

DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought



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is an independent quarterly established to express Mormon culture and to examine the relevance of religion to secular life. It is edited by Latter-day Saints who wish to bring their faith into dialogue with the larger stream of world religious thought and with human experience as a whole and to foster artistic and scholarly achievement based on their cultural heritage. The journal encourages a variety of viewpoints; although every effort is made to ensure accurate scholarship and responsible judgment, the views expressed are those of the individual authors and are not necessarily those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or of the editors.

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JESUS CHRIST, MARRIAGE, AND
MORMON CHRISTIANITIES:
2016 SMITH-PETTIT LECTURE,
SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUM

John G. Turner

“I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.”

According to his official history, that’s all Joseph Smith said to his mother after God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to him while he prayed by himself in the woods. Whether or not Presbyterianism was true was a more pressing question for the young Joseph Smith than it is for most of you. Sometime in the mid-1820s, Lucy Mack Smith and several of Joseph’s siblings joined a Presbyterian church. Joseph must have wrestled with his mother’s choice. Like his father, though, he never joined any Protestant church. But it was surely a major point of controversy and discussion in the family.

“Presbyterianism is not true.”

I have to say that’s a rather small takeaway for a theophany. It’s rather like meeting a three-star Michelin chef and having him declare that the food at McDonald’s is not good.

And it’s a bit annoying. God and Jesus visit the prophet-to-be in a grove and tell him that my church is not true.

Still, having been a Presbyterian all my life, I’d have to concede that Joseph Smith or the Lord had a point. There have been some terribly false things about Presbyterianism and Presbyterians. It’s not just that

we have an unspellable and unpronounceable name, or that what we most excel at is forming committees and subcommittees.

John Calvin and the Protestant Reformation in Geneva were the theological inspiration for those in Scotland and England who embraced Presbyterianism, which means, most simply, the local and regional governance of churches by elected elders and ministers. It's ecclesiastical democracy with checks and balances. It allows us to do things "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).

John Calvin was the theological bogeyman of early nineteenth-century America. Calvinism was under assault from Americans who could not abide the idea that God arbitrarily chose to save some individuals and damn others. The basic concept struck many early Americans as arbitrary and cruel. Methodists insisted that salvation was freely available to all individuals who chose to place their faith in Jesus Christ. Many Unitarians contended that predestination made God loathsome. Joseph Smith and his followers rejected Calvinism as well. A central teaching of the Book of Mormon is that individuals are free to choose "liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all" (2 Nephi 2:27). Christ died for all, not just for a select number of God's chosen.

Calvin did not exclude infants from God's sovereign and just decrees about salvation: "even infants bring their condemnation with them from their mother's womb [and] suffer not for another's, but for their own defect. For although infants have not yet produced the fruits of their own unrighteousness, they have the seed implanted in them . . . their whole nature is . . . a seed-bed of sin."¹

That just stinks. God damning certain infants because they would have sinned had they lived longer! Ugh. At least the LDS Church lets children off the hook until age eight. And now that my daughter is eight years old, I think eight is too young.

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:217 (Book II, chapter 1, section 8).

A few weeks ago, our family had a run-in with the authorities down in Green River, Utah. Not a serious run-in. I was pulled over for going 51 in a 40-miles-per-hour zone. Flashing lights. Police officer at the door. Handing over license and rental car agreement. Agonizing wait for five minutes. I wondered whether “driving while Gentile” is risky in Utah. Apparently not, as I escaped with a warning.

Meanwhile, my daughter was watching *Inside Out* in the backseat on a little DVD player. She had no idea that we had been pulled over. This is *not* because I get pulled over every other day. It’s just because my daughter pays no attention to the rest of the world if she’s focused on something. So I tend to think that God would be unjust to hold her accountable for her sinfulness. I’m giving her until at least eighty years of age.

The Book of Mormon condemns the idea of infant baptism as abominable. It teaches that “all little children are alive in Christ” (Moroni 8:22). Behaviorally, I’m not so sure about that, but it’s a much more attractive idea than Calvin’s contention that God has predestined many infants to hell.

I can find all sorts of other ideas to back up Joseph Smith’s contention that Presbyterianism is not true. John Calvin’s supporting the burning of anti-Trinitarian Michael Servetus at the stake in Geneva. American Presbyterians’ leading the way in the defense of slavery prior to the Civil War. Churches and presbyteries (presbyteries resemble LDS stakes) that have split over issues of women’s ordination and same-sex marriage. Congregational factions fighting over church property.

I might take some offense when the Book of Mormon labels other churches as “false,” or perhaps as belonging to the “great and abominable church,” but I can’t fully disagree with Joseph Smith’s statement to his mother that Presbyterianism is not true. It’s certainly not true in the sense of being Christ’s one true church, or of having avoided episodes that we might all label “abominable.”

At the same time, from John Calvin down to the present, Presbyterianism has also been a vehicle for beauty, for community, for thoughtful inspiration. “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” That’s the opening sentence of John Calvin’s *Institutes*.² Joseph Smith should have liked that. In fact, Joseph Smith centered his final sermons on those very questions. Who is God? Who are we? He answered them a bit differently than had Calvin, but those basic questions have generated so much theological reflection across the centuries.

Surely Joseph Smith would have liked the opening of the longer and shorter versions of the Westminster Catechism, which states that the chief end of our lives is to “glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.” God is not merely to be understood, admired, or worshiped. Rather, humans are to enjoy God.

I would say, far more prosaically, that I have found beauty in local congregations that taught me that I needed a redeemer and showed me a community through which I found one. And so I have stuck with my church, despite its obvious flaws, despite its declining numbers, because it was within its confines that I found beauty, community, and life.

In the history and doctrines of Mormonism, I also have found much beauty, community, and life, and I have also found episodes and ideas that are abominable. Tonight, I will share two instances to illustrate that complexity. Both stories pertain to marriage, which seems very appropriate. Outsiders have at different points in the LDS Church’s history expressed horror over and admiration for Mormon patterns of marriage. Matters of marriage, moreover, have divided and still divide Mormons among themselves, partly because Latter-day Saints affix so much sacred and salvific importance to marriage.

2. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:37 (Book I, chapter 1, section 1).

My first story comes from the time of the Mormon “reformation,” that period in the mid-1850s when Brigham Young and his associates decided that the Saints needed to re-commit themselves to God, to their church, and to their leaders.³ It was nearly ten years after Brigham Young had led the first group of Mormon pioneers to the Salt Lake Valley. While not exactly ten years of prosperity, it had been a decade of relative isolation and peace. The Saints had survived the first several tough winters in the valley, and now thousands streamed to the West each year, from Illinois, from the Northeast, from England, from Scandinavia.

And yet Brigham Young was unsatisfied. Deeply unsatisfied. He feared his people had lost their earlier ardor and zeal. And I think he could see the handwriting on the wall. US officials kept coming to Utah, as did US military officers and surveyors. They would keep coming. Political storms were on the horizon, and Brigham believed the Saints needed to be united and committed in order to weather them.

In response to his concerns, Young and associates such as Jedediah Grant preached sermons that castigated the Saints for their sins, warned them of the dangers of ongoing immorality and disobedience, and instructed them to be rebaptized for the remission of their sins. They needed to show their renewed commitment. Many did. They confessed sins. They were rebaptized. The ensuing months were a spiritual hot-house in many Mormon communities. Repentance. Visions. Speaking in tongues. For many, fear of judgment mingled with the exhilaration of forgiveness and assurance.

It was during this time period that Brigham Young and others openly preached that Jesus’ death could not atone for certain sins, for which sinners had to atone with their own blood. There was bloody talk, and there were bloody crimes during these years. The reformation of the mid-1850s is certainly among the darkest periods of Mormon history.

3. See the broader discussion in John G. Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), chapter 9.

In particular, Young called on those who had wavered over polygamy to step up to the mark and live their religion. Those previously hesitant should embrace the plurality of wives. They should marry if possible. They should marry again if possible. Young pointedly reminded the congregations that “multitudes of pure and holy spirits [were] waiting to take tabernacles.” Righteous men, he argued, had an ongoing responsibility to create those bodies. “If my wife had borne me all the children that she would ever bare,” he explained, “the celestial law would teach me to take young women that would have children.”⁴ Some local leaders warned of violent reprisals against those who voiced opposition to polygamy. “Whang away at them,” one leader in Provo instructed.⁵

The response to such preaching was overwhelming. Letters from men and their bishops poured into Young’s office, requesting permission to take additional wives. Young’s clerk pronounced himself “astonished at the number of applications for permission to take wives.” Pleased with the response, Young told most supplicants to “go ahead.” He or a clerk would sometimes scribble that phrase on an incoming letter. With particular satisfaction, Young noted that the handcart “Sisters . . . are almost all married off; they are much in demand.”⁶ The Saints took the reformation preaching of their leaders to heart. They went ahead. They married. They married again.

Inevitably, the marital stampede led to a decrease in the marriage age. “Nearly all are trying to get wives,” Wilford Woodruff wrote the

4. Brigham Young, Sep. 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses* 4:55–56.

5. Dominicus Carter, in minutes of Oct. 26, 1856, Provo Central Utah Stake Record, LR 9629 11, Church History Library (hereafter CHL), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

6. “astonished” in Brigham Young Office Journal, Jan. 14, 1857, Box 72, Folder 3, Brigham Young Papers (hereafter BYP), CR 1234 1, CHL; “go ahead,” see for example Brigham Young to William Barton, Mar. 5, 1857, Letterpress Copybook 3, page 459, BYP; “Sisters” in Brigham Young to Ezra T. Benson, Jan. 26, 1857, Letterpress Book 3, page 320, BYP.

following spring, “until there is hardly a girl 14 years old in Utah but what is married or just going to be.” Woodruff himself offered his fourteen-year-old daughter Phebe in marriage to Brigham Young, who informed the apostle that he was no longer marrying “young wives.”⁷

While marriages of fourteen-year-old girls were not unheard of in the rest of the United States (the legal age of consent was often twelve for women), such unions were very rare. Mormon leaders, by contrast, blessed an unusual number of early marriages, especially during the reformation.

The issue arose repeatedly during early 1857. Sometimes Young himself found a request distasteful. “Old Father James Alread brought three young girls 12 & 13 years old,” he once complained. “I would not seal them to him. They would not be equally yoked.”⁸ James Allred was seventy-three years old. Other times, though, Young gave permission for the marriage to proceed but counseled the husband to wait to consummate it. Writing to one supplicant, Young granted him permission to wed a thirteen-year-old girl but instructed him to “preserve her intact until she is fully developed into Womanhood.”⁹ Similarly, he counseled another applicant to “‘Go ahead’ but leave children to grow.”¹⁰

When I was researching the life of Brigham Young, these letters made my stomach turn. There are many things I admire about Brigham Young. He could be extremely winsome. He was incredibly funny. He

7. Woodruff to George A. Smith, Apr. 1, 1857, Letterpress Copybook 1, 439, Church Historian’s Office, Outgoing Correspondence, CR 100 38, CHL; “young wives” in Wilford Woodruff Journal (hereafter WWJ), Feb. 15, 1857 (Scott G. Kenney, ed., WWJ, 1833–1898: Typescript [Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983–84], 5:22).

8. WWJ, Jun. 14, 1857, 5:58.

9. Brigham Young to Uriah Butt, Feb. 17, 1857, Copybook 3, p. 408, BYP. See Butt and Joseph Parramore to Brigham Young, Feb. 17, 1857, box 64, folder 5, BYP.

10. Heber C. Kimball to John S. Fulmer, Mar. 20, 1857, Letterpress Copybook 3, p. 474, BYP. Kimball explicitly described his advice as Young’s counsel.

displayed remarkable persistence and resilience in striving to accomplish his goals. He suffered, I think, from something akin to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in the wake of the Nauvoo persecutions and Joseph Smith's martyrdom.

Like all people, though, Brigham Young had feet of clay. "Preserve her intact until she is fully developed into Womanhood." "Go ahead but leave children to grow." In these instances of very early marriage, he acted recklessly, putting girls into situations that denied their true agency and placing them at great risk of abuse.

Certainly, many Mormon women voluntarily entered into and even publicly defended plural marriage in the nineteenth century. At the same time, Church hierarchs, parents, and suitors pressured young women—barely pubescent girls—into marriages. I say that with the recognition that Brigham Young was hardly alone in creating such precarious circumstances for young women. European aristocracies arranged marriages for girls at very young ages in the middle ages and early modern periods. The prophet Muhammad by tradition married his plural wife A'isha when she was six or seven and delayed consummation of the marriage until she reached puberty. Such practices remain common in some parts of the world today. And no doubt many non-Mormon parents pressured their daughters into unwanted marriages in the nineteenth century. Regardless, the Mormon reformation pushed the age of marriage down, creating what I consider abominable circumstances for young women in early Utah.¹¹ In fact, Utah Mormonism very nearly went off the rails in the mid-1850s, with pressure to take plural wives, dangerous saber-rattling against Washington, and shocking instances of extra-legal violence.

11. See the discussion in Todd M. Compton, "Early Marriage in the New England and Northeastern States, and in Mormon Polygamy: What Was the Norm?," in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy* edited by Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 184–232.



“My self and wife Vilate was annointed [anointed] Preast and Preastest unto our God under the Hands of B[righam] Young and by the voys [voice] of the Holy Order,” wrote apostle Heber C. Kimball in his diary in February 1844. At that ceremony, Young poured oil upon Kimball’s head, anointing him as a priest and king “unto the most High God in & over the Church.” Young promised his friend long life and that he would have the power to redeem his “progenitors . . . & bring them into thy Kingdom.” He also anointed Vilate Kimball “a Queen & Priestess unto her husband . . . & pronounced blessings upon her head in common with her husband.”¹²

Two months later, in a privately completed second stage of the ordinance, Vilate Kimball performed a ceremony to prepare her husband for his future burial. She washed his feet, then anointed his feet, head, and stomach. The ritual ensured their readiness to rise together when Christ returned, presuming they died before that event. Vilate Kimball wrote that she had anointed her husband so that she might “have a claim upon” her “dear companion” in the resurrection. Death would not separate them from each other or from the promises and blessings conferred upon them by the priesthood.¹³

Joseph Smith continually introduced new rituals to assure his followers of their future salvation and exaltation, new ordinances designed to make sure the promises of which he spoke. The “second anointing” or “Last Anointing,” described by Heber and Vilate Kimball, was the highest of those rituals. According to Brigham Young, this ordinance

12. This and the several paragraphs that follow are adapted from John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), chapter 8.

13. Heber C. Kimball Journal, 1 Feb. 1, 1844 and Apr. 1, 1844 (one entry in Vilate Kimball’s handwriting), in Stanley B. Kimball, ed., *On the Potter’s Wheel: The Diaries of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), 56–57.

conferred “the fulness of the Priesthood, all that can be given on earth,” a promise that the recipients’ exaltation was certain rather than contingent.¹⁴ Among the blessings they should expect following the ritual was a visitation from the Savior. Anointed and ordained as kings and priests in anticipation of their future kingdoms, men now possessed the authority—the “keys”—to perform “all the ordinances belonging to the kingdom of God.”¹⁵ A wife, in turn, was priestess and queen “unto her Husband,” participating at his side in the governance of an eternal familial kingdom. Over the next century, tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints (in their lifetimes or posthumously) received their second anointings.¹⁶

The Kimbells connected the second stage of the ordinance, in which Vilate Kimball washed her husband’s feet and anointed his body, with the anointing of Jesus shortly before his crucifixion. “Even as Mary did Jesus,” Heber Kimball wrote, “that she mite have a claim on Him in the Resurrection.” Likewise, Vilate Kimball wanted to have a “claim upon him [Heber] in the morning of the first Resurrection.” Heber and Vilate Kimball were now husband and wife for eternity. So, apparently, were Jesus and Mary.

All four New Testament Gospels contain a story of a woman anointing Jesus with expensive, perfumed oil or ointment.¹⁷ In the Gospels of

14. Heber C. Kimball Journal, Diary, Dec. 26, 1845, kept by William Clayton, typescript at HBLL, 126.

15. Joseph Smith quoted in WWJ, Mar. 10, 1844, 2:361–62. See Glen Leonard, *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 260–61.

16. See Devery S. Anderson, *The Development of LDS Temple Worship, 1846–2000: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), xli–xlv; and David John Buerger, “‘The Fulness of the Priesthood’: The Second Anointing in LDS Theology and Practice,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 10–44.

17. Mark 14:3–9; Matthew 26:6–13; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8.

Mark and Matthew, as Jesus travels to Jerusalem prior to his arrest and crucifixion, a woman in the town of Bethany pours an expensive spikenard oil over his head. Some of the men present complain that the jar could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus, however, responds that the woman quite properly has “come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying” (Mark 14:8). Luke’s Gospel diverges from the accounts in Mark and Matthew, as the anointing takes place long before Jesus’ crucifixion at an unnamed location. A woman identified as a “sinner” or, according to some translations, a “prostitute” bathes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them, and then rubs them with oil. Jesus’ host, a Pharisee, objects that his guest, if a prophet, should have known about the woman’s sinful life, whereupon Jesus lambasts his host for his self-righteousness and lack of hospitality. Jesus forgives the woman’s sins. Only the Gospel of John identifies the woman as Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus in the town of Bethany. Some Christians have equated Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene, present at Jesus’ crucifixion and according to two of the gospels the first to see him following his resurrection.

The example of the woman’s anointing Jesus was integral to the way that nineteenth-century Mormons thought about the second anointing. When Vilate Kimball washed her husband’s feet, she imitated the woman at Bethany. LDS Church leaders passed down the connection between the second anointing and that of Jesus at Bethany. In 1889, apostle and future Church president Joseph F. Smith wrote the following to Susa Young Gates:

under certain conditions women have been ordained Priestesses unto their husbands, and set apart to rule and reign with them &c. Then comes the holy ordinance of “*washing of feet*” and anointing with holy ointment, as Mary administered to Jesus. The wife to the husband. This is a law of the Priesthood which Mary understood, having learned it of the Lord. And she received his blessing and approval for it. It was

not confined to *her* nor to the Lord, but so much was given out for a key to the truth.¹⁸

Mary, in this formulation, administered to Jesus in the manner of a “wife to the husband.” Through the second anointing, Mormon ritual quietly introduced the idea of a married savior. And this gave Mormon men and women the opportunity to imitate Jesus and his wife. Some did so very explicitly.

In 1853, Ruth Page married Samuel H. Rogers. Her groom had once been her missionary. Ten years earlier in New Jersey, Samuel Rogers had confirmed Ruth after her baptism. A few years earlier, Samuel had married his brother’s widow. Now Ruth became his plural wife. Shortly after Ruth’s marriage, Church leaders asked Samuel to move to the southern Utah settlement of Parowan. He initially brought his first wife and left Ruth behind with her parents; Ruth joined the family a year later. Ruth and Samuel Rogers never had children. Several years later, Samuel married Ruth’s sister Lorana. For the Rogers family, polygamy was a strain, but they persevered.

The next year, Samuel was preparing to move to a Mormon settlement in Arizona. He asked Ruth if she would consent to remain behind in Parowan. She answered that she “was willing if he would return the next fall and we could go to the Temple.” Before the move, Ruth and Samuel also completed the Church’s most sacred ordinance. Samuel noted in his diary that this took place on the fifty-second anniversary of Joseph Smith’s receiving the plates of the Book of Mormon from the Angel Moroni. “I dedicated the house and room,” Samuel wrote, “also blest the Oil after which my Ruth Anointed my feet and wiped them with the hair of her head, then kissed them after the patern as written in the Testament of the Lord Jesus Christ.” At times, Ruth may have felt

18. Joseph F. Smith to Susa Young Gates, Jan. 8, 1889, Susa Young Gates Papers, MS 7692, box 54, folder 1, CHL. Emphasis in original.

that her earthly claim on Samuel was tenuous, but he would bring her forth as his wife in the resurrection.¹⁹

Many Protestants and Catholics are repulsed at the idea of a married Jesus. Correspondingly, many anti-Mormon books quote nineteenth-century LDS leaders who contended that Jesus had married several women and that he had fathered children on earth. The biblical evidence and early Christian testimony point to Jesus *not* having married on earth,²⁰ but I do not see why Christians should find the idea of Jesus having a wife and children repulsive.

When Vilate Kimball and Ruth Page Rogers anointed and then dried their husbands' feet with their hair, the tenderness in such rituals is hard to deny: A couple trying to make their companionship eternal by imitating their savior and the woman who anointed him. Certainly, there are strong elements of patriarchy in the ritual, but Ruth Page Rogers also used the ordinance to assert herself. Yes, I'm willing to stay behind when you go with the rest of the family to Arizona, *if you complete this sacred ritual with me before you go*. I have a claim on you in this world and the next.

In the twentieth century, the second anointing became an ordinance bestowed on only a few. And even though some American Mormons retain a belief in a married Savior, the idea faded from public view. Nevertheless, these two examples bring together a number of themes central to the doctrines and history of Mormonism: marriage, polygamy, ritual, community, and the Christian Savior.

Marriage is an ordinance or contract that is supposed to both unite individuals and build community. At the same time, the idea of marriage

19. Ruth Page Rogers Journal, Aug. 6, 1879, typescript in author's possession; Samuel H. Rogers Journal, Sept. 22, 1879, MS 1134, HBLL. On the Rogers family, see Paula Kelly Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 2.

20. See Anthony Le Donne, *The Wife of Jesus: Ancient Texts and Modern Scandals* (London: Oneworld, 2013).

has caused so much division. Early Christians wondered whether or not they should follow the examples of Jesus and Paul and *not* marry. Celibacy and virginity became idealized, although both Western and Eastern Christians reified the holiness of marriage as one of the sacraments or mysteries of the church. Protestants rejected both celibacy and the sacramental nature of marriage, thus upholding marriage as ordained by God while removing some of its theological significance. Until recent decades, moreover, nearly all Christian churches have emphasized the hierarchical status of husbands over wives.

Moving ahead many centuries, while many things led to animosity between other Americans and Mormons in the nineteenth century, polygamy stoked the persistence and fierceness of anti-Mormonism. For most Americans, polygamy was un-Christian, un-American, uncivilized. It was barbaric. Not only did it make Mormonism something other than Christian, it made it a species of barbarism rather than a species of religion.²¹

At the same time, Heber and Vilate Kimball, Ruth and Samuel Rogers were polygamists who reenacted the anointing of Jesus. They did not cease being Christians when they embraced Mormonism, or when they embraced polygamy. Instead, they and other Latter-day Saints found new ways to imitate their savior.



Marriage has not only divided Mormon and Protestant Americans, it has also contributed to divisions within churches, Mormon and otherwise. Because marriage occupies such a central place within Mormon history and doctrine, changes in marital practices and debates about marriage have proved unusually fraught for Latter-day Saints. Indeed,

21. See J. Spencer Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

from scholarly debate about Joseph Smith's marriages to the angst-filled discussions of same-sex relationships today, conflicts about marriage have torn families and institutions asunder. That continues, for instance, in the reaction to the recently announced LDS policy toward the children of same-gender couples. For some, the policy is a necessary defense of traditional marriage. For others, it is an affront to the New Testament and Book of Mormon's teaching that Jesus and therefore his church welcome all children with open arms.

For some individuals, insiders and outsiders, the worst moments of Mormon history, or the idea of a polygamous Jesus, or the Church's current policy toward gays and lesbians would lead one to conclude, "Mormonism is not true." And from my vantage point, that's as true as Joseph Smith's conclusion about Presbyterianism. Certainly, as a Protestant, as a Presbyterian, I reject the idea that the LDS Church or any other branch of the Restoration is Jesus Christ's one true church.

When Joseph Smith and a few followers established what they at first called the Church of Christ in 1830, they understood their actions as a clean break with apostasy, a restoration of Christ's true church. Things were never that simple. Mormonism never fully erased the debts to the Protestant culture it claimed to reject. In so many ways, early Mormons borrowed from that religious culture, in their regular conferences, in their talk of "ordinances" and "infinite atonement," in their hymns, in, more than anything else, their intense focus on the figure of Jesus Christ and on his imminent Second Coming. Spending nearly a decade studying Mormon history and doctrine has led me to emphasize what Mormonism has in common with the larger streams of Christianity from which it emerged.

For a long time after its founding, Mormonism charted its own course, with its own doctrines, ordinances, and traditions. And in keeping with the theme of the 2016 Sunstone Symposium, there are many Mormonisms, churches that themselves charted their own paths, some

moving closer toward ecumenical Protestantism and others adhering to nineteenth-century doctrines the LDS Church itself later set aside.

Given the diversity of this history, it's hard to remember that if we belong to any of these branches of Christianity or any of these many Mormonisms, and to some extent even if we've disassociated ourselves from them, we're connected, by history, by scripture, by rituals. We're within the same genealogy of religion, whether we like it or not. That doesn't mean we don't have things to disagree about. That doesn't mean we won't find certain things troubling about some of our distant cousins. That doesn't mean we shouldn't condemn practices that cause individuals to suffer. But it does mean we should hesitate before reaching conclusions such as, "Presbyterianism is not true," "Mormonism is not Christian," or "fundamentalists are not Mormon."



We human beings are frail individuals, spiritually and morally, and church membership and the holding of ecclesiastical offices offer no immunity against those frailties of human nature. Why did Brigham Young sanction those very early marriages? Why did John Calvin support the burning of a heretic at the stake? Why do local and national church leaders sometimes act in ways that seem so contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ? I would add for those who are not or are no longer connected with the LDS Church or any church or religious group, non-religious institutions and their leaders are certainly subject to the very same frailties.

Perhaps some of John Calvin's twentieth-century theological descendants might help us answer such questions. Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr were giants of mid-twentieth-century Protestant theology. They were among those theologians who rejected the modernist idea that human beings were essentially good and that perfect justice and peace could be achieved on earth. By contrast, Tillich stated that human

beings and their religious institutions always remain embedded in the “ambiguities of life . . . with all the disintegrating, destructive, and tragic-demonic elements.” From a strictly sociological point of view, we set ourselves up for grave disappointment when we expect our religious institutions to even approximate the holiness of their ideals. Tillich asserted that a church’s “holiness cannot be derived from the holiness of [its] institutions, doctrines, ritual and devotional activities, or ethical principles; all these are among the ambiguities of religion.” Instead, a church’s holiness rests upon its foundation in Jesus Christ, who redeems it despite its lack of perfect holiness.²²

Or, as Reinhold Niebuhr once explained, the good news of the gospel is not that God enables human beings or institutions to live out Christ’s law of love. Instead, the good news is that even though we and our institutions remain “inevitably involved” in human sinfulness and injustice, “there is a resource of divine mercy which is able to overcome” this fundamental contradiction.²³

Of course, Protestant ecclesiology is rather different than Mormon ecclesiology. Tillich, for instance, regarded the existence of ecclesiastical divisions as “unavoidable.” Noting differences in ecclesiology, he observed that the Catholic Church was intensely averse to criticism. “Since the Roman Church identifies its historical existence with the [true] Spiritual Community,” Tillich wrote, “every attack on it (often even on non-essentials) is felt as an attack on the Spiritual Community and consequently on the Spirit itself.”²⁴

22. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume III: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 162–72.

23. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why the Christian Church Is Not Pacifist,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* edited by Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 102–03. Niebuhr originally published his essay in 1940 in the emerging context of the Second World War.

24. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:167.

So it has largely been with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which resembles Catholic rather than Protestant ecclesiology. Those Mormons who question the Church, even on what seem to be non-essentials, find themselves in stormy waters. And most Latter-day Saints revere their leaders, past and present, and those leaders have asserted that God guides their actions. “The Lord will never,” asserted Wilford Woodruff in 1890, “permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray.”²⁵

Tillich observed that to ask Rome to abandon its claims to exclusivity and holiness would be tantamount to asking the Catholic Church to abandon “its own peculiar character.”²⁶ Nevertheless, the Vatican has substantially relaxed its attitude toward exclusivity in the last half-century and tolerates a much larger measure of dissent and theological diversity than does the LDS Church. In any event, I would suggest that differences in ecclesiology do not preclude an acceptance of Tillich’s basic point about the “ambiguities of religion” as they pertain to the LDS Church. Indeed, Latter-day Saints have expected rather too much holiness from their ancestors, past leaders, and current leaders, and those expectations have impeded a straightforward and sober accounting with the frailties of the Church’s members and institutional history. And they’ve made it difficult for Latter-day Saints who bump up against those obvious frailties.

Moreover, even if many Latter-day Saints revere their leaders, it is not LDS *doctrine* that those leaders are infallible. The LDS Church, for instance, has recognized in recent years that the decision of Joseph Smith’s successors to withhold the priesthood and temple blessings from black members rested on the sinful foundation of nineteenth-century American racism.

25. Official Declaration 1, “Excerpts from Three Addresses by President Wilford Woodruff.”

26. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:169.

Leaders will never lead the church astray. Leaders make grave mistakes that contribute to human suffering. Humans are created in the image of God, but they exhibit obvious frailties. Marriage unites and tears asunder. Whether we are Mormon or Presbyterian or nothing at all, we live with these paradoxes. And if we belong to any sort of Christian church, such paradoxes remind us to place our faith in God and in Jesus Christ rather than in institutions and individuals. We should look to God and our Savior for mercy, and in response, extend as much of that mercy as we can toward the individuals and institutions we encounter.



Leslie O. Peterson
Zina Huntington Jacobs Young Smith
8x10 watercolor on paper

THE CELESTIAL LAW¹

Carol Lynn Pearson

God will be very cruel if he does not give us poor women adequate compensation for the trials we have endured in polygamy. —Mary Ann Angell Young, legal wife of Brigham Young²

Mary Cooper and James Oakey, my maternal great-grandparents, married in 1840 and settled in Nottingham, England. Victoria was on the throne, and occasionally the citizens of Nottingham came out to pay honor as the queen in her carriage passed through on the way to Belvoir Castle. Mary gave birth to seven living children. James became a designer and maker of lace and also helped to develop new lace-making machinery.

I have brought up from the fireplace mantle to sit beside my computer while I write a framed four-inch square of delicate Nottingham lace, a product of James's work, precious enough to cross the Atlantic and to cross the great plains. The lace is black, a color all citizens wore in 1861 mourning the loss of the beloved Prince Consort Albert.

In 1850, the Oakey family was baptized, joining the more than 33,000 Latter-day Saints in the United Kingdom and Ireland (compared to 12,000 in Utah at that time). Missionaries, enthusiastically preaching on street corners and in homes, had reaped a fruitful harvest since their arrival at Liverpool in 1837 with their optimistic gospel of new revelation from God, a restoration of lost truths, and a vision of a people preparing for the return of the Lord. For some time, James and Mary maintained the

1. This essay is excerpted from the author's recent book, *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Pivot Point Books, 2016).

2. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 100.

mission home in Nottingham, the center of the work for all of England. James became branch president, then district president.

Like most wholehearted converts, James and Mary were anxious to gather to the new world and be part of this high endeavor, and by 1862 they had gathered the necessary funds. As they packed the very few things they could take on the voyage, my grandmother, eight-year-old Sarah, was told that none of her large collection of dolls could go. This story was repeated to me often as I grew up:

James said, "We all must make sacrifices, Sarah. And your dolls will be your sacrifice for Zion."

"Father, what is Zion?" Sarah asked.

"Zion, my darling, is the pure in heart."

According to the story, Sarah sadly but bravely dressed and arranged her much-loved dolls around a little table and told them goodbye.



Mary and the children set out for the six-week voyage on the *John J. Boyd*, numbered with 701 Saints of like disposition and destination. James was to make as much money as he could and follow as soon as he was able. One daughter, determined to stay with her boyfriend, abandoned ship just as it was to sail. Another daughter died of mountain fever as the family crossed the plains in a covered wagon. As little Sarah walked the 1300 miles, and as the wagons creaked their way west, they left behind them a nation playing out the bloodiest battles of the Civil War.

Their company reached the Salt Lake Valley on October 1st, 1862, making their way through Emigration Canyon, where the oak, maple, and aspen trees were aflame with the red and orange of autumn. Fifteen years earlier, in 1847, Brigham Young and the first company of Mormon pioneers had arrived and entered a semi-arid valley whose major attraction was that nobody else wanted it. The Mormons had been evicted from their homes in Illinois by mob violence and were determined to

become a nation unto themselves. Brigham had inherited the mantle of the prophet from Joseph Smith, and he was committed to bringing to fruition Joseph's vision of Zion. By the close of the 1860s, 80,000 converts had made the trek to the Utah territory, and the wasteland was truly blossoming as the rose.

My friend and Church Historian Leonard Arrington wrote in his biography of the man who was the mastermind of it all:

Brigham Young was a kingdom builder with dreams as grandiose as Sam Houston or John C. Fremont. But unlike them, he was successful. . . . Brigham Young was the supreme American paradox . . . the business genius of a Rockefeller with the spiritual sensitivities of an Emerson. . . . He was not merely an entrepreneur with a shared vision of America as the Promised Land; he was a prophet . . . and he built beyond himself.³

By the time my great-grandmother Mary and her children arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, it was far different from when Brigham had first gazed on it and famously said, "This is the place." I wonder if Mary even believed her eyes as she looked down from the rim of the valley into a basin that was thriving. And that large building there—that adobe Grecian Doric building with pillars at its entrance looking as if a tornado may have brought it in from some far-off land—looking like it might be—a theatre! It was true—a theatre in the desert, completed and dedicated in March of the same year that Mary and her children arrived. Along with his keen sense of business and colonizing, Brigham brought across the plains his love of the finer things of life.

In the dramatic company that Joseph had organized in Nauvoo, Brigham had performed in the romantic tragedy, *Pizarro*, playing an Incan High Priest, a part that some said he played for the rest of his life. Even before the temple was completed, Brigham insisted on building what became the Salt Lake Theatre, a showplace that quickly became a national landmark, seating 1500 people in a spacious hall with two

3. Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), xiii.

balconies, galleries, boxes, lit by countless candles, elegant chandeliers and suspended coal oil lamps, featuring a deep stage with a wide drop curtain and professionally painted backdrops. Mormonism attracted not only lace makers like James Oakey, but architects, painters, glaziers, artisans, and builders of all kinds. The first play produced was *The Pride of the Market*, one of the eighty in the repertoire of their already developed theatre company. It was said that there was no star of the American stage who did not make an appearance in this remarkable venue. Years later, a non-LDS author went so far as to declare that the Salt Lake Theatre was “one of the Seven Wonders of the theatrical world.”⁴ Perhaps my great-grandmother managed to bring her children to the theatre, bartering for tickets with eggs, cheese, vegetables, or doilies.

As a drama student in the university named after Brigham Young, I memorized his remarkable statement: “If I were placed on a cannibal island and given the task of civilizing its people, I would straightway build a theatre for the purpose.”⁵ And now, writing this book, I feel compelled to present the story of the theatre to give more soul to the story of the Mormon people and to underline my intense admiration and appreciation for Brigham Young and all that was accomplished through him. Brigham was far, far more than a man who had fifty-five wives.



Still, there was *that*. Polygamy. Brigham had sent out a call to the traveling Saints to bring with them “starts” and seeds of every kind—sometimes stuck in potatoes to keep them viable crossing the plains. And prominent among the seeds that Brigham himself brought from Nauvoo to

4. Annie Adams Kiskadden with Verne Hardin Porter, “The Life Story of Maude Adams and her Mother,” *Greenbook Magazine* 11 (June 1914): 885.

5. Harold I. Hansen, *A History and Influence of the Mormon Theatre from 1839–1869* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1967), iii.

be planted in the West there was *that one thing*—the thing that Joseph had restored at the insistence of God, who had sent an angel with a flaming sword, the thing that Brigham had first resisted and then came to enthusiastically accept, the thing that was part of what brought down his prophet-friend—Joseph’s vision of plural marriage.

Such marriages had continued unabated since Joseph’s death but were still protected with secrecy. Here in the territory of Utah, they were finally safe. Brigham could unpack this unusual doctrine of his beloved Joseph and teach it and live it openly under the clear blue western sky where they were accountable only to God.

On August 29, 1852, under the direction of President Brigham Young, the first public acknowledgement of Mormon polygamy was made. Apostle Orson Pratt spoke in the Old Tabernacle to a crowd of perhaps 2500 people on the necessity of the plurality of wives as

a part of our religion, and necessary for our exaltation to the fullness of the Lord’s glory in the eternal world . . . to raise up beings . . . that are destined, in their times and seasons, to become not only sons of God, but Gods themselves. . . .

I think there is only about one-fifth of the population of the globe, that believe in the one-wife system; the other four-fifths believe in the doctrine of a plurality of wives. They have had it handed down from time immemorial, and are not half so narrow and contracted in their minds as some of the nations of Europe and America, who have done away with the promises, and deprived themselves of the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

[The great and noble ones] are to be sent to that people that are the most righteous of any other people upon the earth; there to be trained up properly. . . . This is the reason why the Lord is sending them here, brethren and sisters. The Lord has not kept them in store for five or six thousand years past, and kept them waiting for their bodies all this time to send them among . . . the fallen nations that dwell upon the face of this earth . . . they will come among the Saints of the living God . . . [and] have the privilege of being born of such noble parentage.

Now, let us enquire, what will become of those individuals who have this law taught unto them in plainness, if they reject it? I will tell you: they will be damned, saith the Lord God Almighty.⁶

Incidentally, Elder Pratt's first wife Sarah eventually left him, left the faith, and became a strong opponent of the practice of polygamy. She called her husband's venture into plural marriage "sheer fanaticism," particularly when at age fifty-seven he married his tenth wife, a girl of sixteen. Sarah and all of Pratt's wives and children struggled in poverty.



James and Mary Oakey were still in Nottingham when that historic announcement was made—that polygamy was a true and godly principle—and only two years into their membership in this new church. A few months later in December, Joseph Smith's revelation on plural marriage was read in Britain and was met with shock and, for some, with apostasy. Likely Mary, as she began to hear the rumors validated, would have felt as did Hannah Tapfield King, who wrote to her non-Mormon brother upon hearing the doctrine of plural marriage announced at the semi-annual meeting of the Norwich Conference:

Oh!—Brother, I shall never forget my feelings!!! It had an extraordinary effect upon me, for though I had known for a year that such a principle existed in the church, when I heard it read, and some things in it which I did *not* know, I confess to you I became skeptical and my heart questioned with tears of agony, "did *this* come from God?"⁷

Later Hannah did come to believe the doctrine was of God, as she became the last and fifty-fifth woman sealed for eternity as a wife to President Brigham Young in 1872, five years before he died. And whatever

6. Orson Pratt, Aug. 29, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:58.

7. Rebecca Bartholomew, *Audacious Women: Early British Mormon Immigrants* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 126.

James and Mary Oakey felt about the authenticated rumors, it did not stop them from making plans to join the Saints.

By the time Mary Oakey and her children arrived in the Territory of Utah in 1862, the doctrine of polygamy was deeply planted and very well known. Many hundreds of statements by the highest leaders of the Church made clear the essential nature of polygamy as a foundational part of the gospel, such as this one by Heber C. Kimball, first counselor to President Young: “You might as well deny ‘Mormonism,’ and turn away from it, as to oppose the plurality of wives.”⁸

It was also clear by the time my great-grandmother arrived that not all was well in Brigham’s Zion regarding this principle. He was having a difficult time getting the Saints on board, especially the women. A daughter of Jedediah M. Grant, right-hand man to Brigham Young, notably said, “Polygamy is alright when properly carried out—on a shovel.”⁹ The same women that historian Wallace Stegner called “incredible”¹⁰ Brigham now labeled “whiners.”

At a general conference in Salt Lake City in 1856, four years after the first announcement, Brigham said:

It is frequently happening that women say they are unhappy. Men will say, “My wife, though a most excellent woman, has not seen a happy day since I took my second wife;” “No, not a happy day for a year,” says one; and another has not seen a happy day for five years . . . many of them are wading through a perfect flood of tears. . . .

But the first wife will say, “It is hard, for I have lived with my husband twenty years, or thirty, and have raised a family of children for him, and it is a great trial to me for him to have more women”; then I say it is time that you gave him up to other women who will bear children. If my wife had borne me all the children that she ever would bare, the

8. Heber C. Kimball, Oct. 12, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 5:203.

9. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 94.

10. Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1964; repr., Lincoln, Nebr.: Bison Books, 1992), 13.

celestial law would teach me to take young women that would have children. . . .

Brigham told the women he would release them from their husbands, release them to leave the Territory. But if they chose to stay, he continued, “You must bow down to it, and submit yourselves to the celestial law. . . . Remember, that I will not hear any more of this whining.”¹¹



It is possible to find occasional stories of polygamous families who lived in some contentment. Making the best of a difficult situation is a Mormon characteristic. A culture of polygamy had become a given, rather like the weather. In Leonard Arrington’s diary he gives an assessment of Utah polygamy in general:

Nearly every important Mormon entered into plural marriage and in nearly every instance the first wife, though formerly giving her approval for the second marriage, privately opposed the second marriage and privately was jealous of the second wife. While she attempted to sublimate her feelings, these were recognized by her children and these were magnified by them so that it was impossible for them to look upon the second wife and second family in an objective way—as the children of a brother or sister would look upon aunts and uncles and cousins.

Feelings developed between first, second, and subsequent families. Privately, not publicly, they made snide remarks about their “aunts.” Wives would tear pages out of husband’s diaries that referred to the other wives and family. They would destroy letters to or from the other wives and families. Bitter complaints would be made which were passed onto children and great-grandchildren.¹²

A wise person once said that “people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you

11. Brigham Young, Sept. 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:55–57.

12. Leonard Arrington, *Diary*, Jun. 29, 1975, author’s private collection.

made them feel.” That is the indisputable test of all our teachings, our doctrines, our policies. Mormon plural marriage was enacted with the widespread understanding that the Saints were preparing for a heaven in which each man rules his family kingdom, a kingdom that is more potent and more prepared for eternal increase with every wife that is acquired. Such polygamy—whether fact or fear—becomes a sanctified plundering of the position of women and of the feelings of women, robbing us of our power, our dignity and our self-respect. How Mormon women were made to feel under the trial of past polygamy and feel still under the fear of future polygamy is something that we have never looked in the face. It is a sad face. It bears some resemblance to the face of Emma Hale Smith. We must look without flinching if institutionally we are to heal.

The forced dichotomy between public presentation and personal feelings pointed out by Leonard Arrington added a second layer of awfulness to the situation: emotional inauthenticity, which I believe to be something we Mormon women continue to deal with today. In 1882, Phebe Woodruff, first wife among seven to Wilford Woodruff, fourth president of the Church, speaking at a mass meeting of Mormon women held in defense of polygamy, said, “If I am proud of anything in this world, it is that I accepted the principle of plural marriage, and remained among the people called ‘Mormons’ and am numbered with them to-day.” However, a few days later a long-time friend asked, “How is it Sister Woodruff that you have changed your views so suddenly about polygamy? I thought you hated and loathed the institution.” Phebe responded:

I have not changed. I loathe the unclean thing with all the strength of my nature, but Sister, I have suffered all that a woman can endure. I am old and helpless, and would rather stand up anywhere, and say anything commanded of me, than to be turned out of my home in my old age which I should be most assuredly if I refused to obey counsel.¹³

13. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 101.

Interestingly, Phebe's husband, President Wilford Woodruff, is the man who issued the "Manifesto" in 1890, which officially ended the church's support of plural marriage. This document came, not in response to the feelings of Phebe and other women, their decades of bitter unhappiness, but in response to the fact that the church faced disfranchisement and federal confiscation of its property including the temples, which would in essence destroy the church as an organization. And also, of course, so Utah could be considered for statehood.

There is no clearer evidence that plural marriage was firmly held as an essential doctrine of the Mormon Church through the four decades prior to the Manifesto than a particular formal letter that was sent from church headquarters in December of 1891. This letter, issued jointly by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and addressed to U.S. President Benjamin Harrison, was a plea for amnesty for church members who had practiced polygamy prior to the Manifesto, members who had suffered arrests, trials, fines and imprisonment. The fifteen-men leadership wrote:

To the President of the United States:

We, the First Presidency and Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, beg to respectfully represent to Your Excellency the following facts:

We formerly taught to our people that polygamy or celestial marriage as commanded by God through Joseph Smith was right, that it was a necessity to man's highest exaltation in the life to come.¹⁴

Those words leave no doubt that, in the minds of the highest leadership and in the minds of church members, "polygamy" and "celestial

14. "Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of the Protests Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold His Seat," Vol. II (Washington: Government Printing Office, January 16, 1904–April 13, 1906), 489, <https://archive.org/details/proceedingsbefo01elecgoog>.

marriage” were one and the same, and that the practice was essential for the truly faithful. It would be statistically impossible for all men to practice polygamy, but, according to the church’s official website, “Probably half of those living in Utah Territory in 1857 experienced life in a polygamous family as a husband, wife, or child at some time during their lives.”¹⁵ Polygamous families were considered “elite” and polygamous men were almost always those chosen for advancement in church leadership. This “elite” status influenced even later generations. A friend of mine, writer Andrea Moore-Emmett, who was not a descendent of polygamists, says, “That omission in our pioneer family ancestry always caused my mother great regret, since, according to her, it meant fewer blessings bestowed on all succeeding posterity.”¹⁶



My great-grandmother Mary Oakey and her children stayed for a year with friends in Salt Lake City and then spent a year living in a dugout in nearby Kaysville. When James rejoined the family, they were called by Apostle Charles C. Rich to settle southeastern Idaho. The little town of Paris was their destination, close to the beautiful and placid Bear Lake in a valley covered with wild game and overrun with meadow grass. James, the lace maker, turned his hands to creating bedsteads and chairs. Mary made a home from whatever was available. They were building Zion, home of the pure in heart, and sacrificing for the glory of God.

Despite evident pressure, the Oakeys appeared not to be interested in participating in polygamy. Between their arrival in Paris in 1865 and a fateful, heart-breaking event of 1873, James and Mary Oakey lived the monogamous life they had signed on for. Although there is

15. “Plural Marriage and Families in Early Utah,” <https://www.lds.org/topics/plural-marriage-and-families-in-early-utah?lang=eng>.

16. Andrea Moore-Emmett, *God’s Brothel* (San Francisco: Pince-Nez Press, 2004), 14.

no written record of such, there must have been conversations between this couple, and James—as an upstanding and capable man—would likely have been invited by the leadership into the order of plurality. A strong influence would have been Charles C. Rich, who presided over the entire Bear Lake region, a man who himself—back in the days of Nauvoo and Winter Quarters—had taken six wives. Rich had stayed with the Oakeys while he was a missionary in Nottingham, and Mary and her children had resided for a time with his first wife Sarah when they arrived in the Salt Lake Valley.

I can easily imagine some conversations between James and his priesthood leader, Elder Rich, based on the general documented discourse of the day. Here is a scene that might have taken place in the sawmill owned by Rich. Perhaps the two men spoke as they were cutting and grinding and sanding benches for the chapel:

“Well, James,” says Charles. “President Young is putting it pretty plainly. A man who wants to rise in this church—a man who wants to rise in the celestial kingdom—that man will enter the holy order of plural marriage. I do feel to encourage you in this, James.”

James is silent a moment, then speaks. “I just don’t know if this teaching is correct, Charles. It doesn’t—it doesn’t feel right somehow.”

Charles stops his work and looks James in the eye. “Do you have a testimony of the gospel, James, of the prophet Joseph, of the restoration?”

“I do. You know I do!”

“Then trust the leaders, James! I’d surely hate to leave you behind. We are creating a *chosen people*! Enlarge your posterity! Your *eternal kingdom*!”

James shakes his head and looks down at the sawdust on the log floor. “But my Mary. How could I hurt her like that?”

“You are her head, James, her head and her God. We are the new patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob, ruling over our families with kindness but with strength! Don’t fail your family, James!”

But James said no.

Perhaps the following year another conversation occurred as the two men walked together on a sunny day to priesthood meeting.

“James, last week I had to release a bishop from his position—it would not do to have a monogamist presiding over those who are living the principle.”

James does not respond. Charles continues. “You should be a bishop, James. And even higher. Why, in England, you were one of our best leaders.”

James slows his gait and frowns. “But I—I love Mary. She is the only one I want to be with.”

Charles stops walking, turns to his companion and places a hand gently on his arm. “James. Listen to me. You can love others. As I do. It becomes a maternal love. The brethren say, ‘Love your wives. But not too much.’”

James begins to walk again, quickly, as if he might outdistance the pain. “Every time I think of hurting my Mary like that—I just can’t, Charles. It would break her. She might even—leave.”

“James!” Charles speaks sharply. James turns and looks at him sadly. “James,” the voice now is gentle. “If you do not act, your Mary—and you—may lose your eternal crowns and inherit a lesser kingdom!”

But James said no.

One more conversation I fantasize. The two men speak as they work together in the grist mill.

“Charles . . . I’ve spoken again to Mary. She says no, never. She says she would rather be damned than let another wife into the family.”

Charles pauses in his work. “I am so sorry, James. Obedience. Obedience! That’s the winnowing. Separating the wheat from the chaff, just like we’re doing here in the mill.” Charles reaches into a bushel and thrusts a palm full of kernels in front of James. “Are you wheat or are you chaff, James?”

James sits down on a stool and puts his head in his hands.

Charles continues. “I wish Mary could see, as did my first wife. A second wife is not an intruder—she is the key!—the very key to opening the door of salvation in the celestial kingdom not only for herself, but for her husband and for his first wife. If you love Mary, lead her into righteousness.”

“She will not be led.”

“Then you are released from the law of Sarah, my friend. You have given your Mary the opportunity to approve. She has refused. You are now at liberty to proceed. And if Mary continues in her stubbornness, she is the transgressor.” Charles squats beside his friend and places a hand on his knee. “But believe me, James, Mary will become reconciled. I’ve seen it time and time again.”

Still James said no.

And then something happened that turned the world of James and Mary upside down.



I have known since May 30, 1972, the general story of what happened. I found the account in my diary. Married for six years and the mother of three children, I wanted to learn all I could about the family history, so I spent the day with Aunt Mamie, the older sister of my mother Emeline who had passed away when I was in high school. Aunt Mamie had brought to our home in Provo, Utah, pictures and genealogy sheets.

All she knew of what happened in the Oakey family in 1873 was very sketchy. Later I quizzed other relatives, anyone I thought might shed more light, but all anyone seemed to know were just the bare facts. Again I am going to take dramatic license and construct a scene that might represent those facts.



It is twilight in the two-room log cabin of the Oakey family in Paris, Idaho. The three children who still live at home—Alfred, 24; Sarah, 19;

and Hyrum, 14—sit at the table reading or sewing by the light of the coal oil lamp. Mary, whose hands are always busy, mends a quilt that covers her lap. There is the sound of horses and a wagon. A muffled voice calls the horses to a stop.

Hyrum closes his book and looks up expectantly. “Father’s home!”

Mary places the quilt on the chair and opens the door, letting in the chill of an early October evening. In a moment James enters, slowly. He takes off his hat and looks around as if he’s not sure where he is.

Sarah stands and takes a step toward him. “Father?” she asks gently. “Are you ill?”

“No. No, I’m . . . fine.”

Mary touches his arm. “Sit down, James.”

“In a moment . . . a moment.” James glances at the closed door and then back to his family. “I have something to tell you all. I brought someone with me—from Logan.” He looks at his wife. “We knew her many years ago in Nottingham.”

Mary blanches, reaches for the chair and slowly lowers herself into it.

James continues, anxious now to conclude his news. “Ann. I told you she had come over, Mary. Now a widow . . . she’s in the wagon. I was counseled . . . by priesthood authority.” He pauses, then speaks evenly and solemnly. “Ann was sealed to me in eternal marriage yesterday in the temple of the Lord.”

The children stare at him. No one speaks. With difficulty Mary stands, walks to a coat rack, and takes down a heavy shawl.

“Mary, what are you doing?”

“What I told you for years that I would do. From this moment, James, I am no longer your wife. Tonight I will stay with Sister Olsen.”

“But it is the will of the Lord!”

Angrily, Alfred stands, nearly upsetting the table, and steps toward his mother, helping her with the shawl. “Mother, I will take you there.”

“Mary!”

James and the other two children watch in disbelief as Alfred pushes past his father, opens the door, and escorts his mother out into the night.



That's as far as I imagine the scene.

What we know for certain is this: In the year 1873, directly after James came home with a second wife, Mary, his wife of thirty-three years, left him and never lived with him again. Mary took the three children who were still living with them and moved about seven miles away to a place then called Dingle Dell, now called just Dingle. She told James he was not to follow them. This is the town in which my own mother, Emeline Sirrine, was born. A history of Dingle that can be found on the Internet says: "The first permanent family came in 1873. They were Mary Oakey and her sons Alfred and Hyrum and daughter Sarah."¹⁷

For the first year they lived—as they had in Kaysville—in a dugout, and then in a log cabin with a dirt floor, built by Alfred and Hyrum. Mary, now age fifty-eight, lace maker's wife from a comfortable residence in England, homesteaded 160 acres, and this in a land of dry farming . . . wheat and alfalfa . . . hawks and ground squirrels and sage hens . . . blow snakes and owls . . . winter occasionally reaching 45 degrees below zero . . . snow drifts that covered the fences . . . scarves wrapped around faces leaving an opening only for eyes. To Mary, all of this was a preferable choice to living with a husband that, to her perception, had betrayed her.

In the words of Mr. Stegner, incredible indeed.

Aunt Mamie always wondered why? "Why did Grandfather take this woman as his wife? What did he see in her? Grandmother was so lovely and dainty, always wore a white apron and a black velvet cap. And this other woman—well. . . ." Aunt Mamie would shake her head. "I'll never understand it."

I thought that I would never understand it either, and I thought there was no more information anywhere that would leave some better clues. But then—out of nowhere—the final piece of the puzzle just landed in my lap. I was listening to an episode of Lindsay Hansen Park's

17. "A Short History of Dingle Idaho," Family Search, <https://familysearch.org/photos/artifacts/8144061>.

very impressive *Year of Polygamy* podcast.¹⁸ In the series' one hundred podcasts, Lindsay had already covered the Kirtland and Nauvoo period, the establishment of plural marriage in Utah, and was now examining the pressure that was brought to bear on the men to enter this principle. Suddenly I heard something that made me stand frozen at the kitchen sink. "In 1873, Brigham Young gave a sermon in Paris, Idaho, in which he said that if a man refused to take a second wife, in the eternities he would lose the wife he had." *Paris, Idaho? 1873?* I rewound the sound and listened again. *Paris, Idaho! 1873! "... he would lose the wife he had!"*

I was thunderstruck and felt anger rising in my throat. *How could you say that, Brigham Young! How dare you say that!* I called my four siblings and told them this new piece of family history. They too were very upset. My brother Warren in St. George, Utah quickly got on the Internet and found the very sermon.



As I read the precise words of that sermon today, I imagine another scene. This one takes place just a few weeks prior to the scene in which Mary leaves her husband, and it provides what I am confident is the missing information that explains the mystery. I place myself there in the bowery, a large open structure with a hardened dirt floor with wooden posts holding up a roof of thatched brush and willows. The population of the town is just over 500 and nearly all are present for this event. I stand just behind and to the right of President Brigham Young, and I place Mary and James and their children on the front row so I can see them. They are in their Sunday best, James wearing a dark suit, grey vest, and black bow tie, Mary in her crinoline dress and black velvet cap. Fans occasionally flutter against the heat and the flies. All eyes are on their prophet-president, who has come to give them the word of God. The sermon starts well:

18. Lindsay Hansen Park, *Year of Polygamy*, available at <http://www.yearofpolygamy.com>.

The Gospel of life and salvation that we have embraced in our faith, and that we profess to carry out in our lives, incorporates all truth. . . . I am here to give this people, called Latter-day Saints, counsel to direct them in the path of life . . . [and] I have never given counsel that is wrong.

Brigham touches on many principles that I appreciate. And then—

Joseph received a revelation on celestial marriage . . . a great and noble doctrine. . . . Now, where a man in this Church says, “I don’t want but one wife, I will live my religion with one,” he will perhaps be saved in the celestial kingdom; but when he gets there he will not find himself in possession of any wife at all.

I look out at the front row. Mary Oakey raises her eyebrows and looks unblinkingly at her prophet. Brigham goes on.

He has had a talent that he has hid up. He will come forward and say, “Here is that which thou gavest me, I have not wasted it, and here is the one talent,” and he will not enjoy it, but it will be taken and given to those who have improved the talents they received, and he will find himself without any wife, and he will remain single forever and ever.

James drops his head onto his chest and presses his fingers into his brow.

But if the woman is determined not to enter into a plural-marriage, that woman when she comes forth will have the privilege of living in single blessedness through all eternity.¹⁹

Son Alfred, sitting next to his mother, reaches over and takes her hand. Mary does not flinch. James breathes deeply, looks up at Brigham, whom he now can barely see through his tears. Finally, sadly, James knows what he must do.

President Young finishes his sermon and says amen. The congregation echoes amen. I glance now at the small block of delicate lace here on my desk, the work of the hands of James the lace maker, black lace to mourn the death of the queen’s beloved consort. I mourn now, too. I mourn the death of the bond of love and trust my great-grandparents had created together. I used to blame James, but now I mourn for him.

19. Brigham Young, Aug. 31, 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, 16:22.

He acted not from love but from fear: God's wrath is a harsh thing to fight. And I mourn for Sister Ann, the new wife. She also was directed by authority, she went, and perhaps she suffered as well, knowing that her presence broke hearts. I mourn, too, for President Brigham Young. He thought that he was never wrong.



One last note to this story. A couple of years ago, my brother Warren suggested that he and I take a road trip up to Bear Lake to visit the old family stomping grounds in Idaho. I readily agreed. Our first stop was the lake. You drive around a bend—and suddenly there it is, a beautiful stretch of blue in what appears to be a desert. We then drove into the little town of Paris. The major feature in Paris is a very impressive tabernacle, built by the Mormon settlers and now on the National Register of Historic Places. Skilled artisans had set their hands and hearts to creating something of beauty, stability, and usefulness. The building is a Romanesque structure made of red sandstone that had to be transported by wagon or sled from a quarry eighteen miles away. The designer was prominent architect Don Carlos Young, one of Brigham's sons.

It is not possible to walk unimpressed through this building that can hold two thousand people. And if you have ancestors who likely helped in the construction of it, there is an added layer of appreciation. I walked down an aisle of the main hall toward the choir loft, pipe organ and podium, my hands enjoying the polished pine wood of the benches, each of them an original from the late 1880s. Very likely my great-grandfather James helped to cut and to sand some of these benches. My brother was busy taking pictures. Suddenly I said, "Hey, Warren. Would you take a picture of me up at the podium?"

"Sure."

I climbed the stairs and arranged myself at the heavy, carved wooden podium and looked out at a most amazing view, the intricate woodwork of the ceiling, the stone carvings, the balconies, and the stained glass

window in the far wall. The hall had been designed by a shipbuilder from England and looked and felt like a huge and elegant hull. It was evening, nearly closing time, and the hall was empty except for my brother and me.

This uppity woman suddenly realized—*The hall was empty!*

I later realized that it had been 140 years ago to the very month since Brigham had given his fateful sermon in the bowery very close to this spot. Hundreds of Mormon prophets and General Authorities had spoken right here. I shouldn't . . . But . . . I planted my feet, grasped the edges of the podium, surveyed the empty hall and began.

"Dear brothers and sisters. We are gathered here today in honor of my great-grandmother, Mary Cooper Oakey, who in the year 1873 had the good sense and courage to say no to polygamy. I believe you know her story; it is printed there on the program. Sister Oakey, we honor you. I am also pleased to let you know that new light has come on that troublesome subject of polygamy, new light that makes it clear that there was a lot of misunderstanding and a great deal of unnecessary pain. Hopefully before long we will be able to write 'the end' to the sad story of Mormon plural marriage. There will now be refreshments and celebration in the foyer. Thank you."

I scanned the hall again. It was still empty. But in my mind I saw two figures sitting on the front bench, one in a dark suit with a grey vest and black bow tie, and one in a crinoline dress with a black velvet cap. They were holding hands.

JOSEPH SMITH, POLYGAMY, AND THE LEVIRATE WIDOW

Samuel Morris Brown

Polygamy is, for many Americans, Mormonism's defining feature. Even now, over a century after the main church abandoned the practice, images of Latter-day Saint polygamy persist in the popular and scholarly imagination. Most accounts of Mormon polygamy have either emphasized sexual experimentation and marital reform on the one hand or biblical primitivism on the other.¹ While these accounts are at least partly true—Joseph Smith did believe that he was replacing a failed system of marriage, and he and his colleagues frequently invoked Bible patriarchs to explain their behaviors and doctrines—polygamy was also a solution to a specific set of contemporary cultural problems—remarriage after bereavement—refracted through biblical interpretation.

Understanding polygamy through the lens of Smith's persistent, distinctive exegesis of Luke 20, the story of a hypothetical levirate widow (a childless woman whose brothers-in-law were obligated to marry her in order to assure offspring for their dead brother) both elucidates the

1. See especially Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Knopf, 1945); Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 123–80; and Richard Hughes and Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). While M. Guy Bishop, "Eternal Marriage in Early Mormon Marital Beliefs," *Historian* 53, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 77–88 correctly draws attention to the relevance of eternal marriage to the question of polygamy, his treatment is limited and dated.

conceptual matrix from which Mormon polygamy arose and points out the complexity of early Mormon belief about human relationships in the afterlife.² Smith's complex and idiosyncratic exegesis of Luke 20 exemplifies his "marvelously literal" approach to biblical interpretation.³ For Smith, polygamy provided a commonsensical approach to a practical problem: what does it mean to love again after the death of a spouse? As he worked through his interpretation of the thought experiment of Luke 20, Smith demonstrated the intense importance of temporal collapse and metaphysical correspondence in his thought: what was true on earth, briefly, would be true in heaven forever. Time and space were leaky containers for human experience in Smith's hands.⁴

The Sadducean Thought Experiment

Though Smith was a harsh critic of the proto-Victorian marital system, he saw himself as a powerful advocate of family. Where the Bible appeared to argue against the centrality of marriage, Smith took great pains to correct it. Most famously, the synoptic gospels reported that there would be no marriage in the afterlife.⁵ Using the Mosaic practice of levirate marriage to frame the question, the Sadducees asked Jesus what would happen to a woman whose successive husbands/brothers-in-law died after marrying

2. In this essay I expand and further contextualize the brief overview of this topic in my book *In Heaven as it Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 237–38. I originally presented a version of this paper at the American Academy of Religion meeting in San Francisco, November 2011.

3. Brown, *In Heaven*, 11, 124, 245, 260. I'm mindful of Charles L. Cohen's apt observation that I explored insufficiently the question of marvelous literalism in prior work; this essay is a partial attempt to flesh out more of what I mean by marvelous literalism. See his review of *In Heaven* in *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 170–73.

4. I explore these topics in detail in a book in progress currently titled *Joseph Smith's Metaphysics of Translation*.

5. Luke 20, Matthew 22, Mark 12. Matthew largely follows Mark.

her. In this thought experiment, a total of six husbands tried and failed to raise offspring to their dead brother. The Sadducees, non-believers in resurrection, used levirate marriage to prove the absurdity of Jesus' claim to an afterlife. Jesus dismissed their argument by stating that those who are "worthy to obtain" the "resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage." Instead, "they are equal unto the angels," supernatural beings generally believed to be sexless and probably genderless.⁶ A literal resurrection, the Sadducees teased, threatened bizarre permutations on marital arrangements. Jesus, in response, stressed the reality of resurrection but not the preservation of marriage.

While polyandry was not a known component of Second Temple Judaism, the levirate duty probably was. What happened to prior relationships, though, when a widow remarried? What about a widower? If there were any hint of marital persistence in the afterlife, serial monogamy forced a confrontation with polygamy. Second Temple Jews were not the first to puzzle over this conundrum, and they would not be the last, although early Christians seem to have been comfortable with Jesus' answer that a literal resurrection did not imply the persistence of marriage.

In nineteenth-century America, the once regnant "theocentric" model of heaven was giving way to a different, "domestic" model. Theocentrism, based in Augustinian theology with a recharge by Calvin, maintained that human connections paled in comparison to God's excellencies and would therefore not matter in the afterlife. The competing, domestic model maintained that familial relationships—hallowed by Romantic and Victorian culture—had to persist in the afterlife.⁷ Even though the domestic model was gaining ground in antebellum America,

6. On the nature of angels, see the essays in Peter Marshall and Alexandra Walsham, eds., *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For many centuries, a tension persisted between the concept of angels as the holy dead versus angels as a distinct type of creation from humans.

7. Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 58, 92, 155, 258 and Brown, *In Heaven*, 205–08.

many centuries of Christian tradition argued against its central claim: the perpetuation of human marital relationships in the afterlife.

In several respects, the domestic heaven represented an attempt to protect a marital system embattled on earth. In the early national period, American family norms were in constant evolution against a backdrop of high mortality and substantial geographical dislocations, particularly for people living outside the eastern population centers.⁸ Median age at death was in the low- to mid-forties; those that lived beyond forty-five years had a high probability of suffering spousal bereavement at least once.⁹ Limited means of communication and travel exacerbated the problem. Many people existed in a state of familial uncertainty between separation and bereavement on a par with Schrödinger's famously liminal cat.¹⁰ Missing husbands might reappear after years away, or more commonly would never be seen again. How to secure divorce when the vital status of the spouse couldn't be ascertained wasn't always clear, and

8. On evolving family structures, see, e.g., Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: A History of American Families, 1600–1900* (New York: Verso, 1988).

9. Although precise estimates are difficult to obtain, as of the 1900 US census for men under fifty-five, there was still one currently widowed man for every ten currently married men, while the rates of widowhood were higher still. My analysis of data presented in David Kertzer and Peter Laslett, eds., *Aging in the Past: Demography, Society, and Old Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 254. Although data aren't available, the numbers from the 1900 census are certainly an underestimate for the early nineteenth century.

10. Schrödinger's Cat is a classic thought experiment meant to exemplify the disquieting disjunction between subatomic and Newtonian events in quantum physics. In it, the prominent physicist, Erwin Schrödinger, wondered over the fate of a cat (a Newtonian object) whose life depended on radioactive decay (a quantum event). Given certain assumptions about quantum probability, the decay event was held to depend on the act of observation, suggesting the bizarre (im)possibility that a cat might be both alive and dead, trapped indeterminately in a field of quantum probability, like a subatomic particle. Erwin Schrödinger, "Die gegenwärtige Situation in der Quantenmechanik," *Die Naturwissenschaften* 23:48 (29 November 1935): 812.

a significant number of early Americans simply didn't know their present marital status.¹¹ These social and demographic contexts are crucial to understanding the conceptual infrastructure of Smith's polygamy.

Jesus' response to the Sadducees' riddle posed no problem for the theocentric afterlife: the levirate widow would be the husband of none of the men, as human marriage vows were meaningless in God's unmediated presence; God was so much greater than any human that it would be sacrilege to attend to human relationships in the divine presence. The domestic model, on the other hand, left open the possibility of complex relationships in the afterlife because it insisted that human marriage could persist beyond the grave. Many Atlantic Protestants downplayed the potential conflict, but it was inherent in the practice of remarriage after bereavement, if mortal marriages were to persist in the afterlife.

Occasionally, probably rarely, Protestants imagined a reassembled family that contained all of their spouses. Methodist itinerant James Rogers (1749–1807) reflected on his own dual bereavement in a prayer that he hoped to pray every week, written in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

O let all my passions and affections burn for thee with unextinguishable blaze! . . . Prepare me . . . to fill a throne and wear a crown of equal magnitude [as his departed second wife] . . . such is thine unparalleled love as to give me the two women which of all other upon earth were every way calculated to make me happy . . . Methinks I can almost distinguish my sweet Martha and Hester Ann, each vying with the other, who shall be the next messenger upon some errand of love to me! . . . Then shall all the twelve, three parents and nine children . . . with rapturous astonishment cry—How strangely at last we are met in the sky!¹²

11. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich explored these themes in her 2015 Mormon History Association Presidential Address, "Runaway Wives 1840–60."

12. Cited and discussed in Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 105–08. I thank Christopher Jones for bringing this source to my attention.

Rogers's remarkable anticipation of afterlife reunion was far from the norm within Protestantism, even among proponents of the domestic heaven, but his poignant aspiration prefigured the rudiments of Smith's theological solution to the problem of eternal human love and serial bereavement.

More typical of Protestantism were the views of John Wesley or Matthew Henry or Adam Clarke, important Bible interpreters for early Americans. When these authors read the story of the levirate widow, they interpreted it in standardly theocentric terms. Angels have no sexual schism to heal and no need to reproduce biologically, and therefore post-mortal human beings shouldn't either.¹³ Joseph Smith disagreed, vehemently.

Smith first articulated his views on the levirate widow in his 1831–1833 New Translation of the Bible.¹⁴ In that New Translation, Smith made only minimal changes to the accounts in Luke and Matthew. The New Translation of Mark did, though, acquire the resurrection emphasis of the Lucan narrative. Where the King James Bible reported that God is not “the God of the dead, but the God of the living,” Smith explained the latter clause in a way that drew attention to the problem of life after death—“for he raiseth them up out of their graves.” While in the King James text the dead serve as a conceptual foil for the living, in Smith's revision the dead are reanimated; their distance from the living is thereby

13. See, e.g., Wesley's *Notes on the New Testament* or Henry's one-volume *Commentary* or Clarke's *New Testament*.

14. Stephen Fleming proposes evidence of the levirate practice in the Book of Mormon's sole reference to polygamy in Jacob 2, but the anti-libertine sermon of Jacob 2 is more straightforwardly a reference to the story of Abraham and Hagar, in which God allows Abraham to father children with Hagar because his wife Sariah is barren. See Stephen Joseph Fleming, “The Fulness of the Gospel: Christian Platonism and the Origins of Mormonism” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2014), 368–89, which argues that Genesis 16 is the relevant precedent for Jacob 2, then posits a fanciful connection to John Dee's diary. While I'm sympathetic to the levirate narrative in general, Jacob 2 (expanded at length in D&C 132:30–37) more clearly refers to Hagar and Abraham (see Brown, *In Heaven*, 238).

minimized. The apparent separation between the living and the dead was not real: God was the God of both, and he performed resurrection to assure that he would tend to the living.

This exegetical expansion of Luke 20, tying marriage to resurrection and life to afterlife, persisted in various ways throughout Smith's career. In later preaching, Smith suggested that marriage was intimately connected to resurrection, both in general terms and in the highly specific anointing ritual of the Nauvoo temple liturgy.¹⁵ The intimate interconnection of the living and the dead is a subset of Smith's ongoing practice of what some call metaphysical correspondence, the claim that "as above, so below," an ancient belief now best remembered as the conceptual infrastructure of horoscopic astrology.¹⁶ While twentieth-century physicists have retained mild echoes of the power of correspondence in the non-local interactions of paired electron spins or the similarity across scales of fractal processes, metaphysical correspondence, in essence, understood that ontological similarities could be deeply influential. In Smith's hands, the traditional idea that the structures of the universe influenced the structures of human life came to define in part the persistence of human society—Smith called it "sociality"—across the boundary of death. In other words, earthly relationships had to be reflections of heavenly relationships. Heaven and earth had to be metaphysically connected.

By 1835, Smith had explicitly told his followers that they could marry their spouses forever, what initially seems to be an unremarkable

15. The connection between resurrection and marriage is central to the second temple anointing, and that ritual connection encouraged the flourishing of an early Mormon belief that men would resurrect their wives at Christ's Second Coming. On humans resurrecting each other, see Brown, *In Heaven*, 91–97, 199–200.

16. On metaphysical correspondence, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 132 and Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 6, 13–16, 26–27, 141, 147, 164.

endorsement of the domestic heaven.¹⁷ Their marriages would last forever because domestic bliss was forever. Smith had also, though, begun to suggest plural marriage to a few followers, leading to intermittently turbulent controversy, especially with his second-in-command Oliver Cowdery. The 1835 *Articles of Marriage*, probably penned by Cowdery but held as binding on the Church, strongly affirmed a Mormon commitment to monogamy. Even that early denunciation of polygamy had to acknowledge, though, the exception to permanent monogamy: “one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again.”¹⁸ That proviso “in case of death” would prove the undoing of eternal monogamy in Smith’s developing system.

The collapse of afterlife into life posed by remarriage after bereavement and the promise of eternal marriage would be difficult to square with a plain reading of the Bible, though. Jesus’ response to the Sadducean thought experiment seemed pretty clear: there would be no marriage in heaven. Contrary to almost every other exegete and in defense of a social resurrection, Smith found in the thought experiment evidence that marriage, *performed correctly*, could in fact defy death. Reading the Sadducees’ taunt as literally but idiosyncratically true, Smith saw Christ’s answer as stipulating that marriage had to be performed before death in a specific way in order to survive a mortal dissolution.

Whereas other Protestants were often anticipating heavenly reunions with spouses and children, Smith had the audacity to take the Sadducean thought experiment to its hyper-logical conclusion—not even serial remarriage could be abrogated by death. But, as Smith obliterated temporal distance, his solution transformed the very concept of marriage. Smith and his Latter-day Saints reported that all marriages could be saved from the clutches of death, but *only in a radically new*

17. Brown, *In Heaven*, 229, 232–33.

18. *Doctrine and Covenants* [1835], 251.

form. Polygamy provided reassurance that no ties would be severed, even in a society where widows and widowers multiplied seemingly without limit. This solution came at a cost, though: Mormon marriage relationships would differ, radically, from the rising Victorian norm of companionate monogamy.

Most people would not, I suspect, infer from the postmortal polygamy (or something like it) of widows and widowers the idea that mortal polygamy should be normative. But Smith was not most people. Exercising his own version of metaphysical correspondence, Smith consistently collapsed the distance between heaven and earth and among past, present, and future. What mattered in the heavenly there and then had to matter in the earthly here and now. In Smith's hands, earth and heaven—the living and the dead—were separated only by a diaphanous shroud that he and his followers likened to a thin veil. The side effect of this collapse of spatiotemporal distance was a genuinely strange marital pattern in the here and now. Ultimately, this specific chain of logic persuaded more than just Smith himself.

Although the precedent of biblical patriarchs and the sacramental power of temple rites inspired many followers to accept polygamy, in some cases the more familiar problem of remarriage after bereavement proved more persuasive. That specific framing persuaded Smith's brother Hyrum, Mormonism's second-in-command in Nauvoo and erstwhile foe of polygamy. As various commenters have noted, including Hyrum himself, it was the reality of Hyrum's loss of his first wife, Jerusha Barden (1805–1837), and subsequent marriage to Mary Fielding (1801–1852) that made polygamy imaginable.¹⁹ When Hyrum first advocated polygamy semi-publicly in August 1842, he merged the levirate obligation and the domestic heaven to affirm the necessity of polygamy. According to a near-contemporary account, "Hiram said before the High council

19. Andrew F. Ehat, "Joseph Smith's Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the 1844 Mormon Succession Question" (MA thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 126–27. See also Brigham Young, Address, Oct. 8, 1866, CHL.

that. . . The Law that a man shall take his brothers wife and raise up seed unto him as it was in Israel must be again established.”²⁰ In an April 1844 speech shortly before his and his brother’s death, Hyrum reflected that his marriage to his first wife Jerusha came “before God showed us his order,” which meant that Jesus’ response to the Sadducees applied to them, and they would “be as the angels” without Joseph’s new form of marriage. Hyrum brought the concept of celestial polygamy to his second wife, Mary Fielding, and she concurred. Polygamy, in this account, was the straightforward solution to remarriage after bereavement and the domestic heaven. It was a doctrine, Hyrum Smith said, that no “honest man or woman” should “find fault with.” It was a “glad tiding of great joy.”²¹

When Joseph Smith introduced formal eternal marriage rites in 1840s Nauvoo, remarried widowers generally were sealed to their dead wives with their living wife acting as proxy, while also being sealed to their living wives.²² When ritual adoption arrived shortly thereafter, the adoptive children were generally connected to the first, dead wife, rather than the new, living wife.²³ Tying the strands together, Mercy Thompson later testified that her marriage to Hyrum was explicitly levirate, with a clear plan for Hyrum to sire offspring on behalf of her dead husband Robert.²⁴

20. Franklin D. Richards, “Scriptural Items” Notebook, LDS CHL, Aug. 12, 1843. I thank Don Bradley for bringing this source to my attention.

21. Hyrum Smith, [Conference Minutes], April 8, 1844, Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 1: DVD 1, 6:1985–88.

22. Bishop, “Eternal Marriage,” 87–88. See also Lyndon W. Cook, *Nauvoo Marriages Proxy Sealings 1843–1846* (Provo: Grandin, 2004), 56–57 *et passim*.

23. On adoption in this period, see Jonathan Stapley, “Adoptive Sealing Ritual in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 53–117.

24. “An Important Testimony,” *Deseret News*, Feb. 6, 1886 includes an affidavit dated Jan. 31, 1886, in which she laid out the plan to have Hyrum devote new offspring to her dead husband at the time of resurrection.

Several other women in Nauvoo were apparently sealed under specific conditions as levirates rather than for an eternity with the new husband.²⁵

Only three clear statements from Smith in favor of polygamy remain, one the official revelation that circulated privately among the Mormon inner circle beginning in 1843 (now D&C 132); another, a precursor private revelation to the Whitney family on the occasion of Smith's 1842 marriage to their daughter; and the last, his public defense of the main revelation in the aftermath of an opposition paper's public criticism in 1844.

In the main revelation and his public defense, Smith highlighted the problems of the levirate widow in a clear reuse of Luke 20. The revelation (currently D&C 132:7–18) reiterated the Sadducean thought experiment to argue that civil marriages—as indeed all human contracts or covenants—cannot endure past death. Participation in such lesser marriages put a person at risk of becoming a specific kind of subservient, “ministering” angel in the afterlife. In the endorsement of such an angelic status, Smith combined his exegesis of Luke 20 with his Nauvoo-era divine anthropology (in which gods and humans are explicitly members of the same species). If Christ equated angels with sexlessness (Luke 20:36), then that meant that “angel” in this context referred to a lesser ontological status. Smith's exegesis here is stunning in its idiosyncrasy and remarkable in its consistency, demonstrating the lightly constrained creativity available within Smith's marvelous literalism. By reading the levirate widow's problem in the afterlife as her lack of access to temple marriage rather than her mortality, Smith demonstrated a special kind of esoteric reading that employed extra-textual knowledge (in this case, his temple marriage rituals) alongside a textual puzzle posed by the juxtaposition of the domestic heaven and the plain sense of Luke 20. Rather than ignore the tension inherent in the domestic model of heaven (the chance that it will cause jumbles for those who remarry after bereavement), Smith carved out for himself and

25. Joseph Smith's widows (who chose to remain in polygamy) are the best-known cases of this phenomenon. See, e.g., Cook, *Proxy Sealings*, 55.

his followers a coherent solution between the competing theocentric and domestic models of heaven.

One year after the polygamy revelation began to circulate privately, critics and disaffected followers created the *Nauvoo Expositor*, an opposition newspaper intended to expose Smith's personal flaws and scandalous, esoteric teachings. Smith responded quickly, mobilizing a Nauvoo city effort (he was mayor at the time) to quash the press. In his testimony before the city council, Smith complained that the *Expositor* "make[s] a criminality, for a man to have a wife on the earth, while he has one in heaven, according to the keys of the holy Priesthood." Later in his speech, Smith tied the problem still more explicitly to the levirate widow, explaining the context for the 1843 polygamy revelation that had rocked Nauvoo. "On enquiring concerning the passage in the resurrection concerning 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage,' &c., he received for answer, men in this life must marry in view of eternity, otherwise they must remain as angels, or be single in heaven, which was the amount of the revelation."²⁶ The topic of earthly polygamy was fraught and ultimately led to Smith's murder, so much is left elliptical or subtly allusive in his public remarks. But the plain meaning of his statements was that Smith's marriage rituals would create precisely the complex afterlife marriage patterns with which the Sadducees had taunted Jesus two millennia previously. This is worth emphasizing: contemporary sources suggest that polygamy was Smith's answer to the problem that remarriage after bereavement posed for eternal family relationships.²⁷

Smith's only other statement in favor of polygamy was his revelation to the Whitneys regarding his marriage to their daughter. In this setting, Smith still closely pursued questions of immortality and the conquest

26. *The Nauvoo Neighbor* extra (Jun. 17, 1844), quoted here, contains a reasonable typescript of the manuscript minutes, albeit with minor shufflings and clarifications.

27. In some respects, Smith's use of the precedent of polygamy among Bible patriarchs was a complement to this claim about remarriage after bereavement. See D&C 132:1, 34–39.

of death, although in that context he did not draw explicit attention to the levirate widow. He promised the Whitneys “honor and immortality and eternal life” for their participation in polygamy. He further prayed, “let immortality and eternal life henceforth be sealed upon your heads forever and ever.”²⁸ The marriage he described in the Whitney revelation was precisely the marriage unavailable to the Sadducees, a sociality that could extend into the afterlife. Smith’s statements on polygamy demonstrate his concern that marriage bonds survive the premature death of a spouse.

As Smith began to introduce polygamy, his vision of the afterlife radically diverged from the Victorian domestic model. His exegesis of Luke 20 probably played at least a conceptual role in one of the most notorious and painful elements of early Mormon polygamy: Smith’s practice of marrying some women who were civilly married to other men. This practice, often erroneously termed “polyandry,” played on the contrast between modes of marriage inherent to Smith’s exegesis of the levirate widow.²⁹ Just as the marriage of the Sadducees, certain classes of marriage were lesser, impermanent, non-sacerdotal. These impermanent marriages could be superseded by Smith’s sacerdotal, permanent marriage. The few women placed in the unenviable position of being dual wives had to span the distance between the Sadducean marriage to

28. Revelation dated Jul. 27, 1843 at LDS Church History Library in Salt Lake City.

29. For a review of polyandry generally, see Katherine Starkweather and Raymond Haynes, “A Survey of non-Classical Polyandry,” *Human Nature* 23, no. 3 (June 2012): 149–72. In that account, polyandry is generally a system, mainly in hunter-gatherer societies, in which a primary male spouse recruits other male spouses—often his blood kin—to limit the fracture of agricultural inheritances or to assure protection of offspring during frequent absences. In some instances, polyandry is associated with multiple fatherhood, in which more than one man is simultaneously considered father to a child (recall that older societies did not share our understanding of the biology of human reproduction). In early Mormon polygamy, dual wives had a low-status/civil husband and a high-status/sacerdotal husband, and the first husband generally was the lower status one. When offspring resulted, the children were not considered to have two fathers.

their first husbands and the celestial marriage to the Mormon hierarchy. Such an untenable approach, however consistent with Smith's levirate exegesis, soon transitioned into established Mormon polygamy. While a recent proposal to describe the earliest phase of Mormon polygamy as an homage to Platonic "composite" marriage is unpersuasive,³⁰ the dual wives of early Mormonism stand as a reminder of just how disruptive Smith's vision of the afterlife could be.³¹

Conceptual Structures of Mormon Polygamy

There is more in the problem of the levirate widow than just the specter of polygamy in remarriage after bereavement. Smith's exegesis required several assumptions, and his theology employed distinctive readings of the levirate widow story as touchstones for interrelated concepts. Smith's account demonstrated that (a) "angel" could refer to a kind of postmortal human excluded from family relationships, (b) marriage was a sacrament, like baptism, that had to be performed during mortality, and (c) sacramental marriage was intimately associated with the act of resurrection. This complex exegetical network proved crucial to Smith's overall project of negotiating the extremes of the domestic and theocentric models of afterlife and the harsh realities of bereavement in the providentialist world of American religion (where God chose who would die and when, no matter how untimely a death might seem). Smith saw in the scriptural thought experiment the paradoxical solution to the problem of spousal death.

Though Mormon angelology has various minor complexities, Smith made two key claims about angels: in general, what other Christians understood as an entirely different class of sentient beings were actually

30. Fleming, "The Fulness of the Gospel," 351–85. Fleming's notion that Smith was in some way recapitulating the shared wives of Plato's *Republic* strikes me as far-fetched at best.

31. On dual wives, see Brown, *In Heaven*, 242–43.

humans at another stage in their development, and the term “angel” in point of fact could refer to those unfortunate enough to have ended up outside the sacramental marriage system. Essentially all early Mormon references to angel as beings inferior to humans invoked the imagery and language of the Sadducean thought experiment.³² Angels were to minister to those who had entered Smith’s eternal marital system, unable themselves to participate in it. Jesus’s words of marital restriction echoed across eternity.

The doctrine of afterlife family bonds coexisted with Smith’s divine anthropology—the ontological equivalence of humans, angels, and gods—in a way that seemed to derive at least in part from the promise of Luke 20 that some humans would be as “angels” in the afterlife. Smith seems in this sustained exegesis to have been able to keep two superficially incompatible notions at play simultaneously. The word “angel” carried two potential meanings: a divine being of the species (*Ahman* in the primordial language, according to early revelations) that encompassed God and humans, and a kind of curse that might befall such beings in the absence of sacerdotal marriage.

In tandem, early Mormons developed a theology that the Saints would resurrect each other, perhaps in a quiet but startling echo of the role of the trumpet-wielding archangel at Christ’s Second Coming. Specifically, men, whose status was equivalent or even superior to angels, would resurrect their wives as parents resurrected their children when Christ returned to earth, a doctrine disseminated in multiple ways in earliest Mormonism.³³ The close association of marriage with resurrection per se in Luke 20 (and Smith’s revision of the Marcan account in his New Translation) seem to have supported this connection, though the belief drew on multiple parallel antecedents.

32. Brown, *In Heaven*, 260–61.

33. Brown, *In Heaven*, 92–93.

The exegesis of the story of the levirate widow demonstrates the ways Smith diverged from the rising Protestant domestic heaven as he pointed out internal inconsistencies within it. The domestic heaven forced the issue of post-mortal polygamy because spousal bereavement was ubiquitous. In taking the domestic heaven to a hyper-logical conclusion, Smith broke with the popular belief of his peers. He did so in order to reconcile the power of human love, so strong it must surely persist beyond death, with the frequent disruptions to that love which death perpetrated.

Smith's polygamy made a claim that humans could love the way God loved, that their commitment would not flag if the scope of their domestic connections enlarged. For many people, the intensity of love within serial monogamy was proof that precisely such love was a reality. Though bereavement is highly individual and lost love haunts most who remarry, serial monogamy after bereavement provided a kind of laboratory for the type of love Smith saw his Saints acquiring for the eternities. Smith seemed to be making an analogy between Latter-day Saints and God, whose love was boundless. God's love grew with each additional beloved soul.

Theocentrism claimed that the rift between God and humanity was too wide to allow humans to have such a capacity for divine love, while the domestic heaven seemed to suggest that humans would struggle to love deeply those outside their domestic nucleus. Following neither the theocentric nor the domestic model, Smith's afterlife advocated a boundless human love for others. As Latter-day Saints endorsed an eternally expanded hearth, they were trying on the kind of love God and Christ felt toward every human being.³⁴

Formally, the Sadducean thought experiment was a case of possible polyandry. While Smith's exegesis of the thought experiment could have

34. Kate Holbrook and I explore this topic in "Embodiment and Sexuality," in Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 292–305.

endorsed polyandry as well as polygyny, no reliable contemporary evidence suggests that he did. It is not clear why precisely Smith married dual wives early in his career: various hypotheses have been advanced, with little clear evidence in support of any specific explanation.³⁵ Whatever the reason, Smith's message seemed to be that his sacerdotal marriage took precedence over civil marriage: the dual wives had a civil marriage to one man and a sacerdotal marriage to a more powerful man. Just as his new baptism took precedence over Protestant baptism, so did his new marriage take precedence over civil marriage. Marriage in this view was a kind of death-defying sacrament rather than an expression of the rising companionate ideal of Victorian marriage.³⁶

Whatever the precise reasons for the early dual wives, by 1842 Smith had abandoned the practice. The few actual levirate widows in Nauvoo were the women for whom sacerdotal levirate marriage was clearly limited to mortality.³⁷ Polyandry per se was not apparently a component of Mormon polygamy.

This asymmetry, in which men can potentially have multiple post-mortal spouses but women cannot, generally persists to the present day in the LDS Church, with complex exceptions. Why Smith's sustained exegesis of Luke 20 did not embrace frank polyandry is an open question. It may well have been that such *independent* female power was too striking, even for Smith's remarkably open mind. Then-current transitions in family and economic structure were tending to restrict female power

35. The scandalous question of who had sex with whom has activated considerable debate, mostly but not entirely informal and online, but that line of inquiry strikes me as basically orthogonal to the important religious and conceptual questions.

36. On marital sacramentalism, see Kathleen Flake, "The Development of Early Latter-day Saint Marriage Rites, 1831–1853," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 77–103.

37. In general, this status fell primarily on Joseph Smith's widows, who were remarried sacerdotally for time only with his polygamous heirs, generally the apostles.

outside the Victorian nucleus. Situated between the waning of official female spiritual authority and the slow rise of female political power, Smith's system arrived in a sociocultural context that surely constrained his innovations in some ways.³⁸ While it would be tempting to see the Sadducee denial of polyandry as playing a role in the specific polygynous focus of early Mormon polygamy (in other words, Jesus said the levirate widow would not have multiple postmortal husbands, so polyandry per se wasn't possible), I'm skeptical. Smith subverted the rest of the parable, and he never indicated that the failure of afterlife marriages was related to the sex of the involved parties. The fact that Smith never apparently endorsed post-mortal polyandry does, however, suggest that he was hitting up against the limits of the thinkable in his world.³⁹

For many contemporary Mormons and Mormon observers, the asymmetry between widows and widowers has become increasingly painful in the aftermath of the immense cultural changes brought to a head in the "super-nova" of secular individualism around 1960–2000.⁴⁰ Attempts to map solutions that are both true to Mormon roots and to modern sensibilities about the nature of gender and sexual identity will require careful attention and considerable work. Multiple currents were present within early Mormonism that could be appropriated to many different approaches, both for and against aspects of what is now called the neo-Victorian worldview.

Even within the constraints of his society, Smith made several important proposals that ran contrary to cultural expectations. According to best evidence, Smith at least identified a divine mother (earliest

38. On waning spiritual authority for women, see, e.g., Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998). Seneca Falls would occur in 1848, and female suffrage in the US wasn't fully granted until 1920.

39. On unthinkable things, see, e.g., Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 428–29.

40. The term super-nova in this sense belongs to Charles Taylor. On secularity, see his *Secular Age*, 300, 377, 412, and 423ff.

Mormons initially called her the “queen of heaven”), and he announced that both women and men were greater than angels (again reflecting his distinctive exegesis of Luke 20). In his temple rites, he was ordaining women as priestesses. Even as he rejected polyandry and accommodated to some contemporary gender norms despite his rejection of Victorian marriage, Smith was proposing that women had an ontological status of staggering gravity. He was not envisioning good wives, he was revealing priestesses who were, equivalently, goddesses.⁴¹

Despite Smith’s cultural heritage in early America and the fact that he struggled to elaborate a system in which women were loci of independent authority, his basic system could encompass a broader vision of female authority. In fact, Smith’s connection of polygamy to the basic problem of love in the face of mortality raises a possibility that could be put to use to elaborate a system of durable inter-connection less reliant on neo-Victorian social norms.

Conclusion

In an imaginative, strikingly literal exegesis of Luke 20 that spanned most of his career, Smith envisioned a complex response to death’s ravages on human relationships, a familiar and vexing problem in nineteenth-century America: what does it mean to remarry after bereavement? In so doing, he pointed out unspoken tensions in the domestic heaven and the Victorian family on which it depended. Similar tensions have come to the fore again in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries for some members of the LDS Church. This time rather than just the threat

41. On Mother in Heaven, see Susanna Morrill, “Mormon Women’s Agency and Changing Conceptions of the Mother in Heaven,” in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matt Bowman (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 2016), 121–35. On women as priestesses/goddesses within the Mormon temple *cultus*, see Flake, “Early Latter-day Saint Marriage Rites,” 88–94, 102 and Kathleen Flake, “Ordering Antinomy: An Analysis of Early Mormonism’s Priestly Offices, Councils, and Kinship,” *Religion & American Culture* 26, no. 2 (2016): 155–66.

to Victorian monogamy, there are now hard questions to ask about sexual asymmetries and the status of women and men in afterlife pairings.

Following the threads of the story of the levirate widow illuminates the use of biblical exegesis in early Mormonism and fleshes out the conceptual infrastructure of early polygamy. It also points out the reasons why these tensions have never gone away: we human beings continue to love, and we continue to die. And we have never been able to fully come to terms with that conjunction.

A VIEW FROM THE INSIDE: HOW CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY CHANGED MY MIND ABOUT POLYGAMY

Jennifer Huss Basquiat

My first entry into the world of so-called Mormon polygamy began on June 17, 2010 when I attended the second annual conference of Safety Net, an organization that seeks “to assist people associated with the practice of plural marriage, whether an active polygamist or exiting polygamist.” Safety Net strives for neutrality toward the actual practice of plural marriage so they can “meet physical, emotional, and educational needs.”¹ The goal of their annual conferences is to increase awareness of the issues surrounding the practice of plural marriage, present individual stories of polygamy, and discuss resources available to those wanting to leave polygamous family structures. At the time, I simply assumed every woman wanted just that: to escape polygamy. I believed that women in polygamous relationships had been brainwashed, had little autonomy, and lived in insular communities. As I sat listening to the keynote speaker, Jim Cates, a noted clinical psychologist who works with Old Order Amish, I looked over and saw a young woman sitting near me who was drawing a butterfly. What a perfect metaphor, I thought! She

1. “A Program of the Family Support Center,” Safety Net, <http://www.safetynetu-tah.org/index.html>. In addition to the annual conference, Safety Net also conducts monthly meetings that alternate between northern and southern locations in Utah. These meetings are designed to promote the organization’s four objectives: safety, collaboration, education, and outreach.

too wants to escape the rigidity of an overbearing and fundamentalist religion. I surmised that she was probably from a polygamous community and couldn't wait to plot her escape. I complimented her on her drawing, we had a lovely conversation, and she drew another butterfly for my six-year-old daughter. And then what I thought I knew about polygamy fractured into tiny, little cracks.

Up until this point, I had assumed that polygamous communities in southern Utah and northern Arizona were all like Colorado City, where Warren Jeffs ruled an iron-fisted patriarchy. Jeffs, the head of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and notorious polygamist leader, was a fugitive on the FBI's most wanted list, and his arrest in 2006 set off a firestorm of negative publicity regarding the practice of polygamy.² This negative publicity was certainly well deserved for the FLDS Church, and Colorado City came to epitomize and reinforce the prevailing opinions about polygamy in the United States: of abuse, underage child brides, neglected and abandoned young boys, and hopelessly controlled women at the mercy of their authoritative, power-hungry husbands.³ What became problematic, however, was that one person's story, even a collected group of stories taken from predominantly *one*

2. Jeffs had been placed on the FBI's most wanted list for unlawful flight to avoid prosecution on Utah state charges regarding his alleged arrangement of illegal marriages involving underage girls. In May and July 2007, the state of Arizona also charged him with eight additional counts, including sexual conduct with minors and incest in two separate cases. See "Sect Leader Indicted on Sexual Conduct with Minor, Incest Charges," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/07/12/polygamy.charges/index.html>.

3. See Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (Harpswell, Maine: Anchor Publishing, 2004); Andrea Moore-Emmett, *God's Brothel: The Extortion of Sex for Salvation in Contemporary Mormon and Christian Fundamentalist Polygamy and the Stories of 18 Women Who Escaped* (San Francisco: Pince-Nez Press, 2004); Carolyn Jessop and Laura Palmer, *Escape* (New York: Broadway, 2008); Elissa Wall, *Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing Up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs* (New York: William Morrow, 2008); and David Ebershoff, *The 19th Wife* (New York: Random House, 2009).

community, could not represent the larger cultural practice of contemporary polygamy, particularly when such communities are so diverse and when the majority of those practicing polygamy reject the authority of Warren Jeffs. According to Anne Wilde, author, practicing polygamist, and political activist:

Polygamous families live by a variety of values and standards. Members of organized fundamentalist groups are often influenced by the traditions or expectations of the larger religious body with whom they identify. There are a number of different Fundamentalist Mormon communities centered in and around Utah, including two larger groups, several smaller groups, and the independent Fundamentalists who are not members of any organized group.⁴

Within this surprisingly diverse community of practicing polygamists (numbered to be around 40,000), only 25 percent recognize Warren Jeffs as their prophet.⁵ The rest of this larger “community”⁶ finds leadership in such varied options as a recognized council of elders, an internally recognized presiding patriarch, or, in the case of independent households (wherein the largest number of practicing polygamists are found), a male head of household.

4. Presented at the 3rd Annual Safety Net Conference held in St. George, Utah, on March 11, 2011. Safety Net is an organization funded by the Utah Attorney General’s office to promote access to social services within polygamous communities. Anne Wilde has also coauthored *Voices in Harmony*, a text aimed at refuting the negative view of polygamy held by most Americans. See Mary Batchelor, Marianne Watson, and Anne Wilde, *Voices in Harmony: Contemporary Women Celebrate Plural Marriage* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2000).

5. The rough breakdown of this community is as follows: 15,000 self-identify as independents, 10,000 as FLDS, 7,500 as the Allred Group, 2,000 as residents of Centennial Park, 2,000 as part of the Davis Co. Co-op, and 1,500 who classify as “other.” See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Fundamentalist Mormons by Affiliation,” field document, St. George, Utah, March 11, 2011. All field documents in author’s possession.

6. I use this term loosely because most of the separate groups have limited, if any, communication with one another. This lack of communication stems from both theological and geographical differences.

These groups are all united in their belief in celestial marriage⁷ and the practice of a plural lifestyle, but they do not practice it in the same way. Some groups assign women to husbands, some allow underage marriage, some prefer to construct their communities in isolation, and some live squarely in suburban neighborhoods. Much like any human group, there are distinct differences and individual nuances in the ways people choose to live their faith. In reality, some plural communities seek to integrate themselves into contemporary society, to live alongside the “gentiles.”⁸ Such communities are actively choosing to live their belief in plural marriage differently—to live their version of Mormonism differently.

During the Safety Net conference, my perceptions about polygamous families began to change. On the conference schedule was a panel comprised of young adults from the Centennial Park community. The youth who spoke on this panel were enlightening. Dressed in modern (albeit modest) attire, they looked nothing like the anachronistic images of pioneer dress generally associated with the FLDS plural lifestyle. They spoke articulately about their community, eagerly engaged with the audience, and shone with confidence. This was hardly the expected demeanor of someone suffering from systematic abuse at the hands of old men. One young woman, in particular, left a strong impression. Her name was Stephanie, and there was a light in her that connected so well with the audience as she talked about her service to the community and her plans for the future. As a member of Voice Box, a youth organization and volunteer group, she believed living by example was the best form of missionary work. She shared a quote generally attributed to St. Francis of Assisi to make her point, “Go preach, and if you must, use words.”⁹

7. Many practitioners of plural marriage find the catchall term *polygamy* to be offensive because it implies a secular desire for multiple wives and ignores the celestial and eternal commitment such a practice requires.

8. Historical LDS usage and contemporary fundamentalist usage often refers to non-Mormons as “gentiles.” See “Gentile,” LDS Bible Dictionary, <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/bd/gentile?lang=eng>.

9. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Voice Box,” field notes, St. George, Utah, Jun. 17, 2010.

It was this interaction with a group of civically minded and engaged youth that opened my mind to the many realities of polygamy. Polygamy, even fundamentalist Mormon polygamy, cannot be categorized by one sweeping (and extremely negative) generalization. As a woman who was born and raised among the FLDS said, “Everyone who’s living in the culture is an individual and they are living an individual experience.”¹⁰ Rather than focus on just one collection of shared and common experiences drawn primarily from Colorado City, why not examine the story less told? From this point on, I made it the focus of my fieldwork to learn about Centennial Park, Arizona, located just three miles from Colorado City.

In comparison to Colorado City, Centennial Park is a relatively new community dedicated to plural living. It was formed in 1984 when Marion Hammon and Alma Timpson were dismissed from the FLDS Priesthood Council in Colorado City by acting prophet Leroy S. Johnson.¹¹ After a disagreement surrounding the future leadership of the FLDS group, Johnson assumed these men would just fade away from influence; however, they held meetings (initially in their homes), built up a new community, and ended up taking quite a few followers with them. Centennial Park, as it exists today, sits in stark contrast to its fundamentalist neighbors down the road.¹² The most telling difference is the community’s open embrace of the outside world. Susie Timpson, former Centennial Park Action Committee President states, “We want to

10. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Conversation with Shirlee Draper,” field notes, St. George, Utah, Mar. 11, 2011.

11. See E. Keith Howick, *Polygamy: The Mormon Enigma* (Silverton, Idaho: WindRiver Publishing, 2007).

12. The disagreement that created Centennial Park arose between those who supported the “one man” doctrine (which argued that only one man should preside over the church) and those who supported the idea of a presiding priesthood council composed of several worthy men. Centennial Park was created by these dissenters and founded a mere three miles from Colorado City. In 1986 the Centennial Park group built a meetinghouse and later, in 2003, created a charter school for elementary education. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Centennial Park History,” field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 12, 2011.

be as transparent as we can be. We want people to come to activities, visit the clinic, and attend church if they want to. We have nothing to hide.”¹³

During my ongoing fieldwork, I came to learn that the practice of contemporary plural marriage varies not only from community to community but also from family to family. The purpose of my research has been (and continues to be) twofold: first, to examine how this marginalized group of practicing polygamists struggles with and attempts to overcome the various hegemonic power structures of dominant American culture, and second, to listen critically to how this group chooses to define itself, absent from the Western gaze that classifies polygamy as primitive and inherently abusive to women. Through engaged and critical observation, my preconceived and media-influenced ideas of polygamy as interchangeable with abuse have been challenged and, subsequently, changed. In an era where legal access to marriage has been (and continues to be) hotly contested, the challenge to engage and understand is more important than ever.

One particular area of focus in my research unpacks the rather complicated ideas of hegemonic authority and engaged observation. While my research is ongoing and by no means complete, there are two clear themes that have thus far emerged: First, plural marriage, as practiced by families in Centennial Park, illustrates a direct contradiction to media reports about American polygamy. Second, in some communities polygamy has historically provided benefits to women, unacknowledged by mainstream society, and continues to do so. While most people in America view polygamy as a black-and-white issue, I have been teasing out the gray areas that disrupt the predominant social narrative. This is not without risks. I have been accused of “drinking the Kool-Aid”¹⁴ simply because I have listened to polygamists of Centennial Park describe and

13. The Centennial Park Action Committee (CPAC) is committed to achieving the decriminalization of polygamy. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Conversation with Susie Timpson,” field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 10, 2011.

14. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Conversation with Anne Wilde,” field notes, St. George, Utah, Mar. 11, 2011.

define themselves. The most provocative backlash to date occurred shortly after my presentation at Safety Net's fourth annual conference in 2012, where I was invited to be a featured speaker. My presentation, "Moving Beyond Cultural Sensitivity: Embracing Equality in Plural Communities," was designed to get attendees to think outside of the very small box into which the understanding of polygamy is crammed. Several of the women from CPAC drove up from Centennial Park to hear me speak, and my presentation was very well received by the plural community. Outside of the community and in the blogosphere was another matter. I was accused of encouraging felonious behavior with minor children, sweeping abuse under the rug, and (a personal favorite) conflating my chosen field of cultural anthropology with polygamy apologia.¹⁵

Nevertheless, I discovered that the people of Centennial Park challenge popular media images and perceptions of what it means to be a polygamist. Rejecting labels that have been imposed upon them by others, members of this community simply say they are engaged in "the Work." At other times they may also call themselves "Joseph Smith Mormons."¹⁶ Driving through this community is like driving through most other small communities in the American West. While driving through Colorado City can bring scornful looks and unwanted followers tailgating until you leave town, Centennial Park is a friendly and welcoming community.¹⁷ Sanjiv Bhattacharya notes this reality from his time spent in the community:

The first thing I learn about Centennial Park is that they're big on waving here. They wave from the streets, from their cars, at intersections. And

15. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "FLDS Texas Blog," field document, Jun. 22, 2012. See also FLDS Texas Blog at <http://texasflds.wordpress.com/2012/06/10/general-discussion-77-the-wait-for-the-rulings/>.

16. Again, terminology becomes important. Members of Centennial Park do not identify as FLDS (led by Jeffs) or as Latter-day Saints (mainstream Mormonism).

17. On my first drive through Colorado City, I was closely tailed by a black pickup truck with tinted windows. People on the streets turned their faces away with open scorn for this unwelcome visitor. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Colorado City," field notes, Colorado City, Arizona, Mar. 10, 2011.

it's not just kids or people I've met—*everyone* waves. And smiles. It may well be doctrine at this point . . . [But] there's a purity of purpose to Centennial Park, an air of discipline.¹⁸

Residents' attire, while modest, is modern and does not serve as a telltale marker of plural living as do the pioneer dresses found in Colorado City. But the differences go deeper than that. In Centennial Park, marriage before the age of eighteen is not permitted, and it is the woman who typically choose her spouse, *not* the men. In the event that a woman has not been "moved by the Spirit" through thoughtful prayer to identify her future spouse, she may consult the Council of Brethren for guidance.¹⁹ Yet, even in this case she makes the decision to marry. She is never assigned or forced to participate in plural marriage. Contrary to mainstream American perception, "No one is forced to marry anyone they don't want to marry. *No one*. Now, I don't know what's happening over there (pointing toward Colorado City). That's what we hear in the media, but we don't always know whether to trust it."²⁰

Stephanie, that bright, young woman volunteering with Voice Box, found herself contemplating marriage not too long ago. A student at Mojave Community College, she didn't plan on marrying young. She had plans; she was going places. She remarked that "some of my other friends were dying to get married. I just wasn't."²¹ But Stephanie started to recognize an unfamiliar call or what she described as a "weird, antsy feeling."²² Rather than turn herself in to the Council of Brethren for marriage placement, she decided to fast and pray and reach a decision herself, but also in conjunction with priesthood counseling. A valuable

18. See Sanjiv Bhattacharya, *Secrets & Wives: The Hidden World of Mormon Polygamy* (Berkeley, Calif.: Soft Skull Press, 2011), 72.

19. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Choosing Wives," field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 12, 2011.

20. See "Ruth" in Bhattacharya, *Secrets & Wives*, 75.

21. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Interview with Stephanie," field notes, Merry Wives Café, Hildale, Utah, Jun. 28, 2012.

22. Ibid.

resource for her during this time was *1960 Priesthood Discourses*, a published collection of talks delivered by the Council of Priesthood and Their Associates. The passages regarding marriage were particularly useful:

My brothers and sisters, the thing that the servants of God have been trying to get this people to do is live according to the teaching they have received, that they might know and understand that we are saved no faster than we gain knowledge. Knowledge of what? Knowledge of our Father in Heaven, who He is, why He created us, and why we are here. I have young men and women come to me and want to place themselves in the hands of the Priesthood, that they might be placed correctly during their lifetime. Why do they come? Because they have been taught that they made covenants before they came here, and they want to know who they covenanted with.²³

It was important to Stephanie that she not make this decision alone; she very much wanted “input and counsel so that [she had] support.”²⁴ While admitting this decision at such a young age was decidedly “weird,” she firmly impressed upon me how right the whole decision-making process felt to her. In discussion with Brother John, she arrived at a name, discussed her choice with Brother John as well as her father, and allowed the Priesthood Council to approach the man she had selected. Stan called her in December while she was wearing pajamas and studying for her Spanish final at MCC. Stephanie admitted she was “freaking out. The whole thing just seemed so surreal.”²⁵ She started seeing this man, who already had one wife to whom he had been married for four years. Stephanie met her as well and determined that this was the family with whom she was meant to be.

Despite common misunderstandings to the contrary, Stephanie made a fully informed, consensual decision to enter into celestial

23. See Claude T. Cawley, ed., *Priesthood Discourses, 1960* (Centennial Park, Ariz.: The Work of Jesus Christ, 2004), 103.

24. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Interview with Stephanie,” field notes, Merry Wives Café, Hildale, Utah, Jun. 28, 2012.

25. Ibid.

marriage. She was not brainwashed. She did not live in an isolated community cut off from dominant American culture. She didn't even grow up in a plural household; her father, although married multiple times, never took plural wives. She also married at nineteen, which is not unusual in mainstream Mormonism. Of her experience, Stephanie says, "I thought it would be so hard. I thought joining another family would be difficult, but it's just been the easiest thing. I really didn't think I would be here. But now I can't imagine *not* being here."²⁶

Another way in which Centennial Park is challenging preconceived notions of plural marriage revolves around the importance of education within the community. Here, women (as well as men) are encouraged to further their education beyond high school. Many members of Centennial Park enroll in classes at Mohave Community College, located just minutes from the community. Mary Timpson, a formidable matriarch within the community, referenced Brigham Young's teachings on education, stating, "Education is the power to think clearly. That is what we want for our children."²⁷ Comparing the Centennial Park community to the FLDS community, Susie Timpson emphasized:

We're not them, you know. We're not the FLDS. Our people have a choice. We don't force here, no. Our children watch television, they read books, they go to college. We can get you figures on how many go to college, but it's higher than out in the world. It's so sad what's happening over there [Colorado City] with the young girls being forced. And I know that's the sensational story, but we don't do that.²⁸

Indeed, Centennial Park's commitment to education is reflected in its creation of both Masada Charter School and the Academy.

Masada Charter School opened its doors in the fall of 2001 to 150 students from the community. It currently serves over 500 K–9 students.

26. Ibid.

27. Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Education Lecture with Mary Timpson," field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 10, 2011.

28. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Conversation with Susie Timpson," field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 10, 2011.

(Students in grades 10–12 generally continue their education at a private high school within the community known as the Academy.) The Masada school building was constructed by members of the community and financed through a Department of Agriculture loan. In 2008, Masada Charter School was a Blue Ribbon Award recipient recognized by the US Secretary of Education.²⁹ Currently, Masada is ranked in the top 10 percent of all Arizona schools and more than 90 percent of its students meet or exceed state standards in reading and mathematics. It is also worth noting that Masada is not a religious school. Yes, it is located in the heart of Centennial Park, but as principal Polly Dockstader notes, “Masada was created to be a community school. It is a culturally supported school, yes, but it is not a religious school. Our students can just focus on learning; they don’t need to hide their backgrounds and/or their families.”³⁰

Part of the reason Centennial Park is so openly committed to the education of their children connects to the larger argument made in mainstream media that polygamy inherently equals abuse. According to Mary Timpson, polygamy is not the reason that abuse occurs within these communities. The reason for abuse is the “lack of education, isolation, and the lack of commitment to personal growth. A balanced education comprised of liberal arts, practical arts, and twenty-first century living creates self-fulfilled individuals.”³¹ Sometimes these self-fulfilled individuals decide that the plural lifestyle is not for them. However, unlike the inevitable shunning that occurs in more rigid and isolated religious communities, in Centennial Park such a decision barely merits a shrug.

29. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Blue Ribbon Award Letter,” field document, Centennial Park, Arizona, Oct. 6, 2011. See also Blue Letter Award, Masada Charter School, <http://www.masadaschool.org/filestore/BlueRibbonAwardLetter.pdf>.

30. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Interview with Polly Dockstader,” field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Oct. 6, 2011.

31. Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Education Lecture with Mary Timpson,” field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 10, 2011.

As Timpson so clearly articulates, “I lead my own life as my children will lead theirs.”³²

What becomes truly revolutionary within the community of Centennial Park is a strong commitment to challenging popular American representations of polygamy. As I noted earlier, polygamy is regularly equated with abuse and the subjugation of women in media reports and popular opinion. However, these beliefs are firmly rooted in an ontological privilege that upholds dominant cultural patterns. Even so, as Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen notes:

[T]o many researchers . . . the question of women’s subjugation in polygyny cannot be examined without focusing on the women themselves and their internal relationships. To a woman in a polygynous marriage, the bond to other adult females, including [. . .] her co-wives, may constitute a more critical relationship than that with her husband for her productive, reproductive and personal achievements It is therefore not possible to generalize as to whether polygyny is by nature competitive or cooperative. It depends on the particular polygynous context.³³

Indeed, the suggestion that women can benefit from plural unions is echoed in Centennial Park. Joanne Timpson Yarrish, the community’s practicing midwife, bluntly states that “monogamy makes slaves of women.”³⁴ Having spent several years getting to know women in Centennial Park, I admit I understand this point. As they look on my own personal Facebook page and see the many activities my children are engaged in, the volunteer hours I put into their schools, the holiday meals and decorations I prepare, and my position as a full-time tenured

32. Ibid.

33. Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen, *Polygamy: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Oxford: Berg Publishing, 2008), 127.

34. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Interview with Joanne Timpson Yarrish,” field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Sept. 24, 2012.

professor, they say things like, “Wow, Jennifer. You could really use a sister wife.”³⁵ I’d be lying if, on occasion, I didn’t see the appeal.

When pressed to further explain her position, Joanne makes a strong case for polygamy as a collaboration wherein women do not shoulder the burden of a household alone; they can rely on a close-knit group of women who share the same familial goals to find both joy and fulfillment both within *and without* their family structures. To this end, Joanne has spearheaded a volunteer group called the Nightingales. Comprised of young, unmarried women over the age of eighteen as well as “empty nesters,” the Nightingale program is designed to provide help with child-rearing and infant care. Volunteers must complete educational training, be certified in basic care, and pass a clinical exam under the watchful eyes of the midwife. For the young ladies of Centennial Park, these opportunities act rather like “missions” wherein they are able to assist in newborn and postpartum care.³⁶ In the plural community of Centennial Park, it truly does take a village to raise a child and it is a commitment that everyone takes seriously.

This is not to suggest, of course, that abuse is absent from polygamy. Abuse can occur anywhere, regardless of religious affiliation or marriage pattern. However, members of Centennial Park believe that forced isolation, the fear of “coming out” to mainstream society, and the stigma a plural lifestyle carries create an environment wherein abuse can thrive and go unreported (as was so widely seen in Colorado City). Activists within Centennial Park urge those in the outside world to “unlock the door so you can see for yourself that plural marriage can stand up to scrutiny in the light of day.”³⁷ Polly Dockstader goes further, stating,

35. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Lunch at Merry Wives,” field notes, Hildale, Utah, Oct. 4, 2012.

36. See Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Tour of the Birth Clinic,” field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 12, 2012.

37. See the Centennial Park Action Committee’s (CPAC’s) website at <http://www.cpaction.org/CPAC/index.htm>.

“polygamy has become a synonym for abuse and tyranny. It is time for the outside world to stop controlling the terms of the debate.”³⁸

It is here that I believe my work has broader application. It is time for interdisciplinary research and critical ethnography to bring much-needed opposition to the cacophony of prejudice currently commanding the loudest voice in American discourse surrounding polygamy. It is my belief that as more people truly understand the workings of alternative religious communities, American culture in general will become more accepting of cultural, familial, and religious diversity. Indeed, all marginalized groups should benefit from the power of self-determination. When scholars remain open to the critical way “persons choose to present themselves, how they construct their identity, and ultimately, how they embody, reflect, and construct their culture,”³⁹ they uncover contextual truths often hidden by the privilege embedded in dominant narratives. Disrupting one’s own privilege can be uncomfortable, but continuing to misrepresent modern polygamy as monolithic contributes to misunderstandings that, in turn, create “many social problems that could, otherwise, be minimized by giving the phenomenon the study and attention it requires.”⁴⁰

38. Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Dockstader,” field notes, Centennial Park, Arizona, Mar. 11, 2011.

39. Elizabeth C. Fine and Jean Haskell Speer, *Performance, Culture, and Identity* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1992), 10.

40. David G. Maillu, *Our Kind of Polygamy* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1988), viii.

SCARED SACRED: HOW THE HORRIFYING STORY OF JOSEPH SMITH'S POLYGAMY CAN HELP SAVE US

Stephen Carter

Probably the most destabilizing piece of historical information most Mormons come across is Joseph Smith's polygamy. Though his practice is vaguely known by many, there seems to come a time when the details really come into focus: when we understand how young some of the girls Joseph took to wife were, how many of the women were already married to his friends, how coercive he could be in gaining a woman's hand, how he kept Emma in the dark for such a long time, how much pain and heartbreak the practice caused. And it is very difficult to reconcile these details with our desire to revere Joseph Smith as a prophet and as a good man.

This reaction is understandable since so many of us come from cultures that don't have a history of polygamy. It goes against our tradition of the "one and only," of the nuclear family, of our hope for equality between the sexes, of our desire to protect children, of our belief in agency. Seriously, would we countenance *any* of Joseph Smith's polygamous behavior today? Anyone who would pursue fourteen-year-old girls, or woo already-married women would be lucky to stay out of jail. And certainly that person would be excommunicated.

However, Joseph Smith is not going away. He founded our church, and the Church is committed to defending him, as was shown in the

polygamy essay on [lds.org](https://www.lds.org) that absolved him of his behavior by saying that he was forced into it by an angel with a flaming sword.

The story of Joseph's polygamy is a disturbing one, but my thesis is that it is also one of the most essential stories Mormonism has—a modern-day version of the story of Abraham and Isaac: a story uniquely capable of shocking Latter-day Saints—not out of the Church, but into a deeper relationship with the divine.



The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the Bible's most frequently told stories. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his only son on a mountaintop. So Abraham takes Isaac on a long journey and binds him to a boulder. He raises his knife but is stopped by an angel who offers a ram in Isaac's stead. We have all heard interpretations of this story in church. In fact, it seems to me that we spend much more time on the interpretations than we do on the story itself, probably because, deep down, we feel how horrifying and repugnant the story is to our most basic values. Think about it. A man brought his child to a mountain in order to kill him. Period.

As the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard observed, if you taught the story of Abraham and Isaac in church on Sunday and then on Monday came upon a member of your congregation taking his son to a mountain in order to sacrifice him, what would you do? You would stop him, of course.¹ Using any force necessary. Why? Because killing children is wrong. Period. Further, if you had encountered Abraham on the road with Isaac and understood what Abraham intended to do, what would your reaction be? You would stop him, of course. Using any force necessary. Who cares if an angel was planning to abort the sacrifice at

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Alistair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1985), 59.

the last second? Who cares if Isaac's sacrifice is a prefiguration of Jesus' crucifixion? One does not attempt to kill children. Period.

Given the fact that one should not kill children (period), how can we encounter the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac? First, we need to go past the story's events and peer into its inner workings. We need to recognize what the story is *doing* rather than getting hung up on what it is *telling*. This is very difficult: it goes against all our training on how to encounter a story.

In some ways, stories are tools. We use them to give order to our experiences. They can be templates that guide our own lives and actions. For example, perhaps we might hear the story of the Good Samaritan and decide to follow the example of the Samaritan by being more compassionate. Perhaps in our youth we are inspired by a testimony given in sacrament meeting, and then, years later, find ourselves testifying of the same thing. When we find a story that resonates with us, we often use it like a cookie cutter, pressing it onto our lives, watching how it molds the once amorphous lump of our experience into a recognizable shape. This reveals a far more profound way that stories affect us. We think that *we* tell stories, but more often stories tell *us*. This is a strange thing to contemplate; after all, don't stories come out of *our* mouths, through *our* pens, or through *our* keyboards?

The science fiction/fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett once described stories as rivers, flowing through space-time.

Stories etch grooves deep enough for people to follow in the same way that water follows certain paths down a mountainside. And every time fresh actors tread the path of the story, the groove runs deeper.

[...]

So a thousand heroes have stolen fire from the gods. A thousand wolves have eaten grandmother, a thousand princesses have been kissed. A million unknowing actors have moved, unknowing, through the pathways of story.

[...]

Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats.²

I'm a good case in point. I grew up hearing stories about some of my progenitors who had made their careers as writers, editors, and poets. I decided that I wanted to be a writer as well. So I focused my energies: I joined the student newspaper. I became a full-time news reporter. I got an MFA. I wrote articles, essays, and books, and eventually became a magazine editor. The writer story "told" me, just as it had told my great uncle Paul and great aunt May. Certainly their individual stories had different details than mine because of the time and place they lived in, but we have a very similar overall story. And we deliberately let that story tell us—even invited it. Letting a story "tell" you isn't necessarily a bad thing: people with knowledge of their family history tend to be more resilient because they have stories close at hand that they can hitch rides on. "Uncle so-and-so was an engineer; I might have an aptitude for that, too. Grandma was a great organizer; I might do well in business." So, though the first (and usually *only*) thing we see about stories are the events they narrate, their true power lies in what they *do*—which can often be invisible. Let's take a look at the story of Abraham and Isaac again, but instead of focusing on its content, let's focus on what it's *doing*.



According to Kierkegaard, the story of Abraham and Isaac is *deliberately* structured to horrify us. It is trying to break us out of our perceptions of what it means to have a relationship with God. Most of us consider God to be a fatherly figure that blesses us when we are righteous and allows punishment to come upon us when we sin. Mormonism sticks very close to the father metaphor, making God the father of our spirits, a

2. Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad: A Novel of Discworld* (New York: Harper, 1991), 3.

father who presented a plan of salvation for his “children,” who watches over us on Earth as a father might, who wants us to return to live with him. It’s an easily understood and comforting metaphor.

However, Kierkegaard argues that this approach eventually blocks us from being able to enter into a deeper, more direct relationship with God, simply because (as both Christian and Mormon scripture argue) God is beyond our comprehension. As God self-describes in the Book of Moses, “Endless is my name; for I am without beginning of days or end of years” (Moses 1:3). When Moses encounters God, his physical being has to be transfigured in order for him to even survive: “... no man can behold all my glory, and afterwards remain the flesh on the earth,” God explains (Moses 1:5). Indeed, when the glory of God leaves Moses, his physical body collapses for hours, and Moses muses that “man is nothing, which thing I had never supposed” (Moses 1:10). When Satan comes to tempt him, Moses sees through him easily simply because Satan is comprehensible to his mortal mind, “where is thy glory that I should worship thee?” Moses asks. “I can look upon thee in the natural man” (Moses 1:13–14).

If Moses, one of the greatest prophets, had never supposed humanity’s utter nothingness compared to God, what makes us think we have even a whisper of understanding concerning the divine? Our mortal minds and weak language can’t even begin to conceive of or attempt to describe God. God is too vast, too powerful, too ineffable, too complex, too simple, too everything. When we approach God, we are stepping into unexplored territory, the one-millionth part of which we’ll never be able to traverse, much less comprehend, *much* less communicate. What makes us think that a deep relationship with God is epitomized by warm feelings, answered prayers, and a happy life? We are like people living on a sandbar, never even imagining that a continent lies just yards away.

The story of Abraham and Isaac attempts to break us out of our tiny perception by saying something utterly horrifying. “A man of God tried to sacrifice his son.” That sentence should not exist. How can a man of

God contemplate the murder of his child? If we are being honest—if we are not letting our awe of scripture and tradition make us lazy—this is where our perceptions explode. This is where we can start to understand that the story is trying to do something normal stories don't usually do: push us out of itself and into the realm of metaphor. This story is not valuable as a description of a literal occurrence; it's valuable as a story that brings us into an alternate reality teeming with symbols—like saying, “Once upon a time, a woodcutter brought his son and daughter out into the forest and abandoned them there.” The story of Abraham and Isaac is trying to show us what happens when a person becomes deeply connected with God: when a person has stepped off the sandbar and made for the continent; when a person has gone beyond the father/child metaphor; when a person enters what Kierkegaard called a “subjective” relationship with God.

In order to enter a subjective relationship with God, we need to become a subject ourselves: someone fully aware, fully in control, fully oneself, tapped into the deepest roots of our own unique spark. And then we need to bring that wholeness into a relationship with God, holding nothing back. We are a subject, and God is a subject. There is no subject and object. One does not act while the other is acted upon. We become like Nephi, to whom God granted any desire, not because Nephi had become an excellent sock puppet, but because Nephi knew Nephi, Nephi knew God, and God knew Nephi. They had become one.

When one has entered such a state, conventional morality, which had before taken up so much of our bandwidth, falls away. Not because we should no longer live by it, but because it has become miniscule: irrelevant to our relationship with this amazing being. It was helpful as we groped toward God, but now it's like sounding out the letters of a word when we know how to speed-read. As the Waterboys once sang, “That was the river. This is the sea.”

When you enter into a subjective relationship with God, the relationship is between you and God *only*. No one looking at that relationship

from the outside has any basis for judging it. The possibilities that this relationship has opened up are so far beyond human understanding that an outside viewer would have no way of perceiving what was happening anyway. That person would have to enter his or her own subjective relationship with God to get even an inkling, and then he or she would be too caught up in his or her own divine relationship to care anymore.

This is what Abraham's story is pointing us toward: how, when we enter into an intimate relationship with God, we are catapulted beyond good and evil, how human law and rationality suddenly look like pitiful candles in the noonday sun. How we make a quantum leap into a relationship that no eye hath seen nor ear heard nor mind conceived.

At this point, you would be fully justified in saying, with no attempt to hide your incredulity, "You mean that the story of Abraham uses attempted infanticide to symbolize what happens to a person when he or she enters a relationship with God? That's messed up." On one level, I completely agree with you. Using a violent, repulsive act to signify a subjective relationship with God seems very strange, especially if, as many faith traditions maintain, God is love.

But I'm hard pressed to think of an approach that would work better simply because of how stories work. As the narrative theorist Robert McKee has pointed out, conflict is the only thing that can drive a story. If things just get better and better for a character, the character has no reason to strive, no reason to struggle; he or she becomes complacent. If the character is nice to the world and the world is nice back, nothing changes. However, the higher the obstacles mount against a character, the more a character struggles, the more he or she suffers, the more intrigued we get, the more invested we become. Conflict arouses our faculties. Niceness lulls us into complacency.

A good example of this principle is Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Everyone and their dog are fascinated with its first book, *The Inferno*. (Some have even read it.) We hang on every word of Dante's journey through the nine circles of hell and the torments he observes in each.

But less than one percent of those who have encountered *The Inferno* know a single thing about *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Why? Because those two books are full of angels, clouds, and songs. Things just get nicer and nicer—the antithesis of a compelling narrative. So even though our first hope is that a story that could break us out of our complacent relationship with God would be a nice one, it probably can't be so. Only conflict can awaken us. There must needs be opposition in all things.

To recap. The story of Abraham and Isaac is a horrifying one. None of us here endorse Abraham's actions in any way. We would all do our level best to stop him from going up that mountain and would probably vote for locking him away. However, this story is not about its content. It is structured to break us out of conventional thought, much as a *koan* is meant to (e.g., If you meet the Buddha, kill him). It is meant to help us see that a subjective relationship with God is so far outside mortal ken that it cannot be perceived—and especially not judged—from the outside.



It seems to me that the tale of Joseph Smith's polygamy functions as a modern-day Abraham and Isaac story. So many of its events are horrifying; and a man of God commits them. If we caught Joseph Smith on the road to convince a fourteen-year-old girl to marry him, we would do everything in our power to stop him. We would probably even vote to lock him away. Just as with Abraham's story, the shockingness of the tale wants to eject us from the narrative all together, which is why so few Mormons can stay for long in Joseph's story without jumping to one conclusion or another: Joseph was forced into polygamy by an angel and is therefore blameless (Abraham was commanded by God to kill his son and is therefore blameless), or Joseph was an oversexed, manipulative, power-drunk man (Abraham suffered from a psychosis; he believed God was speaking to him when it was really his mental illness). If we

resist using either of these very understandable escape hatches, I think we can find something of the power of this story.

As with Abraham's, Joseph's story is of a man who has entered into a subjective relationship with God and therefore finds himself beyond conventional morality. Abraham was given license to kill. Joseph was given license to marry. But we can't get caught in the content; in a story like this, it's all about the symbolism. When one is in a subjective relationship with God, conventional morality is like sounding out letters when one can speed-read. You've entered a context where the mortal mind and all its structures are far transcended. God is much too big to be confined to neurons and language. That was the river; this is the sea. The story of Joseph Smith's polygamy is another version of the story of Abraham and Isaac. They are similarly structured, and they teach the same principle.

Now is the perfect time to say, "But, Stephen, isn't it obvious that Abraham's story is a myth while Joseph Smith's is historical? Actual people were involved in Joseph's actions. We have *records* of his doings. How can it be profitable to read his story symbolically when it is painfully literal?" In many ways, I think you're right. Joseph's story is thousands of years closer to us than Abraham's and it takes place in a cultural context similar to our own. Some of it may have happened to our own ancestors. Some of us may feel the reverberations of Joseph's actions in our own families.

However, I think the story's proximity is also its strength. As I've said, the story of Abraham and Isaac has been repeated so many times that it has lost much of its shock value. (We tell it to *children*, for Pete's sake.) And with the loss of that shock comes a diluting of the story's potency. However, Joseph Smith's story still hits the gut. We see our own fathers, sisters, wives, husbands, mothers, and brothers in the story. We especially see ourselves. Here is the man we revere as the greatest of all prophets. What would have happened had he approached *us*? And how do we reconcile our reaction to our respect for prophethood? How do

we reconcile our reaction with our own selfhood? Our own subjectivity? We are put in a position of deep conflict, which is where struggle and purification occur. Where a subject begins to get built.

I also think that Joseph's tale has a somewhat more constructive arc than Abraham's does. While Abraham's trajectory leads toward death, Joseph's leads toward life. Joseph wasn't commanded to kill; he was commanded to unite—and, implicitly, to multiply and replenish. His unlawful actions tended toward the creation of life, though they also led toward the destruction of many family relationships. His tale's tendency toward life seems almost like we're getting our wish that the story of a subjective relationship with God be a less violent one. Joseph breaks foundational social rules, many hearts, and many relationships, but it is because he is uniting while Abraham was destroying. We aren't headed toward a sacrificial altar; we're headed toward (let's not mince words or metaphors) a marriage bed.

Joseph's story is also more compelling because he actually *does the deed*. Abraham is stopped before he commits the sacrifice. But Joseph is not. An angel does not step out at the last moment to halt the nuptials. In fact, he seems to be standing behind the couple, wielding a flaming sword (the closest thing an angel has to a shotgun). Abraham gets to go home with a living son, and Joseph gets to go home with a new wife, but also with the hordes of problems that would plague him (and his people) for the rest of his short life.

Joseph's story seems more honest to me. The person who comes into the most intimate relationship with God isn't necessarily the person who is happy and prosperous. We need only consider the story of Jesus to understand that. That's where Joseph's story finally transcends Abraham's. Joseph made the "sacrifice." And the consequences followed. What is it to be in a subjective relationship with God? You find yourself beyond good and evil. You find yourself in a relationship with a being so great, so incomprehensible that no one outside the relationship can understand or judge it. That is its beauty. It is only you and God: an

ultimate connection with everything that was, is, and will be. Including everything and everyone. You are not separate. You are one. You are not gone from existence, life, or relationship: you have become sealed to it all. But that is also its danger. The only thing you're guaranteed from your intimate relationship with God is an intimate relationship with God. Prophets die, sometimes horribly. But if you have that relationship, that's all you need.

At this point, it is tremendously hard not to go back to the *content* of Joseph Smith's polygamy story. It's hard not to say, "Hold on, you're saying that Joseph Smith's subjective relationship with God nullifies all the pain and destruction he caused? All you have to do is say, 'God told me to do it,' and you're off the hook? Are you saying that Joseph Smith had an intimate relationship with God while he was ruining the intimate relationships of so many other people?"

These are totally legitimate questions if the *content* of the story matters. But in this context, the content matters only insofar as it serves to *eject* us from the story. Once it has done its job, the content drops off like the booster rocket from a space shuttle. Joseph's actions propelled us out of the narrative, and now we must leave them in order to explore our own possibilities in the divine.

Yes. If we met Joseph on the road to take a fourteen-year-old wife, we would do all in our power to stop him. The pain resulting from the way he practiced polygamy is real. It will never stop being real. I'm not trying to justify him in any way. I am not arguing that he was allowed to do what he did because he was in a subjective relationship with God. I am talking only about how these two stories *work*. How they symbolize aspects of an intimate relationship with God. The stories are confusing when their *content* takes the spotlight, when we don't see them as pointing to concepts that are galactically foreign to our experience and assumptions. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Probably the most compelling thing about Joseph's theology is his insistence on our radical agency. The agency of a human soul is so complete, so utter, that one-third of God's children could choose Satan over Jehovah *while in the presence of God* (Abraham 3:28). We are the irrevocable creators of our souls. We forge ourselves choice by choice. There is no limit to the heights we can reach or the abysses we can plumb. We can become gods: beings that have penetrated every secret, connected with every soul, experienced every atom. But we are almost always trapped inside nice stories that preach nice morals and bring us to nice endings. But these stories stop significantly short of revealing our potential. We are like people who have never seen the Milky Way because the city lights tower above us. These lights make us think we know the way. They show us paths to known destinations. But that is not what Joseph's theology was about. That is not what Jesus was trying to teach. Sell everything you have, they said. Leave your family. Let the dead bury their dead. Pluck out your eye. (Each a horrifying metaphor.) Stop at *nothing* to reach that god-spark inside of you.



Both of the stories I've talked about have been about men. But there are similarly structured stories involving women. For example, Laura Brown's character in Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (or its luminous film adaptation). And just to let you know: spoiler alert. Laura Brown is a 1950s housewife with a doting husband, a new suburban home in southern California, a beautiful (though intense) little son, and a daughter on the way. But it is evident from the very beginning that Laura is burdened by some malaise, one that becomes so onerous she comes very close to killing herself. But at the end of the movie, we find out that a few months after giving birth, Laura had boarded a bus and gone to Canada, never seeing her family again.

Laura Brown's abandonment of her family is unthinkable to me. "Monstrous," as one character put it. Her actions are so far removed from my experience and thoughts that I cannot imagine what would motivate her to do such a thing. And the story never gives me any help. I've watched the movie at least half a dozen times and have found only one hint as to what might have motivated Laura Brown. At the end of the movie, a much older Laura tells another character, "I had a choice between life and death. I chose life." No particulars, no details, no backstory. We just have to take her word for it. For a long time, I felt that this was a weakness in the story, but now I see it as a strength.

Abraham's story is the same: he has a doting wife, a tent in the sunny desert, and a beautiful son. But he is weighed down by a burden so onerous that he comes very close to killing his son. Why does he try to perform such a monstrous act? The story gives us only one hint: because God commanded it (without giving a reason why). Abraham had to choose between obeying and disobeying the life force of the universe. And he chose to obey it. But he gives us no particulars, no details, no backstory. We just have to take Abraham's word for it. Joseph had to take more wives. Why? Because he was commanded to by an angel with a flaming sword. These stories all have the same structure. My reaction to Abraham's story is the same as my reaction to Laura Brown's and Joseph Smith's. It's unthinkable. But as we have seen, there are many unthinkables strewn throughout the scriptures.

Is it worth sacrificing money to become one with life? Is it worth sacrificing a job, a boat, a car, social status? These stories careen past those banal questions without even a glance. They take us right to the edge of the cliff and push us off. How great is the worth of one soul? So great that Laura Brown left her young family to bring hers into the light. So great that Abraham made his only son into a sacrifice. So great that Joseph Smith broke hundreds of hearts.

Those who have ears, let them hear past these monstrous metaphors and into their structures.

Jesus did not teach the parable of the person who put off becoming one with God until the next life. He did not praise the rich or the successful or the powerful. He didn't even teach kindness or tithing or humility or the Word of Wisdom or modest dress codes: he taught *atonement*. Becoming one with God: something beyond the grasp of every human mind. Something no one has ever been able to capture in any art. Something we can only ever point toward.

In many ways, what “happens” in a story is secondary. Its content is beside the point. What the story *does* is the most powerful thing about it. Most stories want to tell *us*. But there are a few that are structured in such a way that they try to violently eject us from themselves and let us see a symbol of a connection with the indescribable Divine. To let us feel for a moment an inkling of what it's like to be connected with God. The same God who—so long ago, so recently, still—wades deep into matter unorganized and brings forth a brand new story.

GERONTOCRACY AND THE FUTURE OF MORMONISM

Gregory A. Prince, Lester E. Bush, Jr., and
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The sudden and unexpected resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013 broke a centuries-old tradition within Roman Catholicism of service-until-death of its top leader. If, as many expect, Pope Francis I eventually follows Benedict's lead, it is likely that a new and enduring tradition will have been effected.¹ The astounding transformation of the Roman Catholic Church under the younger and energized Francis underscores the importance of Benedict's courageous decision.

Of the major Western religious traditions in the United States, only The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints retains the service-until-death policy for its top leader. For more than a century following its founding in 1830, longevity was such that physical or mental incapacitation were not a significant issue. Medical science was not sufficiently advanced to be able to prolong life once a terminal illness began, and lifespan was not sufficiently long that age-related dementia was significant, if even present. However, advances in medicine have increased lifespan without concomitantly avoiding age-associated medical issues, most notably dementia. This has created a problem for Church leadership since policy holds that members of the Quorum of the Twelve

1. See Alan Holdren and Andrea Gagliarducci, "Full Transcript of Pope's In-Flight Interview from Korea," *Catholic News Agency*, Aug. 18, 2014, <http://www.catholicnews-agency.com/news/full-transcript-of-popes-in-flight-interview-from-korea-96141/>.

and First Presidency (together abbreviated Q15) serve for life² and that upon the death of a sitting Church president his successor is the senior member of the Q15.

Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) was the exception among recent presidents of the LDS Church. In full command of his faculties at age ninety-seven, he paused while writing, by hand, a sermon at his office, noting to his secretary that he was not feeling well. He returned to his apartment earlier than usual, leaving the sermon unfinished, and three days later died peacefully at home. For half-a-century prior to President Hinckley's death, however, the transition from one Church president to the next was often characterized by long periods of decline in the physical and/or mental health of the sitting president; and, upon his death, the succession of a man of increasingly advanced age. Although a gradual shift of administrative oversight from the First Presidency (composed of the president and two assistants) to the Quorum of the Twelve, which began at the death of David O. McKay in 1970, lessened the impact on day-to-day church function of an ailing president, several episodes during the past half-century illustrate the risk of gerontocracy on Church governance. The incapacitation of President Thomas S. Monson (born in 1927), the incumbent president, and the recent controversy over divisive anti-LGBT policies³ engender a discussion of reasons for current LDS governance, insights provided by medical science into future expectations, historical consequences of lengthy periods of presidential incapacitation, and options for alternative outcomes.

2. In the nineteenth century some counselors in the First Presidency were chosen from outside the Quorum of the Twelve and did not have guaranteed lifetime tenure. Since the turn of the twentieth century, all counselors in the First Presidency have remained in the Q15 until death.

3. The current policy, announced in November 2015, calls for excommunication of any Church members who are in legal same-sex marriages, brands them "apostates," and disenfranchises their children from the Church.

Policy of Presidential Succession and Tenure

The assassination of Joseph Smith (1805–1844), founder of Mormonism, created a crisis for the Church. The problem was not that he had given no instructions regarding the means by which his successor should be chosen, but rather that he had given *too many* instructions. Several hints were provided in LDS scripture (Doctrine & Covenants, section 107), but none was dominant over the others:

The residual council of the First Presidency.

The traveling high council (a.k.a. Quorum of the Twelve Apostles).

The combined standing (stake or diocese) high councils.

The Seventy.⁴

In addition, other claims arose from non-scriptural sources:⁵

A counselor in the First Presidency.

A special or secret appointment by Joseph Smith.

The Associate President of the Church.

The Presiding Patriarch.

The Council of Fifty.

A son of Joseph Smith.

Brigham Young (1801–1877), on behalf of the Quorum of the Twelve, prevailed in the minds of the majority of Church members, but significant numbers eventually followed Sidney Rigdon, James Strang, Lyman Wight, Alpheus Cutler, and, most notably, Joseph Smith III, who

4. The Seventy, an office introduced by Smith in 1844, collectively represent the third-highest council in the church, behind the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve.

5. D. Michael Quinn, “The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844,” *BYU Studies* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 187–233.

founded the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ).⁶

For three years following Joseph Smith's death, the Quorum of the Twelve, as a group, governed the church that ultimately settled in Utah. In December 1847, Brigham Young persuaded his fellow quorum members, with difficulty, to reconstitute a First Presidency separate from the Quorum of the Twelve and to designate him as the Church president within the First Presidency. Since he was the senior apostle, his accession to the presidency began a policy observed since that time, albeit by custom rather than scriptural mandate.

While Brigham Young's claim to the presidency derived from his being the senior apostle, and while each subsequent Church president had also been the senior apostle, serious questions as to the permanency of the policy arose periodically for the following half-century. Heber J. Grant, who became Church president in 1918, wrote in his journal on April 5, 1887 that "I do not think it is absolutely necessary that in case of the death of the President of the Church and the subsequent reorganization of the First Presidency that the President of the Twelve Apostles should be made the President of the Church." George Q. Cannon suggested that, even though Brigham Young and John Taylor were presidents of the Twelve before becoming Church presidents, "it did not follow that that principle would be carried out hereafter." And, in 1896, two years before he became Church president, Lorenzo Snow told Quorum of the Twelve members that they "had the right and power to select a First Presidency either in or outside of the Council of the Twelve."⁷

6. See Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration: A History of the Latter Day Saint Movement*, 4th ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Pub House, 2001) and Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer, eds., *Scattering of the Saints: Schism within Mormonism* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2007).

7. Quoted from Gary James Bergera, "Seniority in the Twelve: The 1875 Realignment of Orson Pratt," *Journal of Mormon History* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 54, n. 111.

Although the senior apostle has always become the new president, significant changes in the way the term has been defined have occurred, in each case preventing one or more men who would otherwise have become president from advancing to that position:⁸

Change #1: Date of Ordination. When the Quorum of the Twelve was first constituted in 1835, seniority was determined by chronological age, rather than date of ordination. As vacancies occurred in the quorum, however, date of ordination became the basis of seniority. For example, when Lyman Wight was added to the Twelve in 1841 he was older than any other member of the quorum, but he was listed as the junior member. If the original policy of chronological age had held up, Wight would have been the senior apostle at the time of Joseph Smith's death, and thus the new church president.

Change #2: Uninterrupted Tenure. During the lifetime of Joseph Smith and at a time when membership in the Church or a quorum within it was often terminated for causes that now seem trivial, Orson Hyde and Orson Pratt, two of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve, were excommunicated and dropped from that quorum. A short time later both were re-baptized and reassumed their original positions of seniority in the quorum. In 1875, however, Brigham Young ruled that one clock stopped when they were excommunicated, and a new one started when they were re-baptized. The move dropped each man three positions. If Young had not made the change, both Orson Hyde (d. 1878) and Orson Pratt (d. 1881) would have been Church president.

Change #3: Quorum Membership, not Office of Apostle. Since the Quorum of the Twelve was organized in 1835, nine men have been ordained to the office of apostle at a time when there was no vacancy in the quorum, the most recent being Alvin R. Dyer in 1967. (Brigham Young ordained three of his sons apostles-without-quorum, the youngest being eleven years old, and did so without the knowledge of the Quorum of the Twelve, thus demonstrating the rarely invoked authority of the Church president to operate without consensus—which, as discussed below,

8. Reed C. Durham and Steven H. Heath, *Succession in the Church* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970).

allows an alternative pathway in the future.) Of the nine, four eventually moved into the quorum as vacancies occurred, one of them being Brigham Young Jr. Apparently since the April general conference in 1869, seniority had been determined by the date of ordination to the *office of apostle*, rather than to the date of entrance into the Quorum of the Twelve. There was no written policy governing the issue, and since it had no immediate effect on succession to the presidency it remained unchallenged for three decades.

During the presidency of Lorenzo Snow, the question arose as to who his successor would be. Brigham Young Jr. was ordained an apostle in 1864 but was not added to the Quorum of the Twelve until 1868, whereas Joseph F. Smith was ordained an apostle *and* member of the Quorum of the Twelve in 1867. In a meeting of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve on April 5, 1900, “It was unanimously decided that the acceptance of a member into the council or quorum of the Twelve fixed his rank or position in the Apostleship. That the Apostles took precedence from the date they entered the quorum.”⁹ If the policy had not been changed at that date, Brigham Young Jr. would have been Church president for a year-and-a-half.

In addition to making changes in the definition of apostolic seniority, Church leaders broke from a well-established tradition when, in 1898, they sustained a new Church president immediately upon the death of his predecessor. Previously, following the deaths of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor (1808–1877), governance by the collective Quorum of the Twelve occurred for periods ranging from eighteen months to three years before a new Church president was selected. In contrast to the above-noted changes, which came about by administrative action, this one came through direct revelation, as recounted in the minutes of the meeting at which it was announced: “[The Lord] had shown and revealed to him [Lorenzo Snow, the new

9. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938), 310–11.

Church president] several days ago that the First Presidency should be organized before the next conference.”¹⁰

In summary, the procedure governing succession to the presidency was never scripturally delineated, continued to evolve for over seven decades following the founding of the Church in 1830, and did not assume its current formulation until the turn of the twentieth century. Although there have been no evolutionary steps since the turn of the twentieth century, there is no doctrinal basis for denying the possibility of future changes.

Lifetime tenure, which held for all three of the presiding councils of the Church (First Presidency, Quorum of the Twelve, and First Council of Seventy) for well over a century, is a policy without a scriptural mandate. As will be detailed below, its abandonment for the First Council of Seventy leaves open the door to reconsideration for the other two councils.

Medical Science and Church Governance

For more than a century the policies of apostolic succession to the presidency and lifelong tenure carried little or no downside for the Church. This was largely due to the relatively young age at which nineteenth-century apostles were chosen, which translated to younger Church presidents and the relatively brief interval between onset of terminal illness and death of the president.

The trend since the beginning has been for the age at entry into the Q15 to increase gradually. Taking the entire first century of the Church's existence, the average age of new Q15 members was thirty-six years, while the average age during the second century (1930 to the present) has been fifty-eight years. Despite the increase of twenty-two years, the *total time served* has remained essentially unchanged due to the concomitant increase in average longevity. That is, instead of extending from ages forty

10. Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sept. 13, 1898, 4, <https://cadview.lds.org/findingaid/CR%20100%20137>.

to seventy as in the nineteenth century, service of twentieth-century Q15 members now spans ages sixty to ninety.

If men in their eighties and nineties were as healthy and alert as those in their sixties and seventies, the shifting age of Church leaders would not have much relevance. Unfortunately, the eighties and nineties are notoriously difficult years medically, with the greatest challenge being the “epidemic” of dementia that is now superimposed on the other debilitating ailments of old age. According to one 2007 study, the prevalence—i.e., the proportion in the population—of dementia is about five percent among men ages 71–79, about eighteen percent among men ages 80–89, and over forty-five percent among men age ninety and over.¹¹ For those age ninety and above, the incidence—i.e., new cases each year expressed as a percent of that population—is about thirteen percent per year in those 90–94, about twenty-one percent in those 95–99, and about forty-one percent per year in those 100 and older.¹²

Church leaders have proven just as vulnerable to the challenges of old age—including dementia—as the population in general. About half of those who have reached their nineties since 1950 eventually had some degree of mental incapacitation, which is much more problematic than physical infirmities in terms of discharging leadership responsibilities.

The health challenges facing increasingly aged Q15 members were amplified for Church presidents, for two reasons. First, as the age of entry to the Q15 rose, so did the age of the Church president. That is, the average age of the Church president over two-decade intervals beginning in 1830 rose from forty (1830–49), to seventy (1870–89), to eighty-one (1950–69), to ninety (1990–2009). Second, in addition to assuming office at increasing ages, twentieth- and twenty-first-century Church

11. B. L. Plassman et al., “Prevalence of Dementia in the United States: The Aging, Demographics, and Memory Study,” *Neuroepidemiology* 29 (Nov. 2007):125–32.

12. Maria M. Corrada, et al., “Dementia incidence continues to increase with age in the oldest old: The 90+ study,” *Annals of Neurology* 67 (2010):114–21.

presidents have generally lived to an older age than their nineteenth-century counterparts, in large measure because of advances in medical care that favor physical acuity over mental.

The severity of the medical problems increasingly experienced by Church presidents has been hidden from the general Church membership for as long as possible, and generally quite successfully. Functional limitations have been masked by controlling public appearances, taking advantage of periods of lucidity characteristic of dementia, and ghost-writing talks and editorials based on the president's earlier writings. For familiar themes, teleprompters have allowed those with modest limitations to read talks prepared by others as though they were original. When the limitations are more advanced, such talks have been read by someone else. Prime examples of these strategies come from the late years of David O. McKay's life, when his secretary, Clare Middlemiss, rearranged prior talks or writings and had one of his sons read them in general conference—until, in a family conference, Lawrence, David O.'s oldest son, put his foot down. His rationale was that Church members were getting the inaccurate impression that his father was still capable of writing the talks.¹³

While the Church has shied away from revealing details of a president's health and at times has gone to great lengths to make it appear that a president is functioning at a higher level than reality, the semi-annual general conferences provide a public setting wherein a crucial measure of physical and intellectual function cannot be hidden: speaking from the pulpit. Since at least the end of the nineteenth century, Q15 members have spoken in each general conference unless excused for health reasons or out-of-town assignments, and Church presidents have spoken in multiple sessions at each conference. Conference reports have been

13. For an extended treatment of this issue, see Gregory A. Prince and Wm. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005).

published for every general conference since 1897, allowing tabulation of the best available index of the level of function of Church presidents:

Wilford Woodruff (1807–1898) spoke at every conference prior to his death at age 91;

Lorenzo Snow (1814–1901) missed only one general conference prior to his death at 87;

Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 80;

Heber J. Grant (1856–1945) missed only one conference prior to his death at 88;

George Albert Smith (1870–1951) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 81;

David O. McKay (1873–1970) was unable to speak at the last six conferences prior to his death at 96;

Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 95;

Harold B. Lee (1899–1973) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 74;

Spencer W. Kimball (1895–1985) spoke only once in the last nine conferences prior to his death at 90, and then for less than one minute;

Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994) was unable to speak at the last nine conferences prior to his death at 94;

Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) spoke at every conference prior to his death at 97.

David O. McKay, Spencer W. Kimball, and Ezra Taft Benson missed a combined total of twenty-three conferences, and that this pattern of incapacitation is likely to remain the rule rather than the exception is suggested by focusing on the current president, Thomas S. Monson. His participation in general conferences documents a steady and significant decline in function. After conducting three of the five sessions in the first

three conferences after he became president in early 2008 (as was typical also for previous presidents), he conducted only one session in October 2009, and has not conducted a single session since then. In the October 2014 and prior conferences he spoke at four sessions (also typical for previous presidents), but in April and October 2015 he spoke at only two sessions in each conference, and in the latter he appeared physically distressed during one of his two addresses. While the official position of the Church is that he is “feeling the effects of advancing age,” it is an open secret, if not common knowledge, that he has been suffering from dementia for several years.¹⁴

Consequences of Incapacitated Church Presidents

A power vacuum at the top, caused by the incapacitation of the Church president, can put the entire church at risk of damage that might otherwise be prevented by a competent president. Three examples that occurred since the late years of the McKay presidency demonstrate the point.

Blacks and the Priesthood: In the late 1960s, when David O. McKay was incapacitated sufficiently that the Quorum of the Twelve declared

14. David Noyce, “At 87, Mormon Leader Thomas S. Monson ‘Feeling the Effects’ of His Age, LDS Church Says,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 1, 2015, <http://www.sltrib.com/lifestyle/faith/2465653-155/at-87-mormon-leader-thomas-s> on July 9, 2016. Although Church leaders and public affairs officials have steadfastly declined to go on the record and use the word “dementia” to refer to Monson’s mental state, I (Prince) have had private conversations with several LDS General Authorities over the past half-dozen years in which each has independently and voluntarily described Monson’s condition as dementia. Recently, R. B. Scott published an online article in which he wrote, “More of the day-to-day duties of running the worldwide church fall to the counselors of Thomas S. Monson, the 88-year-old 16th president of the church who has long suffered from diabetes and, more recently, from age-related dementia” (R. B. Scott, “With Rising Lifespans of Mormon Prophets Come Increasing Dementia and Leadership Dilemmas,” *The Muss*, Dec. 15, 2015 (<http://www.themuss.net/articles/2016/1/5/with-rising-lifespans-of-mormon-prophets-come-increasing-dementia-and-leadership-dilemmas-1>), accessed Jul. 9, 2016).

him to be mentally incompetent,¹⁵ a letter written by Sterling McMurrin to McKay's son Llewelyn touched off an internal power struggle that resulted in a deep and damaging rift at the highest level of Church governance. In a private meeting in 1954, McKay had told McMurrin that the century-long exclusion of Blacks from priesthood ordination—a major source of concern to McMurrin—was a policy rather than a doctrine, and that the policy would eventually change. McMurrin had considered the conversation private and had not publicized it, and McKay had not discussed the policy/doctrine issue with any of the Q15. McMurrin's letter to Llewelyn, which was intended to memorialize the incident for the benefit of McKay's family, was shared by the family with two of McKay's counselors in the First Presidency, Hugh B. Brown and Alvin R. Dyer.

When Brown learned that President McKay considered the matter policy rather than doctrine and anticipated that it would change one day, he attempted to change it administratively, not realizing (since McKay had not broached the subject with him) that McKay would not change the policy without first receiving a supporting revelation—something that he repeatedly sought but never received. Dyer, seeing that Brown was attempting to change the policy by administrative action, secured the support of Elder Harold B. Lee, the presumptive *de facto* successor to McKay since Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, already well into his nineties, was already suffering age-related health issues. Lee and Brown clashed privately, and because Lee was significantly more senior in the Q15 than Brown (despite Brown's being in the First Presidency), Lee prevailed and obliged Brown to sign a First Presidency letter that he, Lee, had drafted (absent McKay's signature due to his incapacitation), which reinforced the *status quo* of the policy on ordination.

15. "Minutes by President Alvin R. Dyer of Meeting of First Presidency," Nov. 12, 1969, in David O. McKay diaries of the same date.

McKay died only weeks after the letter was publicized.¹⁶ The general Church membership was not aware of the clash that had occurred in the backdrop of the letter, largely because the policy's *status quo* had been maintained, and few realized that it was the cause of Brown's release from the First Presidency as soon as McKay died—the first time since the death of Brigham Young a century earlier that a counselor in the First Presidency was not retained by a new Church president. Brown was devastated by the release, and while it occurred after McKay's death, the real damage happened at a time when McKay lacked the capacity to prevent it.

The History Division and the Intellectuals: One outcome of a general reorganization of the Church bureaucracy in the early 1970s was the creation of the History Division directed by Leonard Arrington, the only professional historian ever to have the title of Church Historian. The new prospect of professional historians writing the sacred history was deeply challenging to some, most notably senior apostles Ezra Taft Benson (who would become Church president) and Mark Petersen. The two men, with an occasional assist from junior apostle Boyd K. Packer, worked behind the scenes to dismantle the History Division, despite the fact that Church president Spencer W. Kimball expressed support and appreciation for Arrington and his franchise. As a series of cranial surgeries greatly reduced his vitality, President Kimball's ability to counteract the push from Elders Benson, Petersen and Packer to dismantle the organization diminished. Arrington was eventually relieved of his title as Church Historian and the History Division was dissolved.

Emboldened by the dissolution of the History Division, Elder Petersen moved to tamp down activities of LDS intellectuals across a broader front. In 1983, acting independently at a time when Kimball was

16. The First Presidency Circular Letter was dated December 15, 1969 and was widely read from the pulpit by bishops and branch presidents. For a detailed account of this episode, see Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism*, chapter 4.

essentially not functioning either physically or mentally, Elder Petersen drew up a list of Church members—including Arrington—who had published historical articles in the independent publications *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Sunstone*, and *Seventh East Press*. He then called the stake presidents of the authors, spoke “very harshly” about their publications, and instructed them to meet with them and “take some appropriate action.”¹⁷ When Gordon B. Hinckley heard about Peterson conducting what was then being termed the “witch-hunt,” he said that the apostle had been acting on his own and that he, Hinckley, had known nothing about it. Soon after, Hinckley apparently brought it to an abrupt end, but not before considerable damage had been done.¹⁸

The September Six: In the fall of 1993, when Church president Ezra Taft Benson was totally incapacitated, senior apostle Boyd K. Packer initiated disciplinary actions against a small group of LDS intellectuals, similar in nature to Petersen’s action a decade earlier. This time, however, instead of the nebulous instruction to “take some appropriate action,” the mandate was the more serious measure of excommunication. Within the space of a few weeks, six people were brought before Church disciplinary councils and charged with apostasy or “conduct unbecoming a member.” Five were excommunicated and a sixth received the lesser penalty of disfellowshipment. Collectively they became known as the September Six.

Although disciplinary councils are purported to be local matters initiated by local leaders, apostles confided to Steve Benson, Ezra Taft’s grandson and a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist for the

17. Lester E. Bush Jr., “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview’ (1973): Context and Reflections, 1998,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 267.

18. Fletcher conveyed this information to Lester Bush, who in turn reported it to me (Prince). It is recorded in my diary under the date of May 18, 1983. For a more detailed account, see Gregory A. Prince, *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), chapter 27.

Arizona Republic, that Packer had initiated them.¹⁹ Benson went public with the information, which was published broadly in newspapers, and subsequently resigned his Church membership in large part because of the duplicity he had witnessed. The adverse action taken against the September Six sent a chill through the LDS intellectual community that continues to have negative consequences over two decades later.

Options for the Future

A starting point for exploring options for changing the LDS Church's succession policy is to examine the history of three other religious traditions that, until recent decades, had lifelong tenure—including hierarchical power—for the top church leader: the Episcopal Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ). The Episcopal Church paralleled the LDS Church in elevating the next-senior officer upon the death of the top leader, while the Roman Catholic and RLDS churches employed selection processes that did not rely on institutional seniority.

The Episcopal Church abandoned both lifetime tenure and seniority succession in 1926, with the result that the average age-at-succession of its Presiding Bishop dropped from 70.3 years prior to 1926, to 59.0 years since 1926.

Next to abandon lifelong tenure was the RLDS Church. Departing from a tradition that had been observed since the founding of the church in 1860, President W. Wallace Smith announced to the World Conference in 1976 that at the subsequent conference in 1978 he would step down and his son, Wallace B. Smith, would be his successor. The transition was seamless, and the tradition of self-retirement has been

19. Vern Anderson, "Cartoonist Says Oaks Lied to Protect Fellow Apostle," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 12, 1993, B-1 and B-2.

perpetuated by Wallace B. Smith (1996) and his successor, W. Grant McMurray (2004).

In February 2013, Pope Benedict XVI stunned the world by announcing his voluntary retirement—which occurred later the same month—thus becoming the first Roman Catholic Pope in over seven centuries to step down voluntarily. His successor, Francis I, seemingly suffered no sense of crisis of legitimacy among the world’s one billion Roman Catholics, and he stunned them and non-Catholics by moving quickly to restore to Roman Catholicism the moral authority that had declined greatly in the face of decades of scandal. If Pope Francis follows the example of Pope Benedict and voluntarily retires, it is likely that a tradition of limited tenure will become the rule for the Roman Catholic Church—and will leave the LDS Church as the only significant church in the United States with lifelong tenure for its top leader.

Three questions face the LDS Church if it is to move away from the current system of gerontocracy. First, would a change in the mode of succession, with the senior surviving member of the Q15 becoming the new Church president, be required? Second, is there a doctrinal, immutable mandate for lifelong tenure for the Q15? And finally, if not, is there a viable alternative?

To the first question, the answer is that apostolic succession, while not the only possibility prescribed by Joseph Smith, has worked well—if one overlooks the detrimental effects of gerontocracy that can be addressed through other reforms. Successors to the presidency since the death of Brigham Young in 1877 have served an average of 41 years in the Q15 by the time they became Church president, and while it is obvious that service in that group prepares one to become president, four decades of such service places the new incumbent in an age bracket laden with medical challenges.

To the second question, the answer is an unequivocal no. Service until death is a tradition but not a scripturally-based doctrine. Although the tradition has remained in place for nearly two centuries for the Q15, it was abandoned after nearly a century-and-a-half for the next-ranking governing council in the Church.

And to the third question, the answer already exists in a reform introduced four decades ago. In the mid-1960s the idea of placing General Authorities on emeritus status first began to be discussed within inner circles. The First Council of Seventy, acting under the direction of David O. McKay, reviewed the office of Seventy and the function of the First Council of Seventy (on a general level) and the various Quorums of Seventy (on a local level). McKay asked them to produce written recommendations for change, but with the caveat that all such recommendations reflect the unanimous sentiment of the council. Early in their deliberations, they discussed the possibility of abandoning lifetime tenure by granting council members emeritus status at a specified age. One council member, Elder Paul Dunn, reported, "When we first brought it up in that first meeting, one of the brethren went right through the roof to the steeple. And so, because we couldn't agree, that was left out of that first paper."²⁰

McKay's successors Joseph Fielding Smith (1970–72) and Harold B. Lee (1972–73) asked the First Council of Seventy to continue the evaluation and recommendation process, but each time the council was unable to achieve unanimous consent for emeritus status. By the time Spencer Kimball (1973–85) asked the council to go back a fourth time, the holdout on emeritus status had died, thus clearing the way for what was implemented on September 30, 1978, and has been the policy for the First Quorum of Seventy ever since.²¹ Though never announced publicly, the age for emeritus status has been seventy years.²²

20. Paul H. Dunn, interviewed by Gregory A. Prince on February 18, 1995.

21. The First Quorum of Seventy had been formed in 1835 but was discontinued in the late 1830s, with the First Council of Seventy (consisting of seven men) being retained and having General Authority status. In 1975 Church president Spencer W. Kimball reconstituted the First Quorum of Seventy and gave it General Authority status.

22. Emeritus status was also granted in 1979 to Eldred G. Smith when his office of Presiding Patriarch was discontinued, and in 2012 to two members of the Presiding Bishopric. None of the three men ever held a position within the Q15.

When asked if emeritus had been suggested for members of the Q15, Elder Dunn said that such a suggestion had been above the pay grade of his council, but that they had certainly opened the door if the Q15 had wished to walk through. In fact, Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency did propose to the Q15 emeritus status for apostles, although not the Church president. Brown's grandson, Edwin Firmage, recalled:

He concluded that there needed to be an emeritus system, that age would take its toll, whether the person was a prophet or not, they were still humans, and age could take its toll. There should be a system of removing people from sort of lock-step advancement to the presidency. So, he proposed an emeritus system. It was later adopted, but only in part, a far lesser part. There is one now that has come directly from grandfather's proposal, but they excluded the Quorum and that was the whole matter of concern to grandfather. . . . He proposed it and he deliberately placed it, thinking he could tempt a few votes of people who weren't terribly fond of him, by putting himself the first victim of the new process. He would have emeritized himself out of the Quorum. . . . He was chagrined when it was turned down. He smiled at me in kind of a half-hearted way and said, "I thought I could sweeten this up by making myself the first victim, but it didn't go."²³

Given the absence of a scriptural mandate for lifelong tenure, along with the abandonment of such tenure for one of the leading councils of the Church, the door remains open for the Q15. To address the medical problems coincident with advanced age, a new policy would need to set age limits for service in the Q15 so that new Church presidents would not begin their terms in their ninth or tenth decades of life; and for the Church president himself, so that the end-of-life medical issues that have had an adverse effect on the majority of presidents since the middle of the twentieth century could be avoided. A plausible scenario would be to adapt the precedent of the First Quorum of Seventy and place Q15 members (aside from the Church president) on emeritus status at age

23. Edwin B. Firmage, interviewed by Greg Prince on October 10, 1996.

seventy-five, and Church presidents at age eighty-five. In cases where health issues arose before the stated age, medical emeritus status could be granted (as is already the case with the First Quorum of Seventy).

How might such a change be implemented? Given that the change would remove from many members of the Q15 the possibility of becoming Church president, the change likely would need to occur in the same manner as in the Roman Catholic Church and the RLDS Church, where the top leader, while still in undisputable command of his faculties, announced the change publicly. While the LDS Church generally works by consensus among the Q15, there are precedents for unilateral action by the Church president, which in some instances caught the entire Quorum of the Twelve by surprise. Given the special deference of LDS laity and hierarchy to the prerogatives of the Church president, a pronouncement from the top, even of this magnitude, would likely be received with joy—and with increased hope for the future of the Church.



Leslie O. Peterson
Patty Sessions
8x10 watercolor on paper

THE SOURCE OF GOD'S AUTHORITY: ONE ARGUMENT FOR AN UNAMBIGUOUS DOCTRINE OF PREEXISTENCE

Roger Terry

The famous couplet coined by Lorenzo Snow in 1840, “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be,”¹ rears its head every now and then, inspiring both awe and some confusion among rank-and-file Latter-day Saints while causing at least a degree of discomfort for Church leaders and spokespeople who are trying to make Mormonism more palatable for our mainstream Christian friends and critics. Some observers have even suggested that the Church is intentionally downplaying this doctrine.² Nevertheless, the couplet found its way into the 2013 Melchizedek Priesthood/Relief Society manual *Teaching of Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow*, and this distinctive doctrine also appeared prominently in previous manuals containing the teachings of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith.³

1. In Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), 46; see also “The Grand Destiny of Man,” *Deseret Evening News*, Jul. 20, 1901, 22.

2. See, for instance, Armand Mauss, “Rethinking Retrenchment: Course Corrections in the Ongoing Campaign for Respectability,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 4 (2011): 6–7.

3. See *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012), 83; *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 30; *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 40.

So, what are we to make of this theological nugget, this idea that God was once a mortal man going through similar experiences to ours, who overcame through faith and obedience and, presumably, the assistance of his own deified Father? Should we assume, as President Gordon B. Hinckley was reported to have said, that Lorenzo Snow's couplet "gets into some pretty deep theology that we don't know very much about"?⁴

I would suggest that although our understanding of the particulars of the premortal existence is certainly meager, this radical doctrine is not something we should downplay.⁵ In fact, I would argue that without this doctrine, the boundary between Mormonism and mainstream Christianity blurs in certain ways, because it has inescapable ramifications not only for how we understand our own eternal nature and potential, but also how we view our relationship with God, including the question of why and how he is able to exercise authority over us. In short, this doctrine is perhaps the most distinctively "Mormon" of all our doctrines and is something we should neither gloss over nor disavow in any way. This tenet is not just an afterthought to Joseph Smith's other teachings; it is, in a fundamental way, the culmination of what he was trying to teach the Saints in Nauvoo, and if we were to fully embrace this doctrine, it might, among other things, revolutionize the way we understand and exercise authority in the Church. Before we can do this, however, we need to clear up some theological loose ends. So let me set the table with some necessary doctrinal history.

A Selective History of the Doctrine of Preexistence

In a 2013 *BYU Studies Quarterly* article, Samuel Brown argued that adoption is a theology that, among other things, differs from the doctrine of spirit birth that has prevailed in the Church since shortly *after* the death

4. Don Lattin, "Sunday Interview—Musings of the Main Mormon," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Apr. 13, 1997, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/SUNDAY-INTERVIEW-Musings-of-the-Main-Mormon-2846138.php>.

5. See Gordon B. Hinckley, quoted in Van Biema, "Kingdom Come," *Time*, Aug. 4, 1997, 56.

of Joseph Smith.⁶ Before I began editing Brown's essay, I spent some time reacquainting myself with the history of this doctrine. What I learned reinforced for me just how crucial our view of the premortal experience is and how important it is to examine the ramifications of certain beliefs, some of which remain very much unsettled.

The doctrine of spirit birth plays an integral role in the development of the more encompassing doctrine of preexistence. Blake Ostler recounts a portion of this doctrinal history in a 1982 *Dialogue* article,⁷ as does Charles Harrell in a 1988 *BYU Studies* article⁸ and in his more recent *"This Is My Doctrine": The Development of Mormon Theology*.⁹ Ostler and Harrell begin with early Mormonism (roughly 1830–1835) when Latter-day Saints accepted the Catholic/Protestant idea of an infinite and absolute God and perhaps had no well-developed concept yet of an actual premortal existence of humanity. It has been argued that the spiritual creation mentioned in what is now the Book of Moses¹⁰ was understood by early Mormons to involve a strictly conceptual creation rather than an actual creation of all things, including men and women, in spirit form. Ostler presents this argument,¹¹ for instance, but Harrell contends that "no record from the early era of the Church offers any evidence that this spiritual creation was ever viewed in any way other than as a spirit

6. Samuel M. Brown, "Believing Adoption," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2013): 45–65.

7. Blake T. Ostler, "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (1982): 59–78. Thomas G. Alexander also offers this argument in "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine from Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 5 (Jul.–Aug. 1980): 33, n. 23.

8. Charles Harrell, "The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844," *BYU Studies* 28, no. 2 (1988): 75–96.

9. See Charles R. Harrell, *"This Is My Doctrine": The Development of Mormon Theology* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), chapter 11.

10. See Moses 3:1–7; 5:24; 6:36, 51, 59, 63.

11. Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 61.

creation.”¹² Although we may not be able to discern exactly how early Latter-day Saints understood the concept of “spiritual creation,” we do know that Joseph Smith introduced the idea of uncreated intelligence in 1833 with the revelation that is now Doctrine and Covenants 93,¹³ but at that time the word *intelligence* was understood differently than Mormons today interpret the scriptural text. The notion of uncreated intelligence was understood to mean a general knowledge or awareness and not a personal preexistent spirit or unembodied but self-aware entity.¹⁴ Contemporary Latter-day Saints have been guilty of superimposing their current definition of terms on earlier statements, which creates problems in understanding what those early Latter-day Saints actually believed.

In 1839, Joseph Smith publicly rejected the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and introduced the idea that each individual’s spirit was not created and has always existed.¹⁵ This teaching appears on several different

12. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 80.

13. D&C 93:24 states, “Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.”

14. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 82–83. Harrell quotes Parley P. Pratt and Thomas Ward to support the notion that the early Saints did not understand *intelligence* to mean a “personal preexistent spirit.”

15. Ostler, “Idea of Pre-Existence,” 61. See also Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 85. It should be noted that Joseph Smith’s understanding of the premortal existence of the human race and related concepts evolved and expanded over time. To try to harmonize all of his statements and even his revelations on the subject is probably impossible. Consequently, his later statements deserve more attention than his earlier statements. For example, Moses 6:36, revealed in June 1830, speaks of “spirits that God had created.” Likewise, Moses 3:5 refers to “the children of men” and that “in heaven I created them.” But in 1839, Joseph began teaching the doctrine of uncreated spirits: “The Spirit of Man is not a created being; it existed from Eternity & will exist to eternity. Anything created cannot be Eternal” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* [Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991], 9, quoting the Aug. 8, 1839, entry in Willard Richards Pocket Companion). In February 1840, he taught, “I believe that the *soul* is eternal; and had no beginning” (Ehat

occasions,¹⁶ and again what Joseph meant exactly with the term *spirit* is subject to debate, but he did use the term *soul* twice in describing the eternal existence of human beings, suggesting something more than a form of nonsentient intelligence. B. H. Roberts, for instance, insisted that Joseph was referring only to the mind or intelligence of man, not to the spirit body,¹⁷ but Joseph could very well have been referring to the spirit as an embodied form.

In 1842, Joseph began teaching that spirit is matter.¹⁸ He expanded the idea of uncreated, eternal spirits and their relationship to God until his death in 1844. In the so-called King Follett discourse, for example, Joseph taught that God found “himself in the midst of spirit and glory [and] because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the

and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 33, quoting Matthew Livingston Davis, a journalist who reported a speech Joseph gave on Feb. 5, 1840). It is difficult to reconcile these statements.

16. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 85, gives quotations from Joseph Smith in Aug. 1839, Feb. 1840, Jan. 1841, Mar. 1841, Apr. 1842, and Apr. 1844 to support this doctrinal innovation.

17. See Roberts’s footnote to his amalgamated version of Joseph’s King Follett discourse, recorded in Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:311 (hereafter cited as *History of the Church*).

18. “In tracing the thing to the foundation, and looking at it philosophically we shall find a very material difference between the body and the spirit:—the body is supposed to be organized matter, and the spirit by many is thought to be immaterial, without substance. With this latter statement we should beg leave to differ—and state that spirit is a substance; that it is material, but that it is more pure, elastic, and refined matter than the body;—that it existed before the body, can exist in the body, and will exist separate from the body, when the body will be mouldering in the dust; and will in the resurrection be again united with it” (Joseph Smith Jr., “Try the Spirits,” *Times and Seasons* 3 [Apr. 1, 1842]: 745). See also Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 84. On May 17, 1843, Joseph taught this doctrine at Ramus, Illinois; his words as recorded by William Clayton were later canonized as D&C 131:7.

rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”¹⁹ If the record is an accurate reflection of what Joseph taught,²⁰ it appears he understood that God did not “create” his spirit children, but *found* them and entered into a covenant relationship with them. This is consistent with the Book of Abraham, which explains that God “came down in the beginning in the midst of all the intelligences” that Abraham was shown (Abraham 3:21). Two comments on this statement: First, if neither God nor the human race has a beginning, what is this beginning Abraham talks about, which is also mentioned in D&C 93:29 (“Man was also in the beginning with God”)? It must be the beginning of our association with our Father. If we accept the notion that God was once as we are, we also must accept the idea that he was not always God and that he was therefore not always our Father, which means our relationship with him had to have a beginning. Second, Joseph seemed to use the terms *intelligence*, *spirit*, and *soul* interchangeably at times. Two verses later in Abraham’s record, referring to the “intelligences” mentioned in verse 21, the account states that “God saw these *souls*”²¹ that they were good” (emphasis mine), so he likely wasn’t seeing what modern-day Mormons would consider “intelligences,” namely, some sort of self-aware prespirit entities, because this concept, as I discuss below, did not develop until many years after Joseph’s death.

In all of Joseph’s teachings about the eternal nature of God and his children, there is no mention of exactly how they are related. Harrell and

19. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 360, quoting William Clayton’s transcript.

20. The King Follett discourse is generally quoted from one of two amalgamated texts, one produced by B. H. Roberts for *History of the Church*, and a more recent amalgamation by Stan Larson, published in *BYU Studies* in vol. 18, no. 2 (1978). These amalgamations are attempts to weave a coherent thread of oratory from four different sets of notes, all taken in longhand. The quotation here is taken from William Clayton’s account, not from an amalgamated text, but since it is a longhand transcript, it may not represent exactly what Joseph said.

21. Obviously, Joseph didn’t mean by “souls” our current understanding, which is body and spirit welded together (see D&C 88:15).

Ostler agree that there is no record of Joseph introducing the idea of a literal spirit birth, although Harrell argues that “Joseph Smith must be credited with having provided the impetus that led to an awareness of spirit birth.”²² Terryl Givens goes a step further, suggesting that Joseph must have given his close associates reason to believe not only that spirits are eternal but also that something such as spirit birth occurs. For instance, “William Clayton . . . recorded Smith as teaching that marriages which persist in the eternities will include the power to ‘have children in the celestial glory,’ implying that we may have been created by a comparable process. . . . Other evidence, however, suggests that Smith considered spirit and intelligence to be synonymous concepts, referring to an eternally existent entity.”²³ If he had lived a year or two longer, he may have resolved this uncertainty, but we have no way of knowing which path Joseph’s thought may have taken. After his demise, though, his followers began openly developing the doctrine of spirit birth. According to Brown,

By 1845, several Church leaders were arguing publicly that Joseph Smith’s divine anthropology required a birth from prespirit into spirit, a transition graphically patterned on the process of gestation and parturition familiar from human biology. There is a relentless, albeit asymmetrical, logic in this attempt to describe the internal workings of the system Joseph Smith had revealed only in broad contours. . . . They could as easily have chosen the spiritual rebirth of conversion and baptism, or the covenantal fatherhood proclaimed by King Benjamin, or the rebirth of resurrection as the exemplar for the process of premortal birth, but they chose mortal parenthood as their reference point.²⁴

22. Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 91.

23. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 156.

24. Brown, “Believing Adoption,” 49.

Givens traces the first printed mention of a Heavenly Mother to an 1844 letter of W. W. Phelps to William Smith.²⁵ “He followed that exposition several months later with a hymn sung at the December 1844 dedication of the Nauvoo Seventies Hall, which announced ‘Here’s our Father in heaven, and Mother, the Queen.’”²⁶ Later that year Eliza R. Snow, one of Joseph’s plural wives, published her poem that is now the popular hymn “O My Father.”²⁷ But the existence of a Heavenly Mother requires spirit birth no more than the existence of a Heavenly Father does. References to a metaphorical parenthood and birth abound in scripture.²⁸ Still, from the Pratt brothers, George Q. Cannon, Erastus Snow, and others, the doctrine of spirit birth began to seep into public discourse.²⁹

25. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 108–9, quoting W. W. Phelps, “The Answer,” [to William Smith], *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 24 (Jan. 1, 1844): 758.

26. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 109, quoting a report in *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 2 (Feb. 1, 1845): 794.

27. First published in *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 17 (Nov. 15, 1845): 1039.

28. In scripture, as elsewhere, *birth* is often used in a metaphorical and not a literal sense. Being “born of the Spirit” (Mosiah 27:24) or “born of God” (Mosiah 27:25) or “spiritually begotten” (Mosiah 5:7) or “born again” (John 3:3) or “born of water and of the Spirit” (John 3:5) are all metaphorical terms. We “become [Christ’s] sons and . . . daughters” not through any sort of physical birth process but by covenant and adoption. Is it possible that our premortal relationship with God was similar to this? I would not be offended if this were the case. Some would argue that the phrase “bear the souls of men” (D&C 132:63) in the context of plural marriage refers to women bearing spirit children in the celestial kingdom. It has also been used as evidence for the existence of a Heavenly Mother. But as Givens explains, the interpretation of this verse is far from settled: “The syntax of the sentence makes the meaning a little ambiguous. . . . Whether the bearing refers to replenishing *this earth*, or an activity ‘*in the eternal worlds*’ is unclear” (Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 108). Likewise, a phrase in an earlier verse, “continuation of the seeds forever and ever” (D&C 132:19), has been understood by some as proof of spirit birth. But *seed* is already a metaphor when used regarding human conception. Why could it not be metaphorical in a spiritual context also?

29. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 110.

Ostler indicates that after Joseph's death Brigham Young and Orson Pratt, who disagreed on the basic nature of God and humans, both nevertheless adopted the idea of a literal spirit birth.³⁰ Although others promoted the idea of spirit birth,³¹ Young and Pratt were its two most influential early proponents. Young preferred the idea that personal identity was created at the organization of the spirit body and that intelligence was a raw material of sorts, without self-awareness or agency or accountability.³² Pratt's theory, by contrast, involved "particles" that were eternal, self-aware, and capable of being governed by laws. They were organized at spirit birth into a new configuration that required them to act, feel, and think in union (as a spirit body).³³ Both Young and Pratt agreed, however, that neither God

30. See Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 64–65.

31. For example, Lorenzo Snow had speculated on the doctrine as early as 1842. Lorenzo Snow to Elder Walker, Feb. 14, 1842, Lorenzo Snow Notebook 1841–1842, MS 2737, pp. 75–77, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. William W. Phelps had also written the notion into a hymn published several months after Joseph Smith's death. William W. Phelps, "Come to Me," *Times and Seasons* 6 (Jan. 15, 1845): 783.

32. See discussion in Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 66. For examples of Brigham Young's teachings, see *Journal of Discourses*, 2:135 ("The origin of thought was planted in our organization at the beginning of our being"); 6:31 ("What is the mind? It is that character that was made and fashioned after the image of God before these bodies were made"); 7:285 ("The life that is within us is a part of an eternity of life and is organized spirit, which is clothed upon by tabernacles"); 8:205 ("God is the source of all intelligence, no matter who possesses it, whether man upon the earth, the spirits in the spirit-world, the angels that dwell in the eternities of the Gods, or the most inferior intelligence among the devils in hell").

33. See discussion in Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 64–65. Pratt taught that "each particle eternally existed prior to its organization; each was enabled to perceive its own existence; each had the power of self-motion" (Orson Pratt, *The Seer* [Washington, D.C., 1853], 102). These particle entities would be "organized in the womb of the celestial female" and become thereby individual spirit bodies. "The particles that enter into the organization of the infant spirit are placed in a new sphere of action . . . [and] can no longer act, or feel, or think

nor his children existed as autonomous, self-aware individuals until after they had been organized through the process of spirit birth.

In 1884, after the deaths of Young and Pratt, Charles Penrose promoted a theory somewhat similar to Orson Pratt's, endorsing again the idea that only "in the elementary particles of His organism" did God have no beginning and that "there must have been a time when [God] was organized."³⁴ In 1907, B. H. Roberts published the idea that before spirit birth we existed as individualized "intelligences" that were then given spirit bodies through a process similar to mortal conception, gestation, and birth.³⁵ Whether this idea is original to Roberts is uncertain, perhaps even doubtful. As Jim Faulconer has pointed out,³⁶ in 1895, Brigham Young Academy instructor Nels L. Nelson published an article in *The Contributor* in which he proposed three components in man: the ego, the spirit body, and the physical body. Defining the first component, Nelson wrote: "The ego [is] that in us which enables us to say: 'This is I, and this is the universe.' This principle is co-eternal with God. It never had a beginning nor can it ever have an end. It might appropriately be called the mind of the spirit."³⁷ This notion of an uncreated ego, he claimed, was the only way he could see to harmonize Joseph Smith's teachings that the spirit is uncreated and yet is born of Heavenly Parents. Roberts had certainly read Nelson's article, for he mentioned both "Prof. Nelson" and the "ego" in

as independent individuals, but the law to control them in their new sphere requires them to act, and feel, and think in union" (Pratt, *The Seer*, 103).

34. Charles Penrose, Nov. 16, 1884, *Journal of Discourses*, 26:23.

35. B. H. Roberts, "Immortality of Man," *Improvement Era* 10, no. 6 (Apr. 1907): 406–7, <https://archive.org/stream/improvementera106unse#page/408/mode/2up>.

36. James Faulconer, "The Mormon Understanding of Persons . . . and God," *Speaking Silence* (blog), Aug. 17, 2011, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Mormon-Understanding-of-Persons-and-God-James-Faulconer-08-18-2011?offset=1&max=1>.

37. Nels L. Nelson, "Theosophy and Mormonism," *The Contributor* 16, no. 12 (1895): 736.

his own 1907 article,³⁸ but he expanded upon this reasoning and perhaps adopted the terminology of Smith's King Follett discourse, renaming this uncreated component the "intelligence," a self-aware prespirit entity. Roberts was not alone in promoting this theory. In the draft of his 1914 *Rational Theology* that was submitted for approval to the First Presidency, John A. Widtsoe promoted ideas similar to Roberts's.³⁹

Significantly, Roberts's explanation of premortality was rejected by the First Presidency, as was Widtsoe's, and the relevant text was deleted from *Rational Theology* before it was published. Roberts's magnum opus, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, in which he outlined his view of a two-tiered premortality, was not published until sixty-one years after his death (jointly by BYU Studies and Deseret Book, followed the next year by a Signature Books edition). But because of the inherent appeal of the idea of sentient prespirit intelligences, over time it gained ascendancy and is now probably the most common understanding of the premortal existence held among Latter-day Saints.⁴⁰

Bruce R. McConkie and others, however, promoted a neoorthodox view more similar to Brigham Young's, insisting that men and women

38. Roberts, "Immortality of Man," 407, 408.

39. See discussion in Alexander, "Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 30–31. See also John A. Widtsoe, *Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: General Priesthood Committee, 1915), 26–27, 64–66, 146, for the published version of Widtsoe's ideas.

40. "In spite of such cautionary statements [as made by Joseph Fielding Smith], numerous Mormon writers have assumed personal eternalism to be Mormonism's official doctrine at least since 1940" (Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 72). In the April general conference of 2015, Elder D. Todd Christofferson gave this doctrine a semi-official stamp of approval by presenting it as if it were a settled matter: "Prophets have revealed that we first existed as intelligences and that we were given form, or spirit bodies, by God, thus becoming His spirit children" (D. Todd Christofferson, "Why Marriage, Why Family," *Ensign*, May 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-why-family?lang=eng&r=1>).

did not exist as conscious entities before spirit birth.⁴¹ The Church has never weighed in with an official stance on this disagreement over our prespirit status, and so a degree of ambiguity reigns at this fundamental level of LDS theology. The one constant, however, from 1845 to the present—appearing in the theories of Pratt, Young, Penrose, Nelson, Roberts, McConkie, and many others—is the idea that we are begotten by our Heavenly Father and given birth by a Heavenly Mother in a process similar to human conception, gestation, and parturition.

Ironically, it may have been Charles Darwin who indirectly cemented spirit birth's place in the Mormon doctrine of premortality.⁴² Five years after Young's death, Orson Whitney argued against Darwin's theory of evolution, which presented challenges to Christian theology in general, by employing the notion of spirit birth in his defense of the biblical account of earth's (and man's) creation: "Man is the direct offspring of Deity, of a being who is the Begetter of his spirit in the eternal worlds, and the Architect of his mortal tabernacle in this. . . . For man is the child of God, fashioned in His image and endowed with His attributes, and even as the infant son of an earthly father is capable in due time of becoming a man, so the undeveloped offspring of celestial parentage is capable in due time of becoming a God."⁴³

Twenty-seven years later, in November 1909, in the wake of a Brigham Young University centennial celebration of the birth of Charles Darwin and troubling statements in support of Darwin by faculty member Ralph

41. Ostler, "Idea of Pre-Existence," 72. See, for instance, Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 387 ("The intelligence or spirit element became intelligences after the spirits were born as individual entities"). See also Alexander, "Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine," 32.

42. Credit for this insight goes to a blogger using the pseudonym "aquinas," who wishes to remain anonymous and has since removed all of the relevant posts from the internet.

43. Orson F. Whitney, "Man's Origin and Destiny," *Contributor* 3, no. 9 (Jun. 1882), 269–70.

Chamberlin and others, the First Presidency issued a document (“The Origin of Man”) drafted by Orson Whitney and based largely on his 1882 article. This document included the following:

The Father of Jesus is our Father also. . . . Jesus, however, is the firstborn among all the sons of God—the first begotten in the spirit, and the only begotten in the flesh. He is our elder brother, and we, like Him, are in the image of God. All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity. . . . The doctrine of the pre-existence . . . shows that man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality.⁴⁴

This doctrinal exposition effectively established spirit birth as the official doctrine of the Church regarding our premortal relationship with our Father in Heaven. As evidence of how influential this exposition still is, over a hundred years after its publication, “The Origin of Man” has been quoted in two official Church manuals in recent years (one manual actually quoting from the other).⁴⁵

The doctrine of spirit birth gained traction only after Joseph Smith’s death; nevertheless, it seems to be the only official teaching of the Church today, although the wording current Church leaders use is often more cautious and measured than in earlier days, likely because of the adverse reaction this doctrine elicits from mainstream Christians.⁴⁶

44. Joseph F. Smith, John R. Winder, Anthon H. Lund, “The Origin of Man,” *Improvement Era* 13, no. 1 (Nov. 1909): 75–81; also reprinted as “Gospel Classics: The Origin of Man,” *Ensign* 32, no. 2 (Feb. 2002): 26–30.

45. *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, n.d.), 9, https://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/06195_eng.pdf?lang=eng, quoting *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 335.

46. Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, for instance, made this statement in 2012: “Members of the Church understand that God

It may be that the doctrine of literal spirit birth emerged as an attempt to bridge the conceptual gap between Joseph's early revelations (especially Moses 3) about a spiritual creation of everything, including humankind, preceding physical creation and his later teachings about uncreated and eternal spirits. This new doctrine, however, gave birth to another conundrum: how to account for evil and accountability in the world if, as Brigham Young taught, God created the spirits of men and women from impersonal eternal material called "intelligence."⁴⁷ This conundrum is identical to the dilemma created by the Christian doctrine *creatio ex nihilo*, merely moving it back one link in the chain of existence. B. H. Roberts (perhaps following the lead of Nels Nelson) solved this problem by introducing the idea of prespirit beings called "intelligences," thus allowing for eternal inequality and accountability, but this idea introduced other philosophical difficulties, which Blake Ostler briefly outlines: "The doctrine of personal eternalism raises problems for

the Father is the Supreme Governor of the universe, the Power that gave us spiritual being, and the Author of the plan that gives us hope and potential. He is our Heavenly Father, and we lived in His presence as part of His family in the premortal life. . . . Our Heavenly Father has chosen not to reveal many details of our premortal life with Him. . . . Every human being is a begotten spirit son or daughter of our Heavenly Father. *Begotten* is an adjectival form of the verb *beget* and means 'brought into being.' *Beget* is the expression used in the scriptures to describe the process of giving life" (Quentin L. Cook, "The Doctrine of the Father," *Ensign*, Feb. 2012, 33–34). In admitting that God has revealed very little about our premortal existence, Elder Cook employs, interestingly, a carefully worded and rather broad (if not figurative) definition of the term *beget*.

47. The problem of trying to reconcile God's goodness with the presence of evil in the world, often referred to as *theodicy*, is closely intertwined with the ideas presented in this essay. For a thorough discussion of this problem, see David L. Paulsen and Blake Thomas Ostler, "Sin, Suffering, and Soul-Making: Joseph Smith on the Problem of Evil," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2002), 237–84.

Mormon thought. If the number of intelligences is infinite, then an infinite number of intelligences will remain without the chance to progress by further organization. If, on the other hand, the number of intelligences is finite, the eternal progression of gods resulting from begetting spirits must one day cease. Either way, the dilemma remains.”⁴⁸ What we are left with today are certain unsettled points of doctrine.

Doctrinal Possibilities

These doctrines are unsettled primarily because Joseph Smith died before he made clear exactly what he understood regarding our premortal state, and apparently none of his successors have felt comfortable filling in all the gaps (or perhaps they have disagreed on the details). It is also possible that Joseph himself was uncertain regarding some of the particulars and that God, for some reason, was reluctant to reveal too many specifics about the nature of premortality. The revelations are intriguing but unclear on some points. According to Doctrine and Covenants 93:29, for instance, “intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be.” But does this refer to some sort of unembodied yet individualized prespirit entity or a rudimentary, impersonal spiritual element? Whatever it means, the context suggests something more than the general conceptual notion of knowledge or understanding held by the earliest Mormons.⁴⁹ The idea that intelligence cannot be created suggests it is a self-existent capacity or entity. Along these same lines, in the King Follett discourse, given just weeks before the Prophet’s murder and captured in longhand imperfectly by four scribes, Joseph taught, “The mind of man—the intelligent part is coequal with, God himself. . . . Is it

48. Ostler, “Idea of Pre-Existence,” 74.

49. “All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence” (D&C 93:30). Here, intelligence appears to have the ability to act independently, and so does truth, which raises questions about what truth actually is. Of course, this may merely be another example of Joseph using words imprecisely.

logic to say that a spirit is immortal and yet have a beginning[?] because if a spirit have a beginning it will have an end. . . . Intelligence exists upon a self-existent principle—is a spirit from age to age & no creation about it.”⁵⁰ Although Joseph seemed to use the terms *mind*, *intelligence*, and *spirit* interchangeably, he was very clear that the “mind of man,” the intelligent part that gives us agency, identity, and being, had no beginning. Whether that intelligent mind was already packaged in a spirit body is uncertain. Joseph left both doors open on that question.

Because of the imprecision of Joseph’s statements and the equally imprecise records that preserved these statements, we are left with two initial possibilities: (1) our spirits always existed in an embodied form, or (2) our spirits were organized by Deity through either a process analogous to mortal birth or some other creative endeavor. The second option leads to two further possibilities: (1) prior to the creation of our spirits, we were already self-aware, individual, intelligent entities with agency and accountability; or (2) our spirits were organized from an impersonal spirit substance called intelligence, at which point we became sentient, accountable individuals. Dividing these possibilities along different lines, there are two ultimate alternatives: (1) at some point, we became individual, accountable entities; or (2) we have always existed as self-aware, individual beings, either as uncreated spirits or as intelligences who later acquired spirit bodies. During my investigation of our premortal past (and perhaps heavily influenced by Brown’s essay), the more I learned about the idea of spirit birth and its theological history, the less persuasive I found it. But that is not the most important question anyway. Whether my spirit always existed, whether I am a literal child of Heavenly Parents through

50. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 359, William Clayton account. I would argue with Joseph’s logic here. Simple mathematics demonstrates that something can have a beginning but no end. A straight line that begins at point A but goes on forever in a certain direction is an example. Another is a series of whole numbers, beginning at 3 and increasing by 3 forever—3, 6, 9, 12 . . . and so on to infinity. So logic does not insist that because we have no end we also have no beginning.

a process of spirit birth, or whether my spirit body was organized using some other mechanism and was then adopted into the heavenly family does not really matter to me. Adoption is a perfectly viable method of joining a family, either in mortality or in a prior life.⁵¹ The more important question—indeed, the *most* important question, regarding our premortal existence—is whether, on the one hand, I was always “me,” an individual with a unique personality, strengths and weaknesses, and the inviolable right to choose my path, or, on the other hand, at some point in the past I was conjured into existence out of impersonal elements and given free

51. See note 28 above. Regardless of the theological arguments for or against spirit birth, however, there are serious logistical problems with the notion that we all became children of Heavenly Parents through some sort of process similar to mortal conception, gestation, and parturition. Consider, for example, that before the end of the Millennium there will have been at least 317 billion of Father's “children” sent to this earth (through either mortal birth or being cast down with Satan). How I derived this admittedly *conservative* estimate is detailed in appendixes A and B at the end of this article. And this world is but one of “innumerable” worlds God tells us he has created (see Moses 1:35). The staggering number of children our Heavenly Father would have had to sire ought to make us rethink our belief that we were born to heavenly parents through some process similar to human conception and birth. Even polygamy on a galactic scale could not produce such a massive “family.” These mind-boggling numbers alone strongly support the notion of eternally existing spirits that become God's children through covenant and adoption rather than birth. These numbers also reveal how naïve we are in assuming that we lived “with” Heavenly Father in the premortal existence, a truism usually spoken glibly, as if it were perfectly rational that we ran around the heavenly mansion with our siblings and sat down to dinner with him every evening, just as we do with our mortal parents.

There are, of course, other ways around the sticky issue of astronomical numbers. One is the possibility of multidimensional time, which I have explored elsewhere and which would allow, hypothetically, for billions of births at once. See Roger Terry, *“Away with Stereotyped Mormons!”: Thoughts on Individuality, Perfection, and the Broad Expanse of Eternity* (Orem, Utah: Rendsburg Publishing, 1996), 27–40. But this possibility has even less basis in scripture than the notion of spirit adoption.

will at that point, with its accompanying accountability. This is a crucial question for several reasons, and I believe the evidence overwhelmingly favors the idea that we have always existed as accountable beings with free will. Let me give only two of several possible arguments supporting this assertion.

Agency and Accountability

If we assume that God organized our spirits from some kind of impersonal spiritual element called intelligence, and that before this creative act those spirits did not exist as conscious, individual beings, then God did in fact create something—a conscious, self-aware, independent, accountable personality—where before there was nothing. And if this is the case, the creation of the spirit signifies the inception of agency, if this is even possible.

We know that spirits had agency in the premortal existence. But if God created a conscious entity from unconscious elements, knowing perfectly at the outset that this particular new being possessed substantial flaws and weaknesses and had no chance whatever (in God’s mind, at least, since he sees the end from the beginning)⁵² to gain exaltation, then God would be, in a very real sense, at least partially accountable for that being’s damnation. Why? Because he created that spirit child with insurmountable weaknesses, which he or she had no choice in acquiring. In essence, if God, using impersonal “intelligence” as his potter’s clay, chooses for some reason to make one spirit vessel adequately strong and another hopelessly flawed, then the ultimate exaltation or damnation of the individual is largely his doing.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell used this same argument to combat the notion that God created all things out of nothing:

Latter-day Saints also know that God did not create man *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. The concept of an “out of nothing” creation confronts its adherents with a severe dilemma. One commentator wrote of human

52. See, for instance, Abraham 2:8 and D&C 38:2. See also note 56 below.

suffering and an “out of nothing” creation: “We cannot say that [God] would like to help but cannot: God is omnipotent. We cannot say that he would help if he only knew: God is omniscient. We cannot say that he is not responsible for the wickedness of others: God creates those others. Indeed an omnipotent, omniscient God [who creates all things absolutely—i.e., out of nothing] must be an accessory before (and during) the fact to every human misdeed; as well as being responsible for every non-moral defect in the universe.”⁵³

Antony Flew, the atheist philosopher quoted by Elder Maxwell (and who late in life became a deist),⁵⁴ is pointing out the inescapable flaw in the notion of *ex nihilo* creation, but the same illogic applies to the idea that God created conscious and imperfect but accountable beings out of impersonal, unaccountable raw materials. On a significant level, this idea is precisely analogous to *creatio ex nihilo* and leads to the inescapable conclusion that God is at least partially (perhaps primarily) accountable for the evil in the world. Indeed, some of his children have an astonishing capacity and proclivity for evil. Given the choice, why would God create such beings?

Blake Ostler similarly argues that a fundamental incompatibility exists between free will and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*:

If the causes of our acts originate from causes outside of our control, then we are not free and cannot be praised or blamed for what we do resulting from those causes. . . . Thus, a person must be an ultimate source of her acts to be free. . . . The source of the action is the agent's own will that is not caused by events or acts outside of the agent but from the agent's own

53. Neal A. Maxwell, “The Richness of the Restoration,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1998, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1998/03/the-richness-of-the-restoration?lang=eng>, quoting Antony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair Macintyre (1955; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1973), 107.

54. William Grimes, “Antony Flew, Philosopher and Ex-Atheist, Dies at 87,” *New York Times*, Apr. 16, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/17/arts/17flew.html? r=0>.

acts of will. . . . If the libertarian demand that we must be the ultimate source of our choices to be morally responsible for them is sound, then God cannot create morally responsible persons *ex nihilo*.⁵⁵

Ostler's argument is valid whether we are talking about the Christian notion of God creating the physical world and mortal souls out of nothing or the LDS view that God created (organized) all things spiritually before they were created physically. Free will, or agency, can only truly exist for God's children if they are what theologians call "first causes," uncreated individuals.

Mormons do not believe in a deterministic God. We believe in a God who has perfect foreknowledge.⁵⁶ But since the God described by those who favor the "impersonal intelligence" theory does indeed play a deterministic

55. Blake T. Ostler, *The Problems of Theism and the Love of God*, vol. 2 of *Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 410–11.

56. There is some debate among LDS philosophers and theologians about God's omniscience, what the term means, and whether it includes a perfect foreknowledge of events. Terryl Givens, for instance, refers to the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, which "states that 'Latter-day Saints differ among themselves in their understanding of the nature of God's knowledge. Some have thought that God increases endlessly in knowledge as well as in glory and dominion. Others hold to the more traditional view that God's knowledge, including the foreknowledge of future free contingencies, is complete.' But it is hard to find in Mormon writings either any apostolic pronouncement that limits God's knowledge of the future or the opinion that divine omniscience would be an impediment to free will. [Joseph] Smith denied the assumption that God's omniscience must condition at least a limited predestination. He asserted simply, 'I believe that God foreknew everything, but did not foreordain everything; I deny that foreordain and foreknow is the same thing'" (Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 100, quoting David L. Paulsen, "Omnipotence of God; Omnipresence of God; Omniscience of God," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 3:1030, and a report in a letter [now lost] by Mathew L. Davis, written to his wife, Feb. 6, 1840, in Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 33). In LDS scripture, we also have the Lord describing himself as "the same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes" (D&C 38:2), and "I know the end from the beginning" (Abraham 2:8).

role in the lives of his children—by the choice of elements he employs in their creation—he is, therefore, ultimately accountable for their failures.

We may argue that no weakness is insurmountable, that we can choose to accept God's grace and overcome our weaknesses, so that "weak things become strong" unto us (Ether 12:27). Our ultimate destiny is then a product of our choices, regardless of any disadvantage we may have been given at the outset. But if we were burdened before we were ever capable of choice with fundamental weaknesses—perhaps even a basic incapacity to plant the seed of faith—how can we be accountable for not having sufficient faith to accept God's grace and overcome that weakness? It is an eternal catch—22. Our strengths and weaknesses always influence our choices. Sometimes we are simply too weak to choose correctly. Sometimes we are too weak to even ask for strength. If God created us as sentient beings from nonsentient material, knowing from the outset that we would not choose to become as he is—and this is a very real scenario for the majority of his children who live to the age of accountability—we might very well ask why he would create us that way. For his entertainment? Because he needs other beings to worship him? Or perhaps so that he would be needed by us? But we do not believe in a sadistic or narcissistic or insecure God. So why wouldn't he create us differently, make us more like his flawless Firstborn? Precisely because he did *not* create us from impersonal raw materials.

Sin, Satan, and Punishment

The notion of sin also argues against the theory that our spirits were formed out of impersonal raw material. Sin is more than simple bad behavior (doing things we know we should not do). The question that is rarely asked, or answered, is what causes us to do things we know we shouldn't do? Temptation? No, temptation does not *cause* sin. The root cause of sin is our inability or unwillingness to resist temptation. In other words, sin results from weakness. If we had no weakness, we likely would

not sin. Christ was sinless because he was not weak. He was tempted in all points, undoubtedly more severely than any of God's other children, yet he never succumbed (see Hebrews 4:15). Someone once said: "Sin is not ignorance; it is insanity."⁵⁷ This is a perceptive distinction. When we have no knowledge of appropriate behaviors and attitudes, we are not accountable. Sin occurs when we know the law but act against our own better judgment. Sometimes we act against better judgment out of rebellion (although it can be argued that rebelliousness is simply a particular manifestation of weakness), but usually our sins do not come from rebellion. Most often we are simply too weak to withstand temptation, too weak to break out of dysfunctional behavioral patterns, too weak to invoke God's saving grace. So, if our weaknesses are God's doing because he used an inferior quality or selection of "intelligence" when he formed our spirits, then we cannot be accountable for our failure to measure up. "It's not my fault," any of us could argue, "that God didn't use top-quality intelligence when he organized my spirit. It's not my fault that he didn't make me more like Jesus." Indeed, in such a universe, dear Brutus, the fault is *not* in ourselves, but in our stars.⁵⁸

The very existence of Satan creates difficulties for the intelligence-as-impersonal-raw-material argument. God sees the end from the beginning. He knew, when he organized the spirit son named Lucifer, that he was creating a vessel doomed to suffer the horrible torments of eternal hell. Would a compassionate God create from oblivion a conscious being, a son he would love, if he knew with a perfect foreknowledge that this son would spend eternity in hellish agony? Not if intelligence were merely a mass of raw, impersonal material to be used as God saw fit. Such an act would be nothing less than sadism. The same, of course, holds true for

57. My sister, who worked in the late 1970s in the BYU Graduate School office, attributed this statement to the dean of the Graduate School, Chauncey Riddle, who was also a professor of philosophy.

58. My apologies to William Shakespeare; see *Julius Caesar*, I.ii.140–41.

his other children, many of whom, he knew at the outset, would suffer varying degrees of eternal damnation.

The only logical explanation for the fact that we are completely accountable for our decisions and must suffer the consequences of those choices is that we have always existed, that our weaknesses and strengths are an intrinsic part of us, and that we have always been accountable for them. This makes perfect sense. If I am either an eternally existing spirit or recipient of a spirit body and have the opportunity to both expand my innate strengths and overcome my inherent weaknesses—through my own efforts and through the saving grace of Christ—it is I who am wholly accountable for my success or failure, and my free will is totally unimpaired. In this theory, instead of God being a preferential determiner of destinies, an omnipotent playwright who dreams up an infinitely varied cast to perform his bizarre eternal tragicomedy, he becomes a compassionate volunteer, aiding in our eternal progress, but never infringing on our eternal agency to become whatever we choose. The only logical explanation for our unfettered free will, our complete accountability, and a just God's willingness to punish us for disobedience is the *eternal* existence of identity. And this, I believe, is what Joseph Smith was trying to teach. Eternal sentient existence redefines our relationship with God. If we were just impersonal intelligence before God "created" our spirit bodies, then his relationship to us is far different than if we existed forever as self-aware beings with agency and inherent strengths and weaknesses.

It has taken many paragraphs and a good deal of doctrinal history and theological reasoning to reach the main point I am trying to make in this essay, but let us be clear about one thing: the notion that our basic personal essence and individuality have always existed is not just fodder for fascinating gospel speculation. It has some significant ramifications. At a fundamental level, it defines our relationship with Deity, our relationship with each other, and the source and nature of God's authority over us. By logical extension, it should also influence how we view our own authority and the way we exercise it.

Joseph Smith's "Heresy": The Source of God's Authority

As a church, we claim to have been organized by men who had first received authority from divinely commissioned messengers. The Savior himself always grounded his own authority in the claim that he was sent by his Father and always executed the Father's will (see 3 Nephi 27:13; John 7:28–29; 8:28–29, 42; 12:49). Regarding the gospel and the Restoration, everything is thus dependent on correct authority that can be traced back to God. But this leads to an even more fundamental question: What is the source of God's authority? Although on the surface this query may appear either obvious or blasphemous, if we are to achieve a correct gospel perspective on authority and on the nature of our relationship with Deity, this is a question we must address, for its answer reveals the foundational pattern upon which all authority in the Church, and even the Savior's own authority, must rest. Let me clarify here that when I talk about God's authority I am not referring to his power over the physical universe. That is unquestionably a consequence of his perfection and intelligence. I am instead referring specifically to his authority *over us*. Why and how does he have authority over us?

I am no expert in the beliefs of other religious traditions, but I assume the customary Christian answer to this question would be that since God is omnipotent and omniscient and since he created all things, including us, either *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) or *ex deo* (out of himself), then we are no different from any of his other creations and he can do whatever he pleases with us. His authority needs no source, because he *is* the source—of everything. Interestingly, if we as Latter-day Saints accept the theory proposed first by Brigham Young, that we did not exist as self-aware individual entities before our spirit birth, then our answer to the question regarding God's authority would be quite similar to the traditional Christian answer, and because of nebulous doctrine here, authority figures sometimes do make statements that lean toward this

view of our relationship with Diety.⁵⁹ But I believe Joseph Smith suggested a radically different response to this question, a response most Christians would consider heresy. Indeed, Joseph completely redefined not only the nature of humankind but also the nature of God and of our relationship to him, which in turn circumscribe our ability to exercise authority in his name. In William Clayton's notes of the King Follett discourse, we find the following, some of which has already been quoted above:

Another subject—the soul—the mind of man—they say God created it in the beginning. The idea lessens man in my estimation. [I] don't believe the doctrine—[I] know better—God told me so. . . . We say that God was self-existent who told you so? It's correct enough but how did it get

59. For instance, we quite often hear God referred to as “the Governor of the universe” or “the great God of the universe” (LDS Bible Dictionary, 681; Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Bear Witness of Him,” *Ensign*, May 1990, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/04/we-bear-witness-of-him?lang=eng>). But if we believe statements from earlier prophets—“As man now is, God once was”; “he has passed the ordeals we are now passing through”; “God Himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!” (see references in footnote 3)—then God is not the Governor of the universe. How could he be the great God of this universe if he was once a mortal inhabitant of a world in this universe? The only possibility is if we accept the multiverse theory, but no prophet has ever gone on record with such a claim. If we reject the multiverse theory and accept doctrine taught by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and Lorenzo Snow, we must admit that our Father is the Governor of a part of this universe. Does this diminish him? No more than Joseph's assertion that he was once as we are now. Certainly, being the great God of even one galaxy such as ours is consistent with his own statements about himself. “My works are without end. . . . And worlds without number have I created. . . . [A]nd innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them” (Moses 1:4, 32, 35). Here God is obviously claiming that his worlds are without number *to us*. They are too many *for us* to count. And that statement is certainly true of the Milky Way galaxy. We have only vague estimates of the number of stars in our galaxy and even more uncertain estimates of the number of planets, and no mortal could live long enough to count them, even if we were able to see them all.

into your heads—who told you that man did not exist upon the same principle. . . . The mind of man—the intelligent part is coequal with, God himself. . . . Is it logic to say that a spirit is immortal and yet have a beginning because if a spirit have a beginning it will have an end—good logic—illustrated by his ring. All the fools and learned & wise men that comes and tells that man has a beginning proves that he must have an end and if that doctrine is true then the doctrine of annihilation is true. But if I am right then I might be bold to say that God never did have power to create the spirit of man at all. He could not create himself—Intelligence exists upon a self-existent principle—is a spirit from age to age & no creation about it. . . . That God himself—find himself in the midst of spirit and glory because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.⁶⁰

If Clayton's notes from this sermon are accurate, it seems quite clear that Joseph believed God did not create the essence of humans—our spirit or intelligence, our mind. Our spirits, writes Abraham, “have no beginning” (Abraham 3:18). God came down among “the intelligences,” he told Abraham, and made some of these “spirits” his rulers (Abraham 3:21–23).⁶¹ This does not mean, however, that God came down among the weaker intelligences and forced them to accept his plan and his laws. Such a notion runs counter to everything we know about our Father in Heaven. It also runs counter to every notion we possess of behavior that is moral

60. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 359–60, William Clayton Report.

61. Abraham records that the Lord showed him “the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones” (Abraham 3:22). Some have interpreted “organized” here to mean that God organized the intelligences into spirits, but a more plain reading is that God came down among intelligences or spirits who were then (or perhaps already) organized socially. Indeed, this is the way the Prophet Joseph repeatedly interpreted this statement. Charles Harrell gives five different examples of this interpretation between 1839 and 1843, then concludes, “The only organization of intelligences envisioned by the Prophet in these statements is a social organization and not an organization of intelligence into intelligences. Joseph taught that spirits, like God, are self-existent” (Harrell, “Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence,” 86).

and appropriate in exercising authority righteously. If, as Joseph boldly declared, we are eternal beings whose minds or intelligence could not be created, and if, as the account of Abraham suggests, God came down in the beginning among a group of already existing beings, then we were, in a very real sense, self-existent and independent, and God, no matter how much more intelligent or perfect he was, would have had no right to dictate to us how we were to exist. To put it in modern terms, he did not conduct a hostile takeover of our eternal spirits or intelligences. No, this is not how God would behave. More consistent with the pattern he has established in all his dealings with us, he likely entered into a covenant relationship with his future children. Seeing his glory and intelligence when he “came down,” we naturally desired to become like him, so we accepted his offer to become our Father, and he promised to place us in a “sphere,” or repeated spheres (see D&C 93:30), where we could progress, where he would institute laws that would enable us to advance. We were not forced into the premortal “sphere,” where we were his spirit children, but accepted it freely as the price we had to pay to progress. And in both the premortal sphere, where we purportedly lived with and learned from him, and in this mortal sphere, where we are tried and tested away from his presence, we have always been free to obey or disobey his commandments and to accept the consequences of either choice. Because God did not create us *ex nihilo* or *ex deo* at either our mortal birth or our “spirit birth,” our relationship to him is not that of puppet to puppeteer. Nor do we exist merely at his whim and pleasure. Ours is a relationship founded on the principles of free choice, covenant, and accountability.

Significantly, this redefined relationship of humanity to Deity also redefines the source of God's authority over us. If I am correctly assessing what Joseph was trying to teach toward the end of his life, then God's authority does not come from the mere fact that he is perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent or from the mistaken idea that we were created at his caprice for his own purposes. Rather, his authority must be a consensual matter. He has authority over us *only because we granted it to him*. Truman

Madsen suggested as much: “In all-important ways even He, the greatest of all, can only do with us what we will permit Him to do.”⁶² I am not suggesting that we can escape God’s authority simply by declaring we are no longer answerable to him, nor am I implying that our relationship with him is in any way democratic, even though he has built this feature to a certain degree into his Church, at least on a theoretical level (see D&C 20:65; 26:2). Of course God has great authority over us. That issue was settled long ago—in the “beginning,” I assume. If he wishes to, he can punish us or even end our earthly sojourn. All I am concerned about here is the *source* of this authority. Where did it come from? Must it not exist because we elected at some point to grant him this authority, trusting him to use it perfectly in helping us attain our full potential? If so, this explains why he is so careful about our free will, why Jesus insisted that authority among his disciples was to be exercised differently than the authority wielded by unbelievers (see Matthew 20:26–28), why Joseph Smith outlined strict parameters within which priesthood authority is valid (see D&C 121:34–42), and why the human race is so compelled to seek freedom and so abhors oppression. Thus, the source of God’s authority is not power or force or position. He is neither tyrant nor dictator. He is the ultimate Leader because we chose to *follow* him. And apparently, this pattern is the one we should emulate, not the opposite pattern, the one so common in the world, a pattern of usurping power and exercising it unilaterally. Those who chose to not follow God—Lucifer and his followers—were, in essence, reneging on their part of the covenant they had made that granted God authority over them. Consequently, they were cast out of heaven and will eventually be consigned to a place where they can no longer progress, because they chose to reject the course that would have led them onward and upward to eternal glory and perfection.

62. Truman Madsen, *Four Essays on Love* (Provo: Communications Workshop, 1971), 57.

Concluding Thoughts

The picture of God I have painted above presents, I believe, a sound argument regarding our premortal existence. If God did indeed, at some point, create us as sentient, individual personalities from some sort of impersonal spirit element, then in a very real sense we are his creations—his property, as it were—and he does not need our consent to do with us as he pleases. He can place us in the most awful circumstances and refuse to help us or even give us any understanding of why we are going through disease, disaster, and destitution. In such a universe, God is indeed the source of all intelligent beings and of all authority, as well as the source of all weakness and suffering. But according to this theory, since he created us so imperfectly, with inherent flaws, how can we possibly trust him to perform his works of salvation perfectly? Something in this view of eternity, to put it in Joseph's terms, tastes bad.⁶³

What I have attempted to establish here is the idea that we have always been sentient, individual beings, which leads inexorably to the conclusion that God's authority over us and his relationship to us is far different than if we assume he created our individual personalities, or minds, out of raw material (or out of nothing). In other words, I am arguing that *he* is not the source of his authority over us—we are. I have also attempted to demonstrate that this idea is central, even essential, to Mormonism's unique message, because without it, our relationship with God is not fundamentally different than that imagined by traditional Christianity, our belief in premortality and in an embodied God notwithstanding. This unique Mormon understanding of our eternal nature implies that as individuals we have certain eternal, unalienable rights, and it is apparent from God's dealings with us that he strictly honors these rights, two of

63. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 346, quoting Wilford Woodruff's journal: "this is good doctrine, it tastes good, I can taste the principles of eternal life, so can you."

which are the freedom to choose and the accountability for our choices (see 2 Nephi 2:26–27; D&C 101:78; Galatians 6:7).

Elsewhere I have discussed two basic types of authority—personal and institutional.⁶⁴ God’s authority over us is certainly personal, unless he is merely an officer in some larger, eternal organization. In that case, we should not be worshipping our Father but some other superior God who gave him authority over us. We would have a hard time supporting this notion. But personal authority is an influence over others that comes either through consent or force. If what I have suggested above is true, then God’s authority comes from the fact that we consented to it. If we toss this idea aside, the only alternative we are left with is that he usurped authority over us by force—unless we accept the idea that God created us, or our consciousness, out of either nothing or out of himself. In either case, we run into the inevitable conclusion that it is God, not we, who is responsible for our sins.

I see no other reasonable alternative: God’s authority, and the authority he granted Joseph Smith through divine messengers, actually originated with us. In other words, the authority he gives us comes from us in the first place.⁶⁵ If this seems like circular thinking, look at it through an analogy: The president of the United States has authority, and that authority comes from the citizens of the country. He can use that authority to appoint individuals to perform certain functions that are legally binding upon all citizens, whether they agree with the actions and decisions of those appointees or not. It is similar with God. We granted him authority over us. He is therefore free, limited only by his perfect grasp of moral

64. See “Authority (Part 2: What Is It?)” *mormonomics & mormonethics* (blog), <http://mormonomics.blogspot.com/2015/09/authority-part-2-what-is-it.html>.

65. One inevitable question arising from the conclusion I have reached here is relevant to the current discussion in the Church about women and priesthood ordination: If 100 percent of us consented to give our Father authority over us, why should we think it is somehow appropriate that he then share that authority again with only half of us? Somehow the circle here seems incomplete.

parameters, to use that authority to appoint servants to carry out his purpose, which is to save our souls, and sometimes we may not like the way that authority is exercised. In the case of the US president, we can get rid of him after four years if we do not like how he and his appointees exercise the authority we granted him. In the case of God, there is no such termination clause. But we knew that when we signed on as his children.

If, however, my interpretation of our relationship with God is inaccurate, then we must toss out the King Follett discourse, other statements by Joseph about the eternal nature of spirits, and the assumption that we have always been sentient, self-aware beings. In that case, we would be just what mainstream Christians claim we are—creations of a God who can exercise arbitrary authority over us because he created our consciousness. Thus, the ramifications of our view of premortality are enormous. In other words, this is a question we really need to settle.

Appendix A

How Many of God's Children Will Be Born on Earth?

Population Estimate Based on Mormon Assumptions (and Population Reference Bureau estimates and Pew Research projections)

YEAR	POPULATION	BIRTHS PER 1000	BIRTHS BETWEEN BENCHMARKS
4000 BC	2	80	—
AD 1	300,000,000 ¹	80	40,000,000,000 ²
1200	450,000,000	60	26,591,343,000
1650	500,000,000	60	12,782,002,453
1750	795,000,000	50	3,171,931,513
1850	1,265,000,000	40	4,046,240,009

YEAR	POPULATION	BIRTHS PER 1000	BIRTHS BETWEEN BENCHMARKS
1900	1,656,000,000	40	2,900,237,856
1950	2,516,000,000	31–38	3,390,198,215
1995	5,760,000,000	31	5,427,305,000
2011	6,987,000,000	23	2,130,327,622
2050 ³	9,600,000,000 ⁴	20	7,054,020,000 ⁵
2051	2,500,000,000 ⁶	24.5 ⁷	36,000,000
2088 ⁸	10,000,000,000	24.5–37.7	7,875,603,400
3050	10,000,000,000 ⁹	10	96,200,000,000
Total			211,605,209,068 ¹⁰

Notes

1. According to the Population Research Bureau, this period is very difficult to model, and some estimates are higher. See “How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?,” <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2002/HowManyPeople-HaveEverLivedonEarth.aspx>.

2. This is my adjustment of the 46 billion estimated by the PRB. Their estimate assumes 5 million people on earth in 8000 BC. The PRB also assumes 1.138 billion births between 50,000 BC and 8000 BC. The high birthrate in these early years is necessary to maintain any sort of population growth. The number here assumes a mortality rate of 75 per 1000, which leaves a net population growth rate of just .5 percent per year.

3. Just taking a shot in the dark here, I am assuming the Second Coming will be in 2050, which is as good a guess as anyone else’s. Delaying it or moving it up a few years has very minimal effect on the final tally.

4. Pew Research Center estimate. See Rakesh Kochhar, “10 Projections for the Global Population in 2050,” Feb. 3, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/02/03/10-projections-for-the-global-population-in-2050/>.

5. I am assuming linear population growth and linear birthrate decline. This yields an average of 176,350,500 births per year during this period.

6. I am assuming only 2.5 billion will survive the great bonfire at the Second Coming. This includes all 1 billion who will be younger than 8 years old, half of the billion who will be between 8 and 14, and 1 billion from the 7.6 billion who will be 15 or older. PRC projection.

7. Doubtless, the birthrate will have to increase substantially after the Second Coming to repopulate the planet (and provide bodies for all those righteous spirits waiting to come to earth during the Millennium). Current US fertility rate for women between ages 15 and 44 is 63 per 1000. See "Fertility and Birth Trends," Child Trends Data Bank, <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=fertility-and-birth-rates>. If we assume 200 per 1000 for the presumably fecund and terrestrialized survivors in the child-bearing demographic, there would be roughly 61 million births per year at the beginning of the Millennium. This converts into 24.5 births per 1000 total population. The number is relatively low because I am assuming that more than half the population is younger than childbearing age at this point, as opposed to Pew Research's estimate for 2050 of only 15 percent.

8. See Appendix B.

9. I am assuming that when population reaches 10 billion, it levels off (birth and death rates are equal). Because no one dies until age 100, if the birthrate remained even at 20 per 1000, population would grow exponentially (at 1 percent growth per year), and by the end of the Millennium it would reach somewhere in the neighborhood of 138 trillion. A birthrate of 25 per 1000 would yield a population of over 15 quadrillion. A birthrate of 10 per 1000 maintains steady population in a society where everyone dies at age 100.

10. This total is actually conservative in several ways. Different assumptions could raise the figure substantially. First, the 300-million estimate for AD 1 may be low. Second, if the Second Coming occurs much later than 2050, total births would be higher. Third, I assumed that population levels off at 10 billion during the Millennium. It should be obvious that a terrestrialized Earth that reverts to its Edenic state could easily support double that number of inhabitants. If so, total births would be much higher. On the other hand, it could be argued that either more people survive the burning at the Second Coming (say, 50 percent as opposed to my assumption of 25 percent) or that my estimate of 200 births per 1000 women between 15 and 44 years of age during the early years of the Millennium is far too high. Changing either of these figures might adjust the total birth figure downward, but not by a significant amount. We are still looking at a number somewhere in the neighborhood of 200 billion.

This figure, of course, includes only those of God's children who came to earth and obtained a body. Mormon theology assumes that one-third of Heavenly Father's children rebelled in the premortal existence and followed Satan. If we take the one-third figure literally, that number would be 105,802,604,534. Add this to the number born on earth, and God's family in the premortal world would have been 317,407,813,602. What this suggests is that, in spite of our

folksy Mormon belief that we “lived with Heavenly Father” and knew him like we know our earthly fathers, we likely had little or no individual, face-to-face contact with him.

The best estimate I can make is that historically about 37 percent of all humans born on this Earth died before the age of 8. Until the twentieth century, life expectancy was stuck between 20 and 30 years, and was perhaps as low as 10 years in the early centuries. If we combine those who died before age 8 with all those who accept the gospel either on earth or in the spirit world and add to it perhaps half of the 103 billion people who will be born during the Millennium, then Mormon doctrine suggests that the celestial kingdom will easily be the most populous of the three degrees of glory. Can you imagine this earth, in its celestialized state, housing 100 billion inhabitants? Sounds a bit crowded. Soy lent Green, anyone? Of course, in popular Mormon thought, the celestial kingdom is just a temporary way station. We’ll all be off rather soon creating and populating our own worlds. If this is true, even an infinite universe might get a bit crowded with every inhabited world producing, say, 40 billion new gods. Is there really “no end to space,” not to mention matter? And what about those who are relegated to being ministering angels, or whatever we wish to call those who are not married and must remain in the lower two levels of the celestial kingdom forever? What will they do? And how does their fate differ from those in the terrestrial kingdom? All that is obvious is that we know virtually nothing about the hereafter.

Appendix B

Population Estimate during Millennium to Reach 10 Billion

YEAR	POPULATION	FEMALES 15–44	BIRTH RATE 15–44	BIRTHS	DEATHS
2051	2,500,000,000 ¹	307,000,000 ²	200 ³	61,400,000	110,000 ⁴
2052	2,561,290,000 ⁵	333,814,000 ⁶	200	66,762,800	110,000
2053	2,627,942,800	360,628,000	200	72,125,600	110,000
2054	2,699,958,400	387,442,000	200	77,488,400	110,000
2055	2,777,336,800	414,256,000	200	82,851,200	110,000
2056	2,860,078,000	441,070,000	200	88,214,000	480,000
2057	2,947,812,000	467,584,000	200	93,516,800	480,000

YEAR	POPULATION	FEMALES 15-44	BIRTH RATE 15-44	BIRTHS	DEATHS
2058	3,041,328,800	494,098,000	200	98,819,600	480,000
2059	3,139,668,400	556,327,000	200	111,265,400	480,000
2060	3,250,453,800	618,556,000	200	123,711,200	480,000
2061	3,373,685,000	680,785,000	200	136,157,000	1,360,000
2062	3,508,482,000	742,114,000	200	148,422,800	1,360,000
2063	3,655,544,800	803,443,000	200	160,688,600	1,360,000
2064	3,814,873,400	864,772,000	200	172,954,400	1,360,000
2065	3,986,467,800	926,101,000	200	185,220,200	1,360,000
2066	4,170,328,000	946,701,000	200	189,340,200	2,600,000
2067	4,357,068,200	968,882,400	200	193,776,500	2,600,000
2068	4,548,244,700	993,745,200	200	198,749,000	2,600,000
2069	4,744,393,700	1,021,289,400	200	204,257,900	2,600,000
2070	4,946,051,600	1,051,515,000	200	210,303,000	2,600,000
2071	5,153,754,600	1,084,422,000	200	216,884,400	4,200,000
2072	5,366,439,000	1,120,080,400	200	224,060,100	4,200,000
2073	5,586,255,100	1,158,390,200	200	231,678,000	4,200,000
2074	5,813,733,100	1,202,922,900	200	240,584,600	4,200,000
2075	6,050,117,700	1,253,678,500	200	250,735,700	4,200,000
2076	6,296,653,400	1,317,557,000	200	263,511,400	5,600,000
2077	6,554,564,800	1,380,868,400	200	276,173,700	5,600,000
2078	6,825,138,500	1,450,312,700	200	290,062,500	5,600,000
2079	7,109,601,000	1,525,889,900	200	305,178,000	5,600,000
2080	7,409,179,000	1,607,600,000	200	321,520,000	5,600,000
2081	7,725,099,000	1,691,370,100	200	338,274,000	8,000,000
2082	8,055,373,000	1,752,544,100 ⁷	200	350,508,800	8,000,000
2083	8,397,881,800	1,816,204,300	200	363,240,900	8,000,000
2084	8,753,122,700	1,882,619,000	200	376,523,800	8,000,000
2085	9,121,646,500	1,952,056,200	200	390,411,200	8,000,000
2086	9,504,057,700	2,024,784,100	200	404,956,800	10,800,000
2087	9,898,214,500	2,101,099,900	200	420,220,000	10,800,000

YEAR	POPULATION	FEMALES 15–44	BIRTH RATE 15–44	BIRTHS	DEATHS
2088	10,307,634,500				
Total	2051–2087			7,875,603,400	

Notes

1. I assume 2.5 billion survivors of the Great Bonfire at the Second Coming. All 1 billion under age 8 survive. Half of the billion ages 8–15 survive. Only 1 billion of those over age 15 survive.

2. Based on 2015 world population 15–44 (3,338 million) divided by total population 15–99 (5,434 million). This percentage (61.4%) is then multiplied by the estimated 1 billion survivors of the Great Bonfire ages 15–99 (614,000,000). Female portion is assumed to be one half of this total. Statistics for 2015 population distribution from United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>. Download Excel chart “Population by Age Groups—Both Sexes.”

3. Birthrate estimated at 200 per 1,000 female population ages 15–44, three times the current fertility rate of 63 per 1,000.

4. Deaths based on 2015 world population 95–99 (3 million) divided by total population 15–99 (5,434 million). This percentage (.055%) is then multiplied by the estimated 1 billion survivors of the Great Bonfire ages 15–99 (550,000). Each year represents 1/5 of this total. The next age bracket (90–94) represents .24% of total population 15–99, and so on. This is based on the LDS understanding that people in the Millennium die when they reach age 100.

5. Total population = previous year’s total + births – deaths.

6. Increase in females 15–44 calculated by estimating the number of women who turn 45 (8,900,000) and the number of girls who turn 15 (35,714,000) and add the difference to 307,000,000. The difference holds for five years, then shifts slightly. Two years later, the difference increases substantially because the billion age 1–7 begin turning 15.

7. In this year, the women turning 45 were 14 at the beginning of the Millennium and therefore were part of the 8–14 age group, of whom I estimated that 500 million survived. Their number, then, would be $500,000,000 \div 7 \div 2 = 35,714,285$, which I round to the nearest hundred. This number is subtracted from the number of girls turning 15 and is added to the previous total female population to arrive at the sum listed.

THE MISSING MRS.

Marianne Hales Harding

Every afternoon when I pick my children up from school the teacher who acts as a crossing guard calls out, “Hello, Mrs. Harding!” I return his large, friendly smile and call back, “Hello, Mr. —!” Occasionally the encounter is elongated by a sentence or two about how brilliant my child is or how much she enjoys his English class. On the whole, it is a pleasant exchange. But my name is not Mrs. Harding. It never has been. Not even when I was married.

In school settings I am almost always “Mrs. Harding.” It’s the default name for mothers: Mrs. Whatever-Your-Kids’-Last-Name-Is. I don’t bother correcting the kids because they never remember. Come to think of it, that’s why I don’t bother correcting the adults, either.

My name wasn’t an issue until I got married. The expectation in my largely conservative community was that I would take my new husband’s name, but it felt odd to completely rebrand myself. I was unsettled, but that wasn’t a strong enough reason to deviate from the norm, so I cast about for arguments that would poll well with my huge (and opinionated) extended family. I landed on the idea that I was known professionally as Marianne Hales and therefore it wouldn’t be reasonable to lose my name completely. “Are you that well known?” my brother-in-law retorted. He had a point. I was twenty-five years old, just out of grad school, and could find pretty much all of my adoring fans on my wedding guest list. The idea that twenty-five years of personhood was sufficient reason to retain my unique identifier was not entertained. Marriage is the start of a new life and the creation of a new family, so it’s only right to have a new (unified) name, I was

told. But it was a new life for my husband too, and his new life didn't involve nearly as much paperwork.

Not that I would actually say that to my mother or aunts. The fact that I was giving this any thought at all had created mild alarm within the family. We have no shortage of opinionated women in my family, but there's opinionated within the Church and opinionated on the way out of the Church and sometimes the distinction is very fine indeed. It's fueled by the ongoing tension between autonomy and obedience—we are taught to question and think and then are questioned when we think. The Mormon origin story is a boy who, in following his own heart, bucked the major religious traditions of his time, faced persecution and public outcry because of it, and stayed true to his own thoughts and feelings to the end. If Joseph Smith had been as meek as Mormon women are sometimes asked to be, there would be no LDS Church.

This wasn't the first time I had lived in that paradox, but, as a fairly newish adult, it weighed on me. I spent several months deciding how far I wanted to stray from the traditional, finding where the line between conscience and conformity lay for me, personally.

I finally settled on using a double last name with no hyphen (thank you, Hillary Rodham Clinton—the most famous double last-namer I was aware of at the time, though even she didn't use it exclusively). Hyphenated last names felt dated at that point and I loved the look of my new name: Marianne Hales Harding. My last name finally balanced my lengthy first name, visually, and it rolled off the tongue. Well, it rolled off *my* tongue. No one else knew quite how to handle it. At the doctor's office they sometimes filed me under Hales, sometimes under Harding. I got junk mail addressing me with the first name of "Hales." And at church? Sister Harding, of course. At the temple, thoughtless temple workers actually crossed out half of my last name thinking, I assume, that I had a very unusual first name and hadn't realized they were only asking for my last. Because my atypical name felt slightly seditious, I never corrected anyone who got it wrong. I introduced myself

properly but didn't get argumentative when people heard only what they expected to hear. (That would be rude.) Once a friend noticed me signing a check and said, "Wow you use both names all the time, huh?" Yes, I replied, because that's my name. Marianne Harding is not the person I chose to be.

Marianne Harding was who I was on the records of the Church, though. No one ever asked what my name would be when I got married, and I didn't take the time to change it from the default until many years afterward. It was one thing to stray from the traditional, but quite another thing to have to battle for it at every turn. I was up for the former but not so much for the latter.

It was as a newlywed in Seattle that I learned to speak up when it came to my name choice. Lori Mortensen, our Relief Society president, felt strongly that people should be addressed by the name he or she chose. She had the self-assurance I lacked to gently and respectfully correct the bishop (and others) over and over again until I was known generally as "Sister Hales Harding." I credit her for providing the validation I needed to fully embrace my name choice. She was one of the first faithful women who didn't bat an eye at my name, who accepted it without question. She was the one who made me feel like I had the right to determine how I present myself and that it wasn't minor heresy to deviate from the default. She validated, too, my feeling that a name is not a frivolous thing. It isn't silly to care deeply about how you are known.

The question was flipped on its head ten years after I was married when, once again, I had to choose my name. This time I had fewer years invested in the name, but the stakes were higher. Everyone assumes when you get divorced that you will revert to your maiden name but, once again, that felt odd to me. *I* hadn't left the family; my husband had. Why should I have a completely different last name from my young children? Why should I wade through the endless sea of paperwork? At thirty-five, I was entrenched in the world as Marianne Hales Harding in ways that

I never was as twenty-five-year-old Marianne Hales. The logistics were overwhelming. Beyond that, though, it felt like losing my name would be to lose the last ten years of my life, to erase my marriage. This was something my husband wanted to do, but I never did. You can't erase promises made, covenants uttered, lives lived. You can't erase the person I chose to be. That is how I found myself navigating the world as a single person with a distinctly "married" name.

This is stranger within the Church than in the larger community. In the years since my marriage there has been some movement toward regularizing non-traditional married name choices, but with most Church members it seems like a begrudging acceptance. Pushing that even further leads to befuddled looks or exasperation. When I told one of my priesthood leaders that I wasn't going back to my maiden name after the divorce, you could almost see the little man in his head shouting, "I do not GET you, lady!" I suppose it is progress, though, that the response is more "whatever" than hellfire these days.

Now I'm mostly known only by my first name because my full name is a long story (as you know only too well at this point) but also because, over seven years post-divorce, I haven't fully embraced my name choice. It feels slightly seditious. And perhaps it is. I refuse to refashion myself based on my marital status—something my husband never had to do (*no* husband ever had to do, actually). Through it all he remained Mr. Michael Harding. There was no question. He was never faced with the choice between devaluing precision in language (the presumptive "Mrs." that was no longer in any way true for me) and revealing the deep wound of divorce to any random stranger who managed to mangle my name. I didn't send out a Christmas letter for two years because it hurt so much to inform people about what had happened, but society's way of handling names asked me to bring up the subject on a daily basis with people I hardly knew. It's no wonder "Mrs. Harding" was born. It's no wonder she persists.

But she also persists because, as a culture, we continue to identify women in large part by whether or not we are married, despite the fact that this quality does not impact most of our interactions. It's as if the proper thing to say when volunteering in a first-grade classroom is "Before you do this math worksheet, you should know that I am no longer in a committed romantic relationship."

The stigma of being a single woman is still so pervasive that when a single teacher at a recent school meeting was mistakenly called "Mrs." by the vice principal, she was razed as having "gotten a promotion" by fellow teachers afterward (a joke that every sister in a singles ward has endured at one point or another). At best this is a lighthearted example of inattention to gender issues. At worst this is an instance where we tacitly allow a supervisor and coworkers to, essentially, talk about an employee's sex life in public.

Carelessness with language like this isn't the same as malicious sexual harassment, but it *is* a sort of harassment, on par with all of the obnoxiousness women regularly shrug off because we live in a world where a man's sex life is nobody's business and a woman's is everybody's.

Very few people mean ill by this, so it feels mean to call out individuals for the pervasive linguistic issues they have inherited. No one here invented this system of tracking, punishing, and rewarding women based on their marital status. But if it is ever going to change, it will be when *individuals* opt out of the system, when enough people refuse to classify women based on sex, when women are not defined by which male they are currently connected to. This is the sort of thing that only happens on an individual basis. This is the sort of knowledge that only sinks in when it is consistently highlighted in real life situations, like the persistent, gentle reminders of my Relief Society president.

As those of you who know me as "Mrs. Harding" may have guessed, I'm not very good at that. I hesitate for fear of being branded as an angry, argumentative person. I hesitate because I don't want to return kindness

with awkwardness. I hesitate because not every person shares my belief that language is powerful and shapes our thoughts and actions. But that *is* my belief, and I am a hypocrite if I do not stand up for it, even when it is awkward. So maybe I ought to start reminding people of what my actual name is. Even the well-meaning crossing guard.

Eight Visions of the First

Derived from Joseph Smith Jr.'s four accounts of the First Vision

Bonnie Shiffler-Olsen

I.

And how shall I know it?

In the 16th year at about the age of twelve

I was about at this time, in my fifteenth year,
an obscure boy of no consequence
of a little over fourteen years of age.

My mind seriously impressed
with the glorious luminary of the earth
rolling in majesty through its courses
and I stood—
a man walking forth upon the face
thereof.

II.

I discovered all important concern,
convinced of my sin and feeling to mourn,
found I did not come unto the summum bonum
of perfection. My heart exclaimed,
“Well hath the wise man said!”
I knew not who was right.
The beast of field, fowls of heaven,
fish of waters;
are they all together wrong?

III.

Strength and beauty wrought up in my mind.

I considered upon these
in their bounds
a power and intelligence so exceeding great
that maketh and bindeth,
marvelous even:
spirit and truth.
I seek such to worship.

My mind called to great feelings,
a deep and pungent
uneasiness
somewhat partial to believing.
I felt desire in the midst of this war—
so great the tumult it was impossible
for a person
young as I was
and so unacquainted with men and things
to come to any certain
conclusion.

IV.

I often said to myself, what is to be done?
I began to reflect upon the importance
of being
aloof. At length I discover
I must remain in darkness
and confusion or else.
Could God be believing,
as if author of a church?

V.

Being thus perplexed
 in mind, I most desired
 to call out amidst my anxieties—

retired to the silent
 woods to make
the attempt.
Kneeled down on the morning
 of a beautiful day
in a secret previously
 designed place
early and began
a fruitless attempt.

 In other words,
for the first time with fixed determination,
having looked around—
my swollen tongue in my mouth
 —I cried,
finding myself alone.

There was none else.
 To whom could I go?

VI.

Which is it?

behind me a noise like some person
walking
 but could not draw nearer

I sprung up but saw no thing
to seize upon,
could not speak
overcome and astonishing—
my tongue thick
as if doomed in that
great alarm
by some enemy of destruction
I had never before felt,
ready to sink
to the power of despair and abandon.
To whom if any
being?

VII.

I saw,
believing to obtain
and he spake
my name.

My mouth opened, and liberated
I cried my cry:
 enwrapped
in a brilliant wilderness of light,
the world gracefully taken
 away in a pillar
 like flame in the air, yet nothing
 consumed.

And a personage, come quickly
calling me—
 another in the cloud
all draw near me,
many whose brightness defy all glory
entered in.

And receiving, I cannot write,
was filled
in the midst of unspeakable ungodliness,
 forgiven.

VIII.

Noon opened,
resembling a promise
eclipsed the glory of my heart above me
with a likeness.

I, my glorious spirit,
saw
saying,
 “Marvelous!”

And he, “I am.”

And again,
 lying on my back, I came to
find myself in the 16th year
of my 14 years of age,
early in the spring
 looking into the sun.

Words

Jamie Naylor

The young African boy stumbles over the Supper of the Lord's words—
in the Promised Land: a new gospel.

The man in the dark suit signals, again.

Again. And yet again, while we in the pews squirm.

Just a visitor, I ponder words like spirit and letter and
tender mercies, torrents inside.

Finally, His Body as bread is passed and the congregation is washed
in a wave of relief—

though the young boy's head stays bowed.

Another smoothly speaks the words of remembrance of His Blood.

And it is done. I feel yet parched

and only you, a stranger here, slide silently from your seat

to follow him out the door as the Priesthood take their places

back with the rest of us. One can never know

if your words, or his burning tears,

will make a difference.

The Flock

Les Blake

I had walked
a few steps

of chalk cold
asphalt toward

the front door
when the rustle and rush

of blackbusted air
caught me up

dead on my feet.
A feathering fluttering

crease in my ears,
its shear of wind

stuttering
west to east

leaving me at peace
a grounded bird.

In a blink
the flock of swallows

swallowed
me whole then blinked

out of sight.
Left me wondering in their wake

what to make of all
our intersecting.

Some moments we fight
in nightsilence.

Some moments the fight
gone, going white

like morning's
first birds light the dawn.

This dawn, this soul,
loud with the joy of having

unconsciously, undeservedly
walked into flight.

I am aware of
the likelihood of never

stepping into such
grace again ever.

The Skin of the Story

Susan Elizabeth Howe

Three of her children were taken:

one whispered
out of life by a flapping heart,

one stoned in the head by a tumor,

one catapulted through a windshield
into the hereafter.

Unable to pierce God, to fathom
his depths, she bargained for the others:

If you need a life, take mine. Then came

disintegrating veins,
her feet roped,
swollen purple;

the fall in Mexico, no words
to tell the doctor
he set the unbroken leg;

threatened blindness,
the chiseling of her eye sockets;

replacement of her color
by a blankness one
brain cell at a time.

This is the skin of the story
that held her together:

six children prospered.

When she broke her neck
on the stairs
after her last child's wedding,

she believed she had cracked
God's code:
what he meant by
marrow

in the bones.

My Sadness¹

Susan Elizabeth Howe

My sadness eats sauerkraut because she's allergic to sauerkraut.

My sadness roams heating ducts, shuffling through the lint.

My sadness sharpens her teeth.

My sadness starts the avalanche she gets caught in. Then I can't breathe.

My sadness wears a crown adorned with plastic rubies and a circlet of rabbit fur.

My sadness weeps over the word adorned.

My sadness wanders the fields looking for killdeer eggs.

My sadness wades the shallows bare-legged, attracting leeches.

My sadness calls leeches bloodsuckers.

My sadness tries out for the hummingbird then feels inadequate when the tackle gets the part.

My sadness wears her hair down to her tush and irons it.

My sadness, believing sugar to be a thickening agent, ruins the pudding.

1. First published in *Pleieades*.

My sadness takes up throat-singing and wins a horse.

Sometimes my sadness shrinks to the size of a salmon egg.

But my sadness never washes away in the current.

THE RIVER RERUN¹

Karen Rosenbaum

Morning 3, Nankoweap Camp

Across the river, she sees a big brown lump shamble over to the water's edge. She wants it to be graceful, sleek, to glide through the water, not lumber like a bear on the land. Elaine can see it through the right lens of her binoculars. It is what she longed to see thirty years ago, on that last trip down the Colorado. It is a beaver.

It does not make her heart hop.

The left lens of her binoculars fogged up yesterday, which wasn't supposed to happen since they are waterproof binoculars, good ones. They didn't have binoculars the other time. She and Rob smirked at the one person who did, the mousy woman who was always calling out bird names. They were young then; smirking came easily. The muscles of their mouths, the muscles in their legs, shoulders, backs—they all moved effortlessly, without consequence.

"Just got the permit, Aunt Elaine," Chip, Ben's boy, had said on the phone. "A cancellation. So I'm putting together a trip. I know Uncle Rob always wanted to run the Colorado again, right? Now you're both retired so you don't have an excuse. And I talked to my folks. They could stay at your place that week and visit Grandma in the nursing home every day."

He thought of everything, Chip did. And Rob so wanted to go, to prove to himself that he could do it. Just getting on the J-Rig made her

1. Excerpted from the author's recent publication, *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Books, 2015), which is reviewed later in this issue ([192](#)).

wonder. They couldn't scramble onto the J-Rig the way the others did. Rob could hop over from the rocks. Elaine's arms were pretty good, so she could haul herself up.

That first day, they saw condors through the binoculars, three of them, flying over the canyon, and she thought she might have spotted a nest. She passed the binoculars around—everyone wanted to see birds as big as gliders, a species that might—now—survive. Even Mike wanted to see, Mike who doesn't believe in evolution and extinction.

Yesterday they just rode small rapids, nothing more than Class 5s, and she doesn't think it was the water that clouded up the left lens. After all, the salesman said he cleaned his binoculars by putting them in the sink. Maybe it was the steam from her body in the sun.

It's early. The only other person up is pretty, pensive Olivia, wandering down by the river. In among the tamarisks, Rob and the others are still asleep atop sleeping bags—it's warm here, it's June. Elaine woke to a chorus of canyon wrens and tottered off with the binoculars in search of them. She found one too, through her right lens, singing its heart out.

Mornings are the best time. It's the nights that she dreads, too stiff, too stimulated, too worried to sleep. Mom in the nursing home, sometimes happy, sometimes hating it. Maybe she'll behave for Ben and Bertie. At home Elaine doesn't sleep well either, though it is soothing to have Rob next to her under the sheet instead of two feet away in a separate sleeping bag on the other cot. The first night, at South Canyon, Chip put their cots head to head because there was such a narrow spot for them.

Dear Chip brought the cots. They all, except Chip, who sleeps on the J-Rig, and Vin and Allie, who are very young and who can't stop touching each other, use cots. Vin and Allie set up their little camp as far away from the rest as possible. Could they have managed sex on a cot? Well, maybe on Mike's big cot, the one Tom and Vin scoffingly call "Princess." How old I am, Elaine thinks. Yesterday, in the late afternoon, when the others were hiking up to the Indian granaries, she and Rob stayed in camp, stripped off all their clothes in the warm sun, used the

tepid water in Chip's sun shower bag and the cold water of the Colorado to wash off the sunscreen and sweat and sand. It wasn't the least bit sexy. Rob has those love handles and a bit of a belly; she would be thin but for the fat joints, and she has that wrinkly neck and ugly moles all over her torso and mottled thighs. And the steel-colored hair, cropped short, a helmet, Rob calls it. It's the same color as his beard. If someone had been spying from the brush, they would not, alas, have been titillated.

Thirty years ago, no one had cots and almost everyone was titillated. Sex was a watery undercurrent beside the Colorado even though nobody actually did much, at least that she and Rob knew about. Too communal, too crowded. They have made a conscious effort on this trip not to bore the others with their memories. She has her old blue river guide still, with dates and notes. Saturday, while they were waiting to put in at Lee's Ferry, she was chatting with the grey-bearded guy who brought Chip his back-up motor, and she asked him if he knew any of the boatmen and boatwomen from way back when—she was thinking of Terrill, wild-man Terrill with his peeling, muscular bare arms and his effusive tales of heroism—and the grey-bearded guy said Terrill lives in Flagstaff and still does an oar trip now and then. Elaine finds that extraordinary—that Terrill is still alive, that he hasn't perished in some South American revolution or been shot by a jealous husband.

Chip's is a small, private trip—two aging relatives and five friends, not a commercial excursion like the one they did all those years ago—though they and their fellow travelers were young then and expected to pitch in, loading and unloading morning and evening, and bailing out the water that filled the bottoms of the rafts in the rapids. The commercial trips they've seen so far seem to cater to big groups of the recently retired, people as old as or even older than themselves. At Lee's Ferry, Elaine watched them wilting in the shade of their big bus or waiting in line at the cinderblock bathrooms, the last flush toilets anyone would see for some time. The women wore too much eye makeup and too-tight tank tops and fluorescent flip-flops with plastic flowers. Later

that day, coming behind them through Badger Creek Rapid, Elaine saw that they were clinging to the ropes along the sides of two enormous motorized rafts, sporting, under the orange life jackets that everyone on the river wears, matching blue windbreakers. At one campsite, their guides, “caretakers,” said Rob, had set up a neat row of matching tents.

“But *we* need care,” she told Rob. So far Allie and Vin have unloaded their heavy dry bags in the evening and dragged them back down to the J-Rig in the morning. Elaine and Rob just watch as the others heave the bags off and on, and as Mike, who has taken on “groover” duty, sets up and dismounts the metal box-toilet. They wouldn’t be able to straighten up the rest of the week if they tried to lift any of that stuff. They’ve mostly helped with meals—Chip’s wife, Kim, had packed nine days of food, some frozen, in the big bins under the deck. The deck very cleverly doubles as the meal preparation table with fold-out legs, and they have big canvas chairs with drink holders that Rob and Elaine are in charge of setting up and folding and stuffing back into their sandy bags.

“So how long have you and Rob been together?” Elaine turns to see Olivia, who has soundlessly approached from the brush. She must have walked all the way around.

“Good morning,” Elaine smiles at her, but Olivia doesn’t smile back. “Thirty-three years. Before you were born.”

Olivia runs her fingers through her coppery hair. She hasn’t tied it into a ponytail yet and stuck it through the hole in her cap. “Are you sleeping okay?” Elaine asks gently. Olivia looks as if she has been crying.

“Not really.” She looks down at her purple-red toenails. “Tom’s into this camping stuff. I’m not. He went with Chip down Cataract Canyon last summer a couple of times. He didn’t insist I go then, but the Grand Canyon, well, he says I have to do this. Chance of a lifetime and all.” She pauses. “I miss Danielle. She’s only six. She’s with my folks in Grand Junction. I didn’t know I wouldn’t even be able to *call* her every night.”

“Your camera,” Elaine points to Olivia’s wrist strap, “do you have any pictures of her?”

“Oh yeah,” Olivia says. “Here. Look.” There on the screen is a small girl, red-haired and light-skinned, hugging a large yellow dog. She looks to be about the same age as Elaine and Rob’s first grandchild, darling Penny.

“She looks like you,” Elaine says. “Who’s taking care of the dog?”

“That’s Barney.” Olivia smiles at her camera. “Next-door neighbors. We haven’t lived in Phoenix very long. Tom and Chip worked together in Grand Junction, but Tom got laid off last year—I guess he didn’t impress the boss as much as Chip did—and now he works for his dad. Phoenix is okay, but it’s so hot. Kids can’t play outside until November. And we loved Grand Junction. And *my* folks are a lot more helpful than *his* folks.” She glances at her watch. “Guess I’ll go wake up Tom. Packing the dry bags is a real bore, isn’t it?”

“Not the best part of the trip,” Elaine agrees.

But not the worst either, she thinks as Olivia disappears into the mesquite.

Afternoon 4, Elves Chasm

Rob is still on the J-Rig with Chip, but the others are on their way up, so Elaine adjusts her walking sticks and follows. In the blue river book, thirty years ago, she wrote, “Short Hike to Elves Chasm,” but now she sees there isn’t a trail. How do the others know where to go? Vin and Allie haven’t been here before, but they set off at a run up the rocks as soon as they pulled in. Tom and Olivia followed them. Tom, at least, ought to know the way—he and Chip and Mike and some other he-men took the J-Rig through the Grand Canyon two years ago. Elaine is trying to scramble up the rocks behind Mike, her least favorite person in the group. Last night he told her that he has collected plenty of weather data for the past hundred years, and he sends it to school with his kids to prove to the teachers that the earth is getting colder, not warmer.

“I wish it were true,” she told him.

“C’mon,” he says now, glancing back over his shoulder at her. “This way.”

And then he is gone and she can’t decide which is *this* way. She opts for the flattest rocks and gasps as a lizard scuttles out of the path of her hiking stick. It’s lovely here anyhow, even if she doesn’t get to Elves Chasm. Maybe she’ll intercept Chip and Rob when they start climbing.

She goes forward sometimes, backtracks sometimes, takes left turns, tries to go up. A cavern with water and ferns is very pretty, so she stops and drinks from her canteen. She is clearly lost, but she is exasperated, not afraid. Mike is a jerk. In the rapids he perches on the left pontoon just daring the waves to wash him into the river. She wishes they would.

Yesterday was the start of the big rapids, the big adrenaline rushes. Hance and Horn, and today, Hermit—she likes those breathy H names. And then Crystal. Olivia got hysterical at Crystal. Elaine had held her to calm her. She discovered it’s hard to hug someone when you’re both wearing life jackets.

She sees what could be a grassy trail back to the river. Around big rocks, she suddenly comes upon a pool with three people lazily kicking their feet in the water. They must be from the group of kayakers that passed them while they were having lunch. Kayaks on the Colorado. Elaine can hardly believe they would make themselves so vulnerable. The one in the khaki cap is a woman, and not a young woman either, maybe forty-five. Elaine waves at them. “This the way down?” she asks.

“Yeah. You on that big boat?” asks the woman. Elaine nods. “The one we saw hung up at Crystal?”

“Our nephew built that boat. He ran it onto a rock, and one of the guys jumped out to try to push us off, and we almost squashed him. He was okay though. But it took his wife a while to recover.”

“Crystal’s never easy,” says the older of the men. “Usually too little water.”

“How often have you done this?” Elaine asks. He holds up both hands, fingers extended.

"I've only done it four times," says the younger man. "Mom has done it seven."

Elaine gasps. "And I thought I was brave," she says, "just clutching the ropes."



She settles herself with her book in the shade near the J-Rig. During quiet times, she has been trying to read *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, but has had difficulty concentrating. John Wesley Powell was braver even than the kayakers. Uncharted territory. 1869. Wooden boats. One arm. John Wesley Powell might have needed a little help in getting up to Elves Chasm, except white men didn't know about Elves Chasm then. But the book says Powell was about Chip's age when he and his men tackled the Colorado, and he apparently hiked wherever his men hiked. She loves the story about his getting trapped in a side canyon, unable to go ahead or go back, and how he yelled out to George Bradley, who was always, it seems, rescuing the others, and Bradley, who didn't have a rope, lowered his own long underwear, which Powell lunged for and which helped him either up or down, the book doesn't say. Three of the men deserted Powell later, though. And they probably didn't survive. Served them right, she thinks.

Of course Mom thinks *they've* abandoned *her*. "My kids stuck me in here," she tells people who visit the care center. "Moved me here from Nevada. Where I'd lived ninety years. Don't get old. They treat you like trash." That's what she says when she's the most lucid. That's when she might hit an aide with her telephone or swear a blue streak at the nurse. She'd kick people if her legs still worked. When she's more confused, she loses her feistiness and seems helpless and pathetic. Elaine shuts her book and sighs.

Allie and Vin appear in front of her. "We were worried about you," they chorus. Vin adds, unnecessarily, "Everyone was up there but you."

Elaine shrugs. "I tried. I was following Mike, but he left me in the dust."

Allie shakes her head. Her hair is wet and kinky. "He shouldn't have done that," she says. "That's awful."

"It was probably too hard a scramble for me for me anyway," Elaine says. She must have inherited the martyr skills from Mom. "Did Rob make it?"

"Chip had to help him," Vin says. "But he got there. You should've seen him jumping off."

"Tom got pictures," Allie says. "It's so beautiful. They'll show you when they get back."

"Did everyone jump in?" Elaine asks. She tries not to sound annoyed. Thirty years ago, the drop from the high hole in the rock was too scary for her. Rob had done it because he felt he had to. But at least then she got to see it, the narrow gorge, the cascades, the green, green pools, and she had paddled around in the water while the others jumped.

"Everyone leapt in," says Vin. "Even Olivia."

"But she didn't want to," says Allie. "Tom kind of made her."

"But she was glad once she did it," Vin says. Allie looks unconvinced.

The others are coming down the rocks. Rob and Chip are relieved and a little abashed, she thinks, to see her. "Where did you go?" they ask. "We figured you'd decided not to come."

"Just went up a little way."

"You should've seen Uncle Rob jump," says Chip.

"I couldn't have made it up there without Chip." Rob is clearly very pleased with himself. "He practically carried me. Where were you?"

She looks at him, then looks away. "I went to the mall," she says tartly, "and bought some mascara."

Night 6, National Canyon Camp

Olivia has disappeared. Tom is frantic. He and Chip are hiking up National Canyon, a big flashlight augmenting their headlamps. Vin and

Allie and Mike are searching closer to the camp and up and down the river. Rob and Elaine hear them calling Olivia's name.

"Won't do much good to call," Rob says, "if she means to go missing." They are sitting in the canvas chairs close to the water's edge. It would be a pleasant night—mild breeze, clear sky studded with stars—if Tom hadn't come rushing back from their campsite and raised the alarm. Olivia had excused herself after dinner, didn't want to play "Murder" in the sociable circle around the pole lamp.

"She's not a happy woman," says Elaine.

"Are you a happy woman?"

Elaine thinks about this. She has thought about this a lot, especially since the newspaper went under, giving her time to think of all the connotations of that word "retire."

"Well," she says, "I wouldn't head up one of the side canyons by myself."

"So, if you could choose to live your life again, would you?"

"I guess," she says. "Yes. Sure. You would, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah." He runs his hand over hers. "Even if it doesn't make much sense."

"We've made it make sense."

"People like Mike don't have to do that, do they? Chip either. They just know there is a big purpose. They're probably reconciled to death. Find meaning in pain. All that." He clears his throat; Elaine thinks his voice catches. "Lucky bounders. Look how well my folks did after LaNell died, lots better than I did, and they're her parents. They *know* they'll see her again. They'll all be together in tidy tract houses in the sky."

"There's more to life than death," Elaine says. "Than facing death."

"Yeah, but some of those things are explained by religion too. Suffering. Injustice. Not explained satisfactorily, but, well, some people are satisfied, aren't they? Take your brothers. Steve. Ben. Ben and Bertie raised Chip to believe all that hooey, and they all claim to be happy. Do you think Mindy'd be happier if we'd raised her to be a believer?"

"I think Mindy's happy," Elaine sighs. "Who knows if someone else is happy or not? And *we* were raised to be believers. We just didn't keep believing." She sucks her lips in. "Bertie takes a lot of Zoloft. And look at Mom. Well, we function anyway. We aren't a dysfunctional family, are we?"

"No." He strokes her hand, fingers. "Your finger tips are cracking. Are you glad we came?"

"I'll tell you when we find Olivia. We *will* find her, won't we?"

"How far could she go?"

"Farther than she thought before this trip. I talked her into hiking up Havasu yesterday. She wanted to stay with us while the rest of them went. I knew *we* couldn't do it again, but I told her *she* could." She digs her feet into the sand. "I told her how gorgeous Beaver Falls are. You hiked all the way to Mooney back then. None of them made it to Mooney yesterday."

"Chip could've," Rob says, "if he didn't have to worry about everyone else. Maybe Olivia's scared of Lava tomorrow."

"We're all scared of Lava," Elaine says. "We're supposed to be scared of Lava."

"You're not as scared as last time."

"No," she says. "Even after Chip told us today how he flipped the J-Rig in Cataract Canyon last summer. I didn't know about that."

"He probably didn't tell Ben and Bertie."

She laughs. "Didn't tell them about that man who got tossed out and who ended up miles downstream and his wife who became unhinged, who'd blame her, who told Chip this wouldn't have happened if he had a prayer every morning before they set out. You know," she says, "we have faith. Mindy has faith. We just have faith in different things than Ben and Chip and especially Mike."

"Yeah."

Vin is hallooing down the river. Way down. Allie and Mike must be with him. Chip told them to stay together.

Elaine opens her river book and sets her headlamp beam on the page. "Look," she says. "Thirty years ago, we camped here. It was the eleventh night, and we were going to be on Terrill's boat the next day. He got us so worked up about Lava!"

"Terrill," Rob snorts.

"Took us a lot longer on those oared rafts. It seems too easy on the J-Rig with a motor. Except when the motor kills, that's pretty unnerving."

"We don't have to bail. Water runs right off the deck. And that truck seat Chip has for us to sit on. This is the luxurious life."

"I don't know," she says. "My hips hurt all the time."

There is the strident sound of a whistle coming from up the side canyon. Chip has given Vin a whistle too. One blast means they've found Olivia and to return to camp. Two means "come."

Rob lets out a breath. "Now let's hope she's okay."

"She's okay," Elaine says, "physically."

Vin and Allie and Mike get back to the campsite first.

"I'm so glad." Allie sinks into a canvas chair next to Elaine and switches off her headlamp. "What could she be thinking?"

"She's not thinking," Mike says.

"We've got to make her feel comfortable," Allie says. "Tell her we love her and everything. Don't tell her how she got us all worried sick."

"How she almost ruined our trip," Mike says.

"We don't know what happened," says Rob. "Let's make like she was just walking around, maybe on the way to the groover, and she couldn't find her way back."

"Right," Vin says.

Chip and the spotlight lead the way. Behind him, fierce little headlamps shining, the two others. Tom's arm is around Olivia. She is sobbing. Rob reaches them first. "It's so easy to get lost." He touches Olivia's shoulder. "We're just happy they found you." She stops crying for just an instant and looks at him, then buries her head in Tom's chest.

"We all need a good night's sleep," Chip says. "We've got a big day tomorrow."

Morning 7, Lava Falls

"Vulcan's Anvil," says Chip from the back of the J-Rig. He motions toward the black mound of lava in the river as they pass it. "Vulcan, the Roman god of fire."

"Live long and prosper," says Rob, doing the Vulcan salute.

"They're all too young to know *Star Trek*," says Elaine, but Mike laughs.

"Mr. Spock," he says. "I remember."

Mike is in his regular spot, atop the left pontoon. Tom, who usually rides the right pontoon, is sitting on the deck, his arm around Olivia's waist. She is wearing dark glasses and looks at no one.

"Reruns," Rob whispers to Elaine. "Remember, Mindy could do the Vulcan salute."

Chip pulls the J-Rig onto the rocks. "Mike and I'll scout Lava," he says, "so we can decide how to run her. You all sit tight." Mike ties up the boat, and the two of them trot down the rocky trail.

"So what are our chances of flipping?" Allie asks Tom.

"Minuscule. This is a *big* boat. And Chip knows what he's doing." He glances down at Olivia, but she doesn't acknowledge his attention.

"He did flip in Cataract," Allie reminds him, "on the upper Colorado. Were you with him then?"

"Naw," Tom says. "He had a group from his church. But that was Big Drops. They're more serious rapids than Lava."

"I didn't think anything was more serious than Lava," Allie says. "Chip even said a prayer this morning."

That was after everyone had finished their cold cereal and oranges. It had been a simple prayer for protection and guidance, and Chip hadn't mentioned Lava by name. The people who didn't say prayers were look-

ing around at those who had their heads bowed—Mike, Tom, Olivia. “When I’m in a tight spot,” Chip had said afterward, “I say, ‘Lord, if you get me out of this one, I’ll never get back on the river again.’ And the Lord always gets me out of trouble. And I always get back on the river.”

It seems to take a very long time before Chip and Mike return. Vin has found a sack of cashews and has passed them around. He offers them to Chip when he bounds back onto the J-Rig.

“It’s doable,” Chip says. Mike unties the rope, pushes the J-Rig away from the rocks and jumps to his pontoon.

“Now, I don’t want anyone on the pontoons,” Chip says. “I want you all on the deck, hanging onto the straps. Allie, you get onto the truck seat, and you too, Olivia, next to Elaine and Rob. Mike, Tom, Vin, here, in front of them.” He has Olivia and Allie trade places, so Olivia and Elaine are in the middle, the safest spots. He winds an extra line on the deck for them to grab.

“What if you’re bounced off the boat?” Allie asks.

“Then Tom or Mike will take over till I’m fished out,” Chip says. “Everyone ready?”

He settles his cap back onto his head and starts up the motor. Elaine clenches the rope across her lap. With white knuckles Rob clutches the rope too.

“Wahoo!” shouts Chip.

“Wahoo!” shouts Mike.

“Yeah!” shouts Vin.

“Go for it!” says Rob, not as loudly.

They are, for a moment, submerged in an enormous wave, then thrust above it, then slammed under water again. Elaine remembers to keep her eyes open. They burst through and are suddenly in calm water. All that anticipation and what did it take? Half a minute?

“Man!” Chip roars. “What a great run!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!” howls Mike.

They all laugh. Elaine squeezes Olivia’s hand. She is laughing too.

Day 8, Separation Canyon

They've pulled into Separation Canyon for lunch. On the deck-table, Elaine and Rob have spread out the bread, mustard, cheese, lunchmeat, lettuce, oranges, Oreos; sliced the tomatoes, pickles. Mike builds an enormous sandwich with everything but oranges. The others laugh when he places two Oreos between his cheese and lunchmeat.

"How you gonna get your mouth around that?" Tom asks. Mike answers him by taking an enormous bite. Only one pickle slice falls into the sand. He picks it up and considers eating it, then drops it into the trash sack. Everything they carry in has to be carried out.

"Are you wearing sunscreen?" Olivia pokes Mike's shoulder tentatively. "You're as red as the rock."

"He's wearing tanning solution," Tom says.

"That stuff doesn't keep you from burning," says Rob.

"Hell," says Mike. "My only souvenir—a tan, a burn. They won't let us take anything else out of the canyon."

"You got to eat the trout you caught," Allie says. She's a little sore that he didn't share.

"Yeah, I guess that's leaving the canyon in some form," says Mike. The groover bags are all stored somewhere beneath the deck.

Allie makes a face, raises her eyebrows at Elaine.

"After we eat, we hike up to the plaque," says Chip. He's told them about the men who separated from Powell's first expedition. "We'll get a group picture." He turns to Elaine. "You've never seen it."

She shakes her head. "This is new territory for us. We took out at Diamond Creek, ten, fifteen miles back. A little Indian bus took us back up to the top of the canyon."

"What I want to know," interrupts Vin, "is why those guys left Powell *here*."

"Yeah," says Allie. "I don't see any white water."

"No," Chip says. "Hoover Dam didn't go in until 1935. This here is really part of Lake Mead now. I guess Separation was the mother of all

rapids before that. The guys who left Powell were sure the guys on the boat were going to die. And the guys on the boat were sure the guys who left them were going to die. Guys on the boat were right.”

“Lotta guys on boats did die,” says Allie. She has been reading a book Chip keeps in a locker—stories of those who met their end on the Colorado. She is especially impressed with the story of the honeymooners who drowned in 1928.

Elaine struggles, pole, step up, pole, step up, trying to follow Allie, who seems to be skipping up the side of the hill. Suddenly, she stops and turns around. “Hey, Elaine,” she says. “I’ll wait for you.” The others, even Rob, are ahead. Elaine pants and grunts and hopes the sounds are taken as signs of appreciation.

Chip sets a camera on a rock. “Gather up,” he says, and herds them against the wall next to the plaque. He pushes the button, then scurries back to the group. Mike and Rob make Vulcan salutes. “Grin,” Chip says, “whether you feel like it or not.” They all grin. Elaine feels like it.

“The irony,” Chip says, “is that Powell’s boat ran Separation with no trouble at all. The three guys got to the top of the canyon, but no further. Probably killed by Indians.”

“Maybe they were translated,” Rob says.

“Probably not to heaven,” says Chip. “Maybe to hell. Isn’t that what happens to quitters?”

Last night was hell. First that business with Olivia. When they settled onto their cots, for the first time all week, Elaine had gone to sleep immediately. Then she heard Rob’s voice. “We’ve got to set up the tent, Elaine. It’s starting to storm.”

Chip appeared with the spotlight to help them. They could hear the others too, cussing. Theirs was such an old tent, smaller than those of the others—the tent that they had taken, new, down the Colorado decades before, the tent they hadn’t used for years although they had set it up on the back patio to make sure it still worked, that they could still work it. They had to leave the cots outside, grabbing their pads and

sleeping bags and their daypacks and pushing everything else in. Inside they lay side by side, close together for the first time this trip, listening to the rain beating on the tent, the wind blowing.

“I’m not having much fun,” Elaine had said.

Now, as they start back down the hill from the plaque, Elaine slips. Mike gets to her first, stands her up. “You okay?” Rob is in front of her, holding the tip of her pole. “Elaine?” he asks.

Her tailbone feels shattered, but she can stand. She closes her eyes for a second, then does what she always does. “I’m fine,” she lies. “Let’s go.” She moves one foot ahead of the other, leaning heavily on her poles.

My tailbone’s jammed into my hip bone, she sings to herself. My hip bone’s jammed into my thigh bone. What comes next? Oh hear the word of the Lord. Oh yes.

Day 9, Lake Mead

The channel widens again, and here they are in the lake, about three hundred river miles, Chip says, from their starting point. The canyon has flattened out—it is the desert of Elaine’s past, not a *grand* canyon, though the mountains in the distance look purplish and pretty. They camped near Pierce Ferry last night—their last night on the sand, and no, she certainly isn’t sorry about that, though Rob is whimpering about it all ending. One spot they just passed, Chip told them, is called God’s Pocket.

Elaine likes that name. God’s Pocket. This lake is the lake of her childhood, and in those days she felt tucked safely in God’s Pocket.

Her family didn’t used to come to this part of the lake—they went to the other side on the flat beaches near the road to Boulder City. Here the sand slopes onto the beach, and families have set up watered plastic chutes that children slide down. Elaine looks at them through the right side of her binoculars. When she was a child, they didn’t take toys to the lake. There were anchored rafts, and you could swim to one, haul

yourself up and sun a while, then get back in the cold water and swim to the next. Ben and Steve learned to swim before she did even though they were younger. They weren't afraid of the water and the muddy bottom of the lake the way she was. There were picnic tables, where families would bring potato salad and cold chicken and watermelon and cookies. Once she crawled underneath one of the picnic tables in a game of hide-and-seek, and she was bitten all over by a hill of red ants. She cried all the way home, and her mother ran a tub of tepid water and dumped in a box of baking soda for her sit in.

Mom. As hard as it has been for her and Rob to keep up, their load has been lighter because Ben and Bertie have been dealing with Mom.

And all the other things she hasn't given a thought to. No phones, no radio, no TV, no computers, no papers, none of those horrific articles that she herself could have written a couple of years ago. And the day-to-day sad images of life in L.A.—the homeless encampments under the freeway onramps, the men sifting through the recycling bins to fill shopping carts with aluminum cans, but mostly the scenes from the nursing home. The woman across the hall from Mom, the one who shrieks for hours on end.

How quiet it is here now that the river isn't surging through its prison walls. Chip has set up a canopy on the deck so they don't broil as they lunch on what's left in the cooler—some cheese, some crackers, some apples and oranges, a lot of Oreos, and cans of Mountain Dew, which, as Rob points out to Chip, has plenty of caffeine and an unconscionable amount of sugar. Chip shrugs.

"Bath time!" shouts Mike, who has stripped off his life jacket. He holds up a plastic bottle and leaps into the lake. Vin and Allie shed their water sandals and life jackets and jump in next. Tom whispers something to Olivia, and in a minute they are bobbing up and down in the water too, Olivia giggling while Tom pours shampoo onto her head. Before Elaine can look over to Rob, she sees him descending the rope ladder that Chip has unwound.

“Go on, Aunt Elaine,” says Chip. “I have to stay with the boat.”

“I could stay with you,” she says.

“Naw. Go on. You want to.”

He’s right—she does want to. It’s the one thing she can do. She unzips the bottoms of her zip-off pants, undoes the lifejacket and sandals, and slides smoothly into the water. It feels glorious, warmer than the pool she uses at home, and, wonder of wonders, she doesn’t hurt anywhere; she can move everything. She breaststrokes, keeping her head above the water so she can see the others splashing, sudsing, tossing the shampoo bottle, squealing.

Rob paddles over to her, tugs on her shirt, smiles. She smiles back.

This afternoon, they will take the J-Rig out of the water at South Cove. Tomorrow they’ll be back in the world of worry, but she pushes that out of her mind right now. Tomorrow worry. Today squint into the blue, blue sky and be buoyed up by the water, water that has rushed through the most sublime of all the ancient canyons, the grandest canyon of all.

END

Mormon Tradition and the Individual Talent

Mary Lythgoe Bradford. *Mr. Mustard Plaster and Other Mormon Essays*. Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2015. 185 pp. Paper: \$20.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-742-7.

Reviewed by Joey Franklin

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot writes that tradition “cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.”¹ This has always underscored for me the importance of knowing your literary tradition, of reading widely and deeply, and of exposing yourself to a variety of great voices. In many ways the work I did in graduate school was a clunky attempt to cultivate what Eliot calls “the historical sense,” an awareness of tradition that “compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones” but with “the whole of the literature of Europe” and “the whole of the literature of his own country” in his mind as well.² Tradition, to Eliot, was the deep well of Western literature. Studying the personal essay in school, tradition for me meant the work of the genre’s luminaries—Montaigne and Bacon, Hazlitt and Lamb, Woolf and Didion, Baldwin and White.

Tradition was not, decidedly, the cloistered Mormon culture of my youth. In fact, since my time as an English major at BYU, I’ve deliberately worked to be a writer who happens to be Mormon, and not, heaven forbid, a “Mormon Writer.” To focus one’s work on the cultural curiosities and provincial preoccupations of Mormondom seemed tantamount to insulating oneself from the “real” artistic world. Writing about Mormonism would turn people off, shut out readers, and invite prejudice, misunderstanding, and maybe even downright scorn. Common

1. T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *The Egoist* 6, no. 4 (1919): 55. The essay in its original publication can be accessed at <http://library.brown.edu/pdfs/130876199525004.pdf>.

2. *Ibid.*

advice given to me early on, usually from other writers who happen to be Mormon, was to keep my Mormonness out of my writing; focus on learning the literary tradition and leave my cultural tradition out of it.

But this summer I've been reading a small collection of Mormon essays by Mary Lythgoe Bradford and it has me reconsidering my definition of tradition and my understanding of its role in literature, particularly in the personal essay. Most of *Mr. Mustard Plaster and Other Mormon Essays* was originally published as *Leaving Home* by Signature Books back in 1987, which won the Association for Mormon Letters Personal Essay Award. This new volume reprints those essays on various themes of Mormon interest—faith and doubt, family tradition and genealogy, marriage and parenting—and includes new essays on widowhood and on what Bradford calls being a “DNA Mormon”: “The Church belongs to me and I to it” (163). The essays are steeped in Mormon culture, simultaneously critiquing and celebrating Mormon tradition while completely sidestepping any anxiety about how that culture might be received by a non-LDS audience. Granted, much of the book is culled from the pages of decidedly Mormon-centric publications (*Sunstone*, *Dialogue*, *Exponent II*), but as I read Bradford, I get the sense her confidence comes less from the security of a sympathetic audience and more from the way she has embraced Mormonism as her own. She writes with Eliot's “historical sense” of the Mormon tradition, and the result is a profoundly authentic portrait of a Mormon life.

The collection is divided into five sections and follows more or less the trajectory of Bradford's life from her pastoral childhood in Salt Lake City to her student years at the University of Utah and its LDS Institute. She offers a glimpse of her life as a wide-eyed newlywed in Washington, DC, and she examines the perceived tensions inherent in being both a bishop's wife and the editor of *Dialogue*. She invites us along on mission tours to the Philippines and Spain with her adult children, and she welcomes us into the small condo of her retired widowhood.

Throughout each essay, Bradford wears her Mormon faith, not as a badge of courage or a scarlet letter, but as a simple fact of who she is. And yet, it's hardly an unremarkable fact. Her faith is the essential ingredient to each essay, and her inside-out exploration of Mormon culture invites readers to consider her particular Mormonness apart from larger expectations of what Mormons are "supposed" to be. And at the same time, because she speaks as an insider, her observations come off as the constructive criticism of a concerned family member, not the bombastic attack of a detractor.

In "Yesterday the Ward House," Bradford describes how the church building served as a hub of social and spiritual life growing up and laments the homey feeling that has gone away from contemporary chapels. "We call it The Church, and we are warned to keep our kids from tearing the phone off the wall," she writes. "My children sit with folded arms learning 'reverence'" (5). And she uses those quotation marks with a subtlety that invites us to consider our own definitions of reverence. In "Marriage and Printmaking," she writes about her work as editor at *Dialogue* in the early 1980s while her husband served as a bishop, and she calls attention to strains of anti-intellectualism in Mormon culture: "In the mind of some, piety and publishing don't mix—especially independent, scholarly publishing in a church context. But our response was: They do too mix!" (36). And in "Seeding In," Bradford analyzes the cultural difficulty of speaking openly about sexuality: "I don't want my teenagers to think of sex as just a dangerous temptation, like drugs, instead of what it is, the motivating life force that enables us to be both different from each other and alike too" (41).

In one essay with a more academic flavor, Bradford offers a portrait of Virginia Sorensen, author of several novels and children's books and winner of the 1957 Newbery Medal. Bradford believes Sorensen has been neglected by Mormon culture because of a "misunderstanding many Mormons share about the purpose of fiction" (21); that is, too many Mormons have difficulty stomaching the realities of good and evil in

the world. "Fiction has always been about sinners and their struggles between good and evil," writes Bradford. "Fiction writers must stand aside from that which most engages their personal lives, looking to a deeper engagement with their art" (21).

Bradford has been a participant in and critic of Mormon culture as it has grown from a regional to a global phenomenon, and the fact that much of her observations and criticisms still hold true today (her Sorensen article on the Mormon aversion to "difficult" fiction, for instance, is nearly fifty years old) is perhaps the strongest argument for this collection's reprinting. Mormon culture needs Bradford-like writers now more than ever: those who can write about Mormon culture as naturally and openly as the best Catholic and Jewish and Buddhist authors write about their own religious traditions; writers who can be critical in constructive ways, who can speak up and speak out; writers who can champion Bradford's vision for Mormonism: "A Mormonism that recognizes the human condition, that accepts different ways of seeing, a Mormonism that recognizes that true religion is not so much unity of opinion as unity of action" (30).

It is this vision of Mormonism that makes Bradford's collection an essential read for young writers in the Mormon tradition who are figuring out what role their own faith will play in their work. *Mr. Mustard Plaster* is not written as a model for how every Mormon writer should engage their tradition. Instead, it reads as a reminder that authenticity depends a great deal on one's willingness to engage with all aspects of one's self, and that between the poles of sanctimony and cynicism, there is a hopeful place where art and faith can thrive, not in spite of, but because of each other.

As a personal essayist, a teacher, and a Mormon, I read Bradford's work and the label "Mormon Writer" begins to feel less problematic. After all, the most successful essayists will always write from the core of Eliot's literary tradition, but an essential part of that tradition is a candid analysis of the essayist's life. If Bradford's collection teaches us

anything, it is that the line between one's life and one's culture is thin, if it exists at all. And a writer's best hope for authenticity is to not only embrace one's literary tradition but one's cultural tradition as well.



Quiet Stories, Complex Emotion

Darin Cozzens. *The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand and Other Stories*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2016. 202 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0-9883233-9-1.

Reviewed by Braden Hepner

Darin Cozzens's second collection, *The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand and Other Stories*, contains Emus and Mormon spinsters, ill-fated wedding ceremonies and wheelchair races in the dementia ward, washtub nostalgia and the ambiguous values of patriarchal blessings. Beneath these elements of the quietly bizarre run themes of desire, fate, and, most prominently, forgiveness.

From the wind-swept lands of Wyoming and the Intermountain West, these stories feature lives of struggle and need. Cozzens plumbs the human experience for meaning and dredges it up in double handfuls. This is our world, an existence within which "it is a rare case that doesn't involve one human wronging another" (128), where chastity is a cakewalk compared to "loving your enemy" (133), where "excitement is half fear" (22), "love is a fearful thing" (22), and the ubiquity of injustice is poignant and heartbreaking. In the face of this travail, Cozzens's characters trudge on because, as one of them observes, the only "human antidote" is love (160).

In "The Washtub," a bidding war erupts at a farm liquidation sale over a washtub, with human intrigue driving the paddles rather than

common acquisitiveness. The emotions of the characters—among them a man whose running suit matches his alma mater’s team colors, and whose chewing gum matches his running suit—are nuanced and layered, their meaning half-buried and often as unfathomable as that in our own lives. The washtub—a relic from days before modern plumbing, early site of children’s baths, late holder of warble repellent—means something different to all interested parties, each of whom see it as an aid to personal agenda, be it to assuage the hunger of nostalgia, to cover a flagrant professional error, or to spark a potential romance.

Cozzens’s focus is on the intricacies of life—often Mormon life—in the contemporary West. Lives of single-wide trailers and mule dung, of the unrelenting forces of modern commerce and ordinary people working to subsist and find some measure of contentedness among hardship and unjust fate. His fiction is technically sound, and despite being compromised occasionally by didacticism and moralizing, it gets at the heartbeat of human existence, giving quotidian sweat and grit their deserved purposes. The conflict at its core is subtle and deep. Common lives hold profound meaning.

Cozzens opts for substance over sensation, for quiet subtly and depth over familiar mythologizing. Throughout many of his stories he chooses to limit his audience to those familiar with Mormon culture and theology—a world of patriarchal blessings and Elders Quorums. Readers unfamiliar with these elements will, nevertheless, find the characters and their plights moving. The Mormon experience is, after all, a human experience.

In that regard, Cozzens is tuned-in to the complexities of orthodox belief, the beauty of faith, and the perils of Mormon culture. He presents Mormon life as it is for so many—a life of contented, if not perfect, worship through behavior. Yet he is perspicacious enough not to hold all punches, and currents of light chiding flow throughout. Ever, the protagonist of the title story, “The Last Blessing of J. Guyman LeGrand,” gets the willies when he is dragged to a recruitment meeting

led by “four or five overgroomed ex-missionaries in three-piece suits and tasseled dress shoes, bearing testimony of attic insulation in front of a hotel conference room full of penniless college guys” (179). Ordinary life for these characters is full of “contradictions and absurdities over which [they had] no control” (133).

In “Chariot Race in D-Wing,” a story about “*how to forgive*” that draws parallel wisdom from the film *Ben-Hur*, Ed Beverly is a Mormon English professor at a Presbyterian school. Wrongfully fired and haunted by decades of animosity toward Chairman Grubgeld, he fancies he hears the old man’s ghostly crutch tap coming from the dementia wing of a hospital he is visiting. He hasn’t heard it, but he is drawn anyway through the doors, where he finds his old nemesis pushing chess pieces around a Monopoly board. In the process of reckoning with his grudge, he realizes that his “pity was more dodge than compassion” (134) and that he has fallen short of his own beliefs. “[He] lost his job not because [he] was Mormon, but because [he] wasn’t Mormon enough” (134). It is sentiments like this one that keep these stories from mere faith-promotion, or a pandering to any approved sentiment, pushing them instead toward deep human drama.

Even so, Cozzens is at his best in stories like “Spinsters and Their Dreams,” where Ivy Teague draws a succinct and eloquent summation of her life as her brother lies on his deathbed. Ivy holds an aged grudge of her own, and in her worldview curiosity is often confused with “cruelty” and “destructiveness” (70). In “Liquidating Earl Haws,” banker Frett Maxwell Jr. is given the distasteful task of informing Earl and Ruby Haws that their livelihood of farming is over, that the bank is seizing their meager assets. “To plant anything was to hazard the harvest, and no one was exempt,” Frett Jr. muses twice (151, 166). It is snowing and cold as he approaches the Haws farm, and there is no answer at the door. He finds the old couple in the barn coaxing a heifer through her first birth. “For one last sweet moment, Frett Maxwell Jr. delay[s] announcing himself” and watches as Ruby kisses her husband on the cheek (166). In a moment of metaphorical

beauty amid a grievous context, the former heifer noses her newborn calf, and the calf “[flaps] its ears and [makes] a start” (166). The best story of the bunch, “Liquidating Earl Haws” deftly avoids moralizing and ends on an affecting note of poetry and non-resolution.

Readers looking for quiet stories of complex emotion and human struggle will enjoy this carefully-wrought collection. Cozzens deserves to be read, and this collection is a welcome addition to contemporary Mormon fiction.



Past Second Base

Joey Franklin. *My Wife Wants You to Know I'm Happily Married*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015.
194 pp. Paper: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-8032-7844-8.

Reviewed by Eric Freeze

At the last Association of Writers & Writing Programs conference, a famed historical literary figure stood for pictures and selfies next to booths piled high with books. He was bald except for a tuft of hair in the middle of his head and a dark goatee and handlebar mustache. In a more mainstream context, people would probably think he was Shakespeare with his brocade doublet and puffy sleeves. But most images of Shakespeare emphasize his shoulder-length bob. And Shakespeare wore a stiff collar, not a pleated ruff. Maybe the actor just didn't have the hair? And why the goatee? But anyone who has studied the history of the essay knew immediately when they saw him: it was Michel de Montaigne.

Conference-goers would soon find that the actor who so closely resembles the French essayist (minus the stick-on facial hair and Renaissance garb) was actually Joey Franklin, a professor of creative writing at

Brigham Young University and author of *My Wife Wants You to Know I'm Happily Married*, published by the University of Nebraska Press. Like Franklin's elaborate performance art, banking on his striking likeness to Montaigne, his essay collection similarly channels Montaigne's literary influence. Franklin's winding essays truly *essay*—or try out a concept or idea by tying together various personal, cultural, and academic ephemera. Franklin essays about kissing, about fast food jobs, about T-ball parenting, and about his father's incarceration. Each subject has its fair share of reflection and examination, combined with narrative and description. The revelations aren't earth-shattering—I get the feeling Franklin would be suspicious of them if they were—but instead sit on the tongue like a great vintage of a non-alcoholic wine. But although they may look alike, Joey Franklin is not Montaigne. He's a contemporary Montaigne. A Mormon Montaigne.

Probably Franklin's most interesting work in the collection happens when the subject matter pushes boundaries of Mormon culture. When Franklin was seven, his father was incarcerated, causing rifts and tensions in an otherwise seemingly normal LDS home. Franklin plies the experience for insights about father-son communication, about the ways that parents and children mirror each other or hide their insecurities or inadequacies behind the guise of adulthood. In "Grand Theft Auto: Athens, Ohio, Edition," Franklin writes about the theft of his maroon Ford Escort, a family car so trashed that they left the keys in it. An interloper steals the car even though it's the most beat-up one on the lot: "When [the thief] lifts the handle, he not only finds the doors unlocked, but by the street lamp's glow I'm sure he notices a camping chair, a folding bike rack, and two car seats. Never mind the interior smells of rotten milk and stale Cheerios; never mind the diapers and fast-food wrappers covering the floor; never mind the cracker crumbs smashed into the upholstery. This car is open, and hey, look there, in the tray beneath the emergency brake—a set of keys" (33). Franklin's essay then follows this hypothetical thief through the next forty-eight hours, through cans of

beer and oxycodone, through his freeloading drive around southeastern Ohio with two girl friends to the car's eventual recovery after the driver turns into a patrol car without signaling. The ironies pile up in this essay: the car Franklin's family wants to purchase as a replacement has a theft-retrieved title, and their grad-school poverty is offset by the more desperate poverty of the incarcerated thieves. The irony questions the assumptions and entitlements that govern their lives. Shouldn't they be angry? Vindictive? But someone has it worse. They're protected by insurance and can always get another car.

Perhaps that's what I found so compelling about this collection: it takes either seemingly benign or extraordinary subject matter and then complicates those subjects through introspection, juxtaposition, or analysis. One of the strongest pieces is "Working at Wendy's," an essay about getting a minimum-wage stop-gap job while Franklin's spouse was completing university. At the time, Franklin had a graduate degree and other employment, but the proximity of Wendy's and the flexible hours drew him to the job. He was, in a word, different from the single moms and ex-felons or college dropouts that constitute the majority of this particular Wendy's workforce. His difference is apparent from the very beginning: "As I hand the manager my résumé, I realize it is a mistake. He doesn't want to know my service experience, or my academic references, or my GPA. All he wants to know is whether I can spell my name correctly" (21). Rather than moralize about his position through interpretation or speculation, Franklin instead chooses objective juxtaposition. He tells his story, relays what he hears from those around him, and then goes home to his wife and young child. The juxtaposition here shows us what introspection cannot: that while his colleagues are trapped in a narrative not of their own making, Joey can leave at any time. And the empathy and care Franklin takes in telling their stories shows us that that is a kind of injustice.

The essays also exhibit a range of formal innovation. The T-ball essay, for example, is written in second person, an appropriate choice for an essay that performs itself on its subject matter in such an incriminating way. The “you” here stands for Franklin’s actual lived experience and dilemmas about how to parent a talented child in an over-competitive sport, but it also implicates the reader in a way that makes us question how we also reinforce the stories that we tell young boys about excellence in sports. We’re thrust into this uncomfortable position of promoting a talented child while simultaneously being aware of the forces at play around us.

Other essays look at his family, particularly his relationship with his spouse. In the first essay about the lifespan of a kiss, Franklin acknowledges that, “Needless to say, she’s had some reservations about the writing of this book” (18). An essay on dancing, “The Swing is Gone,” delves into aspects of their courtship, how, even though she wasn’t as serious a dancer, she was still eager to learn and willing to support Franklin when he competed with his dance partner. Franklin finds this intriguing, which leads him to make changes in his life and eventually to abandon competitive dance. He chooses another center, another obsession. As the title of the book and the title essay last essay suggest, Franklin’s spouse, Melissa, inhabits the work—proof of what a lasting marriage can be. His wife wants us to know, and through her, so does Franklin.

My Wife Wants You to Know I’m Happily Married is pleasurable, aesthetically interesting, thoughtful, and complex, if at times a little thematically safe. If there is any fault in the book, it is this: it reinforces rather than challenges the rules it has prescribed for itself. It’s a book that’s aware of its limitations, as unpretentious as its t-shirt-festooned cover. It has male-pattern baldness, a diminutive name, and it will never get past second base. But I think that’s also partly the point. Within those self-prescribed limitations, the book is a delight.

Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives: Ceaselessly into the Past

Karen Rosenbaum. *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2015. 204 pp. Paper: \$14.95. ISBN: 978-0-9883233-6-0.

Reviewed by Josh Allen

When reading Karen Rosenbaum's short story collection *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives*, I kept thinking about the end of *The Great Gatsby* and Fitzgerald's haunting conclusion: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."³ So it is with the women who populate Rosenbaum's fourteen stories in this collection. The past defines them, breathes always within them. They live preoccupied with family legacies and personal histories, often ruminating, always remembering. Consider, for example, the structure of Rosenbaum's story "Requiem in L Minor." Charlotte, the main character, is recopying an old address book that's grown faded and illegible. She's reached the Ls—Angela and Mark Laird. Their names are offered to readers as a subheading, and under that heading, Charlotte dredges up memories of her time with the Lairds, reflecting on the past. The story continues in this way, on through the address book, with Nathan Loewe, Carole and Ken Lidwell, Jill Leonard, Morty Lawler, and Ginny Lin. In each of these sections, Charlotte moves through her past, reaffirming it. This single story's structure seems a fitting microcosm for the larger collection. The fourteen stories in this book are divided into four sections, each section focusing on the women within a single family and exploring their histories and the accumulated baggage of their lives. But it's not just their own lives' weight these women bear. They also bear the weight of family legacy—inherited faith, family responsibilities, or even stories themselves. And yet, for Rosenbaum's female protagonists,

3. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1925/2004), 180.

the past is never an oppressive force. Rosenbaum's women bear their pasts without complaint, accepting them as instrumental and often welcome parts of who they are. This emphasis on / preoccupation with the past does much for Rosenbaum's writing. It fuels her prose, lends her stories a gratifying subtlety, allows her to develop finely wrought characters, and ultimately imbues her work with the artistic weight that makes this collection such a pleasure.

There are no high-adrenaline moments in these stories, no swift crescendos into passion or drama, and so, neither are there passages where the sentences shorten and speed up to fuel the rising drama. The prose throughout this collection remains quiet, reflective—as it should for a book built upon memory. It's all a bit like this passage from "The Price of Ties": "The daughter hums as the Honda laps up the Interstate. She likes to drive, likes the sensation of speed and smoothness and control. Her monthly weekend trips from Evanston began when her father was ill and continued after he died" (23). And so it goes—a simple present action (i.e., driving) propels a character into reflection. This formula pervades these stories and fuels prose that rolls along like that car on the interstate, set on quiet cruise control. The prose moves methodically, even elegantly, as it does in this passage from "Paradise Paved": "She can almost see, standing at her right elbow, Miss Hunsaker, a pen in her right hand, a short, fat glass of something clear and tinkly in her left. When she would lean over Elaine to correct her hand position or draw arrows to the problem notes, Elaine could smell Miss Hunsaker's strong, juniperish breath" (105–06). Here, the prose remains soft and slow-moving—Elaine "almost" sees her past, as if she's witnessing the slow movement of ghosts—because the past is always treated with reverence, and each of the characters is moved by it to a genuine sense of awe.

Related to this quiet prose are the quiet and subtle transformations of Rosenbaum's characters. Impatient readers might crave more volatility—more dynamic characters and grander character arcs. But given Rosenbaum's emphasis on memory, her characters' subtle transformations

feel authentic. Consider the end of “Requiem in L Minor.” Returning again to her address book, Charlotte thinks: “I should write to Ramona. No confession, no conversion. A letter of love. Love, no matter what. Mostly” (152). Any changes that emerge here, from a character willing to dwell so worshipfully over her address book, feel more like affirmations than transformations. And yet, this story, like so many in the collection, ends with both an affirmation and a transformation. Charlotte makes the kind of change that can be triggered by revisiting long-carried memories—a subtle change—so subtle that it’s captured in a single word (i.e., “Mostly”). Other stories in this collection follow suit. In fact, a few of the character arcs in these stories are so understated that I had to re-read them to see them at work. But the story arcs are there. By moving through their pasts, these characters not only reaffirm their identities; they also slowly and methodically develop them.

Rosenbaum’s reverence for memory, then, becomes the defining attribute of her finely wrought characters, and since we stick with her characters for more than one story, we get to see them reflect on different aspects of their pasts, often from different points in their lives. Sometimes, a single character’s stories are even separated by decades, such as in “Havesu,” which follows Elaine on a river rafting trip, and then in “The River Rerun” (published in this issue), which follows Elaine on the same trip some thirty years later. This technique—letting us watch characters wrestle with memory at different points in their lives—draws readers closer to Rosenbaum’s characters. As more stories are offered, more memories are turned over, and readers gain new layers of character authenticity and complexity. I often found myself growing fonder of these characters the more I read. This technique also allows Rosenbaum to develop one of her major themes: that bearing the weight of memory is a shared feminine experience that spans generations, and that by bearing the past, women (particularly western, Mormon women) become bound in a universal feminine soul. In this way, even everyday objects like old snapshots and long-since worn baby dresses take on enormous weight.

One of the most common burdens of the past that Rosenbaum revisits is that of faith. Some of her characters take up their inherited

Mormon faith gladly; others shed it. But to Rosenbaum's credit, her characters are not hobby horses for some agenda. This book is not activism masquerading as fiction. Her characters are too carefully developed for that. For example, in "The Price of Ties," one character says, "Believing isn't the easiest thing in the world" (31), and we believe her. These characters' faith or lack thereof comes across as simply one of their human qualities, one piece of their pasts they're destined to wrestle with, never a statement by their author.

Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives is a fine collection. It is carefully crafted, and its thorough examination of how our histories shape and refine us lends this book its artistic and thematic weight. That weight, like these characters' pasts, is well worth bearing. These stories were composed over four decades and appeared originally in various publications including *Sunstone*, *Irreantum*, and *Dialogue*. Fittingly, *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives* received an award from the Association for Mormon Letters in 2015.



The New Descartes and the Book of Mormon

Earl M. Wunderli. *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013. 396 pp. Paper: \$32.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-230-8.

Reviewed by Mark D. Thomas

The seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes is known as the father of modern philosophy and a leading figure in the rationalist movement. Descartes was weary of past authority and of knowledge gained through the senses. His most famous philosophical statement is "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am). If I doubt that I exist, that

doubting is thinking. It is therefore self-evident that I exist as a thinking being. This is the epistemological foundation upon which all of his other knowledge claims are built.

Earl Wunderli has an analogous way of reading disputed texts. He attempts to start with the most certain epistemological principle that he can—the text itself. The starting point to understand the Book of Mormon, Wunderli claims, is not found in history, archaeology, or even revelation. History, linguistics, and archaeology regarding the Book of Mormon place the meaning of the text in the hands of a narrow group of specialists whose arguments are difficult to assess. Revelation is, according to Wunderli, certainly a real empirical experience but cannot be the ground of textual knowledge since its meaning is not self-evident and open to dispute. I recall while attending the University of Utah witnessing a returned missionary walking up to a female friend of mine at lunch in the Institute of Religion. The returned missionary informed my friend that God had revealed to him that they would be married. My friend laughed in his face and walked away. She soon thereafter married someone else. This young man's revelation is one of many examples that demonstrate that the meaning of revelation is not self-evident and is therefore not an infallible epistemological foundation in a Cartesian sense.

While Wunderli sees historical, linguistic, archaeological, and revelatory knowledge claims regarding the Book of Mormon as arcan, opaque, or private, what is not open to dispute is the existence of the text itself; the text has the virtue of being easily accessible to all and its content is agreed upon. I read the text, therefore I am. So Wunderli spent decades studying names, words, and phrases in the Nephite text. However, he does not claim infallibility of interpretation or knowledge, nor does he throw out all academic disciplines that provide a possible context for reading. What he does insist upon is that academic tap dancing cannot be allowed to silence the voice of the text. In his book, Wunderli has written about a widespread flaw in the history of Book of Mormon

interpretation—ignoring the voice of the text. In Wunderli's approach, the first task of understanding a text is to carefully question the text itself.

The corollary of his thesis is that the one thing a text cannot do is hide what it is. Every opening of a book is a judgment day in which words can be interpreted and texts weighed in the balance. Here are some samples of Wunderli's method. What are the major themes in the Book of Mormon? Wunderli concludes that that can be determined by finding what the narrators spend the most time discussing. For example, Nephi's account constitutes only fifty-five years but amounts to twenty percent of the Book of Mormon. The four books after 2 Nephi cover 415 years but only constitute five percent of the Book of Mormon. These four books are seen as mere filler to connect the narrative of Nephi with the large plates and do not contribute to the text's major themes. Wunderli argues along these lines and concludes from the text itself that the main themes of the Book of Mormon are:

Origins of the American Indians and a destiny of the scattering from Babel

The restoration of ancient Christianity to an apostate world

The visit of Jesus as God to America

The continuous cycle of righteousness and ruin, ending in final destruction. (17–22)

Another topic Wunderli mines from the text itself is the extent of the promised land. "The Jaredites first and then Nephi and Lehi all include North America as part of their promised land" (259). Here he argues that a continental view of the promised land is the clear understanding in the text. "The limited geography theorists [such as John Sorenson who confine the Book of Mormon story to a small section of Central America] disregard much of what the Book of Mormon explicitly states in order to preserve their view of its real history" (267).

Once Wunderli has established the interpretive principle of listening to the text, he then brings in various disciplines of scholarship to

dialogue with the text. His primary concern is to determine if Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon or if it is a translation of an ancient text. Wunderli again believes that his conclusions are obvious to any objective reader of the text.

He starts with the biblical passages in the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith used the King James Version of the Bible throughout, with its many translation and textual errors. Nephite writers quote biblical texts that would be written hundreds of years after the Nephite quotation. Prophecy in the Book of Mormon is detailed and accurate up to the time of Joseph Smith. After that, the prophecies begin to fail. For example, the Book of Mormon repeatedly prophesies that the Jews would return to the promised land after they had been converted to Christianity. By examining the theology, word usage, names, and idioms in the Book of Mormon, Wunderli concludes that the Book of Mormon is very likely the product of a single author with the perspective of a white European-American.

Wunderli summarizes the textual, scientific, and religious ideas in the Book of Mormon that are anachronistic. He then concludes, "The contents of the Book of Mormon speak for themselves. . . . The Book of Mormon may mean different things to different people, but it is not a literal history of ancient America" (238).

Mormon scholarship on the Book of Mormon seems to be headed in the opposite direction from the call to hear the voice of the text. Tap dancing with the shoes of obscurity is written on the Mormon apologists' marquee. But I predict that someday Book of Mormon scholars of all persuasions will come around to listening carefully to the voice of the text as the foundation of knowledge about the Book of Mormon, as Wunderli has advocated.

STEPHEN WEBB: IN MEMORIAM

Mathew N. Schmalz

When I heard the news that Stephen Webb had passed away on March 5, 2016, I mourned the loss.¹

I never met Stephen Webb. Although we both attended the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, he was several years ahead of me in the program. I did not know his wife or his children, nor was I close to the many people who called him friend, colleague, and mentor. Instead, I knew Stephen Webb through his scholarship: a scholarship that reflected his complex spiritual and intellectual journey from Evangelical Christianity to Roman Catholicism. Stephen Webb's scholarly output was enormous—always of high caliber and, more than occasionally, provocative in the best sense: Stephen Webb always made people think. He wrote about Christian obligations to animals; probed the spiritual dimensions of Bob Dylan's music; and argued for an understanding of providential place of the United States in God's plan for humankind.² For me, however, Stephen Webb as a scholar remained, first and foremost, one of the few Catholic academics who appreciated Mormonism's intellectual complexity.

While I wish I had known Stephen Webb more fully as a person, I nonetheless admired how his scholarly work built bridges and created

1. Stephen Howe Webb, *Indianapolis Star* Mar. 9, 2016: A7; See also Samuel D. Rocha, "The Excess of Stephen Webb," *First Things*, Mar. 16, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/03/the-excess-of-stephen-h-webb>.

2. Stephen Webb, *Good Eating: The Bible, Diet and the Proper Love of Animals* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press/Baker, 2001); Stephen Webb, *Dylan Redeemed: From Highway 61 to Saved* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Stephen Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

shared spaces for Catholics and Latter-day Saints to more fully understand, and appreciate, each other. His tragic and unexpected loss is most keenly felt by his friends and family; but it is also felt by those who never knew him but were inspired to travel along the scholarly path he blazed that allowed Catholics and Mormons to tarry in discussions with each other as fellow Christians. In this short essay, I cannot memorialize Stephen Webb in all his richness as a person. But I can share what I learned about Mormon/Catholic dialogue from him and introduce his work to those who may not have had the opportunity to engage it. In so doing, I hope that all of us can appreciate the depth of his work and the promise it holds not just for Catholics and Mormons, but for all Christians, who long to see God face-to-face.

Stephen Webb was a materialist—not of the Marxist, atheist kind—but of a peculiarly and authentically Christian kind. He explored early Christian understandings of materiality of the universe, and the materiality of God, in his 2012 monograph *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter*. In his broad ranging discussion, Webb surveys Christian understandings of God as immaterial and presents a contending and contrary argument that materiality is part of God’s perfection. He argues for a “heavenly flesh Christology” that understands humans and God as sharing in the same materiality: humans really are made in the image of God.

This position, so complementary to Joseph Smith’s revelation that “all spirit is matter” (D&C 131:7), is open to a number of criticisms from the Christian Christological and metaphysical tradition. In a rather critical review of Webb’s monograph, Eastern University philosophy professor William Cary notes how Mormon conceptions of deification through eternal progression devalue the uniqueness of “Christ’s flesh” and thus, unwittingly perhaps, devalue the salvific significance of Christ Himself.³ Webb opposes what is often called “apophatic” or “negative” theology

3. William Cary, “Material God: A Review of *Jesus Christ, Eternal God*,” *First Things*, May 2012, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/05/material-god>.

that focuses on what God is not. Such a distrust of the apophatic, Cary implies, robs God of transcendence: from a materialist perspective either God is everything or God is dependent on what He is not—positions that both obfuscate considerations of what makes God’s “Being” distinctive. Simply put: an exclusively material God is no god at all.

Perhaps in response to such criticisms, Webb extended and deepened his consideration of Mormon metaphysics in *Mormon Christianity*, published by Oxford University Press in 2013.⁴ Against perceptions of Mormon philosophical materialism as simplistic or superficial, Webb shows how Mormon theology resolves crucial theological questions—while in the process raising other theological problems that LDS tradition must seriously confront. But before advancing the core of his scholarly argument in *Mormon Christianity*, Webb admits to a severe case of “Mormon envy.”⁵ Webb’s description of this syndrome is salutary because it applies to so many Gentiles throughout academia who have been drawn to Mormonism’s distinctive history, its sense of community, and its seemingly relentless optimism. But Webb’s “Mormon envy” is primarily intellectual—after all, for Mormons, matter does, indeed, matter.

Mormon Christianity’s intellectual trajectory is given orientation by Webb’s consideration of Greek thinkers who placed metaphysics at the center of their philosophical systems: Plato who in spite of his privileging of the immaterial realm, sought “to bridge the gulf between spirit and matter” and Plotinus who “taught that life begins with the One and involves a descent into the material world.”⁶ But most compelling for Webb are the neo-Platonists—figures such as Imbalichus and Marsilio Fincino—who turned to “magic” and “ritual” to conceptualize and forge

4. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Kindle Edition.

5. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, chapter 1.

6. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 64, location 990; 66, location 1034.

a closer relationship between humans and the divine.⁷ While he makes it clear that Joseph Smith was certainly no neo-Platonist, Webb nonetheless observes that Smith affirmed the “gifted character of rituals and the correlation between closeness to God and moral transformation.”⁸ That Joseph Smith dabbled in folk magic and divination suggests not puzzlement, but more than a hint of divine providence.

Materiality and spirituality, with human and divine embodiment as their correlates, connect Catholicism and Mormonism in unexpected ways that allow both to complement and correct each other. Webb centers his reflections on the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation that articulates how Christ is sacramentally present—body, soul, and divinity—under the external appearances of bread and wine when they are consecrated by the priest during the Catholic mass. Webb quite rightly points out the difficulty that many Catholics have with the Mormon practices of partaking of the sacrament as water, not wine, in a way that does not seem similar to reverential reception of communion in a Catholic context.⁹ But Webb encourages both Catholics and Mormons to look beyond superficial differences in ritualization to appreciate how both Catholicism and Mormonism believe that transubstantiation, in the sense of the joining of the material and spiritual, lies at the center of the human experience of the divine. Accordingly, Catholicism can teach Mormonism how this joining of the material and spiritual is fundamentally Christological in character.¹⁰ For its part, Mormonism can help Catholicism avoid a kind of hyper-ritualization in which the focus on transubstantiation during the Catholic mass effectively prevents a broader appreciation of how the material and the spiritual come together in the totality of God’s creation.¹¹

7. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 68, loc. 1059.

8. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 72, loc. 1123.

9. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 78, loc. 1215.

10. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 167, loc. 2526.

11. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 81, loc. 1254.

Webb is not beyond criticizing what he regards as Mormonism's "excesses." He is no proponent of polygamy and argues that Brigham Young, in particular, was guilty of theological overreach. In Webb's view, Mormonism still needs to contend with its conception of God as "master of matter" and how that relates to eternal law, as well as resolve the very real tension in the affirmation that matter is both chaotic and good.¹² Most fundamentally, Mormonism needs to consider much more carefully how divinization works when matter is considered to be eternal and "thus, relatively speaking, unchanging" while humans themselves, as material beings, undergo substantial changes.¹³

Such "aporias" notwithstanding, Webb does argue that Mormonism untangles some crucial theological questions that conventional Christianity still finds challenging. The first question concerns why Christ's body experienced very little corruption or putrefaction while entombed. Since Mormons believe we have spiritual bodies in addition to physical bodies (though both are material), Webb contends that it is plausible that Christ's flesh was of a significantly higher order than normal human flesh, even though it still was material.¹⁴ The second question Mormonism helps answer concerns the process of transubstantiation. Webb appears to argue that Catholic theology reached an impasse with regard to the specific mechanisms of transubstantiation and finally rested with an understanding of God's omnipotence in which anything and everything is within God's power to accomplish—no matter how contradictory it might seem.¹⁵ By contrast, Mormonism's robust and sophisticated materialism allows an unlikely partnership with quantum physics that does not confine matter—and what it can become—within the parameters of classical physics. Through this discussion, Mormon metaphysics becomes a complement and corrective to classical Catholic

12. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 210, loc. 3196.

13. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 210, loc. 3181.

14. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 194, loc. 2943.

15. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 200, loc. 3010.

metaphysical theories associated with the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and his retrieval and appropriation of Aristoteleanism. But perhaps more provocatively, Webb shows us how Mormonism has a firm intellectual foundation that would allow LDS philosophers to join physicists and other academics on the cutting edge of contemporary investigations about what matter is, what it can be, and why it matters.

I think it's fair to say that many Catholic theologians and philosophers would find Webb's discussion interesting, but also highly idiosyncratic and perhaps even lacking in rigor. Webb takes Mormon thought seriously and what emerges is a far more complex, and nuanced appreciation of the LDS tradition. But in his enthusiasm to pursue interesting and unexpected connections between Catholicism and Mormonism, Webb seems to oversimplify not only Catholic thinking about subjects like transubstantiation but also contemporary scientific thought that demands a mastery of mathematics and technical language not often gained by scholars whose primary training has been in divinity schools, not laboratories. But *Mormon Christianity* is all about breaking down boundaries. Webb provides a philosophical bridge or plumb line that connects Christian understandings of materiality and immateriality so that the boundary between Catholicism and Mormonism itself becomes permeable. Likewise, in Webb's intellectual excursions, religious reflection and scientific inquiry assume co-equal roles as disciplines that have something important to say—and discover—about the world and human life, in all their complexity.

A fine example of the dialogue of Stephen Webb's commitment to Mormon/Catholic dialogue can be found in *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation*, a series of discussions between Webb and BYU professor of religion, Alonzo L. Gaskill.¹⁶ While intellectually substantive throughout, *Catholic and Mormon* also preserves an almost informal style of back and forth that makes it profitable reading even to those who

16. Stephen H. Webb and Alonzo L. Gaskill, *Catholic and Mormon: A Theological Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Kindle Edition

might be intimidated by Webb and Gaskill's deep knowledge of Christian philosophy and theology. Together, Webb and Gaskill discuss the role of authority in the Catholic and Mormon traditions, and comment upon other salient issues such as revelation, ritual, soul, and, of course, matter. Both scholars have a robust understanding of how Mormonism and Catholicism can contribute not only to contemporary discussions concerning ethics or personal growth, but also to investigations that probe how and why the world works—or does not work—as it does. Both Webb and Gaskill resist attempts to place religion in a conceptual box in which it remains master of an increasingly circumscribed intellectual domain. Given this intent, perhaps a more provocative, and slightly more accurate, title of their discussion could have been *Mormonism and Catholicism Unbound*. Indeed, as careful scholars and skilled interlocutors, Stephen Webb and Alzono Gaskill show us that when Catholics and Mormons take their traditions seriously, a broader horizon emerges that reclaims religion as an overarching frame for human inquiry and intellectual exploration.

It is difficult to choose which section of Mormon and Catholic is the most thought provoking. But Webb and Gaskill's discussion of "Mary" drew me in the most fully, precisely because I both agreed and disagreed with their approach so strongly. Catholicism and Mormonism have strong things to say about gender: for both traditions, family and marriage are central, and the distinctions between men and women are considered to be inscribed in God's plan for creation. Both Webb and Gaskill draw attention to the central role of what could be called the divine feminine or "the goddess problem" in both Mormonism and Catholicism—although neither Mary or Heavenly Mother are "divine" in the conventional or theological sense for Catholics and Mormons, respectively.¹⁷ Through Webb and Gaskill's back and forth, seemingly idiosyncratic or even embarrassing Catholic and Mormon understandings of Mary—from

17. Webb and Gaskill *Catholic and Mormon*, 50. Kindle Edition.

the Catholic belief that Mary was “assumed body and soul into heaven,” to the Mormon understanding that Mary and Heavenly Father quite intimately joined together—can be seen as ways to affirm the “feminine side to the divine,” the significance of the human body, and the importance of women as women.¹⁸ But also noticeable in their discussion is a failure to reference the voices of Mormon and Catholic women as well as an apparent unwillingness to seriously engage issues of patriarchy, for it is also true that the lived experience of Mormonism and Catholicism can raise challenges and cause pain for women in a way that seems to belie the irenic and positive view of femininity or womanhood in both traditions.

In surveying Stephen Webb’s discourse about and with Mormonism, I am reminded—to inartfully reference 1 Nephi 1:1—that while I was “taught somewhat in the learning of” Christian traditions of metaphysical inquiry, philosophy could never take me to the places I wanted to go spiritually and intellectually. I am not convinced that Catholic or Mormon thought—separately or together—can do all that Webb believed they could do, especially when set alongside contemporary speculation in the sciences. While I see Catholicism and Mormonism as surprisingly complementary in many respects and, like Stephen Webb, have a serious case of “Mormon envy,” I am more concerned with how Catholics and Mormons can share their experiences of Jesus so that we can more fully understand God’s presence in the world and join together to make that world a better place. But even as I struggled with some of its more extravagant speculations, Stephen Webb’s work allowed me to see that one cannot ignore the intellectual and theological aspects of Catholicism and Mormonism when thinking about possibilities for substantive dialogue and cooperation. Indeed, Webb would argue that my reluctance to push Catholicism and Mormonism’s metaphysical claims is the sign of someone who has given up the fight against both modernity and post-modernity—the sign of someone who is resigned

18. Webb and Gaskill *Catholic and Mormon*, 55; 60. Kindle Edition.

to religion's truncated place in contemporary culture. He would also surely press the point that in order for Catholics and Mormonism to come together to make the world a better place, there needs to be a clear and fulsome intellectual understanding of what the world actually is, and why it is important.

Two weeks before his death, *First Things* published what came to be Stephen Webb's last essay for a broad scholarly audience. In "God of the Depressed," Webb writes about how difficult it is for Christians to speak of depression, and why it is a "befuddling" malady that church leaders and theologians reference as infrequently as they do hell.¹⁹ Webb concludes his reflections by recalling the experience of Christ fasting in the wilderness and the "hiddenness" of much of Jesus' ministry:

He also spent many years hidden from public view, his mission kept secret, his life so obscure that the Gospels tell us nothing about them. He had a long time of waiting, and he knew what awaited him. It is this time of hiddenness, I think, that most captures the depressant's emotional state. The depressed wait for the long nights to end and the anguish to subside. The depressed, like Jesus during his so-called lost years, are hidden from sight, waiting for their lives to begin.²⁰

"God of the Depressed" is insightful and moving. And it also reveals what I think was a fundamental tension in Stephen Webb's scholarly work. For him, a metaphysic of materiality was not simply an intellectually pleasurable puzzle, but a necessary foundation on which to ground the Christian expectation that we will see God face to face. It is striking then that his discussions of materiality are usually advanced through almost immaterial academic abstractions—from considerations of Monophysitism to the Higgs Boson particle. Although he never refers to himself or to his own experiences in "God of the Depressed," reading between the lines of academic prose, it is clear that the powerful intellectual

19. Stephen H. Webb, "God of the Depressed," *First Things*, Feb. 19, 2016, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2016/02/god-of-the-depressed>.

20. Ibid.

content of his scholarly work proceeded from a spirituality that knew, understood, and felt God's presence—as well as God's apparent absence.

When Stephen Webb looked at Mormons, he saw people “too happy to be Christian.”²¹ He drew upon William James' well known typology to argue that Mormonism was a religion of “healthy-mindedness,” emphasizing optimism and joy, as opposed to a religion of the “sick soul,” like Catholicism, that emphasizes original sin and suffering.²² Indeed, Mormonism, to an outside observer or to a newly baptized Latter-day Saint, might indeed seem to be a religion of the healthy minded: all is eternal progression, the family endures forever, and God is close. But I wish Stephen Webb had considered the testimonies and imaginings of those who reveal the complex and sometimes conflicted core of LDS experience: Kristin Haglund and her courageous discussions of Mormon feminism and her own struggles with depression; Christopher Bigelow and the members of *The Sugar Beet* who reveal a transgressive side to the Mormon psyche; Dan Wotherspoon, whose *Mormon Matters* podcast embraces an unflinching realism and openness to self-investigation.²³ Their voices affirm time and time again that Mormons, too, feel the heaviness of life and reach out for the touch of a “God who weeps.”²⁴

Mormonism may be about eternal optimism in a healthy-minded sense, but it is also about labor, about work that extends beyond the vale of death. Mormonism is about a God who “cannot, will not, allow

21. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 49, loc. 759.

22. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 43, loc. 694.

23. See “Episode 25: An Interview with Kristine Haglund,” *Feminist Mormon Housewives Podcast* (Dec. 10, 2012) <http://feministmormonhousewivespodcast.org/episode-24-an-interview-with-kristine-haglund/>; Christopher Bigelow, *Kindred Spirits* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla Press, 2007); Paul Allen, *The Mormon Tabernacle Enquirer: Latter-day News, Advice, and Opinion* (Pince Nez Press, 2006); *Mormon Matters: A Weekly Podcast Exploring Mormon Culture and Current Events* <http://www.mormonmatters.org/>.

24. See Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

moral or ethical imperfection in any degree whatsoever to dwell in his presence” as Stephen E. Robinson writes in his otherwise quite optimistic book, *Believing Christ*.²⁵ This moral or ethical perfectionism can exact a heavy price as exemplified in the despair and self-harm that shapes the tortured life of Frank Windham, the fictional protagonist of Levi Peterson’s *The Backslider*.²⁶ While Joseph Smith sought to comfort his fellow Mormons in the King Follett discourse by speaking of the “everlasting burnings of exaltation,” one cannot help but think that fire causes excruciating pain as it consumes and cleanses.²⁷

Perhaps Stephen Webb’s emphasis on materiality was a response to the experience of divine absence: a way of affirming how there is substance in what appears to be empty. Those of us who suffer—or have suffered—from depression feel an internal emptiness, a “sick-soul” sense of personal nothingness that resists even the most sustained and “healthy-minded” efforts of support and persuasion. But through the work of Stephen Webb, Catholics and Mormons who fall into the abyss of depression may be able to realize that Jesus does have a real, tangible, presence alongside them. I wish I had known Stephen Webb and I wish that his life had been longer. But when Catholics and Mormons together reflect on the fullness of his short life and all it contained, we can more fully appreciate and understand how and why God did share Stephen Webb’s tears as He now surely shares ours.

25. Stephen E. Robinson, *Believing Christ: The Parable of the Bicycle and Other Good News* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1992), loc. 121, Kindle Edition.

26. Levi Peterson, *The Backslider* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986/2012), Kindle Edition.

27. Joseph Smith, “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign*, Apr. 1971, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1971/04/the-king-follett-sermon?lang=eng>.



Leslie O. Peterson
Martha McBride Knight
8x10 watercolor on paper

HOW TO BUILD A PARADOX: MAKING THE NEW JERUSALEM

Kristine Haglund

The text the bishop suggested for my remarks today comes from Doctrine and Covenants 45:66: “And it shall be called the New Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God.” This was a delicious topic for me to think about—the idea of a city on a hill, a heavenly city called Zion, is a subject that has occupied poets as often as it has prophets, and the vision of this city has inspired many of our loveliest hymns, which have been very pleasantly running through my head for weeks now.

Zion is the word we use more often, but it’s worth thinking about the name “New Jerusalem” as well. The etymology of the name “Jerusalem” is contested, but one fairly common theory is that the word is a portmanteau of *Yerusha* (meaning “heritage”) and *saalem* or *shalom*, meaning “peace” or “wholeness.” So, a heritage of peace. Prefacing the notion of heritage with “New” makes it a bit paradoxical, and building Zion—establishing a new heritage—is surely a paradoxical project. The verse I mentioned above is prefaced by an instruction for the Saints to gather money and purchase an inheritance, so we’re alerted to the fact that this is not the usual sort of heritage, but instead one we are to be involved in creating. This is just the beginning of the paradoxical aspects of the description of the New Jerusalem; in fact, it seems to me that Zion is built on a series of paradoxes that I’d like to poke at a bit this afternoon.

First, there is the temporal paradox of Zion. Zion is, in the scriptures, always already fled; we know it only after it is gone. The New Jerusalem,

according to the Doctrine and Covenants, will be built on the site of the Garden of Eden. Always there is this yearning for something lost, some place in the past. But Zion is also always yet to come; the hope of Zion is the promise of restoration. And restoration, it seems to me, requires the knowledge of what was lost. Zion is more precious because it fulfills the longing for a lost Eden. It is Zion in part because it assuages grief and loss—without the sufferings of the past and present, the hope of future glory cannot shine as brightly. The apostle Paul makes reference to this paradoxical linkage of past and future in our yearning for Zion in his beautiful litany of the forebears of our faith in Hebrews 11:3–16:

Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.

By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God.

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:

For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.

Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

The descriptions of the New Jerusalem in Doctrine and Covenants sections 42 and 45 echo this language about seeing the promises afar off, desiring a country that feels like a memory but is born more of spirit and imagination than of earthly experience.

The next paradox, related to the first, is that Zion is both a physical space and an abstraction. That is, Zion is made of memory and longing and hope, which are clearly not tied to a particular place, and yet it is also a physical space. This paradox is especially poignant at the moment when section 45 is given. The Saints are divided, some in Ohio, some in Missouri, a lot of the men on missions—and *none* of the places where they're living are looking to be very hospitable. And yet it's just at this moment that precise instructions for how to share and distribute property are given, even though they don't *have* any property. They're being commanded to live the law of consecration, establish a temporal

kingdom of God, and yet, they're told that the New Jerusalem is to be established in Jackson County—from whence they will eventually be expelled (violently). And this is excruciating to Joseph Smith—one of the things that's clearest in the Doctrine and Covenants and in his writings is how desperately he longs for the physical company of the Saints. Here's a passage from a funeral sermon he preached for Lorenzo Barnes:

I would esteem it one of the greatest blessings, if I am to be afflicted in this world, to have my lot cast where I can find brothers [and sisters, I'm *sure* he meant to say] and friends all around me. . . .

When I heard of the death of our beloved Brother Barnes, it would not have affected me so much, if I had the opportunity of burying him in the land of Zion. . . .

I have said, Father, I desire to die here among the Saints. But if this is not Thy will, and I go hence and die, wilt Thou find some kind friend to bring my body back, and gather my friends who have fallen in foreign lands, and bring them up hither, that we may all lie together.

I will tell you what I want. If tomorrow I shall be called to lie in yonder tomb, in the morning of the resurrection let me strike hands with my father, and cry, "My father," and he will say, "My son, my son," as soon as the rock rends and before we come out of our graves.

And may we contemplate these things so? Yes, if we learn how to live and how to die. When we lie down we contemplate how we may rise in the morning; and it is pleasing for friends to lie down together, locked in the arms of love, to sleep and wake in each other's embrace and renew their conversation.¹

So, Joseph conceives of Zion as the place where earthly longing for heaven finds its fulfillment, where the love we enjoy on earth, partly because we live together and eat together and play games and talk together as earthly beings, is finally made eternal. (This is, of course, why we feel our souls at rest in the temple—it is a place where

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith (1938; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 294–95.

the eternal and heavenly can be located in earthly, physical space.) We will recognize heaven because we have missed it here on earth. What I mean to say is that I think this sort of homesickness, what in German is called *Sehnsucht*, is a crucial part of establishing the New Jerusalem—homelessness, in this view, is a prerequisite for arriving at home. In Isaiah, the description of Zion makes this explicit:

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations.

And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers.

... For your shame ye shall have double; and for confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them. (Isaiah 61:3–5, 7)

Another apparent contradiction is in the law of consecration as we understand it in relation to the New Jerusalem—this law is wholly bound up in material goods and property, and yet it is not materialist in most of the ways we understand that word. It's all about stuff, and it's not about stuff at all, but about the hearts that beat above the bellies that need filling, inside the bodies that need to be clothed and housed. The New Jerusalem is fully in the world, engaged with the commerce and physicality of every human day, and yet it is utterly otherworldly, concerned with souls. This conflation of the physical with the spiritual is beautifully expressed by Isaiah in several places: “but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise” (Isaiah 60:18). It is beautiful, but not costly.

O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, behold, I will lay thy stones with fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires.

And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. (Isaiah 54:11–12)

The glory of Lebanon shall come unto thee, the fir tree, the pine tree, and the box together, to beautify the place of my sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

... For brass I will bring gold, and for iron I will bring silver, and for wood brass, and for stones iron. (Isaiah 60:13, 17)

But also: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isaiah 55:1).

And this invitation brings us to the final paradox I want to consider: that Zion is both a refuge for the Saints and a beacon to the world—her walls are Salvation, not stone; the gates of Praise are open as wide as the Lord’s arms. Returning to Doctrine and Covenants section 45:

And [your inheritance] shall be called the New Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God;

And the glory of the Lord shall be there, and the terror of the Lord also shall be there, insomuch that the wicked will not come unto it, and it shall be called Zion.

... And it shall come to pass that the righteous shall be gathered out from among all nations, and shall come to Zion, singing with songs of everlasting joy. (D&C 45:66–67, 71)

In thinking about this paradox, I realized that we have a perfect model for a refuge that is also inviting, in our homes and families. The Reverend Canon Susan Harriss describes this beautifully in my favorite Mother’s Day sermon of all time:

As mothers, as fathers, we have at our disposal a wonderful time of rehearsal. We may set aside our interests time and again; we may practice watching the interests of others. But if that sacrificial love starts

with our children, and stops there, we will have lost our opportunity to fulfill Christ's commandment, and so have everything that He has promised. Christ's commandment is that we love, not just our children, but one another!

. . . Jesus said, "whosoever loses his life for my sake, will keep it for eternity." If my sacrifice, and yours, is not so much pointed at personal fulfillment, and not even toward the health and education of my children, but beyond that, to the love of the world and God's creation, then I have resurrection. Whatever I have lost, I will have gained—not in the shining faces and adulation of my own children but in the living fabric of the world they inhabit.

This is the best news of all, because, mothers and fathers, when our time has come, when, having fulfilled the duties of our state of life we are free to address ourselves to the needs of the world, when it comes time to love one another as Jesus loved us, we already know how! We have already learned! How to teach, how to feed, how to tend, how to heal, how to care, how to love. But it is different with us this time, because we act not out of duty. This time, in addition to knowing how to love, we also know why.

Because He first loved us. Because Christ has risen. Because in addition to being seen, spotted, glimpsed walking on earth, our beloved Christ has begun to dwell within us. . . . Having practiced our scales, played the daily exercises of love for our children, the scales of our belonging, now we come to the concerto. Now the music begins. Having loved our own, we now can love the world. Now we rise to the task for which parenting prepared us. Because he loved us; because while we lost ourselves not just in sin but in duty, not just in forgetfulness but in earnestness, in our sincere desire to do what was right for our children, because although we lost ourselves in our mothering, God remembered us, and brought us forward, and made us new.²

2. Susan Harriss, "More Life, More Life: On Parenting," in *The Book of Women's Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other's Voices*, edited by E. Lee Hancock (New York: Riverhead, 1999), 140–42.

And of course it is not only in our families that we can learn to balance this paradox. The need for self-forgetfulness, for binding one's own interest to that of another human being, arises in all kinds of situations if we approach our corner of God's creation as a potential habitus for Zion.

This, of course, brings me to the slightly embarrassing part of my talk where I quote from *O, The Oprah Magazine*. The October 2009 issue has a small, sweet essay about a magnificent radio show called *Bookworm*, in which an awkward, brilliant guy named Michael Silverblatt conducts interviews with authors that regularly achieve moments of profound human connection, even, I think, revelation. Here is what Silverblatt said about why he wants to connect with writers, not just let them promote their work, and why he thinks his work matters: "I believe in the elaborate taking care of others. And we live in a culture where 'I'm not my brother's keeper,' 'That's your responsibility,' 'Get a life,' have become bywords, code phrases, anthems for elaborate indifference, selfishness, greediness, and the failure of empathetic acceptance. In the same way that we need to repair the economy, we need to repair the effects of an economy of selfishness."³ I think "an economy of selfishness" is a brilliant description of the world we live in, much of the time. It is Babylon. The refuge that the New Jerusalem is to provide the Saints is, at least partially, available to us whenever we choose "the elaborate taking care of others." We can make Zion, in large and small ways, with the brute materials of our earthly existence: casseroles, prayers, merit badges, baby blankets, a ride, a hug, a Band-Aid, a loan, a smile, a flower, banana bread, hymns, tears shed on a friends' shirt, the shirt. Here's Michael Silverblatt again: "It's one of the secrets of the world. We all have the key to one another's locks. But until we start to talk, we don't know it."⁴ I would amend that and say that until we start to love, we don't know it. But the truth we can learn when we catch a glimpse of Zion is that starting to love is

3. Kristy Davis, "The Bookworm," *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Oct. 2009, 154–60.

4. Ibid.

not some mystical, otherworldly project; it is an entirely this-worldly endeavor. We build our part of Zion with wood and stone and mud and iron, and then God promises to restore our wastelands and make our feeble gifts worthy of his habitation.

There's a moment when I think I see Zion distantly, and the memories of it often sustain me when the world gets dark. It's that small pause between the end of the sacrament hymn and the moment the priest begins to say the sacrament prayers. In every congregation I've ever been in, I have felt the hush descend, heard the babies quieted, and sensed the whole ward drawing breath together. It was most poignant in a branch I lived in in Germany, where one of the priests stuttered—every time it was his turn to say the prayers, you could practically touch the love and concern of the branch members who loved that boy and willed him to be able to make it through without much trouble. But it's always there, and I think all that we do week in and week out—visiting teaching, preparing lessons, bringing food, caring for each other's children, praying, disciplining ourselves to study the gospel, serving our neighbors, baking cookies, planning youth activities and sharing time, enduring Cub Scout pack meetings and driving hordes of smelly big Scouts home from campouts—*all* of it is for that one moment of breathing together, knowing ourselves to be borne on the breath of God. When we need each other the way we need air, and when we look together toward the bread of life and the living water Christ offers, we find the promised refuge of the New Jerusalem.

It is true that Zion is an impossible paradox—it is the province of poets, insane utopians, and of prophets burdened with the weight of God's dreams. But it is here, too, in the light just behind the clouds of dailiness that both obscure our vision and save us from the light of the sun we are not yet prepared to see. It is my witness and my prayer that God will save us when we lose ourselves in lives of simple tenderness, that as we learn to love his world we will become his partners and his friends in saving his creation, and that he will, in his good time, restore us to

Zion and Zion to us. I bear witness that, with Sara, we may “[judge] him faithful who [has] promised” (Hebrews 11:11). His promise is assured through the sacrificial love of Christ:

[W]ith great mercies will I gather thee.

In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer.

... For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee. (Isaiah 54:7–8, 10)

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

CONTRIBUTORS

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CAROL LYNN PEARSON {carollynnpearson@gmail.com} began her writing career as a poet, with many of her poems being reprinted in such places as the Ann Landers column and college literary textbooks. The poems appear now in a compilation, *Beginnings and Beyond*. Her memoir, *Goodbye, I Love You*, tells the story of her marriage to a homosexual man, their divorce, ongoing friendship, and her caring for him as he died of AIDS. This book is credited with opening the conversation about homosexuality in the Church in 1986. Many other of her works are also well known to Mormon readers, such as the musicals *My Turn on Earth*

and *The Order is Love*. Her work on behalf of LGBT people includes *No More Goodbyes*, *The Hero's Journey of the Gay and Lesbian Mormon*, and the stage play *Facing East*, which received an award from *Deseret News* as “best play of the year,” and went on to have a limited off-Broadway run. Her work on women's issues includes a one-woman play, *Mother Wove the Morning*, which she performed over 300 times, playing sixteen women throughout history in search of God the Mother. *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men* is a book she considers the most important of her career. She is the author of numerous inspirational books, such as *The Lesson* and *Embracing Coincidence*. Her Christmas books include *A Stranger for Christmas*, *The Modern Magi*, *The Christmas Moment* and *A Christmas Thief*. Ms. Pearson has an MA in theater, is the mother of four grown children, and lives in Walnut Creek, California.

LESLIE O. PETERSON {lfolau@hotmail.com} came to art, not by design but by serendipity. In 2011, she enrolled in a community art class with a son-in-law who had recently suffered a stroke. Though she meant the course as a form of therapy for him, she was captured in an instant and has been a painter of prolific output ever since. Peterson is best known for her charming, whimsical series of portraits titled “The Forgotten Wives of Joseph Smith.” These thirty-four portraits have garnered a great deal of attention locally and nationally. In 2015, Provo's Writ & Vision bookstore featured the collection for several weeks, the University of Utah and Dixie State University both staged exhibits, and a video about the series won two awards in the annual Radio West Film Competition. Most notably, the *New York Times* published an article about Peterson and all the wives in its August 18, 2015 edition. Peterson decided to paint Smith's wives after reading an essay about them on lds.org. She says that working on the portraits was her way of celebrating their reappearance in Mormon awareness and bringing them to life in church history after a long absence.

GREGORY A. PRINCE {gprince@erols.com} was born and raised in Los Angeles. Over a four-decade career in biomedical research he pioneered the prevention of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) pneumonia in high-risk infants. He has published three books on Mormon history—*Power From on High: The Development of Mormon Priesthood* (1995), *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (2005), and *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (2016)—and over two-dozen articles, chapters and reviews in the field of Mormon Studies. He is the Interfaith Liaison in the Washington, DC Stake. He and his wife, JaLynn Rasmussen Prince, are the parents of three children, the youngest of whom (Madison) is autistic. JaLynn and Greg now spend their time heading the Madison House Autism Foundation (madisonhouseautism.org), through which they hope to address the national issues facing autistic adults and their families.

KAREN ROSENBAUM {karenmcrose@gmail.com} taught English for thirty-four years at Ohlone College, in Fremont, California. Now retired, she concentrates on her own writing. “The River Rerun” is the third of her Grand Canyon stories and the fifth of the stories following the life of her character Elaine. In 2016, *Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, Wives* (Zarahemla Press), which comprises these and other short stories, won the Association of Mormon Letters Best Short Story Collection award. Much of Karen’s fiction was published first in *Dialogue*.

BRENT N. RUSHFORTH, one of the founders of *Dialogue*, is a principal in the Washington, DC office of McKool Smith. He has extensive litigation experience in antitrust and unfair competition, intellectual property and trade regulation, and has represented such clients as VISA, MCI, Cox Communications, Black & Decker, Marriott Corporation and the American Booksellers Association. While serving as Deputy General Counsel of the Department of Defense, he was actively involved in the SALT Treaty negotiations. For the past twelve years, he has represented

Muslim detainees wrongfully imprisoned at Guantanamo, six of whom have been released.

BONNIE SHIFFLER-OLSEN {msballetstudio@yahoo.com} has work previously published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, likewise *folio*, *new bourgeois*, *Outlet*, *Touchstones Journal*, and elsewhere. She lives in Provo, Utah and works as a poet, essayist, and full-time caregiver to her philosopher husband. They have five children.

MATHEW N. SCHMALZ {mschmalz@holycross.edu} is a grateful husband and father. He is also faculty ombudsperson and associate professor of religious studies at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. Mat received his B. A. from Amherst College and his Ph.D. in the History of Religions from the University of Chicago. He has received Century, Watson, Fulbright, and AIFS Fellowships, and resided in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka for a total of four years as a student and researcher. His publications engage global Catholicism (particularly in South Asia), Catholic theology and spirituality, Mormonism, and The Watchtower movement. He is the founding editor of the *Journal of Global Catholicism*, co-editor of *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances* (SUNY, 2012, with Peter Gottschalk) and author of *Mercy Matters: Opening Yourself to the Life Changing Gift* (OSV, 2016). Schmalz has been a panelist for *On Faith* and the *Boston Globe* website *Crux* and also writes for the *Huffington Post*. He has published opinion pieces in the *Washington Post*, *Fortune*, *Commonweal Magazine*, and *The National Catholic Reporter*, and has provided expert commentary to *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, ABC's *Good Morning America*, NPR, CNBC, *Hardball* with Chris Matthews, and U.S. News & World Report, among others.

ROGER TERRY {mormonomics@gmail.com} is editorial director at *BYU Studies*. He is the author of books (fiction and nonfiction), articles, essays,

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