

THIS EARTH AND THE INHABITANTS THEREOF: (NON-)HUMANS IN THE DIVINE HOUSEHOLD

Michael Haycock

Worlds without number have I created . . . But only an account of this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, give I unto you. For behold, there are many worlds that . . . now stand, and innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them.

— *Moses 1:33–35*

Things as They Really Are

In 2009, Elder David A. Bednar warned about potential pitfalls of digital spaces. Reminding listeners that the acquisition of our bodies was our primary reason for entering mortality, he said, “some young men and young women in the Church today ignore ‘things as they really are’ and neglect eternal relationships for digital distractions, diversions, and detours that have no lasting value”: eternity or bust. In immersive virtual environments like Second Life, the allure of the merely simulated—“the monotony of virtual repetition”—can substitute “for the infinite variety of God’s creations and convince us we are merely mortal things to be acted upon instead of eternal souls blessed with moral agency to act for ourselves.”¹

Animal Spirits, Bodies, Eternities

An oft-ignored element of LDS theology is that eternal bodies are *not* limited to *human* ones. Contemplating the biblical apocalypse, Joseph

1. David A. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are,” *Ensign*, June 2010, <https://www.lds.org/study/ensign/2010/06/things-as-they-really-are?lang=eng>.



Figure 1. Tympanum of St. Trophime in Arles, France. Photo by Rolf Süssbrich. Reproduced with permission: CC BY-SA 3.0.

Smith eschewed metaphor, teaching that “John saw the actual beast in heaven, to show . . . that that being did actually exist there.”² The beasts of John’s vision were individuals, not symbols. What’s more, Joseph added, “John heard the words of the beasts giving glory to God and understood them. God who made the beasts could understand every language spoken by them.”³ They apparently had enough intellectual capacity for intelligible speech.

Joseph also said that they “were four of the most noble animals that filled the measure of their creation, and had been saved from other

2. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 185.

3. Quoted in Gerald E. Jones and Scott S. Smith, *Animals and the Gospel* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Millennial Productions, 1980), 5.

worlds, because they were perfect” and “represent the glory of the classes of beings in their destined order or sphere of creation, in the enjoyment of their eternal felicity”⁴ (see Figure 1). In a similar mode, during the endowment, the Creator commands animals to multiply “in their sphere” and plants to multiply “in their element,” “that every form of life might fulfill the measure of its creation and have joy therein”—language that echoes Lehi’s assertion that “men are that they might have joy,” teachings about human salvation, and verbiage applied in temple ordinances to humans and human reproduction.⁵

Others have grounded the existence of nonhuman spirits on an interpretation of the two creation narratives in Genesis: Genesis 1 is a “spiritual” creation, Genesis 2 a “temporal” one. Some analogize this to a blueprint versus a building; everything created had a model previously outlined by God.

I should mention that this is all still valid: in the past decade, official Church magazines have reiterated that animals “will enjoy some kind of salvation and immortality,” but are not “begotten sons and daughters of Heavenly Father.”⁶

Personal Interlude: 2015–2019

If we’re friends on Facebook, you may have seen that one of my personal projects has been a series of icon-style paintings of equine characters who are inspirational exemplars of faith, perseverance, labor, and joy. Some characters you might recognize from C. S. Lewis’s Narnia books (see Figure 2) and from scripture, though stylized: Balaam’s donkey, the original speaker in tongues through divine power (see Figure 3).⁷

4. Doctrine and Covenants 77:3.

5. 2 Nephi 2:25.

6. “Do Animals Have Spirits? What Happens to Them after They Die?,” *New Era*, Mar. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/study/new-era/2012/03/to-the-point/do-animals-have-spirits-what-happens-to-them-after-they-die?lang=eng>.

7. See Numbers 22.



Figure 2. Fledge, the winged horse from *The Magician's Nephew* and Jewel, the unicorn from *The Last Battle*. By Michael Haycock.



Figure 3. Balaam's Donkey. By Michael Haycock.

Care for Animal Bodies

In the nineteenth century, many argued that cruelty to animals inured humans to cruelty in general; by encouraging kindness to animals, humans' cruelty to other humans could be mitigated. In this spirit Lorenzo Snow came to regard sport hunting as a "murderous amusement" and Spencer W. Kimball pled with children to not kill the little birds.⁸

In a similar move, I believe that LDS teachings about animal spirits should serve to extend our circle of moral consideration and care beyond the human, if only because it would make it all the harder to disregard our fellow humans. Given frequent admonitions to value the eternal over the temporary and revelation that the same sociality we have here on earth will persist into the kingdoms of glory, knowing that nonhuman animals will have a place in those kingdoms—that our relationships with nonhumans have "lasting value"⁹—should awaken some concern about our treatment of such animals in mortality.

After all, it seems that we will meet more individuals before the judgment bar of God than Jesus, Jacob, Moroni, our families, and other humans we knew.¹⁰ When faced with the chicken that lived its entire life in a tiny cage or the cow on the industrial feedlot, how do we justify wholly ignoring the "word of wisdom" to eat flesh only in times of cold or famine? When faced by Tilikum the orca at SeaWorld, how do we justify our entertainment? When faced by the polar bear that died of starvation; the caribou who found a pipeline across their migration route; the last Pinta Island tortoise, Lonesome George—and the many others whose family lines we, through our individual and collective agency, have

8. See Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 188–89; and Spencer W. Kimball, "Fundamental Principles to Ponder and Live," Oct. 1978, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1978/10/fundamental-principles-to-ponder-and-live?lang=eng>.

9. Bednar, "Things as They Really Are."

10. See Jacob 6:9, 13; Mormon 9:13.

cut off forever—how do we justify our exploitative consumption? The earth is full of violence, much of it human against our coinhabitants.

Elder Bednar warns, “Deceitful acts supposedly veiled in secrecy, such as illegally downloading music from the Internet . . . , are nonetheless deceitful. We are all accountable to God, and ultimately we will be judged of Him according to our deeds and the desires of our hearts.”¹¹ Similarly, and much more seriously, we should realize that our hands are not clean of our fellow sojourners’ blood simply because our violence is laundered through a disaggregated global economy with obscured supply chains. After all, the same God who gave Adam dominion over the earth, exhorting us to use it “with judgment, not to excess, neither by extortion,”¹² also observed that “it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority . . . , they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.”¹³

Instead, perhaps we could ponder new shades of King Benjamin’s teaching that we are in the service of our God when we are in the service of our fellow *beings*.¹⁴

The Evolution and Diversity of Bodies

One year before Joseph reported being visited by Elijah “to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, lest the whole earth be smitten with a curse,” a young geologist visited the Galápagos Islands and formulated the principles upon which would be founded our current knowledge that all residents of this earth are kin.¹⁵ The spirit of Elijah worked to turn our hearts to fathers, mothers, and cousins farther than we’d ever dreamed, and we have much work to do before we can integrate the insights from the science of life into our theology.

11. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are.”

12. Doctrine and Covenants 59:20.

13. Doctrine and Covenants 121:39.

14. Mosiah 2:17.

15. Doctrine and Covenants 110:15.

As this conference evinces, many are contributing to this discussion, but there is a small way in which I feel I should probably contribute: by taking evolution as a given, we can use insights derived from evolutionary history to enrich our theological models of a Zion community. Though any conclusions drawn from scientific investigation must be as tentative as the science itself, I propose that one of the primary arenas in which this could take place is that of the vexing question of sexual diversity. Vexing, that is, because our theological models no longer account for observable phenomena: LDS leaders no longer teach that non-heterosexuality is evidence or byproduct of sin, therefore allowing non-heterosexual people a place in the Church; yet concurrently we have almost no discourse available about faithful single life, and leaders seldom address how these earthly, bodily realities will manifest themselves in the heavenly kingdoms.

High-Fidelity Models

Another of the values against which Elder Bednar weighed cyberspace was *fidelity*. On one hand, he spoke of the fidelity of a simulation to its analogues in the physical world, the verisimilitude of the model. In this respect, high fidelity combined with good purposes (architectural designs, occupational training, and so forth) is edifying. Elder Bednar used as an example a simulation of a sealing room in the Newport Beach California Temple compared with the nearly identical actual room. Meanwhile, high fidelity mixed with less-than-good purposes (for instance, virtual worlds, images, and stories more enticing than embodied life) is a recipe for “stifling, suffocating, suppressing, and constraining impacts” on one’s life.¹⁶

On the other hand, Elder Bednar described “personal fidelity”: the correspondence between your online and “real life” identities. In this respect, LDS internet users should ensure that their online actions are

16. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are.”

characterized by high fidelity to their offline identities, and thus avoid fracturing themselves into mutually contradictory embodied and unembodied facades, some of which might act contrary to God's will. Actions in cyberspace have moral import.



Figure 4. Boxer of *Animal Farm* and Seabiscuit. By Michael Haycock.

Personal Interlude: 2005–2007

One reason I paint horses today is that several inspirational equine characters I encountered in my youth made a big impression on me (see Figure 4); indeed, with that narrative and symbolic influence, and for a number of other reasons, I took to artistically representing myself in horse-ish form. Though it was in some ways an affirming practice, innocuous and even fun, I could not restrain my ever-anxious mind

from interrogating it: why did I find this self-image comforting? Was I deluded? Was I scorning God's gift of a human body with its unique cognitive, moral, and divine capabilities?

Evolved Humans in Zion

Whatever unknown meaning sexual differentiation and pairing might have had for pre-embodied spirits or postmortal perfected beings, on earth, as far as we know, it is a trait evolved due to its efficacy in genetic recombination. But it is by no means a universal adaptation for survival. Throughout the animal kingdom, including among our closest relatives, we see a diversity of reproductive and reproduction-adjacent behaviors. Farther away, things get stranger: Ursula K. Le Guin quipped once that "oysters change sex with great nonchalance."¹⁷ Why do these examples matter to an LDS theology of human lives? Well, if we take it seriously that reproduction, gender, and kinship are eternally important while also accepting our evolved kinship with beings whose lives do not fit the categories into which we sort human lives, what should we learn about God's will for the structure of kin in the hereafter?

I must note that this is not to say that the human situation is identical to any other animal's, nor that we should model human society or our understanding of humanity on observations of other animals. We're our own evolutionary clade.

Nor am I suggesting that the products of evolution are unquestionably morally good. After all, there are other human traits and behaviors that have, yes, evolved, but can prove destructive. Wendell Berry describes the results of our current instantiation of novelty-seeking and predation: "The aims of productivity, profitability, efficiency, limitless growth, limitless wealth, limitless mechanization and automation can enrich

17. Ursula K. Le Guin, postcard to Michael Haycock, Jan. 30, 2013.

and empower the few (for a while), but they will sooner or later ruin us all.”¹⁸ You might say: the “natural man.”¹⁹

What I am saying is that the animal kingdom provides ample evidence that a diversity of reproductive and reproduction-adjacent behaviors is an objectively verifiable product of evolution, something that seems to convey some benefit to the flourishing of a species. We should not be surprised to find such diversity within humans as well—especially given the complex genetic, epigenetic, hormonal, environmental, cultural, and personal factors that all contribute to an individual’s sexual orientation and gender identity. And we should consider ways in which this diversity, within whatever bounds the Lord sets, can prove essential to the building of Zion. “All God’s critters got a place in the choir,” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland quipped in a recent general conference talk. “When we disparage our uniqueness or try to conform to fictitious stereotypes—stereotypes driven by an insatiable consumer culture and idealized beyond any possible realization by social media—we lose the richness of tone and timbre that God intended when He created a world of diversity.”²⁰

For perhaps obvious reasons, non-heterosexuality tends to have a negative impacts on an *individual’s* reproduction. Therefore, a variety of theories seek to explain how non-heterosexuality could have made it through the colander of natural selection. Perhaps the most likely is that of kin selection, which Darwin himself first proposed: while non-heterosexual people have fewer children of their own, they help their relatives’ offspring survive to reproduce, thereby increasing the

18. Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 12.

19. Mosiah 3:19.

20. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Songs Sung and Unsung,” Apr. 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2017/05/saturday-afternoon-session/songs-sung-and-unsung?lang=eng>.

probability that the genes they share with their siblings will be passed on.²¹ We care for those to whom we are related.

Therefore, the evolution of non-heterosexuality could have served an integral role in the survival and flourishing of humanity. In a family, a community, a world, every person has their niche, and human reproduction is more than just copulation, conception, and birth. Human children have a very long period of maturation, requiring supportive communities, with extended family and multiple generations together, including members without children of their own. As the aphorism says, “It takes a village to raise a child.”

And, indeed, it takes more than humans to raise a human child. In the words of Wendell Berry, “If we speak of a *healthy* community, we cannot be speaking of a community that is merely human. We are talking about a neighborhood of humans in a place, plus the place itself: its soil, its water, its air, and all the families and tribes of the nonhuman creatures that belong to it.”²² Despite our technological advances, our societies are still built upon nonhuman resources and beings. We have never been alone, though Adam did not find the companionship he needed among the animals.

What occludes these insights, it seems, is a too-constrained concept of how human society reproduces itself. Under recent economic and social pressures that profit from consistent, uniform, interchangeable models of society and labor—no matter how detrimental to personal

21. “I can see no real difficulty in any character having become correlated with the sterile condition of certain members of insect communities: the difficulty lies in understanding how such correlated modifications of structure could have been slowly accumulated by natural selection. This difficulty, though appearing insuperable, is lessened, or, as I believe, disappears, when it is remembered that selection may be applied to the family, as well as to the individual, and may thus gain the desired end.” Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, 106, available at <https://charles-darwin.classic-literature.co.uk/on-the-origin-of-species/ebook-page-106.asp>.

22. Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, 14.

and communal flourishing—the family has gone nuclear, squeezing out or expelling any stray electrons and ignoring all other forms of matter.

Personal Interlude: 2007–2009

On my mission, I was taught and came to believe that anything that took time, attention, and emotions away from the missionary work, in whatever small degree, was a satanic ploy to disrupt my and others' progress toward salvation. The first things I pledged to forswear were drawing and horses—I couldn't see a place for my creative efforts and life stories alongside God's. In Argentina, some people still used horse carts, so I gave myself a rule: "Thou shalt not watch horses or think about them."²³ As a result, I spent the next eighteen months literally closing an eye whenever I passed a horse on the street. I came to the ominous conclusion that "For all the weird, irreconcilable uniquenesses we might have, God has the answers."²⁴

Belonging in Zion

As much as we might forget, our theological heritage and imagination of human community do extend beyond the family. Paul and modern revelation provide a more ecological framework for understanding diversity in the Church: "members" of the body of Christ, each possessing certain gifts that enable them to serve the others.²⁵ Catholic lesbian Eve Tushnet, for instance, speaks of her orientation as something that gives her tools needed to serve her fellow beings in unique ways.²⁶ Acceptance and incorporation of non-heterosexual people does not even require condoning non-heterosexual romantic relationships, but it will require more creativity to form a vision of Zion-as-ecosystem.

23. Personal journal entry, Oct. 1, 2007.

24. Personal journal entry, June 30, 2009.

25. 1 Corinthians 12 and Doctrine and Covenants 46, especially.

26. Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2014).

If we do not broaden our view of human experience, if we limit our concept of the family to the supposedly nuclear household of Adam and Eve, we are, in essence, adopting a low-fidelity, virtual model of humanity and our place in our world. In the words of Alice Major, “we forget we live on a planet that is more inventive than ourselves.”²⁷ Instead of “the infinite variety of God’s creations,” we get “the monotony of virtual repetition,” believing we are to act out parts in the same script instead of “eternal souls blessed with moral agency to act for ourselves.” We speak not of “things as they really are,” nor of “this Earth and the inhabitants thereof”—we minimize the importance of the bodies we have, and we disembodied Christ.²⁸ We create a version of Zion without hands or eyes.

But we need not confine ourselves to this stunted virtual reality. Just as genetic diversity in a population increases its ability to adapt to changing habitats, personal and cultural diversity can help Zion not only survive but endure and prevail. We are not bound by the shapes and models of our generation; we are “eternal souls blessed with moral agency to act for ourselves.”

Personal Postlude: 2013

After years of study and spiritual labor, I overcame the ascetic excesses of my mission. During this period, out of curiosity, I ventured onto Second Life. After exploring several regions—cities, landscapes, starships—I remembered that there was an LDS one, named Adam-ondi-Ahman: Adam-walks-with-God. Alongside a museum about the story of the Book of Mormon (Figure 5), a recreation of the Washington D.C. Temple exterior (Figure 6), and *this* (Figure 7), there was a meetinghouse you could tour. It was humorously uncanny how they got all the details right:

27. Dan Zak, “‘Everything Is Not Going to Be Okay’: How to Live with Constant Reminders That the Earth Is in Trouble,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 24, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/everything-is-not-going-to-be-okay-how-to-live-with-constant-reminders-that-the-earth-is-in-trouble/2019/01/24/9dd9d6e6-1e53-11e9-8b59-0a28f2191131_story.html.

28. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are.”



Figure 5. Screen shot from Second Life courtesy of Michael Haycock



Figure 6. Screen shot from Second Life courtesy of Michael Haycock

classrooms with chalkboards, industrial carpet, even a glass announcement case with the missionary plaque of a Second Life regular.

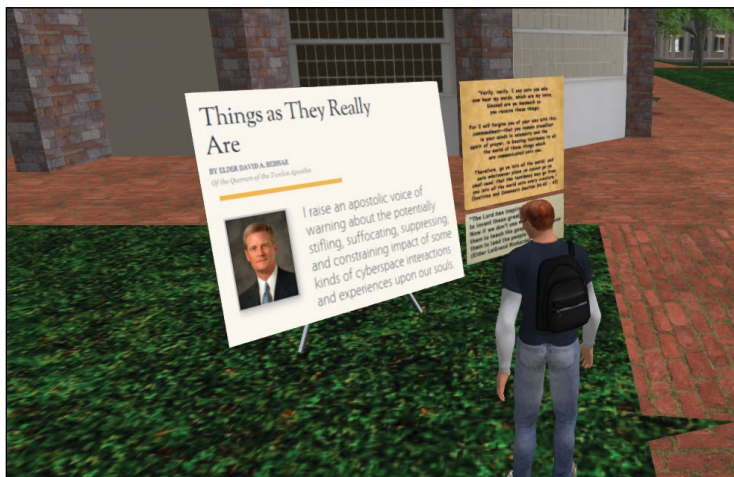


Figure 7. Screen shot from Second Life courtesy of Michael Haycock



Figure 8. Screen shot from Second Life courtesy of Michael Haycock

I walked my avatar into the empty chapel and sat it down (Figure 8). So shocking, so yearned-for, yet so unlooked-for was that conjunction of the mundane and the fantastic that I found myself overcome. Some among us might even have called it a tender mercy.

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