud options surveyed above, as well as aligns with the primary sources’ clear emphasis on Smith’s encounter with a material object he discovered.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, I am concerned by the bracketing of Smith’s claim by all three of the aforementioned scholars to not have only been personally influenced by the plates, but to have translated myriad ancient voices.

The issue here is reminiscent of the postcolonial theorist Mary Keller’s intellectual history of religious studies analyses of spirit possession. Keller observed that, despite individuals’ claims to being overcome by the agency of ancestors and other invisible forces, their experiences were consistently reduced to symbolic actions reflective of cultural beliefs that served to address “real” social issues.¹¹⁶ The effect of such an analysis is to trace the claims undergirding diverse religious expression insofar as they do not exceed modern metaphysical sensibilities, at which point the turn is to impose the pervasive modern Western assumption that “religiousness is a matter of belief” to account

114. Hazard, “How Joseph Smith Encountered,” 146.

115. Emma Smith accompanied her husband on his discovery expedition, and many others provided transportation, lodging, protection from thieves, places to hide the plates, and witnessed him return from the hill with a set of plates (although under a cloth) (Bushman, *Believing History*, 93–105). Emma also describes “[moving] them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my [house]work” (“Last Testimony of Sister Emma”). A select eleven were even given permission by the angel Moroni to “handle” them and “[see] the engravings thereon” (see “The Testimony of the Three Witnesses” and the Testimony of the Eight Witnesses” in the Book of Mormon). For a discussion on the credibility of their accounts, see Dan Vogel, “The Validity of the Witnesses’ Testimonies,” in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, 79–122; and Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49.

116. Mary Keller, *The Hammer and the Flute* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 33, 35–37, 54–72.

for the remainder against something apparently more “real.”¹¹⁷ Not only does this misrepresent the diverse worlds inhabited by religious practitioners, but it ignores that in such cases, “it is receptivity” to an other agency, comparable to “a hammer, flute, or horse that is wielded, played, or mounted,” that “makes the possessed body powerful.”¹¹⁸ To explore the implications of this shift in the role of the human subject in religious experience, Keller states:

We need to create a discursive space in which the agency of religious forces can be recognized as such. This is not because religious forces are ‘real’ and thus should not be scrutinized critically. This is a methodological argument regarding our ability to recognize alternative modes of subjectivity and to subject ourselves to the agency of the others who attract our attention. Methodologically it allows the scholar to represent religious bodies at war as bodies that are negotiating with power that is not the same power that Western scholars have identified as hegemony and ideology.¹¹⁹

Likewise, I would suggest that we need to consider the possibility that Smith really experienced being spoken through by other voices.¹²⁰

117. Keller, *Hammer and the Flute*, 7, see also 41, 44–46.

118. Keller, *Hammer and the Flute*, 9, see also 48.

119. Keller, *Hammer and the Flute*, 159–60.

120. One other interesting alternative is Taves’s and Dunn’s theory that Smith’s ability to dictate extensive narratives without external sources through reference to trance states that enable “automatic writing” (Taves, *Revelatory Events*, 250–69; Taves, “Joseph Smith, Helen Schucman”; Scott C. Dunn, “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon,” in Vogel and Metcalfe, *American Apocrypha*, 17–46). This cross-cultural phenomenon refers to states of consciousness within which an individual can write or dictate words to a scribe for extensive periods of time without prior knowledge of, or control over, the words themselves, and thus attributes them to an external force. The primary problem with this theory, however, is its reliance on Smith’s natural knack for storytelling and high degree of familiarity with the King James Bible to posit a robust set of mentally stored raw materials upon which Smith’s mind drew while under hypnosis to produce the content of the Book of Mormon. There

Without doing so, I believe we are missing a crucial point from which to explore the world that Smith inhabited and the nature of religious experience therein. My suggestion then is that in light of the *gter ma* tradition, we can both move past claims of literal linguistic translation or fraudulent deception—which, as I have argued, stretch the primary source accounts of Smith’s translation in unreasonable ways—while still taking seriously Smith’s claim to be giving voice to other agents. In this view, Smith can be seen as one who encountered a material object that not only had personal effects on him but forged relational bonds between him, an angel, and a past civilization in seemingly unpredictable ways—most importantly, by enabling him to channel a type of revelatory mode through which he served as a medium for ancient

is scant evidence for these innate qualities and/or cultivated knowledge base. In making this claim, Taves and others (Rodney Stark, “A Theory of Revelations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, no. 2 [1999]: 294; Hickman, “‘Bringing Forth’ the Book of Mormon,” 76–77) rely exclusively on Lucy Smith’s (Joseph Smith’s mother) comment that during their “evening conversations,” Smith would give “amusing recitals” about “the ancient inhabitants of this continent” before discovering the plates (Scot F. Proctor and Maurine J. Proctor, eds., *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996], 112). However, I think they are reading too deeply into this comment. This seems to be a reference to what Moroni told Smith during their first meeting. In Smith’s own words: “I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this Country, and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people was made known unto me” (“History, 1838–1856, vol. C-1 [November 2, 1838–July 31, 1842],” March 1, 1842, 1282, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842/456>). For a critique of the automatic writing theory, see Brian C. Hales, “Automatic Writing and the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 2 (2019): 1–35.

voices, yet only while in the object's presence.¹²¹ In this way, Smith's four years of preparation to retrieve the plates from the angel Moroni, chastisement at the hands of that angel resulting in the plates being removed and his ability to translate muted,¹²² as well as attempts to create and maintain amicable relationships with aids throughout the process,¹²³ can be seen as Smith ritually orienting himself in relation to the power of a sacred object over a prolonged period of time in order to become an effective medium for its message.

I also think this reading aligns well with compelling recent arguments regarding what Smith could have meant in using the term

121. The closest approximation to my theory thus far in Mormon studies are Josh E. Probert's brief comments that the seer stone "acted on Smith" and "acted as a mediator" ("The Materiality of Lived Mormonism," *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 26–27). My emphasis on the plates instead of the seer stones stems primarily from their being the claimed contextual source of the translation and the fact that, when the angel took the plates away, Smith could no longer translate despite having access to seer stones.

122. Smith's mother recorded in the late winter or early Spring of 1827 that Joseph had received "the severest chastisement" of his life at the hand of Moroni for being "negligent" with respect to "the things that God had commanded [him] to do" (Proctor and Proctor, *Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith*, 135). After preparing the first 116 pages of the plates, Smith mistakenly allowed his scribe, then Martin Harris, to show the transcript to family members, after which they were lost and the plates subsequently taken from Smith from June 15 to September 22, 1828 (Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 66–69).

123. Two early sources written by friends of Smith record that the angel told him he must "bring the right person" to retrieve the plates, who Smith later learned was Emma Hale, a local woman who married a few months later. These accounts written by these friends, Joseph Knight and Willard Chase, are summarized in Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 158, 163. Smith also had to retain an amicable relationship with Emma to be able to translate ("Letter from Elder W. H. Kelley," *Saints' Herald* 1 [1882]: 68) and was inspired to engage with different scribes throughout the process.

“translation” to describe his project,¹²⁴ particularly that made by Jared Hickman. Hickman has recently argued against “the paradigm of *linguistic* translation” in favor of what he calls “*metaphysical* translation.”¹²⁵ Hickman notes that “the word ‘translate’ and its variants appear only five times in the King James Bible, and none of these refers to linguistic translation.”¹²⁶ In fact, three are found in the fifth verse of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews—which happens to be one of the most cited chapters of scripture in the early Mormon movement¹²⁷—which speaks of God translating Enoch “that he should not see death.” Moreover, Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary* offers five definitions of the term *translate* before arriving at today’s conventional usage of “[rendering] into another language,” all of which convey the sense of transporting something from one place to another. With this notion of translation in mind, Hickman argues that Smith’s “[bringing] forth” ancient voices “as if [they] had cried from the dust”¹²⁸ can plausibly be seen not as a conversion of the language of the gold plates into English, but as Smith’s transferring ancient voices across time and space.

I diverge with Hickman slightly where he emphasizes Smith’s role as an activist, claiming that the qualifier in the last line, “*as if*,” arguably opens “a gap between the Book of Mormon text and indigenous voices, emphasizing Smith’s role . . . as an activist; that is, someone acting on

124. Other comparable, interesting arguments for non-linguistic translation, which I do not have space to survey here as they extend to Smith’s other translation projects, are Kathleen Flake, “Translating Time,” *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (2007): 497–527; and Samuel M. Brown, *Joseph Smith’s Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

125. Hickman, “‘Bringing Forth’ the Book of Mormon,” 54.

126. The other two appearances of the term are in 2 Samuel 3:10 and Colossians 1:13.

127. Grant Underwood, *The Millenarian World of Early Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 163–64n4.

128. 2 Nephi 3:15–19.

behalf of Native peoples as a ‘spokesman’ . . . rather than as an actual medium of Native peoples.”¹²⁹ My reading, on the other hand, tries to take after Bushman’s observation that the “signal feature” of Smith’s life was “his sense of being guided by revelation”¹³⁰—that is, that he was driven by real forces outside him rather than acting on behalf of forces he encountered in vision. Nevertheless, the general idea that Smith’s metaphysical translation consisted of Smith “[translating] himself into the ancient American world through the virtual reality technology of the seer stone and then [translating] that world back into his own through the virtual reality technology of oral storytelling,” thereby “altering the way Euro-Christian settlers inhabit the indigenous cosmos they find themselves in,”¹³¹ I find to be compatible with my reading of Smith’s translation.

I also believe that my reading could provide insights into Smith’s own theological innovations around themes of materiality and historicity, which I will only have space to briefly mention here. Moving forward very tentatively, I would suggest that my theory resonates with Rosalynde Welch’s use of the term “prime agency”—drawing implications from Smith’s “King Follet Sermon,” and his claim that “spirit is matter”¹³²—to suggest that in Smith’s radically re-envisioned Christian cosmos, agency resides “not in the human personality but in Mormonism’s plural ontology of intelligent matter; prime agency, in other words, is hardwired into the basic structure of reality.”¹³³ As my theory that the plates were agentive objects that facilitated Joseph Smith’s channeling of ancient voices across time and space constitutes one of Smith’s

129. Hickman, “‘Bringing Forth’ the Book of Mormon,” 75.

130. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, xxi.

131. Hickman, “‘Bringing Forth’ the Book of Mormon,” 54, 60, 75, 77–78.

132. Doctrine and Covenants 131:7.

133. Rosalynde Welch, “The New Mormon Theology of Matter,” *Mormon Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2017): 70.

founding religious experiences, reorienting the dominant paradigm of interior, subjective belief as the foundation of religious experience to an interaction with an agentive material world,¹³⁴ I suggest that Smith's distinctive cosmic vision could stem from formative encounters with the material world that imbued in him a pervasive sense of materialist agency, seen in not only claims of material monism but further distinctive ritual actions around materials, in, for example, building temples and wearing sacred garments.

Finally, I would suggest that moving past claims of linguistic translation need not coincide with an outright rejection of the Book of Mormon's historical claims. Although it should be clear that the manner by which Joseph Smith produced history is not amenable to modern conceptions of historiography, this should not amount to a declaration that his means are ineffable and his claimed historical productions are impermeable to critical examination. Rather, it would be useful to take up Charles Stewart's usage of the term "historical consciousness," referring to "whatever basic assumptions a society makes about the shape of time and the relationships of events in the past, present and future," the form of which "in any given society is an open question, requiring empirical, ethnographic investigation."¹³⁵ That Smith had a unique conception of time that can be investigated to better understand his "historical productions" has been fruitfully explored by Kathleen Flake and Samuel Brown.¹³⁶ Stewart's application

134. On this pervasive, Protestant influenced paradigm of religious studies, see Peter J. Bräunlein, "Thinking Religion Through Things," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 28, no. 4/5 (2016): 370–72; and Brigit Meyer, "How Pictures Matter," in *Objects and Imagination: Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning*, edited by Øivind Fuglerud and Leon Wainwright (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 165–66.

135. Charles Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness in Island Greece* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

136. Flake, "Translating Time"; Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation*.

of the term includes an emphasis on how discoveries of buried objects “charged with human-like attributes,” “performative icons” capable of mediating “visionary knowledge,”¹³⁷ in conjunction with dreams in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Island Greece (which he explicitly compares to Joseph Smith’s discovery of the gold plates)¹³⁸ aid in influencing such unique conceptions of time. It is precisely such an approach, put into conversation with my theory of the gold plates as agents, which could be productive in forwarding theories of Mormon historical consciousness, thereby providing further glimpses into the unique world Smith inhabited.

137. Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness*, 51, 64, 68.

138. Stewart, *Dreaming and Historical Consciousness*, xvii–xviii.

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THE GARDEN ATONEMENT AND THE MORMON CROSS TABOO

Jeremy M. Christiansen

Michael Reed's 2012 book *Banishing the Cross: The Emergence of a Mormon Taboo* sets out an excellent account of the uncomfortable relationship between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the core symbol of Christianity: the cross. Reed persuasively demonstrates that the taboo was a late development in Latter-day Saint history and locates much of the taboo's roots in anti-Catholicism of the early to mid-twentieth century.

This article presents a modest contribution to Reed's scholarship by accounting for the role of the distinctive Latter-day Saint belief about the Garden of Gethsemane in Christ's atonement and its relationship to the cross taboo. As taught in the Church's official *Guide to the Scriptures*, Jesus "suffered in Gethsemane for the sins of mankind."¹ We can refer to this belief as the "garden atonement." That belief is distinctive in and of itself, but many articulations of the doctrine also place the garden over and above Jesus's crucifixion. Thus, as described by the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, which in turn is quoting multiple twentieth-century church leaders, "for Latter-day Saints, Gethsemane was the scene of Jesus's greatest agony, even surpassing that which he suffered on the cross."² According to this view, Jesus "suffered 'the pains of all men

1. "The Guide to the Scriptures," *Gethsemane*, accessed Dec. 10, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/gethsemane?lang=eng>.

2. S. Kent Brown, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 542.

. . . *principally* in Gethsemane.”³ Yet, much like the cross taboo, the garden atonement is not a founding-era Latter-day Saint belief, but one based on teachings of “modern Church leaders.”⁴ Specifically, it is a later theological innovation that largely coincided with the cross taboo’s rise and formalization (from around 1916 to the mid-1950s), and for the same reasons—reliance on anti-Catholic polemics and a desire for Mormon distinctiveness amid the assimilation into Protestant America that came with the demise of polygamy in Mormon theology.

I. The Cross Taboo According to Reed

Reed’s work persuasively establishes that the Mormon cross taboo “emerged . . . at the grass-roots level around the turn of the twentieth century and became institutionalized mid-century under the direction of David O. McKay.”⁵ Reed’s historical evidence all but compels the conclusion that early Latter-day Saints had no discernible aversion to the cross. To the contrary, Latter-day Saints made substantial use of the cross in a variety of religious contexts, some of which would likely make some Latter-day Saints today uncomfortable, from the belongings of early Church leaders, to sacred architecture (including the Cardston, Alberta temple, the Laie Hawaii temple, and the Salt Lake Assembly Hall), floral arrangements for deceased presidents of the Church displayed at their funerals, Latter-day Saint marriage certificates, decorations hanging in Latter-day Saint temples, stained glass windows of church buildings, jewelry of both men and women, and cross-stitch art and quilt designs by the Relief Society.⁶

3. Brown, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 542 (emphasis added).

4. John Hilton III and Joshua P. Barringer, “The Use of Gethsemane by Church Leaders,” 1859–2018, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 51.

5. Michael Reed, *Banishing the Cross: The Emergence of a Mormon Taboo* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2012) 3.

6. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 67–68.

A turning point began in 1915–16. The Church (through presiding bishop Charles W. Nibley) petitioned the Salt Lake City Council to build a large cement Latin cross on the top of Ensign Peak. Its proponents, including Nibley and B. H. Roberts, took a broad ecumenical defense of it as “the symbol of Christianity” that should be used to honor both “the ‘Mormon’ pioneers,” who entered the valley in 1847, as well as “the Catholic church,” who should “be given the credit” of arriving “seventy years before” and contributing to the settling of the area.⁷ But significant opposition arose from numerous sides, both LDS and non-LDS, united at least in part by a desire not to project the impression that Utah was “a Catholic State.”⁸ Apostle Orson F. Whitney publicly spoke out against the Ensign Peak cross as a symbol “of the Catholic Church,” saying it should not be associated with the Mormon pioneers.⁹ This provoked a series of private exchanges between Nibley and Whitney, each claiming he had the backing of higher Church authorities for his position.¹⁰ Whitney’s correspondence with other Church leaders feature polemics against devotional use of the cross, raising the point that if one’s friend were unjustly killed on a gibbet, you would not hang it in your house as a reminder.¹¹ Numerous people accused Nibley of unwittingly or otherwise acting as an agent of Rome, and ultimately the Ensign Peak proposal was dropped.¹²

Division over personal and public use of the cross still existed for some decades among high-ranking Church leaders.¹³ But one opinion

7. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 87.

8. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 88–89.

9. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 94.

10. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 94.

11. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 97.

12. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 100.

13. B. H. Roberts tombstone is an unadorned cross, Elder Spencer W. Kimball had a strong devotion to the cross, and Bishop Nibley did as well. See Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 111–12.

that would prove formative on the matter was that of David O. McKay, future Church president. His experiences with Catholicism had soured him on it, causing him to vent in his diary in 1923, “O what a Godless farce that organization is!”¹⁴ And he and other Church leaders feuded with the Utah Catholic hierarchy.¹⁵ Although some evidence suggests he may have toned down these feelings later in life, as president of the Church in the 1950s, he publicly declared the “Catholic Church” to be one of the “two great anti-Christ[s] in the world” alongside communism.¹⁶ It is thus rather unsurprising that in 1957, McKay effectively cemented the cross taboo in place in a letter response to a Latter-day Saint bishop who inquired about the propriety of “L.D.S. girls . . . purchas[ing] crosses to wear,” to which McKay responded: “This is purely Catholic and Latter-day Saint girls should not purchase and wear them. I stated that this was a Catholic form of worship. They use images, crosses, etc. Our worship should be in our hearts.”¹⁷ Other prominent Church leaders, although sometimes with differing rationales, espoused the same view about the cross, including J. Reuben Clark Jr., Mark E. Peterson, Bruce R. McConkie, and future presidents of the Church Joseph Fielding Smith and Gordon B. Hinckley.¹⁸ From there, the cross taboo took the form it holds within Latter-day Saint devotion and belief today.

II. The Cross-Centric Atonement of Early Mormonism

To understand the connection between the cross taboo and the belief in the garden atonement, it is first important to understand that the

14. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 113.

15. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 113. See also Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 112–23

16. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 115.

17. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 115–16.

18. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 118.

latter, like the former, is a late theological development.¹⁹ It is a doctrine that was likely not believed or taught by the Latter-day Saints or their leaders until near the end of the nineteenth century. That conclusion follows from a review of the available teachings of Joseph Smith, other early Latter-day Saint leaders, catechisms and treatises, hymns, and scriptural texts.

Teachings of Joseph Smith. As recent scholarly commentary notes, “Joseph Smith never presented a systematic view of Atonement.”²⁰ The corpus of his publicly available teachings never shows him teaching the garden atonement. Hilton and Barringer conclude, “Joseph Smith did not provide any teachings regarding Gethsemane.”²¹ What little exists suggests what one would expect someone who had a Protestant background to believe about the relationship between the cross and the Atonement in that period. Searches for “Gethsemane” in the currently available Joseph Smith Papers Project online yield only two results. One is an original manuscript of one of Joseph Smith’s revisions of the New Testament but contains nothing of import on the subject,²² and the second is a letter from Orson Hyde, discussed further below. But that is it. Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible made no alterations to the text

19. For other prominent examples of such developments, see Boyd Kirkland, “Jehovah as the Father: The Development of the Mormon Jehovah Doctrine,” *Sunstone* 9, no. 2 (1984): 36–44 (discussing the “several phases” of development concerning the identifies of God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, Elohim, Jehovah, Michael, and Adam); and D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994) (discussing the evolution of the concepts of authority and priesthood within the church).

20. John D. Young, “Long Narratives: Toward a New Mormon Understanding of Apostasy,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, edited by Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 324.

21. Hilton and Barringer, “Use of Gethsemane,” 53.

22. “New Testament Revision 2 (second numbering),” 41 (second numbering), The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/new-testament-revision-2/98>.

of Luke 22:44. When Joseph Smith did speak about the Atonement, his views align with a cross-centric understanding of it: “It must be *shedding the blood of the Only Begotten to atone for man*, for this was the plan of redemption, and without the *shedding of blood was no remission*” of sins.²³ In his 1830 revision of the Bible, when describing visions given to Enoch regarding the future coming of the Messiah, whose mission is to redeem mankind from their sins, he does not write about Jesus in the garden, but of “the Son of man lifted upon the cross.”²⁴

Teachings of Other Early LDS Leaders. The teachings of Latter-day Saint leaders from the early Church period through most of the nineteenth century similarly espouse views of the Atonement that identify it with Jesus’s suffering on the cross. Moreover, not only do these leaders not teach that Jesus suffered for sins in Gethsemane, but they teach that he suffered agony in the garden in anticipation of the crucifixion.

There are 208 references to “atonement” in the *Journal of Discourses*. A qualitative review of each shows that in no case did anyone teach that Christ suffered in an expiatory manner in the garden. Public statements and teachings of Brigham Young,²⁵ Wilford Woodruff,²⁶ George Q. Cannon,²⁷ Daniel H. Wells,²⁸ Orson Pratt,²⁹ Heber C.

23. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* 49 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007) (emphasis added). See also “Letter to the Church, circa March 1834,” 143, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-circa-march-1834/2>.

24. “Old Testament Revision 1,” 18, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/20>.

25. Brigham Young, July 8, 1860, *Journal of Discourses*, 8:115; Brigham Young, Aug. 31, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:365; Brigham Young, May 29, 1870, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:178; Brigham Young, July 17, 1870, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:220.

26. Wilford Woodruff, Apr. 6, 1872, *Journal of Discourses*, 15:8

27. George Q. Cannon, Dec. 3, 1871, *Journal of Discourses*, 14:319

28. Daniel H. Wells, June 30, 1867, *Journal of Discourses*, 12:74

29. Orson Pratt, Feb. 11, 1872, *Journal of Discourses*, 14:328; Feb. 4, 1872, *Journal of Discourses*, 15:69.

Kimball,³⁰ Charles W. Penrose,³¹ and others,³² consistently teach that the Atonement occurred on the cross and make no mention of Gethsemane in this regard. References to the garden of Gethsemane in speeches are exceedingly sparse before the twentieth century.³³ But when the suffering in the garden is referenced, it is for a proposition that later Church leaders would come to deny: that Jesus's suffering in the garden was (in his humanity) in contemplation of his impending torture and crucifixion,³⁴ with Lorenzo Snow making this point expressly in 1893.³⁵

Hilton and Barringer, in their statistical review of general conference addresses and the *Journal of Discourses*, point to only one supposed counterexample. Respectfully, their analysis is flawed. They contend that John Taylor “explicitly connect[ed] Gethsemane with Christ’s suffering for our sins” in “1859.” They assert that Taylor made this connection “when he taught that Jesus ‘came to atone for the transgressions of men. . . . Then again, in Gethsemane, he was left alone, and so great was the struggle that, we are told, he sweat, as it were, great drops of

30. Heber C. Kimball, Dec. 13, 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, 6:122

31. Charles W. Penrose, May 1, 1880, *Journal of Discourses*, 22:83.

32. *Journal of Discourses*, 23:4; George C. Bywater, Aug. 2, 1885, *Journal of Discourses*, 26:288. See also “Letter from Oliver Cowdery, 6 November 1829,” 7, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-oliver-cowdery-6-november-1829/2>.

33. See Hilton and Barringer, “Use of Gethsemane,” 56. (“Prior to 1900, the word *Gethsemane* was used in the *Journal of Discourses* only five times.”).

34. John Taylor, Nov. 13, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:199; Moses Thatcher, Apr. 8, 1882, *Journal of Discourses*, 23:206–7; Amasa M. Lyman, Dec. 25, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:300; Erastus Snow, Jan. 5, 1860, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:357; Orson Hyde, Oct. 5, 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, 16:232; John Taylor, May 1, 1880, *Journal of Discourses*, 21:214–15; Lorenzo Snow, Jan. 10, 1886, *Journal of Discourses*, 26:367.

35. “Discourse by President Lorenzo Snow,” *The Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star* 56, no. 4 (Jan. 22, 1894).

blood.”³⁶ Taylor never “explicitly” made any such connection in that discourse, as the material omitted in Hilton and Barringer’s ellipses makes clear. The omitted material lists a number of temporally disparate events in Jesus’s life, making a connection (let alone an “explicit” one) between Gethsemane and the Atonement implausible.³⁷ The full text says that Christ came to atone

for the transgressions of men—to stand at the head as the Saviour of men. It was necessary that he should have a body like ours, and be made subject to all the weaknesses of the flesh,—that the Devil should be let loose upon him, and that he should be tried like other men. Then, again, in Gethsemane, he was left alone; and so great was the struggle that we are told he sweat, as it were, great drops of blood. In the great day when he was about to sacrifice his life, he said, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” He has passed through all this, and when he sees you passing through these trials and afflictions, he knows how to feel towards you — how to sympathise with you. It was necessary that he should pass this fiery ordeal; for such is the position of things, and such the decrees of the All-wise Creator.³⁸

Hilton and Barringer acknowledge that “it is possible that the reference to Christ atoning for the transgressions of men has reference to” the crucifixion,³⁹ but immediately jump to Taylor’s teachings of some thirty years later in *Mediation and Atonement* to suggest that Taylor was teaching a garden atonement in the 1850s. Apart from the quoted text simply not supporting the asserted connection, the argument presupposes a uniformity of John Taylor’s teachings that scrutiny does not bear out. Prior to publishing *Mediation and Atonement*, Taylor publicly

36. Hilton and Barringer, “Use of Gethsemane,” 60 (quoting “Discourse by Elder John Taylor, Tabernacle, Nov. 13, 1859,” *Deseret News–Salt Lake Telegram*, April 11, 1860, 1.).

37. “Discourse by Elder John Taylor, Tabernacle, Nov. 13, 1859,” *Deseret News–Salt Lake Telegram*, April 11, 1860, 1

38. “Discourse by Elder John Taylor,” 1.

39. Hilton and Barringer, “Use of Gethsemane,” 60n35.

taught that the Atonement consisted of “the shedding of the blood of the Lamb of God upon Calvary.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Hilton and Barringer’s work by itself is perhaps some of the strongest evidence of the lack of any belief in the garden atonement before the end of the nineteenth century.

Catechisms and Doctrinal Treatises. Catechisms and doctrinal treatises, while rare in LDS spheres today, were important summations of Latter-day Saint belief in the past. These systematic presentations of belief similarly suggest that the garden atonement was not taught early on.

John Jaques was well known within Mormonism for his *Catechism for Children*, first published in 1854. Jaques’s catechism was in print for thirty-five years in multiple editions, was printed in seven languages, and received endorsement in general conference.⁴¹ The catechism in

40. *Journal of Discourses*, 21:251. Professor Hilton has greatly advanced the study of LDS theories of atonement by his bevy of recent research on Gethsemane and the crucifixion, and his works are highly recommended. I do not agree with all of Professor Hilton’s conclusions or assumptions, however. For instance, although his article on the teachings regarding the crucifixion is impressive (see John Hilton III, Emily K. Hyde, and McKenna Grace Tussel, “The Teachings of Church Leaders Regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ: 1852–2018,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 [2020]: 49–80), it obscures important doctrinal changes in Church teaching and presents Church teaching across two centuries as if it were largely unified. But examples of Church leaders teaching inconsistently on this topic abound, from John Taylor to James Talmage to Orson Whitney. Moreover, Professor Hilton’s work also indulges the questionable assumption that what is or is not LDS teaching is manifest via statistical occurrence of usage over the entire life of the Church, without regard for the qualitative character of specific instances of teaching and their cultural context. That said, Hilton’s work is impressive and a tremendous contribution, and his willingness to suggest to Latter-day Saints that they be less hostile to the cross and crucifixion imagery is, from my perspective, commendable.

41. See Kenneth L. Alford, “A History of Mormon Catechisms” in *A Firm Foundation: Essays on the Administrative and Organizational History of the LDS Church*, edited by Arnold K. Garr and David Whittaker (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 223–44.

its 1854 edition asked, “How then was a redemption from the effects of the Fall wrought out?” The Answer: “God sent His only begotten Son, who knew no sin, to die for the sins of the world, and *thus* satisfy the demands of justice.”⁴² This same formulation was reprinted in the 1872,⁴³ and 1877 editions as well.⁴⁴

Eliza R. Snow also produced a catechism, entitled *Bible Questions and Answers for Children*, which had a series of detailed questions and answers surrounding Jesus’s suffering in the garden, but did not teach a garden atonement. Rather, Jesus asked “His Father to . . . [r]emove the cup from Him.”⁴⁵ The catechism then asks, “What did Jesus mean by the cup?” to which the answer was “The awful death before Him,” and noting, without any suggestion that it was expiatory, “Q—In His great agony, how did He sweat? A—Like large drops of blood.”⁴⁶

James E. Talmage’s 1899 edition of the *Articles of Faith*, which offers an entire section based on the third article of faith (i.e., “We believe that through the atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.”), makes no mention of the garden at all. Rather, for Talmage in 1899, “The atonement” — “a leading doctrine [taught] by all sects of Christianity” — consisted of

42. Elder John Jaques, *Catechism for Children Exhibiting the Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1854), 33 (emphasis added).

43. Elder John Jaques, *Catechism for Children Exhibiting the Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon, 1872), 32.

44. Elder John Jaques, *Catechism for Children Exhibiting the Prominent Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: David O. Calder, 1877), 30.

45. Eliza R. Snow, *Bible Questions and Answers for Children*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 81.

46. Snow, *Bible Questions*, 81.

“the vicarious nature of [Christ’s] *death*.”⁴⁷ The centrality of “the great sacrifice . . . on Calvary” achieved “on the cross,”⁴⁸ is readily apparent.⁴⁹

John A. Widtsoe’s *Rational Theology*, a systematic treatment of Latter-day Saint beliefs published in 1915, makes no mention of suffering in the garden (indeed, of the garden at all), but rather, when speaking of the “need of a Savior,” states that “Jesus actually came to earth . . . and in time *suffered death* so that the act of Adam might be atoned for.”⁵⁰ One would not discern the garden atonement from Elder Widtsoe’s treatise.

Hymns. Early Latter-day Saint hymns offer additional evidence that the garden of Gethsemane was not understood as it would later come to be. Rather, Mormons strongly emphasized Christ’s death on the cross in their worship songs addressing the Atonement. The 1835 *Collection of Sacred Hymns* contains no hymn that mentions Gethsemane. Rather, the hymns reflect a cross- or death-centric view of the Atonement.⁵¹ The 1840 Manchester hymnal contains one hymn referencing “thy bloody sweat” in the third verse, but it would count as, at most, an ambiguous reference to the garden, given that all surrounding passages seem quite clearly aimed at painting a picture of Jesus on “yonder tree,” statements uttered from the cross (“Forgive them, Father”), Christ’s

47. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1899), 77 (emphasis added).

48. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 82.

49. Indeed, Talmage quotes John Taylor’s *Mediation and Atonement* and quotes Doctrine and Covenants 19 (discussed further below) in ways that strongly indicate he views Christ’s bleeding at every pore as associated with the cross. See Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 80–81 and note j, 78–82.

50. John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: General Priesthood Committee, 1915), 35.

51. See *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of the Latter Day Saints* (Kirtland, Ohio: F. G. Williams & Co., 1835), 77–81, hymns 58, 59, 60, and 61.

“passion on the tree,” His death, his “bleeding feet.”⁵² The 1841 hymnal has one hymn about the garden, but never says that the atonement occurred there,⁵³ and is rather unequivocal in using imagery of the cross when speaking of Christ’s atonement.⁵⁴ The 1845 hymnal is similarly centered in its sacramental hymns on traditional crucifixion imagery like the “Five bleeding wounds . . . [r]eceived on Calvary,” and it is these wounds that “pour effectual prayers” and “strongly speak for [us]” before the Father.⁵⁵

Scriptural Texts. The Atonement is a significant theme of early LDS scriptural texts, specifically, the Book of Mormon and what would later be called the Doctrine and Covenants. The Book of Mormon, when speaking of the Atonement, connects it with Christ’s death and suffering on the cross, and the garden is given minimal, if any, importance.⁵⁶ When the revelations compiled into the Doctrine and Covenants speak of Christ’s atonement, they do not focus on the garden⁵⁷ but speak instead of the Atonement being wrought through Christ’s death, that is, “through the shedding of his own blood.”⁵⁸ It is implausible to read the phrase “shedding” of blood to refer to sweating blood, as the

52. *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Europe* (Manchester: W. R. Thomas, 1840), 47–48, hymn 36.

53. *A Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Nauvoo, Ill.: E. Robinson, 1841), 318, hymn 288.

54. See *Collection of Sacred Hymns* (1841), 318, hymn 288. See also 82, hymn 74; 208, hymn 191; 120, hymn 112; 202, hymn 185; 203–4, hymn 186; 204, hymn 187; 272, hymn 272.

55. *Collection of Sacred Hymns for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Bellows Falls, Vt.: S. M. Blake, 1845), 65, hymn 44.

56. See, for example, 1 Nephi 11:33; 2 Nephi 2:6–10; 2 Nephi 9:7–8.

57. Doctrine and Covenants 29:1; 74:7.

58. Doctrine and Covenants 76:69.

phrase means death, not bloodletting.⁵⁹ This context is important for understanding the two texts on which LDS leaders would later rely in developing the garden atonement: Mosiah 3:7 and Doctrine and Covenants 19.

In Mosiah 3:7, a self-styled pre-Messianic prophecy, it states, “And lo, he shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.” The mention of Christ’s anguish for the wickedness and abominations of his people is, today, read as meaning that Christ atoned for sin in the garden, causing him to sweat blood. But the broader context of the chapter and the Book of Mormon’s other references to atonement makes this reading doubtful. In context, this verse is merely a prophecy about Christ’s suffering in the garden, noting that it is anguish “for the wickedness and abominations of his people,” but the text itself says nothing expiatory about that suffering in the sense understood and taught by LDS leaders today. Mosiah 3:7 does not say the word *atonement* at all (odd for a book that discusses the “atonement” by name numerous times). There is an atoning event spoken of in Mosiah 3, but it is Christ’s death, crucifixion, and resurrection in verses 9, and 11. Understanding Mosiah 3:7 as speaking of the Atonement is out of sync with the rest of the Book of Mormon, which connects atonement with sacrifice in the context of the slaughtered lamb under the Mosaic law.

Doctrine and Covenants 19 seems like stronger footing but represents, at best, a proto-teaching. The passage’s immediate context makes

59. See Alma 34:13; Alma 52:4; 3 Nephi 3:19; Mormon 4:11. See also *Webster’s Dictionary* (1828) (definitions of “blood”). For further, but later, evidence on the understanding that “shedding blood” in the Book of Mormon and other Latter-day Saint contexts has long been understood to mean death, see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Blood Atonement and the Origins of Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1905; Heber City, Utah: Archive Publishers, 2000).

it an odd vehicle for revealing such a distinctive doctrine in such an oblique way. And notably, in their own review of LDS scriptural texts, Hilton and Barringer candidly admit that there is a “paucity of scriptural teachings regarding Gethsemane,” and more specifically, that Doctrine and Covenants 19 does not “make it explicit” that when it speaks of Christ bleeding “from every pore,” it is referencing Gethsemane.⁶⁰

In a recent work analyzing Joseph Smith’s “translation” of Luke 22:43–44 and its impact on the LDS Church’s tendency toward a “King James Version onlyism,” Grant Adamson cites both Mosiah 3:7 and Doctrine and Covenants 19 and posits that Joseph Smith put an “emphasis on the atonement in the garden instead of upon the cross.”⁶¹ Adamson shows that such a view was not necessarily “unique,” and suggests that numerous “popular biblical commentaries” of the time contained such ideas and could have been something Smith was exposed to directly or indirectly.⁶²

Adamson contends that other Christians may have held a garden atonement theory, but is difficult to sustain the conclusion that Smith did. Adamson does not cite any source from Smith *outside* of the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants when making conclusions about Smith’s views on the Atonement. There is a reason for this, although it is no fault to Adamson—there is no such source.⁶³ Adamson recognizes that “quantitatively, there are many references to the cross/crucifixion in the Book of Mormon” and the Doctrine and Covenants. Still, he indicates that Mosiah 3:7 and Doctrine and Covenants 19 should be given the most weight because they describe Jesus’s “agony” “much more intensely.”⁶⁴ However, references to “atonement”

60. Hilton and Barringer, “Use of Gethsemane,” 52–53 and 52nn9–10.

61. Grant Adamson, “Luke 22:43–44 and the Mormon Jesus: Protestant Past, KJV-Only Present,” *J. Bible and its Reception* 9, no. 1 (2022): 56.

62. Adamson, “Luke 22:43–44,” 61.

63. Young, “Long Narratives,” 324.

64. Adamson, “Luke 22:43–44,” 61 and 61n33.

are overwhelmingly, indeed seemingly exclusively, connected to the cross, not the garden.⁶⁵ There is no explicit connection anywhere in LDS scripture between the garden and the Atonement *per se*. Prior to the rise of the garden-atonement theory, numerous high-ranking LDS leaders interpreted Smith's texts differently. Hilton and Barringer note that LDS leaders, from John Taylor to Mark E. Petersen, connected the sweating of blood in Doctrine and Covenants 19 to the *crucifixion, not the garden*.⁶⁶ Talmage appears to have done so as well in 1899.⁶⁷ A consideration of the available, relevant evidence strongly suggests that the garden-atonement appeared late in the theological life of Mormonism.

III. The Emergence, Rise, and Solidification of the Garden Atonement and Its Connection to the Cross Taboo

If the garden atonement was not something taught in early Mormonism, it raises the question of when and how did it become a “unique” and distinctive doctrine for Latter-day Saints.⁶⁸ This section will consider that question, concluding that the doctrine initially came about as part of the Mormon search for distinctiveness during the fertile period of doctrinal redefinition that occurred with the demise of polygamy around the turn of the nineteenth century and was solidified during the same time period in which the cross taboo emerged and formalized, that is, starting around 1916 and formalizing in the 1950s. Setting up Mormonism as a foil to Catholicism (the archetype of apostate Christianity) was a significant factor in this process.

The first appearance of the idea that Christ suffered for sin in the garden is likely in John Taylor's 1882 book, *Mediation and Atonement*,

65. See notes 56–59 above.

66. Hilton and Barringer, “Use of Gethsemane,” 52n9.

67. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 80–81 and note j, 78–82.

68. Young, “Long Narratives,” 330n31.

where Taylor appears to connect Mosiah 3:7 with the garden scene and the Atonement.⁶⁹ At this point, there is no reason to suspect any connection between the garden atonement theory and an aversion to the cross or anti-Catholic sentiments. President Taylor's reports of interactions with the Catholic Church during his European Mission (particularly in Paris) are quite positive, decrying "a sort of Catholicism; not the Catholicism that was, but which is," by which he meant, not well lived by the people.⁷⁰ And he praised "Catholic priests" as "more honest" and hardworking than their Protestant counterparts, as well as being "more intelligent, . . . know[ing] the basis upon which their church is founded," and able to "reason upon principles the Protestants cannot enter into."⁷¹ He elsewhere noted that "the Catholics have many pieces of truth," alongside "the Protestants, the Mahometans, and Heathens."⁷²

President Taylor's ideas about the garden were, however, ambiguous. James Talmage, in 1899, appears to have seen Taylor's references

69. John Taylor, *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, 150 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1892), 47–48. One might argue that the earliest possible appearance of the idea is an 1842 letter that Elder Orson Hyde wrote to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles during a visit to the Holy Land, in which he describes his feelings upon being in the garden of Gethsemane, and then, from the Mount of Olives says, "There, there is the place where the Son of the Virgin bore our sins and carried our sorrows." "Times and Seasons, 15 July 1842," 851, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-15-july-1842/5>. It is difficult to say that Hyde was teaching the garden atonement, both because his writing may be indicative of him physically pointing to various locations in the New Testament and vividly describing them, and his mentions of the Atonement later in his life do not identify the garden as having any significance. *Journal of Discourses*, 16:232. See also Hilton and Barringer, "Use of Gethsemane," 60n34.

70. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:22.

71. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:22.

72. *Journal of Discourses*, 1:155.

about sweating blood as being associated with the crucifixion.⁷³ But others read it differently. In 1888, B. H. Roberts repeated Taylor's theory and viewed it as involving the garden. More than the location of the event, however, Roberts focused on the importance of the idea of vicarious suffering of pains and sorrows (apart from a penalty of sin).⁷⁴ Importantly, Roberts's development of this idea involves him rejecting the traditional Christian view of the garden (and the view being espoused by Lorenzo Snow five years later), arguing that "there was something more . . . in the suffering of the Messiah [in the garden] than merely the ordinary pangs and terrors of personal death," but rather, "as stated by the late President John Taylor," Christ mystically suffered "the weight, the responsibilities and the burden of the sins of all men."⁷⁵ Connecting B. H. Roberts's views to the cross taboo and its underlying causes is complex, perhaps fittingly for someone like Roberts. On the one hand, Roberts was one of the most prominent and first proponents of the Ensign Peak cross proposal, struck an ecumenical tone in that capacity, and was even buried underneath a cross tombstone.⁷⁶ Yet Roberts was also well known to give "aggressively anti-Catholic" radio addresses,⁷⁷ and his influential apostasy-narrative writings relied heavily on "anti-Catholic polemics."⁷⁸ In his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, he recounted a skeptical account of Constantine's vision on the Milvian bridge (fair enough, as many call it into question), but then strangely emphasized as a possible motivation for the story "the

73. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 80–81 and note j, 78–82.

74. B. H. Roberts, *The Gospel: An Exposition of its First Principles; and Man's Relationship to Deity* (Salt Lake City: Contributor Company, 1888).

75. Roberts, *The Gospel*, 24.

76. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 87.

77. Eric R. Dursteler, "Historical Periodization in the LDS Great Apostasy Narrative," in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 46n14.

78. Dursteler, "Historical Periodization," 33.

cunning invention of interested priests seeking to make the cross an object of veneration,”⁷⁹ linking the cross with the apostasy that consummated in Rome’s embrace of the faith. While this occurs after Roberts first adopted the developing garden atonement view, the role of such apostasy narratives and their connection to the cross would become increasingly important.

The watershed moment for the garden theory was likely the publication of James E. Talmage’s book *Jesus the Christ* in 1915, with an additional revised edition in 1916, the same year that the Ensign Peak controversy raged and brought the issue of the cross to the fore. As noted, Talmage’s views on the atonement in 1899 were centered “on the cross.”⁸⁰ By the time Talmage wrote *Jesus the Christ*, however, something important had changed. Because of the federal government’s actions to suppress polygamy in Utah, and polygamy’s concomitant decline as a (or even *the*) central organizing soteriological concept in the faith, a “profound transformation of Mormonism” occurred.⁸¹ The principle that had “set them apart” was evaporating under government pressure, resulting in “LDS authors turning their attention more fully to . . . crafting a theology of Atonement,” among other things, including Taylor’s writings in *Mediation and Atonement*.⁸² This time period was “an extremely fertile theological era of definition,”⁸³ and Talmage played a central role in it, perhaps singlehandedly reshaping the very doctrine of Deity for the Church.⁸⁴ In this period, in part owing to the ongoing

79. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1895) 128.

80. Talmage, *Articles of Faith*, 82.

81. Young, “Long Narratives,” 325.

82. Young, “Long Narratives,” 325.

83. Dursteler, “Historical Periodization,” 25.

84. See Kirkland, “Jehovah as the Father,” 36–44.

assimilation into Protestant America,⁸⁵ the Church was looking to reestablish the ways in which it was set apart from Christian faiths,⁸⁶ and Catholicism became a straightforward and oft-appealed-to foil for Mormonism in its apostasy narratives, including Talmage's foundational 1909 work, *The Great Apostasy*. Such works were, at times, "strident[ly] anti-Catholic,"⁸⁷ drawing upon polemics of Protestant writers as well as Enlightenment advocates such as Voltaire and Hume.⁸⁸

Following suit, Talmage's writings on the apostasy—some of the most influential in Mormonism—decried the "tyranny . . . [of] the thoroughly apostate and utterly corrupt . . . Church of Rome,"⁸⁹ leaving nearly no practice or belief untouched. For Talmage, making Mosheim's words his own, the Catholic belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist was "an absurd tenet, and a 'monstrous and unnatural doctrine.'"⁹⁰ Eucharistic adoration was "a very pernicious practice of idolatry."⁹¹ He criticized the early emergence of desert monasticism as a "perverted view of life," "unnatural," and "frenzied,"⁹² and argued that the apostate Church, "as early as the fourth century," began to teach "that it was an act of virtue to deceive and lie, when by that means the interests of the church might be promoted."⁹³ Liturgically, Tal-

85. Armand L. Mauss, "Assimilation and Ambivalence: The Mormon Reaction to Americanization," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 1 (1989): 33–34.

86. See Miranda Wilcox, "Narrating Apostasy and the LDS Quest for Identity," in Wilcox and Young, *Standing Apart*, 96–99.

87. Dursteler, "Historical Periodization," 25.

88. Dursteler, "Historical Periodization," 33–34, 49n50.

89. Dursteler, "Historical Periodization," 28.

90. James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1909), 120.

91. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 121.

92. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 105.

93. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 107.

mage claimed that “the Church” abandoned “the pristine simplicity of its worship” and replaced it with “elaborate ceremonies, patterned after Judaistic ritual and heathen idolatries,”⁹⁴ including, among other things, the “burning of incense” (a practice with “pagan origin and heathen significance”),⁹⁵ and the introduction of “the adoration of images, pictures, and effigies.”⁹⁶ This last point would prove critical. Like B. H. Roberts before him, Talmage was keen to decry the story of Constantine’s vision of the cross, the sincerity of his conversion, his making “Christianity the religion of the state,” and the fact that “he made the cross the royal standard” of a Church that “had already become apostate.”⁹⁷ Thus, Talmage reaffirms that the cross was itself a sign of apostate Christianity, an admixture of worldly paganism and idolatry.

With this view of Catholicism and the apostasy presupposed, it is perhaps understandable to find Talmage, in *Jesus the Christ*, making a novel theological move that dramatically distanced Mormons from the cross, Catholicism, and broader Christianity: expressly subordinating the suffering of the cross to the suffering in the garden, this apparently being the first time any Latter-day Saint leader did so. Contrary to the teachings of Latter-day Saint leaders before him, Talmage asserted that “the thought that [Christ] suffered through fear of death [in the garden] is untenable.”⁹⁸ Instead, Jesus

struggled and groaned under a burden such as no other being who has lived on earth might even conceive as possible. It was not physical pain, nor mental anguish alone, that caused Him to suffer such torture as to

94. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 113.

95. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 115.

96. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 115.

97. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy*, 76.

98. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to Holy Scriptures both Ancient and Modern* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915), 613.

produce an extrusion of blood from every pore; but a spiritual agony of soul such as only God was capable of experiencing . . .

In some manner, actual and terribly real though to man incomprehensible, the Savior took upon Himself the burden of the sins of mankind from Adam to the end of the world.

Talmage then argued that “the further tragedy of the night, and the cruel inflictions that awaited Him on the morrow, to culminate in the frightful tortures of the cross, could not exceed the bitter anguish through which He had successfully passed.”⁹⁹ Indeed, in the later chapter on the crucifixion, Elder Talmage states that that “Eloi, Eloi” cry from the cross merely might have been a second suffering of the pains of the Atonement, but includes it as an afterthought: “It seems, that in addition to the fearful suffering incident to crucifixion, the agony of Gethsemane had recurred, intensified beyond human power to endure.”¹⁰⁰ For Talmage, at this point, it is the garden, not the cross, in which Christ fights “the supreme contest with the powers of evil.”¹⁰¹

Given the emphasis on the Atonement within the LDS faith, it makes sense that in this period there would be an increasing discomfort in associating this all-important event with the cross (a sign of apostasy and Catholicism), particularly when reference could be made to definitively Mormon scriptures (Mosiah 3:7 and Doctrine and Covenants 19) to assert the garden atonement. The cross-taboo was driven, in no small part, by “a desire to disassociate [the church] from the Catholic Church,”¹⁰² and the evidence suggests that the garden atonement figures into this in important ways. Subsequent influential Mormon writers would make the connection between the cross and the apostasy, on the one hand, and the garden and the atonement as restored knowledge, on the other, even more concrete.

99. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 614.

100. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 661.

101. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 613.

102. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 145.

Joseph Fielding Smith was a highly influential writer on the apostasy within Mormonism whose writings represent a “culminat[ion]” of the thinking and writings of “Roberts and Talmage.”¹⁰³ According to some, he was “one of the most important doctrinal thinkers and probably the most influential conservative force of Mormonism’s second century,” publishing “more books and articles than any other Mormon president.”¹⁰⁴ His writings in the mid-1950s (at the same time the cross taboo was formalizing) were explicit in connecting the apostasy, the false veneration of the cross and belief that the Atonement occurred upon it, and the true belief that the Atonement happened in the garden. As he taught in *Doctrines of Salvation*:

A great many people have an idea that when he was on the cross, and nails were driven into his hands and feet, that was his great suffering. His great suffering was before he ever was placed upon the cross. It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that the blood oozed from the pores of his body: ‘Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink.’¹⁰⁵

Making himself somewhat of an unwilling witness to the previous widespread belief in the Church that the Atonement occurred on the cross (and that Doctrine and Covenants 19 was read by some as referring to events on the cross), Smith, after quoting Doctrine and Covenants 19, says “*That was not when he was on the cross; that was in the garden.*”¹⁰⁶

103. Dursteler, “Historical Periodization,” 29.

104. Dursteler, “Historical Periodization,” 29.

105. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, vol. 1, compiled by Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 130.

106. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:130.

Smith taught this in general conference as early as 1947.¹⁰⁷ And Smith also stridently taught in one book with an entire section dedicated to “The Wearing of the Cross,” that “to look upon [the cross] as an emblem to be revered because of the fact that our Savior died upon [it] is repugnant to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”¹⁰⁸ As with Roberts and Talmage, Smith, too, claimed that the “custom of adoring the cross” grew “out of the purported vision given to Constantine,” but that “such a custom is repugnant and contrary to the true worship of our Redeemer.”¹⁰⁹ He asserted that “we may be definitely sure that if our Lord had been killed with a dagger or with a sword, it would have been very strange if religious people this day would have graced such a weapon by wearing and adoring it because it was by such a means that our Lord was put to death.”¹¹⁰ Reed rightly identifies Smith as a central figure in the reinforcement of the cross taboo within the Church.¹¹¹

Bruce R. McConkie also figures prominently on this issue, and his theological influence is well attested.¹¹² McConkie infamously identified the Catholic Church as the “Church of the Devil” spoken of in the Book of Mormon,¹¹³ taught that the “apostate” “degenerate Christian Church developed the practice of using symbolic crosses in the architecture of

107. Joseph Fielding Smith, *One Hundred Eighteenth Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1947), 147–48.

108. Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Wearing of the Cross,” *Answers to Gospel Questions*, vol. 4 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 17

109. Smith, “Wearing of the Cross,” 17.

110. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 119.

111. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 117–19.

112. David John Buerger, “Speaking with Authority: The Theological Influence of Elder Bruce R. McConkie,” *Sunstone* 10, no. 2 (1985): 8–13.

113. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 108, 129–31.

their buildings and as jewelry,” all a “morbid mania,”¹¹⁴ and further that “the sectarian world falsely suppose that the climax of [Christ’s] torture and suffering was on the cross—a view which they keep ever before them by the constant use of the cross as a religious symbol,” when in reality, “the great pains” of the Atonement were “endured in the Garden of Gethsemane.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, the first edition of *Mormon Doctrine*, which is organized in encyclopedic fashion, under the entry for “Mark of the Beast,” it reads, “See Sign of the Cross.”¹¹⁶ Another doctrinal enforcer of the cross taboo,¹¹⁷ it cannot be overlooked that McConkie is credited with providing “the seminal general conference talk” on the Atonement, “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane.”¹¹⁸ The garden-centric atonement theory was one he had been teaching in general conference for decades, even when it was not yet fully accepted. For example, in one year he taught that “in the Garden of Gethsemane . . . [Jesus] took upon himself the sins of the world,”¹¹⁹ even though earlier that year another apostle, Joseph Wirthlin, was still asserting the traditional teaching in general conference: “In the Garden of Gethsemane, [Jesus] suffered spiritual and mental anguish in anticipation of the crucifixion that was about to take place.”¹²⁰

114. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 160.

115. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 501.

116. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 426.

117. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 119–21.

118. Young, “Long Narratives,” 330n31.

119. Bruce R. McConkie, *One Hundred Nineteenth Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1948), 25.

120. Bruce R. McConkie, *One Hundred Eighteenth Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1948), 143.

Other figures that Reed identifies as being important in the cross-taboo saga, including Orson Whitney¹²¹ and J. Reuben Clark Jr.,¹²² both have connections to teaching the garden atonement in the early twentieth century when it was a novel idea still competing with the traditional doctrine. David O. McKay's nearly implacable prejudice against Catholicism is well attested,¹²³ and he may well have been a teacher of the garden atonement.¹²⁴

When tracked visually, one can see the rise of "Gethsemane" in general conference addresses which begin in earnest in the 1910s when Talmage published *Jesus the Christ* and the Ensign Peak controversy

121. Some might be tempted to think Whitney's views on the garden atonement stem from his famous dream-vision of Gethsemane. But recent scholarship from Dennis B. Horne—which itself assumes that Whitney's vision was of "the atonement (in the garden of Gethsemane)"—demonstrates a shift in Whitney's gloss of just what it was he was seeing. Dennis B. Horne, "Teachings and Testimony of the First Vision: Orson F. Whitney's Dream-Vision of the Savior," Interpreter Foundation, Mar. 4, 2020, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/blog-teachings-and-testimony-of-the-first-vision-12/>. The event was supposed to have happened in 1877, before John Taylor's *Mediation and Atonement*, and written accounts were published in 1883, 1885, 1889, 1926, and 1930 (Horne, "Teachings and Testimony"). In the accounts from the nineteenth century, Whitney sees Christ's agony, but nothing in the visions suggests this is a view of the atonement or that the suffering was expiatory. But in the accounts from 1926 onward, Whitney begins to add in information into the account about Christ suffering for the sins of the world (Horne, "Teachings and Testimony"). His 1930 autobiography has the same gloss. See Orson F. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls* (Salt Lake City: Zion's Printing and Publishing Co., 1930), 82.

122. Reed, *Banishing the Cross*, 117–18. See also J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949) 316; J. Reuben Clark, Jr., *One Hundred Eighteenth Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1954), 43–44.

123. Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 112–23.

124. See David O. McKay, *Glaring Evils of Our Day and a Warning to Youth*, McKay School of Education, Brigham Young University, accessed Sept. 21, 2022, <https://www.education.byu.edu/mckay/67apr6.html>.

first brought conflicting ideas of devotional use of the cross into focus in the Mormon arena:¹²⁵

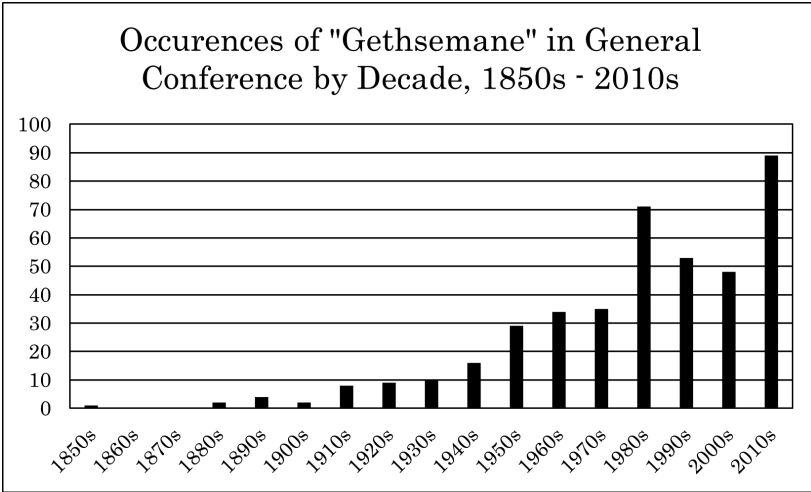


Figure 1

IV. Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the garden atonement—a belief not held or taught by Latter-day Saints until late in the nineteenth century, and not clearly taught until the beginning of the twentieth—came to prominence and solidified alongside the cross taboo and for the same reasons. As polygamy began to falter under pressure at the turn of the century, Mormons sought redefinition as well as assimilation into the broader culture, all while seeking to remain distinct. During this period of theological innovation, apostasy narratives derived from anti-Catholic Protestant and Enlightenment narratives set up Catholicism as a foil

125. These numbers were gathered by searching *Gethsemane* in the database located at <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>. For a fuller account of the statistical usage of *Gethsemane* in general conference addresses, see Hilton and Barringer, “Use of Gethsemane.”

to Mormonism's restoration, and increasingly decried the cross as a sign of apostasy. At the same time, Mormon leaders increasingly began teaching that Jesus's key suffering occurred not on the cross, as apostate Christianity believed, but in the garden of Gethsemane, and they also began to take a strong stance against devotional use of the cross, identifying it as a Catholic symbol (that is, an apostate one). The two doctrines appear to have largely developed and solidified side-by-side, likely serving to mutually reinforce one another.

None of this is to say that today Latter-day Saints hold on to the garden atonement doctrine and their discomfort with the cross because of any conscious anti-Catholicism. But these views have had lasting impact on Mormon belief and practice. Today, Latter-day Saint devotional art associates Jesus's atonement with the garden of Gethsemane and largely eschews the crucifixion.¹²⁶ In 2018, the Church introduced a primary children's song entitled "Gethsemane," strongly reinforcing the garden atonement as "the hardest thing that ever was done, the greatest pain that ever was known, the biggest battle that ever was won."¹²⁷ The Church's new logo, announced in 2020, which features an image of the Lutheran statue, the *Christus*, by Bertel Thorvaldsen, similarly reinforces LDS discomfort with the cross and its relation to the Atonement. In making the announcement of the new logo, President Russell Nelson was keen to emphasize that it "portrays the *resurrected living* Lord," noting that "*this symbol* should feel familiar to many, as we have long identified the restored gospel with the *living, resurrected Christ*."¹²⁸ Such statements have an obvious, if unstated second half, echoing

126. See Douglas Davies, *The Mormon Culture of Salvation: Force, Grace and Glory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 43, 46.

127. "Gethsemane," *The Friend*, Mar. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/2018/03/gethsemane?lang=eng>.

128. "The Church's New Symbol Emphasizes the Centrality of the Savior," *Mormon Newsroom*, Apr. 4, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-symbol-church-of-jesus-christ>.

the teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley: “For us, the cross is the symbol of the dying Christ, while our message is a declaration of the Living Christ.”¹²⁹ “The cross [was] the instrument of His torture, the terrible device designed to destroy the Man of Peace.”¹³⁰ Most recently, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated his address at the October 2022 general conference to explaining “why we generally do *not* use the iconography of the cross,” including that it is a sign that “we are . . . a *restored* church” whose “origins and . . . authority go back *before* the time of councils, creeds, and iconography,” emphasizing Jesus’s “Resurrection,” and explicitly referencing “President Gordon B. Hinkley[’s]” teaching that “the lives of our people must [be] . . . the symbol of our [faith].”¹³¹ As recent scholarship confirms, such views continue to have significant impact on church members who exhibit strong aversions to imagery of the crucifixion and strong preferences for images of Gethsemane,¹³² something that appears likely to continue for the foreseeable future and will likely reinforce the belief in the garden atonement theory.

129. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Symbol of Our Faith,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2005, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2005/04/the-symbol-of-our-faith?lang=eng>.

130. Hinckley, “Symbol of Our Faith.”

131. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lifted Up upon the Cross” (Oct. 2022), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2022/10/41holland?lang=eng>.

132. See John Hilton et al. “Latter-day Saints and Images of Christ’s Crucifixion,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 49–79.

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"Anointing for Burial,"
17 x 30", oil on panel,
by Rose Datoc Dall, 2022

BODIES OF CHRIST WRITING CONTEST

Editor's Note: In 2021, *Dialogue* hosted a writing contest titled Bodies of Christ with the following parameters:

Dialogue seeks submissions of poetry (up to 100 lines), short fiction (3500–6000 words), and personal voice (nonfiction, narrative essays, 250–3000 words) centered around our theme. Submissions should fit *Dialogue*'s mission, and the work or author should have a Latter-day Saint/Mormon connection (past or present). Submissions for this theme can encompass any subject that wrestles with the confluence of body and spirit, the temporal and the spiritual, the imperfect body and perfection embodied (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19–20; 12:12–13; Romans 12:1–5; 2 Cor. 12:7–10.)

We received numerous excellent submissions. In this issue we are pleased to present the winner of the contest.

TIMES AND SEASONS

Margaret Olsen Hemming

They came to us just before spring arrived, at the same time I began putting seeds into the ground in my garden. Lettuce, spinach, arugula. The ground was just getting warm enough to welcome some cool-weather plants and I had just planted seeds that morning. Simon was six years old and his sister Juniper right behind him, almost five. I had gotten a phone call two hours earlier that the Department of Social Services had removed them from their home. The placement would be for somewhere between three days and fifteen months. Could we take them?

Over the next several weeks, the garden greens began peeping up out of the ground, a bright, almost impossible shade of green that made me want to kneel down and munch on them straight from the soil. We also started to learn about Simon and Juniper: their individual quirks and dislikes, the way they spoke, what would trigger a tantrum, their complicated relationships. For the first week, they took turns getting up throughout the night and wandering around the house like pale ghosts, turning on every single light, while my husband and I wearily took turns getting up to send them back to bed, reminding them of their nightlights and the hallway light, and turning everything else off again. As they began feeling more confident in a new space, they asserted themselves in typically childlike ways like refusing to clean up a mess or rejecting the vegetables on their plates. They told us their opinions and their histories, sharing the narratives which had helped shape them. As my understanding of them grew, they moved from blank-faced strangers in my mind into complex and intricate individuals. Each of their bodies held an entire universe of history and possibility.



When my husband and I first started telling people at church we had been licensed and would begin fostering, most assumed it was with adoption as the goal, to add to our own three biological children. “Congratulations!” they would say, “How long before the children become yours forever?” We had to explain we weren’t even considering adoption, just providing a safe place for a while. Sometimes it confused them. Mormons are so accustomed to planning for eternity that forming relationships that are meant to pass away feels foreign. Not for time and eternity. Not even for this earthly life. Just for a few weeks or months, a tiny fraction of mortality.

People frequently ask me how I can stand to say goodbye to the children. In some ways, this question confuses me. I don’t experience the temporary nature of fostering as something bad—in fact, there’s something beautiful in it. So much of the relationships in my life are built around the idea of eternity. The timeline of fostering acts as a counterweight to the heaviness of “forever” without losing any of the value of the relationship. It’s like the work of caring for an apple tree compared to a squash. The tree will last for generations while the squash’s lifetime is just a few months, but a good gardener nourishes both and values the fruit. When a child is in my home, I give them all the love and care that is in me. They are mine for a time. And yet they are not truly mine. No matter what they’ve been through, they always long for their real parents, the ones whose smell, voice, and touch are familiar. Their parents almost always long for them in return. The separation of their bodies is a grief beyond what I can imagine. It’s so powerful it appears as a physical ache, like an almost-visible missing limb. It is a relationship I am only interested in supporting, not replacing.



No one can care for a young child without getting to know the child’s body intimately. As days passed with Simon and Juniper, I got to know their bodies while simultaneously watching them change. They

put on weight and their cheeks filled out. Their muscles grew stronger, and their hair grew thicker. As we taught them to use the toilet, bathed them, put on band aids, washed faces, brushed teeth, wiped their bottoms, applied sunscreen, cut their hair, and clipped their toenails, I came to know the soft parts of their skin. The places they liked being tickled and where they were too sensitive to touch. The infection in one toe. The cowlick on Simon's forehead and another at the nape of his neck. I can tell you which of his teeth have had cavities filled and what Juniper smells like in the morning. Although smaller than adults, children's bodies seem to take up much more space. They always need something: a drink, a snack, a bathroom, a tissue, a band aid, a nap. Their growth emphasizes the human condition of the constant renewal of each cell: as they inched upward, I thought about how bodies continually replace themselves, so that even the same body is not literally the same material after a time. Our stomach lining is replaced every three weeks. Red blood cells live only about four months. Every few weeks we have entirely new skin. Within just a few months of living with me, everything I could see in Simon and Juniper's bodies was completely familiar and also brand new. Our bodies decay and endure simultaneously.



Some Mormons tell me that my relationships with my foster children will be forever, even though my husband and I are not sealed to them. "They'll recognize you in the eternities," these people say reassuringly. I rather hope that's not true. I like the idea that the children might forget this time in their lives, experiencing God's healing so completely that the memories of this period fade into nothingness. I have no scriptural or prophetic foundation for this, but something whispers its truth to me. Scripture tells us that God forgets our sins completely following repentance, which seems paradoxical for an omniscient being. How can a God who knows everything forget large parts of our lives? Similarly, I

hope a resurrected soul can retain the wisdom learned from life experiences while not being forced to remember the worst of what happened to them. That would be the kind of impossible equation an endlessly just and merciful divine being might offer. Maybe grace presents the opportunity to leave behind the parts of us that broke us open. Maybe those scars don't have to last forever, marking our bodies and souls with the memories of trauma. I think God loves us enough to allow some things to be temporary and simply pass away into the ether, sloughed off like dead skin cells.



Juniper and Simon seemed drawn to my garden, as children often are. I firmly believe that time in that space is some of the best therapeutic healing I can offer anyone. As the summer wore on, the nightly salads were replaced with eggplant, cucumbers, green beans, and tomatoes. The children insisted they hated tomatoes and gagged when tomatoes appeared at the dinner table. They refused to let any near their mouths. As we harvested vegetables, I let them taste anything they wanted right off the plant. Basil, carrot greens, blackberries, and sour gherkins all went past their lips with various reactions. One sunny day, they popped bright red cherry tomatoes into their mouths and I watched their eyes get big with delight. After that, any time I worked in the garden, Juniper would wander around the beds shouting “Yum, yum, yummy!” as tomato juice dripped down her chin. The joy on her face filled me with gratitude for the divine gift of delicious and healing fruits and vegetables.

There are narrow parameters of what I can do for these children. I'm not there to fix them or heal them. Trauma runs deep and leaves its marks on bodies, especially little ones. The old idea of children being resilient and bouncing back quickly has made way for new research which informs us that trauma, particularly childhood trauma, affects us mentally and physically in unexpected and sometimes unacknowledged

ways.¹ A short time of stability and safety will not undo what they've experienced; they face a lifetime—possibly longer—of work in order to heal. I know what I cannot do, but I also know where my strengths lie. I can put seeds in the ground and nurture them into delicious food which helps Juniper's body and soul grow strong. In that moment of surprise and joy with the first tomato, the spiritual and physical realms revealed their inextricable intertwinement to me. Jesus showed deep care and concern for bodies in his miraculous healings of the wounded, sick, and hungry. While the power of spit and mud came from the man applying it to a blind man's eyes, the power of a tomato is inherent to itself. It is a perfect gift of God, formed from sunlight, earth, and water, that simultaneously offers temporal and spiritual relief.



The children, particularly Simon, loved going to church and Primary. The Primary president told me he eagerly put his hand up to respond to absolutely any question with a loud, confident answer of “God?!” He quickly learned the Primary songs and asked for them at bedtime. His favorite was “Families Can Be Together Forever,” and I wondered what went through his head when my husband sang it to him in Simon's dim bedroom in the evening. The words and ideas seemed both beautiful and jarring in his circumstances. Did the words about families being “so good to me” ring true to him? Did he long for a promise that he would be returned to his father and never leave him again? I never asked him these questions, but the look of peace on his face during the song gave me at least a few answers. Something in the lyrics felt healing to him.

The idea of a family that lasted forever clearly made a big impression on him, particularly after a Primary lesson about the temple. One day

1. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

as we passed a field in which a wedding was taking place, he watched carefully for a few minutes and then sighed and said sadly, “Too bad they’re not in the temple so they won’t be together forever.” I felt my heart break into a few more pieces as I considered the ramifications of the theology he had learned in my faith community. I told him I didn’t believe in a God who would keep apart anyone in Heaven who loves each other. God is far too dynamic and compassionate for a limitation like that. “So, any family can be together forever? Even if they don’t go to the temple?” he asked. I hesitated, not because I don’t believe in the power of love but because I’m not even sure I believe in forever. “Yes,” I said, looking down at him. “Forever.” He grinned broadly.

I thought about that conversation again on the first cool morning of fall as I walked my dog in the early morning light. Simon had left our home the evening before and my whole body felt dull and heavy as I processed it. The house felt startlingly quiet and calm with only my own three children and Juniper in it, a reminder that each little body amplifies the burden of parenting exponentially rather than linearly. As I walked, I pondered about what passes away and what remains. Mortal bodies, a “frail existence,” as Eliza R. Snow described them, seem more real and critically important than ethereal souls when I am doing the never-ending daily work of caring for them.² It’s hard to believe they are what will fade into nonexistence while something we can’t even see endures forever. I struggled that morning merely with the concept that only the weekend before, I had washed Simon’s hair and helped him tie his shoes. I was his guardian, bound to him by a legal relationship a judge had ordered and society recognized. I was also tied to him through love, built over a million sacrifices and shared experiences. Forty-eight hours later, the law recognized no relationship between us and I had no influence over his life or even a right to know what happened to him next. Only the love remained.

2. Eliza R. Snow, “My Father in Heaven,” Oct. 1845, *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, IL), Nov. 15, 1845, vol. 6, no. 17, p. 1039.

Sandy Solomon wrote in the final stanza of her poem “Spring Recalled in Spring”:

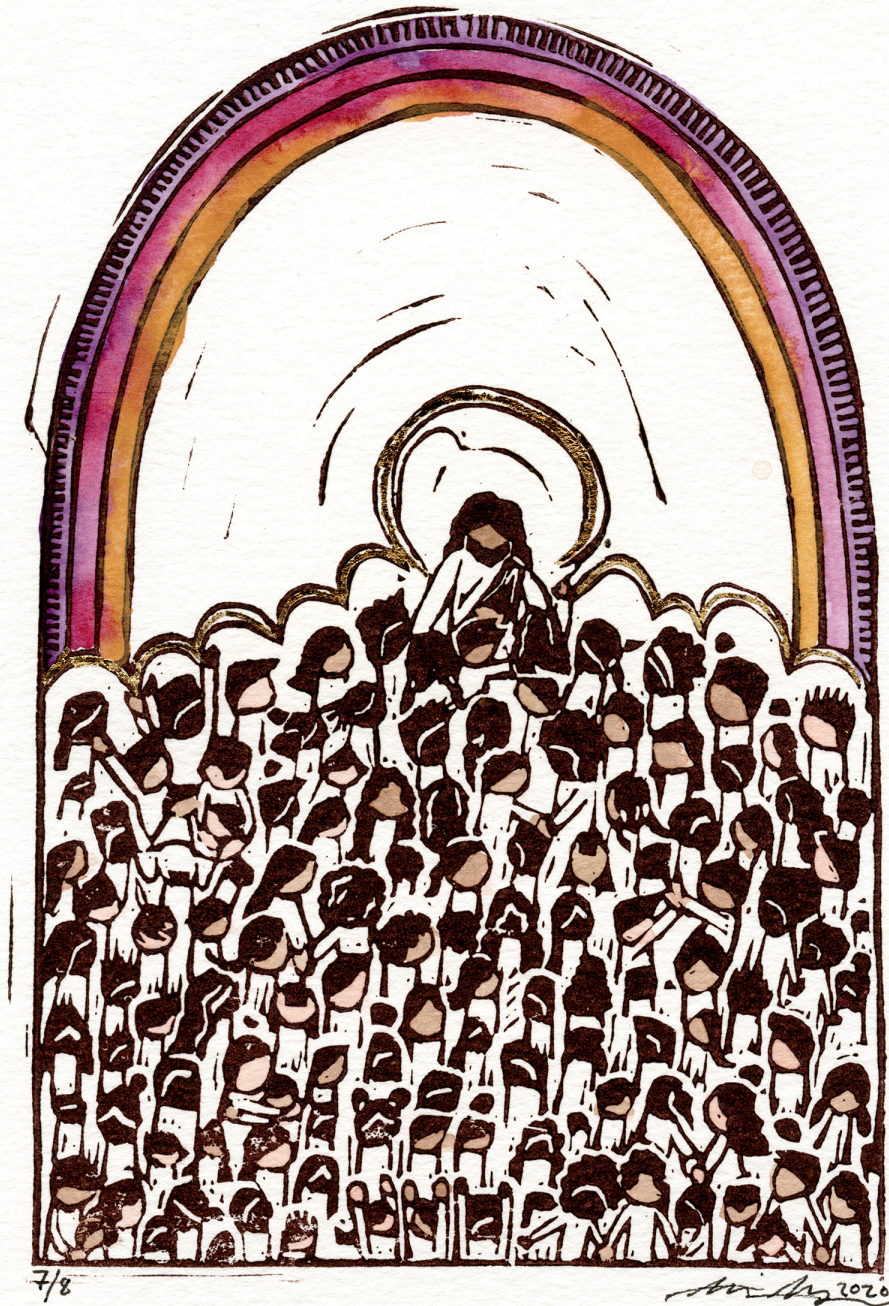
Love won't be reckoned in gain or loss;
it was and yet it is.
Across the woods the dogwood floats,
giving itself away.³

I feel the power of a freely given and temporal love in sunlight, tomatoes, the changing colors of tree leaves, and a child's growing body. It was and yet it is. The divine equation will never be resolved in mortality.

A breeze and overcast sky, along with fading leaves and drooping plants, signaled to me that I'd be pulling out my garden for the year soon. The tomatoes which had started as seeds the size of a fingernail clipping six months earlier had grown into bushes eight feet tall, bent over with weight and losing their battle with a fungus. Putting a garden to bed for the season is as much work as waking it up in the spring. All the annuals are removed, cut up, and mixed into the compost pile. Over time, the plants decompose and return to the building blocks of plant matter: nitrogen, carbon, phosphorus, calcium, oxygen. Nature works so quickly that within a few weeks, the different substances are unrecognizable. A year and a half from now, I'll use the soil from that same pile to nourish lettuce seeds for a coming spring. It's almost like it fades away into nothingness and lasts forever, all at the same time.

3. Sandy Solomon, “Spring Recalled in Spring,” *The New Yorker*, Oct. 18, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/25/spring-recalled-in-spring>.

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"Beloved Little Ones," 8 x 10",
linoleum block print, watercolor, metal leaf,
by M. Alice Abrams, 2020

PRESSED PALMS

Caitlin McNally Olsen

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.

—Romans 12:2

One spring weekend, with a six-month-old and a new career, I found myself dipping into depression, my body sore and restless and exhausted. Change the scenery, I told myself, then suggested to my husband that we take our baby to the Grand Canyon for the night. Drive a few hours, get a cheap hotel, see this beautiful chasm neither of us had ever seen, and come home grateful to sleep in our own bed. So we went. We pushed our baby in his stroller along quiet Arizona streets and ate pizza (or was it burgers?) and slept in a cheap, clean hotel. We woke the next morning and went to the Grand Canyon; we took photos at its edge and stood in awe, like good tourists, and began the drive home. We all wore green; it was Saint Patrick's Day. I still have those photos.

On that drive home, away from the canyon, we were in a head-on collision on a two-lane freeway. I was driving and swerved just enough for our car to be clipped near the back, sending us rolling off the road. I don't remember much, as I hit my head on the ground through the sunroof as the small SUV rolled, but I do have some vague impressions. I fuzzily remember, after we'd come to a stop and other cars had pulled over to help, sobbing out these words: "I can feel my fingers, I can feel my toes! I can move my fingers, I can move my toes!" Over and over and over. Answering a question someone had asked or answering a question I was asking myself, I'm not sure. I do not remember my husband leaving his passenger seat to rush to our baby who was screaming behind us. I don't remember my baby boy's screams. I do not remember

the kind stranger who gave me a blanket from her car, a blanket we still have and use, a blanket my daughter slept with last night.

In my work as a psychotherapist, there is a constant conversation between my clients and me. Each one of them wholly their own, existing and filling a life and breathing air that is so far from the air I breathe. Each of them is a part of the whole that makes up “my clients.” Each one of them contributing their disparate voice to create what my clients collectively say, think, want, and do, allowing me, in my limited individual reality, to say absurd things like “My clients prefer daytime sessions.” I know it’s not the whole truth, I can think of half a dozen clients who do *not* prefer daytime sessions even as the absurdity comes out of my mouth, and yet, most of them do and the majority rules and “my clients” have spoken.

Me, taking it all in and piecing it all together, all while representing to them the collective that is “therapist.” Me, making concrete for them the abstraction “mental health professional” while they, in turn, make concrete for me the abstraction “clientele.” We talk one on one, we talk one on two, we talk one on many. There are individual sessions and couples sessions and group sessions. And moving repeatedly between all of them and me is this:

My depression is worse, they say.

I’m so anxious, they say.

Our marriage is broken, they say.

What is your body doing right now as you say that to me? I ask in response.

I don’t know, they say, and then: Why are we talking about my body?

I do remember this: Sitting up in a hospital bed, confused as to why there was gravel in my hair. Asking my husband what happened, why are we here, where’s the baby. Distracted with concern about breastfeeding; does the hospital have a pump I can use? We hadn’t brought mine; I’d never planned to be separated from the baby. The small electric breast pump would have careened dangerously around the car had

it been brought; it would have likely been broken beyond repair, perhaps broken a body part, or an entire body, beyond repair. We had considered bringing our dog, a giant black lab. She almost certainly would have died, flung about as we rolled, had we not decided to leave her home with a dog-sitting neighbor.

I see my neighbors and their bodies, you see yours, mine see me. Our bodies have been seen by thousands of people, viewed, consumed visually, over and over and over. Likely by no one person more than ourselves; mirrored in glass or distorted by our eyes' perspective, we look at our own bodies. I look at my hands and fingers as I type these words. I imagine how I look as I sit at my desk. How do I look from the front? And the side? What about the back? From a higher perspective? From down low, where my children's blue eye lines beam?

Those kids. They look at me and watch me and try to catch my eye. They have learned to knock when the door is closed (though they, of course, don't always remember) and they have learned to say, "Excuse me, Mom," (though they, of course, sometimes forget) and they have even learned to take my hand when I am in conversation and squeeze it twice to silently get my attention. I taught them that. I also taught them that when I squeeze back, twice, it means I am aware of them, aware they would like my attention, and I am asking for their patience, knowing I know they are there, hoping that their knowing about my knowing is enough for now.

How do you know depression is here? I ask my clients. What does anxiety do to you? They often will tell me: I'm so tired, or, My heart is racing.

Hearts race in response to so many things. Anxiety, yes. And also excitement. And fear. Stress. Arousal. Love. I wonder about Mary's heartbeat when Gabriel came to her. I wonder about Joseph's when Mary came to him. I wonder about Mary Magdalene and her heartbeat. Jesus's, too. With His family, His apostles, His followers, His enemies. Perfect love was there, in that heart, and I wonder if it was beating fast

at times, like the rest of ours do, or if the perfection of that love meant for an ever-calm heart, a steady beat.

I tell the story of the car accident often, mostly to my son, who survived it with barely a scratch. He and I share the experience of knowing it happened, knowing the story by heart, loving the story, and feeling, deep down, as if it must have happened to someone else.

It transformed me, the car accident. Or maybe I conformed myself to it, or rather what it showed me, and what still eludes me about it now. How did we all survive? Seeing the car in the tow lot the next day, seeing how misshapen and tiny it looked, I wondered: How did we ever fit in that thing, let alone get out of it? I wonder still.

We hit our beats, my clients and me.

Tell me about your body, I say.

What do you mean? They ask.

I mean this: Tell me what you feel physically. What do you notice, *physically*, from the inside out?

This is hard, they say. I don't usually think this way.

I know, I tell them. We're trained by this world to think about how our bodies look and we're not trained to think about how our bodies feel. It can help to close your eyes; What do you notice?

I notice the conforming of our minds to the world, believing the lie that visual appeal is the guiding purpose of our bodies' existence. I notice it in myself, always there, playing at the edges. *What do I look like from the front?* I once believed my body's appearance held the key to transformation. I now believe my mind holds the keys, and always has.

We can't forget, I tell my clients, the human mind is housed in the human brain, and the brain is an organ in the body.

Why did it happen the way it did? Why did we go on the road trip? Because I felt depression creeping around the edges, stalking me in a way it hadn't before. I wanted to flee, to believe it couldn't find me in Arizona, to believe that if it did, I could lead it to the rim of the grandest

canyon I'd ever seen. Believe that it would lunge for me near the edge, and I'd smoothly sidestep, send it floating, flying, hurtling hard for the desert floor.

This conversation is repeated between my husband and me:

Why are we here? I say. Where's the baby?

We were in a car accident. James is with a family from the local ward. You met them last night, handed him to them yourself.

He's okay? I ask.

Yes, he's just fine.

Wait, what happened though? Did we get to the Grand Canyon?

Another question.

Yes, and we were driving home when another driver fell asleep at the wheel.

Are they okay? Is everyone alright?

Yes. Everyone's okay. You got hurt the worst with that concussion.

Have I asked you this before? It feels like we've had this conversation before.

Yep. It's okay. The doctor says it's normal.

Later, when I started to regain myself, when my brain began healing hours after it had been concussed, I asked my husband: Did I drive well? When the other car started coming toward us, did I do a good job? Did I swerve as quickly as possible? He tells me yes, and I remember that he's told me yes several times already, and still I ask again: Did I drive well? In other words: Did I sidestep the tragedy that was hurtling toward us?

They come to me for change, my clients. Change my depression into joy. Change my anxiety into calm. Change my broken marriage into a happy one. And lately: Change my doubt back into faith. They come to me, having failed, as we all do, to transform their bodies, for a different kind of transformation; for a renewing of their minds, and, more and more, for a renewing of their souls. Their hearts race and their minds ache and their souls beg.

My child takes my hand; I feel soft fingers and a miniature palm wrap itself around my own. This little hand is warm and slight, and it squeezes twice. *Excuse me, Mom.* And I am called away from the ebb and flow of conversation, away from the wondering and the knowing, and I put my attention on the space between my own palm and the tiny palm, toward the warm air and hot energy moving between my skin and theirs. I close the space with my own squeeze, two times. *I know you need me; You know I know.*

My heart races at the car accident story (“memory” will never feel like the right word). How scared I must have been. How painfully light my body must have felt as gravity relocated once, twice, three times. How eerie and quiet it must have seemed once the car stopped its rolling. Quiet, except for the baby.

I want to know the way I once did, my clients tell me. I want to believe like I used to.

I know, I say.

It used to be so much easier, so simple, so straightforward, they say.

I know, I tell them.

The quiet is still there, a thick membrane between what I know I experienced and what I remember of the experience. It’s like looking through a fog, remembering a dream from the deepest sleep, peering through a lace veil with not one, not two, but three layers, the tiny patterned cutouts never quite lining up.

One client tells me about her grandfather. His voice reading scripture, his voice praying over meals, his voice when he answered the telephone. I thought God was just like my grandpa, she says. And then he died, and, without that voice, without him, I can’t hear God anymore.

I have one clear memory from between the moment of impact and the lifting of the fog, a memory accessible with ease and simplicity, as if the curtains parted for a second or two before closing again. I remember looking toward the backseat of the car as we rolled. Looking where my six-month-old was belted in his car seat, and seeing two

women, one on each side of him. They were sitting calmly, each looking out their own window. They weren't screaming. They weren't alarmed. They did not notice my gaze. They were still, neutral, almost bored. But they were there, wearing long dresses, with their hands clasped in their laps, on either side of my baby, as the world outside the car turned and turned and turned.

I didn't mean to bounce my brain off my skull when I left home that weekend, and yet it happened, and it helped. I transformed, and returned home with a deep gratitude for my life, my husband's life, my son's life. I went back to our cozy little house and a panting dog and parents who'd driven into town to take care of me, needing to check for themselves that my heart was still beating. Depression had rushed toward me at sixty miles per hour—and I had dodged it.

My clients, my children, my own slippery self, we all try dodging. We dodge questions and requests, insults and accusations, sleepy drivers and ghostly depression. We renew ourselves, iterating as we go. We sit on therapist's couches, we knock on closed doors, we squeeze little hands, we careen off roads. We see our own bodies and each other's bodies, we check for heartbeats within and without. We bounce our brains off our skulls, we hold our minds and wrap them around the imperfection of human love. And, occasionally, we sit calmly, hands in our laps, palms touching, watching the world turn upside down.

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"This Bitter Cup,"
8 x 10", oil on panel,
by Esther Hi'ilani Candari, 2021

ALL THINGS BOTH TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL

Mauri Pollard Johnson

*For by the power of my Spirit created I them; yea, all things both spiritual
and temporal.*

—*Doctrine & Covenants 29:31*

The therapist I had been seeing for my eating disorder had me take two pieces of paper and lay them on the ground, the space between them meant to represent how wide I viewed my waist. After I had laid the paper down, she had me lie between them, on my side, while she moved the two pieces to reflect the apparently objective reality of my torso wideness. When I stood up and looked at the carpeted void between the two white sheets, I didn't believe it. I was convinced that I had moved them closer in the process of standing up. Or perhaps my therapist had moved them in the brief moment when I wasn't looking. She pulled out the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and read to me the section on Body Dysmorphic Disorder. I answered yes to each of the criteria she read to me, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from the stark pieces of paper, which seemed to be pulling themselves further and further away from each other: seeing a very different reality than what my therapist was seeing.

The word *dysmorphia* has roots in ancient Greek, meaning misshapeness or ugliness. I take these words and wear them like a cloak. I absorb them. And although I have realized the extent to which I have embodied them, I wonder how deep they have truly sunk.

For those who deal with it, body dysmorphia is a state of existence. It is like water: you are numb to it when you are surrounded by it. It is

the conflation of truth and the utter distrust of what you see or feel in front of you juxtaposed to what others tell you. I fit into a size-two pant from Old Navy while shopping for new clothes as a self-initiation into grad school. And yet I take it as a mistake, a fluke, a one-time thing. I am too afraid to take them out of my closet, convinced they won't fit. It is a confusion of truth. My therapists tell me I have a disorder—that my dysmorphia literally morphs the way I see myself into something opposite to reality. But that doesn't make it any less painful when I look in the mirror and my reality is my dysmorphia. My husband tells me my body is beautiful, neighbors and family members and even strangers tell me I am “a tiny thing,” I live my life with the truth of thin privilege handed to me by the outside world. These are the truths outside of me. And yet, my truth is the distortions that my body dysmorphia presents to me. What is truth, then, if it is not subjective?

One of the many truths I hold within my religion is that my body and my spirit are stitched together with a divine thread—that “the spirit and the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15). To me, this truth argues the idea that if I were to peel my spirit away from my body—separate my soul for a brief moment to examine it under a microscope—they would appear identical. This theology also would argue that there is an inherent, eternal, celestial connection between my body and my spirit—a sharedness of things, a type of telepathy, a relationship so deep that only death could force them apart. If my spirit is connected to my body in such an intricate way—connected neurologically, systematically, emotionally, viscerally—does this mean that my body, then, has passed my dysmorphia on like a contagious virus or disease? Has my spirit, by unfortunate birthright, consequently inherited this disorder?

The distress that comes from my body dysmorphia brings me to compulsions: placing my hands on my hips to measure the width of my waist; touching my stomach over and over and over again to see how far it sticks out, to try and push it back in; obsessively trying on

tight dresses, skirts, shirts, underwear, anything to verify if they still fit, concretely convinced that they won't; staring at my body in mirrors and windows, turning from side to side, sucking in, pulling and pinching and pushing the parts that fill me with such self-loathing. If I do these just right, I can glimpse for a brief moment the perfection I have the potential to be, if only I had more willpower.

In the spiritual practice of fasting, we are told that our spirit becomes the master of our body. That forcing our body through spiritual starvation puts it into submission to our spirit. Giving into hunger means we are weak, means we are carnal, means we are damned. I was told that I am no longer allowed to fast. That starvation, for me, is no longer a spiritual practice. There are many first-Sunday church meetings—when those around me are engaging in our traditional, monthly fast—when I attend dripping with guilt and self-loathing. Thinking that, if only I could fast, starve, restrict for just a little bit, perhaps I could look a little more perfect, a little more beautiful, a little more obedient, a little more like Christ. Perhaps a twenty-four-hour starvation would be the thing to save me in all spheres.

Once, stopped at a red light on our way home from church, I asked my husband if I was a good person, choking through the tears hiding at the back of my throat. His reassuring words fell dead upon my lap.

I repeated the question a few weeks later, the asking now becoming a compulsion borne out of my obsession to know if I am okay, if I am good, if I can be saved.

I return to this asking again and again and again.

I wonder if my body and spirit, because of their connectedness, share experiences. Does my spirit encounter a similar type of dysmorphia that my body does? In reflection, this feels true to me. I had never wondered about the contorted form of my spirit before my body dysmorphia infected my body. I had always felt comfortable—confident, even—in my spiritual standing and appearance before myself, God, and

all those around me. But now I shrink—I hide behind metaphysical baggy sweaters and hate myself for not fitting.

Growing up, I was praised for being obedient, for being faithful, for following and not asking questions. I went to church every Sunday; I read my scriptures with our family and on my own, sitting under the covers in my bed as my parents would pass by to look in; I prayed every night and every morning before leaving for school; I prayed about every decision; I never broke the Word of Wisdom, the law of chastity, the law of the Sabbath day; I went on a mission when I received the revelation to go, despite the fact that I was seriously dating the person I wanted to marry and lacked any desire to serve; I accepted without question policies like church history like banning Black members from having the priesthood, polygamy, priesthood power and leadership positions given only to men, restrictions put upon LGBTQIA+ members and their family members, and so forth. I remember learning of the November 2015 policy preventing children of same-sex couples from being baptized and accepting it without flinching, wondering why people struggled with this, believing it made sense, pitying those who could not just “follow the prophet.” My spirit appeared flawless, but I was just going through the motions.

From age fifteen, when I first started dieting, until now, I have received praise for my willpower around food and my dedication to “healthy eating.” People tell me they want to be like me at potluck dinners and activities with free food. I hold my plate of salad or vegetables or heaping piles of fruit and let them adorn me with flattering words: *You eat so healthy! I wish I had your willpower! You're so good! You're so self-disciplined! I admire your self-control! I wish I was more like you!* At first, I would feel valued, loved, worthwhile. Now, I see how it slowly kills me. I usually stay silent, despite the tumult within me.

I was praised for this rigid obedience and faith, my staunch rule-following, just as I was with food and dieting and exercise. My religious observance was often as strict as my dieting-turned-eating-disorder:

never missing a day of seminary, even though the grade did not affect my GP; accepting policies that hurt others, never questioning the intent or impact; restraining from crossing any physical boundaries with my boyfriend of over six years, despite the fact that those around me, who seemed just as faithful and obedient as I was, were edging along the boundaries, stepping over lines to see what would happen. I had routines in place: read a page of scripture every night, say a prayer before bed, say a prayer before leaving in the morning, never miss church, wear dresses and skirts on Sundays, always say the most correct answer, the one the teacher was looking for, the one God was looking for, the safest response.

And yet, over the past few years, I have felt my faith maturing, expanding, growing out and up. This feels both freeing and terrifying. I have spent many of the weeks preceding multiple General Conference sessions begging God to help me know if my newfound empathy, compassion, and inner truths were sinful or wrong—to know if I was apostatizing myself. My family sees my expansion as separation—from the church, from the gospel, from God. They view my questions and confusions as disbelief. They see my frustrations as hatred. They see my striving for belonging and inclusion as mutilating the doctrine. From them, and many others who live within church orthodoxy, I must hide, shrink, compact my faith so I can fit within their mold of what a righteous person looks like.

When my body dysmorphia sets in, when my body feels expansive, I cope by shoving my body into compression workout shorts or yoga pants. The tight fabric squeezes my body closer to the shape I think it should be, although never quite enough.

I often shove my faith into a box, keeping it neat and tidy, closer to the shape that the people around me think it should be. When my spirit feels expansive, I see it as misshapen instead of miraculous. I force my beliefs, my emotion, my love to be small enough to stuff into the box.

The convergence of my body dysmorphia and spirit dysmorphia results in an explosion of mistrust. *If train A approaches the station at x miles per hour and Train B approaches the same station at y miles per hour, how likely is it that the Sabbath day will end in a puddle of tears and self-loathing?* Instead of the sacrament cleansing my soul, it magnifies the dirt caked to my skin. I have trained myself to sit during the ten minutes of ceremonial passing of the bread and water to recount my mistakes, tally off my sins, berate myself for weaknesses, for being human, for existing. I was taught that this was to be a time of spiritual masochism: think about all of the ways you are imperfect—all of the ways you are momentarily damned. I sit, suffocating in pain and shame. As I bow my head and close my eyes, I stare into a metaphysical mirror at my spirit, and a misshapen ugliness is reflected back to me—unworthy, unrighteous, repulsively sinful. I allow my hair to cover my face, to shield the disfigurement of my spiritual self and the tears that I can't stop.

People—usually people who don't know me well—still tell me they admire my self-control and willpower to not eat certain foods or to go running every day. I alone know the excruciating shame and self-repulsion I feel when I miss a day of running or eat the dessert at a party or complimentary bread at a restaurant. And people still tell me how they revere my faith and obedience. I accept their compliments, despite the sickening feeling when I realize I have questions and waverings and struggle to accept policies and traditions and there are days and days and days that I miss my routines and feel condemned forever. These two sides of my self, disfigured and morphed from the reality that others see, are pieces of me I don't know how to release.

My mind is inscribed with years of feeling ugly, of feeling disformed, of feeling imperfect, feeling sinful. Just as it is difficult to feel beautiful when my mind distorts the bodily image I see in the mirror, so

it is difficult to feel worthy when my mind distorts the spiritual image I see upon internal reflection. And although the sacramental ordinance has caused me grief and pain for the past few years, lately I have been meditating on the symbolism of the bread as body and the water as blood or lifeblood or spirit: both my own body and spirit, and that of Christ.

As I remember the body of Christ, I remember that he embodied all mortal experiences. Meaning that Christ, in the process of the Atonement, housed my dysmorphia within his body. And, as I take the sacrament, I—even if only momentarily—embody Christ: perfection, divinity, beauty in lack of comeliness.

As I drink the blessed water, I embody the spirit of Christ—or perhaps am reminded of the part of His spirit which already lives within me: perfection, divinity, holiness, worthiness. As I focus on seeing Christ within my spirit, I can, for a moment, see myself as whole rather than deformed.

We read in 2 Corinthians that “when [we] are weak, then [we] are strong.” My dysmorphia, both in body and spirit, are what I perceive to be my greatest weakness, and it’s hard to know how, as Ether reminds us in the Book of Mormon, this weakness could ever become a strength. And yet, it is in our weaknesses that we are compelled to bring Christ into our being, let him fill our cracks, let him come unto us. When we are weak, then we are strong because when we are weak is when we let Christ fill us.

Although this does not feel like a cure to neither my body nor spiritual dysmorphia, it does feel like a balm; a momentary pain reliever; ibuprofen for my aching soul. This relief only lasts momentarily—returning again after meals or before getting into the shower or when I forget to pray or read scripture or struggle to accept certain words of church leaders. But I try to hold on to these fleeting moments, and glorify God in both my body and spirit, which I’m reminded are God’s,

which, to me, means that He is in me and through me and I am of Him, which makes me consider that, even if I can't see it myself, I am filled with some amount of grace and beauty and worthiness, and that that is enough.

Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit. (Ether 3:16)

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His Own Hand

J. S. Absher

I desire to be to the Eternal Goodness what his own hand is to a man.

—Theologica Germanica

i. What the Right Hand Is

Take my right hand—the index finger crooked
from a long-forgotten break; the dint
where a melon spoon of cells, precancerous,
has been scooped out; the little crescent
moons under each nail, the nails badly bitten;
the worn-out cartilage at the base of the thumb
that ruins my grip and sometimes sleep, when bone
of metacarpal scrapes trapezium:

it's an old hand, but take it, and all
it screwed in or up, hammered or caressed,
lines botched, weeds pulled, promises kept. Small-
time doer even when it does its best,
it is doubled in yours, and fear is halved
of age manhandling our kind and loving craft.

ii. What the Left Hand Does

Age manhandles my kind and loving craft.

Item: My left is acting on its own.

Example: As I proof a poem online,
it hovers over the keys, then slowly
descends, wrist relaxes, a fingertip

drops, depressing almost always a *d* or *t*,
 plosive consonants that blow up the word
 they land on, bomblets from a passing plane.
 This is not how I pictured my later years,
 worried about an errant hand. *Item:*
 When I pass my cluttered desk, how often
 it drags off a tottering book or stack of papers.

The left thumb became arthritic first:
 that hand lifts and grasps, the doctor said,
 its partner finesses. Right has been
 the writer since I was young, Left
 the written on. At ballgames, the right
 goes over the heart, the left dangles. Right
 throws, Left wears a glove to catch.
 Dexter acts, Sinister suffers. *Item:*
 The right waves happily as a child departs,
 the left clasps the back of the neck in grief.

iii. Prodigal

He first clasped the neck of his son in joy,
 not grief—the aging father in Rembrandt's
Return—then the shoulder and back of his boy
 kneeling, one shoe off, one on. The large hand
 on our right, Father's left hand, is the roughened
 hand of clenching and judging, the peasant's
 who handed his queen, unwomaned, a gift of snakes.
 The hand on our left, smaller for pity's sake,
 is feminine and soothing, made to caress.
 The big hand is grasping the shoulder in fear
 he will lose the boy again; more hopeful, gentler,

the other touches him with lovingkindness.
Return again and be Our sons and daughters,
Yahweh pleads, Return: We will be Father
and Mother. Prodigal says, I am a man:
look at these scars on my hand.

iv. Fingers

Look at the scars on my hand
and on my fingers, clumsy claws
that are fat and short, raw
sausages, not digits—spillers,
knockers over, arthritic grippers,
nailhead missers and thread strippers,
packaging grapplers, tyers of shoes
that won't stay tied, slappers
of skeeters, swatters of flies,
typo makers, smearers, droppers
of eggs and messy breakables,
pimple-, bubble-, button poppers,
filchers of river-rounded pebbles
for garden paths, china breakers
and rim chippers, crystal-crackers
(they've cost me dearly), rock skippers,
just once (I swear) bird flippers,
zipper-downers and zipper-uppers,
and takers of the Lord's Supper.

Often, too often, have they failed me—
look at the piles of scribbled verse—
but did not punch or thief or worse,
or do much shameful or barbarous,

unlike the fingers Rodin sculpted
bristling and lurking in the dark,
that (wrote Rilke) seemed to bark
like the five throats of Cerberus.

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Our Lady of Innumerable Appellatives

Dayna Patterson

*Enter into Her gates with thanksgiving
and into Her courts with praise.*

—Psalm 100:4

1.

Swirl of gold gleaming in our daughters' eyes.
Amen. Whorl of cirrostratus haloing
the moon. Amen. Your fingerprints are
everywhere. Lady of Ice. Lady of Sand.
of Maple Star and Gingko Fan. of Rot.
of Scat. of Hoarders and Whores. Goddess,
is there any title you would refuse?
of Shopping Carts with One Wonky Wheel.
of Loofas. of Wedding Cakes. of Artisanal
Pumpnickel Loaves. of Mud. of Moss.
of Mirages. of Vultures and of Vespers.
We'd like to pour you into a ceramic mug
we made in high school, sloppy rings and drippy glaze.
We'd like to tuck you into a locket,

2.

fold you tiny into a locket,
wear you around our necks, the ultimate
amulet. You're no saint of narrow scope.
Your sight is wide, your praxis: gatherhood.
of Violin recitals and the A String Concerto.
of Messy Music and Divine Harmony.
of Cacophony. of Canticle. of Beginner's luck.
Dead finch on the sidewalk under a blooming

magnolia tree. of Ovation and
 Oration and Oblation and Elevation
 and Desecration. Carpenter ants.
 Water bears. Leptons. Lady of Smallest
 Units and Magnificatus Extremis.
 Lady of Made Up Latin. of Lingua Franca.

3.

Teach us your lingua franca, your pidgin.
 Lady of Tamil. Lady of Greek.
 of Nahuatl. of Sanskrit. of Urdu.
 Eskimo. Korean. Hebrew.
 Chinese. Egyptian. Nushu.
 Lady of Mariology. Angelology.
 Eschatology. All the -ologies
 and all the -olatries. Lunolatry
 and Ichthyolatry. Astrolatry
 and Zoolatry. Lady of Words. The
 Word. of Celery, even, the fibrous kind
 impossible to chew. of Math, Complex
 Calculus, mind-bending Theoretical Physics.
 All that, plus simpler stuff, like addition.

4.

Lady of the Simple Truth of Addition,
 like loneliness + 1 and what that equals.
 Lady of Every Possible Love.
 Same sex. Trans. Bi. Asexual. Pansexual.
 Lady of All Loving Formulations &
 Goddess of Every Gender. Transgender.
 Cisgender. Agender. Pangender. Non-
 binary. Two-spirit. Genderqueer. All the genders.

Holiness of every color. Black. Pink. Red. Blue. Grey.
All the colors and color combinations.
All the ages, zygote to crone. Goddess
of Puberty, of Menstruation, of Menopause.
Goddess of the Blood Moon, bleed us, lead us
through the shadow of your pulsing seasons.

5.

Through deep shadow of each pulsing season,
lead us, Lady of Every Kind of Blood.
A. B. O. Positive. Negative. Anemic.
Cold-blooded. Warm-blooded. Sap-blooded.
Overstory and understory.
Root, trunk, branch, foliage. Sky and earth.
Foot, torso, arm, head. Death and birth. Goddess
of Endless Litanies, we like to imagine
your special grace lighting our darkest
corners, the forgotten cobwebbed crevices.
We imagine your bright gaze burning up
dew on the neglected rake. We hold tight
to the myth of specialness, chosendom.
But, Madonna, you're no leashed deity.

6.

Lady, you're no leashed deity. No chain
forged between you and our basin. Our grove.
Our desert. Our field. Our mountain. Free-range
Goddess, you've answered to many names.
Asherah. Innana. Ishtar. Astarte.
Sauska. Isis. Venus. Ema. Sophia. Shekinah.
Semiramis. Amaterasu. Aphrodite.
Queen of the Night. Queen of Heaven. A host

of others we've lost or forgotten. Now
 we cry out with tears *Lady, I believe;*
help thou my unbelief. Swallow us
 like tepid water. Hold us in your hands
 like tufts of fog. Tuck your song into our
 wooden bodies, you the string, you the bow.
 Teach us music fluid enough for praise.

7.

Teach us music fluid enough to paint
 your praise. Gift us eyes wide enough to drink
 your crystalline wonders. Stretch our ears
 tuba-huge to catch your spirit-whispers.
 Make of our ragged patches one quilt warm
 enough for every dreamer: rock, bug, sprout.
 You are the Shepherdess knocking icicles
 from our woolly locks. We are the sheep,
 sure of sheer, oblivious to your care,
 Our Lady of Ice. Our Lady of Sand.
 of Maple Star and Gingko Fan.
 of. of. of. Your fingerprints everywhere:
 Cloud-whorl, a halo round the moon. Amen.
 Gold-swirl, our daughters' radiant eyes. Amen.

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*Penitent Magdalene, Donatello**Anita Tanner*

Shock of aging
in a wooden sculpture—
more than years
displayed here,
her gaunt
and weathered face
portraying time had its way—
sunken eyes,
broken teeth,
parched and haggard lips.

The cathedral
of her hands
forms a gothic arch
below her chin
suggesting prayer,
her frail body embraced
by heavy strands
of hair ropes
forming a belt
around her waist, cascading
all the way down her
elongated torso, a frayed
shawl once enfolding
beauty.

She's given all that up
to a skeletal faith that asks
forgiveness, that pleads
through her veins, grains

of white poplar, for
nourishment beyond time,
beyond the sculptor's art
breathing into soft,
striated wood the praise
and passion of deep
change, the crucible
of new life,
the oxygen
of sacrifice.

ANITA TANNER {anitatanner6@gmail.com} was raised on a small family farm in Star Valley, Wyoming, where she learned the value of hard work and a love of the land, nature, and animals. Tanner began writing a few months before the birth of her fifth child. She, her husband, and six children made their home in Utah, later moving to Colorado. After her husband's death in 2002, Tanner moved to Boise, Idaho. Writing and reading for her is akin to breathing.

THE WARD ORGANIST

William Morris

Never learn to play the organ, the old woman told me. I should call her Sister something, but I don't remember her last name. Never learn to play, she told me. Once you do you're stuck.

I don't remember what I replied. Probably said something like, it doesn't sound so bad. Said there were worse things to be.

I was in my mid-twenties. I was unmarried and working as a database manager for a small nonprofit, so I guess they thought I had the time to learn.

They weren't wrong.

Never learn to play the organ, the old woman told me. Not unless you can commit to it. Sure, you may find yourself in a ward with another organist to split time with, she said. You might get a different calling from time to time. But make no mistake, once you go down the path of becoming a ward organist, that's what you'll be until you die.

I'm sure I had second thoughts at that point.

I don't remember what they were.

I had second thoughts about a lot of things back then.

It's your choice, the old woman said. I don't care what the bishop says about it. If you aren't ready for this, speak up now. I don't need you wasting my time. And I don't want to waste yours either. You're young. You can do plenty of things besides learn to play the organ, so if you're not sure about this, you can say still say no. Or you can say, yes. But if you say yes, the old woman told me, you show up for every lesson with me, and you practice the rest of the week, and you understand that saying yes means saying yes for life.

I'm sure I said something like, it's fine. I'm fine with it.

That's what I was like back then.

By then I knew I'd probably never get to use my art history degree professionally. And I didn't know but strongly suspected that I'd probably never marry. Not in this life. I was looking at a future of things being fine.

Just . . . fine.



I'm still fine.

The angels cluster around my ceiling at night. They circle, a damp glow in the room, golden as plates.

They don't keep me awake.

They never have.

They also don't say anything. The only sounds they make are indistinct whispers, strange susurrations. If they are messengers from God, the messages aren't for me.

I'm pretty sure they're heavenly beings, although I've never asked to shake any of their darting, quicksilver hands.

I just watch them until I fall asleep.

Most nights I fall asleep just fine.

Some nights I lay awake.

But that never has anything to do with the angels.

They are gone when I wake up in the morning. And so I arise and start my day as the advancement services director of a larger nonprofit than the one I worked for back when I learned to play the organ.

On my lunch break and in those Zoom meetings I don't have to pay much attention to, I fill private Pinterest boards with images that remind me of them. And I don't stick with art from the Christian tradition. Sure, I have plenty of pins of Orthodox icons and Renaissance paintings, but I also track down representations of buddhas and bodhisattvas; Islamic gilded metalwork and enameled glass; drawings and paintings of demons, gods, and demigods from everywhere from Bali

to Finland; anime and video game characters; photos of lava flows, organic honey, and lens flare effects—anything that reminds me of them in some way.

One Pinterest board is named Almost Accurate Representations. Another is called Way Off But Interesting Nonetheless. Another is called Gold Tones That Are Reminiscent. Another is called A Big Mood (That Shall Soon Pass).

Maybe I'll make the boards public one day. When things get bad. Really bad. Not just the terrible but bearable bad everything is now.

Sometimes when I hear them whispering, I wonder what they're talking about.

But I don't ask them that.

Because I'm pretty sure I know what they're whispering about.

I see it on Facebook and Twitter. I read it in the email newsletters that fill up my Gmail account. I see it on everyone's faces. Even on the faces of those who are masked.

Especially on their faces.



You say, yes, it means showing up for every meeting, the old woman told me. It means showing up for every meeting *early*.

I do that anyway, I said. Probably said. It was true back then.

It's mostly still true.

Although I had to really think about it when the bishop asked me to come back to in-person church.

What about Sister Mathis, I said.

The Mathises moved back to Idaho, he said.

Everybody is moving back to Idaho and Utah.

It doesn't affect me much because the few members I'm friendly with are the ones who, like me, like it here or are stuck here. But I do

miss seeing the kids around. Miss being asked to play the piano at baptisms. We're becoming one of those wards where all the children are either in the nursery and Sunbeams or are teenagers, only half of whom are active.

I thought about telling the bishop no. But I was fully vaccinated and still in my forties and the nice thing about being an organist is you are automatically social distanced from everyone else, and when I'm not playing the organ, I sit in one of the choir chairs that is behind the organ. It means the Martinez boy has to side shuffle a bit to bring me the sacrament, but he hasn't hit puberty yet, so we don't come close to banging knees.

At first, I was upset that the other boys always make him take the stand, but I know his parents are vaccinated, and he wears a good mask and isn't one of those fidgety deacons who is always fiddling with his mask and then touching everything.



Don't be one of those organists who goes and sits in the audience with their family, the old woman told me. You don't want to be calling too much attention to yourself. And you want to be ready in case the presiding authority changes things up. It doesn't happen much. But you don't want to be caught flat-footed that one time it does.

That's not an issue for me.

I've never had family to sit with.

The first couple of Sundays back, I left right after sacrament meeting. Fled out the nearest door like Joseph yeeting himself away from Potiphar's wife.

Now I stay.

I just don't go to second hour.

I'm sure that'll come up in ward council at some point, but so far no one has come up to me, their face scrunched in concern, their voice

soft as feathers. They have more pressing concerns. Other sheep who have wandered much further away.

I sit in the padded armchair that's in the east-facing foyer across from the floral-patterned couch and next to the floral-patterned love-seat and scroll through my private Pinterest boards, my face bent down to the screen as if in an attitude of worship or prayer.

During quarantine, I installed one of those apps to limit my screen time, but then I never set it up.

I do cut off my screen time in the evening, though. I don't check my phone after nine and turn off my TV no later than ten.

I used to stay up and watch the local news. But I don't care about local news anymore. If the past five years has taught me anything, it's that our lives are subject to much larger, stronger currents and forces than ever before.

So at night I trade the blue glow for a golden one.

Although sometimes they seem more like brass or even copper.

I don't know what determines that.

I kept a journal for a while that documented the changes in their hues, but when I tried to cross-compare it with what was happening—to me, on social media, with the Church, with the country, with the world—there was no discernible pattern. Perhaps there's just too much data. Perhaps they mix it up simply for my benefit, for aesthetic reasons.

Whatever the reason I appreciate the variegation. It spurs me to find even more images to add to my Pinterest boards.

And I suppose one tender mercy of this whole thing is several museums have opened up their digital collections to the general public.

I thought about starting a Twitter account that highlights all the resources that are out there, but every time I attempt to create a new account, I have a stupor of thought over what the username should be. I'm choosing to take that as a sign I should stick to my private Pinterest boards for now.

I do have a main Twitter account, but it's on private, and I don't follow anybody. Instead, I use lists to keep track of what's going on in all the different ecosystems I'm interested in: art history academics, angel art enthusiasts, chefs and food personalities (especially former *Top Chef* and *Great British Bake Off* contestants), Mormon influencers (broadly speaking—not just the Instagram mommy blogger ones), and any of the writers, journalists, and academics who seem to have good takes on things.

I know it's not good for me, but there's part of me that wants to know what's going on, and I can't seem to turn it off.

Maybe if I understood what the angels were whispering about, I could delete my account.

But really, it's not that bad. I'm mostly fine.

Although . . .

Sometimes I am tempted to post something. Go off private and enter the conversation.

I think I would be good at it. I'm pretty funny. I'm a good writer. I can be pithy.

But I'm afraid of making a mistake and getting piled on.

Nobody wants to be the main character of the day on Twitter.



The old woman told me, she said, you can make little mistakes and only a few people will know, but you make a big mistake, and everyone knows.

She told me about a time that a general authority was visiting, and she wanted to make sure the congregation was properly paying attention, so she cranked the volume up for the rest hymn but cranked it up too high and dang near blew out the ear drums of everyone on the stand. She said she'd never been so embarrassed in her life.

But she had this wry smile as she said it, a thin-lipped smile.

That's all I really remember about her, her thin, pale lips coated with a pink, waxy lipstick that probably should have been several shades darker; her bony hand tapping my right thigh when it was time to use the pedals.

I'll practice a lot, I said. And I won't mind if I make a mistake. I have a thick skin.

It'll get thinner as you age, the old woman said, with a sharp bark of a laugh and a wink.

So far, the only thing my skin has done is develop eczema.

I don't know if it was the stress or being indoors all the time or what. Maybe it was that when I got sick in early February before we were sure it had arrived to US shores, it wasn't the flu flu and now my immune system is messed up. Maybe all of those.

It started with a patch on my neck then crept up my cheeks until it reached my eyebrows. There's also a patch on the side of my right knee that stretches around to the back. I have a couple of small scars there now. I was disciplined enough to not scratch my face, but behind the knee? I just couldn't stop myself.

It didn't help that I didn't see a dermatologist for a year.

I was afraid to.

Then I was afraid not to.

So I finally made an appointment and went. Luckily, my case is mild enough it's been easy to treat, and now my skin is mostly fine.

I lay in my bed at night colloidal oatmeal thick as the dews of heaven across my face and neck and knee.

I ask the angels sometimes if they can help with it. It's amusing to me. To ask for something so small, something that doesn't really even bother me that much.

So far, the angels haven't responded.

Well, there was that one time when I asked, and they suddenly left, and I had a hard time getting to sleep because the room was too dark.

But they came back the next night. Perhaps a little more coppery than normal—but that may have just been my imagination.

I was happy they came back.

I enjoy their visitations.



I've only played one funeral since March 2020. I played both the viewing and the funeral.

The old woman told me that was her favorite part of being a ward organist. The hymns on the programs are the ones everyone knows. The ones that really mean something. People are reverent at funerals. And they actually sing. The veil is thinner. You're playing for both the people in attendance and the attending angels, she said. And you get lunch afterwards.

The funeral was for Brother Park.

It was just last month. He was only in his fifties. The bishop didn't tell me what he died from, and I'm not friends with the ward members who always seem to know that kind of thing.

Heck, I didn't even find out that Sister Wells had left her inactive husband until last week when she mentioned it in her testimony.

I don't bear my testimony in church. Only when I give a talk or the one time I filled in as Gospel Doctrine teacher.

The walk from behind the organ to the podium just seems too short to gather your thoughts. And I don't have anything to talk about other than the angels. And I know to not talk about them.

Some things are both sacred and secret.

It's not that I don't have a testimony. It's that I don't know what to say about it.

I'm not going to repeat the same old lines. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just not for me. They really don't have anything to do with what I believe. Or maybe it'd be better to say that they have nothing to do with how I believe.

Besides, the old woman told me that I shouldn't feel pressure to stand up if there's a long lull during fast and testimony meeting just because I'm already so close to the pulpit.

Every time we play should be a testimony, she said. Every time *is* a testimony if you play with feeling, she said.

She told me that a lot of ward organists don't play with feeling. Not real feeling. They play hesitantly because they don't have technical proficiency. Or they play with too much confidence because they are technically proficient. Those ones always play too loud and fast, she said. Which is worse than playing too slow as torturous as that can be. It's worse because you can tell they aren't approaching the organ with enough reverence. With a measure of awe.

You have to pretend it's a not quite fully broken horse, she told me. You have to approach it that way every single time. Approach it with caution and respect and a bit of fear, but also with confidence and the knowledge that comes with practice.

I didn't practice for six months. From March through August 2020. Then the bishop asked me to practice so I'd be sharp whenever I felt like I could come back.

So I did.

At five thirty in the morning every Saturday.

That way I could get at least an hour and a half of practice in by the time people arrived to clean the building.

There was this one time I didn't leave right away.

Shortly after seven, some sullen teenage boy from the other ward stumbled into the chapel with a vacuum cleaner, the cord dragging

behind him, the hood on his hoodie up, hiding the over-the-ear headphones he was wearing.

But I saw them.

And I stayed and played while he vacuumed.

I don't know what he was listening to. Maybe it was something appropriate.

But I kept playing in case it wasn't, the sound of the vacuum providing a constant roar against "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," which I was practicing for the upcoming Easter program.

Heard all together it sounded like the rushing of angels. Or what I imagine that to sound like. My angels are silent except for the whispers.

You'd think those early morning practices in the chapel is when I'd see the angels. But nope. They come to the bedroom of my reasonably priced when I purchased it now appreciated in value and either about to skyrocket or crash in value suburban town home and swirl around the popcorn ceiling like koi or mosquitoes or internet discourse. Many eyed not because they're seraphim or a meme of seraphim but because they're in constant motion.

I call them my investors.

I have no idea what they're investing in. But the appellation seems rather apt to me.



I only tried to quit the lessons once. I called the old woman up and told her I had changed my mind.

You can't quit, she said. I've already invested a lot of time in you.

It's only been three weeks of lessons, I said.

Three weeks is a lot when you have as little time left as I do, she said. But, she told me, if that's what you have to do, you should do it. You have your agency even if you don't know what to do with it.

Old women are scary.

I hope to be half that scary when I'm old.

But that's not why I kept going. I kept going because for all that I had a hard time making up my mind about things, I sensed I needed something beyond my work and my hobbies. Something that made me uncomfortable but that could also tie me to others.

Not that I'm super tied to others.

Oh, I'm friendly enough with numerous people in the ward. And there are a handful I could and would call on in a time of actual need and they'd help me out.

But I do sometimes think other ward members resent me.

The men because I can choose to work for nonprofits that pay me enough to support my comfortable but not luxurious lifestyle and provide me with meaningful work that makes a difference in the world.

The women because I spent my twenties and thirties mastering the organ, learning Italian and Japanese cooking, traveling to Europe or Asia every three to five years (I'm overdue for another trip abroad), and collecting modestly priced art to fill my modest townhome.

Sometimes I think they pity me.

I have no spouse or children. I live alone far away from the rest of my family. I have no close friends. No pets. And I have no apparent worldly achievements.

Yes, I can cook and play beautifully and live surrounded by beautiful things, but I wonder if they tell themselves they'd have done more things, done great things with my life circumstances and apparent talents and training.

They're wrong.

They wouldn't have done anything more with their life than I have. Probably less.

But the thing is, the old woman was right when she told me when I returned to the lessons that she would have respected me more if I hadn't picked the lessons back up again because at least I would have shown that I knew how to make a choice. She was also right when she

said agency is wasted on the youth, especially today's youth. Everything I have and do I just kind of fell into. I like it. But I don't know how much I chose it, really chose it. How much have I actually exercised my agency?

Maybe that's why I have the angels.

Maybe the Father (or the Mother [or both!]) sent them to me so I have something meaningfully different in my life. Not a compensation, but a reminder there really is something there for me in the next life even if church leaders are vague and sometimes condescending about what that might be.

Maybe the angels are a reminder that we really don't know anything about what's to come.

That not all choices are made in mortality and not all choices need to be difficult to be real choices.

And that's fine.



Sometimes I do wonder if the angels are trying to communicate with me. Wonder if the different colors and patterns mean something.

I have to be careful with this train of thought.

I know the risks of social isolation.

I understand that my master's degree has taught me to look for esoteric patterns.

I am all too aware—we all are (or should be aware by now)—that the mind can all too easily go down certain paths, seeing things that aren't there, making connections of things that have nothing to do with each other in service of a narrative we want to be true but isn't true—or maybe not even want to be true but can't help from coming to see as true because we want something in the world that feels like it all fits together. A narrative we can use as a touchstone.

So other than that one spurt of documentation, I am careful to not let my mind attempt to create order from my visitations, from my swirling investors.

The Pinterest boards remain impressionistic. No narratives there.

I do sometimes let my thoughts wander as I read the scriptures. And sometimes I find myself turning to Isaiah and Revelations and Daniel and certain sections of the Doctrine and Covenants a bit too often.

I even downloaded Swedenborg's *The Earths in Our Solar System Which are called Planets and the Earths in the Starry Heaven, and Their Inhabitants; Also the Spirits and Angels There From Things Heard and Seen* to my Kindle a couple of months ago.

But I haven't opened it yet.

I'm content placing my angels firmly within Joseph Smith's world-view, especially since I do think the angels were there when I received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

I was nine. My parents were only intermittently active. They wouldn't become active until a few years later. But they were active enough to finally get around to getting me baptized. My uncle baptized and confirmed me. When he said, receive the Holy Ghost, I opened my eyes and rolled them as far upwards as I could. Maybe it was a trick of the light. Maybe the light was bouncing off of the watches of all the men who had their hands on my head, but I saw glimmers of gold and at least one blurry eye or shape of an eye up towards the ceiling.

Thinking back now, perhaps that experience is how I ended up majoring in art history, even though I didn't focus on religious art in my master's degree program. My thesis was on the influence of innovations in textile manufacturing on both representational and nonrepresentational painting, photography, and mixed media in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art.

My parents were active until they died. Half my siblings no longer are. And I'm worried about my youngest brother. He and his wife are having a hard time right now. I don't know the details. I can just tell from certain subtle changes to their Instagram posts. They're not openly expressing doubts. It's more that they've become interested in the things that so often go along with those doubts.

I worry about them, but not about myself.

I'm fine.

I don't have doubts.

Or rather, not the kind of doubts that'll cause me to leave the Church.

If I ever go inactive, it's because I'm just too tired to play the organ anymore.



They'll wear you out, the old woman told me. If you get good enough, it won't just be sacrament meetings. It'll be baptisms, funerals, stake meetings. They'll get more ambitious with Christmas and Easter programs. If they get greedy or no one else in the ward can play, they'll make you choir accompanist, and they'll ask you to sub in primary. And the better you get at the organ, the more they'll want you on the piano even though you and I know they're two different instruments, she said. You'll become the go-to for all the special musical performances, which means either practices during the week or late Saturday evening or early Sunday morning.

She was prophetic. Or rather, she knew from experience how certain archetypes work in the Church. Some folks are always leaders. Some men are always clerks. Some women are always in Young Women's. A few lucky souls are teachers.

Ward organists are made—not born, not foreordained, she told me.

It's possible she was just trying to get me understand the importance of practicing every week.

Perhaps she really did want to make sure it was a choice I was making for myself and wasn't being pressured into it.

It really is about the only out of character choice I've made in my life.

I'm not a natural at music.

There are times when I regret it. I sit on the bench, my feet resting on the wooden pedals, my hands by my side, wondering why I'm here in this place again.

But then I play.

Slower than I'd like to, but quicker, in my experience, than most other ward organists across the US and Canada.

I play, and the congregation follows.

The old woman told me there may be some exceptions you run into—some you'll love and some who will drive you crazy—but for the most part you're the one who keeps the time of the hymn and not the chorister. The chorister follows you, she said. And so does the congregation. They don't actually need the music you're playing. They know the hymns. Your role is to kick them into the right pace. The members will do the rest.

And so they do.

There have been times lately when I wonder about my pace. Am I rushing my playing? Is it a tad slower than it was before?

I can't quite tell.

I worry that my internal clock is off.

But wherever the pace is at it seems to be working. The congregation is singing well even with their masks on.

And my playing is as steady as it ever was.

Not that that's a surprise.

Steady is what I do.

I have my nonprofit job. My cooking and my art. My townhome.

I have my early morning practices. I have my playing during sacrament meeting and my foyer meditations during second hour.

And I have my angels at night.

I may not have used my agency all that much.

I may just be passing the time until the world completely falls apart.

But I'm good at keeping time.

And I'm fine.

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DISPATCHES FROM KOLOB

Ryan Habermeyer

Dear President Russell M. Nelson,

For centuries, the pope has been addressed as *Your Holiness*, and they call the Dalai Lama the *Enlightened One*, and that Hindu Bhagwan fellow is the *Fortunate One*, and I have it on good authority the ayatollah prefers the title *His Excellency, A Most Divine Judge of Beards*. I know you know this. You are the prophet, seer, and revelator of the one true Church. Yes, sir. The Mormons. You knew before anyone else if the sun would rise this morning. You know my middle school science project was how Mozart makes lima beans grow faster. You know my wife ran off with the guy who sells lawnmowers on TV. You know what I ate for breakfast. You know what you ate for breakfast. Hell, you probably know what Jesus ate for breakfast. You know, even if you don't know you know right this second, that I am just off Route 59 writing this letter. You know you are the prophet, but I'm going to call you brother, brother prophet, because that was good enough for Jesus, which is precisely why I'm writing.

Brother prophet, you probably already know about my neighbors. Heber and Sophronia Peck? I'm sure the bishop provides you weekly updates on all the half-ass faithful members in our congregation. We Mormons are a long-suffering bunch, so every congregation has a handful. Which means you know poor Heber was the one who planted the idea to adopt in her head because he was unable to plant anything in its proper place. They flew halfway across the country to that orphanage and that's where they found that scraggly, bearded little nuisance of a teenager mopping the floors. Jesus. That's what the orphanage director said. Jesus. Not like your gardener, *Jesús*. Born in one of those villages

nobody can pronounce outside Baghdad but, thanks to the Big-W he grew up in Albany. His stepfather was a brewmaster at the Beverwyck Brewing Company before it closed.

Don't ask me how he ended up in the orphanage. Heber, as I'm sure you know from his file, was tickled pink the boy was a real Middle Easterner, like the original Jesus. This is the original Jesus, the orphanage director told them. Said something about how the crucifixion didn't take. Forgive my blasphemy, brother prophet, but that's what she said. Sophronia thought it was a cruel joke, but the longer they looked at that sad man-child mopping the floors the more convinced they became he was *the* Jesus.

Two weeks later he was walking around our neighborhood. The adopted son, Jesus of Albany.

Wasn't long after they brought him by the house for introductions. I was watching cartoons in my underwear. Are you a cartoon man, brother prophet? I picture you knowing everything about *Looney Tunes*. Great minds think alike. Just call me Wile E. Coyote. That's what my daughter used to call me. We would watch cartoons together when I wasn't on the highway. Mr. Coyote is very trickery, she used to say. Coyote with a keg of dynamite waiting to turn roadrunner into breakfast. Why does coyote want to blow up *beep beep*? To send him to Jesus, I used to say. Why does Jesus want *beep beep*? He's lonely. Like us? We watched Coyote fall off a cliff and disappear into a cloud of dust at the bottom of a canyon. Then he is there again chasing *beep beep*. He always comes back. Maybe coyote is Jesus? she would say. Then we played the game of oiling daddy's guns and drove around for an hour with the siren looking for coyotes to shoot.

Forgive me, brother prophet. I've prayed for the Lord to take the scramble out of this egghead, but sometimes prayers are like letters to the ACME Corporation. I was talking about boy-Jesus of Albany. Shook his hand and said I hoped to see him on Sunday. But his handshake left me suspicious. Then there were the neighborhood rumors.

How he listened to the *Ramones*. Watched anime. Showered without having to be reminded. Ate his meals without complaining. A little bit of a rabble-rouser, if you ask me, hunting through the dictionary for words like *bourgeois* and *disestablishmentarianism* just to get a rise out of folks. Weeks after he arrived, he got suspended when he stood on a desk in biology and announced to the rest of the class dissecting a pig was animal cruelty.

And the swine that is cloven-footed ye shall not touch, he told the principal.

But in all fairness, the original Jesus was also something of a smart-ass, brother prophet, and he sure told the Pharisees a thing or two.

Despite this little outburst, boy-Jesus actually preferred the company of animals to people. That was the only reason he agreed to come to the youth duck hunting activity pioneered by yours truly. I'm the Young Men president, brother prophet, but I'm sure you've read all that in my file along with the other sixty-seven letters I sent. It's a rather impressive dossier, is it not? I think I got a good chance for exaltation. Boy-Jesus showed up that morning with his own decoy. Carved it last night, he said. I knew he was lying, but I swear, brother prophet, it was the most amazing decoy I'd ever seen. Straight from God's workshop. And my father was a three-time champion with one of his duck decoys on permanent exhibit at the world-famous Ward Museum. When the hunt was finished, I went to see it, wanting to hold that miracle for myself, but as God is my witness it swam off.

Later that evening, when I invited myself over to talk with him about the duck—and about shaving that nasty bird's nest off his face so he could come to church and stop being a heathen—I found him in his room with a pigeon in his lap. I'd seen it in the gutter earlier that morning. Whacked it twice with a shovel and tossed it in the garbage. And yet, brother prophet, the boy had resurrected it and mended the broken wing. It fluttered about the room. It ate out of his hand. It's a dove, boy-Jesus told me. It's a pigeon, I told him. He shook his head and smirked.

I tried changing the subject, telling him the more frequently you shave the prettier your wife will be. And where's your wife? he wanted to know. I thought I'd test him a little so I said, Well, son, she stepped out. And do you know what boy-Jesus of Albany said, brother prophet? He looked at me without blinking, a little dreamlike, and said, No. She followed the stars and fled into the wilderness these one thousand two hundred and threescore days.

I must admit, brother prophet, I felt a burning in the bosom when he said it.

Then he turned up the radio. *Public radio*, brother prophet. You like politics? I asked. They're bombing Gaza again, boy-Jesus said solemnly. And that upsets you? I folded my arms across my chest and leaned against the door. I am come to send fire on the earth, the boy-Jesus said, but what will I, if it be already kindled? I don't remember hearing that in the Gospels, I told him. The boy-Jesus looked me in the eye and shrugged. I did hundreds of things you people didn't bother to write down, he said. Sometimes I wonder if when God made hormones, he ruined the plan of salvation.

It went on like this for a while. I'd see him around town scheming Lord knows what. Turns out the boy spoke a little Arabic and knew all about the Maccabean revolt and how to grow pomegranates. And yet, brother prophet, if that boy was the messiah, why wouldn't he come to worship with us? Why did he spend every Sunday talking with the hobos and girls with tattoos? I know without a shadow of a doubt we belong to God's church, the only true and living church on the face of the earth. What kind of messiah would shun his chosen people?

Ted used to say the messiah would come like a thief in the night. Ted knew all about the messiah. Ted sold lawnmowers on TV. He had lots of time to think. He knew about the apocalypse too. Ted believed in everything. An anti-nihilist. He was driving home one night when he got a flat tire. Saw a lavender cloud. Followed it past the barbed-wire fence and over the plateaus where he found machines digging a crater.

Filling it with a strange liquid. The sea of glass, Ted told a dozen of us neighbors. Prophecy fulfilled. Amen, the neighbors said. The end of days, Ted said, bowing his head. He'd come back from the sea of glass to tell us about it, to inspire us to prepare. Showed us his footprint where he'd stepped in it. With an apocalypse it is never the end of things, Ted told us, it's only the beginning.

You want to talk about an apocalypse? As luck would have it, boy-Jesus finally showed up in the chapel with a clean shave. It was testimony Sunday. You know how that goes. We heard witness from the mouth of babes. Then Josephine Sandgren shared a dream of an angel who gave her a potato wrapped in gold foil and commanded: *Eat and speak with the tongue of angels*. Ida May Bollwinkel said she got a flat tire on the highway and the three Nephites fixed it. Early Sheasby talked about how he was out hunting and saw a curelom. Others testified after Jesus was resurrected he visited the Aztecs, then visited other nations turning some skins black, others yellow, but the righteous remained white. Another preached that the sheep not of this fold are on other planets, which makes Jesus the first alien.

Later, when I asked what he thought of the service, boy-Jesus said, I should have never stayed on the cross for you people.

If it's a miracle you're looking for you should come to the Pinewood Derby, I said.

If I'm being honest, brother prophet, I just wanted to test the boy's powers of carpentry. But by now I was also a little fond of the kid. Am I ashamed to say I wanted to believe this boy was the messiah? This world is rotten to the core. Ted's going to save us, my wife used to say. Out in the desert, there in Kolob Canyon, that's where we'll be safe, she said. But there are so many Jesuses in the world it's hard to know which one to believe.

Still, over the weekend I watched the boy carve that little block of wood until it looked like something from the heaven of Dale Earnhardt, may he rest in peace. For a moment he turned me into a believer and

as we were walking to the chapel, I told him maybe next year we could build a quantum engine for the car. I told him the joke about Stephen Hawking and the Buddha having a steam in the sauna when a quark and Schrödinger's cat walked in. Trust me, brother prophet, it's a good clean joke and you'll never think of hadrons the same again. You know what he did? Nothing. Stared at me, clueless. The messiah, creator of worlds without end, and he didn't get the joke about the particles he created?

The night got worse from there. The car placed sixth. The bishop lost quite a bit of money.

It gnawed my mind all night. Who was this Jesus of Albany? Maybe his disciples had taken him off the cross and he'd been wandering ever since. Or maybe he was a little orphaned smart ass. Or maybe there's a reason my mother called me Abraham. But the heavens don't open for me like they do for you, or my neighbor Ted who sells lawnmowers on TV. Ted who told my wife about the desert and the red dragon with the seven heads. You need to see things at an angle, she tried to explain. But I could never be angled. I've always been the shortest distance between two points. Not long after she said Ted had anointed her his number four and maybe someday I too could be a number. I bet sometimes you wake up in the middle of the night with the weight of the cosmos on your conscience, brother prophet, and the only thing to bring you peace is to walk down to the vault and dance around with the Liahona and swing the sword of Laban. Damn, I wish I had a sword of Laban. All I have is the highway. Forgive me. My handwriting is a little sloppy. I'm writing this on the hood of the car outside of La Verkin. You ever driven down Route 59 at night, brother prophet? The wind makes a tunnel of your ears. Everything feels surrendered, a broken movie reel spitting out images and noise. They gave me a badge to hunt Mexicans out here, brother prophet. But now I just drive and drive. Staring at ribbons of sand wondering if she's in a bunker somewhere or if she finally got angled enough to untether from this earth. Wondering if

I'll ever see my little girl again. Sometimes I'm driving and I hear her voice. *Beep-Beep*. And it feels like Wile E. Coyote had an accident with the TNT inside my chest. You ever seen what the body does when it's too close to a bomb, brother prophet? They say it turns to pink mist, but I've never seen that. The truth is to be born is to be bombed and we're all little pieces of Christ, aren't we? That's why we came to this earth. Little by little he's stitching us to him whether we want it or not, like Frankenstein's monster.

And the boy-Jesus? Well, he had been busy trying to redeem himself from the Pinewood Derby debacle. How might a teenage recluse from Whatsitstan make amends in Zion? Glad you asked, brother prophet. He signed up to play in the annual basketball tournament. Believe it or not, boy-Jesus was a terrible athlete. Clumsy, flat-footed, and genuinely ignorant of team play. A decent dribbler, sure, but mostly he missed layups, refused to play defense, and was occasionally cited for flagrant fouls. He couldn't shoot worth a damn, but in the pregame huddle his prayer was otherworldly. So the coach, yours truly, said the hell with it: if he prays like that throughout the tournament there's no way we can lose.

He warmed the bench as the team's official pregame, halftime, and time-out prayer-giver. Before the first game, he prayed that the opposing team would have their bowels filled with compassion. They practically let us steal the ball. In the knockout round, he prayed the poor in heart would be freely given the bounties of heaven. We scored half our points on free throws. By the time the semifinal started, there were girls in the crowd holding signs that said *Dreamy for Jesus* and *Jesus is All-Star*. At halftime, boy-Jesus prayed that the Lord might take charge. And so, near the end of the game, I put him in to play defense. And like a sacrificial lamb, he stood in the paint and took a charge. But before we could celebrate, he pulled the referee aside and admitted his feet weren't planted. Call reversed. The other team made the free throws. Game over.

One newspaper said there was a riot in the gymnasium, and another said we sang hymns and ate Jell-O. They're probably both true. The Lord says do not associate with babblers of gossip, but all the rumors I've ever heard are true. It's true my wife ran off into Kolob Canyon to wait for the apocalypse. It's true the constitution hangs by a thread. It's true I saw an orphan boy sitting on the curb in the parking lot who may or may not have been given an atomic wedgie by his friends. It's true he had a welt under his eye from someone who threw a basketball in his face. It's true I heard one of the parents in the parking lot mumble *Maybe we ought to crucify him again*. It's true I told the boy this was just a little apocalypse and the one that matters was still to come. It's true he said he wanted to go home, not this shitty excuse for Zion but home-home, away from these people who held in the highest virtue an unlimited capacity for boredom, people who revel in their worship being exactly the same week after week, people convinced that repetition is the first law of heaven, people for whom faith is just theater. And it's true I said these are the last days and nobody gets the home they prayed for and then he just stared at me with big weepy roadrunner eyes, like this had all happened before and he couldn't believe it was all happening again, and he said he would walk away from this, just like he had before, so what could I do but cuff him and put him in the trunk? There's nothing sinister about it, brother prophet. Perfect love casteth out all fear. Isn't that what he said? I happen to love the apocalypse we've been promised and intend to see if fulfilled.

I've been driving the highway ever since, eluding the coyotes and roadrunners of this world. When we came to the end of the highway, we kept driving. Boy-Jesus has wandered the desert before. Sooner or later, we'll find Ted and the bunker. And then we'll go down. And wait. And wait. And maybe sometimes we'll come out to watch the sunrise, and maybe sit by the highway and watch the birds circling the sky as they swoop down on the roadkill, devouring without words, without sounds, flying away in awkward swoops along the highway which cuts

through the earth, through us, in a straight line that somehow crafts an angle. We'll dream of fire and brimstone, sure, but also of coyotes and roadrunners lying down together. But mostly we'll keep Jesus safe in the bunker, waiting, keeping him hidden until we know what to do with him.

Your Brother in the Faith,

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"Baby Wearing Christ" 5 x 7",
linoleum block print, watercolor, metal leaf,
by M. Alice Abrams, 2020

BUTTERFLIES

Phyllis Barber

Trying to get to the nursery proper and all of the blooming plants—bright colors, heady smells, early summer at its best—Mona almost walked past his table. It was one of those fold-up numbers with foldout legs. Portable. Impermanent. The young man standing behind the table was dressed in a gray plaid shirt tucked into neatly ironed chinos, hair neatly cut but not too short or too neat.

Maybe I should stop and see what he's all about? After all, Mona was in a gregarious mood. Today she was free from thinking about what needed to be done next. Without speaking or saying a word to anyone or anything, she celebrated this moment to herself.

The day was exquisite. Early summer at its best. Full, round sunshine. Clear skies. Mona could hear the birds singing in the trees, celebrating the season. But she couldn't help but wonder whether birds actually celebrated the season. What were they saying, if she were privy to bird language? Slowing her step, she stopped in front of his table. Their eyes met. They both smiled. He opened his mouth, ready for a customer. And she decided to listen to his spiel. Soon enough, she'd get back to following the path that led to the rows of plants stretching just around the corner.

Droplets of sweat on his lip, he seemed genuinely convinced in what he was promoting behind the felt-tip sign he'd made to attract customers. "You'll never believe what's in these bags." He held up a waxed-paper bag holding something that looked like the beginning of five fingers. "I'd like to show you . . ."

Mona wanted to listen even though the sun was begging her back, begging her to find someplace cool, to be on her way. But he'd set up the table with curious paraphernalia—collapsible net tubes to be

used for who-knows-what, the waxed-paper bags, and a money box, always money. Her sense of what-might-happen-next was aroused.

“These are cocoons, growing every day. And all you need to do is wait for ten days.” He held up the bag with the half-formed cocoons, then set it down and untied a string on one of the net bags, opening it to full length. It reminded Mona of a Slinky except it didn’t slink. It was a pop-up net contraption that could, untied, change from a disc to a four-inch-tall basket.

“Then put the bag into this tube. Fasten it to the top with the safety pin I’ve included. They’re hungry little buggers, and they’ll eat what’s in the bag for sustenance. After they’re secure inside this net, leave them alone for about seven days. You’ll be surprised, amazed, over-the-moon at what happens, but remember not to take the butterflies out before their wings have dried. Read the instructions. You’ll be good.”

“Butterflies?” she said. “These will really be butterflies?” The waxed-paper bag looked like something out of her own kitchen. Some half-remembered leftover. But she was in the mood to believe. She opened her purse, took out his asking price of twenty dollars, and handed it to him.

“You won’t be sorry,” he said, giving her the bag and one tied net tube in exchange—her kit for possibility.

She set all of this carefully into her purse, which she didn’t close, worried that something might be suffocated in the process. “Good luck with more customers.”

She continued along the path to the aisles of flowers and soon-to-be flowers and felt lighter somehow. She felt like skipping, though not quite. That was for the young ones who could bend like pretzels. Sunshine. Flowers. Gardeners. The smell of hundreds of promises.

Probably just a scam, but he seemed nice enough, she told herself. *Could be Saturday morning baloney, but I don’t care.* Then she looked around for something new and different to put in her garden. So many plants. So many tiny bodies that grew with sunlight and water. *It’s all a*

miracle, she thought. The way things start with a seed. The way the seed opens to water. The miracle of a stem winding up and out of the soil.

I'm lucky to be alive on such a day as this, she told herself as she walked past the signs that read Dahlias, Marigolds, Shasta Daisies. It's a more than perfect day even though it's hot. How amazing to live in four seasons after my childhood in two, barely. Mostly hot and then too cold for a few months. She loved being in the midst of these plants with their buds and blossoms, almost like some kind of heaven that couldn't be described by mere words.

She thought about her husband, Stefan, who couldn't be with her today, walking having become hard for him. He was such a specimen, such an athlete, and now he could barely walk. It hurt her head to think about him, all of the changes he'd had to accept in such a short period of time. Not fair. Not fair. So, she turned her thoughts to other things.

The nursery was busting at the seams that day—everyone wanting to be entertained all summer by the showy flowers that couldn't wait to strut. She finally picked out two geraniums, waited in a long line to pay her pittance, and felt satisfied that she'd thought about her garden and its possibilities instead of Stefan, if only for a small moment. The smells. The greenery. The rich soil. The people dressed in shorts, cutoffs, overalls. The endless promise of growth all around her. The stop at the nursery had been impulsive, a quick right into a space in the long line of parked cars at the side of the road. And here she was with the possibility of butterflies in her purse, two geraniums in hand, and a few unplanned hours. What a day!

There was a bird in a cage above the cashier, shifting about on its two claws, feet, whatever they were. Something like a white parrot with a topknot, she couldn't remember its name, though, did that matter? It was skittering across the rod with its two claws, not saying much except for a few squawks. It was a rather handsome bird. Maybe it was a keeper of the nursery at night, though it was probably covered by a sheet or a blanket by then. How did it come to be in this cage? Was it raised this

way on some kind of bird farm or was it caught in the wilds? And here it was, hanging above the counter, someone's pet, she hoped. A pet someone loved, cared for, and looked after.

A cage. That's where Stefan was. In a cage. It wasn't fair that he'd been given (by whom, she'll never know the answer) such a narrow range of operation, such limited movements, such trouble with his walking. His neuromuscular disease was cruel and more than cruel to Stefan, who had been such a child of movement, a man of strength because he had such an able body, King of the Gym, even. He had an athletic body: power in his legs when he bicycled for miles and power in his arms when he played tennis, football, and basketball. Exquisite to watch, though all Mona had seen in the past few years was a scuffling walk, a bent back, an unyielding body. She must remember. She must. It would be unfair to forget.

But enough of thinking about cages and Stefan, Mona told herself as she became first in line. She retrieved her wallet to pay the bill, her purse still open. "Thank you, thank you," she told the cashier who was too ready for the next person in line to pay much attention. Then she strolled back along the path, past the butterfly man once again. He was talking to someone else, so she decided there was nothing more to say, even though she wanted to ask him again. "Butterflies? Really?"



The waxed bag sat on the kitchen counter, tucked away in one of the less-lighted corners, still more theory than fact, even though the cocoons kept growing longer and the sticky substance on the sides of the bag kept diminishing in size. Something, somebody, was eating the so-called food that the butterfly man had left inside the bag, maybe by sucking it up, osmosis, or something. Mona couldn't figure it out. But she didn't pay much attention, busy attending to breakfast and dinner for Stefan, keeping the kitchen alive with smells and ideas for the next meal. Maybe even an exotic dessert.

She didn't say much to Stefan about the two bags that were tucked away—the waxed bag and the net bag. She didn't mention them because they seemed insignificant. When contrasted with his diminishment, they were unimportant. An afterthought. An impulse to be thrown away when they didn't amount to anything. The idea was fluff on her counter. Detritus. Instead, she thought about what could be done to make Stefan's life fulfilling when so much had been lost.

Stefan. How she dreamed he had wings and could lift into the sky and fly anywhere he wished. How she wanted the world to be a lovely place for him, no troubles, no worries. How she wished everything could be perfect and she could walk by his side and they could hike, bike, swallow the outdoors, the autumn leaves, the spring green, the paths to new places. How she desired to travel the world, as Stefan had always done, though now it was difficult to negotiate a walk to the bathroom.

"Eggs again," she said to Stefan when she served him his breakfast. "Sorry breakfast is boring, but hey, it's protein. Necessary stuff."

"No worries," he said, holding out his hands to receive the plate from his place in the reclining chair where he sat every morning. He pressed the button at the side to bring himself to a sitting position. Mona loved that the chair was mechanical, could change from laid out to sitting up, and had the right kind of arms to grab when Stefan needed to stand. It was a big, comfortable, brown velour chair, much better than the bulky, hulky, bombshell chairs they'd seen when they picked this one out. *Why, she'd wondered in the store, could manufacturers make such monstrous things? What could they possibly be thinking?*

"What should we do today?" Stefan asked, though there were very few things they could do and they both knew it. Maybe go for another ride, but they'd gone on so many rides and drives, some of them worthwhile, some of them a mere excuse to get out of the house. The movie theaters, which had always been an option, were dangerous places with the Covid pandemic, but maybe she and Stefan could go early, now that

the theaters were open again. They could beat the crowds. But maybe there were no crowds anymore. She didn't know.

"I need to run a few errands," Mona said, standing by his recliner, holding on to the reassuring handles of his walker as she talked. There were times when Mona needed to go out, not only to run errands but to keep her sanity, her sense of the world still running along beside her. But for now, she remembered to stand up as straight as she could, important to maintain some kind of posture between the two of them. Some sense of order. Uprightness. She always encouraged Stefan to walk as upright as possible even though his back often bent into a comma when he used his walker. But maybe she had too many rules, too many ideas of how someone should be when she herself didn't know exactly how he felt. What was it like to be him facing so many physical barriers? She was never sure where the lines of caregiver and receiver ended and began. She suspected she was overly attentive.

"Maybe you can be my wing man. Sound exciting?"

"Not so much," he said, checking to see if the TV remote was resting on the arm of the chair. *He's probably thinking about what show he can watch as soon as I clear away breakfast,* Mona thought. "I'll just hang out here until you get back."

"I'll get back as quickly as I can and shouldn't be long. You sure you'll be okay?"

"I'll just be sitting here."

"You sure?"

Her hesitancy stemmed from an incident in which Stefan had fallen. One black night. One dark, dark night, it seemed in her memory. Neither of them could figure out what happened, but he'd been half asleep, fuzzy in the head, and tried to make his way to the bathroom. He'd taken a blind fall onto the hard stone tiles of the bathroom floor. Luckily, there was a guest in the house who had helped Mona get Stefan back into bed, but there had been damage: jagged skin-splits on his arm, deep cuts, lots of blood, and the necessity of stitches in his hand where the thumb joins the fingers. Stefan sat on the edge of the bed

while Mona cleaned, medicated, and wrapped the wounds, blood leaking onto the comforter, leaving traces of the event behind. She tried to be proficient, efficient, sufficient—all of those things, though the sum of blood was almost more than she could take.

His skin is so thin, so susceptible to tearing, to pulling apart, Mona thought. It's like Stefan's body is a cocoon getting close to the end. It grows until its paper-thin walls collapse. Except a cocoon doesn't deteriorate into nothing. It becomes a butterfly. Something that flies. Away. Up in the air. It catches shades of light and dark as it finds a new place to light. Metamorphosis. Something from almost nothing. And Mona kept wondering. How does an old person emerge from his or her cocoon, the thin-walled skin, body, shrinking away? Maybe the spirit of man, of woman, flies away when the husk of the body dries up and is blown by the wind.



At the end of ten days, Mona transferred the paper bag to the net tube. First, she untied the string until the tube popped into its four-inch length. She sat it on its blue bottom, then opened it up with its zipper. Though she tried several times, however, she couldn't pin the bag to the top of the net without tearing the paper. If she tore it, then she'd harm the cocoons. Not a good idea. She placed the bag inside instead, on the floor of the tube, not what she'd been told to do. She zipped it closed. This would probably be a bad call, but this whole endeavor wasn't one of the brightest ideas she'd ever had anyway, listening to someone at an impermanent table on an impulsive day at a nursery. Listening to promises that good things would happen if she followed instructions. Did the world work that way anyway?



Seven days later, she saw some dark shadows in the net tube. Some one-winged shapes emerging from the cocoon, glued together, or so it

seemed. She remembered the instructions that said to let the wings dry before unzipping the tube, but she had no idea that these sodden wings would ever become unstuck, let alone turn into two that would fly.

“Hey, Stefan. I’m growing butterflies in the kitchen. Can you believe it?”

“Is that another one of your wild, off-the-wall projects?” Stefan said, sitting in his chair, flipping the channels on the remote. “You’re always trying something, aren’t you?”

“Well, why not?” she answered from the kitchen. “You never can tell when something might be worth the trouble, can you?”

“No, you can’t,” he said.

There was a thick pause in the room, the question of whether or not Stefan was one of Mona’s projects unanswered. He wouldn’t tell her what he was thinking in this regard, and she was afraid to ask. But he seemed to have a parade of thoughts going on in his quiet head. Mona was always wondering what he was thinking, always wanting to ask if he was tired of all of this or if he wanted her to leave him be. She never knew if he was interested in what she was doing or not.

But this time, she’d decided to do whatever interested her anyway, heaven or hell in the future. What was twenty dollars this time around? A paper bag full of what seemed to be cocoons? A net bag that popped up to full height before it traveled down the stairs, though her bag didn’t attempt stairs.

“Do you want to go to the gym today?” she asked, peeling some Granny Smith apples for a cobbler recipe from a cookbook that was usually reliable. Sometimes he liked to walk on the treadmill and pedal the stationary bike to keep in some kind of shape, though he usually paid for it the next day, his body reacting to any kind of demand. The piper must pay, it seemed, when it came to Stefan’s condition.

“Sure,” he said. “I feel pretty good today. Give me half an hour.

“You got it.” That would give her the time to get the cobbler prepared for the oven. She could bake it when they got back.

Stefan finally got up from his chair, shuffled to the bedroom, found his black gym shorts on the arm of a chair and made his way into them, something he could still do most of the time. Then he went to the laundry room and stepped into a large pair of tennis shoes that he left tied loosely so he could step into them without bending over.

“Let’s go,” he said, Mona just finishing the crumble crust on the cobbler, more complicated than she’d first imagined.

“I’m coming,” she said, knowing it would take her a couple of minutes more to finish this project. “I’ll be right along.” Stefan was waiting in the car when she finally emerged onto the driveway, not really dressed for the gym though it didn’t matter anymore. Gone were the days when men lusted after her svelte shape wrapped in lycra.

The gym was on the second level of the rec center. Mona took the stairs while Stefan took the elevator. They met at the top, said “Bon voyage,” and went to their respective spots at the gym. Mona walked around the nine-times-makes-a-mile track, did some sit-ups, and tried a few weightlifting machines while Stefan walked on the treadmill, which felt safe to him—King of the Gym—and rode the stationary bike. Rare were the moments when she wasn’t thinking of Stefan and how he was faring, but she needed exercise, too. There was also a time when he needed her to back off, to give him room to be what he was, to lighten the load of this unwelcome burden. There was a time when he needed her not to ask how he was doing, to treat him as though everything was normal.

The right balance isn’t easy to determine, Mona thought as she walked around the track on the blue lane provided for walkers. Too much, then too little. Interested. Disinterested. On the spot. Off the mark.

The people at the edge of the track worked out on mats, lifting their legs from a lying position on the floor, balancing on Bosu balls, wearing elastic bands around their ankles and walking sideways. One woman was swinging barbells overhead, puffing in between, the barbells looking heavier than she could ever lift. One man worked out in the boxing

corner, punching bags steadily, moving from the upper cut bag to the double-ended bag, dancing on his two feet. All of them were engaged in the flow of strengthening themselves, fine-tuning themselves. This was something Stefan might have enjoyed doing.

So much industry in one room, she thought as she made her ninth and last lap. Then she found a bench to wait for Stefan. *Leave him alone*, she reminded herself. He was a man who savored his own head, his own space, for a few minutes.



It was Father's Day the next day. Maybe it was a manufactured day to make sure fathers were remembered as well as mothers, and maybe it was a commercial enterprise, but nonetheless, Stefan was a father. He needed to be remembered, though he wasn't interested in gifts, not really. He wasn't a materialistic man who needed anything. He didn't wait to see what anyone had done to make sure he had a good day, except she knew that he noticed.

Mona had given him some slippers, but he told her he might trip when he was walking in them and therefore didn't think they were a good idea. Stefan was not easy to please, she knew that, and he kept to himself much of the time. *Oh well*, Mona thought, *at least I remembered him. He's someone's father, bottom line.*

While she was in the kitchen, which she liked to be in much of the time, Mona decided to see if the butterflies were really butterflies after all. They'd had a day for their wings to dry and so it should be safe to unzip the bag and let them out. Stefan was sitting on the back deck, the sun shining warmly on his knees that were always tan. Tan seemed to be second nature to him, though Mona's legs had become spotty and unpredictable when it came to sun leaving its mark on them. She rarely wore shorts.

Mona walked out on the deck and handed him the net bag. "You want to unzip this bag? There's supposed to be butterflies in there." She'd

asked him casually, not knowing what to expect, though probably there would be a flight of a few commonplace butterflies into the backyard air.

“Sure,” he said, all of a sudden coming to life and more interested than usual. Mona smiled. He held the bag, unzipped it, and looked at the movement inside the netting. Suddenly, without any warning, the butterflies emerged. One at a time. They fluttered into the air above Stefan’s head, above the back deck. “Painted Lady. That’s the kind of butterfly in these cocoons,” the man at the nursery had said. But to see them in their condition of being a butterfly was much greater than the words he had spoken. They were a thing of beauty. Black and pink, a slanted design across the wings. Stefan and Mona dropped their mouths as they took flight. Stefan watched them flutter through the air, scattering in different directions. As if they were attached by a string to his eyes, he followed them as they flew.

The last one of them landed on the geranium Mona had bought at the nursery, flitted at the edge of one leaf, stayed in place for the briefest of moments. Stefan and Mona looked at each other, their eyes full of surprise. There were no words that could be spoken, nothing more that could pass between them, except for a flicker of a smile on Stefan’s face.

“And they did this on Father’s Day,” he said, unusually animated. Then he sank back into his chair to watch and see if any of the butterflies would fly back to their deck and feel a kinship to the home where they were born. They were now his babies, Mona thought. His donation to the great outdoors. He and Mona sat in their chairs in the sun, in the warmth, and didn’t say much.

PHYLLIS BARBER {pnbarber511@gmail.com} has published ten books, her latest being *The Precarious Walk: Essays from Sand and Sky*. She has won many awards for her writing, one being the Associated Writing Programs Award Series Prize for Creative Nonfiction for *How I Got Cultured*. In 2016, she was also awarded for Outstanding Contribution to Mormon Letters, given by the Smith-Pettit Foundation and the Association of Mormon Letters.



"Loaves and Fishes,"
30 x 48", oil on canvas,
by Rose Datoc Dall, 2015

The Enduring Vertigo of the Elect Lady

Libbie Grant. *The Prophet's Wife*. New York: William Morrow, 2022. 480 pp. Paper: \$16.99. ISBN: 9780063070622.

Reviewed by Calvin Burke

Of the legacy of Joseph Smith, historian Bernard DeVoto wrote in 1936, “The vision perishes; it is the vertigo that endures.” Reading the novel *The Prophet's Wife* by Libbie Grant is to feel that same perishing vision and enduring vertigo experienced by DeVoto and countless Latter-day Saints negotiating their relationship to the inherited past of their own faith today.

The grounds of the early Saints and polygamy are well-trod within Mormon literature. Where Grant—*Washington Post* bestselling author of *One for the Blackbird*, written under her pen name Olivia Hawker—breaks new ground is in the decision to foreground one of the most controversial figures in Mormon history: Emma Hale Smith.

Grant's Emma is strong, disillusioned, and profoundly independent—not merely “a wife” but “*the* wife of Joseph Smith Junior” (2), as she declares to the governor of Illinois in the opening chapter. She watches, often powerlessly, as her young husband Joseph, equal terms charismatic and narcissistic, weaves a pious fraud that ultimately ensnares and destroys him.

Folk magic and polygamy figure prominently in the narrative. Inspired by scholarly work like D. Michael Quinn's *Early Mormonism and the Magic Worldview* and John L. Brooke's *The Refiner's Fire*, Grant's foregrounding of early Mormonism's connections to western esotericism is a significant addition to her narrative. Revelatory, too, is Grant's frank treatment of the sexual ramifications (and abuses) that some argue characterized early Latter-day Saint marriages. Grant is not

as gentle or nuanced with this material as some past Mormon authors were. The quiet devastation of Virginia Sorensen's *A Little Lower than the Angels* and the earnestly awkward kingdom building of Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua* are entirely absent from *The Prophet's Wife*; what remains is a cutting critique of Mormon patriarchy. *The Prophet's Wife* goes for the jugular in ways that are bound to be uncomfortable for practicing Latter-day Saints.

The narrative is punchy and pithy, and the voice is largely true to the time. It bogs down occasionally, however, in dialogue-heavy sections, where the dialogue doesn't ring true and pulls readers out of the skin of the characters. Grant's depiction of Emma herself is likely to be the most controversial—Emma doesn't believe her husband is a real prophet and even has romantic dalliances with Joseph's brother Don Carlos (which Grant, in an author's note, acknowledges is not historical). While Grant's depiction of Emma never feels entirely wrong, the book itself transcends historicity for a more important debate. Where *The Prophet's Wife* succeeds most is in its demonstration that the life of Emma Smith has extraordinary relevance to the challenges roiling the Brighamites nearly two centuries later. Today's Mormons find themselves just as haunted by the ghosts of their faith's founding sins as they were in Emma's time. If *The Prophet's Wife* is characterized as anti-Mormon literature by practicing Saints, it will be because the novel demonstrates precisely how institutional Mormonism's mythical self-regard furthers its contemporary oppression of women. Though Mormon readers may find themselves wishing for the more sympathetic treatments provided by Sorensen and Whipple, the reality remains that gentler treatments from our past have all but failed to yield institutional introspection, much less repentance. Perhaps nuance is not what we deserve?

The Prophet's Wife is precisely the kind of narrative that unfurls in the maelstrom when "the vision perishes"—a critique of contemporary Mormonism's failures told through historical fiction. A product

of enduring vertigo though it is, Grant's work proves a champion of women's resiliency and autonomy in the face of oppression—and that, perhaps, is the only solid ground upon which we can safely build.

CALVIN BURKE is currently a research assistant for the Mormon Studies Initiative at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Deeply involved in advocacy at the intersection of queer rights and Mormonism, Burke's advocacy efforts have been featured in many outlets, including the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Daily Beast*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *Washington Post*. In 2022, the Center for American Progress in Washington, DC, selected Burke as one of their "Faith Leaders to Watch."



Queerness Is Mormonism Is Queerness

Blaire Ostler. *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction*. BCC Press, 2021. 136pp. Paper: \$10.95. Kindle: \$7.49. Audiobook: \$17.99. ISBN: 9781948218412.

Review by Adam McLain

Queerness—the lived identity of LGBTQ+ and non-normative people—and Mormonism—the theological and social structures adhered to by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—always seem to be at odds. Blaire Ostler's *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* rejects this conflict with an approach that collapses the two into each other: queerness is Mormonism and Mormonism is queerness. This unapologetic stance toward queerness and Mormonism is different than many other approaches to the subject and makes her text's contribution innovative, advancing, and integral to the contemporary conversation of queerness within Mormonism.

Queer Mormon Theology is separated into seven chapters that discuss central themes: theology, God, Christ, the family, sexuality and creation, polygamy, and policy. Ostler uses this approach to center each topic on a queer reading of the subject rather than an investment in the theology and scholarship as it has been previously constituted. For example, in the second chapter, on Christ, Ostler reads Jesus as queer or, at least, having become queer through the Atonement by experiencing multiple embodied experiences (from childbirth to male-pattern baldness). While Ostler's arguments succinctly read queerness into the Atonement, she doesn't establish the various atonement theologies that have proliferated and still proliferate Mormonism. This tactic means she can approach her subject with fresh eyes, unencumbered by years of scholarship.

In addition, this unencumbered approach means that she can reach her audience with her message of queer Mormonism without fear of getting bogged down by having to undo harmful rhetoric or scholarship, engage with anti-queer scholars, or argue against apologists. In other words, Ostler seems to escape presenting the heteronormative theology. Indeed, this approach helps her reach her audience—practitioners of Mormonism. She can clearly articulate her queer Mormon theology and have it stand on its own with Mormon scripture and devotional literature as her foundation.

For this reader, the subtitle to the text is a critical way to view and use the book—Ostler's text is introductory and invitational. She does not wish to be the final word on the topic; instead, her engagement opens the door for further, more prolonged, and deeper investigations of the subject through her unapologetic, collective hermeneutic. For example, future writers on queerness and Mormonism might use Ostler's work as a medium by which to engage queer theologians like Justin Lee, Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, Marcella Althaus-Reid, and many others. Another potential for future study that Ostler does not engage with but that is brought up with her hermeneutic is what it means for Mormonism to

be, as Ostler argues, inseparable from queerness. Thus, *Queer Mormon Theology* should be read as the beginning of a theological conversation that is unapologetically queer *and* Mormon rather than a definitive declaration of queer, Mormon, or queer Mormon theology. Ostler's text moves the conversation away from self-deprecating, polemical autobiography or academic, institutional histories to the philosophical, the ontological, and the theological.

Ostler's book invites more approaches to queerness and Mormonism that accept the two within each other. Instead of building bridges across a chasm that separates queers and Mormons, a queer Mormon theological approach means queers and Mormons stand on the same cliff, dealing with the same scripture, the same history, and the same mortal existence with the same eschatological consequences. Thus, I hope that Ostler's text is read by those interested in queerness and that her hermeneutic of *queer Mormon* rather than "queer" and "Mormon" or "gay" and "Latter-day Saint" will open doors to new insight and engagement.

ADAM MCLAIN {adam.j.mclain@gmail.com} researches and writes on dystopian literature, legal theory, sexual ethics, and Mormonism. He is currently a graduate student at the University of Connecticut. He has a bachelor's degree in English from Brigham Young University and a master of theological studies from Harvard.

ARTISTS

M. ALICE ABRAMS is an illustrator and printmaker specializing in linoleum block print and watercolor located in Vancouver, Washington. Her artwork reflects her religious convictions and insights, as well as her experiences with parenthood. Her goal is to create simple yet poignant artwork that makes people feel loved and welcomed in the gospel. When not busy carving or painting, she is trying to keep up with her lively daughters and dog with her husband.

ESTHER HI'ILANI CANDARI is an artist and educator from Hawai'i. As an academic, her work complements her visual artistry and serves to enrich and inform conversations related to race, gender, and Latter-day Saint doctrine. In addition to her studio work, she designs curriculum for Sentient Academy, teaches art courses for Southern Virginia University, manages programming for Writ & Vision Gallery, and serves on the Board of Directors for Dialogue Foundation.

ROSE DATOC DALL is a Filipina American artist who is an award-winning contemporary figurative painter known for her bold colors and graphic compositions. Her most iconic pieces are sacred works on the life of the Savior. Rose received her BFA in fine art studio and art history from Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. Rose is a wife and mother of four adult children, and grandmother or "Lola" to three grandchildren.

GARY ERNEST SMITH lives and works at his home and studio with his wife Judy in Highland, Utah. They have four married children and eight grandchildren. The major projects he has done for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are murals for the Nauvoo temple, the Samoa Temple, the Brigham City Temple, and the Provo City Tabernacle Temple. He has individual paintings hanging in numerous temples and church buildings throughout the world. He continues today to produce paintings the church uses for whatever capacity they need.

DIALOGUE

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Keith Burns and Linwood Lewis, "Transcending Mormonism: Transgender Experiences in the LDS Church"

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