

THE GARDEN ATONEMENT AND THE MORMON CROSS TABOO

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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

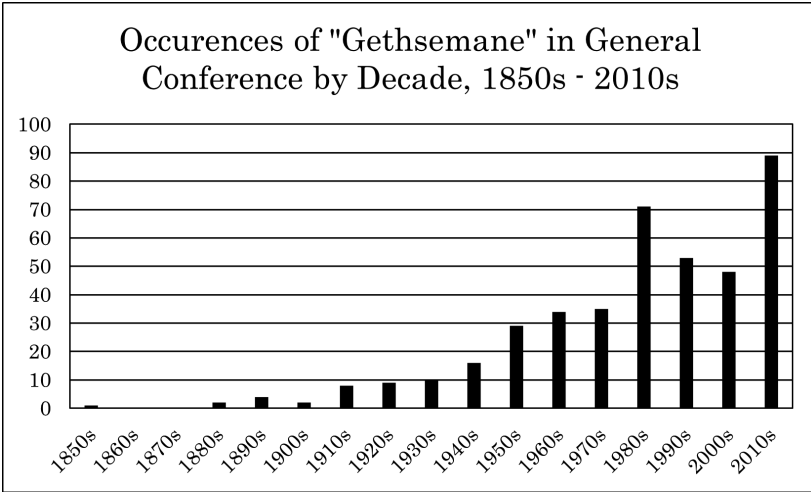


Figure 1

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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