

# 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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## EDITOR'S NOTE

With this issue, *Dialogue* begins its sixth decade. To celebrate this milestone, we are pleased to present new work from three long-time friends. Frances Lee Menlove was a *Dialogue* founder and served as its first manuscript editor. Her essay “The Challenge of Honesty” appeared in the first issue, setting an editorial direction for the journal of courageous truth-seeking. Here she looks at *Dialogue*’s “Unending Conversation.” Bob Rees—the journal’s second editor, past board member, and frequent contributor—provides a prophetic call to “reimagine the restoration.” Finally, we are pleased to publish a new short story from R.A. Christmas, whose essay, “The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt: Some Literary, Historical, and Critical Reflections,” appeared in the very first issue of *Dialogue*. Christmas served as an editorial assistant in the early years of the journal and has frequently contributed both poetry and prose. Together with the other authors in this issue, these voices demonstrate *Dialogue*’s commitment to confront the future with optimism, authenticity, and vision.

—Boyd J. Petersen



# REIMAGINING THE RESTORATION: WHY LIBERALISM IS THE ULTIMATE FLOWERING OF MORMONISM

Robert A. Rees

Eugene England Memorial Lecture  
Utah Valley University, March 6, 2015

*Not "Revelation" 'tis that waits,  
But our unfurnished eyes.  
—Emily Dickinson<sup>1</sup>*

Tonight I want to challenge some of the conventional axioms of Mormon religion and culture and to propose a more progressive Mormonism. Let me begin, however, with a tribute to my dear friend Eugene England. In the introduction to the *festschrift* I edited in his honor titled *Proving Contraries* (which is an apt summary of Gene's life), I wrote, "Outside of some in the general Church leadership, perhaps no Latter-day Saint of our generation enjoyed such wide and deep affection and respect as Gene did."<sup>2</sup> I imagine that when some scholar writes the history of modern Mormonism Gene will be seen as one of our most enlightened and influential teacher/scholars. My hope is that what I have to say tonight illuminates some of the ideas that animated his discipleship and exemplifies some of the virtues that governed his life. It has been an enormous loss these past

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1. Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1862–63, *Letters of Emily Dickinson* edited by Mabel Loomis Todd (New York: Gosset and Dunlap, 1962), 260.

2. Robert A. Rees, ed., *Proving Contraries: A Collection of Writings in Honor of Eugene England* (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 2005), xiv.

fourteen years to have been deprived of his intellect and spirit. Gene had a good heart. Like most liberals, it was a little to the left.

Let me also say something at the beginning about my use of the word “liberal.” It is, unfortunately, a word that has lost much of its original meaning and is most often used in a pejorative sense—even as an expletive—sometimes spit out as if it were viperous. A recent article published in a national LDS magazine titled “Are You a Liberal Mormon?” stereotypes liberals and suggests that they aren’t really very faithful and are “playing right into Satan’s hands.”<sup>3</sup> Etymologically, however, the word has positive meanings. “Liberal,” first used in the Middle Ages, derived from the Old French *libéral*, which in turn was derived from the Latin *liberalis*, and meant “noble, gracious, munificent, generous, selfless.” During the English enlightenment, *liberal* also came to mean tolerant and free from prejudice. Unfortunately, for many on the political and religious right, “liberal” has none of these positive, salutatory connotations today. I hope what I say tonight might be instrumental in shifting some perceptions about what it means to be liberal within a Mormon context.

By “liberal” I also intend the meaning in Joseph Smith’s statement about God: “Our heavenly Father is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive.”<sup>4</sup> That the prophet intended the positive qualities I have just listed is evident by something else he says: “The nearer we get to our heavenly Father, the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls; we feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders, and cast their sins behind our backs.”<sup>5</sup> The Prophet’s usage of “liberal” is in keep-

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3. Joni Hilton, “Are You a Liberal Mormon?” Oct. 31, 2013; the original has been taken down from the *Meridian* website but is available at <https://archive.org/details/MeridianMagazineAreYouALiberalMormonMeridianMagazineLDSMormonAndLatterDaySaintNewsAndViews>.

4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith (1938; repr., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 257.

5. *Ibid.*, 240–41.

ing with his dictionary, Webster's 1828, which defines "liberal" as "Of a free heart; free to give or bestow; not closed or contracted; munificent; bountiful; generous; giving largely."<sup>6</sup> It is those qualities I have in mind when I say that liberalism is the ultimate flowering of Mormonism.

From everything we know of Jesus' ministry, we can conclude that that he too "is more liberal in His views, and boundless in His mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive." Examples of the Savior's liberality are found on every page of the gospels, in his disciples' words, and in the Book of Mormon. Liberality is often the theme of Latter-day prophets. The following from President Stephen L. Richards is one example among many one might cite: "When the gospel was restored in this age all the goodness and mercy of Christ was restored. . . The essence of the . . . whole restored gospel was and is election without coercion, persuasion not compulsion, no unrighteous dominion, only patience, long-suffering, meekness, kindness and love unfeigned."<sup>7</sup>

My remarks today are not intended to diminish the very substantial importance of many of the Church's more conservative principles and values. In a world of often capricious change, the Church's stability is to be admired; in a world of increasing moral relativism, the Church's doctrinal consistency can be seen as a virtue; in a world of wanton disregard for standards of modesty, sexual morality, and decency, the Church's clear and certain standards offer safety and refuge; and in a world in which the family is under siege by many forces, the Church's teachings on this core institution are a great blessing to members as well as to society in general. My own life has been immensely blessed by these conservative virtues.

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6. *Webster's Dictionary 1828—Online Edition*, available at <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Home?word=Liberal>.

7. Stephen L. Richards, "Truth is Neither Black nor White." Although the address was delivered in the April 1932 General Conference, it did not appear in the printed version of the proceedings. As quoted in "An Olive Leaf," *Sunstone* (Dec. 2011): 80. The full text of the address was published in the May–June 1979 issue of *Sunstone*.

As with anything, liberalism can be taken to extremes. As Christian Wiman observes, “Liberal churches that go months without mentioning the name of Jesus, much less the dying Christ, have no more spiritual purpose or significance than a local union hall.”<sup>8</sup> But an excess of liberalism is not a problem facing the Mormon Church or Mormon culture at present. Were there a greater balance between liberalism and conservatism in the contemporary Church, one could argue for a sensible synthesis between the two, but the century-long imbalance toward conservatism suggests that a course correction in the direction of liberalism would be healthy for the Church because it would both help retain our more liberal minded saints and, in my estimation, attract more liberal-minded truth seekers. When Utah was vying for statehood at the end of the nineteenth century, the First Presidency argued that “the more evenly balanced the parties become the safer it will be for us [Mormons] in the security of our liberties . . . and the more evenly balanced the parties our influence for good will be far greater than it possibly could be were either party overwhelmingly in the majority”<sup>9</sup> (as it is in Utah and the Intermountain Region at present).

Let me also say a word about imagination. The Oxford English Dictionary (1971) defines “imagination” as “the creative faculty of the mind in its highest aspect; the power of framing new and striking . . . conceptions.” Imagination reveals not what is, but what is possible. Genesis suggests that before God (or in Mormon cosmology *the Gods*) created anything, they first imagined it; Christ had the most vibrant and fertile imagination in history. As I read about his life and teachings in the gospels, I picture a great and

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8. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 138.

9. First Presidency to Joseph W. Young, 29 May 1891, archives, Historical Department, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, as quoted in Eugene England, “Why Mormons Should Become Democrats: Reflections on Partisan Politics,” in *Making Peace* (Signature Books: Salt Lake City, 1995), 86.

fecund imagination. It isn't just the inventive language, the subtle irony and humor and the fresh metaphors and narratives that flowed from his mind and heart that make Jesus of Nazareth such a great imaginer, but, especially, his capacity to imagine each of us caught in the snares of sin, lost in temptation's tangled web, each uniquely in need of grace, mercy, and love. Beyond this was his god-like capacity to imagine each of us as glorified beings, each of our futures a reflection of his present.

I am aware of the negative ways in which "imagination" is sometimes used in scripture. It is often qualified with such words as "vain" "evil" and "foolish." Imagination can and sometimes does run in those directions, just as with all human capabilities. What I have in mind is more in keeping with the promise made to William Law in the Doctrine and Covenants: "He shall mount up in the imagination of his thoughts as upon Eagle wings" (124:9). God reveals to prophets (and others) what He imagines is possible, what He wants them and us to imagine and then do. Such is reflected in the following translation of Hosea 12:11 where God says, "In the hands of the prophets shall I imagine."<sup>10</sup> One can argue that when God invites us to "reason together" with him he is also inviting us to imagine with him.

The astonishing revelations that began when Joseph Smith went into the woods to pray came about because he imagined some kind of an answer, but he could not possibly have imagined the dramatic, even startling way it occurred. That vision expanded his imagination exponentially and emboldened him to seek for other revelations. What flowed from those seminal revelations was the beginning of what Mormons call the Restoration. According to Harold Bloom, Smith "was an authentic religious genius and surpassed all Americans, before or since, in the possession and expression of the religion-making imagination. . . .

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10. Rachael Gordon, "The Power of Imagination: A Kabbalistic Understanding," *Chabad.org* (blog) [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1449301/jewish/The-Power-of-Imagination.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1449301/jewish/The-Power-of-Imagination.htm).

There had to be an immense power of the myth-making imagination at work to sustain so astonishing an innovation” as the Restoration.<sup>11</sup>

The promises of that restoration are found in Smith’s personal history and in the new scriptures he introduced to the world. According to Kathleen Flake, “Smith’s narrative history of human and divine interaction was ultimately oriented *to a future time that served as a basis for acting in the present*. It provided a world of meaning by which his believing readers understood themselves existentially, including their future and not merely their past” (emphasis added). This is precisely what I am proposing—that we orient ourselves to a reimagined future by acting in the present. Flake adds, “Most fundamentally, Smith’s writings give his believing readers a different sense of what was and what will be. . . .”<sup>12</sup> That promised future is the subject of my remarks tonight.

According to Bloom, Smith did not live to see the full flowering of his visionary imagination. What is more, Bloom does not believe Smith’s modern and contemporary followers have completely fulfilled or continued the Prophet’s religion-making imagination. No less an authority than Elder B.H. Roberts came to the same conclusion at the end of the nineteenth century. Roberts distinguished between what he calls “disciples pure and simple— . . . whose whole intellectual life . . . consists of their partisanship . . . and mere repetition” of religious formulas and those disciples who “bring to the new teaching, from the first, their own personal contribution . . . [and] help lead the thought that they accept to a truer expression. They force it beyond its earlier and cruder stages of development.”<sup>13</sup> Note his use of the word “force,” which in this context

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11. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 91–92.

12. Kathleen Flake, “Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith’s Narrative Canon,” *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (Oct. 2007): 524–25; [https://my.vanderbilt.edu/kathleenflake/files/2012/01/JR-flake\\_translating\\_time.pdf](https://my.vanderbilt.edu/kathleenflake/files/2012/01/JR-flake_translating_time.pdf)

13. B.H. Roberts, *The Improvement Era* 9 (1906), 712–13.



I think Roberts intended “[to] bring about by unusual effort.”<sup>14</sup> Roberts added, and this is the part of his essay most relevant to re-imagining the Restoration, that Mormonism “calls for thoughtful disciples who will not be content with merely repeating some of its truths, but will develop its truths; and enlarge . . . [Mormonism] by that development.” Then he states this astonishing idea: “Not half—not one-hundredth part—not a thousandth part of that which Joseph Smith revealed to the Church has yet been unfolded, *either to the Church or to the world*” (emphasis added). Pause a minute to consider the profound implications of such a statement.

Roberts continues, “The work of the expounder has scarcely begun. The Prophet planted by teaching the germ-truths of the great dispensation of the fullness of times. The watering and the weeding [are] going on, and God is giving the increase, *and will give it more abundantly in the future as more intelligent [and, one might add, more imaginative] discipleship shall obtain*” (emphasis added). Roberts added, God “will give it more abundantly in the future.”<sup>15</sup> To some extent our present is a partial fulfillment of that “more abundant future,” but we are also charged with extending the Prophet’s vision of the Restoration into an even grander, more abundant future.

What Roberts emphasizes is that Mormonism’s future requires not a passive waiting for God to reveal those things yet to be revealed, but an active, energetic, imaginative seeking and working for their unfolding. He concludes, “The disciples of ‘Mormonism’ [which includes contemporary Mormons], growing discontented with the *necessarily primitive methods* which have hitherto prevailed in sustaining the doctrine, will yet take *profounder and broader* views of the great doctrines committed to the Church; and, departing from mere repetition, will cast them in new formulas; cooperating in the works of the Spirit, until they help to

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14. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=force>.

15. Roberts, 713.

give to the truths received a more forceful expression and carry it beyond the earlier and cruder stages of its development” (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup>

Roberts’ call for “profounder and broader views” and “casting . . . new formulas” is as clear and concise an invitation to imaginative discipleship as I can conceive. Today, we have the choice to transform some of those “primitive methods” into more progressive ones. One of Mormonism’s unique doctrines is that revelation is both continuous and scattered—that it is democratically available—meaning that all have the opportunity, even the responsibility, to receive it, although, clearly, some do not realize this or act upon this principle.

Let me shift my attention to some specifics. I am a scholar and poet, not a prophet, and so what I suggest in the following is a result of my imaginative projections, the longings of my heart and the deep yearnings of my soul for a more progressive Mormonism. In the brief time I have tonight, I can only cover some of those areas I consider of the greatest importance to a reimagined Mormonism. These include: our stewardship over the natural world; the feminine goddess; the status of women; the state of those whom Jesus classifies as “the least of these”; war and peace; a more Christ-centered church; a more progressive political and social Mormonism; the importance of a liberal education; and the place of love as the essential force in making all of this a reality.

### Earth Stewardship

Our imaginations should allow us to project two possible scenarios for the earth’s fate—and therefore our own fate—one is to continue on our present destructive course and the other is to act with great urgency to reverse the degradation we have set in motion—if it isn’t already too late. The latest news from climate scientists reveals glacial melting to be accelerating in both the Arctic and in Antarctica. According to *The Washington Post*, “We may have irreversibly destabilized the great ice sheet[s] of West [and

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16. Ibid.

East] Antarctica” which together would cause sea levels to rise more than twenty feet.<sup>17</sup> Imagine New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Bangkok, Calcutta, Amsterdam and many other great cities and rural areas under water! What we may have unleashed is a slow-motion flood of biblical proportions.

Some scientists predict that humans will become the sixth extinction in world history.<sup>18</sup> No responsible Christian contends that Christ will rescue us from the consequences of our own folly. In fact, I think Christ intends for us to read Matthew 25:40, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me,” not just in terms of the past and present, but also the future. In this sense, he asks us to imagine those who *will* suffer from famine, pestilence and disease because of our inaction—to imagine them as if they were Christ himself. Can we imagine being confronted over our indifference or inaction by a great-granddaughter who is starving and has no water or by a great-grandson who is being swept away in a flood or drowned by rising seas—or by Jesus who asks why we didn’t imagine him in their place? Had the people of Noah’s time been able to see their world swept violently away by water, had the Jaredites seen the reduction of their civilization to two survivors caught in an insane fight to the death, or had the ancient Nephites foreseen the fire and destruction that enveloped their nation prior to Christ’s visit, perhaps they would have repented and prevented their peoples’ destruction. The question is whether we will act more wisely.

Global warming’s effects were all too visible to a group of us from the Liahona Children’s Foundation who visited the island nation of Kiribati at the end December 2014. Kiribati, located in the middle of

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17. Chris Mooney, “The Melting of Antarctica Was Really, really Bad. It Just Got Worse,” *The Washington Post*, Mar. 16, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/03/16/the-melting-of-antarctica-was-already-really-bad-it-just-got-worse/>.

18. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014). See also, Thom Hartmann, *The Last Hours of Humanity: Warming the World to Extinction* (Cardiff, Calif.: Waterfront Digital Press, 2013).

the Pacific, is one of the world's poorest nations; it also happens to have a significant LDS population—some seventeen percent of the island's inhabitants are Mormon. Scientists predict that Kiribati will be the first nation to lose all of its landmass to rising seas. Everyone there will have to relocate to other nations in the next several decades. This is only one place imperiled by our folly.

In my imagination, the Mormon Church will establish Earth Stewardship as its fifth mission, realizing that fulfilling the other four major missions—perfecting the saints, preaching the gospel, redeeming the dead, and caring for the poor and needy—depends on a healed and whole planet. That is, without clean air and water, without sustainable natural resources, without the delicate balance in the atmospheric, oceanic, and biological spheres, the only growth area for the Church of the future will be work for the dead!

I believe that saving the earth is *the* moral imperative of our own and future generations. Arthur Zajonc says, “Morality concerns the nature and quality of our relationship with other people and, by extension, to the world of which we are a part.”<sup>19</sup> I imagine the Mormon Church becoming known worldwide as a leader in a movement to redeem the living, including the living planet, for the generations who will inhabit it for the rest of this century and beyond. We need to revise the tenth Article of Faith from its present passive voice, “The earth will be renewed . . .” to “We will renew the earth so it can receive its paradisiacal glory.”

### A Mother Here: Reimagining the Divine Mother

Our neglect of mother earth is, perhaps, tied to our neglecting the nurturing influence of our Mother in Heaven. Almost all religions began with a female deity. Over the course of Judeo-Christian history, that deity has all but disappeared. One of the most radical and revolutionary yet immensely

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19. “Mind and Morality: A Dialogue with Arthur Zajonc and Michael McCullough,” *On Being with Krista Tippett*, Mar. 12, 2015, <http://onbeing.org/programs/arthur-zajonc-michael-mccullough-mind-and-morality-a-dialogue/>.

appealing and consoling doctrines revealed to Joseph Smith is that we have both a Father *and* a Mother in heaven, and, further, as a foreshadowing of what God wishes as a model for our marital relationships, they are equal in knowledge, power, and glory. Calling her “this Mother of all creation, this mistress of light and space,” I once wrote, “All that we know of her from modern revelation, all of the images we find of her in other traditions, all the ways in which our imaginations reach out to her, make the idea of heaven more inviting.”<sup>20</sup> But it is also true that her absence has made human history more tragic. Imagine how different the world would be if over the centuries—or even since the Restoration—we had had the wisdom of her voice, the deep and tender whisperings of her heart.

What Enoch revealed about the nature of God the Father is by extension also true of the Mother: she too weeps over the bent and broken world, is heavy with lamentation over her lost and wandering children. Like the Father, her heart is broken, not only by our transgression but by our pride and indifference and by the way we treat her children, especially her daughters. In reimagining the Restoration, we can bring her to life not only for ourselves but also for the entire world, for, consciously or not, the world yearns for the divine mother. The poet Alicia Ostriker says, “What I really believe is that we can all be midwives of the Divine Female; can help her be born into the world again. . . . We also have to imagine her.”<sup>21</sup>

### O Daughters of Zion: Imagining the Whole Mormon Woman

Speaking of her daughters, I believe one of our most important tasks in reimagining the Restoration is to picture a Church and a world in which all women, the daughters of Zion and all their sisters throughout the world, truly feel equally valued—not solely for their roles as wives and mothers, but as fully-fledged children of God, joint heirs of not only

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20. Robert A. Rees, “Our Mother in Heaven,” *Sunstone*, Apr. 1991, 50.

21. “God the Mother,” in *A God in the House: Poets Talk about Faith* edited by Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler (North Adams, Mass.: Tupelo Press, 2012), 143–44.

some far other-worldly kingdom, but of the one here in which we live and move and have our being. For all of our rhetoric to the contrary, the reality is that many women do not feel equally important, valued, or loved, either in the Church or in the world, essentially because they are not. Consider the following grave statistics:

Currently, an estimated 160 million females are “missing” worldwide due to infanticide and femicide. “This is the equivalent of an entire generation of girls being wiped from the face of the earth.”<sup>22</sup>

Rape continues to be widespread, and is an egregious form of violence against girls and women. In many countries rape is endemic. According to the World Health Organization (2013), “more than a third of all women are victims of physical or sexual violence.” That’s over one billion women—or more than three times the entire population of the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Add to this list honor killings, genital cutting, child marriages, dowry deaths, and other forms of abuse and violence, and one can only conclude that as far as women and girls are concerned, we live in a brutal, barbarous, uncivilized world.

Neither the Church nor individual Mormons can hope to solve all of these problems, but we could all imagine and work for a world in which the girls and women within our families, congregations, and communities are accorded full respect, dignity, and equality. In 1978 women were allowed to pray in sacrament meetings; in 1985 they were allowed to speak in general conference; and in 2013 they were allowed to pray in general conference. Wow! Who knows what other amazing advancements await Mormon women in the future! Our imaginations

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22. Jimmy Carter, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 116.

23. Roni Caryn Rabin, “Nearly 1 in 5 Women in U.S. Survey Say They Have Been Sexually Assaulted,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 14, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/health/nearly-1-in-5-women-in-us-survey-report-sexual-assault.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/15/health/nearly-1-in-5-women-in-us-survey-report-sexual-assault.html?_r=0).

will fail us if we don't consider the possibility that many of "the great and important things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (D&C 97:14) we are encouraged to seek and work for concern women—their full citizenship in the Church and their equal humanity in all spheres. It is, I believe, what our Mother in Heaven wants. It is what she imagines us imagining.

### The Least of These: Poor Wayfaring Men and Women

Women's status is not all that needs to be re-imagined. We must also re-imagine the place of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, as well as those considered inferior because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, economic, or social status or any other kind of "otherness" that prevents us from seeing them as fully human and equal citizens of society and of Christ's kingdom. I believe that Jesus' statement, "The poor you have always with you" (Matthew 26:11) is a condemnation rather than a statement of inevitability, especially knowing that the City of Zion had no poor among them. As a religious community, we Latter-day Saints are known for our generosity. In fact, because we are tithe payers, our per capita charitable giving is larger than any other religious group in the United States, and yet many of us live far beyond our needs while many of our brothers and sisters live in extreme, even grinding poverty, poverty that could be significantly ameliorated by even modest additional giving on our part.

In an article titled, "Feed My Lambs," I argued that Jesus' question to Peter is also directed at us, "Lovest thou me more than these [meaning materials things]?" I wrote:

To those of us living in the modern, developed-world church, I think Jesus is saying . . . , "I have blessed you with enormous wealth. You live in large houses more spacious than you need and often some of your bedrooms lie empty; you drive expensive cars and pass by the poor on roads and byways. You eat three meals (or more) a day and your larders and pantries are fully stocked. . . . You have more of everything than

you actually need and have more luxuries than any previous generation in history. What do you intend to do with all of these things? Do you love me enough to follow me and give generously to the poor?”<sup>24</sup>

During the Great Depression President Heber J. Grant *said that he would go so far as to “close the seminaries, shut down missionary work for a period of time, or even close the temples,” rather than “let the people go hungry.”*<sup>25</sup> More recently, Bishop David Burton underscored this by saying, “No matter how many temples we build, no matter how large our membership grows, no matter how positively we are perceived in the eyes of the world—should we fail in this great core commandment [and] . . . turn our hearts from those who suffer and mourn, we are under condemnation and cannot please the Lord.”<sup>26</sup>

Jesus was the Lord of everyone, but particularly of the poor. He cannot be pleased with the enormous gap between the rich and the poor in this generation where the top one percent possess seventy-five percent of the nation’s wealth and also earn twenty-five percent of the annual income.<sup>27</sup> Just as startling, the top one percent own nearly four times as much as the bottom eighty percent—a startling statistic. The consequence is that even in this, the richest nation in history, there is grinding poverty, hunger, despair, and unnecessary death—and a rapidly disappearing middle class.

In light of such suffering and need, it is obscene to speak disparagingly about the redistribution of wealth or to try and deny health care to those who cannot afford it. According to researchers at the Harvard

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24. Robert Rees, “‘Feed My Lambs’: Jesus’ Last Great Teaching,” *Meridian Magazine*, Dec. 15, 2014, <http://ldsmag.com/feed-my-lambs-jesus-last-great-teaching/>.

25. As quoted by H. David Burton, “The Sanctifying Work of Welfare,” April 2011, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/04/the-sanctifying-work-of-welfare?lang=eng>.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Jill Lepore, “Richer and Poorer: Accounting for Inequality,” *New Yorker* Mar. 16, 2015, 26.



Medical School, “45,000 people die in the United States annually because they lack health insurance.”<sup>28</sup> That’s one person every twelve minutes. There is something morally wrong about a nation that has a military budget greater than the next eight nations combined and yet does not provide basic health care for all its citizens.

I don’t wish to preach a Jeremiad, but I cannot see anything but disaster coming from an economic system so severely imbalanced in favor of the rich. As Hugh Nibley warned, “The calamitous effect of wealth, according to the Book of Mormon, is the inequality it begets.”<sup>29</sup> Such inequality has a negative impact on the Church itself. As we read in Third Nephi, because of “a great inequality in all the land . . . the church began to be broken up” (3 Nephi 6:14). Some economists predict that unless it becomes less severe, this level of inequality could lead to significant political and social unrest. I remember a visit Gene England and I made to see Elder Hugh B. Brown when he was in the hospital. Referring to the Civil Rights Movement, Elder Brown said to us, “remember, my young friends, at the heart of every revolution there is an important truth.”

As with the poor, so is it with others whom we consider least. I am haunted by a story Elder Marion D. Hanks told me about a black man he had converted to the Church while serving as a young missionary in Ohio. Against Elder Hanks’ advice, this man and his family moved to Utah, where they were subject to significant racist treatment by their fellow Latter-day Saints. Wanting the full blessings of the gospel and believing skin color was a result of a preexistent transgression, this good brother said to Elder Hanks, “I would strip every inch of black skin from my body if I could hold the priesthood.” Similar sentiments have been spoken by countless gay, lesbian, and transgender Latter-day Saints who, having been taught

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28. Susan Heavey, “Study links 45,000 U.S. Deaths to Lack of Insurance,” *Reuters*, Sept. 17, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/17/us-usa-healthcare-deaths-idUSTRE58G6W520090917>.

29. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 394.

that their sexual orientation or gender identity was their own fault, made valiant efforts to rid themselves of what they were told was a detestable crime against nature. In despair, many such Latter-day Saints have taken their lives. Jesus teaches us that we collectively bear responsibility for such suffering and death. Likewise, as Francisco Goldman says, “The great metaphor at the heart of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew is that those who suffer and those who show love for those who suffer are joined through suffering and grace to Jesus Christ.”<sup>30</sup>

In the future church I imagine, I see gay and lesbian couples and their children sitting comfortably in our congregations. I see transgender saints who are not ridiculed. I see people of all colors, nations, backgrounds, and personalities sitting peacefully together. What I see reminds me of the final scene in the movie *Places in the Heart* as described by Dan Wotherspoon: This “depression era film in which Sally Field portrays a widow struggling to keep her land and succeeding through the aid of an unlikely group of friends, family and strangers, ends with a scene in church in which the bread and wine are passed from congregant to congregant (including some not physically present in the meeting but somehow shown as being so, such as her deceased husband and the young black boy who killed him and who was then lynched by town members). As they partake of the emblems of Christ’s sacrifice, we see them reconciling with each other as they softly speak the words, ‘peace of God’ before drinking the wine.”<sup>31</sup>

### “Study War No More”: Blessed are the Peacemakers

Perhaps nothing will require a greater re-imagining than for us to imagine a Mormon culture that is not as war-like as is our present one. In 1976

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30. Francisco Goldman, “Introduction,” *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pocket Canon Bible (New York: Grove Press, 1999), xv.

31. Daniel Wotherspoon, “All Truth is Encompassed in One Grand Whole,” manuscript in my possession. The essay will appear in the second volume of *Why I Stay* that is projected to be published by Signature Books in 2018.

President Spencer W. Kimball asserted, “We are a warlike people.” That he was referring to the Latter-day Saints is evident by what he says next, “[We are] easily distracted from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord.” Speaking of Americans in general, but by implication Church members as well, President Kimball was even more specific, “When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrication of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications. . . . When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God.”<sup>32</sup> President Kimball’s words echo First Presidency statements at the beginning of both the First and Second World Wars.<sup>33</sup>

Our consistent, even enthusiastic support of war is in direct opposition to the Lord’s commandment in the Doctrine and Covenants that we “renounce war and proclaim peace and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers [and mothers], and the hearts of the fathers [and mothers] to the children” (98:34). As Hugh Nibley elaborates: “‘renounce’ is a strong word: we are not to try to win peace by war, or merely call a truce, but to renounce war itself, to disdain it as a policy while proclaiming . . . peace without reservation.”<sup>34</sup> Significantly, this commandment links renouncing war and establishing peace with intergenerational healing: turning the hearts of parents and children to one another.

War begets war, violence breeds violence. We have every reason to be repulsed and appalled by the rise of the Islamic State, but to a large

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32. Spencer W. Kimball, “The False Gods We Worship,” *Ensign* (June 1976), 4.

33. See Joseph F. Smith, “Our Duty to Humanity, to God, and to Country,” *Improvement Era* 20, no. 7 (May 1917): 645–56 and “Message of the First Presidency,” Report of the Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 6, 1942 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, annual), 88–97.

34. “Renounce War!” *Daily Universe* (BYU), Mar. 26, 1971, in Hugh Nibley, *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, vol. 13 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake: FARMS/Deseret, 1994), 267.

extent ISIS is a monster of our own creating. One can draw a straight line from our deliberate and disastrous disenfranchising the Sunni Baathists when we invaded Iraq and the rise of ISIS. This disenfranchisement unleashed the floodgates of Shia revenge that has magnified the enmity between these opposing branches of Islam and caused it to metastasize into a barbaric caliphate,<sup>35</sup> one funded by our Gulf Ally, Saudi Arabia, which dramatically illustrates the insanity of war. In other words, we have sown the winds of war and inherited the whirlwind of an even wider, more violent war, the end of which it is impossible to predict but horrible to contemplate.

In contrast, the Lord speaks of the saints being gathered to Zion, which will “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” (D&C 45:66). This is a pre-millennial city, where, we are told, the wicked will not come (D&C 45:67) and where those who will not take up their swords (or their guns!) against their neighbors will “flee for safety.” Further, we are told that “there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another” (D&C 45:68–69). Consider the implications: the *only* place in the entire world where there will be no war will be among the saints. That certainly couldn’t happen in the Mormon heartland today! In fact, one could argue that someone proclaiming peace among the Mormons today might be regarded with suspicion if not derision (and likely labeled a Liberal!).

We can begin to re-imagine our attitude about war with the following statement from the First Presidency’s 1981 Christmas message: “To all who seek a resolution to conflict, be it a misunderstanding between individuals or an international difficulty among nations, we commend the counsel of the Prince of Peace, ‘Love your enemies, bless them that

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35. Jason M. Breslow, “How Saddam’s Former Soldiers Are Fueling the Rise of ISIS,” *Frontline*, Oct. 28, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/iraq-war-on-terror/rise-of-isis/how-saddams-former-soldiers-are-fueling-the-rise-of-isis/>.

curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; [in order] That you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.’ . . . This principle of loving one another as Jesus Christ loves us will bring peace to the individual, to the home and beyond, even to the nations and the world.”<sup>36</sup> This indeed is radical theology. Do we believe it?

In an article titled, “Can Nations Love Their Enemies? An LDS Theology of Peace,” Eugene England argued that “LDS theology offers a guide to better conduct. I believe its fundamental message is that ‘effective pacifism’—even unilateral disarmament if accompanied by massive efforts to extend intelligent, creative, tough-minded but loving help to other nations . . .—is the ideal solution, the only one that could make our enemies no longer enemies. . . .”<sup>37</sup> This seems to be in accord with Jesus’ call for a non-violent, but nevertheless assertive response to injustice. Biblical scholar, Walter Wink, calls this “Jesus’ Third Way,” which is neither passive acquiescence nor violent confrontation.<sup>38</sup>

What I imagine in the future is a Mormon Church that deliberately, consistently, and systematically sues for peace, works for peace, and establishes peace—a sort of Quaker church on steroids, if you will. Think of what it would mean for preaching the gospel if Mormons were known all over the world for their anti-war, pro-peace ethic. That would clearly create a climate in which people might indeed say, “Let us go up to Zion.”

### Toward a More Liberal Political and Social Mormonism

Earlier, I mentioned that when Utah was vying for statehood, in an attempt to prevent the majority of Mormons from gravitating en masse

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36. *Church News*, Dec. 19, 1981, 2.

37. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Salt Lake: Orion Books, 1984), 148.

38. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 98–111.

to the Democratic Party, which had been much more sympathetic to the saints than the Republicans, Church leaders divided towns and congregations right down the middle, with half going to the Republicans and half to the Democrats. That most Mormons identified with the Democratic Party can be seen by the fact that eighty-two percent of Utah citizens voted for Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryan in the 1896 presidential election. What we have today in the intermountain area is almost a complete reversal, with Utah and Idaho leading the nation in voting Republican. This is why Gene England argued that some Utah Mormons should consider becoming Democrats.<sup>39</sup> As a life-long Republican, he was serious, because he knew that supermajorities inevitably infringe upon the rights of minorities. Lest you think Gene was being unfair or unreasonable, he also proposed that more Mormons on the coasts should become Republican.

Nevertheless, it isn't the shift to the right among their fellow Mormons that many liberals find disturbing, but rather a shift of many Latter-day Saints to the far right, even to a fundamentalist ideology, one that demonized former-President Obama; that sees the Democratic Party as Socialist (without fully understanding what that word means); that bemoans so called "welfare queens" while increasing corporate welfare; and that sees capitalism as the greatest economic system the world has ever known (which would be news to Jesus, the people of Enoch, and those who practiced the United Order in early Utah).

It is far too easy to confuse partisan political ideologies with gospel principles. Such confusion, I contend, is destructive to Mormonism's ultimate mission. The extent to which a dominant far-right ideology is identified in the public mind with Mormonism undermines Church growth and status, leading many outside the Church to regard Mormonism as rigid and regressive, as anti-science and anti-intellectual,

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39. Eugene England, "On Saving the Constitution, Or Why Some Utah Mormons Should Become Democrats," *Sunstone*, May 1988, 22–30. Available at [http://eugeneengland.org/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/1988\\_e\\_004.pdf](http://eugeneengland.org/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/1988_e_004.pdf).

as insular and narrow-minded, and as favoring the rich over the poor. Such individuals are likely to hold the worst stereotypes of Mormons, thus leaving them blind to the truly remarkable truths of the Restoration and the very substantial gifts of Mormonism. Separating right wing (or left wing) politics from the gospel could aid us in a more expansive reimagined Restoration.

### Toward a More Christ-Centered Mormonism

While as Mormons we need to put greater distance between our politics and our religion, we need less space between our Church and the rest of Christianity. Mormons are avowedly and devotedly Christian, yet sometimes it seems we are more Mormon than Christian. By that, I mean that at times we are more focused on religious principles and practices that are more identified with our history and tradition than we are on Christ. I have been told that half of those who leave Mormonism no longer consider themselves Christian. I hope this is not the case, but if it is, it represents a colossal failure on our behalf. If our lived experience as Mormons more fully reflected Nephi's words—"We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ" (2 Nephi 25: 23, 26)—then it seems to me that those who abandon Mormonism would be much less likely to abandon Christianity. I believe we could, with little effort, make Christ more central to that sacred space we occupy in his name each Sunday, as well as to other spaces in our religious life.

One way Mormons could be more Christ-centered is by celebrating Holy Week. Except for Easter, Mormons pay almost no attention to Holy Week. I remember Arthur Henry King being shocked when he came to BYU to find his fellow Mormons playing sports, going to dances, and participating in other secular activities on Good Friday. He said with passion in his voice, "That is the day my Lord died!" Our Primary children usually have an Easter egg hunt during this season,

but my guess is that few have been taught to honor this holiest of days, called by some Christians “Great Friday.”

At least we celebrate Easter—except when it conflicts with general conference, as it will do so twenty more times this century. It is likely that the First Vision took place during Holy Week, possibly on Easter Sunday, for Easter came early in 1820 (April 2) and Joseph says he went into the sacred grove on “a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring” (JS–H 1:14). Most Mormons are unaware that when Christ and Elijah appeared in the Kirtland Temple in 1836 it was during Holy Week. Could the Lord be teaching us something about a week that one commentator has called “the most concentrated, symbol-laden, primitive, critical, foundational, animating . . . time in the Christian calendar?”<sup>40</sup>

### The Value of a Liberal Education

Finally, I believe a key to achieving a more progressive, more enlightened Mormonism is to encourage Mormons to obtain and then apply in their daily lives a truly liberal education, one that emboldens an open, informed mind and heart. A liberally educated person does not flee from either faith or doubt, honors both science and religion, and relies on the heart as well as the mind. She does not surrender her thinking or her emotions to others, particularly to the savants on cable television and talk radio. Ultimately, she does not rely on any authority that is not in accord with her own deepest sense of what is morally true and spiritually right.

The credo of the liberally-educated Latter-day Saint is President Hugh B. Brown’s 1969 address to the students at BYU called “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind.” Among other things, he said:

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40. James Oregon, “Celebrating Holy Week’s Symbols,” [http://www.jamesoregan.com/jamesoregan/Academic\\_-\\_Celebrating.html](http://www.jamesoregan.com/jamesoregan/Academic_-_Celebrating.html). See also my article “Why Mormons Should Celebrate Holy Week,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2004), 151–67.



One of the most important things in the world is freedom of the mind; from this all other freedoms spring. Such freedom is necessarily dangerous, for one cannot think right without running the risk of thinking wrong, but generally more thinking is required, and we [the First Presidency] call upon you students to exercise your God-given right to think through on every proposition that is submitted to you and be unafraid to express your opinions, with proper respect for those to whom you talk and proper acknowledgment of your own shortcomings. . . .

He continued,

Preserve . . . the freedom of your mind in education and in religion, and be unafraid to express your thoughts and to insist upon your right to examine every proposition.

And then he said these astonishing words:

We are not so much concerned with whether your thoughts are orthodox or heterodox as we are that you shall have thoughts.<sup>41</sup>

Essentially, President Brown was encouraging Latter-day Saints to open their minds to the possibilities of the Restoration. In the same address, he said, “While I believe all that God has revealed, I am not quite sure that I understand what he has revealed, and the fact that he has promised further revelation is to me a challenge to keep an open mind and be prepared to follow wherever my search for truth may lead.” I think he would agree, even if that search leads, as it sometimes does, into the sometimes-treacherous territory of liberalism.

## Conclusion

“Thy mind, O Man [and Woman], if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and

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41. Hugh B. Brown, “An Eternal Quest—Freedom of the Mind,” May 13, 1969, available at [http://aims.byu.edu/sites/default/files/foundationdocuments/An\\_Eternal\\_Quest--Freedom\\_of\\_the\\_Mind--Hugh\\_B\\_Brown.pdf](http://aims.byu.edu/sites/default/files/foundationdocuments/An_Eternal_Quest--Freedom_of_the_Mind--Hugh_B_Brown.pdf).

contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse.” —Joseph Smith<sup>42</sup>

Thirty-five years ago, Eugene England invited me to participate in a BYU Humanities Forum he was moderating on Mormonism’s contributions to the Humanities and the imaginative arts. Gene spoke of the “real and the ideal, both doing ‘the highest justice to the visible universe’ . . . and also holding up model and visions of the highest good and possibilities for man.”<sup>43</sup> That’s one of the things the imagination does. In my remarks that day, titled “The Paradise of Meaning: Imagination and the Religious Experience,” I argued that religion and the imagination “are fundamentally related and . . . touch us at our deepest center; both reveal things to us that we can’t know in other ways.”<sup>44</sup> While each by itself is limited, together religion and the imagination create a paradise of meaning and possibilities.

I am calling for Latter-day Saints to forge a new future for Mormonism, one that imagines a religious way of life that builds on the best of the Restoration from the past, combines it with the most enlightened ideas of the present, and projects the dawning of a brighter day through the prism of a liberal ideology—liberal in the sense in which I have tried to resurrect its original meaning and intention—combined with the best conservative principles.

In imagining a fully realized Restoration, I am not suggesting that the Church change its essential mission or compromise its core values or principles. But history has shown that when religions have the courage to admit error, when they recognize their own fallibility and limitations, they open themselves to new ideas, new growth, and new revelations. As

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42. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 137; see also Dean C. Jessee and John W. Welch, “Revelations in Context: Joseph Smith’s Letter from Liberty Jail, March 20, 1839,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 3 (2000): 137.

43. Typescript of Gene England’s notes in my possession.

44. Manuscript in my possession.

Christian Wiman asserts, “Any belief that does not recognize and adapt to its own erosions rots from within.”<sup>45</sup> Again citing B.H. Roberts, in some ways and to some extent the Church needs disciples who are committed to improving it and helping it to more fully realize the promises embedded in its enlightened scriptures and radical theology. As Wiman argues, “Faith is not faith beyond some change. Faith is faith *in change*.”<sup>46</sup>

As a Church, we need to ask ourselves if there are present teachings and practices that we will look back on in the future with regret that we didn’t challenge and change, just as we have been doing over the past several decades. The history of the Church suggests that social and spiritual evolution are to some extent inevitable. Society changes, new technology emerges, new discoveries open new vistas in many fields, and forces beyond our control dictate policy we can’t even imagine (although that’s exactly what I am urging we should try to do). Add to all this the promise that God himself has made to reveal many great and glorious truths pertaining to his kingdom and one has the expectation of an evolving Church. I have always been struck by the fact that the Lord refers to his church as both “true and living.” That organic metaphor is important for us to keep in mind as we participate in the continual unfolding of the Restoration.

I imagine the Church of the future casting a broader net, building a wider tent, teaching a more inclusive Christianity. I believe Mormonism would be more attractive to more people were we to remove the stumbling blocks to that attraction as we recently have done by openly acknowledging past mistakes and changes in both doctrine and practice. Unless we do so, we run the risk that more of our fellow saints, in the language of Jesus, will “go away” from us.

My heart breaks anew with each departed saint because I feel that each takes something vital with her- or himself and that their leaving

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45. Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*, 111.

46. *Ibid*, 104.

diminishes us as a community. I experience each departure as a loss and I have a strong impulse to persuade all who leave to return. As Rumi says, “When one of us gets lost, is not here, he must be inside us. There’s no place like that anywhere in the world.”<sup>47</sup> What I am calling for is a more expansive moral imagination, one that more fully opens our hearts and minds to the profound treasures of the Restoration and then uses them to bless our own people as well as others in the wide world.

Finally, I contend that this reimagined Mormonism, which is a projection of the possibilities and promises embedded in the Restoration’s seminal revelations, can be realized only through love. We need love, that of Christ and one another, to fix the fissures in our faith community; we need love to bridge our seemingly unbridgeable differences; and we need love to heal one another’s wounded hearts.

At present the community of believers that constitutes the Mormon Church is not as unified as it could be. I believe Christ calls all of us to unify it, to harmonize our differences, to forgive one another, to enlarge the capacities of our hearts to love. It is only through the lens of love that we can see the way things truly are and understand love’s complexity and diversity as well as its enormous promises and blessings. These ways of seeing help us to understand that in every situation and context and in every relationship we are called to do one thing—the most loving thing of which we are capable.

### Coda

I would like to close with a story. It isn’t necessarily a conservative or a liberal story, but it is a story that illustrates love’s power in healing divisions. Raymond Carver’s “A Small Good Thing” is a story about a couple, the Weisses, and the birthday celebration they are planning for their only son, Scotty. The mother orders a cake from the local bakery.

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47. *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks (Castle Books: Edison, N.J., 1995), 205.

On the day of the party Scotty is hit by a car and lapses into a coma. The parents wait anxiously by the bedside day and night, but their son never awakens and, after a few days, dies. The baker, unaware of the accident, continues to call the parents to come and pick up their cake. Grieving, they do not return his calls. He continues to call and becomes abusive and threatening. Finally, one night they go to the bakery to express their outrage at the Baker's behavior. When they tell him that their son is dead, he is embarrassed and ashamed. A simple man, he does the only thing he can think of—he offers them fresh-baked bread. As they sit in the darkened bakery eating, he reveals his own lonely life, childless, working sixteen hours a day baking thousands of wedding and birthday cakes and imagining the celebrations surrounding them, none of which ever touch him personally.

Finally, he takes a fresh loaf of dark bread from the oven, breaks it open and offers some to them. “‘Smell this,’ he says, ‘It’s a heavy bread but rich.’” Carver writes, “They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the florescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.”<sup>48</sup>

This is a powerful story of loss, grief, death, conflict, forgiveness, and redemption. It is also a story about empathy, sympathy and compassion. The story's association of bread with light and the coming dawn reminds us of Christ who is both the bread of life and the light of the world and who is the world's greatest example of the virtues I have mentioned in this essay. Partaking each week of the bread of life, we taste of his light and his love. It is a small good thing we do every Sunday and is akin to all the other small gifts of kindness, generosity, and forgiveness we give to one another. Those acts of love, it seems to me, have their genesis in the light of Christ which is in each of us.

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48. Raymond Carver, “A Small Good Thing,” *Where I’m Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 376–405.

I said earlier that Gene England's good, thoughtful, and faithful heart was a little to the left. That is also true of all of us. It is where, in shaping our bodies and our spirits our Heavenly parents placed this powerful organ of light and love. They also have hearts, real beating and feeling hearts, and since we are made in their image, we can say with confidence and joy that their hearts too are a little to the left.

# PRE-MORTALITY IN MYSTICAL ISLAM AND THE COSMIC JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

Bradley J. Cook

## On the Origin of the Soul

Across centuries and cultures, the origin of the human soul has been a subject of deep interest and yearning, often finding wondrous expression in theology, philosophy, science, and art. Ruminating on the profound mystery of earthly existence, the noted medieval Šūfī mystic Jalāluddīn Rūmī (d. 1273 CE) pondered:

All day I think about it, then at night I say it.  
Where did I come from, and what am I supposed to be doing?  
I have no idea.  
My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that,  
and I intend to end up there.<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in Rūmī's meditation is an impulse that there might be heavenly antecedents of the soul, and that the soul perhaps not only extends into an eternal future from birth, but also into a spiritual past. Rūmī imagines that his birth and his beginning are perhaps two distinct things. The soul, as conceptualized by Rūmī and others, is the intelligent, individuated, and immortal essence of humankind—a self with

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1. Coleman Barks, trans., *The Essential Rumi* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 2.

a long history that precedes and transcends mortal embodiment.<sup>2</sup> The notion of a disembodied, self-conscious moral agent having its own history prior to joining the body is not unique to Rūmī's time period or region, but one that is traceable across millennia and across cultures. The idea of preexistence in a variety of forms is easily discernable in classical settings of Greek, Egyptian, and Persian strands of thought, and, in turn, vestiges of the notion found their way into early Jewish and Christian thinking.<sup>3</sup> However, it is a concept that has long been obscured by history due to its usually belonging to more mystical and esoteric strands of wisdom. A modern exception to this obscurantism, at least within the Christian tradition, occurred in the 1830s when Joseph Smith, the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, claimed to receive revelation emphatically affirming a doctrine of human preexistence.<sup>4</sup> The LDS doctrine of pre-mortality, or premortal existence, continues to be one of many theological concepts differentiating Mormonism from conventional Christianity.

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2. The definitions of the terms *spirit* and *soul* have long and complex histories with shifting meanings over time. The terms used by many ancient thinkers (*ruach* and *nephesh* or *neshamah* in Hebrew; *pneuma* and *psyche* in Greek; *rūḥ* and *nafs* in Arabic) were often harnessed synonymously to represent the incorporeal and eternal elements of the human being. The soul's premortal existence, in the sense explored here, is distinct from reincarnation or metempsychosis. The scholars, poets, and theologians identified within this essay largely reject soul transmigration, favoring the idea that the soul has only one embodiment in its present human form.

3. Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Givens provides a masterful treatment of the conceptual development of the preexistence in Western civilization.

4. See Abraham 3:24. See also Blake Ostler's treatment of the origin and development of the doctrine of pre-eternity in "The Idea of Pre-Existence in the Development of Mormon Thought," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 59–78.



Islam has had its own intellectual, religious, and emotional interaction with the idea, but the concept of pre-mortality was ultimately consigned by mainstream Islam to the fringes of theological idiosyncrasy. Even so, the explanatory power of pre-mortality has provided a remarkably durable ontological coherence and symmetry for many Muslims across time.

### Mainstream Interpretations

Before exploring the notion of the preexistent soul, it is necessary to understand the more widely accepted theological narrative of the soul's origin as found within mainstream Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam.<sup>5</sup> Immortality, by most monotheistic orthodox derivatives, is unidirectional, assuming the soul originates at birth and extends into an infinite future.<sup>6</sup> The human soul comes into existence as a direct creative act of God at the time of birth as a composite of physicality and spirit. On the human soul generally, and pre-mortality more specifically, the primary texts of Islam provide very little insight. Qur'ān 17:85 reads: "they ask you about the soul (rūh). Say: The soul is one of the commands of my Lord, and you are not given aught of knowledge but a little."<sup>7</sup> Indeed for mainline Sunnī and Shī'ī Islam, the nature of the spirit or soul is presumed to be a mystery that God reserves to himself, and humans cannot and should

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5. Sunnī Islam constitutes between 85%–90% of all Muslims worldwide. The second largest branch of Islam is Shī'ī Islam, which constitutes about 10–15% of all Muslims.

6. See "Soul, Human, Origin of," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 13:353–56; David Calabro, "Soul, Jewish," *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, edited by Roger S. Bagnall, et al. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 6337–38; "Nafs," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 1st ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1936), 55–56; and Duncan B. Macdonald, "The Development of the Idea of Spirit in Islam," *The Muslim World* 22, no. 2 (1932): 153–68.

7. All English translations of the Qur'ān in this essay are from M. H. Shakir, *The Qur'ān* (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'ān, 1999).

not try to grasp its secrets or unravel its mysteries. All that mortals are intended to understand is the timing of when the *rūh* is breathed into the body when life begins. In Islam, the spirit is usually believed to be breathed or blown into the fetus sometime between 40–120 days after conception.<sup>8</sup> Foundational to this conventional position on life beginning at birth is Qurʾān 32:9, which reads: “Then He made him complete and breathed into him of His spirit, and made for your ears and the eyes and the hearts.” God, in other words, animates the body by breathing the spirit of life into it. The spirit, in this sense, is a by-product of God, not an independent, self-existent entity, and God’s breathing the spirit into the body is understood as a metaphysical occurrence beyond human comprehension. Since the human soul is accepted as a mystery in mainstream Sunnī and Shīʿī Islam, it is understandable that discourses about the soul’s preexistence are largely ambiguous or viewed as a peripheral theological matter not warranting sustained attention.<sup>9</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim’s (d. 1350 CE) *Book of the Soul* (*Kitāb al-Rūh*)

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8. Qurʾān 22:5 and 23:12–14 describe the fetal development process. *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukharī* vol. 8, book 77, number 593: “Allah’s Apostle, the truthful and truly-inspired, said, ‘Each one of you collected in the womb of his mother for forty days, and then turns into a clot for an equal period (of forty days) and turns into a piece of flesh for a similar period (of forty days) and then Allah sends an angel and orders him to write four things, i.e., his provision, his age, and whether he will be of the wretched or the blessed (in the Hereafter). Then the soul is breathed into him.’” See also Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans., *Summarized Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukharī* (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1996), 643.

9. The only debate of real note is the dispute over the noted Andalusian Ṣūfī philosopher Ibn ʿArabī’s (d. 1240) arguments that a human being exists “both in time (in the body) and before-time (in the spirit)” and is an uncreated and an “eternal and after-time organism.” See Mullā Alī Al-Qarī Al-Ḥanafī, unpublished *Extracts from the Book Ibtāl Al-Qawal bi Waḥdat al-Wujūd*, which outlines the various refutations of Ibn ʿArabī’s uncreated soul position, available at <http://docs.umm-ul-qura.org/ibtal.pdf>. To reinforce his point, Ibn ʿArabī quotes the venerated theologian and jurist Abū Ḥāmid Al Ghazālī (d. 1111): “and the soul is not created, it is directly from the realm of God’s command.” Many scholars and philosophers influenced by the schools of

ranks as one of the few books in the classical period on the subject and is widely accepted as doctrinally sound by both branches of orthodox Islam. Ibn al-Qayyim explores in detail the timing and the nature of the soul's beginning, which can be summarized by: "The Holy *Qur'ān* (and) the Traditions (*ḥadīth*) denote that He, glory be to Him, (that He) breathed in (man) of His spirit, *after* creating his body. From that breath the spirit was created in (man)."<sup>10</sup> In essence, Ibn Qayyim reinforces the idea that the souls of humankind only come into existence sometime between conception and birth.

### Heterodox Interpretations

However, within the more mystical strains of Islam, one can locate various propositions of a spiritual, premortal realm as a coherent premise of the soul's beginning. The doctrine of pre-mortality in Islam emerged more through religious absorption and syncretic assimilation than through any of its own primary scriptural sources. Most of the extant sources on this topic are found through *Qur'ānic* and *ḥadīth* interpretative commentary and through various creation accounts compiled by religious scholars both orthodox and mystic. The most notable mystical-

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Al Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī have taken issue with the notion of an uncreated human soul, arguing that the soul cannot be co-eternal with God. However, it is not the soul's co-eternality with God with which this essay is concerned. The thinkers and scholars used here would likely agree that the soul can be both created by God *and* preexistent to mortality. Another contributing variable the concept of pre-mortality is not well developed in mainstream Islam is likely due to its doctrine of singularity where there is no god but God, and "He begets not, nor is He begotten, and none is like Him" (see *Qur'ān* 112:1–4). Many orthodox theologians, particularly from the Sunnī fold, have taken issue with the notion of preexistence, arguing that this might imply a familial relationship with God, albeit spiritual, creating a dangerous chain of reasoning suggesting human divinity, a blasphemous (*kufr*) conception.

10. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Kitāb al-Rūḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1997), 256. Emphasis mine.

ascetic aspect of Islam is Sūfism. Sūfī orders constitute a small religious minority within present-day Islam and seek a deeper inner and esoteric religious experience than the larger orthodox branches of Islam. Sūfī narratives are replete with premortal imagery and are integral to such fundamental theological ideas in Sūfism such as *dhikr* (remembrance) and *tawhid* (unity).<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the greatest impact on the doctrine of pre-mortality in Islam can be traced to Platonic and Neoplatonic influences. Hellenic intellectualism deeply penetrated regions in and around the Mediterranean and was “in the air and easily accessible” to Muslims in Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Plato gave form and legitimacy to human preexistence in the fourth century BCE, and the idea was later elaborated on by such thinkers as Philo of Alexandria, Origen, and Plotinus.<sup>13</sup> As Terryl Givens notes, the fact that “most of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato is particularly true in the case of preexistence.”<sup>14</sup> Plato had a similar impact on nascent Islamic philosophical development. As Islam expanded between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, so did its contact with other ideas and religious communities, where convergences of thought and assimilation were almost certain. Inevitably, mystical elements also found expression in Islam, influenced in varying degrees

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11. Sūfīs are considered neither Sunnī nor Shīʿī by some, while others claim that their mystical approach can apply to either Sunnī or Shīʿī Islam. Hence, a Sūfī can technically be a Sunnī or Shīʿī in the eyes of many.

12. Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1914), 14. For further elucidation on the influence of Greek thought on Islam, see Ian Richard Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).

13. See T. Taylor, ed. and trans., *The Works of Plato*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1984), in particular see Phaedo 71d–84c; Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1970); C. D. Yonge, trans., *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993); and A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, 7 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966–88).

14. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings*, 27.

by its own porous boundaries with Jewish, Christian, and Hindu ideas.<sup>15</sup> With Islam's growth and expansion also came differing Qur'ānic and *ḥadīth* interpretations split along Sunnī, Shī'ī, and Ṣūfī lines. It was in this milieu that the concept of pre-mortality emerged in Islam, even if it was to ultimately fall outside both intellectual and theological convention. However, unlike many other speculative cosmologies that met a demise from critical debate, pre-mortality as an idea persisted with uncommon historical resiliency within specific forms of Islamic thought.

In a peculiar passage in Qur'ān 19:9, God addresses Zachariah, "Indeed I created you before, when you were nothing." A particular reading of this passage suggests indirect evidence that the soul is an independently created entity. Further, the soul is said to be taken and returned, intimating perhaps that the soul is traceable to a particular origin. Passages such as "Return unto thy Lord ('*Irjah'i illa rabbiki*") and "Every soul shall taste of death; then unto Us you shall be returned (*turja'ūn*)"<sup>16</sup> could imply either a reintegration of the soul's divine energy with God at death, or as others have suggested, a literal return of a self-existent but unembodied being to a place of its beginning. A couple of unique passages in the *ḥadīth* literature provide a glimpse into how the prophet Muḥammad might have conceptualized the human spirit in the context of premortal relationships. In *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, one of the

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15. See R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London: Athlone Press, 1960) and Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (New York: Frank Cass, 2012), 190–216. Certain Arabic terms also help conceptualize that immortality and eternity might be extended infinitely in both directions and perhaps understood more as an infinite geometric line rather than a geometric ray that only begins at birth. The Arabic term *qīdam* (or *kidam*) is defined as eternity *a parte ante*. Etymologically, the word *qīdam* should be also associated with the cognate term *azal*, meaning a "constant duration of existence in the past." See R. Arnaldez, "*Qīdam*," *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 95.

16. Qur'ān 89:28, 11:4, 29:57. See A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955).

most widely trusted compilations of the prophet's *ḥadīth*, Muḥammad is claimed to have said:

People are like mines of gold and silver . . . and the souls are troops (*al-arwah junūd mujannada*) collected together and those who had a mutual familiarity amongst themselves in the store of prenatal existence would have affinity amongst them, (in this world also) and those who opposed one of them, would be at variance with one another.<sup>17</sup>

In this extraordinary account, the prophet Muḥammad seems to provide insight into the immediate affinity humans occasionally experience when meeting for the first time. In a discursive note on this *ḥadīth* it reads: “just as the birds of a feather flock together, in the same way good souls remain close to one another in the prenatal state of existence and in the material world also.”<sup>18</sup> In *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, another highly respected *ḥadīth* source, it is also recorded: “Spirits are like conscripted soldiers: those whom they recognize, they get along with, and those whom they do not recognize, they will not get along with.”<sup>19</sup> Ibn Ḥajar (d. 1448 CE), the noted medieval Shafi‘ite Sunnī exegete, commenting on this specific *ḥadīth* notes:

It could be that what is being referred to is the beginning of creation in the realm of the unseen (*ḥāl al-ghayb*) when, it is reported, souls were created before bodies (*al-arwāḥ khuliqat qabl al-jasām*), and used

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17. A. H. Siddīqī, trans., *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, vol. 3, book 32, *ḥadīth* 6377 (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, n.d.), 1386. See also *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, book 45, *ḥadīth* 2638 (Beirut: Dār Ihyā’ Al-Torāth Al-‘Arabī, 2000). M. S. ‘Abd al-Raḥman, *Islamic History and Biography*, vol. 14 (London: MSA Publication, 2004), 117, comments: “narrated by Abū Hurayrah the *ḥadīth* does not say ‘humans were alive before being born.’ Only [that] the souls were in heaven. This heaven is not the one people with good deeds go to in the hereafter. It is somewhere that we do not know. . . . In simple words, this place is like a bank where the souls created by Allah were placed.”

18. Ibid.

19. “*Al-arwāḥ junūd mujannadah fa-mā tā ‘araf min-hā iytilāf wa mā tanākir min-hā ikhtilāf*,” as found in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, “*Bāb al-Aḥādith al-Anbiyā, Bāb al-Arwāḥ Junūd Mujannadah*” (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub Al-‘ilmiah, 2007).

to meet one another and express their pessimism about the future. When souls have entered bodies (come to the physical realm) they may recognize one another from the past, and may be on friendly terms or otherwise based on that past experience.<sup>20</sup>

The prominent Indian *ḥadīth* scholar Muḥammad Shams al-Ḥaq ‘Azīmabādī (d. 1911 CE) also interpreted this *ḥadīth* to mean: “souls meet each other before they get into their bodies.”<sup>21</sup> Without an *a priori* conception of pre-mortality as an operational framework, passages like these are perhaps rendered less intelligible and more strained for logical consistency.

### Creation Narratives

*Ḥadīth* and medieval creation narratives describe an entire epoch and a panoply of created beings with varying degrees of free will participating in a long and complex drama well before humans arrive on the scene. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh Al-Kisā‘ī (c. 1100 CE), in his noted *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*, describes one such creation myth. According to Al-Kisā‘ī, prior to the creation of Adam, God created “seven heavens and seven earths,” each with its own nations and inhabitants.<sup>22</sup> Al-Kisā‘ī also lays out an angelology of the heavens prior to the advent of humanity. Interestingly, the seventh heaven is described as being occupied with angelic inhabitants “in the form of men.”<sup>23</sup> After God created time and the natural phenomena found in the heavens and various earths, he then created “the Soul Rational (‘*aql*’).” Speaking to the yet unembodied but rational, responsive soul, God said:

20. Ibn Ḥajar Al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī* (Beirut: Dār Al-‘Arafa, n.d.), vi. 236.

21. Muḥammad Shams al-Ḥaq ‘Azīmabādī, *‘Awn al-Ma’abūd* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1979), xii. 124.

22. Al-Kisā‘ī, *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’* of Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh Al-Kisā‘ī, translated by T. Wheeler (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997).

23. Ibid., 12. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude these angels were incarnated humans given Islam’s conventional differentiation between the two beings, with angels possessing no free will in the cosmic hierarchal order.

“Draw nigh!” And it drew nigh. Then he said to it, “Draw back!” and it drew back. “By My Majesty and Splendor,” God said, “I have not created anything so beloved to me as thee. Through thee I shall take away and through thee shall I give. Through thee I shall reward and through thee I shall punish.”<sup>24</sup>

This account of the creation of an independent soul is situated in an epoch preceding human history. Ibn Sīnā or Avicenna (d. 1037 CE), the great Persian polymath, argues that it is this first intelligence (*al-‘aql al-awwal*) from which human souls emanate.<sup>25</sup> Ibn Sīnā contends that what differentiates humans from other sentient creation is that humans possess a soul with rational faculties and an independent free will preexisting the body. In poetry he writes of the grief of the soul’s descent from the heavens to its temporary rendezvous with the material world.<sup>26</sup> Depicting the spirit/body duality of the human being, he writes:

There descended upon you from that lofty realm,  
A dove, glorious and inaccessible.  
Concealed from the eye of every seeker,  
Although openly disclosed and unveiled.  
Reluctantly she came to you,  
And reluctantly, in her affection, will she depart.  
She resisted, untamed; then upon her arrival  
She grew accustomed to this desolate waste.  
She forgot, I think, promises of sanctuary and  
Abodes from which she had been unwilling to leave.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Ibid., 10.

25. Ibn Sīnā, *Kitab al-Najat* (Cairo: Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Kurdī Press, 1938).

26. Golam Dastagir, “Avicenna’s Mystical View of the Soul: His Responses to Aristotle and Plotinus,” *The Jahangirnagar Review* 9 (2000): 1–15.

27. Ibn Sīnā, “*Al-Qasīda Al-‘Ainiyya* (Ode on the Soul),” as found in Peter Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 92. It is difficult to reconcile Ibn Sīnā’s mystical accounts of the soul’s descent with other philosophical arguments he made for the soul’s origination with the body. To illustrate the inconsistency of Ibn Sīnā’s views on this point, see Lukas Muehlethaler “Revising Avicenna’s Ontology



Muḥammad Shahrastānī (d. 1153 CE), an influential Persian historian, in his book *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, describes a creation narrative as held by certain heretical sects within the Muʿtazilah traditions in this way:

They hold that God created men healthy, sound in body and intelligent, in an adult state, and in a world other than this one in which they now live. He created in them the full knowledge of himself and showered on them blessings. It is impossible for the first of God's creatures to be anything but intelligent and thinking beings, able to draw lessons from experience, whom, from the beginning, God placed under an obligation to show gratitude to him. Some of them obeyed in all things God allowed to remain in heaven where he had placed them from the beginning. Those who were disobedient in all things God cast out of heaven and put in a place of punishment, namely hell. Those who were partly obedient and partly disobedient God sent to this world and clothed them in these gross bodies.<sup>28</sup>

Creation myths like these, adapted from the Qurʾān and other Islamic literature, underscore the myriad trans-historic beings found in the cosmos prior to human corporeal creation.<sup>29</sup> These stories are iconic in Islamic culture and, to a degree, establish a scaffolding in which various actors, including disembodied human souls, might exist and exercise free will prior to mortality. Even if these narratives are considered fanciful, some Muslims still believe these stories to contain profound and

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of the Soul: Ibn Kammūna on the Soul's Eternity *a Parte Ante*," *The Muslim World* 102 (October 2012): 597–616.

28. Shahrastānī is specifically referring to the Khābiṭīya and Hadathīya sects. See Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, "*Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*," in *Muslim Sects and Divisions*, edited by A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (London: Kegan Paul, 1984), 54.

29. In another influential compilation on the creation narrative is by the venerable Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE), who wrote the monumental work *Taʾriḫ al-Rusūl waʾ al-Mulūk* (*The History of Prophets and Kings*). Within this work, Al-Ṭabarī carefully documents various traditions regarding early Islamic cosmology where God created other categories of intelligent, sentient beings preceding the creation of Adam. See F. Rosenthal, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: General Introduction and from the Creation to the Flood*, vol. 1 (New York: State University Press of New York, 1989), 250.

sacred truths, and they remain cultural manifestations of pre-mortality's appeal. Through the wide range of the *Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* genre, pre-existent realms serve as powerful interpretative tools in making sense of humanity's relationship to the heavens and situating the human soul in a divine drama prior to life on earth.<sup>30</sup>

### The Verse of the Covenant and 'The Trust'

One of the most enigmatic but thought-provoking passages in the Qur'ān reads:

And when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes! We bear witness. Lest you should say on the day of resurrection: Surely we were heedless of this.<sup>31</sup>

30. Other available printed versions of the *Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* are: 'Abd al-Şāhib al-Hasanī Al-Āmilī, *al-Anbiyā' : Hayātuhum, qışaşuhum* (Beirut: al-A'lami, 1971); Ishāq Ibn Bishr, *Mubtada' al-Dunyā wa-Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* (Bodleian Library, Oxford: Huntington 388, fols. 106B–170B); Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1968); Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn Manşūr Ibn Khalaf al-Nīsābūrī, *Qışa al-Anbiyā'* (Tehran: Majmū'ai Mutūni, 1961); Al-Sayyid Ni'mat Āllāh Al-Jazā'irī, *al-Nūr al-Mubīn fī Qışaş al-Anbiyā' wa'l-Mursalīn*, 2 vols. (Najaf: n.p., 1374); Juwayrī, Muḥammad, *Qışaş al-Anbiyā'*, ed. Hajj Sayyid Aḥmad Kitābchī (Tehran: n.p., n.d.); Muḥammad-Bāqir Majlisī, *Hayāt al-Qulūb Dār Qışaş wa-Aḥwālāt-I Payghambarān-i 'Izām wa-Awşiyā-i Īshān*, 3 vols. (Tehran: Chāpkhāna-I Islāmiyya, 1373); 'Abd al-Wahāb Al-Najjār, *Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al- 'Arabī, n.d.); Nāşir al-Dīn ibn Burhān Al-Rabghūzi al-Dīn, *Qışaş al-Anbiyā': An Eastern Turkish Version* (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī, *Ismat al-Anbiya'* (Cairo: Silsilat al-Thāqafa al-Islāmiyya, 1964); Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Al-Tha'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis: Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: Dār al-Rakhiyya al-Kutub al-'Arabīyya, n.d.); Sa'id ibn Hibat Āllāh Al-Rāwandī, *Qışaş al-Anbiyā'* (Beirut: n.p., 1968).

31. Qur'ān 7:172.

This verse is referred to by Muslims as the Verse of the Covenant (*al-Mīthāq*), where God enters into a primordial compact with Adam and all future humankind.<sup>32</sup> There are widely differing interpretations surrounding this verse, ranging from the figurative to the literal, but there is almost universal agreement in Islam that humanity will be held accountable at the Day of Judgment for this self-conscious but premortal admission of God's ultimate lordship. This particular scriptural passage, however, has fostered a long but obscured history of theological speculation on the soul's origin by a variety of Muslim scholars, philosophers, and mystics. 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf Alī says of this verse, "According to the dominant opinion of commentators each individual in the posterity of Adam had a separate existence from the time of Adam, and a Covenant was taken from all of them."<sup>33</sup>

From the earliest periods of Islamic history, the Verse of the Covenant seized the imagination of Muslim scholars and made a tremendous impact on Islamic literary expression, particularly those from the medieval exegetical and speculative traditions.<sup>34</sup> Most reports on the Verse of the Covenant describe God's creating Adam and then summoning all future humanity in spiritual form to acknowledge and testify of their unqualified commitment to worship only God. The details of the event vary depending on the narrator, but most accounts generally go as follows:

When Allah created Adam, he stroked with his Hand over his back. So all the souls which were due to be born in his progeny until the Day of

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32. The Verse of the Covenant has alternatively been referred to as the Day of the Covenant (*Yawm al-Mīthāq*), Day of the Primordial, and the Day of *Alast* (after the first word of God's question 'Am I not your Lord?' '*Alastu bi-rabbikum?*').

33. 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf Alī, trans., *The Meaning of the Qur'ān* (Beltsville, Md.: Amana Publications, 1989), 395, n. 1146.

34. See Wadād al-Qāḍī, *The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur'ān* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 2006).

Judgment came out of his back. In front of all the eyes of every human He made a shining light and put them before Adam. Adam said: O Lord! Who are they? He replied: They are your progeny.<sup>35</sup>

Al-Kisā'i writes that when God made this covenant with Adam and his posterity, angels gathered around Adam, who was overcome with "fear and trembling." God then touched Adam's loins, first with his "Right Hand of Might" and then with his left. In the first case, all the righteous posterity of Adam appeared, led first by Muḥammad and his apostles, then a "party of believers proclaiming God's Oneness and affirming their faith in Him." After God's left hand touched Adam, all the unrighteous came forth with Cain, son of Adam, in the vanguard. When all of Adam's descendants to the end of time were finally assembled, God put the question to all future humanity: "Am I not your Lord?" They all answered with assent, "Yea, we do bear witness." However, Al-Kisā'i notes, while "the people on the right answered immediately, . . . those on the left hesitated before answering."<sup>36</sup> For those who accepted this covenant, a transhistorical contract—with free will as a necessary precondition—was established between humanity and the divine. Absolutely fundamental to Islam is the autonomy and accountability of the individual soul, and implicit in this conception and in the Verse of the Covenant is a prerequisite domain of action prior to mortality consequential to the soul's future temporal and spiritual spheres.

Another verse that occupies space in the Islamic mythic imagination is Qur'ān 33:72, which reads in part: "Surely We offered the Trust (*ʿAmāna*) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to be unfaithful to it and feared from it, and man has turned unfaithful to it; surely he is unjust, ignorant." This verse has been debated

35. Rashād Azamī, *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ of Ismaʿil Ibn Kathīr Al-Damishqī* (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, n.d.), 32. Translated by author.

36. Al-Kisā'i, *Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, 63. Variations exist depending on the narrator that ascribe, for example, the simultaneous physical presence of all future generations in miniscule form such seeds (*durriyyah*) or particles of light.

among Muslim scholars for centuries as to what the Trust actually is. Arguments range from the more pedestrian Sunnī interpretation as generic duties of humankind and the attendant accountability for disobedience to the more domesticated Shīʿī interpretation as proof text to support the question of the early imamate in Islam.<sup>37</sup> Sūfīs, on the other hand, have tended to interpret the Trust as love, free will, and responsibility. In any case, the verse arguably plays a crucial role in the plot structure of the Adamic narrative and is implicitly related to the primordial covenant. Other interpretations on the *ʿAmāna*, albeit more in the heresiographical tradition, place the Trust at a time when “God created people before [creating] their bodies.”<sup>38</sup> Just as God offered humanity a compact at the Day of the Covenant, so too did he invite humankind to accept his Trust when heaven and earth refused. Al-Mughīra bin Saʿid al-ʿIjlī (d. 737 CE), a figure associated with an early Shīʿī *ghulat* sect writes, “God then proposed to the heaven, earth and the mountains that they take upon themselves ‘the trust’ . . . but they refused. God next proposed the Trust to men.”<sup>39</sup> For Al-Kisāʿi and other commentators, the Trust is given considerable attention in that heaven and earth were created sentient and endowed with intelligence.<sup>40</sup> Various *tafsīr* on the *ʿAmāna*, including Al-Ṭabarī’s, leave little doubt

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37. For an exposition on the range of debates on the meaning of *ʿamāna*, see S. Alexander, “The Divine Trust: An Examination of the Classical Tradition Concerning the *ʿAmāna* of Qurʾān 33:72” (master’s thesis, Columbia University, 1986).

38. Ibid., 13.

39. Al-Mughīra bin Saʿid al-ʿIjlī as found in A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn, *Muslim Sects and Divisions* (London: Kegan Paul, 1984), 153.

40. Al-Kisāʿi, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ*, 63. To illustrate this point further, Al-Kisāʿi writes: “The angels gathered around Adam in their various forms, and Adam was overcome with fear and trembling. Gabriel leapt and clasped Adam to his breast, as the valley began to tremble and quake with fear of God. ‘Be still, O valley!’ cried Gabriel, ‘for you are God’s first witness to the covenant God

about the Trust's primordial nature.<sup>41</sup> Al-Mughīra describes preexistent humanity this way and situates the *Mīthāq* antecedent to the Trust:

When He (God) wished to . . . He created creation in its entirety. . . That was on account of God the most high, by what they claim, creating at that moment the shadows of the people (*zalāl al-nās*). The first among them that God created was Muḥammad. . . He sent Muḥammad to the people altogether while they were yet shadows and He commanded him to have them bear witness on their own account of their recognition of the lordship of God.<sup>42</sup>

It is possible to infer from Al-Mughīra that the *ʿAmāna* is potentially as significant for the premortal soul as the *Mīthāq* in its religious potency and symbolic power for pre-incarnated humanity. In another source, Al-Mughīra connects the period of time of the Trust when humanity was in a preexistent “shadow” state but possessed the agency and capacity to accept or refuse God's Trust and be accountable for that decision. Of course, Al-Mughīra's perspective on this epoch of Islamic meta-history was never accepted as part of the mainstream understanding of this verse, but it does offer a notable mythic alternative to the more particularist Sunnī exegetical positions. As we will see, Šūfism interprets both the *Mīthāq* and *ʿAmāna* as Qurʾānic substantiation of the believer's original, primeval status to which they yearn to return.

### Expressions of Origin and Return

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is making with the descendants of Adam.’ And the valley, with God's permission, was still.”

41. Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿu ʿIlbayān ʿAn Taʾwil āy al-Qurʾān*, 2nd printing (Miṣr: Shirka Maktaba wa-Matbaʿa Mustafa al-Babī Ishalbī wa-Awlādihī, 1954), 54.

42. Wilferd Madelung and Paul E. Walker, *An Ismaili Heresiography: The ʿBāb al-Shayṭānʿ from Abū Tammām's Kitāb al-Shajara* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 70. See also R. Khanam, ed., *Encyclopedia of Middle East and Central Asia*, vol 1. “Al-Mughiriyya” (New Delhi: Global Vision Publishing House, 2005), 570.

The implications of the Verse of the Covenant and the Trust have enormous significance in Islamic thought, but probably most profoundly in Ṣūfī speculative theology. Annemarie Schimmel writes at the outset of her *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*:

The idea of this primordial covenant (*Mīthāq*) between God and humanity has impressed the religious conscience of the Muslims, and especially the Muslim mystics, more than any other idea. Here is the starting point for their understanding of free will and predestination, of election and acceptance, of God's eternal power and man's loving response and promise. The goal of the mystic is to return to the experience of the "Day of *Alastu*," when only God existed, before He led future creatures out of the abyss of not-being and endowed them with life, love, and understanding so they might face him again at the end of time.<sup>43</sup>

A central feature of Ṣūfī theology is for individuals to ceaselessly strive to return to one's original, primordial state. Humanity's phenomenal existence in the world of creation is meant to be a divine testing period separate from the Beloved or God. Schimmel elaborates on the religious task of the Ṣūfī mystic: "Man should recover the state he had on the Day of the Primordial Covenant, when he became existentialized, endowed with individual existence by God, which, however, involved a separation from God by the veil of createdness."<sup>44</sup> The true self, according to Ṣūfism, must transcend the confining, finite physicality of the body to evolve and progress to a higher, more perfect state of existence. Spiritual and physical discipline, then, is the primary purpose of earthly, bodily existence in order that both the soul and body can become perfected through the eventual unification with the divine. Amīn al-Dīn Balyanī (d. 1334 CE) describes Ṣūfī sensibility in this regard:

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43. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 24.

44. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 143.

The wisdom behind imprisoning the spirit (*rūh*) within existence (*wujūd*) is this: When the spirit came forth in the original world ('*alami-I asli*), it had no veil. It had come forth within the blessing of union [with God] (*visal*) and did not know the value of this blessing. . . . It was unacquainted with tasting and desire, affection and love, and all the stations and degrees. . . . Then it was turned from the world of union to that of separation so that pain and sorrow, and love and desire, come forth in it. . . . Then whenever it would reach a new station among the stations of this path it would reach a fresh light and [eventually] attain perfection through this journey.<sup>45</sup>

The penultimate religious goal of the *Ṣūfī*, then, is to return to one's origins—to spiritually progress in order to recover one's original unity with God. Schimmel writes, "The *Ṣūfīs* . . . often longed for their true home, for a time and place of their lofty primal state."<sup>46</sup> The concept of *Tawḥīd* (unity) in *Ṣūfī* thought is not only to affirm God's own absolute and delimited oneness, but also reflects the believer's deep longing for a unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*) with God.<sup>47</sup> Al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 910), an early *Ṣūfī* figure, transposed the idea of *Tawḥīd* onto the Day of the Primordial Covenant this way:

Unification is this, that one should be a figure in the hands of God, a figure over which His decrees pass according as He in His omnipotence determines, and that one should be sunk in the sea of His unity, self-annihilated and dead alike to the call of mankind to him and his answer to them, absorbed by the reality of the divine unity in true proximity, and lost to sense and action, because God fulfills in him what He hath

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45. Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 35.

46. Clyde Edward Brown, *Religionless Religion: Beyond Belief to Understanding* (Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse, 2009), 92.

47. The aspiration of all *Ṣūfīs* for a union with God presumes a paradox of being an eternally constituent of God and the individual self. Mystical ascent in *Ṣūfism* tends toward a stress on the enigma of a self that both originates and terminates in God, yet possesses a will that is free and independent.



willed of him, namely that his last state become his first state, and that he should be as he was before he existed.<sup>48</sup>

Arguably the greatest of all Ṣūfī philosophers to verbalize the spiritual journey from a premortal sphere to an incarnated earthly experience and back again was Jalāluddīn Rūmī, the thirteenth-century mystic whose poetic expressions continue to transcend culture, time, and place. He rhetorically asks: “We were in heaven, we were the companions of angels—when will we return there again?”<sup>49</sup> Rūmī, who often harnesses the simile of a bird to represent the human soul, muses: “I am the bird of the spiritual Garden, not of this world of dust; For a few days, they have a cage of my body made.”<sup>50</sup> In other instances Rūmī depicts the soul as a falcon who leaves the sultan’s royal abode and descends to the company of crows. Exiled to this lower existence and longing to be reunited with his king, he hears the falconer’s drum calling him from exile to his rightful home and nobility.<sup>51</sup> Rūmī writes:

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48. ‘Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *The Kashf al-Maḥjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, translated by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Brill, 1959), 282–83, as found in Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 146. See also Junayd, as found in Maulānā ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-Uns*, edited by M. Tauḥīdīpūr (Tehran: n.p., 1957).

49. Jalāluddīn Rūmī, *Dīwān al-Kabīr yā Kulliyāt al-Shams*, edited by Badī‘uz Zamān Furūzānfar, vols. 1–7 (Tehran: n.p., 1957), poem 463.

50. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam’s Mystical Tradition* (New York: Harper, 2007), 234.

51. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 307. Carrying the soul metaphor further into another animal allegory, Schimmel points out: “One of the finest images in Persian poetry (Aṭṭār, Khalkānī, Nizāmī and later by Rūmī) in the late twelfth century is that of the elephant who dreamed of India. The elephant, an animal invariably connected to India, may be captured and carried away from his homeland to foreign lands, but when he sees his home in a dream, he will break all his chains and run there. This is a perfect image of the mystic’s soul, which in the midst of worldly entanglements, is blessed with the vision of its eternal homeland and returns to the primordial Hindustan” (*Mystical Dimensions*, 308).

How should the falcon not fly  
back to his king from the hunt  
when the falconer's drum  
it hears to call: "Oh come back"?

...

Oh fly, oh fly, O my soul-bird,  
Fly to your primordial home!<sup>52</sup>

The bird as an artistic surrogate for the human soul is a common convention in other Šūfī mystical poetry and literature. Probably the most celebrated example of the soul/bird motif is Farīduddin 'Aṭṭār's *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*) which describes the quest of birds journeying over seven valleys to find the lofty abode of their King (*Simurgh*)—the Lord of all Birds.<sup>53</sup> The birds represent different character archetypes and the individuated complexities inherent in humanity. The story is an allegory of the human journey from an original home to the depths and heights of temporal existence, and the worldly attachments that can obscure and divert the reunification of one's spiritual birthplace.

Ibn al-Farīd (d. 1235), another luminary of Šūfī poetry highlighting the "origin and return" theme, writes of the Beloved or God, "I knew no estrangement from my homeland when he was with me: my mind was undisturbed where we were—That place was my home while my Beloved was present."<sup>54</sup> Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 1209 CE), the great poet mystic from Fasa, harkens back to the Verse of the Covenant and of a premortal exchange with the Beloved when he muses:

52. Rūmī, Jalāluddīn, "How Should the Soul," in *Look! This is Love: Poems of Rumi*, translated by Annemarie Schimmel (Boulder, Co.: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 76–77.

53. Farīduddīn 'Aṭṭār, *Manṭiq at-Ṭayr*, edited by M. Jawad Shakur (Tehran: n.p., 1962). See also *The Risālat Al-Ṭayr* (*Epistle of the Birds*), originally written by Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) and later translated by Shahāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī into Persian. See also Al-Ghazālī's work of the same name for a similar story and idea.

54. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions*, 276.

Look well, for the heart is the marketplace of His love, and there the rose of Adam on the branch of Love is from the color of manifestation of His Rose. When the nightingale “spirit” becomes intoxicated by this rose, he will hear with the ear of the soul the song of the bird of *Alast* [“Am I not your Lord?”] in the fountainplace of pre-eternity.<sup>55</sup>

While Sūfī notions of the preexistence are far from uniform, most Sūfīs resonate with the notion of an anterior existence. Most would agree that in this life humans are in a state of forgetfulness and must strive to retrieve the formal glory and knowledge of the soul’s majestic beginning.

Elucidating further the theme of “origin and return” is the Shīʿī, Safavid theologian Ṣadr al-Dīn Muḥammad Shīrāzī, better known as Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1640). In his book *Elixir of the Gnostics*, he expounds on the theosophical notion that human souls have their origins in the first Cause (paralleling Aristotle’s prime mover), eventually returning and being raised in perfection to that original, divine source.<sup>56</sup> Ṣadrā writes of the soul’s “coming from the Presence of the Gatheredness” and “falling into the world of dispersion.” Ṣadrā quotes Qur’ān 7:29, “As He brought you forth in the beginning, so shall you also return.”<sup>57</sup> After several lengthy sections, Ṣadrā lays out the cosmic journey of the soul with its heavenly origin and the various stages of corporeal existence through which it passes on its return journey. “The natural home of the soul,” Mullā Ṣadrā writes, “is in the world of the afterworld,” and the afterworld is “the world of human souls, their homestead, and their true place of return.” In its “original home,” he continues, “the soul was

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55. Rūzbihān Baqlī, “Abhar al-‘Āshiqīn,” *Les Paradoxes des Soufis*, translated by Henri Corbin (Tehran: Tehran Institute, 1966), 396. Baqlī also heavily used the imagery of birds as a metaphor for the soul. See Carl W. Ernst, “The Symbolism of Birds and Flight in the Writings of Rūzbihān Baqlī,” in *The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism*, edited by Leonard Lewisohn (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi, 1992), 353–66.

56. Mullā Ṣadrā, *The Elixir of the Gnostics*, translated by William C. Chittick (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2003).

57. *Ibid.*, 54.

alive, freely choosing, subtle, powerful, knowing through the potency of her Innovator, roaming in her world, joyful, at rest with her Author, in a seat of truthfulness with an All-Powerful King.”<sup>58</sup> In this passage, it is significant that Ṣadrā uses the word *ḥayyah* in describing how the premortal soul was “alive,” not in the sense of potential mortality but rather the attributes associated with living things, in particular the power of self-motion. His term “freely choosing” (better translated perhaps as *capable of choice*), or *mukhtārah*, indicates free will and a degree of personal, individuated agency where souls make choices prior to sinking to this “alien location.”<sup>59</sup> Ṣadrā’s system of origin and return is both a circuit and, as he calls it “a straight path,” an ontological tour of all the various stages through which the soul passes, but in all times and all phases the soul’s free will is preserved, a concept with which Muslim theologians through the ages have grappled mightily.<sup>60</sup>

### The Divine Light of Muhammad

Early mystic sources also suggest that the spirit of the prophet Muḥammad existed as a central prophetic entity prior his birth. The motif of light (*nūr*) in mystic thought represents an exalted manifestation of Muḥammad’s primordial condition. These interpretations evolve from the famous Qur’ānic Light Verse found in 24:35:

Allah is the light (*nūr*) of the heavens and the earth; a likeness of His light is as a niche in which is a lamp, the lamp is in a glass, (and) the glass is as it were a brightly shining star, lit from a blessed olive-tree, neither eastern nor western, the oil whereof almost gives light though fire touch it not—light upon light—Allah guides to His light whom He pleases, and Allah sets forth parables for men, and Allah is Cognizant of all things.

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58. Ibid., 62.

59. Ibid., 63.

60. Ibid., 55.

Mystics theorized that the phrase “a likeness of His light” implies Muḥammad’s light nature, the luminous reflection of God’s own divine light. The *Tamhīdat*, written by the great Ṣūfī martyr ‘Ain al-Quḍāt Al-Hamadānī (d. 1131 CE), suggests:

God created the light of Muḥammad from His light. He formed it and brought it forth at His own hand. This light remained before God for a hundred thousand years, during (which time) He beheld it seventy thousand glimpses and glances every day and night. At each glance He formed it into new light, and created from them all the existent beings.<sup>61</sup>

A notable facet of these interpretations places an emphasis on Muḥammad’s superiority to other prophets and his place as the first prophetic entity created by God. ‘Umar Qatada (d. 118 CE), an early narrator, reported a tradition in which Muḥammad claimed to be the first of the prophets to be created (i.e., as a primordial substance) and the last of them to be sent (as a real prophet).<sup>62</sup> Another tradition claims that the spirits of Muḥammad, ‘Alī and the imāms, were created two thousand years prior to their bodies, and God said to Muḥammad: “I had created you and ‘Alī as light—that is spirit—without body, before I created heaven, earth, the throne and the sea.”<sup>63</sup> Another tradition referring to Muḥammad’s pre-Earth life reads:

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61. ‘Ain al-Quḍāt Al-Hamadānī, *Tamhīdat*, in *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam*, edited by Gerhard Böwering (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 150. Böwering’s excellent work on the Qur’ānic hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī scholar Sahl Al-Tustarī (d. 896) outline various events related to the world of preexistence, including an exposition on the light of Muḥammad and Day of the Covenant.

62. Uri Rubin, “Pre-existence and Light: Aspects of the Concept of *Nūr* Muḥammad,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 69. The renowned scholar ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181) is reported to have said that Allah created Muḥammad’s light “424 thousand year prior to the creation of heaven, earth, the throne, the *kursi*, the tablet, the pen, paradise and hell, as well as before the creation of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus, David, and the rest of those who believed in Allah’s unity.” See Rubin, “Pre-existence and Light,” 116.

63. Rubin, “Pre-existence and Light,” 105.

Before that [i.e., before your appearance on earth], you dwelt well  
among shadows [of paradise].  
Deposited where leaves were stitched [i.e., to cover Adam's loins];  
Then you descended to earth.<sup>64</sup>

Stories of this sort extend beyond the Islamic Middle East where the *Hikāyat Nūr Muḥammad*, a legend found in Malay literature, tells how the mystic light of Muḥammad was made manifest in the form of a glorious bird by God, and all existence came into being from the drops of water that fell from its body.<sup>65</sup> A similar story is found in Bengali Islamic syncretistic literature, where the drops from the body of Muḥammad's *nūr* resulted in the creation of 124,000 prophets along with other various objects and spirits.<sup>66</sup> If Muḥammad's preexistence is permitted, it is not a logical stretch to assume other human beings also had an origin in the eternal realms. Given Muḥammad's status as a human moral exemplar and not divine, it would not be inconsistent to presume that he serves as a prototype of the process of spiritual descent and re-ascension.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the great and enduring existential questions is that of humanity's true essence and identity. In spite of more orthodox interdictions against it, the doctrine of premortal intelligences has demonstrated

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64. Ibn Qutayba, *Adab al-Kātib*, edited by 'Abd al-Hamīd (Cairo: n.p., 1963), as found in Rubin, "Pre-existence and Light," 90.

65. See T. Pigeaud and P. Voorheve, *Handschriften aus Indonesien* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1985), 47 and V. Braginsky, *The System of Classical Malay Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 66–67.

66. Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 129.

67. Qur'ān 18:110, speaking to Muḥammad's mortality, reads: "Say: 'I am only mortal like yourselves.'" It must be acknowledged that because he is in a category by himself in so many ways, Muḥammad's exceptionalism might be a logical argument against this assumption.

impressive endurance and is clearly found in varying but identifiable degrees within Sunnīsm, Shīʿism, and Ṣūfism, though in their more mystical and esoteric narratives. Mainstream Islam has generally relegated the doctrine of the premortal soul to the shelves of unorthodoxy if not light heresy. However, unlike many theological ideas that were confronted and defeated by hegemonic orthodoxy, the notion of the preexistence in Islam was not really defeated in a clear and identifiable contest of ideas. Actual, direct confrontation with the essential ideas of pre-mortality can rarely be found. Rather it appears the notion was swept aside by the broad theological tides and political skirmishes that raged throughout the early Islamic world. Pre-mortality was guilty by association when revered theologians argued clearly against more threatening notions as metempsychosis (*tanāsukh*) or soul transmigration. The view of the preexistence as conceptualized by certain mystics and gnostics merely became collateral damage to larger theological and polemical disagreements.<sup>68</sup> The more speculative and esoteric traditions that demonstrated a consonance with the doctrine of pre-mortality were also constrained and dismissed by scholars and jurists aligned with the prevailing political powers. As movements such as Ṣūfism began to be marginalized and even suppressed, so too did discreet doctrines that may have found fertile ground in mainstream Islam had they not been associated with such fringe and esoteric elements. Entire traditions, such as Ṣūfism, were gradually considered by Sunnī branches as unacceptable deviations of the true teachings of Islam, even if doctrinal portions could have generally been considered religiously sound.

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68. Most Muslim scholars argued for the origination of the soul with its body, but a rare counterargument that may be the most comprehensive challenge to that position is by Ibn Kammūna, a thirteenth-century Jewish philosopher who advanced a systematic philosophical proof that preexistence is a necessary prerequisite for the soul's eternity *a parte post*. See Muehlethaler, "Revising Avicenna's Ontology of the Soul," 597–616.

In spite of more orthodox interdictions against it, the claim that the human soul has premortal origins doggedly persists. It has resurfaced at varying times and places in myriad forms and genres. The notion of a preexistence, like any enduring doctrine or idea, perseveres possibly because of its inherently deep, explanatory power. This version of the cosmic journey of the soul sheds light on some of the weightier problems of existence and has been invoked to answer such universal questions as: Where did we come from? What is our relationship to the divine? Why is there sometimes such an instantaneous bond between companions and lovers? Why are people endowed with unique and innate talents and aptitudes? Are we born against our will?

The history of pre-mortality in Islam is far from linear or consistent and assumes form in a variety of combinations, whether in crude myth, literal belief, or metaphorical abstraction. The idea's allure can easily be developed beyond the modest set of themes selected here, and certainly the ones chosen have permeable boundaries. There is, however, enough recurrence of the pre-mortality motif in segments of Islam to suggest that over the centuries it has powerfully met various important spiritual, emotional, and political needs of certain adherents. In the final analysis, this enduring but subsurface conception of the soul, as originating on the other side of birth, is a testament to the vast and universal human longing to fathom the depth and mystery of existence.



# “ALL THINGS UNTO ME ARE SPIRITUAL”: WORSHIP THROUGH CORPOREALITY IN HASIDISM AND MORMONISM

Allen Hansen and Walker Wright

In his 2005 commencement speech, the late novelist David Foster Wallace provided an unexpectedly frank description of American adulthood for the recent graduates of Kenyon College. Listing painfully familiar annoyances associated with what he calls the “day in day out” of middle-class America—including a hilarious retelling of the common supermarket experience—Wallace urges his audience to fight against their “natural, hard-wired default setting” that tells them they are “the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, he encourages them to see “a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down.”<sup>2</sup> He reminds the graduates that “in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships.”<sup>3</sup> Wallace’s address invokes a kind of postmodern immanence and even sows the

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1. David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water,” commencement address delivered at Kenyon College, May 21, 2005, 8, transcript available at <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf>.

2. Ibid., 8.

3. Ibid.

seeds for a compelling secular model of what some Latter-day Saints may recognize as consecration: the repurposing of the mundane (e.g., time, talents, possessions) for the building of the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

Wallace's writings have been influential on recent thinking in Mormon theology, particularly the work of philosopher Adam Miller.<sup>5</sup> Yet drawing on outside sources for inspiration and theological innovation is nothing new in Mormon thought and can be traced back to the prophet Joseph Smith. In July 1843, Smith taught, "One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth let it come from where it may."<sup>6</sup> Later that same month, he taught, "Have the Presbyterians any truth? Embrace that. Have the Baptists, Methodists, and so forth? Embrace that. Get all the good in the world, and you will come out a pure Mormon."<sup>7</sup> According to Terryl Givens, Smith was "insatiably eclectic in his borrowings and adaptations."<sup>8</sup> Smith's "task would involve

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4. For an insightful analysis of the law of consecration, see Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).

5. See Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2016) and Adam S. Miller, *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace: Boredom and Addiction in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

6. Joseph Smith, "9 July 1843 (Sunday Morning). Temple Stand," in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, edited and compiled by Lyndon W. Cook and Andrew F. Ehat (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), available at <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/words-joseph-smith-contemporary-accounts-nauvoo-discourses-prophet-joseph/1843/9-july-1843>. Authors have standardized the spelling.

7. Reconstruction by Don Bradley in "'The Grand Fundamental Principles of Mormonism': Joseph Smith's Unfinished Reformation," *Sunstone* (April 2006): 36. Original reads: "Presbyterians any truth. Embrace that. Baptist. Methodist &c. get all the good in the world. Come out a pure Mormon." Sermon of Joseph Smith, 23 July 1843 (Sunday Afternoon), in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, available at <https://rsc.byu.edu/archived/words-joseph-smith-contemporary-accounts-nauvoo-discourses-prophet-joseph/1843/23-july-1843>.

8. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 39.

neither simple innovation nor *ex nihilo* oracular pronouncements upon lost doctrines alone, but also the salvaging, collecting, and assimilating of much that was mislaid, obscured, or neglected."<sup>9</sup> Other religions and philosophies can provide new angles, new language, and new lenses by which to explore Mormon doctrine.<sup>10</sup> One of the current authors has built on what Givens calls "Joseph Smith's cosmological monism"<sup>11</sup> to propose a Mormon theology of work that focuses on the sacralization of daily labor and employment.<sup>12</sup> Continuing along the same trajectory, we seek to draw useful parallels between Hasidic Judaism and Mormonism by presenting the former's concept of "worship through corporeality" as a theologically rich source for understanding and describing Mormonism's materialist merging of heaven and earth, sacred and mundane. If, as one scholar has stated, "an examination of other revival movements and their characteristics will also provide a new background against that which is distinctive in Hasidism will stand out in clear relief,"<sup>13</sup> the same holds true for the study of early Mormonism.<sup>14</sup> In this paper, we will outline Hasidism's concept of "worship through corporeality" and its roots in Enochian folklore. We will also briefly touch on the Mussar movement's connection to these Enoch stories and how it shaped their ethics and worldview. Finally, we will explore multiple sources throughout early

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9. *Ibid.*, 38.

10. Hence the scriptural exhortation to "seek ye out the best books words of wisdom; seek learning even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118; 109:7).

11. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 256.

12. Walker A. Wright, "'To Dress It and to Keep It': Toward a Mormon Theology of Work," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2016): 161–77.

13. Arthur Green, "Early Hasidism: Some Old/New Questions," in *Hasidism Reappraised*, edited by Ada Rapoport-Albert (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), 443.

14. For another example of this kind of comparison between Hasidism and Mormonism, see Allen Hansen, "Visions of Light: Itzhak Eyzik and Joseph Smith," *Worlds Without End: A Mormon Studies Roundtable* (blog), May 3, 2013, <http://www.withoutend.org/visions-of-light-itzhak-eyzik-joseph-smith/>.

Mormonism that similarly demonstrate an overlap of the spiritual and temporal in the minds of many Saints, leading them to view their labors as sacred tasks in the building of Zion.

### “Worship Through Corporeality” in Hasidism

Hasidism began as a Jewish revivalist movement in eighteenth-century Poland revolving around Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (the Besht, 1699–1760 CE). “The Hebrew for Hasidism, *hasidut*, denotes piety or saintliness, an extraordinary devotion to the spiritual aspects of Jewish life.”<sup>15</sup> The name meshes well with one of Hasidism’s central teachings: “worship through corporeality” (*avodah be-gashmiyut*).<sup>16</sup> According to this concept, mundane acts can be sanctified and transformed, allowing the worshiper to maintain *devekut* (“cleaving”) with God while transforming the world around her. God in Kabbalistic thought is represented by a series of emanations known as the ten *sefirot*. Each individual *sefirot* has its own unique names, attributes, and configurations, which correspond to its physical counterparts in the material realm. This relationship between form and matter means that a worshiper’s actions have the potential to affect how the divine is configured. Furthermore, by mirroring the divine, the worshiper can determine what blessings flow into the world. While these ideas were emphasized in Kabbalah as underlying the true meaning behind proper ritual and liturgical observance, the sixteenth-century Kabbalist R. Moses Cordovero highlighted their ethical implications in his popular treatise *The Palm Tree of Deborah*: “If you resemble the divine in body but not in action, you distort the

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15. Louis Jacobs, ed., *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 218.

16. The following description draws heavily on Norman Lamm, “Worship Through Corporeality,” in *The Religious Thought of Hasidism: Text and Commentary* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1999), 323–36.

form. . . . What good is it if your anatomy corresponds to the supernal form, while your actions do not resemble God's?"<sup>17</sup>

The Hasidic masters were highly influenced by this mystic-ethical approach and continued to broaden its application. A verse commonly quoted to explain worship through corporeality was Proverbs 3:6: "In all thy ways know him." This indicated to the masters that everything one does could become an act of worship. It was said of one Hasidic master that "he did not travel to the Maggid of Mezherych's [disciple and successor to the Besht] house to hear him expound Torah, but to see how he took off his shoes and how he tied his shoelaces." This same Hasidic master also decried mere preaching. The goal, rather, is to "*be* Torah."<sup>18</sup> Each and every action should be in such harmony with the sacred revelations of God that the act itself embodies them. "Worship through corporeality," writes Norman Lamm, "brought into the domain of religious significance the entire range of human activity."<sup>19</sup>

Despite the popularity of Cordovero's sixteenth-century manuscript, he was not the only or even the earliest source for this doctrine. The Enoch lore circulating in the medieval era played a major role in the development of worship through corporeality. The influential Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac of Acre (1250–1340 CE) was troubled by the Bible's laconic description of Enoch and his heavenly ascent (see Genesis 5:24). While the reasons for Elijah's ascension were fairly clear from the biblical text, the Enoch passages were entirely cryptic. In order to solve this mystery, R. Isaac turned to his teacher for assistance:

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17. Quoted in Lawrence Fine, "New Approaches to the Study of Kabbalistic Life in 16th-Century Safed," in *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship*, edited by Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 102. Translation by Allen Hansen.

18. Meshullam Phoebus ha-Levi Heller, *Sefer Seder ha-Dorot mi-Talmidei ha-Besht* (Lvov, 1880), [Hebrew] 46. Emphasis added.

19. Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, 323.

He said that he received a tradition that Enoch was an *ushkaf*, that is, he sewed together shoes, and with every stitch he made using the stitching awl he blessed God with a whole heart and perfect intent, extending the blessing to the emanated Metatron. Never did he forget during even so much as a single incision to bless, but would always do so, until because of so much love he was not, for God took him and he merited being called Metatron and his virtue is very great indeed.<sup>20</sup>

According to this tradition, the pre-Mosaic Enoch demonstrated his love for God by focusing his love and intents on the divine even during the mundane and menial act of sewing together shoes. His act of blessing caused power and vitality to flow downward to the lowest *sefirah* and unite the lower and upper worlds. Enoch's great display of love for God led to his eventual exaltation and bestowal of the angelic title Metatron.<sup>21</sup> This story was frequently utilized by the sixteenth-century kabbalists of Safed in their theoretical discussions of Kabbalah, though its pietism began to recede into the background. Nonetheless, the tradition continued to exert influence on the monistic idea that profane, mundane, and menial acts carried within them the potential for holiness: "The redemption of the world occurs not through heroic acts by superhuman saints but through the daily activities of a lowly tradesman."<sup>22</sup> The underlying notion was that abstract emotion without appropriate action does not suffice to cause real change in the world. Similarly, acts without

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20. Quoted in Moshe Idel, *The Angelic World: Apotheosis and Theophany* (Tel-Aviv: Miskal, 2008), [Hebrew] 107. Translation by Allen Hansen.

21. The emanated Metatron was considered to be *Malchut*, the tenth and lowest *sefirah*. This Metatron is distinct from Enoch the created Metatron, who is merely given that title. For an overview of these traditions, see Andrei A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Daniel Abrams, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead," *Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 3 (1994): 291–321; and Daniel Boyarin, "Beyond Judaism: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 41 (2010): 323–65.

22. S. Daniel Breslauer, *Creating a Judaism Without Religion: A Postmodern Jewish Possibility* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2001), 98–99.

proper devotion and emotional attachment are often sterile and fail to reach their full potential. This principle was retroactively applied to the seemingly non-religious activities of the patriarchs such as well-digging (see Genesis 26). R. Isaac Luria wrote that the patriarchs' intentions behind the wells "corresponded to those for donning phylacteries."<sup>23</sup> The Hasidic hagiography entitled *Praises of the Besht* includes the story of how the Besht trembled when he saw a hose-maker on his way to prayers. Inviting him over, the Besht questioned the hose-maker about his daily activities. During the course of the interview, the man is shown to be simple, hardworking, honest, full of integrity, and devout. In both trade and devotion, the hose-maker was a contemporary counterpart to Enoch the shoemaker:

The Besht said to him, "What do you do very early in the morning?" He said: "I make stockings at that time as well." He asked him: "How do you recite the Psalms?" He said to him: "I repeat what I can say by heart." The Besht said about him that he is the foundation of the synagogue until the coming of the Messiah.<sup>24</sup>

In her monograph on worship through corporeality, Tsippi Kauffman of Bar-Ilan University observes that the majority of the hose-maker's activities took place outside of the synagogue.<sup>25</sup> It is precisely this paradoxical situation that earns him the greatest praise. Raising the realm of

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23. Moshe Idel, *The Angelic World*, 118–19. The quote is found only in a work by the Sabbatean prophet Nathan of Gaza. Yet, as Idel has argued, it is likely authentic due to there being nothing particularly Sabbatean about it.

24. Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, eds. and trans., *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov (Shivhei Ha-Besht): The Earliest Collection of Legends About the Founder of Hasidism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1976), 110–12.

25. Tsippi Kauffman, *In All Your Ways Know Him: The Concept of God and Avodah Be-Gashmiyut in the Early Stages of Hasidism* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), [Hebrew] 275–76. Translation by Allen Hansen.

the profane to that of the sacred reveals the true essence of worship and hints at the monism that will prevail with the advent of the Messiah.<sup>26</sup>

Reflecting on the centrality of this Enoch tradition to Hasidism, Martin Buber remarked that “man exerts influence on the eternal, and . . . this is not done by any special works, but by the intention with which he does all his works. It is the teaching of the hallowing of the everyday.”<sup>27</sup> By using the shoemaker Enoch as its blueprint, Hasidism spread not only among the poor, illiterate masses, but among wealthy merchants as well. Indeed, they were among its staunchest supporters: “By invoking the Hasidic concept of worship through corporeality . . . the Seer [of Lublin] reassured busy merchants in his audience that they could transform business trips into paths to holiness.”<sup>28</sup> As the Seer himself put it, “When a merchant travels on business, he should say to himself: ‘I am traveling for business so that I will have money to serve God by paying for my sons’ tuition, so that my sons will be Talmudic scholars, engaging in Torah and *mizvot* for the sake of Heaven; and so that I can marry my daughters to Talmudic scholars, and sanctify the Sabbath, and give charity.’ . . . And in this way, he connects his business to God.”<sup>29</sup>

### The Mussar Movement

Enoch the shoemaker served as a model not only for Hasidism, but for the Mussar movement as well. The Lithuanian R. Israel Salanter

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26. “Rabbi Hanokh said: ‘The other nations too believe that there are two worlds. They too say: ‘In the other world.’ There difference is this: They think that the two are separate and severed, but Israel professes that the two worlds are essentially one and shall in fact become one’” (Martin Buber, *The Way of Man: According to the Teaching of Hasidism* [Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill, 1960], 39–40).

27. Martin Buber, *Hasidism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 71.

28. Glenn Dynner, *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 115.

29. Quoted in Dynner, *Men of Silk*, 115.



(1810–1883 CE) sought to transform the Jewish world around him, which he felt had become entirely immersed in ritual and outward trappings at the expense of true devotion to God. The vehicle for his projected revival was exacting—a psychological application of ethics (*mussar*) to all spheres of life:

The Mussar movement fought against a broken and fragmentary Judaism, against a narrow-minded and limited Judaism. It demanded a consistent Judaism, a Judaism that is wide in scope and broad in vision. Half-measures do not suffice in observing the Torah. Keeping well-known commandments and warnings alone will not do. The entire framework must be perfected and expanded to encompass the Torah in all of its commandments and warnings, be they those between God and man, between man and man, between man and himself, and between man and the entire world around him.<sup>30</sup>

For example, according to the Mussar movement, impatience and severity in judging others is on the same legal and moral footing as theft.<sup>31</sup> R. Israel saw in the pursuit of ethical perfection a communal effort and, as an initial step, sought to establish groups among the Jewish upper and middle classes for the study and application of *mussar*. This segment of society was well-educated, affluent, and thoroughly involved in community affairs. In R. Israel's analysis of the Enoch tale above, the theurgical and theosophical elements are entirely discarded in favor of ethics:

This does not mean that when Enoch sewed together shoes he was cleaving to supernal thoughts. The law forbids it, for how can he be occupied with something else when he is employed on behalf of other people? Rather, the essence of his unifications was the concern that each and every stitch would be good and strong in order for people to

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30. Dov Katz, *Tnuat ha-Musar: Toldoteihah, Isheihah, ve-Shitoteihah*, vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv: Hotzaat Bitan ha-Sefer, 1945), [Hebrew] 62. Translation by Allen Hansen.

31. "One that bears a grudge against his neighbor . . . is also culpable of theft" (quoted in Immanuel Etkes, "Rabbi Israel Salanter and His Psychology of Mussar," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Sixteenth-Century Revival to the Present*, edited by Arthur Green [New York: Crossroad, 1987], 235).

benefit from the shoes. Thus he cleaved to the attribute of his maker who bestows his beneficence on all, and this is how he performed unifications, desiring nothing other than to cleave to the attributes of his maker.<sup>32</sup>

As told by R. Israel's modern biographer, "When there was a conflict between God-centered piety or kindness toward one's fellowman, R. Israel preferred the latter, even when it meant sacrificing the former."<sup>33</sup> Enoch's ascension came as the result of his intense devotion to benefiting and bettering humanity. This was the true essence of God's own character. Performing even a menial task to the utmost of one's ability in order to help others was, in R. Israel's mind, the highest form of *imitatio Dei*. Doing one's job well takes precedence over studying lofty theological matters.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935 CE), the preeminent Jewish mystic and thinker of the twentieth century, combined elements from Hasidism and Mussar into his own thought and provided perhaps the clearest expression of Jewish monism:

For Rabbi Kook, the essence of Judaism, which flows from Jewish monotheism, is the passion to overcome separatism, the severance of man from God, of man from man, of man from nature. It is the passion to perfect the world through man's awareness of his links to all else in existence. It is the rejection of the alleged antagonism between the material and the spiritual. . . . It is the rejection of every parochialism that seeks to build man's spiritual home and his structure of values by taking to itself a fragment of life and ignoring the rest. "The Jewish outlook," said Rabbi Kook, "is the vision of the holiness of all existence."<sup>34</sup>

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32. Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *Michtav me-Eliyahu*, vol. 1 (Bnei Brak: Talmidey Yeshivat Ponevezh, 1955), [Hebrew] 34. Translation by Allen Hansen.

33. Etkes, "Rabbi Israel Salanter," 219.

34. Ben Zion Bokser, trans., *Abraham Isaac Kook: The Lights of Penitence, the Moral Principles, Lights of Holiness, Essays, Letters, and Poems* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 26.

## Mormonism's Collapse of Sacred Distance

Before transitioning to Mormon sources, it is worth briefly exploring the metaphysical differences between Hasidism and Mormonism. While the overlap of particular concepts is intriguing, the two movements have vastly different metaphysical foundations. Hasidism has its roots in Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, which largely share the same Neoplatonic (and sometimes Aristotelian) framework as classical theism. In summing up the classical view of God, Eastern Orthodox philosopher David Bentley Hart writes,

To speak of "God" properly . . . is to speak of the one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things. God so understood is not something posed over against the universe, in addition to it, nor is he the universe itself. He is not a "being," at least not in the way that a tree, a shoemaker, or a god is a being; he is not one more object in the inventory of things that are, or any sort of discrete object at all. Rather, all things that exist receive their being continuously from him, who is the infinite wellspring of all that is, *in whom* . . . all things live and move and have their being. In one sense he is "beyond being," if by "being" one means the totality of discrete, finite things. In another sense he is "being itself," in that he is the inexhaustible source of all reality, the absolute upon which the contingent is always utterly dependent, the unity and simplicity that underlies and sustains the diversity of finite and composite things.<sup>35</sup>

Though the application of Platonic elements varies, Hasidism still embraces a Creator/creature divide,<sup>36</sup> viewing God ("Ein-Sof") as "the

35. David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013), 30.

36. See Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, translated by A. S. Worrall (London: T&T Clark, 1994); James Noel Hubler, "Creatio ex Nihilo: Matter, Creation, and the Body in Classical and Christian Philosophy through Aquinas" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1995); Keith E. Norman, "Ex Nihilo: The Development of the

First Cause and the Cause of all causes such that there is none higher than Him up above and none lower down below, and likewise on every side.”<sup>37</sup> From a metaphysical standpoint, the Ein-Sof is absolute, ineffable, and unknowable. Despite the transcendent nature of the classical God and Ein-Sof, Hasidism places a greater emphasis on divine immanence: “the closeness of God to man, or, more accurately, the “withinness” of God in the world. God’s inherence in the cosmos ensures that he is close enough to be related to, to be experienced, to be loved and feared, to assume the aspects of personality.”<sup>38</sup> This “greater role played by immanence and the nearness of the Creator went hand in hand with the emotional trajectory of the young Hasidic movement. Because God was so close, it became possible to make greater demands upon the hasid’s consciousness of God at all times.”<sup>39</sup> It is this strong belief in immanence from which “worship through corporeality” developed.

The Hasidic emphasis on divine immanence is where similarities with Mormon metaphysics begin to emerge. The “collapse of sacred distance” is, according to Terryl Givens, “one of the hallmarks of Mormonism, and of Joseph Smith in particular. . . . Joseph insistently refused to recognize the distinctness of those categories that were typical in traditional Christianity, the sense that there is an earthly and a heavenly, a bodily and a spiritual. . . . Every time that we think we have found an example of what we think is a dichotomy, Joseph collapses it into one.”<sup>40</sup> We are told by Joseph that God the Father is embodied with

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Doctrines of God and Creation in Early Christianity,” *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 (1977): 291–318; Blake T. Ostler, “Out of Nothing: A History of Creation *ex Nihilo* in Early Christian Thought,” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 253–320.

37. Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, 16.

38. *Ibid.*, 2.

39. *Ibid.*, 3.

40. “Interview: Terryl Givens,” *The Mormons*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/givens.html>.

"flesh and bones as tangible as man's"<sup>41</sup> because he "is a Man like unto one of yourselves—that is the great secret!"<sup>42</sup> The joined spirit and body becomes "the soul of man" in Joseph's hands.<sup>43</sup> *Spirit* itself is no longer seen as an immaterial substance, but a "more fine or pure" matter that "can only be discerned by purer eyes."<sup>44</sup> The Lord made clear in an 1830 revelation that the supposed divide between temporal and spiritual laws had in fact never existed: "Wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created."<sup>45</sup> The gathering of latter-day Israel was literal, as was the establishment of Zion, its model being the translated city of Enoch. Richard Bushman explains:

Though modeled after Enoch's Zion, Joseph's New Jerusalem was not to follow Enoch's "City of Holiness" into heaven. Quite the reverse. In Enoch's vision [in Moses 7], latter-day people gather from all over the earth into a holy city, "called ZION, a New Jerusalem." Rather than rising, this city stays put, and Enoch's city descends from heaven to meet the people of the New Jerusalem on earth. . . . The millennium begins in a happy union of two holy peoples on a cleansed earth.<sup>46</sup>

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41. "History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843]," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 1511, available at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/154>.

42. Stan Larson, "The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text," *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (1978): 7.

43. "Revelation, 27–28 December 1832 [D&C 88:1–126]," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 35, available at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-27-28-december-1832-dc-881-126/3>.

44. "History, 1838–1856," 1552, available at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/195>.

45. "Revelation, September 1830—A [D&C 29]," *The Joseph Smith Papers*, 36, available at <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-september-1830-a-dc-29/1>.

46. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 141. See also Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Zion Rising: Joseph Smith's

Zion was the labor that would bring about the convergence of heaven and earth, slightly echoing the Enochian tales underlying Hasidism. An excellent example of the prophet's blurring of past and present, heavenly and earthly is what historian Christopher Smith calls the "inspired fictionalization" of the United Firm revelations. The 1835 edition of these revelations substituted the names of the firm's officers and operational details with various pseudonyms and replacement words that read as if within an Adamic context. Smith explains that "the fictionalization of these texts is . . . a fascinating historical case study in Joseph Smith's tendency to blend practical and mystical concerns. The changes to the revelations were a way of keeping an important secret from outsiders, but they also represented a sort of mystical fusion of the modern Mormon community with the ancient city of Enoch."<sup>47</sup> Beyond the ancient pseudonyms given to those mentioned in the texts (e.g., Enoch for Joseph Smith), "modern terminology not appropriate to an Adamic context was generally replaced with more neutral or ancient vocabulary. Thus, for example, the 'firm' became the 'order.' . . . In one instance the word 'business' was replaced with 'purpose,' and in another 'printing' became 'proclaiming.' One reference to 'the literary and Mercantile concerns' was supplanted by 'the affairs of the poor.'"<sup>48</sup> Through these revelations, Joseph Smith repurposed the seemingly secular practice of business for the building up of the kingdom of God and did so—like the Hasidic forefathers—by drawing inspiration from and expanding upon Enoch's ascension to God. In short, "the prophecy of Enoch provided a personal role model to inspire him and a blueprint to direct him."<sup>49</sup>

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Early Social and Political Thought" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2008, chapters 5–7).

47. Christopher C. Smith, "The Inspired Fictionalization of the 1835 United Firm Revelations," *Claremont Journal of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 17.

48. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

49. Terry L. Givens, "The Prophecy of Enoch as Restoration Blueprint" (lecture given at the 18th Annual Arrington Lecture Series, Logan, Utah, Sept. 20, 2012), 4, available at [http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington\\_lecture/19/](http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_lecture/19/).

In his enlightening exploration of Mormon metaphysics, the late Catholic philosopher Stephen H. Webb explains that:

[B]oth Mormons and Catholics believe in transubstantiation. They just locate [it] in different theological places. . . . For Catholics, transubstantiation is dramatized in a quite literal way in the Eucharist, where the bread and wine become the first fruits of the eschatological economy of Christ's abundantly capacious body. That drama for Mormons is not localized in such a specific way. . . . [T]he Saints actually locate transubstantiation in the potential for every event, no matter how mundane, to convey the physically uplifting power of God's grace. . . . For the Saints, everything we do should rise to the occasion of the Lord's Supper.<sup>50</sup>

The toil and sweat of Zion-building was pregnant with covenantal and eschatological meaning for the early Saints. The need to find the divine in the mundane surely increased as the Mormons headed West and established an isolated, theocratic government. As historian Matthew Bowman has noted, Brigham Young "bound even more closely than had Joseph Smith the Mormons' sense of themselves as a covenanted people, specially chosen by God, to the practical work of building a community on earth. The distance between the sacred and secular on the trail was vanishingly small. The captains of the companies routinely celebrated the Lord's Supper as they prepared decisions about when to move and what trail to take."<sup>51</sup> President Young saw the "work of building up Zion" as "a practical work" and "not a mere theory."<sup>52</sup> The Saints were "not going to wait for angels, or for Enoch and his company to come and build up Zion, but we are going to build it."<sup>53</sup> Young often spoke of "present salvation" brought on by the constant presence of the Spirit:

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50. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 74–75.

51. Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 102.

52. Brigham Young, Feb. 23, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:284.

53. Ibid.

It is present salvation and the present influence of the Holy Ghost that we need every day to keep us on saving ground. . . . I preach, comparatively, but little about the eternities and Gods, and their wonderful works in eternity; and do not tell who first made them, nor how they were made; for I know nothing about that. Life is for us, and it is for us to receive it today, and not wait for the millennium.<sup>54</sup>

If the divine as an abstraction was on its deathbed with the teachings of Joseph Smith, it met its ultimate demise under the leadership of Brigham Young. “In the mind of God,” said Young, “there is no such a thing as dividing spiritual from temporal, or temporal from spiritual; for they are one in the Lord.”<sup>55</sup> Only to “those who understand the principles of life and salvation, the Priesthood, the oracles of truth and the gifts and callings of God to the children of men” is “there no difference in spiritual and temporal labors—all are one.”<sup>56</sup> These spiritual labors could range from “preaching, praying, laboring with my hands for an honorable support; whether I am in the field, mechanic’s shop, or following mercantile business, or wherever duty calls, I am serving God as much in one place as another; and so it is with all, each in his place, turn and time.”<sup>57</sup>

With this outlook, Young declared that his mission was “to teach [the Saints] with regard to their every-day lives. . . . My desire is to teach the people what they should do now, and let the millennium take care of itself.”<sup>58</sup> For Young, focusing the gospel on “the present time, circumstances and condition of the people”<sup>59</sup> was the way in which God’s people should live it. The “law of God,” in his view, was the system “best to live by, and the best to die by; it is the best for doing business; it is the best for making farms, for building cities and temples” and would

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54. Brigham Young, Jul. 15, 1860, *Journal of Discourses*, 8:124.

55. Brigham Young, Dec. 11, 1864, *Journal of Discourses*, 11:18.

56. Brigham Young, Oct. 6, 1870, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:260.

57. Ibid.

58. Brigham Young, May 17, 1868, *Journal of Discourses*, 12:228.

59. Brigham Young, Sept. 28, 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, 10:1.



bring "present security and peace."<sup>60</sup> Recalling a conversation with a "gentleman" who didn't think the Mormons seemed "very religious," Young explained,

That is a mistake, we are the most religious people on the face of the earth. We do not allow ourselves to go into a field to plough without taking our religion with us; we do not go into an office, behind the counter to deal out goods, into a counting house with the books, or anywhere to attend to or transact any business without taking our religion with us. If we are railroading or on a pleasure trip our God and our religion must be with us.<sup>61</sup>

The Mormon religion "incorporates every act and word of man," preached Young. "No man should go to merchandising unless he does it in God; no man should go to farming or any other business unless he does it in the Lord. . . . Our work, our every-day labor, our whole lives are within the scope of our religion. This is what we believe and what we try to practice."<sup>62</sup>

This Mormon version of "worship of corporeality" can be seen in a number of other nineteenth-century Mormon writings and publications. As historian and educator Gustive Larson illustrates, "Mormon exiles heavily charged with a sense of mission located in the Great Basin in July, 1847. Theirs was a task of building an earthly 'Kingdom of God.' The blood of Israel was to be gathered out of Babylon and brought to Zion to labor collectively in creating a self-sustaining commonwealth preparatory to Christ's millennial reign."<sup>63</sup> The developing industry within the basin increased the demand of iron, leading Brigham Young and the First Presidency in 1850 to issue a call for volunteer colonists

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60. Brigham Young, Feb. 20, 1870, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:241.

61. Brigham Young, May 14, 1871, *Journal of Discourses*, 14:117–18.

62. Brigham Young, Jul. 18, 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:60. This apparently did not apply to lawyers: "We do not want them, we have no use for them."

63. Gustive O. Larson, ed., "Journal of the Iron County Mission, John D. Lee, Clerk, December 10, 1850–March 1, 1851," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 20 (1952): 109.

to establish an iron foundry at Little Salt Lake. George A. Smith was appointed to lead the Iron Mission and was accompanied by over one hundred additional volunteers. In 1851, Smith was reported to have said that “idleness was no part of Mormonism. . . . Said that if we did not have work enough to do that he would plan some more as Joseph said there was more honor in building up cities than there was in living in them after they were built.”<sup>64</sup> The colony, “in spite of serious handicaps and much hardship, succeeded in manufacturing the first iron west of the Mississippi. During the 1850s it produced considerable iron for local use and in the seventies and eighties private enterprise in ‘Old Iron Town’ partially supplied the iron needs of surrounding mining camps.”<sup>65</sup> The minutes of the 1853 general conference capture the spiritual edification felt by the Utah Mormons in the midst of industriousness and economic achievement: “Elder George A. Smith was called upon to preach ‘an Iron Sermon,’ who rose, took in the stand one of the fire-irons [from the Utah foundries], holding the same over his head, cried out, ‘Stereotype edition,’ and descended, amid the cheers of the Saints.”<sup>66</sup> For these Utah saints, Smith’s stereotype fire-iron was evidence of their productivity and achievement in the Great Basin. As one non-Mormon commenter noted, “This kind of religious service would satisfy the aspirations of [Thomas] Carlyle himself, whose rather lengthy sermons on the text *laborare est orare* [to work is to pray] are thus condensed into pantomime by ‘Elder George Smith.’”<sup>67</sup>

The October 1897 *Millennial Star* talked of a Mormon Indian colony on the Malad River in Box Elder County, where the local Native Americans

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64. Ibid., 378.

65. Ibid., 114.

66. “Minutes of the General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 15, no. 30 (Jul. 23, 1853): 492.

67. “Article I,” *The Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* 99, no. 202 (Apr. 1854): 370. In fact, Carlyle had positive things to say about the Utah church due to their leader and work ethic. See Paul E. Kerry, “Thomas Carlyle’s Draft Essay on the Mormons,” *Literature & Belief* 25, no. 1–2 (2005): 261–88.

were being urged to dig an irrigation ditch. With the Elder's upcoming absence in a meeting, one of the locals was asked to conduct. When the Elder asked what the subject would be, the native replied (in one of the best examples of Mormonism's own "worship through corporeality"), "O, me preach 'em heap water ditch, water ditch!":

The Lamanite had partaken of the spirit and genius of Mormonism. "Water ditch" and water baptism are both vital principles of that religion. The redemption of the soul, the body and the home of man is its purpose. . . . The redemption of the earth, and its restoration to a paradisiacal state, will be brought about in part by the blessing and power of God, and in part by the labors and sacrifices of its inhabitants, under the light of the Gospel and the direction of the authorized servants of God. The Lamanite who had grasped the need of a water ditch by means of which to redeem a portion of the earth's surface that was a desert had grasped a vital principle of the Gospel of Christ.<sup>68</sup>

Here, the digging of an irrigation ditch is in a sense raised to the same level as baptism, a salvific ordinance. Redemption could be found both in sacred rituals and one's consecrated labor. An 1878 issue of *Millennial Star* chastised missionaries who "pass through the world as in a dream, beholding strange things as in a panoramic vision, and coming back from their tour through continents, forget what their eyes have gazed upon and the sounds that have only just entered their ears." It encourages them to visit "manufactories and other places of interest . . . not for mere curiosity and pastime, but for the purpose of learning something that can be utilized and made valuable at home. . . . They should mark well every useful object, scheme or invention; learn the *modus operandi* of every important industry or enterprise; garner up every principle and thought learned or conceived by contact with the world; and in all their ramblings and sojournings, investigations and sight-seeings, remember Zion and its interests. Every truth is of God."<sup>69</sup> By becoming an "inventive

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68. "A Practical Religion," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 43, no. 59 (Oct. 28, 1897): 679.

69. "Practical Religion and Useful Knowledge," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 13, no. 40 (Apr. 1, 1878): 199.

people” who “adopt anything which is elevating and progressive that can be learned from others,” the Mormons will be able to reach “into the field of thought and the eternal storehouse of intelligence for ideas original to the world, which, embodied in practice, will tend to lead earth to heaven and make this planet similar to the higher spheres.”<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the *Millennial Star* reported, “The Religion of the Latter-day Saints touches every act of their lives. Or at least it should influence them in all that they do. . . . ‘Mormonism’ enters into the whole being, nature, thoughts, sayings and acts of its adherents.”<sup>71</sup>

This conflation of the temporal and spiritual was also recognized by non-Mormon visitors to Utah. “The Gospel which they proclaim,” reported one 1854 article, “consists of directions for emigration, instructions for the setting up of machinery, the management of iron-works, the manufacture of nails, the spinning of cotton-yarn, and the breeding of stock. The same undevotional aspect is exhibited by their public worship, at least in Utah.”<sup>72</sup> Some were critical of this overlap, declaring it as evidence of “the grossly secular and sensuous character of Mormon worship.”<sup>73</sup> In an 1868 review of William Hepworth Dixon’s *New America*, there is a large section devoted to the portion about Mormonism. The “Mormon life is not a life of ease and pleasure,” notes the review, “on the contrary, it is essentially a life of labour and toil; nay, we may say that hand-labour is the essence of every-day religion; with them is far more realised the old saying, *laborare est orare* [to work is to pray], then anywhere else. . . . Labour, in fact, is their religion; they have a creed, it is true, and they have their peculiar doctrines; but the cultivating the land, building of houses, and making the land profitable and their

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70. Ibid.

71. “Religion and Business,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 14, no. 40 (Apr. 8, 1878): 214.

72. “Article I,” *The Edinburgh Review*, 370.

73. *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation* 126 (May 25, 1854): 334.

homes comfortable, is the real religion of the Mormons. Without such a religion . . . life would be impossible in the Salt Lake Valley."<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

Drawing upon older Enoch lore, Hasidism and other Jewish movements sought to imbue mundane acts with cosmic significance. Worship through corporeality held that each action—be it making shoes or going on a business trip—could be consecrated in a fashion that opened the channels for divine transformation. If every action was religiously significant, then attaining a high level of holiness was not the sole domain of scholars or priests. Simply doing one's job conscientiously became a path to holiness and, ultimately, redemption. Similarly, the literal work of cultivating the land, manufacturing goods, and fabricating ironworks became a way in which Mormons not only sanctified themselves, but married the earthly and heavenly realms. Industriousness itself was a kind of holiness, endowing daily labors with an invigorating richness and sacred status. It was, in every sense of the phrase, worship through corporeality. Today's Latter-day Saints can find inspiration among their Hasidic brothers and sisters, the legends of Enoch, and their own Mormon history as they seek to transform and consecrate their daily undertakings for the building of the kingdom of God here on earth.

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74. *The Union Review: A Magazine of Catholic Literature and Art* 6 (Jan.–Dec. 1868): 297.



# DO WE HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT? CANON AND EXTRA-CANONICAL SOURCES OF LDS BELIEF

Christian N. K. Anderson

## Introduction

For two days in October 2010, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was part of the LDS canon. Maybe.

In his October general conference address, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” Elder Boyd K. Packer referred to the Proclamation as divinely inspired revelation. “It fits the definition of a revelation” he stated, and “members of the Church would do well to read and to follow.”<sup>1</sup> Elder Packer did not specify which “definition of revelation” he was considering.<sup>2</sup> He might have meant that the Proclamation was revelation because it was signed by revelators.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, he might have

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1. Boyd K. Packer, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” Oct. 2010, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/cleansing-the-inner-vessel?lang=eng&r=1>.

2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was itself presented in 1995 by President Gordon B. Hinckley. Though signed by the fifteen “revelators,” none of them have ever claimed authorship, and some Mormon observers speculate that it was written by the Church’s legal department, possibly in preparation for a gay marriage court case in Hawaii and not primarily by apostles and prophets. E.g., in a post by Ziff at <http://zelophehadsdaughters.com/2013/02/19/who-wrote-the-proclamation-on-the-family/>, and comments thereon.

3. A definition apparently endorsed by L. Aldin Porter in his last conference talk in October 1994, “When you see any document, any address, any letter, any instruction that is issued by the Council of the First Presidency and the

meant that it was revelation because it was delivered by a prophet at a general conference of the Church, albeit in an auxiliary session that was not then officially considered part of conference. Nevertheless, the claim was sufficiently problematic that within seventy-two hours it had been changed on the Church website, and it was later published in the *Ensign* to read, the Proclamation “is a *guide* that members of the Church would do well to read and to follow.” Church Public Affairs spokesman Scott Trotter issued a statement suggesting that Elder Packer made the changes himself, but he stopped short of suggesting that Elder Packer recognized the need for the change on his own.<sup>4</sup>

This incident highlights the complicated and sometimes contested nature of LDS scripture. With its acceptance of additional canonical books—the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price—as well as its belief in modern prophets, seers, and revelators, Mormonism’s canon is open and mutable. New revelation can be added to the canon when received by prophets, presented to the Church membership, and accepted by common consent of the Church’s general assembly. However, “scripture” is not understood to be only that which is contained within the pages of the standard works. The Doctrine and Covenants allows that “whatsoever [Church elders] shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall

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Quorum of the Twelve, it should be recognized for what it surely is—the mind and the will of the Lord to his people in this day” (“The Revelations of Heaven,” Oct. 1994, [https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1994/10/the-revelations-of-heaven?lang=eng&\\_r=1](https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1994/10/the-revelations-of-heaven?lang=eng&_r=1)).

4. Scott Taylor stated: “The Monday following every general conference, each speaker has the opportunity to make any edits necessary to clarify differences between what was written and what was delivered or to clarify the speaker’s intent. President Packer has simply clarified his intent” (“Mormon Church Clarifies Intent of President Boyd K. Packer’s Talk,” *Deseret News*, Oct. 8, 2010, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700072230/Mormon-church-clarifies-intent-of-President-Boyd-K-Packers-talk.html?pg=all>).



be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation” (D&C 68:4). Thus, Church members grant considerable authority to the words of Church leaders, which creates a sort of extra-canonical scripture. Despite the oft-repeated claim that pronouncements from the general conference pulpit are not infallible,<sup>5</sup> conference talks have profound influence on Mormon culture and day-to-day religious experience. And in a culture of increasing authoritarianism, the status of Church leaders’ words is ever rising.<sup>6</sup>

5. For example, “What a pity it would be, if we were led by one man to utter destruction! Are you afraid of this? I am more afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him. I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security, trusting their eternal destiny in the hands of their leaders with a reckless confidence that in itself would thwart the purposes of God in their salvation” (Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses*, 9:150). “The First Presidency cannot claim, individually or collectively, infallibility” (*Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, 2 vols. [Salt Lake: Deseret, 1957], 1:206). “I make no claim of infallibility” (Spencer W. Kimball, *Improvement Era*, Jun. 1970, 93). “We make no claim of infallibility or perfection in the prophets, seers, and revelators” (James E. Faust, *Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 11). “So be kind regarding human frailty—your own as well as that of those who serve with you in a Church led by volunteer, mortal men and women. Except in the case of His only perfect Begotten Son, imperfect people are all God has ever had to work with. That must be terribly frustrating to Him, but He deals with it. So should we. And when you see imperfection, remember that the limitation is not in the divinity of the work” (Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/lord-i-believe?lang=eng&r=1>). “There have been times when members or leaders in the Church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles, or doctrine” (Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come Join With Us,” Oct. 2013, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng&r=1>).

6. For book-length treatment of this complex general trend, see Gregory Prince and W. Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 40–59; and Alexander Scott Thompson, “‘Follow the Prophet’: The Rise of the Mormon Right, 1960–1980” (senior thesis, Harvard University, 2012).

This essay will attempt to clarify the process by which extra-canonical texts gain the status of “scripture” in contemporary Mormonism. First, I examine the meaning of “formative” and “normative” scripture. Second, I examine in detail the use of scripture in general conference addresses. Third, I examine institutional efforts to teach scripture to LDS youth, with particular emphasis on the scripture mastery program. Finally, I examine the status of “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” which generated the dominant doctrinal theme of the last two decades, as well as the more recent gay exclusion policy. Ultimately, the nature of what constitutes scripture for Latter-day Saints resists facile explication, but I hope this discussion will bring into sharper focus the chaos out of which “Mormon scripture” emerges.

### Formative and Normative Scripture

In the context of world religion, scripture has been defined as any text that is seen within a religious community as speaking authoritatively about things transcendent.<sup>7</sup> It is incumbent upon believers to learn what scripture says and live by its precepts. However, core beliefs often come from extra-canonical literature. Jewish scholar Moshe Halbertal distinguishes between what he calls normative and formative scripture.<sup>8</sup> Formative scripture are texts that give a religion its cultural heft: they transmit the stories, histories, and vocabulary that form the common heritage of the believers. Normative scripture are those writings that describe the rituals, practices, and commandments that are binding on believers as members of that faith community. Halbertal regards

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7. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2000) and Todd Compton, Paul Edwards, Steve Epperson, Mark D. Thomas, Margaret Toscano, and David P. Wright, “Scripture, History, and Faith: A Round Table Discussion,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 89–117.

8. See Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

the Torah as normative—providing Judaism’s laws, rituals, and traditions—and the Midrash as formative—providing its culture and heritage. However, several scholars have pointed out that the situation is actually reversed. Every Jewish child knows the formative stories of Noah and Daniel, but a Hassid who wants to know norms—like what kind of materials are permissible in a kosher cooking pot, or the maximum number of steps one is allowed to take on the Sabbath—turns not to the Tanakh but to the Midrash or Halakhah.

In Mormonism, we have the same dynamic with the standard works and general conference addresses. There is, with the aforementioned exception of the Proclamation on the Family, no doubt about what is and what is not part of the canon. However, conference addresses have a non-binding-but-official exegetical function for the culture. Halbertal would call our canon normative and the stories and interpretations of general conference formative; however, just as in Judaism, the two are often reversed in practice. For example, clear normative prohibitions against tattoos, piercings, and even consumption of alcohol and coffee come not from canonized scripture, but from interpretations of scripture presented in conference addresses.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, formative elements from general conference such as the iconic phrases “tender mercies” and “the work and the glory” are actually quotations from scripture.

Arguing that general conference functions as scripture is startling and distasteful to many progressive Mormons. Nevertheless, one need only reflect on the radically different ways Jewish and Christian churches approach the first five books of the Bible to see that extra-canonical

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9. D&C 89 clearly states that counsel against consuming these substances is not a commandment. It was not until 1902 that Joseph F. Smith adopted a policy of withholding temple recommends to “flagrant” violators, though the First Presidency continued to serve wine in the temple at sacrament meetings until July 1906. Heber J. Grant made complete abstinence a requirement in 1921. See Thomas G. Alexander, “The Word of Wisdom: From Principle to Requirement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (1981): 80–88.

influence is often stronger than the canon itself. Indeed, Benjamin Sommer argues that “one can rightly say that the books in question are not the same books at all but entirely different works that happen to have the same words.”<sup>10</sup> (This is particularly true in Mormonism, where the words of the Pentateuch are not the same as those in other faith traditions, thanks to the Joseph Smith Translation, and the books of Abraham and Moses in the Pearl of Great Price.) Generally, “lived scripture” derives from emphasizing some parts of the scriptural text and ignoring others. Steve Epperson has suggested that such shaping of canon is unavoidable: “Every scripture, every law, prohibition, and narrative cannot be equally authoritative. There’s a ‘canon within the canon.’”<sup>11</sup> General conference addresses, therefore, can be described as “normative scripture,” a sort of meta-scriptural Mormon Midrash that shapes the way we read the canon itself.

### Shaping the Canon

Like the Jewish Midrashim, normative conference talks derive their authority from the formative scripture they interpret, and in the process shape how Mormon culture reads scripture. General Authorities emphasize some scriptural passages, ignore others, and, in some cases, tear them out of the original context. This misappropriation of the original text is generally done so subtly and/or repeatedly that it *becomes* more authoritative than the text itself. However, at least in an LDS context, outright doctrinal innovation would theoretically be permissible only in the form of a new revelation, presented by a prophet (D&C 43:3) and by a sustaining vote

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10. Benjamin D. Sommer, “Scriptures in Jewish Tradition, and Traditions as Jewish Scripture,” in *Jewish Concepts of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 3–34.

11. Compton, et al., “Scripture, History, and Faith,” 102.

of the church body.<sup>12</sup> As a result, general conference speakers are generally reluctant to stray too far from scriptural texts, even as they unwittingly bring their own preconceptions and understanding to bear upon them. Elder Boyd K. Packer once remarked that his goal as a speaker and teacher was “to say nothing that has not been said before,”<sup>13</sup> yet he is arguably among the most influential of the twenty-first century apostles. If we accept this statement at face value, Elder Packer was unaware of his own

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12. Ironically, this “rule” itself appears to derive from interpretation by leaders, not canon. Authoritative statements of this position include: “The only way I know of by which the teachings of any person or group may become binding upon the church is if the teachings have been reviewed by all the brethren, submitted to the highest councils of the church, and then approved by the whole body of the church. . . . Again, we are only bound by the four standard works and are not required to defend what any man or woman says outside of them” (Hugh B. Brown, *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown* [Salt Lake: Signature Books, 1999], 124) and “The only one authorized to bring forth any new doctrine is the President of the Church, who, when he does, will declare it as revelation from God, and it will be so accepted by the Council of the Twelve and sustained by the body of the Church” (Harold B. Lee, *The First Area General conference for Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Spain of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, held in Munich Germany, August 24–26, 1973, with Reports and Discourses*, 69). These statements notwithstanding, the practice has not been rigorously adhered to in church history. D&C 132 was read in conference in 1852, and added to the D&C without a vote in 1876. Sections of the D&C now found in the Pearl of Great Price were canonized by a vote at general conference in 1880. OD1 was accepted by a minority of supporting voters, at least one vote against, and most abstaining including B.H. Roberts (Ronald H. Walker, “B. H. Roberts and the Woodruff Manifesto,” *BYU Studies* 22, no. 3 [1982]:1–4). It was not canonized until 1914, again without a vote. The “Lectures on Faith” were removed from the D&C without vote in 1921 (see Richard S. Van Wagoner, Steven C. Walker, Allen D. Roberts, “The ‘Lectures on Faith’: A Case Study in Decanonization,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 3 [1987]: 71–77). While OD2 and D&C 137–8 were canonized by vote in 1981, minor revisions to the 2013 edition of the scriptures were made without a vote.

13. Personal communication with Paul L. Anderson.

role as a shaper of doctrine and practice. This sort of ironic contradiction is only possible in situations where robust theology is actively discouraged. Margaret Toscano explains, “various Mormon hermeneutics have emerged because people use scripture in different ways in different contexts. Nevertheless, we do not have avenues for understanding and discussing what we are doing in interpretation.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, the word “hermeneutics” occurs only twice on the official LDS.org web domain, and both times in the context of disparaging secular scholarship.

Perhaps the most obvious way our culture constructs its “scripture” is by continually repeating some verses and altogether ignoring the rest. This method can be examined analytically by mining the text of general conference addresses. In the analyses below, I use citations from talks delivered between 1974 and 2016, because 1974 forms a useful lower limit on institutional memory as the earliest talks available on LDS.org.<sup>15</sup>

The most cited verses during this time period reflect a commitment to what almost all members would regard as the key components of LDS theology (see table 1). The most cited scripture is Moses 1:39 where God reveals the purpose of creation: “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” The second most cited scripture is Mosiah 18:9, which can be thought of as the purpose of the LDS Church: Alma the Elder founds his church by the Waters of Mormon,<sup>16</sup> telling his congregants they will be obligated to “mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.” Many verses in the top ten emphasize the importance of cultivating loving interpersonal relationships and providing service (e.g., Mosiah 18:9, Matthew 22:39, Matthew 25:40), and the peace to be found by loving and serving Heavenly Father (e.g., Mosiah 3:19, Matthew 22:37, Matthew 11:28, 2 Nephi 31:20, D&C 20:77).

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14. Compton, et al., “Scripture, History, and Faith,” 104.

15. Text for Conferences from 1971-1973 have recently been made available on lds.org, from 1941 at scriptures.byu.edu, and can be searched (but not viewed) back to 1851 at <http://www.lds-general-conference.org/>.

16. This is the first time the word “Mormon” occurs in our canon.

Rank	Verse	Cites	Summary	Scrip. Mast.
1	Moses 1:39	169	work and glory	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
2	Mosiah 18:9	124	baptismal covenant	2016
3	Mosiah 3:19	108	natural man is enemy to God	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
4	D&C 20:77	105	sacramental prayer	-
5	2 Ne. 31:20	98	ye must endure to the end, steadfast	1963, 2013
6	JS-H 1:17	98	first vision	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
7	Matt. 22:37	93	love God and neighbor as thyself	2013, 2016
8	Matt. 11:28	92	yoke is easy and burden is light	1963, 2013, 2016
9	Matt. 22:39	90	love God and neighbor as thyself	2013, 2016
10	Matt. 25:40	89	inasmuch unto least of these, unto me	1986
11	Moro. 10:32	89	deny ungodliness	-
12	Moro. 10:4	87	Holy Ghost reveals truth	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
13	D&C 121:45	85	doctrines distil upon soul	-
14	D&C 84:38	84	oath and covenant of priesthood	1963, 1986
15	Abr. 3:25	82	prove premortal spirits	-
16	2 Ne. 2:25	81	Adam fell that men might be	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
17	Moro. 7:47	81	charity purifies	2013, 2016
18	2 Ne. 2:27	78	free to choose	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
19	John 17:3	75	life eternal=know God and Jesus Christ	1986, 2013, 2016

Rank	Verse	Cites	Summary	Scrip. Mast.
20	D&C 19:18	73	suffered these things for all	1963, 1986, 2013, 2016
21	3 Ne. 27:27	72	be even as I am	1986
22	D&C 14:7	72	endure —> eternal life	1963, 1986
23	Moro. 10:5	70	Holy Ghost reveals truth	1986, 2013, 2016
24	Alma 7:12	69	Jesus Christ overcame sin and death	2013, 2016
25	Matt. 11:29	69	yoke is easy and burden is light	2013, 2016

*Table 1*

The most cited scriptures, 1974–2016.

The “scriptural vocabulary” of conference speakers is extremely broad (see figure 1). The Gini-Simpson measure of diversity never dropped below 0.995 in any conference session; i.e., 0.5% of citations were to verses of scripture cited elsewhere in the conference session. It might be expected that the widespread use of digital scriptures beginning in the twenty-first century would tend to increase the diversity of scriptures by facilitating the ease with which speakers could find obscure passages. This appears to not be the case; any trend through time is mathematically insignificant and equivocal.



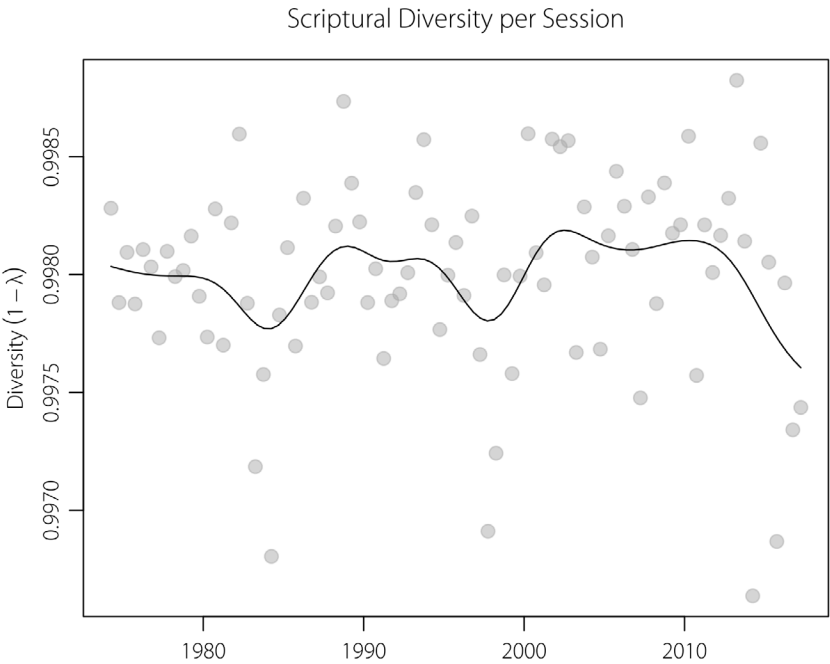


Figure 1

The diversity of scriptural citations is drifting upwards at a non-significant 0.00024% per session ( $p=.52$ ,  $r^2=0.5\%$ ). The trend is equivocal even with temporal binning: diversity per year (Apr+Oct sessions combined) increases at 0.00016% per year ( $p=.47$ ,  $r^2=1.3\%$ ), and a 5-year bin increases at 0.0019%/yr ( $p=.15$ ,  $r^2=17\%$ ).

This implies that scriptural emphasis is actually quite diffuse, which begs the question, are the top verses in table 1 surprisingly common? To answer this question, we need some idea of what the “expected” distribution of scriptural citations would be. A great many linguistic phenomena obey Zipf’s law, which states that as the rank of a datum

increases, its value decreases by a factor of  $1/\text{rank}$ .<sup>17</sup> For example, in a large corpus of English text, the most common word (“the”) occurs roughly twice as often as the second most common word (“of”), and three times as often as the third most common word (“and”), and so forth.<sup>18</sup> This relationship holds for not only written English, but also Latin and Chinese,<sup>19</sup> spoken American English,<sup>20</sup> and two- and three-word phrases,<sup>21</sup> but interestingly does not apply to random or computer-generated text.<sup>22</sup> In other words, it is a startlingly powerful null model for data of this kind.

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17. Harvard linguist George K. Zipf most fully explained his eponymous law in *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1949) and *The Psychobiology of Language* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1935).

18. The formal expression of this is where  $r$  is the rank,  $x(r)$  is the  $r$ th ranked variable,  $C$  is a constant usually close  $x(1)$  and  $\alpha$  is the rate at which  $x$  decreases with rank, usually close to 1 in the case of written languages. Taking the logarithm of both sides, it becomes clear that this implies a straight-line relationship on a log-log plot of rank vs. value. Mathematically, this law is equivalent to a Pareto distribution or a power law relationship.

19. G.K. Zipf, *Selected Studies of the Principle of Relative Frequency in Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932) and R. Rousseau and Qiaoqiao Zhang, “Zipf’s Data on the Frequency of Chinese Words Revisited,” *Scientometrics* 24, no. 2 (1992): 201–20.

20. Hartvig Dahl, *Word Frequencies of Spoken American English* (Essex, Conn.: Verbatim, 1979).

21. Leo Egghe, “On the Law of Zipf-Mandelbrot for Multi-Word Phrases,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 50, no. 3 (Mar. 1999): 233–41.

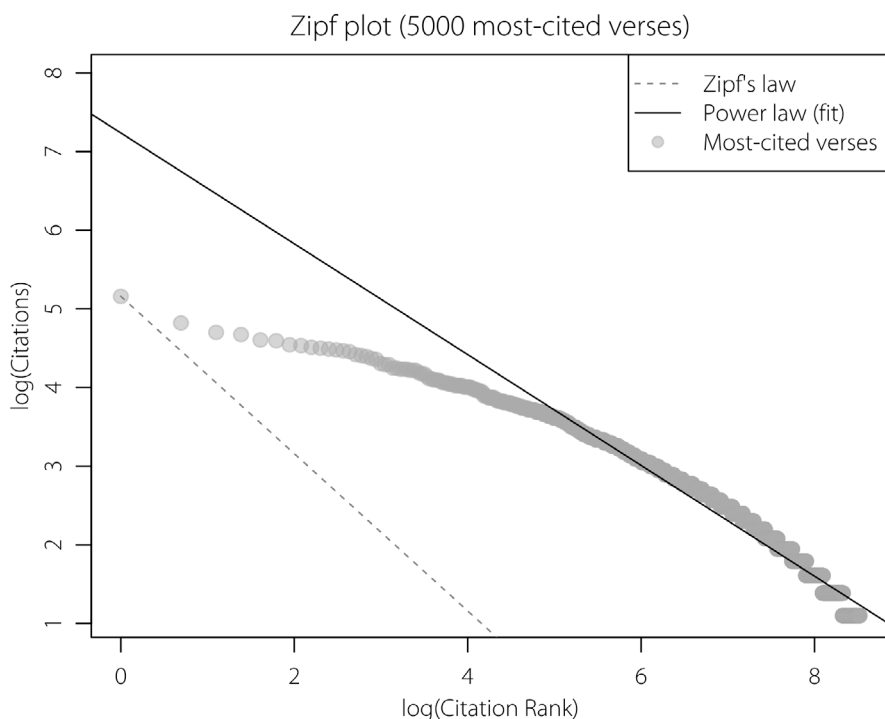
22. Ramon Ferrer-i-Cancho and Brita Elvevåg, “Random Texts Do Not Exhibit the Real Zipf’s Law-Like Rank Distribution,” *PLoS ONE* 5, no. 3 (2010): 1–10. Zipf’s law has been demonstrated to apply to non-linguistic phenomena as well, such as the population of the world’s largest cities, webpage visits, the net worth and number of employees of the largest companies, the income distribution of the United States, the number of citations scientific papers

Yet scriptural citations in general conference do not conform to Zipf's law (see figure 2). The most-frequently used verses receive far fewer citations than we would expect if scriptures were used like words and phrases.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that there is a conscious tendency among speakers to avoid repetition of the same verses, which may be explained as an attempt to reduce audience boredom, to establish the *bona fides* of the speaker as one familiar with the even the obscure passages of scripture, or to avoid promulgating an "official" interpretation of a passage through focused consideration. [Figure 2 available on next page.]

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receive, the frequency of earthquakes of various magnitude (this relationship was discovered independently by seismologists, who called it the Gutenberg-Richter law and based the most common scale of earthquake severity on it). It can be found in book sales in the US, the number of telephone calls received in a year by AT&T customers, the diameter of craters on the moon, the intensity of solar flares, number of deaths in the last 500 years of war, and the number of people with the same last name in the United States. See the reviews and references within Wentian Li, "Zipf's Law Everywhere," *Glottometrics*, 5 (2002):14–21; and M.E.J. Newman, "Power Laws, Pareto Distributions and Zipf's Law," *Contemporary Physics* 46, no. 5 (2005): 323–51.

23. The most common cause of the *opposite* phenomenon, i.e. an excess in the highest ranked data, is discussed in the scientific literature under the appellation "The Matthew Effect" in reference to Matthew 25:29: "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken even that which he hath." These "rich-get-richer" dynamics produce a concave-up curve on the Zipf plot, not the concave-down curve seen in figure 2.



*Figure 2*

General conference scripture citations appear not to follow Zipf's law of rank-frequency relationships. This is true for both the strict form (slope = -1, intercept =  $\log[\text{most-cited}]$ ), and the "relaxed" power-law form (log-linear). The 5000 most-cited verses describe a convex curve on the Zipf plot, not the expected straight line, indicating that the very most-cited scriptures are used far less frequently than expected if scriptures were used the same way words and phrases are used in natural languages. The relationship remains non-linear when considering smaller or larger numbers of verses.

The number of verses cited per conference has been drifting generally upward, with April 2013 representing a peak of just over 1,100 verses, a value expected only once every two centuries based on the previous seventy-eight conferences (see figure 3). This general trend may represent

a relaxation in the “defensiveness” of speakers, who feel that the canonical text and their personal beliefs align so closely that no explanation of the text is needed. Alternatively, this may represent an increasing reliance on the authority of scripture to support points in the talk. In any case, the trend is fairly weak; this peak was followed in April 2014 by the lowest verse count (353) of the time period, compromising the strength of the relationship. While still significant ( $p=.026$ ), approximately 95 percent of the variability in the number of citations per conference session *cannot* be explained by a simple increase through time.

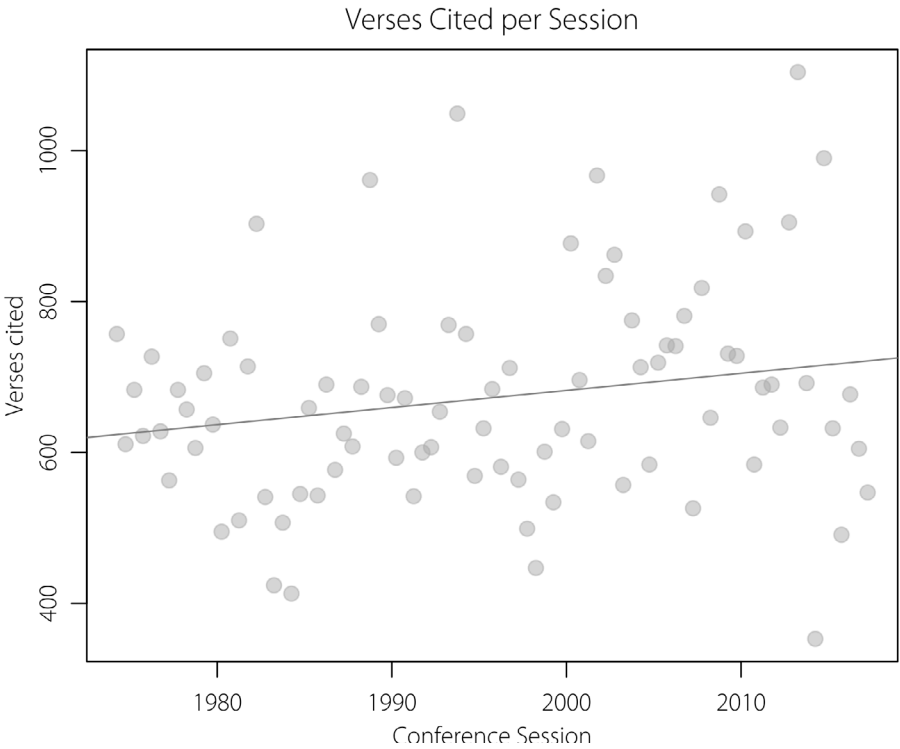


Figure 3

The number of verses cited per session of general conference has been drifting gradually upward at the modest, but statistically significant

( $p=.026$ ), rate of about 2.9 / year. This trend accounts for 5.9% of the variability in the number of verses cited. The 1,102 citations in April 2013 was a particularly notable outlier at the time, expected to occur once approximately every 400 conferences ( $z\text{-score}=3.333$ , percentile=99.96% assuming normality).

The books of the scriptures, indeed the standard works themselves, receive very different amounts of attention (see figures 4 and 5). By any measure, the Old Testament receives far fewer citations than the other standard works. This is somewhat in conflict with divine instruction. For example, in the Book of Mormon Jesus asks the Nephites to “search the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 20:11) and later affirms that “great are the words of Isaiah” (3 Nephi 23:1). Despite these injunctions, verses of Isaiah comprise an insignificantly small fraction of the scriptural references in general conference talks, especially for a book of such length. Since 1974, it has been cited 737 times; for a book with sixty-six chapters, one would expect 2,260 citations ( $p=1e-319$ ); for 1,292 verses and 150,958 characters, 1,666 citations ( $p=7e-152$ ) and 1,664 citations ( $p=2e-151$ ) respectively. Yet Isaiah is relatively citation-dense relative to the rest of the Old Testament. Only the short book of Malachi receives more citations per page<sup>24</sup> than the Book of Mormon, and all receive fewer than the New Testament, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Perhaps this shift in attention away from the Old Testament can most clearly be seen in the fifteen citations per page received by Genesis, in contrast to the forty per page of Abraham and fifty-three per page of Moses, books of purportedly overlapping material.

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24. Everywhere the metric “per page” occurs in this article, it refers to an average per 2,000 alphanumeric characters (not including punctuation or spaces), which is the average number of characters per page in the 2013 edition of the LDS standard works.

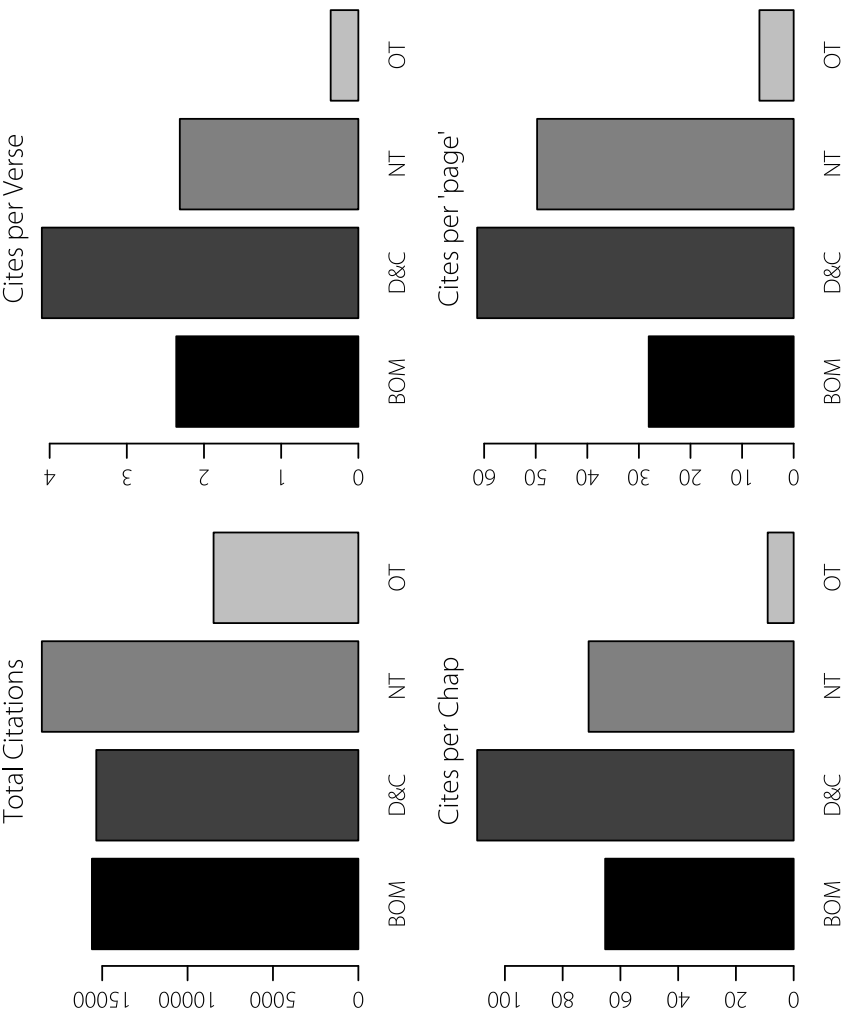


Figure 4

The number of citations each standard work has received in the study period.

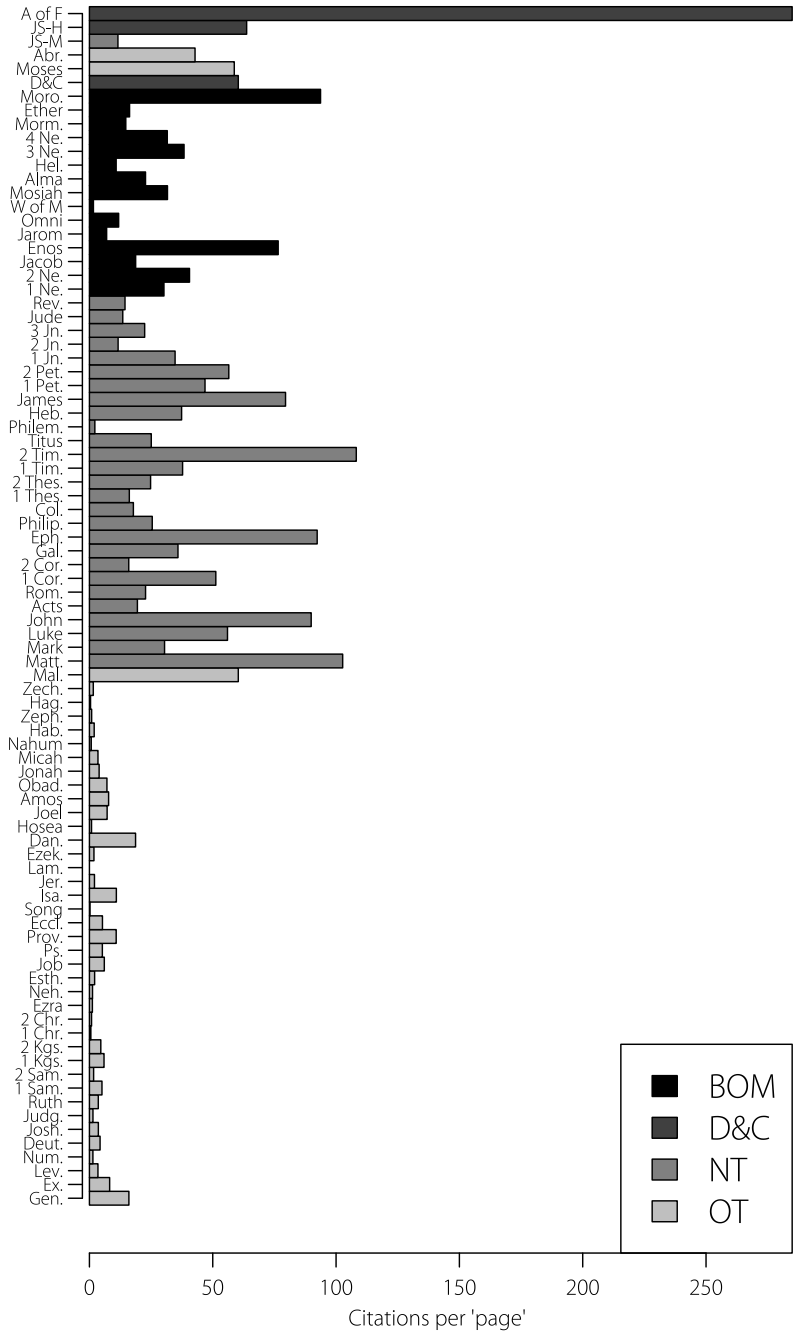
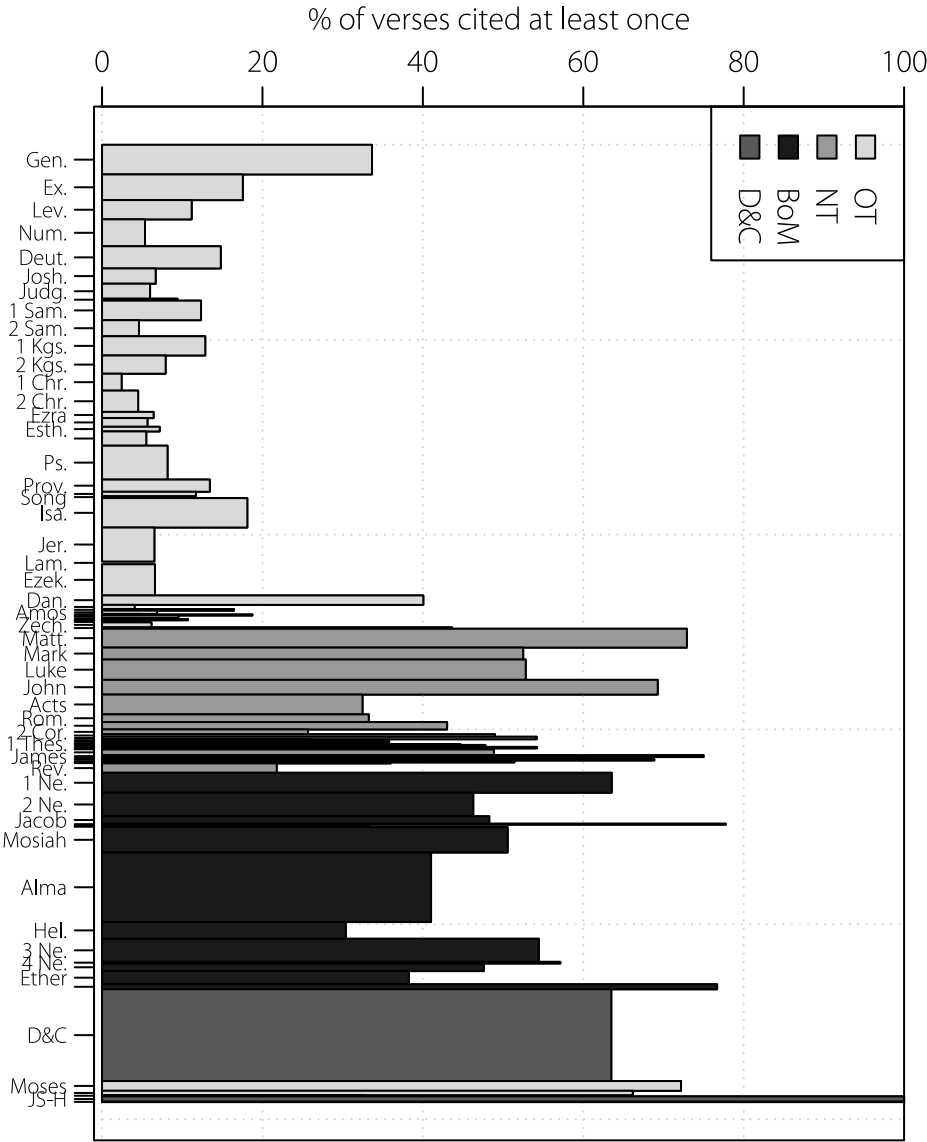


Figure 5



The number of times books in the canon are cited varies greatly. The figure demonstrates citation density, correcting for the length of the text in the LDS authorized version.

Ignoring the Old Testament is even clearer when considering the fraction of verses that have been cited at least once, as opposed to the total number of citations (figure 6). Only Genesis and the short books of Daniel and Malachi have had 20 percent of their verses referred to by general conference speakers. By contrast, not a single book in any other standard work falls below this cutoff value. Lamentations remains the only book never cited by any speaker during the time period. [Figure 6 available on next page.]



*Figure 6*

The fraction of verses in each book of the standard works that have been cited at least one time. The width of the bars is proportional to

the length of each book in number of characters, and as a result some of the shorter books could not be labeled on the x-axis.

Some of the change in attention has been influenced by prophetic mandate. In 1985, Ezra Taft Benson challenged the Church to spend more time and effort reading and studying the Book of Mormon, and emphasized its centrality many times thereafter.<sup>25</sup> The fraction of citations that referenced the Book of Mormon had been holding steady at approximately 15 percent, but after 1985 increased rapidly to ~30 percent, and has remained at, or slightly above, that level ever since (figure 7). The difference between the pre-Benson citation rate and that thereafter is highly significant ( $t=11.4, p<.0001$ ). Despite this increase, the number of citations per Book of Mormon page remains approximately half that of the New Testament, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Indeed, Benson himself supported his refocusing on the Book of Mormon mostly with references to the Old Testament and Doctrine and Covenants. Across his career, Benson's general conference speeches show roughly twice the citation density to the Doctrine and Covenants as to the Book of Mormon. [Figure 7 available on next page.]

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25. E.g., Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion," Oct. 1986, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1986/10/the-book-of-mormon-keystone-of-our-religion?lang=eng>.

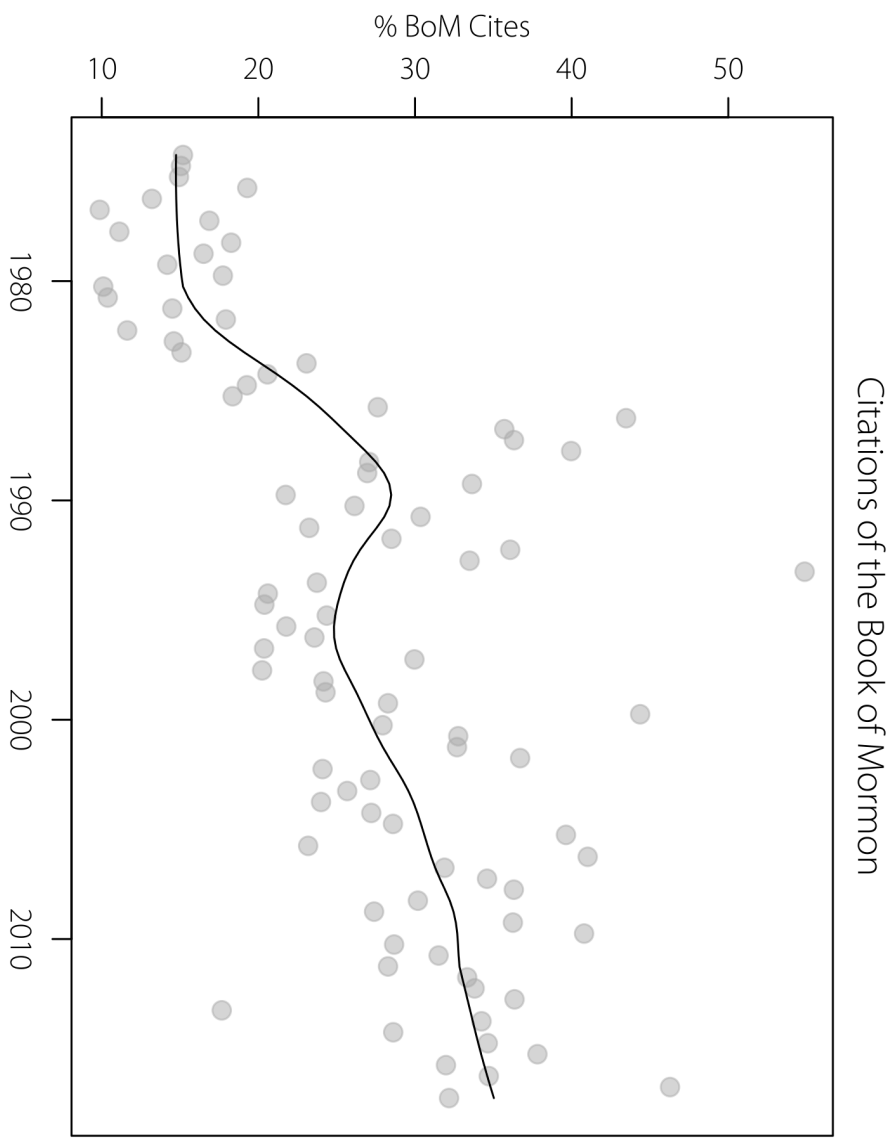


Figure 7

The fraction of verses cited per conference that come from the Book of Mormon increased rapidly in the mid-1980s. This is most likely due

to the vigorous promotion of the Book of Mormon as a missionary tool and core of Mormonism by Ezra Taft Benson, who became prophet in 1985.

Distinct Voices: Variability among Speakers

Speakers exhibit a wide variety of styles in their use of scripture. Elder Russell M. Nelson quotes scripture more often than other conference speakers, citing 5,499 verses in general conference, outpacing second place Elder Neal A. Maxwell at 2,969 by 85 percent (table 2). Even adjusting for the amount of Conference material delivered, Nelson remains atop the leaderboard for the number of references per page of text among apostles (see table 3) due to his tendency to paraphrase a scriptural story, but to cite the entire section of scripture in his footnotes. In a different mode, Elder Maxwell’s rhetorical style involved weaving together numerous quotations from scripture and other sources in a sort of word-collage that was beautiful, erudite, and occasionally opaque in meaning.

Rank	Speaker	Verses	Talks	Total Pages	Sex	Ordained
1	Russell M. Nelson	5,538	68	353	m	12 Apr 1984
2	Neal A. Maxwell	2,969	53	244	m	23 Jul 1981
3	Dallin H. Oaks	2,494	66	359	m	3 May 1984
4	Boyd K. Packer	2,402	84	414	m	9 Apr 1970
5	Marion G. Romney	2,170	51	239	m	11 Oct 1951
6	Thomas S. Monson	2,112	200	895	m	10 Oct 1963
7	Gordon B. Hinckley	1,845	208	936	m	5 Oct 1961
8	Robert D. Hales	1,798	57	270	m	7 Apr 1994

Rank	Speaker	Verses	Talks	Total Pages	Sex	Ordained
9	James E. Faust	1,778	97	496	m	1 Oct 1978
10	Ezra Taft Benson	1,583	57	277	m	7 Oct 1943

Table 2

The speakers who cited the most scripture verses during the study period. As can be seen by the date of ordination, many of the speakers began delivering talks well before the study period begins, and therefore this table does not necessarily reflect "career totals," but output since 1974.

Rank	Speaker	Ordained	Died	VPP
1	Russell M. Nelson	12 Apr 1984	NA	15.68
2	Neal A. Maxwell	23 Jul 1981	21 Jul 2004	12.19
3	Marion G. Romney	11 Oct 1951	20 May 1988	9.06
4	Delbert L. Stapley	5 Oct 1950	19 Aug 1978	8.41
5	D. Todd Christofferson	5 Apr 2008	—	8.17
6	Dale G. Renlund	3 Oct 2015	—	7.58
7	Neil L. Andersen	4 Apr 2009	—	7.09
8	Dallin H. Oaks	3 May 1984	—	6.94
9	Robert D. Hales	7 Apr 1994	—	6.65
10	LeGrand Richards	10 Apr 1952	11 Jan 1983	6.15
11	Mark E. Petersen	20 Apr 1944	11 Jan 1984	5.96
12	Boyd K. Packer	9 Apr 1970	02 Jul 2015	5.81
13	Ezra Taft Benson*	7 Oct 1943	30 May 1994	5.72
14	David A. Bednar	2 Oct 2004	—	5.53

Rank	Speaker	Ordained	Died	VPP
15	Jeffrey R. Holland	23 Jun 1994	—	4.82
16	Joseph B. Wirthlin	9 Oct 1986	01 Dec 2008	4.8
17	Quentin L. Cook	6 Oct 2007	—	4.65
18	Dieter F. Uchtdorf	2 Oct 2004	—	4.15
19	Howard W. Hunter*	15 Oct 1959	03 Mar 1995	3.9
20	Bruce R. McConkie	12 Oct 1972	19 Apr 1985	3.74
21	James E. Faust	1 Oct 1978	10 Aug 2007	3.58
22	David B. Haight	8 Jan 1976	31 Jul 2004	3.18
23	Richard G. Scott	6 Oct 1988	22 Sep 2015	3.17
24	N. Eldon Tanner	11 Oct 1962	27 Nov 1982	3.03
25	Spencer W. Kimball*	7 Oct 1943	05 Nov 1985	2.66
26	L. Tom Perry	11 Apr 1974	30 May 2015	2.56
27	Thomas S. Monson*	10 Oct 1963	—	2.36
28	Ronald A. Rasband	3 Oct 2015	—	2.26
29	Henry B. Eyring	6 Apr 1995	—	2.13
30	Marvin J. Ashton	2 Dec 1971	25 Feb 1994	2.13
31	M. Russell Ballard	10 Oct 1985	—	2.01
32	Gordon B. Hinckley*	5 Oct 1961	27 Jan 2008	1.97
33	Gary E. Stevenson	3 Oct 2015	—	1.23

*Table 3*

The apostles span an order of magnitude in the number of verses cited per page of text during the study period. (\* = this speaker was also Church president during the study period)

Apostles generally cite scriptures more often than other speakers, though not significantly more (5.4 per page versus 4.3 per page). It is remarkable that the five prophets during this study's period had low citation densities. Ignoring newcomers Elders Rasband and Stevenson,<sup>26</sup> President Hinckley has the lowest citation density of all apostles, President Monson is fifth lowest, President Kimball is seventh, and President Hunter is thirteenth; President Benson, at nineteenth, is the only prophet with a citation density above the apostolic, or the global, average. The rankings are even lower when based on verses per talk, because prophets typically deliver a very short, and hence scripture-poor, introduction and farewell at each conference. As the ultimate earthly authority for Latter-day Saints, prophets may feel more liberty to depart from canonical sources when interpreting the gospel and establishing policy for the Church.

### Women and Scripture

There have been times in history when women were not only forbidden to read from scripture in public meetings, but not even permitted to read scripture in the privacy of their own homes. First-century AD Rabbi Eliezer taught that "If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the law [Torah], it is as though he taught her lechery."<sup>27</sup> The apostle Paul, in a hotly contested passage, supports such silencing, at least if we take his words at face value:

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26. Because they have delivered so few conference addresses, their low averages cannot yet be analyzed with much confidence.

27. Sotah Mishnah 3.4. See Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 296; Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *Sisters at the Well: Women and the Life and Teachings of Jesus* (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1993), 17. This was not true for all of Jewish history. Many scholars see the reference to Jael as "most blessed of the women of the tents" (Judges 5:24) as meaning she was the most learned of the women in the place where the Torah was studied. Authorship of that particular chapter of scripture is attributed to Deborah, also female. Elsewhere in the Mishnah, women and children are specifically permitted among the seven readers on the Sabbath day (Megillah 23a), though this practice was repressed by later Sages.



The women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. (1 Cor. 14:34–35)

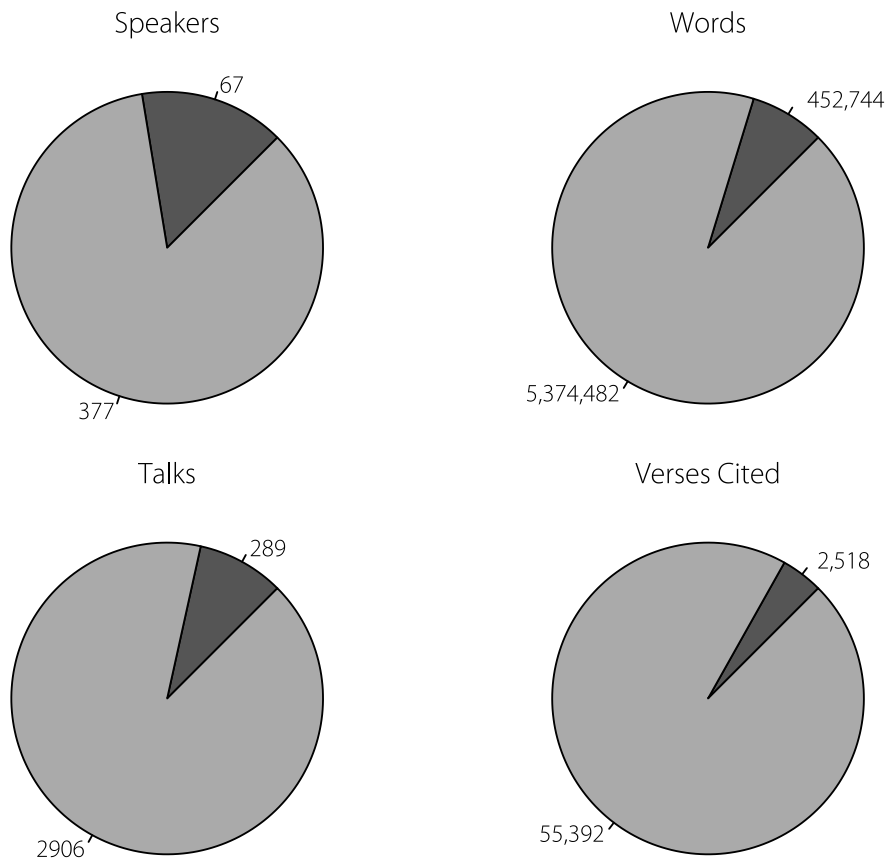
Later, in 1 Timothy 2:12, he wrote “I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, based on these passages some neo-Calvinist and Baptist churches today still do not allow women to give sermons or even read scriptures in public.

Given this pattern of silencing women, I find it somewhat chilling that women conference speakers appear to self-repress their use of scripture, citing fewer than half the number of scriptures men do (5.00 per page versus 2.38 per page,  $p < .0001$ ; 16.8 per talk vs. 8.1 per talk,  $p < .0001$ ). This reluctance to use scripture is even more problematic given the under-representation of women in general conference addresses generally (figure 8). Of the sixty-four female speakers, only Barbara Thompson has a citation density higher than that of the average man’s, and she is also the only female in the top fifty among all speakers who have delivered at least three talks (at #39).<sup>29</sup> Even correcting for the small number of women participating in general conference, the probability that so few women would be represented in the top fifty is less than 1 in 10,000 (91 hits in 1,000,000 bootstrap resamplings) if the citation rate were distributed randomly.

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28. Shmuel Safrai argues that women in first-century Judaism were allowed to interrupt the speaker while he interpreted scripture, and Paul was putting an end to this custom to maintain order, but not prohibiting women from speaking at all, and certainly not from reading scriptures. See Shmuel Safrai, “Were Women Segregated in the Ancient Synagogue?” [www.bibleheadquarters.org/WereWomenSegregatedintheAncientSynagogue.html](http://www.bibleheadquarters.org/WereWomenSegregatedintheAncientSynagogue.html), and Shmuel Safrai, *Haggadah of the Sages* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2007); Tim Hegg, “The Public Reading of the Scriptures in the First Century Synagogue,” *TorahResource*, <http://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/TriennialCycle.pdf>.

29. With Sheri Dew, Thompson is one of only two unmarried women to serve on the Relief Society general board.



*Figure 8*

Women generate little of the content of general conference, and proportionally even less of the scriptural citation total. Note that these totals include Young Women and Relief Society meetings as sessions of general conference.

## Learning Scripture and Memorization

Official discourse frequently encourages Church members to read the scriptures daily and for adults to teach them to their children. Since 1980, Gospel Doctrine manuals for Sunday School classes have been structured to focus on one standard work every year.<sup>30</sup> However, the sorts of things Mormons are supposed to learn about scripture are fairly rigidly prescribed.

During the study period there were frequent challenges issued to Church membership to read the entire Book of Mormon in a year or some part of the year, but General Authorities issued no such challenge to read the other standard works even though they cited the New Testament at a much higher rate. It could be argued that this is an attempt to channel the developing relationship with deity into an exclusively Mormon context.

General conference speakers typically urge members to study the scriptures in rather vague and unambitious ways. President Spencer W. Kimball declared enthusiastically if rather unspecifically, “We want our homes to be blessed with sister scriptorians—whether you are single or married, young or old, widowed or living in a family . . . . Become scholars of the scriptures!”<sup>31</sup> In 1959, then-Elder Hinckley suggested that children should memorize references to scriptures, but not necessarily the verses themselves: “May I suggest that in our family night gatherings we make it a project to memorize one scripture citation a week pertinent to this work. At the conclusion of a year our children will have on their lips a

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30. Benson purportedly thought eight years was too long to wait for the Book of Mormon to come back in the cycle, and cut the time spent on each standard work in half.

31. Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, 102.

fund of scripture which will remain with them throughout their lives.”<sup>32</sup> More recently, Elder Richard G. Scott “suggest[ed] that you memorize scriptures that touch your heart and fill your soul with understanding. When scriptures are used as the Lord has caused them to be recorded, they have intrinsic power that is not communicated when paraphrased.”<sup>33</sup> Even more narrowly, Elder L. Tom Perry argued, “What a great blessing it would be if every member of the Church memorized the Articles of Faith and became knowledgeable about the principles contained in each. We would be better prepared to share the gospel with others.”<sup>34</sup>

Given their complex history, silence on some key doctrinal topics, and extensive descriptions of other de-emphasized beliefs, memorizing the Articles of Faith seems like a rather low bar to clear in order to qualify as an informed proselytizer.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, they are usually the only scripture verses that children are expected and actively encouraged to memorize in Primary. They have been set to music in the English *Children’s Songbook* (though no other languages officially), and being able to recite them is required for several Primary and youth awards.

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32. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Conference Report*, Apr. 1959, 119–21.

33. Richard G. Scott, “He Lives,” Oct. 1999, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1999/10/he-lives?lang=eng>.

34. L. Tom Perry, “The Articles of Faith,” Apr. 1998, [https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/04/the-articles-of-faith?lang=eng&\\_r=1](https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/04/the-articles-of-faith?lang=eng&_r=1).

35. The Articles of Faith were written as a letter to a wealthy non-member, John Wentworth, editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, not as a revelation to the Church, and were frequently elaborated upon by other Church authorities until being canonized in 1880 by vote of the congregation at general conference. See John W. Welch and David J. Whittaker, “We Believe . . . : Development of the Articles of Faith,” *Ensign*, Sep. 1979, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1979/09/we-believe-development-of-the-articles-of-faith?lang=eng>. One published version in South Africa included thirty-three articles, and Orson Hyde pugnaciously expanded the last Article of Faith to read “Everything virtuous, lovely, praiseworthy, and of good report we seek after, looking forward to the recompense of reward; but an idle or lazy person cannot be a Christian, neither have salvation. He is a drone, and destined to be stung to death and tumbled out of the hive.”

This project of memorization has apparently had an effect as these children grow up to become the leadership. The Articles of Faith have the highest per verse and per character citation rate of any book in the standard works, and it is the only standard work whose every verse has been cited at least once. They are one of only five of the 1,422 chapters with ten or more verses in the standard works for which every verse has been cited at least three times. Clearly, there is a correlation between the verses children memorize and the verses General Authorities cite.

The Articles of Faith also provide a microcosmic view of global trends toward mainstream culture and authoritarianism noted by numerous other scholars. The tenth article of faith, which implies that Mormons will all relocate to the Midwest when Jesus builds his capital in Missouri, has been cited only eight times, and the gap between citations is increasing. Elder Cook cited this verse in October 2013 with the qualification that the gathering should be thought of as a metaphor, and, statistically the next reference to this verse would not be expected until April 2025. By contrast, the thirteenth article of faith, with its vague but palatable endorsement of moral qualities and good works, has been cited fifty-seven times. The authoritarian fifth article of faith (“a man must be called of God by . . . those who are in authority”) receives the second most citations, while the anti-hierarchical gifts of the spirit enumerated in the seventh article of faith are the least cited of all with just three references.

### Scripture Mastery

The most visible form of scriptural memorization is the scripture mastery program for teenage LDS seminary students. The program began when a seminary teacher created a list of 160 significant scriptures in 1963, and it was implemented Church-wide by the early 1970s.<sup>36</sup> The list was reduced to 100 in 1986, then changed again in 2013, according

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36. Richard C. Russell, personal communication.

to a Church spokesman, to “align the references to the basic doctrines.”<sup>37</sup> These nine basic doctrines had recently been defined for the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Sunday School programs as:

- The Godhead
- Plan of Salvation
- Atonement of Jesus Christ
- Dispensation, Apostasy, and Restoration
- Prophets and Revelation
- Priesthood and Priesthood Keys
- Ordinances and Covenants
- Marriage and Family
- Commandments

The program was rebranded as Doctrinal Mastery in 2016, a tenth goal (“acquire spiritual knowledge”) was added, and the list of scriptures was again changed.<sup>38</sup>

Analyzing the three changes can reveal interesting details about how scripture is being shaped by Church leaders. First, despite there being only 160 (in 1963) and 100 (on subsequent lists) “passages” on the official lists, most included more than one verse, for a total of 332 (in 1963), 203 (in 1985), 200 (in 2013), and 213 (in 2016) verses

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37. Quotation from Chad Webb, administrator of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion, in Suzanne Young, “New Scripture Mastery Better Aligns with Basic Doctrines,” *LDS Church News*, Sep. 24 2013, [https://www.lds.org/church/news/new-scripture-mastery-better-aligns-with-basic-doctrines?lang=eng&\\_r=1](https://www.lds.org/church/news/new-scripture-mastery-better-aligns-with-basic-doctrines?lang=eng&_r=1).

38. Marianne Holman Prescott, “Seminaries to Implement New Doctrinal Mastery Initiative,” *Church News*, Jun. 8, 2016, <http://lds.org/church/news/seminaries-to-implement-new-doctrinal-mastery-initiative>. See also Marianne Holman Prescott, “Doctrinal Mastery Brings Relevant Experiences to Seminary Students,” *LDS Church News*, Jun. 23, 2016, <http://deseretnews.com/article/865656767/>

respectively. Of the 455 distinct verses used across the four time periods, 108 (24 percent) were retained on all four lists, while 214 (47 percent) appear on only one; both values are much higher than expected by chance ( $p < .0001$ ). The first change in 1986 removed 158 verses, retained 174 verses, and added twenty-nine; the second change in 2013 removed sixty-eight verses, retained 135 verses, and added sixty-five (which included reinstating twelve from the original 1963 Scripture Chase list); and the most recent change in 2016 removed thirty-five verses, retained 165, and added forty-eight (seven of which appeared on the 1963 and/or 1986 lists).

Despite equal numbers of passages from each standard work, there are differences between them. The total number of unique verses is different across works ( $p = .0018$ ), with nearly twice as many verses from the Doctrine and Covenants (141) as Book of Mormon (83) on the four lists, even though only 14.5 percent ( $n = 12$ ) of the Book of Mormon verses appear on all four lists. This is the lowest. The Old Testament has the highest retention rate ( $n = 35$ , 30 percent), though the differences are not quite significant ( $p = .08$ ), and neither is the rate of turnover ( $p = .17$ ).

Is it true, as stated in the news releases regarding the 2013 reforms, that these substantial changes reflect a move toward more equal representation of the nine fundamental doctrines? To answer this question, I assigned every verse to one of the nine doctrines where at all possible, though I was unable to categorize fifty-six verses (table 4). Uncategorizable examples include “for the earth is full, there is enough and to spare” (D&C 104:17), “stupor of thought” (D&C 9:9), and “go and teach all nations” (Matt. 28:19). A fairly large number deal with proper treatment of other people (e.g., “inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these” [Matt. 25:40]), and another segment deals with scripture study (e.g., God’s word is “a lamp unto my feet” [Ps. 119:105]).

<b>Doctrine</b>	<b>1963</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2016</b>
Godhead	20	13	13	14
Plan	50	28	28	30
Atonement	16	11	19	17
Dispensation	71	28	20	27
Prophets	15	6	5	13
Priesthood	27	20	14	16
Ordinances	4	1	1	4
Family	7	3	5	9
Commandments	86	68	65	57
Study (2016 only)	5	5	4	4
OTHER	31	20	26	22
- Community	6	10	15	18
- Uncategorized	25	10	11	4
EXPECTED	36.9	22.6	22.2	21.3
Difference	25.4	15.3	14.1	12.2

*Table 4*

The distribution of scripture mastery verses as applicable to the nine fundamental doctrines. The doctrines have never been very close to having equal representation, and despite press releases claiming the purpose of the revisions is to move that direction, little movement in that direction was observed.

In order to be even, there should have been thirty-seven, twenty-three, and twenty-two verses assigned to each of the nine doctrines on the first three lists, and twenty-one verses assigned to each of the ten categories on the 2016 list. If verses were assigned to categories randomly, we expect the final distribution of verses to categories to be off by an average of 4.5, 3.5, 3.5, and 3.4; furthermore, if the final distributions are off by more than 6.7, 5.3, 5.1, and 5.0 respectively, that constitutes statistical evidence the assignment was *worse* than blind. A human



committee, non-randomly trying to distribute verses evenly, should be able to do substantially better than this. However, the actual observed deviations are very high: 25.4, 15.3, 14.1, and 12.2. Again, the average deviation for a list deliberately constructed with evenness as a goal should be *lower* than lists made randomly; instead, all four actual lists deviate from evenness so far that the probability of making such an uneven list randomly is less than one in a quadrillion.

Could it be that the lists are not evenly distributed because the original Scripture Chase list was so uneven that little improvement was possible given the number of changes on the new lists? The short answer, at least for the first three lists, is also “definitely no.” While it is true that each iteration of the scripture mastery lists moved closer to an even distribution, they did not move by very much. There is no statistical evidence that doctrinal distribution of verses changed at all on the first three lists ( $p=0.12$ ). Given the suboptimal distribution of the original Scripture Chase list, by judiciously dropping 158 verses and adding twenty-nine (as actually happened), the 1986 list could have been only 5.1 verses from even. And given the actual 1986 list, dropping sixty-eight verses and adding sixty-five judiciously could have reduced the average deviation to 3.3 for the 2013 list. In fact, choosing categories at random for deletions and additions create more even distributions than observed 97.6 percent of the time for the 1986 reform, and 99.99 percent of the time for the 2013 reform.

The 2016 reform is another story. Of the forty-eight verses added, thirty-eight were added to categories underrepresented on the 2013 list, and nineteen of the thirty-five removed verses were from overrepresented categories. Only four verses on the list could not readily be assigned to one of the ten gospel topics, nor to the central gospel concept of community. While representation is still statistically different from even, there was clearly an attempt made to approach balance. It is almost as if the 2013 list was determined before the education goals were set, and the two were merely announced concurrently. Perhaps the aim of

bringing the scripture list into accordance with goals is why the 2013 list was changed after just three years, compared to the twenty-three- and twenty-seven-year tenures of its predecessors.

### Alternative Explanations for 2013 Reforms

If a move toward more equal representation of the nine fundamental doctrines was not behind the 2013 changes, what was? Direct involvement by the leadership is reportedly not the cause, as the suggestions of the Church Board of Education (which included Elders Nelson, Oaks, Ballard, and “members of the First Presidency”) resulted in only two changed references according to Chad Webb.<sup>39</sup> President Thomas S. Monson’s involvement is particularly interesting, since out of the six leaders potentially involved in this decision, he has given the most talks and has a large number of citations to added scriptures (second only to Nelson), but had never cited forty-one of the sixty-five added verses in 2013, far more than one would expect by chance. By contrast, Elder Nelson and President Uchtdorf have both cited the added scriptures more than four times per year (though Elder Nelson has so many citations this is not by itself conclusive), a disproportionately large number of President Uchtdorf’s citations were to added verses, and a remarkably small number of verses were added that he hadn’t cited. Sisters Linda Burton and Bonnie Oscarson were also on the committee, but were very recent appointments and probably had minimal involvement. Curriculum director Thomas Valletta perhaps unwittingly revealed how much female involvement was supplied and/or valued when he praised the Board of Education as demonstrating that “the Lord is taking care of the seminaries and institutes through very well prepared and inspired *men*.”<sup>40</sup>

Reading between the lines, as one often must in Church news releases, there appears to be more conflict between Church Educational System

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39. Quoted in Young, “New Scripture Mastery.”

40. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

administration and Church leadership than the changes would suggest. Valletta refers to dozens of meetings over several months, cites input from auxiliaries and teachers, and admits that “not all of his favorites made the cut.” Similarly, Webb says, “There are a lot of wonderful verses, and you can’t put them all in there.” Even if we accept the claim that changes were not made directly by apostles on the Board of Education, it is still likely that changes were influenced indirectly by their importance to the leaders, as indicated by their use in general conference addresses.

It is, of course, very difficult to demonstrate what mechanism causes a pattern, since more than one process can result in the same pattern, and a failure to reject a hypothesis is not the same thing as confirmation. However, we can challenge the hypothesis that the Board of Education was influenced by the rate at which verses are cited in general conference by assuming it is true, and seeing if the logical consequences of such a statement are supported by data. Specifically, if the hypothesis is true, then:

1. The most cited verses in general conference should appear on the scripture mastery lists.
2. Conversely, verses on the scripture mastery lists should be often-cited in general conference.
3. The average number of citations per verse should increase from list to list.
4. Verses that have been added to the lists should be cited more frequently than those that have been dropped.
5. Verses appearing on all lists should have more citations than those appearing on only one.

1. Do the most-cited verses in general conference appear on the scripture mastery lists?

Because each standard work is limited to a constant number of passages on each list, comparisons are done separately for each of the standard

works. In the Old Testament, of the twenty-seven verses cited twenty-five or more times, eighteen of them appear on at least one scripture mastery list. However, all nine omissions are from Genesis, Moses, or Abraham, and may represent an attempt to avoid stacking all the passages into the first few weeks of the curriculum. The sixteen most frequently cited verses from the thirty-eight later books of the Old Testament are all included in scripture mastery. There may also have been some attempt to limit the length of passages memorized. For example, all six verses in Abraham 3:22–27 (the council in heaven) are among the most cited verses in general conference, but students are only required to memorize the first two.

Eight of the ten most-cited verses in the New Testament appear on the scripture mastery lists, including the top six. The two exceptions are John 14:27 (“Peace I leave with you,” sixty-four citations, #7), which was possibly omitted because two other verses from John 14 are already on the list, and John 3:16 (“God so loved the world,” sixty-three citations, #8), possibly omitted because of its association with evangelical churches.

Fourteen of the fifteen most-cited Book of Mormon verses appear on at least one scripture mastery list, eleven of them on the 2013 list. Alma’s baptismal covenant, Mosiah 18:9 (112 citations, #1 in the Book of Mormon and #2 overall), was inexplicably omitted until 2016. This is particularly perplexing considering how few verses fit the “ordinances” doctrinal category. Moroni 10:32 (“by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ,” seventy-five citations, #5) is also omitted, possibly because the cultural touchstone Moroni 10:4–5 (pray to have the Holy Ghost manifest the truth of the Book of Mormon, seventy-six and sixty-four citations, #4 and #10) is already in that chapter.

The Doctrine and Covenants scripture mastery lists include seven of the ten most cited verses. The editors omitted the sacrament prayer on the bread (D&C 20:77, eighty-three citations, #2) and Article of Faith 13 (fifty-seven citations, #9.5), probably because they are expected to be memorized elsewhere. Also, Joseph Smith’s plea to be full of charity and

let virtue garnish thy thoughts (D&C 121:45, seventy-seven citations #3) has been left off all four lists, perhaps because nine other verses from that section have been included. The sentiment is echoed, perhaps deliberately, in the similar-but-obscure D&C 46:33 (“ye must practice virtue and holiness before me continually,” two citations, #1576), which was added in 2013, but removed in 2016.

Overall, the probability of ever being included on a scripture mastery list increases by approximately 1.15% for each general conference citation, a trend that is highly significant using both linear and logistic regression models ( $p < .0001$  for both).

## 2. Are verses on the scripture mastery lists often-cited in general conference?

The average scripture mastery verse has been cited 22.8 times in general conference, nearly five times more than the 4.6 citations the average verse from the pool of ~12,000 cited in general conference has received. Exceptions to this general rule are so rare as to be illuminating by themselves. There are a total of nineteen verses on at least one scripture mastery list that have never been cited; fifteen of these were *only* on the original 1963 list, and none were on the 2013 list. Curiously, the 2016 list reinstated D&C 130:23 (“A man may receive the Holy Ghost, and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him”), absent from the two previous lists, and added Ezekiel 12:16 (God speaks to Ezekiel after a fast of seven days). Both these verses reinforce the reality and difficulty of personal revelation; the next verse in Ezekiel, included despite just two general conference citations, establishes the hierarchical pattern of God teaching a prophet, who passes the teaching on to the people. Other seldom-cited scripture mastery verses have been used out-of-context to support LDS-specific doctrines, such as Ezekiel 37:15–17 (the stick of Joseph and Judah; one, eight, and seven citations); Jeremiah 1:4–5 (“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee”; three and fourteen

citations); 1 Corinthians 15:42 (three degrees of glory; seven citations) and 2 Tim. 3:17 (scripture comes by revelation to prophets; seven citations). Most other exceptions are neighbors of high-citation verses, included to provide context.

The number of seldom-cited verses is not evenly spread across gospel topics (chi squared test  $p=.009$ ). The fraction of verses cited fewer than ten times is high for prophets (65 percent), the restoration (47 percent), and family (36 percent), but low for the unofficial topics of community (5 percent) and study (8 percent).

### 3. Does the average number of citations per scripture mastery verse increase from list to list?

The mean number of citations increased significantly from the 1963 to the 1986 list (21.3 and 28.1,  $p=.0004$ ), but did not significantly change on the two subsequent lists (29.8 and 29.4,  $p=.48$  and  $p=.88$ ). This pattern was duplicated when considering the four standard works individually. However, the fraction of top-cited scriptures on each list has gone up by an average of 4.9% per list (based on the top five, ten, twenty-five, fifty, 100, and 250 scriptures,  $p=.0004$ ).

### 4. Do added verses have more citations than dropped verses?

This is true in all three cases. In 1986, the twenty-nine added verses had been cited an average of 4.7 times up to that point, while the 158 dropped verses had only been cited 2.6. In 2013, the sixty-five added verses had 27.0 citations to the 23.2 of the dropped verses. And in 2016, the forty-eight added verses averaged 23.0 citations, while the thirty-five dropped verses averaged 22.9. None of these changes was significant individually (uncorrected  $p=0.046$ , 0.28, and 0.99), but collectively they were highly significant (24.2 vs 14.75 citations, corrected for length of study period,  $p<.0001$ ). It is worth noting that the only Old Testament

scripture mastery verse that has seen a significant increase in citation rate over the study period, Psalms 127:3 (“Children are an heritage of the Lord”), was added in 2013. It is also the only verse cited in the Proclamation on the Family.

#### 5. Do verses appearing on all lists have more citations than verses appearing on only one?

Overall, this is strongly confirmed with the 108 verses appearing on all lists cited an average of 30.9 times, nearly twice as often as the 15.6 citation average of the 214 one-timers ( $p < .0001$ ). This difference is significant at the Bonferroni-corrected alpha level of .0125 for all standard works except the New Testament ( $p = .15$ ), because the 1963 list omitted a large number of highly-cited scriptures, so very few appear on all four lists.

#### *Summary of scripture mastery analysis*

Despite recent press releases, it is clear that the changes to the scripture mastery list do not reflect a commitment to providing equal support for each of the nine (now ten) fundamental doctrines. They do, however, represent a reasonably accurate reflection of the most frequently used scriptures in general conference, and are becoming more closely allied with conference citations in all four standard works. However, this general trend is complicated by many externalities, so simple predictions based on this rule are usually, but not always, statistically significant.

I would argue that given the two alternatives—following general conference rather than finding an equal number of verses for each fundamental doctrine—the former is preferable for at least two reasons. First, the “fundamental doctrines” do not include key gospel principles such as charity, service, missionary work, human relationships, nor (until 2016) the importance of study and knowledge; it is important that these topics receive attention anyway. Second, the most cited conference scriptures generally *are* Christ-centered, meaningful, and eloquent; therefore, they provide a better model for spiritual development than attempts to score

a limited set of theological points. This is most noticeable in the 1986 revision of the Old Testament verses, which dropped many verses that are often taken out of context to support “restoration of the One True Church” rhetoric (e.g., Genesis 14:20, 49:22; Exodus 28:1; Deuteronomy 18:18; Isaiah 24:5–6; Jeremiah 16:17–21).

However, there are some disturbing trends noticeable as well. First, the majority of scriptures on all four lists reinforce the importance of obeying commandments and leadership, often in extremely austere tones. This privileging of authority for its own sake is unlikely to resonate with teenagers, and the absolutist tone is particularly troubling given the “crisis of confidence” currently being experienced by a large section of Church membership.<sup>41</sup> Second, given that these teens spend most of their time in school and this scripture memorization is occurring within the Church Education System, one would hope for scriptures that emphasize the value of learning. However, pro-education verses like D&C 88:78–79 (“be instructed in theory, principle, and doctrine”), 93:24 (“truth is knowledge of things as they are”), D&C 130:18–19 (intelligence rises with us in the resurrection), 1 Nephi 19:23 (liken scriptures for better understanding), and Joshua 1:8 (meditate on the Law day and night) have been dropped from the current list, and many others commonly cited in conference like D&C 25:8 (Emma should give her time “to writing, and to learning much”), D&C 88:118, 109:14 (“seek learning, even by study and also by faith”) or D&C 88:19 and 109:8 (a house of learning is a house of God) have never been included at all. Although the 2016 reform explicitly addressed this deficit by adding “Acquire spiritual knowledge” to the nine fundamental doctrines, it added just one verse from this obvious list (D&C 88:118). Together, these two trends represent a profound commitment to conformity at odds with the message of the glorious, soaring gospel exemplified by Jesus and conveyed by

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41. Boyd Petersen, “Landing Instructions: How to Navigate (or Help Someone Navigating) a Faith Crisis,” *Rational Faiths* (blog), Aug. 15, 2016, <http://rationalfaiths.com/landing-instructions-navigate-help-someone-navigating-faith-crisis/>.



Joseph Smith. Finally, with the exception of Ruth's promise to Naomi (Ruth 1:16–17) and a passing reference to daughters and handmaids in Joel 2:28–29—both of which appear only on the 1963 Scripture Chase list—not a single verse is written by, to, about, or even mentions a woman. The addition of the explicitly egalitarian 2 Nephi 26:33 (“male and female...all are alike unto God”) in 2016 is such a small step in the right direction; it serves mainly to highlight the distance between the scriptural ideal and the curricular reality.

### The Family Proclamation

Perhaps the distinction between revelation and informal corporate policy is nowhere more confused than in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.” The document is labelled a “Proclamation,” a tag given to at least four previous documents that, even in aggregate, had a negligible impact on Church history.<sup>42</sup> It is likely that the document was drafted by a team of LDS attorneys as a way to join anti-gay marriage court cases; it was indeed used for that purpose within months of publication, and

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42. These were issued in 1841, 1845, 1865, and 1980. A fifth statement in 1901 regarding the importance of vaccination is sometimes counted as a proclamation (e.g., Duane Jeffery, “Natural Law in LDS Theology—Prospects For The 21st Century,” *Sunstone* 2014, Salt Lake City, SL14254) though its importance is so limited I was unable to find a copy, or even an official reference to it, anywhere on the LDS family of websites. (The statement itself, signed by Presidents Snow and Cannon, can be found in “To the Latter-day Saints,” *Deseret News*, Nov. 17, 1900). Like the other four, it was frequently ignored, including by LDS missionary Richard Shumway, who in 1913 began a smallpox epidemic in New Zealand that killed fifty-five Maori including many converts (see Alison Day, “‘Chastising its People with Scorpions’: Maori and the 1913 Smallpox Epidemic,” *New Zealand Journal of History* 33, no.2), and Apostle Abraham O. Woodruff, who died of smallpox at age thirty-one after failing to get vaccinated before a lengthy trip to Mexico.

six times subsequent to that.<sup>43</sup> Despite being drafted without the input or knowledge of the women's auxiliaries,<sup>44</sup> it was read at the General Relief Society Meeting (then not considered part of general conference). It has never been accepted through a vote of common consent, but it is difficult to argue that the document is any less influential, or treated as having any less authority, than canonical scripture.

As noted in the introduction, Elder Packer's 2010 labelling the Proclamation as "revelation" was quickly withdrawn,<sup>45</sup> yet three similar statements by earlier general conference speakers have been allowed to stand,<sup>46</sup> and Elder Packer again called it "another revelation" in April 2011.<sup>47</sup> Sentences from the document are often excerpted to be repeated

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43. See appendix to Boyd J. Petersen, "The Greatest Glory of True Womanhood: Eve and the Construction of Mormon Gender Identity," in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books: 2015), 75–76.

44. Gregory A. Prince, "'There Is Always a Struggle': An Interview with Chieko N. Okazaki," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 45, no. 1 (2012): 112–40.

45. Presumably under considerable pressure, as Packer is not noted for his accommodating style. Apostle Dallin H. Oaks famously referred to decision-making involving Packer as "stage manag[ing] a grizzly bear" ("Disciplinary Actions Generate More Heat," *Sunstone* [Dec. 1993]: 68).

46. Eran Call, Second Quorum of the Seventy, said "I challenge each of you to read, study, and live by this inspired proclamation" ("The Home: A Refuge and Sanctuary," Oct. 1997, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1997/10/the-home-a-refuge-and-sanctuary?lang=ara&r=3>); W. Eugene Hansen, a president of the First Quorum of the Seventy, referred to the proclamation three times in one address as "modern-day revelation" ("Children and the Family," Apr. 1998, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1998/04/children-and-the-family?lang=eng&r=1>); M. Russell Ballard claimed, "The proclamation is a prophetic document" ("What Matters Most is What Lasts Longest," Oct. 2005, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2005/10/what-matters-most-is-what-lasts-longest?lang=eng&r=1>).

47. "In another revelation, the Lord's standard of morality commands that the sacred powers to beget life be protected and employed only between man

by Primary children every week for a month during “Sharing Time” in lieu of a verse from the standard works in official Church curricula (including three of the twelve “verses” for 2014, and inspiring the song for the annual children’s program called “The Family is of God”<sup>48</sup>). Members are frequently encouraged to frame copies of the document and hang them in their homes. Sacrament meeting talks are often assigned based on the document. Perhaps most telling of all, general conference speakers have cited the document by name an astonishing 213 times since October 1995; by contrast, the most cited verse of scripture (Moses 1:39) has received only 80 citations in that time period. Furthermore, in the missionary manual *Preach My Gospel*, the Proclamation is listed under “scripture study” in a section on eternal marriage.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to influencing citations, and in contrast to previous proclamations, the Proclamation on the Family breaks new theological ground by asserting in its first sentence that “The family is central to the Creator’s plan,” and “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity,” establishing post-World War II Western gender roles as theologically and eternally correct, and foretelling an apocalypse if “traditional” families are not vigorously protected

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and woman, husband and wife.” The footnote to this statement refers readers to “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (Boyd K. Packer, “Guided by the Holy Spirit,” Apr. 2011, [https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/04/guided-by-the-holy-spirit?lang=tam&\\_r=3](https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/04/guided-by-the-holy-spirit?lang=tam&_r=3)).

48. “2014 Outline for Sharing Time: Families Are Forever,” <https://www.lds.org/manual/2014-outline-for-sharing-time-families-are-forever?lang=eng>. The song, written specifically for that year’s program, features the lyrics (astonishing in a twenty-first century context): “A father’s place is to provide, preside . . . . A father leads in family prayer” while “A mother’s purpose is to care, prepare, to nurture and to strengthen all her children. She teaches children to obey, to pray . . . .”

49. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 85.

legally. These points have been roundly criticized by scholars,<sup>50</sup> but adopted enthusiastically by conference speakers. The single verse of scripture used in the Proclamation on the Family itself (Ps. 127:3) had been cited just twice prior to 1990,<sup>51</sup> but eighteen times thereafter ( $p=.02$ ) and was added to the 2013 scripture mastery list. The ratio of the word frequency of “home” to “family” has gone from 7:10 in the mid-1970s to 3:10 today, possibly reflecting a distinction between homosexual homes and “counterfeit” homosexual families that persists in the rhetoric of some leaders despite a rapidly changing legal landscape.<sup>52</sup> Despite the Proclamation’s advocacy for severely restricted women’s roles, female speakers comprise fourteen of the top forty speakers to cite the Proclamation in conference (but zero of the top thirty-eight to cite the standard works) led by Bonnie Oscarson, whose 0.68 citations per page is 135 percent higher than the most enthusiastic man’s citation rate. Overall, the citation density of female speakers is 2.3 times higher than that of male speakers ( $p<.0001$ ), implying active collusion in the unequal ideation of gender roles. Interestingly, though the Proclamation has been cited in nearly half (10/22) of the post-1995 conference talks that use the word “homosexual” or a synonym, the vast majority of references to the Proclamation are not in talks regarding homosexuality (114). Rather, those aspects of the document regarding traditional gender roles seem to have more thoroughly captivated conference speakers. During the time period, discussions of “family” have continued to accelerate (increasing from just over 500 references in the 1930s to well over 3,000 references

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50. One of the finest examples being Janice M. Allred, “LDS Gender Theology: A Feminist Perspective,” in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2015), 75–76.

51. Both times by Boyd K. Packer.

52. L. Tom Perry, “Why Marriage and Family Matter—Everywhere in the World,” Apr. 2015, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-and-family-matter-everywhere-in-the-world?lang=eng>.

in just the first half of the 2010s), and an 800 percent increase in the use of the word “complementary” when referring to the responsibilities of men and women.<sup>53</sup> Using Craig’s Zeta to analyze distinctive word use in the corpus of general conference talks before and after October 1995 reveals that assertions of the authority of Church leaders are also on the increase, with words like “authority,” “lead,” “obedience,” and “testify” all in the seventy most increased (“Proclamation” comes in at #12; the names of leaders “Monson,” “Gordon,” “B.,” and “Hinckley” all also make the top fifteen).

Not all the shifts have been regressive, however. By the same metric, the most distinctive word in the Proclamation on the Family is “adaptation,” in a cursory acknowledgement that not all fifteen million LDS members live in two-parent nuclear families. This word had been used only twice before in general conference, neither time in reference to family circumstances, but has been used seven times in reference to families since then. Similarly, references to “women” and “daughters” have increased while “man,” and “man’s” have decreased. References to “heavenly parents,” though uncommon through most of LDS history (0.22 references per year from 1851–1994) have increased ten-fold since the phrase appeared in the Proclamation on the Family (2.37 references per year from 1995–2015).

Thus, although collectively there appears to be unwillingness to declare in writing that the Proclamation “fits the definition of a revelation” even when asserted by the President of the Quorum of the Twelve, there is no such hesitation to treat it as such. This demonstrates just how much like normative scripture even ostensibly non-obligatory policy statements can function in the modern LDS Church.

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53. This parallels a wider rise of the concept of “complementarianism” in conservative American religions. See “Complementarity or Equality Gender and Justice in the Body of the Church,” *Sunstone* 2013, SL13371, and Kaimipono Wenger’s “The Rise of Mormon Complementarianism,” *Sunstone* 2013, SL13211 for discussions.

## The Gay Exclusion Policy

While this paper was under review, the question of what aspects of Church government are decided by leaders acting on their own, and which are directed by God, was further confused by changes to the Church Handbook of Instructions. Although the handbook is ostensibly available only to members of the LDS all-male hierarchy, these changes were noted and discussed online and in the press in early November 2015, before the hard-copy version had been distributed. These changes mandated a disciplinary council for any member in a legal same-sex marriage,<sup>54</sup> refused baptism to the children of gay parents until age eighteen, and allowed baptism thereafter only if the child “specifically disavow[ed] the practice of same-gendered cohabitation and marriage [and did] not live with a [gay] parent.”<sup>55</sup>

The press response to this action was strongly negative. The day after Church spokesman Spencer Hall confirmed the reports, University of Utah professor Jonathan Park blasted the changes in the campus newspaper as “a pestilent, homophobic plot to alienate and embarrass the children of same-sex couples.”<sup>56</sup> Jana Riess, in a “livid” blog post quoted by the *New York Times*, called it a “heartbreaking . . . impossible choice: . . . be excluded from lifelong love and companionship, or excluded from the blessings of the church.”<sup>57</sup> An organized mass resignation event attracted fifteen hundred participants in downtown Salt Lake City on

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54. Church Handbook of Instruction 1, Section 6.7.3

55. Church Handbook of Instruction 1, Section 16.13

56. Jonathan Park, “LDS Church’s Stance on Children of Same-Sex Couples Is Homophobic and Hypocritical,” *Daily Utah Chronicle* [University of Utah], Nov. 6, 2015, <http://dailyutahchronicle.com/2015/11/06/lds-churchs-stance-on-children-of-same-sex-couples-is-homophobic-and-hypocritical/>.

57. Laurie Goodstein, “Mormons Sharpen Stand Against Same-Sex Marriage,” *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/07/us/mormons-gay-marriage.html>.

November 14th, some waiting in line more than an hour-and-a-half to officially remove themselves from the institution.<sup>58</sup>

The LDS Church responded with a carefully scripted interview between the managing director of LDS Public Affairs, Michael Otterson, and Elder D. Todd Christofferson, where Christofferson claimed the policy was designed to avoid “difficulties, challenges, conflicts that can injure development in very tender years” of homosexual couples’ children.<sup>59</sup> Negative reactions continued, suggesting that this explanation was not universally convincing. On an international podcast, attorney James Ord speculated that the motivation for the policy change was primarily limiting legal liability.<sup>60</sup> In a podcast that received approximately five times more downloads than usual for *Rational Faiths*, Elder Christofferson’s own brother Tom described the situation as “dreary,” but encouraged “all of us who have had our hearts broken by this to reach out much more in love and acceptance to those who are affected by this.”<sup>61</sup>

Then, in January 2016 quorum president Russell M. Nelson declared at an internationally broadcast fireside that:

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58. Susanna Capelouto and Ralph Ellis, “1,500 Mormons Leaving Church to Protest Same-Sex Policy, Lawyer Says,” *CNN*, Nov. 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/14/us/mormon-mass-resignation/>.

59. LDS Newsroom, “Church Provides Context on Handbook Changes Affecting Same-Sex Marriages,” video, Nov. 6, 2015, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/handbook-changes-same-sex-marriages-elder-christofferson>.

60. Gina Colvin, “Church Policy Changes and their Legal Contexts: James Ord,” *A Thoughtful Faith* [Podcast], Nov. 8, 2015, <http://athoughtfulfaith.org/church-policy-changes-and-their-legal-contexts-james-ord/>.

61. Brian Dillman, Jerilyn Hassell Pool, and Tom Christofferson, “The Policy Amendment (That Never Should Have Happened),” *Rational Faiths* [podcast], Episode 82. Transcript available at <http://www.wheatandtares.org/19470/tom-christofferson-transcript/>, where it has 110,000 hits; the second-most viewed post on Wheat and Tares has 30,000. Statistics via from personal communication with Brian Dillman, Aug. 18, 2016.

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counsel together and share all the Lord has directed us to understand and to feel individually and collectively . . . This prophetic process was followed in 2012 with the change in minimum age for missionaries and again with the recent additions to the Church's handbook . . . We met repeatedly in the temple in fasting and prayer and sought further direction and inspiration. And then, when the Lord inspired His prophet, President Thomas S. Monson, to declare the mind of the Lord and the will of the Lord, each of us during that sacred moment felt a spiritual confirmation. It was our privilege as Apostles to sustain what had been revealed to President Monson.<sup>62</sup>

At this point, Elder Nelson had asserted unilaterally that the change in missionary age policy and the gay exclusion policy—despite referring to them as *policies*—were nevertheless arrived at by divine “inspiration,” “revealed” to a prophet, and confirmed by the Holy Ghost to Church authorities. This effectively erased the line between policy and revelation. Even the language Elder Nelson used seems to deliberately parallel the only other unquestioned revelation in living memory, Official Declaration 2, which ended the racial priesthood and temple ban: “we have pleaded long and earnestly in behalf of these, our faithful brethren, spending many hours in the Upper Room of the Temple supplicating the Lord for divine guidance. He has heard our prayers, and by revelation has confirmed that the long-promised day has come. . . . It was then presented to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who unanimously approved it. . . .”<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Elder Nelson’s talk was

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62. Russell M. Nelson, “Becoming True Millennials: An Evening with President Russell M. Nelson,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, Jan. 10, 2016, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, <https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-devotionals/2016/01/becoming-true-millennials>.

63. Official Declaration 2, found at the end of the Doctrine and Covenants, canonized by common consent at general conference, Sep. 30, 1978. Note the elements of repeated meetings, prayers in the temple, inspiration given by God to a prophet, and then confirmed by the Quorum of the Twelve. The spiritual confirmation that each of the Twelve allegedly received mirrors oft-quoted



given in an unofficial setting (albeit widely seen and reported), and in the following months and general conferences, the assertion was never corroborated by President Monson or any other apostles.

However, in June 2016 the Church released the new curriculum for their seminary program, *Doctrinal Mastery New Testament Teacher Material*.<sup>64</sup> The lesson on “Prophets and Revelation” distinguishes between policy and doctrine, but suggests that both are revealed by God, and students are marked wrong if they did not recognize the uncanonized Proclamation on the Family as “Eternal Truth.” The lesson also quoted from Elder Nelson’s talk that called the gay exclusion policy revelation, and it repudiated the idea that this “revelation” might change due to social pressure.

In the space of twenty-four hours in early September 2016, the online version of the manual went through at least three revisions and the idea that Church policies are revealed from God and the quote from Elder Nelson’s talk were excised, reinstated, then excised again.<sup>65</sup> The quick tempo of all these drafts, which somehow were made public while still being edited, indicates that the confusion about which revelations are binding on Church members is widespread even among employees with decision-making authority over the curriculum. However, the fact that the assertion of “eternal truth” was ultimately retracted for both the Family Proclamation and gay exclusion policy suggests that the impulse to authoritarianism is being, barely and belatedly, held in check. Nevertheless, Elder Nelson’s talk that sug-

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statements from many participants in the Official Declaration 2 prayer (see Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 [2008]: 53–59).

64. “Prophets and Revelation,” *Doctrinal Mastery*.

65. Jana Riess, “Watch the Mormon Seminary Curriculum Transform before Your Very Eyes!” *Religion News Service*, Sep. 3, 2016, [www.religionnews.com/2016/09/03/watch-the-mormon-seminary-curriculum-transform-before-your-very-eyes/](http://www.religionnews.com/2016/09/03/watch-the-mormon-seminary-curriculum-transform-before-your-very-eyes/).

gested that the gay exclusion policy is revelation was published in the October 2016 *Ensign*.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusions

Joseph Smith's descendant Paul Edwards once stated: "How do Mormons use scripture? They don't. It is my observation that very few Mormon ministers use scripture at all. When they do, they use it to give legitimacy to what they have already decided to do."<sup>67</sup> This strategy is hardly unique to Mormonism, and was pithily captured in a quote attributed to Andrew Lang, as the way "a drunken man uses lamp-posts, for support rather than for illumination."<sup>68</sup> In recent decades leaders have put remarkable emphasis on uncanonized texts, claiming divine inspiration in language remarkably similar to previous descriptions of now-canonized texts.

Attempts to create constructive, friendly, and robust theological discourse have often been suppressed by Church leaders. One poignant example is the excommunication of Paul and Margaret Toscano for their generous and thoughtful book *Strangers in Paradox*.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, additional examples abound. However, it is not impossible for scholars to shape Church discourse in a broader perspective, though they almost uniformly pay a high price for doing so. Lester Bush's *Dialogue* article on

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66. Russell M. Nelson, "Stand as True Millennials," *Ensign*, Oct. 2016, 29.

67. Compton, et al., "Scripture, History, and Faith," 104.

68. Attributed to Lang by several sources, including Francis Yeats-Brown, *Lancer at Large* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 9; and G.A.N. Lowndes, *The Silent Social Revolution: An Account of the Expansion of Public Education in England and Wales 1895–1935* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), vi. The original author of the quote is most likely A.E. Housman, who had written in 1903, "gentlemen who use MSS as drunkards use lamp-posts,—not to light them on their way but to dissimulate their instability" in *M. Manilii: Astronomicum*, translation and analysis by A. E. Housman, vol. 1., (London: Grand Richards Co., 1928), liii.

69. See *Sunstone* 2010, #375: "No More Fellow Citizens But Still Strangers."

the history of blacks and the priesthood is a prime example.<sup>70</sup> Then-editor Robert A. Rees commented “The effect of our publishing this exchange was to clarify many points of misunderstanding and dispel much of the myth that has circulated in the Church regarding the Negro doctrine, and, further, to put the discussion of this subject on a more rational (and hopefully more spiritual) level.”<sup>71</sup> Several General Authorities are reported to have read the essay, even before it was published, and it is widely seen as contributing to the 1978 revelation. Nevertheless, Bush faced remarkable pressure and obstruction at every level in his research, publication, and post-publication life, and was made unwelcome in, then left, the Church.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery published *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* in 1984, and since then the generally hostile attitude toward Emma Smith has shifted dramatically. In the very next general conference, President Hinckley broke with prior tradition and praised Emma by name a total of twelve times.<sup>73</sup> From 1974 up to the publication of *Mormon Enigma*, Emma was mentioned only sixteen times in general conference, and 62.5 percent of them were in an unflattering way. Since then, she has been mentioned on average more than once per conference and 74.6 percent of those in a positive way (Fisher: OR=4.7, p=.008). However, both Newell and Avery faced

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70. Lester Bush, “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (1973): 11–68.

71. Robert Rees, “The Possibilities of Dialogue,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 9, no. 3 (1974): 4–5.

72. Lester Bush, “Writing ‘Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview’ (1973): Context and Reflections, 1998,” *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 229–71.

73. Even apologists have suggested that Brigham Young may have deliberately misled the saints about her. See, for example, Susan Easton Black, *Setting the Record Straight: Emma Smith: An Elect Lady* (Orem, Ut.: Millennial Press, 2007).

significant backlash from the Church at several levels, and they and their children have become disaffected from the Church.

In the aftermath of the Ordain Women event at the October 2013 general conference, the internet came alive with people loudly arguing about the movement's merits, and both sides spent a good deal of time quoting speakers from that very general conference, and less time quoting canonized scripture. This clearly indicates that conference addresses play the primary normative role in the modern Church. While Church leaders have resisted commenting on the Ordain Women movement, several people involved in it have faced disciplinary action, including the excommunication of Ordain Women's organizer Kate Kelly in June 2014.

The hardline retrenchment witnessed in the gay exclusion policy and reinforcement of rigid gender roles appears to have triggered a wave of resignations from the LDS Church. While statistics from the institution are not available, some circumstantial evidence exists nonetheless. For one, there have been mass resignation events. A broader view comes from an analysis of official membership statistics (see table 5). Every April general conference, a secretary to the leadership presents a list of statistics to the Church, including the total membership, number of new children joining the Church, and number of converts. By comparing totals from year to year, it is possible to calculate the number of people leaving the Church, whether by death, excommunication, or resignation. It should be noted that these totals appear to not be complete at the time they are presented, as the growth and loss figures show a great deal more instability than seems reasonable, so the results for any one year should be viewed with some skepticism. However, inferences based on long-term trends are more likely to be valid. To show how much resignation has increased in the last few years, I generously assume that no members left the Church due to excommunication or resignation prior to 2013, and all losses were therefore due to death or the removal of unbaptized children of record. This establishes a reasonable death and/or removal rate of 4.558 per 1000, consistent with a membership

primarily in the developed world. Holding that rate constant indicates that 123,688 members resigned or were excommunicated in the last three years.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>New Children of Record</b>	<b>Converts Baptized</b>	<b>Growth</b>
1995	9,340,898	71,139	304,330	
1996	9,694,549	81,017	321,385	353,651
1997	10,070,524	75,214	317,798	375,975
1998	10,354,241	76,829	299,134	283,717
1999	10,752,986	84,118	306,171	398,745
2000	11,068,861	81,450	273,973	315,875
2001	11,394,522	69,522	292,612	325,661
2002	11,721,548	81,132	283,138	327,026
2003	11,985,254	99,457	242,923	263,706
2004	12,275,822	98,870	241,239	290,568
2005	12,560,869	93,150	243,108	285,047
2006	12,868,606	94,006	272,845	307,737
2007	13,193,999	93,698	279,218	325,393
2008	13,508,509	123,502	265,593	314,510
2009	13,824,854	119,722	280,106	316,345
2010	14,131,467	120,528	272,814	306,613
2011	14,441,346	119,917	281,312	309,879
2012	14,782,473	122,273	272,330	341,127
2013	15,082,028	115,486	282,945	299,555
2014	15,372,337	116,409	296,803	290,309
2015	15,634,199	114,500	257,402	261,862

*Table 5, Part 1*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Losses</b>	<b>Attributable to death (4.558 per 1,000)</b>	<b>Defection</b>	<b>Average Annual Defec-tion</b>
1995				
1996	48,751	43,382	5,369	5,369
1997	17,037	45,045	-28,008	-11,319
1998	92,246	46,548	45,698	7,687
1999	-8,456	48,103	-56,559	-8,375
2000	39,548	49,732	-10,184	-8,737
2001	36,473	51,194	-14,721	-9,734
2002	37,244	52,682	-15,438	-10,549
2003	78,674	54,028	24,646	-6,150
2004	49,541	55,291	-5,750	-6,105
2005	51,211	56,603	-5,392	-6,034
2006	59,114	57,954	1,160	-5,380
2007	47,523	59,397	-11,874	-5,921
2008	74,585	60,855	13,730	-4,409
2009	83,483	62,293	21,190	-2,581
2010	86,729	63,712	23,017	-874
2011	91,350	65,117	26,233	820
2012	53,476	66,601	-13,125	0
2013	98,876	68,061	30,815	30,815
2014	122,903	69,405	53,498	84,312
2015	110,040	70,664	39,376	123,688

*Table 5, Part 2*

Defections from the LDS Church, inferred from official statistics presented at general conference (first three columns). Growth = New Children of Record + Converts Baptized. Losses = Annual difference in Membership - Growth. Attributable to Death = Membership \* 4.558 / 1000 (a rate set so that the total defections between 1995 and 2012 equals 0, an assumption made to arrive at a minimum plausible estimate of defection totals since 2013). Defection (that is, Resignations

+ Excommunications) = Losses - Deaths. While estimates for any one year should be treated with some skepticism (for example, the official statistics suggest over 8,000 members joined the Church who were neither children of record nor new converts; most likely many 1999 deaths were mistakenly reported in the unusually high 1997 total), long term trends can be considered with more confidence. The last three values for defection reflect cumulative totals since 2013, not averages.

While this value is only a rough approximation based on reasonable assumptions, it strongly suggests there has been a sharp change in retention, and Church leaders apparently have contradictory ideas about how to respond. Nevertheless, one thing we can count on: whatever General Authorities decide to do, we will hear about it at conference, with selective quotes from the canon, that will form our new, unique, and ever-evolving Mormon scripture.

## Appendix

### *Methodology*

Data-mining code written in the R statistical language, available upon request from CNKA [christiannkanderson@hotmail.com](mailto:christiannkanderson@hotmail.com). Citations were pulled from both the body of the talk and footnotes. References to entire chapters or multiple chapters were ignored (e.g. “see Alma 32–34”). However, single references that contained more than one verse were counted as a reference to each verse. For example, a footnote saying “Ex. 20:4–5, 8–9; 24:5” would be counted as citing five verses, as opposed to citing each of the five verses 0.2 times each, for example.

The number of characters in each book was determined by counting alphanumeric characters only. The total ignores spaces, punctuation marks, verse numbers, and alphabet characters used to denote footnotes. Verse, character, and chapter totals ignore header information and prefatory material.

Diversity was calculated using the Gini-Simpson index for ease of interpretation (the probability that two scriptures chosen at random are different).

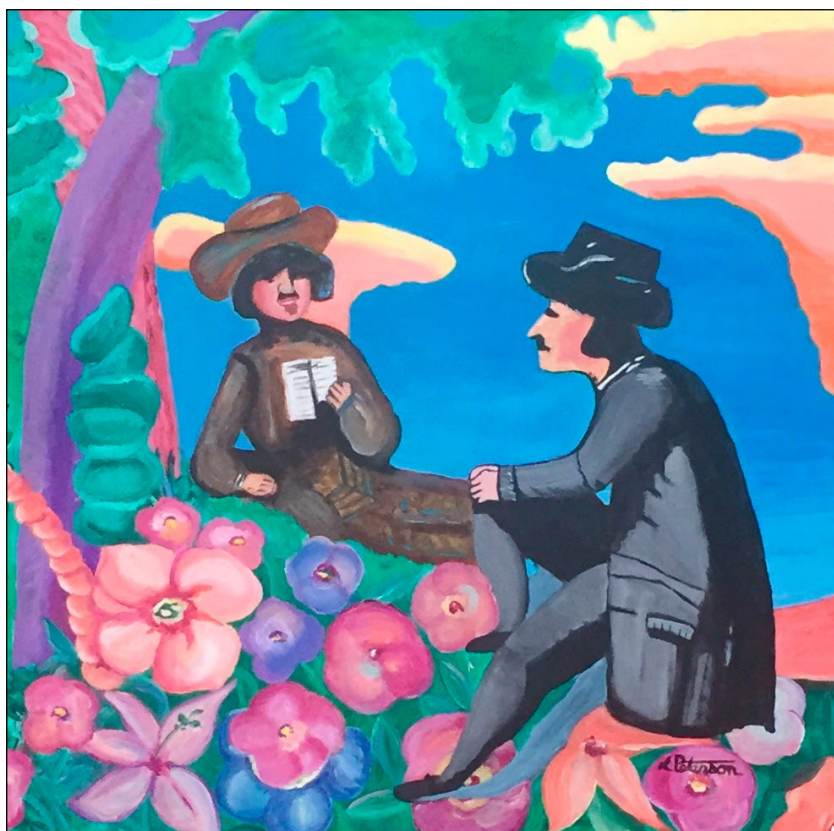
$$1 - \Lambda = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^n p_i^2$$

Where  $p_i$  is the number of times scripture  $i$  is cited divided by the total number of citations. Results are qualitatively similar using Shannon information and Rényi entropy.

The original 160 Scripture Chase passages can be found at <https://theboard.byu.edu/questions/23421/>, and the three more recent lists of 100 are widely available. To analyze departures from an even distribution across nine fundamental doctrines, expectation distributions were determined by randomly assigning the number of verses from each list to one of the nine (or ten) doctrines in 10,000 bootstrap sets. Because the probability of the observed datum was  $\ll .0001$  in each case, a chi-squared distribution was fit to each expectation distribution using Nelder-Mead optimization, and probabilities were computed from the fit distributions.







Leslie O. Peterson  
*Homage to the Original Dialogue*

## THE UNENDING CONVERSATION

For *Dialogue's* Jubilee Celebration

Frances Lee Menlove

*Life can only be understood backwards: but it must be lived forwards.*

—Søren Kierkegaard

Looking back with the perspective of fifty years, I can see (and feel) a sustaining philosophy that has guided *Dialogue* through its amazing half-century tenure, more than a quarter of the entire history of the LDS Church.

In the initial discussions about this fledgling idea for a journal, all voices were heard—Gene England's, Wes Johnson's, Joe Jeppson's, Paul Salisbury's, and mine. Gene's voice was foundational, and I can still hear his philosophy, his faith, running through these past 200 issues of *Dialogue*. Its volume fades in and out, of course, but it is still always there.

This philosophy treasures the collective wisdom as well as the diversity of Church members while reaching out to voices with different perspectives, experiences, and knowledge. This philosophy cries out: Save us from an unexamined faith. Save us from false certainty and narrowness. Celebrate our arts and letters. Puzzle over old and new ethical dilemmas. Champion the value and necessity of free agency. Stay committed to inquiry, the duty to seek truth. Be ever skeptical of absolute claims to truth. Remind us that we are committed to staying in relationship, living in tension, struggling and rejoicing with the ultimate mystery of God. Always be vigilant of our blind spots. Shape us into a community of trust. Announce that we are ready to talk, to "dialogue."

Five decades ago, I doubt any of us *Dialogue* founders could have predicted the massive changes that have occurred in society and in

the Church—in large part due to the information made available and democratization of voices that have come about through the internet. With its rise, and in its free-for-all nature, we are today constantly forced to bring the past and the present together in dialogue. The internet’s widely tilted unbalance of reactions more than analysis, with its appeal to ever-shortening attention spans, must be complemented (even anchored) by the kinds of reflections offered in *Dialogue*. And may *Dialogue* never fail to include perspective-shifting and soul-enlivening offerings from our very best artists, poets, storytellers, essayists, and musicians (and occasionally our humorists).

Ten years ago, I wrote a reflection for *Dialogue*’s fortieth anniversary celebration titled “A Forty-Year View: *Dialogue* and the Sober Lessons of History.”<sup>1</sup> I concluded that piece with a plea: “*Dialogue*, don’t lose your nerve!” My plea was partly a caution about the squelching impact of the move toward formal and heavy correlation of materials and programs that the Church hadn’t yet implemented at the time of *Dialogue*’s founding, and partly a reminder that we need, constantly, to examine and re-examine teachings and ideas as they reveal themselves to be harmful, or at least less and less relevant, in a world informed by science and new discoveries from all fields. Urging *Dialogue* not to lose its nerve was my way of saying, please fight hard against complacency, please champion the philosophy that intellectual and spiritual integrity can coexist, and please remember, as my grandfather taught me, Mormons never have to believe anything that isn’t true.



I was recently asked by a friend, “What is the biggest change you have seen in LDS Church culture in the last few decades?” I answered reflexively, without thinking, “The rise in the notion of infallibility

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1. *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 88–97.

of Church leaders.” My knee-jerk response arose largely because of a relatively recent experience in which I had walked in the front door of a university LDS Institute of Religion building only to find prominent photographs of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve running the entire length of the foyer, with this quotation from Doctrine and Covenants 1:38 in large letters across the top of the pictures:

“WHETHER BY MINE OWN VOICE OR BY THE VOICE OF MY SERVANTS, IT IS THE SAME.”

A student walking into the building would immediately be given the message that the Church is (1) run by white men, and (2) what they say is the latest word from the Lord. Maybe not explicit infallibility, but certainly implicit infallibility is the message that jumped out.

This experience made me wonder if we are seeing a shift, a change since the time of President McKay and apostles like J. Reuben Clark, a shift away from an explicit repudiation of the infallibility of the prophet and apostles and toward a message that their words and policies come straight from God. I have always taken comfort in Henry Eyring’s words that “one of the wonderful doctrines of this Church is that we don’t believe in the infallibility of any mortal.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, here we are today experiencing a slowly creeping notion of infallibility, that perennial temptation (and downfall) of religious leaders throughout the ages. This may sound overblown, perhaps advancing age is making me a tad cranky, but I find it disquieting. The great strength of the Mormon doctrine of change, of fallibility, is that it accepts the complexity of the world and the limitations of our understanding and puts a responsibility for discernment upon individual members. In short, it is a doctrine that *invites* dialogue.

All of us understand that the Church evolves and changes as the times change, and as I reflected on the question I was asked, other shifts came to mind. One dramatic change happened when the Church moved away from the doctrine of a literal gathering of Zion for all members

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2. Henry Eyring, *The Faith of a Scientist* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 52.

in preparation for the last days to a metaphorical understanding of what the gathering was to be: a spiritual gathering, a gathering across continents and around the world. (Let me be perfectly clear: this shift occurred *before* my time!)

I can discern other shifts, far more recent. It appears to me that the notion of the United Order, of the Saints having all things in common—something that I was taught while living in Utah and attending Church history classes was God’s ideal economic order—has faded out and morphed into a full embrace of free-market capitalism, and American-style capitalism to boot. It is as though we look through the lens of our culture (what else can we do?), but then take another step and announce it as normative for everyone everywhere. To me, the notion of this marriage of Christianity and unleashed capitalism is unsettling. Whereas the philosophy behind the United Order tilted the perennial tension between individualism and the common good toward the latter, now the tilt is firmly in the other direction. While writing about the United Order, Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton noted that “[t]he ideal remains a part of twentieth-century Mormon awareness.”<sup>3</sup> While true of the previous century, these echoes seem almost undetectable to my ears today.

Another trend, a positive one, in the last several years has been the greater openness of Church historical records and artifacts, along with an incredible blooming of first-rate scholarship by Mormons (and others) on our history, theology, and sociology. This has nudged along a movement away from unrealistic and unhistorical idealizing of the early restoration Church toward a more nuanced and historically anchored acknowledgment of complexity, with warts here and there. As William

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3. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 126.

Sloane Coffin once wrote: “In other words, religious folk, all our lives, [we] have both to recover tradition and to recover *from* it!”<sup>4</sup>

LDS scholars are also immersing themselves in contemporary historical methods to study the Bible (and its multiple translations) and early Christianity. They are studying ancient manuscripts with the lens of modern linguistics and ethnographic scholarship, overturning centuries-old fictions about the early followers of Jesus. Scholars are discovering that women played a much larger leadership role in early Christianity than we have been taught. Hopefully these studies will spur a faster (and overdue) movement toward true gender equality and discipleship.

I see the abandonment of the priesthood and temple ban against blacks as well as their increasing assimilation into the Church (both in the United States and around the world) as one of most positive, wonderful changes in these last few decades. The ban had institutionalized whiteness as both normative and superior, and surely the time has come to undo both understandings. Lest we forget, *Dialogue* played an important role in this transition. One such contribution was Lester Bush’s powerful (and at the time very controversial) article detailing the role of blacks in the early Church and the eventual rise of the ban.<sup>5</sup> The Church’s Gospel Topic essay on race and the priesthood, recently published on its official website, is also helping to accelerate this continuing progress.<sup>6</sup>

While we are praising *Dialogue*, let’s also not forget how it was an early leader in publishing about the translation of the Book of Abraham

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4. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 9.

5. Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.

6. “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topics, <https://www.lds.org/topics/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

(the mismatch between the scrolls and the text), as well as its theology, including now-suspect views on patriarchal priesthood.<sup>7</sup>

Latter-day Saints have faced some significant ethical dilemmas during this first half-century of *Dialogue*. Gene England wrote about what he considered his top three: “Withholding the priesthood from blacks, participation of Mormons in war, and our view of the roles of men and women.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly the issues of war and peace and justice, males-only priesthood, and gender equality are still on the short list, but for many (my grandkids, for example) the issue of climate change, how we fulfill our sacred obligation to care for our fragile planet, deserves top billing. Earth stewardship is a profound religious obligation, a moral obligation that could use some strong prophetic leadership.

In this fiftieth year of *Dialogue*, we are experiencing a grim new moral problem, one that none of us could have imagined during *Dialogue*’s inauguration. This, of course, is the November 2015 altering of the *Church Handbook of Instructions, Vol. 1* with respect to our LGBT brothers and sisters and the children of same-sex couples. It is a very dark and backward twist in the generally forward-moving path of the Church. This policy (or is it a revelation?)<sup>9</sup> labels as “apostate” any same-sex married LDS couples, says *no* to an infant’s naming and blessing if

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7. The Summer 1968 issue of *Dialogue* (volume 3, no. 2) contains a section called “The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri,” which is comprised of five different examinations of various aspects of the source material for the Book of Abraham. An important essay in the history of sorting out the Book of Abraham’s teachings about race and priesthood is Armand L. Mauss, “The Fading of the Pharaoh’s Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban Against Blacks in the Mormon Church,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1981): 10–45.

8. Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Midvale, Utah: Orion Books, 1984), ix.

9. Russell M. Nelson, “Stand as True Millennials,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2016, 29, available at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2016/10/young-adults/stand-as-true-millennials?lang=eng>.



that child's parents are in a same-sex relationship, *no* to the priesthood ordinance of baptism of eight-year-old children if their parents are in a same-sex relationship, *no* to the priesthood ordinance of confirmation and receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost if a child's parents are in a same-sex relationship. Of course, the Church says this is not a forever banning of these children from Church blessings and the special guidance granted through the gift of the Holy Ghost. When these children reach eighteen, they may choose baptism and receiving the other ordinances if they move out of their parents' home and disavow their parents' lifestyle.

Speaking in alignment with the best thinking of the scientific community, Dr. William Bradshaw, retired BYU professor of microbiology, states that being gay is "not a pathology, a disease, an illness, a disorder, a weakness, a susceptibility, an inclination, a temptation. It is not learned; it is not a passing phase; it is not a perversion; it is not an addiction; it is not communicable."<sup>10</sup> Our LGBT brothers and sisters are fully human manifestations of God's creation, images of God. To me, this new policy shows a startling lack of faith in God. The God it imagines is too small, and this policy is inflicting spiritual pain on the Mormon LGBT community, on their families, on their neighbors, and on all of us who stand by and watch and feel and hear.

The moral distress reverberating through the Church because of this new policy is as wide and deep and painful as anything I can remember since the issue of the ban on blacks in the priesthood during the height of civil rights movement in the 1950s through the 1970s. To me it is pure hubris to believe that our understanding of the next life is clear enough and specific enough to trump basic Christian principles: love, empathy, compassion. Imagine being told not to worry about being marginalized in this life because it will be fixed in the next life!

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10. William Bradshaw, interviewed by Dan Wotherspoon, "309: Making Sense of the Research on Homosexuality—Biological Factors, Part 2," *Mormon Matters*, podcast audio, Nov. 23, 2015.

Recall Paul's reminder that we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:2). We are called to imitate Jesus. We are all under the judgment of the love commandment. The November changes formalized a theology of exclusion. But Paul, again, has the corrective in his beautiful articulation of the "body of Christ" and the folly of saying, "I have no need of you" to any who wish to serve and belong (1 Corinthians 12:12–31). When compassion and love contradict policy, something is wrong—and the error is never found on the compassion and love side of the dilemma. A definition of "apostasy" might be Church policies/practices that mandate/require its members to act in an un-Christlike manner. Here and now is our canvas. It is time to recognize all people as God's children. The policy will change. The question is whether it will be a soft landing or a hard one.



So what about the next fifty years? Will *Dialogue* embrace the role destiny has assigned to it? Can we, in its pages, tell the truth about the difficulties of reality? As the past has taught us, as human knowledge about the world advances, some religious beliefs fall naturally by the wayside: sun worship, witch hunts, the divine as sanctioning slavery, no priesthood or temple worship for blacks, systemized gender inequality. It is challenging when scientists tell us sex and gender are not immutable. Wait until we are asked to wrestle with our ethical obligations to robots that are able to feel and think!

The philosophy and the grounding principles of *Dialogue* have served us well. The initial brochure we sent out soliciting subscriptions said:

*Dialogue* is not a journal of liberal opinion. Nor of conservative opinion. Nor an evangelical journal. Not an official publication of any organization. It is a forum for discussion of all points of view on the encounter of faith and reason, on the relation of religious values to contemporary experience and learning. The editorial position of the journal is merely

that a dialogue on these matters is possible and valuable. That men and women can talk to each other about their faith and experience in a way that can bring some pleasure and some truth to all involved. That men and women need not relinquish their faith to be intellectually respectable nor their intelligence to be faithful. But rather, that they can refine and deepen their faith through intelligent examination and can bring their faith and its moral power into mutually rewarding dialogue with the secular world.

Remember ours is a young religion, not yet 200 years old.

*Dialogue* is made for such times as these. In their recent book *Church Refugees*, sociologists Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope summarize their findings about why people are leaving churches: “We found time and again that people were leaving not because they couldn’t find agreement, in fact, many were leaving because they couldn’t find disagreement.”<sup>11</sup> We who read *Dialogue*, just like those Packard and Hope describe, are looking for community where convictions can be explored, not merely expounded.

*Dialogue* has demonstrated irrefutably that discussions about religion in general, and Mormonism in particular, don’t have to be a game of “gotcha.” *Dialogue* is a place where conversation can run deep, a place where we aren’t afraid to ask questions because we don’t know the answers. It is a place where we can tell the truth about the difficulties of reality, a place where we don’t need to section off the realm of reason from the realm of revelation. John Dominic Crossan, a famous Christian theologian and the featured speaker at the 2015 Salt Lake Sunstone symposium, shares this fundamental conviction: “Reason and revelation or

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11. Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, 2015).

history and theology *or* research and faith—by whatever names—cannot contradict one another unless we have one or both wrong.”<sup>12</sup>

Gene England believed we all have gifts worth sharing, and church is the space in which we share our lives. *Dialogue* facilitates this very human and essential activity of our lives as humans.

I have hope, and hope means the future is not yet written.

Marcus Borg, citing literary theorist Kenneth Burke, invokes the metaphor of a parlor conversation that reminds me of the hosting role *Dialogue* has been playing for this past half-century:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns herself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.<sup>13</sup>

This is the “unending conversation” that has been going on since the beginning of human history and that we join at the moment of our birth and leave at the moment of our death.

*Dialogue*, you are a gift to the Church.

*Dialogue*, don't lose your nerve.

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12. John Dominic Crossan, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis through Revelation* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 4.

13. This passage is quoted in Marcus J. Borg and Tim Scorer, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 4. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 110–11.

# EYES TO SEE

Kylie Turley

## I. Seeing Not

*... because they seeing see not ...*  
*Matthew 13:13*

My first pair of glasses had green plastic rims and Coke-bottle thick, anti-glare-coated lenses, which reflected green light. In every fourth grade photo, my eyes hid behind a glint of green flashing fire, but I did not care because when I slid the glasses on in the doctor's office, the blurry rack of "For Sale" frames suddenly snapped into distinct lines and angles. I slipped the glasses off, then on again—watching the frames become blurry, then crisp again. Yet even knowing about the stunning change, I jerked to a stop outside the doctor's office door, my mom and the trail of siblings piling up behind me. I stared at the trees across the street. Angular leaves fluttered in the breeze, avocado undersides distinct from their forest green tops.

"Leaves?" I shouted. "Leaves? You see leaves on the trees at Sunset Elementary?" My mother laughed. I had forgotten that people see leaves rather than green smears on a fuzzy brownish trunk. Glasses fixed the leaves, and I loved them for making objects and people's faces snatch in their blurry edges, yet they couldn't halt the haloed lights and blurry vision, and new lenses were inevitable. Then came LASIK. When the doctor said I should leave my glasses in a little donation box before the fifteen-minute procedure that would give me 20/20 vision, I nearly hyperventilated. Feeling naked, I shifted from foot to foot and tried to force my hand to let go of my latest pair (wire-rimmed, thin plastic,

no reflection). After thirty long seconds, my sweaty hand released my glasses, hoping to bless the life of an orphan in Africa.

Without heavy glasses cutting the bridge of my nose, I discovered a new me. As a child, I had been scared of my family's dangerous sporting activities, and I unconsciously learned passive avoidance and trickery. I might, for example, "fall asleep" just before my turn to waterski on the driftwood-filled lake—because one overlooked log can hook your slalom ski and slam you into water hard as concrete. You whirlwind, slapping across the lake's surface in a flailing tangle of arms and legs and waterski. The next morning you wake up stiff and aching and find deep purple bruises on your arm and thigh, but you feel lucky you were not sliced by the ski's sharp skag. Pain is the consequence of not seeing driftwood while waterskiing—or of many other unseen obstacles—so I learned to "help" by babysitting the little kids at the winter cabin and to "like" doing dishes instead of working with heavy equipment and machinery outside. With six strong country sisters and one tough little brother, I became the "sissy," the "wimp" of the family. The degrading labels chafed, but family outings were not optional; I never considered refusing to participate. Instead I accepted the labels, believed them, even reinforced them.

But once I had LASIK eyes, I saw things differently. I truly am scared of the Snake River's Big Kahuna rapids, but it is in that spine-tingling, scary-movie-that-you-actually-love type of way. I adore waterskiing now that I can see driftwood, and I am always game for cliff jumping into Yellowstone's Firehole River. I stand on the edge shivering and nervous, but I know it is an adventure, a game. When I could not see, it was no game. You do not feel brave when you cannot see. Daring heroism does not swell up when you skid on wet mud and stagger over unseen roots and rocks, skinning your hands, scraping your shins, blundering and worrying that you are about to slip over the edge of the precipice. When I stand shivering at the top of a cliff and I know where the bottom is, the jump is a deliciously frightening thrill. Leaping into the unknown is petrifying. I spent most of my childhood petrified.

Writing this essay forced me to confront how my poor eyesight created an inaccurate and blurry view of myself. Lack of physical sight created hundreds of small situations in which shame and humiliation could flourish: I had summer-long, sweat-induced acne dotting my nose and cheeks, and I will never forget the day at the lake when I skidded the jet ski right up to the beach—only to discover that I was not parked next to my family; I was standing in my swimming suit, sopping wet, squinting at the wrong family on the wrong beach. In the winter, I got my snowmobile stuck more than my siblings as I peered through poor eyesight and foggy goggles, and every rider in Montana and Wyoming would have driven purposefully off the road to avoid me if they knew how little I could see as I whipped past them at seventy or eighty miles per hour in the unspoken, highly competitive family race back to the car.

I wove those embarrassing situations into my personality, and then I threaded strands of perceived weakness through my memories. I believed—and still do—that I am a fear-filled person. In the mirror I saw—and still see—anxiety prematurely wrinkling my forehead. But this is the irony: when I describe who I was in words and ink, I see a girl I do not know and one I do not remember being. That girl was scared because she could not see. The poor thing sometimes did what she could to avoid fearful situations, but often she threw herself into the blurry unknown alongside those who could see more clearly. That is not wimpy. It is brave. I see that now. But it is too late. A few thousand dollars changed my vision, but what can change the personality that the poor vision created?

## II. Perceiving Not

*“And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith,  
By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand;  
and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive.”*

*Matthew 13:14*

I struggle to recall what I ate for breakfast and how old I will be on my birthday, but I do not forget January 9, 2010. On that day, I was tucked

in my bed with a warm blanket, supposedly having a nap, but actually reading the second book in a fantasy series. The last page crackled as I turned its well-read edge—adding up how much “nap” time I had left and glancing at the stack of four library books on my bedroom dresser. I could not see. I stared toward the stack of books, then down at my still-open novel. The pages were not blurry, but they were not right, so I reached my arm, brushed the book with my fingertips and felt its distance. I blinked a dozen times, snatched my eye drops from the bedside table, and drained them into my eyes. A voice in my head insisted that I should take that nap, telling me that I would wake up, flick open my eyes, and see. I opened my eyes fifteen minutes later, but I could not see.

Even now, years later, I do not know how to explain what my world looks like. I see colors, objects, sizes, and everything around me, but my eyes skid off objects of their own accord. I can casually survey the scenery as if I am meandering down a country road, and everything seems normal. But when I try to look straight at a light switch or my child’s face, my forehead ricochets with pain. If I try too long, my body contorts, my legs and ankles strain at odd angles, my neck pulls to the right, and my body slumps to the left as it twists to compensate.

At the onset, a few doctors told me I needed a psychologist, not an MD. One ophthalmologist shined his bright light in my eyes and announced in a nasally tone, “You’re fine. Come back in a few months if it doesn’t clear up.” He slid his rolling chair backwards, stood up, and leaned against the office wall, arms folded. I blinked and tried to unfold myself from the chair, but dozens of light spots danced, remainders of the glaring beam he had shot in my eyes. I wavered and plopped back down, lightheaded and nauseated. The doctor glared at me, “hypochondriac” emblazoned in the rigid cross of his arms and the disdainful mask on his handsome face. He rolled his professional eyes upward at my apparent antics, reached behind himself to jerk the door open, and marched to his next examination. The nurse looked at the floor, as if doing so would hide the upturn of her red-lipsticked mouth.



I have to admit, it sounds ridiculous. *You say you cannot see, but you read the 20/20 line on the eye chart? You cannot see “right”? Do you see two objects or one?* Simple questions. But, a few months later, when the one-of-a-kind neuro-ophthalmologist at the university’s eye center asked about double vision, I hesitated, then blurted out that I “thought” I was seeing a single white star on a black background, but could not be sure because the star “wanted to split.” I sounded insane. Did I believe the star on the chart had intelligence and thought cloning itself was an ethically viable option? I could not find words to describe what I saw in front of my face.

I still cannot. Do I see single or double? I do not know.

Parkinson’s disease turned out to be the curveball creating my vision problems. The disorder tends to be worse on one side, so, as the disease progresses, eye muscles no longer move together with synchronicity: my right eye hesitates, lagging behind the left. This particular side effect of the disease can present as convergence or divergence insufficiency. I have both. When I found a friend with the same problem, relief swept through me like a whoosh of fresh air. She said she struggles to decide “which eye to look at” when she is speaking to people, and I confided, “On bad days, I cannot focus on my own eyes in the mirror to put on my makeup.” My typical alto sounded like a slightly hysterical soprano, but my friend nodded vigorously, both of us laugh-crying.

It’s an odd irony. For reasons God alone knows, I am back where I began, lacking in sight—not that leaves are blurry this time or that I am blind. I can see with near 20/20 vision out of either eye, but I also cannot see, and this time I know that I cannot. I cannot look you straight in the eyes or read words on a page for any extended length of time, and I have learned to descend stairs like a princess: head up, neck straight, eyes looking horizontally ahead. I do not look down. Distance is a tricky thing when your eyes do not work together; stair steps move and the ground shifts dangerously.

Today, just like every day, I wake and find my hand searching my bedside table for the glasses that I no longer need nor use. I remember that I do not have glasses, and I smile, sleepy eyes still shut. Then I shiver and squeeze my eyelids tight, wrinkling my face. What if today is the day? What if I open my eyes and actually see double? What if my whole world has split wide open?

### III. Being Blessed

*“But blessed are your eyes, for they see”*

*Matthew 13:16*

One random day nearly forty years ago, my mother was bent over her sewing machine, threading the metal needle with expert fingers and one eye shut. Her mother-in-law entered the room, noticed my mom and her squinted eye, and cried, “Oh, Yvonne! Save your eyes for the scriptures!” We have laughed for decades about my grandmother’s instinctive outburst, humored that a fabulous seamstress told someone not to sew and touched that her spontaneous exclamations only showcased a deep love of the Lord and his word.

I did not begin my reading life by following my grandmother’s example. I wasted my eyesight on fiction and fantasy, developing a sort of addiction to reading. I probably should have attended addiction recovery and introduced myself: “My name is Kylie. I read. I should let you know that I read in the car. I do not drive while I read, but most stoplights are at least a paragraph long.” A good book meant that I did not hear people walk into the room and speak to me, I was late to appointments, and I did not answer the door. As a child, I sometimes hid behind my bed so people could not find me; I have done this as an adult, too. I have read all night. I have ignored my children. I have forgotten to cook dinner. But January 9, 2010 changed my life. With limited eyesight, I realized my grandmother was right. I learned it the hard way.

In one of many healing incidents in the New Testament, Jesus Christ heals a man who was born blind. The disciples question Jesus about this man and expose a prejudice of the time period, saying, “Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?”<sup>1</sup> Christ answers that “neither” the man nor his parents sinned, but that the man was born blind “that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). Christ’s answer clarifies that physical disability is not a punishment for sin nor is it a curse, but that is not the end of the story. After the healing, Jesus uses the moment to teach again, explaining to the Pharisees that he came “into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.” The Pharisees understand that they are being criticized, and they snap back at Jesus, “Are we blind also?” to which Jesus responds simply, “If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth” (John 9:39–40).

Jesus’ response flips assumptions upside down: those who believe they see are actually blind, while the blind man perceives far more clearly than the Pharisees. I like this scripture because of my struggles with physical sight, but it runs me in confusing circles. I did not know that I could not see before I got glasses, just like a Pharisee. When leaves snapped into focus, I thought glasses fixed my vision and that I could accurately see the real world around me. Years later I realized that the mere input of sensory data did not help me judge reality any better; I blindly believed the labels assigned to me, saw weakness in my mirror, and acted accordingly. Now my Parkinson’s eyes do not converge and diverge synchronically, and I perceive insufficiently. But I cannot tell you in words how what I see is different from what you see, and I have no idea whether the input of defective sensory data will help me perceive more accurately—or make me even more blind. I know I cannot trust my senses, and thus I ought not trust the conclusions I arrive at based on those senses. I am unable to rely on myself, my observations, or my

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1. See Bible Dictionary, “Blindness”; John 9:1–2.

low-dopamine logic to know what is real. It is as scary as the monster under my bed, as humiliating as wearing my shirt inside-out in seventh grade, and as humbling as my first calculus test in college.

No one asked if I want to cliff jump off the precipice of Parkinson's disease, and when I look over the edge, I panic. I cannot see the bottom. I fear I will belly slap onto water hard as concrete, but I do not get to start on a lower cliff to see if I like it; there will be no passive "falling asleep" avoidance, and there are no glasses that will cause my life to snatch in its watery edges and create the illusion of sharply healed vision. I see my hand tremor a bit more than yesterday and the fear drips down my spine like melting ice water. I see my face in a photo and I cannot help but notice that my head is tilted to the side and something about my smile is asymmetrical, a hint of too-smooth, expressionless skin on the left side. I see the smiles on other people's faces when I cannot remember silly nouns such as "BBQ" or "clouds" or the names of my good friends, "Carolyn" or "Shannon." The people look down like the red-lipsticked nurse, but I see their laughing mouths. All of the realities that I thought I understood have blurred, and my insufficient eyes only see my neediness, lack, and utter inability to live this out. I cannot look straight at myself in the mirror, I never read for fun, and stairs are a constant hazard. If this is seeing, then seeing is a lonely, painful gift. I am not sure that I want it.

So I pretend. Daily I play like I cannot see my future; I do not allow my thoughts to wander to a shackled body that does not walk, eyes that do not see, and hands that tremor and cannot feed oneself. Instead, I make-believe that my insufficient eyes focus on a different face in my mirror, a regal woman who meets my glance standing straight-backed and clear-eyed. Obviously, this one is a cliff-jumper, the kind who shouts out all her fears and throws herself over the edge. I like her striking, pillar-like posture and her pride. But her image wants to split. If my eyes diverge, I think I see a simple, broken woman, sitting surrounded by the brokenness of life. Wrinkled by pain and aged by grief, her body

is twisted, but she is quiet, almost still as she fingers time's shattered fragments: dried green leaves and the memory of her mother; a pair of pink-rimmed glasses and a shard of driftwood; a bit of sand from the wrong beach and a reflection of the wrong girl; a ripped page from a tattered library book, and a pebble from a cliff at Yellowstone's Firehole River.

"Silly little things," I want to tell the broken woman. "Wreckages. Nothings. Everything is broken. Why did you save your eyes for the scriptures?"

Her hands hesitate on the damaged piece, almost as if trembling purposefully, and a smile ghosts across her elderly face. Her eyes flash green fire. Somehow all the little things have doubled.



Lane Twitchell  
*Bushwick Birds (Blown Away)*  
oil, polymers, wax, and sidewalk detritus on cut material  
mounted to panel  
48" x 48"  
2016

## Solomon the Wise

R. Bassett

*Finally [Solomon] said, “Both of you say this live baby is yours. Someone bring me a sword.” A sword was brought, and Solomon ordered, “Cut the baby in half! That way each of you can have part of [her].”*

—1 Kings 3:23–25

Mom remarried and moved out just after I turned six. To move is to choose (which none of us wanted to do), as remarry is to wary, or to worry. Like what I did the first night my brother and I stayed at Mom’s new house. Dad was alone. All alone. Burn. Reburn. So Mom drove me to his house to stay the night there. But I reworried I hurt her feelings, so Dad redrove me the ten minutes back. Four times. Back and forth. Marred, then remarred. Re– backwards is –er. Over and over. Redo. Redoer. To reseparate. That word sounds like a bad one. No, sounds sad. How to reword our new family form? Reform? Reformer? I wanted to remain with both parents instead of reshuttling for an hour; thinking it might be easier if I was cut in half.

# Christus

*Laura Craner*

As a child first, the ramp was  
forever. Walking, counting stars, planetgazing,  
still walking; music playing, missionaries talking.  
Your feet, eye-level, substantial and white, perfect  
toenails and rounded scars;  
My big heart and small  
hands reached out to touch You.



Adolescent next, early spring and crowded square  
And me alone meant surfing waves of tourists until I found  
an interesting one; that day a Jewish one.  
Their questions, sprinkling like April showers, made  
dappled testifiers of not just missionaries but me too.  
We sang, "As I Have Loved You." The Jews sang in Hebrew;  
Their tour stopped outside.  
Heart burning, tears running, I climbed the ramp in leaps  
And saw Your hands stretched out still,  
Like an embrace I wanted to fill.



Jaded then, that accidental night, I figured,  
looking down from the ramp,  
You knew I was there. Your words in music  
called like forever, but I just stopped in to  
get warm. It didn't matter. I'd seen it  
before: scarred feet firm, arms stretched wide, and, the



longer I waited, at this point, reproach in those eyes, maybe  
regret in those hands and that side. I didn't look up to find out.



Mother now, I find myself back, children in tow.  
Buttoned bench, light-streaming window, and You,  
waiting, at the top of the ramp, just like  
You do, scarred feet firm, arms stretched.  
Their eyes open wide, searching, seeing,  
Big hearts and small hands reaching. With them with you  
this is how I remember what it is that I know,  
what it was that I knew.

## The Holy Ghost in Melpomene's Closet

Elizabeth Garcia

*Of bodies chang'd to various forms, I sing.*

—Ovid

Before the black suits,  
before the string of pearls  
you will be in your bedroom slippers, steel woolling the pans.  
Your coveralls, your boots, mucking out stalls.  
Your garden gloves, your favorite shirt shrunk from the dryer,  
too tight or short to wear in public.

And later, after the cards, the wilted flowers,  
the casserole dishes returned somehow,  
and the chainsaw of your anger has dimmed  
to a distant hum,  
when the roots of your hair  
are clinging to your scalp in swirls,  
I will come to you then,  
I will gather you, like Orpheus,  
piece by piece, the joints and sinew,  
the shoulder, the back, a knee, a knee,  
all the bricks of your body, the cast iron  
of your guilt, until you are the empty boneyard,  
furrowed and dry, ready for rain.

# The Holy Ghost in Polyhymnia's Closet

Elizabeth Garcia

*"What you seek is seeking you."*

—Rumi

*Dear Holy (one?) I hope you are home for this.*

*Tell me the name of your name. For this*

*I am on my knees (though I am closed  
still. Bruised.) But I have come for this.*

Awake                the ears                of my ears,                open  
the eyes                of my eyes.                Hum. (For this?)

*For soldered vowels?) Give me groanings.  
(Shall I bloody my thumbs for this?)*

Empty                your heart                as a bucket.  
*Which syllables constitute a quorum for this?*

*It's true: I want pearly feathers. Something seismic.  
But I would be content in your penumbra.                Or this:*

remember                when you died?                Went down  
in the dark                of Buddha's                mother's                womb?                *For this:*

*not clemency. Not to be heard (I didn't  
believe). To utter. One wish.                Limn                for this.*

*(Limn, delete, limn, delete.)      Where is your  
sacred city? I will skirt it three times for this.*

To refrain      is not    to hold back—but repeat,  
repeat,      repeat.      Find a hymn    for this.

Remember      His oath.      *God, you are abundant:*  
*are you satisfied? I'm out of time for this.*

## Ajalon Moon

*S. E. Page*

Five kings fell when Joshua prayed first for Gibeon sun  
Then moonlight in the valley of Ajalon to stay slant and  
Still beam; freeze a span of time beyond its allotted measure.

No power of mine can stop the sky's wheeling fray, yet  
There are gloaming tides when I wish for an Ajalon moon—  
One last chance to meet you under the same kind of blue.

But stretched to shadows by pain, I understand now your leaving  
Was natural as sun death and daystar's rise; still, my heart can't  
Ever forgive the agony of that first gold-lit morning I realized

I would never see you again here. Give me an Ajalon moon!  
A slice of night where I might call out your name and know  
This broken valley will bring me back more than your echo.

## Grand Canyon, North Rim

*Terresa Wellborn*

*For my brother*

The canyon is in the pines,  
you find it there in sharps and flats,  
rush at the edge, a thousand  
improvisations of rain, needles, light fall.

You run the empty space between  
canyon mouth and sky, lungs  
heaving, sucking air.

When she left you,  
took your four boys,  
the sun burned your retinas,  
resurrecting a husk in its place.  
Beyond this, what wraiths?

The Edenic sky fading to a  
dim howl, hallucinations of love,  
reverberations of faces.  
You run still, bitterroot underfoot,  
canyoned cry of jay,  
thunder guttering at the cliff.

It all ends too quickly,  
this one short life.  
The thunder has stopped  
but the sound keeps coming  
out of the canyon.

## SHIFTING BOUNDARIES OF FEMINIST THEOLOGY: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Maxine Hanks

In April 1992, *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported that “three hours before . . . the Relief Society’s sesquicentennial [exhibit] was to open at the LDS Museum of Church History and Art, three quotes were removed” mainly because they “were just a little too sacred.”<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, these quotes referred to teachings in the original minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society. The quotes were: “the Society should move according to the ancient Priesthood”<sup>2</sup>; “Joseph Smith wanted to make us . . . a ‘kingdom of priestesses’”<sup>3</sup>; and the “sisters will be queens of queens and priestesses unto the most high God.”<sup>4</sup> These three quotes were removed and replaced by three statements about the Relief Society’s potential for service and blessings.<sup>5</sup> I saw this censorship as part of a larger historical trend going back 150 years, in which the Relief Society had been diminished, censored, or

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1. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “LDS Women’s Place? New Conflict Emerges,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1992, A10.

2. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Third Meeting of the Society,” *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 22, in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmith-papers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/19>.

3. Bathsheba W. Smith, “Relief Society Reports” [Pioneer Stake], *Woman’s Exponent*, July and August 1905, 14.

4. Eliza R. Snow, “An Address,” *Woman’s Exponent*, Sept. 15, 1873, 62.

5. Stack, “LDS Women’s Place?”

reinterpreted by male Church leaders. It had been diminished by conflicts over polygamy in 1843–44, then censored and disbanded by Brigham Young in 1845, then reinterpreted in the 1855 Church history, which rewrote excerpts from the R.S. minutes.<sup>6</sup>

For example, the Church history quoted the Relief Society minutes as saying, “I now turn the key in your behalf,”<sup>7</sup> whereas the actual quote was “I now turn the key to you in the name of God, and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time.”<sup>8</sup> The Church history also used the phrase “Delivering the keys of the priesthood to the church,”<sup>9</sup> yet the actual quote said, “Delivering the keys to the Society and to the church”<sup>10</sup> and “the keys of the kingdom are about to be given to them, that they may be able to detect every thing false—as well as to the Elders.”<sup>11</sup>

This tendency to rewrite Relief Society history continued from the 1850s into the 1990s. One conference talk delivered in 1992 stated that the “Prophet declared that the Relief Society was to receive instruction and

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6. Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 74.

7. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902), 4:607

8. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Sixth Meeting of the Society,” *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 40, in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/37>.

9. *History of the Church*, 4:604.

10. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Sixth Meeting of the Society,” 37, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/34>.

11. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Sixth Meeting of the Society,” 38, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/35>.



direction from the priesthood leaders who presided over their activities.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, the R.S. minutes described an institutional independence of Relief Society, where “Sisters elect a presiding officer to preside over them . . . [and] he [Joseph] would ordain them to preside over the Society—and let them preside just as the Presidency preside over the church.”<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, the museum curator for the 1992 Relief Society sesquicentennial exhibit, Marjorie Conder, explained, “In 1991, I tried to access the Relief Society minute book at the Church library, but it was inaccessible by every route I tried. It was easier to use the photocopy of a photocopy of a typescript I actually had in my hand than to get permission to see the original. And, if not for that photocopy, it would have been impossible to create the exhibit. Then, after I used quotes from the minute book, the exhibit came under severe fire. This rocked me to the core for years afterward. However, fifteen years later in 2007, I was able to use the actual Relief Society minute book on display for another exhibit that was built around thirty-three quotes from the minute book entitled ‘Something Extraordinary.’ And it really was extraordinary—the wheel had turned by that time.”<sup>14</sup>

This story illustrates a boundary shift between 1991 and 2007 regarding access and use of LDS historical documents like the original Relief Society minutes from being inaccessible to staff even for legitimate use in Church-sponsored projects to being openly available in official and widely public forms. The significance of this boundary shift can’t

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12. “The Relief Society and the Church,” Apr. 1992, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/1992/04/the-relief-society-and-the-church?lang=eng>.

13. “A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo,” *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, 7, in *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/4>.

14. Personal conversation with Marjorie Conder, who recounted this story in 2013. The minutes were available to the R.S. Presidency, and quoted in some Church publications, but not accessible to staff or members.

be overstated; new access to historical materials, including formerly restricted ones, has accelerated in the Church archives and online. (Another example is the minutes of the Council of Fifty, rarely seen by Church historians and unknown to the public, now being published in the *Joseph Smith Papers*.) We can't access everything in Church archives, but we have drastically more access than we had before.

This shift in access has affected women's history itself—from being limited or rewritten in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to publishing the original texts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The entire text of the original *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book* has been published by the Church in its DVD *Selected Collections from the Archives* (2002), online in *The Joseph Smith Papers* (2009), excerpted in the handbook *Daughters of My Kingdom* (2011), and fully published with annotated commentary in the book *The Relief Society: The First Fifty Years* (2016).<sup>15</sup>

This progress also reflects another shift in regard to the Relief Society, from being disempowered by changes in the 1840s and 1920s and 1970s to recovering its history since the 1970s. Mormon women's history was previously found only in limited articles, independent journals, and books, but the increasing accessibility and appearance of women's history and historical documents in Church projects and online since 2000 represents a shifting focus on women as more central, less marginal. Examples include the Women in Church History Research Guide at LDS.org and the Mormon Women's Studies Resource at Brigham Young University.<sup>16</sup>

The recovery of Mormon women's history is vital because women's authority and practices are recorded in their discourse. The Relief Society

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15. For access to the *Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book*, see <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book>.

16. Women in Church History Research Guide, [https://history.lds.org/article/women\\_in\\_church\\_history\\_research\\_guide?lang=eng](https://history.lds.org/article/women_in_church_history_research_guide?lang=eng); Mormon Women's Studies Resource, <https://sites.lib.byu.edu/mormonwomen>.

minutes were Mormon women's "Constitution and Law"—the official canon of women's authority, autonomy, organization, and priesthood.<sup>17</sup> Directly linked to section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants as further developing that revelation, plus containing the women's own inspiration, revelation, decisions, testimony, blessings, and practices, the Relief Society minutes functioned like a women's Doctrine and Covenants. It was revered as the governing document for Relief Society throughout the nineteenth century, with new minute books created for each local Relief Society adding to the canon. These minutes also will be published online.

Access to our Relief Society canon is just one boundary shift related to LDS women's discourse, authority, practices, and theology, which have waxed and waned at different times throughout two centuries of Mormon history. Policy changes have affected women's status in LDS religion in both positive and negative ways.

Yet, the Relief Society exists and operates within another context: that of women's theology or "feminist theology." This includes women's spirituality, spiritual practices, and religious experience, their views and expressions of God, their exercise of ministry, preaching, and writing about religion, interpretation of scripture, their recovery of women's religious history and theology, their reconsideration of religious tradition, critiques of male constructs and language, assertions in participation and authority, evaluations of gender in religion, exploration of women's status, identity, and potential, including motherhood and career.<sup>18</sup> These

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17. "A Record of the Organization, and Proceedings of The Female Relief Society of Nauvoo," 8, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/5>.

18. Maxine Hanks, "Preface," *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), vii–ix; Maxine Hanks, "Introduction," *Women and Authority*, xi–xxx. See also Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., "Preface," "Introduction," *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), vii–viii, xii–xiii, 1–16; Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack, eds., "Introduction," *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London: Routledge, 2003), xiv–xv, 4–7.

practices are abundant in LDS women's history, discourse, and activity from Kirtland to Nauvoo to Utah to the worldwide present.

I've described Mormon feminist theology as "revisionist theology," claiming that "Mormon theology, history, and doctrine need to be reevaluated in light of women's participation, resistance, and perspectives."<sup>19</sup> Mormon feminist theologians "examine how religion is gendered" ranging from ways they "reveal the feminine as inherent in Mormon theology" to considering "how gender is embedded in religious ideas and texts, how it's constructed . . . how religion shapes gender, how gender shapes religion."<sup>20</sup>

In reality, Mormon women have been exploring aspects of feminist theology in one way or another from the beginnings of the LDS Church to the present time.<sup>21</sup> The list of women who've engaged theology or explored women's status in the religion is endless, beginning with Lucy Mack Smith and Emma Hale Smith, Mary Whitmer and Elizabeth Whitney, Eliza R. Snow and Sarah Granger Kimball, Zina D. H. Young and Bathsheba W. Smith, Emmeline B. Wells and the *Woman's Exponent*, Susa Young Gates and Leah Widtsoe, the *Relief Society Magazine* and Amy Brown Lyman and Belle S. Spafford, feminists at *Dialogue* like Mary L. Bradford, and Martha S. Bradley; historians like Carol C. Madsen, Jill Mulvey Derr, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, or Claudia L. Bushman and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich at *Exponent II*, feminists at BYU like Reba Keele, Jan L. Tyler, Cecelia K. Farr, Gail Houston, and Valerie Hudson, or at Ricks College like myself; Sonia Johnson with MERA, and the Algie Ballif Forum; feminists at Sunstone like Peggy Fletcher and Susan Staker; feminists at MHA like Val Avery and Linda K. Newell, and *Journal of Mormon History* like Lavina Fielding Anderson and Martha

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19. Hanks, "Introduction," xxv–xxvi.

20. Maxine Hanks, "Maxine Hanks," in *Latter-day Dissent: At the Crossroads of Intellectual Inquiry and Ecclesiastical Authority*, edited by Philip Lindholm (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2010), 63–64.

21. Hanks, "Preface," vii–ix; Hanks, "Introduction," xi–xxx.

Taysom, groups like Pilgrimage, Mormon Women's Forum, and BYU Voice; online groups like ELWC and MFN, and internet blogs, podcasts like Feminist Mormon Housewives, Mormon Women Project, and Facebook groups.

The scope of Mormon feminist theology goes far beyond what we've realized or recovered in our history and Church practices. Yet, it is centrally present in our theology, doctrine, ministry, and Church structures, even if unrecognized. Having sought feminist theology since the 1970s, I see its centrality in my path and practice. So, I want to highlight a few boundary shifts in Mormon feminist theology over the past twenty-five years that were significant for me personally.

I saw 1990 as a pivotal year. A new general Relief Society presidency was called, and they were feminists: Elaine Jack, Chieko Okazaki, and Aileen Clyde. These women engaged an empowered presence in their office, sermons, and activities, in planning the Relief Society sesqui-centennial, and encouraging women's history. They modeled authentic voice and position. The "dream team," as we called them, represented a visible shift forward for women within the institution; they were doing feminism and feminist theology without using the labels.

I thought we should own the terms "feminism" and "feminist theology" since Mormon women had been doing both all along. So, I began compiling a book about them. In 1990, I called for feminist theology or "Thea-logy" in the *Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly*<sup>22</sup>; and in 1991, I presented a paper, "Toward a Mormon Feminist Theology," on a panel about "The Current State of Mormon Theology" at Sunstone. Peter Appleby from the University of Utah concluded, "The new horizon in Mormon theology is clearly feminist theology."<sup>23</sup> In 1990, my anthology

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22. Maxine Hanks, "Emerging Mormon Thea-logy," *Mormon Women's Forum Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 15–16, available at <http://66.147.244.239/~girlsgo6/mormonwomensforum/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/MWFFVol1Num4.pdf>.

23. "The Current State of Mormon Theology," panel discussion, Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, Aug. 9, 1991; speakers: Lowell Durham, Peter Appleby,

*Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* was advertised in the Signature Books catalogue, along with *Strangers in Paradox*, a book that also engaged feminist theology (without using the term). *Women and Authority* reclaimed “feminism” and “feminist theology” in name and practice as truly Mormon, inherent in our own tradition; it also reclaimed the word “priesthood” as related to LDS women.

In 1990, these were scary moves because at that time, although many LDS women were practicing and writing feminism, very few feminists were willing to use the words “feminism” or “priesthood” in public or print. The excommunication of Sonia Johnson in 1979 had stigmatized Mormon feminism like a shroud of shame in the ’80s, creating an invisible boundary or veil of fear. I felt we needed to confront that fear and de-stigmatize Mormon feminism as a collective. Jan Tyler told me that *Women and Authority* vindicated Sonia, yet I would add that it vindicated all Mormon feminists by owning feminism and crossing the boundary of fear. Afterward, more women and men were talking about “feminism” in public, as if we had always done it.

Unfortunately, the Church’s boundary differed from ours. In 1990–93, warnings about feminism arose in Church talks and I was advised by leaders and members not to talk about feminism in public. It was okay to be feminist, just not in public. Since I was editing a book on Mormon feminist theology, I knew I’d be crossing that boundary. After the book appeared in 1993, I met with a Church authority to discuss concerns—in an attempt to bridge an institutional boundary, the gap between men and women, leaders and members. He explained that feminism imposed secular ideas on the Church, which would never be accepted by the Brethren. I explained that we were not importing secular feminism, we were recovering Mormon feminism—our own tradition. He was firm that discussing LDS feminism in public was

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James Faulconer, Richard Sherlock, Blake Ostler, Mark Gustavson, Paul Toscano, Janice Allred, Maxine Hanks.

wrong and advised me to stop. I knew I had to continue. It was a matter of conviction. The boundary against LDS feminism was based on fear, not truth. We didn't bridge much; we failed to find common ground. I shared some of the blame because we both were defensive and didn't really hear each other. That same week, Elder Packer gave his now famous talk warning of three "dangers" facing the Church: feminists, scholars, and gays, who signified the secular.<sup>24</sup> His concern was protecting the Church from secular intrusions on sacred space. Yet we weren't imposing the secular, we were excavating the sacred and using secular tools to understand the sacred better—to see what we hadn't seen within our own religious tradition.

Soon after, some of us were excommunicated in September 1993. Much has been written about that event, but in reality, it was simple: excommunication resulted from fear, of each other and of the secular intruding on the sacred. Fortunately, in some ways, we've come a long way since 1993.

In 2000, the Church's treatment of scholars began to shift as the Church began to publicly embrace objective scholarship, including non-LDS scholarly work, sponsor Mormon studies conferences, and undertake work on the Joseph Smith Papers Project.<sup>25</sup> Since that time,

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24. Boyd K. Packer, "All-Church Coordinating Council Meeting," May 18, 1993, available at <http://www.lds-mormon.com/face.shtml>.

25. For example: 2002: Latter-day Saint Council on Mormon Studies formed to sponsor lectures, conferences, fellowships, professorships, and created the Howard W. Hunter Chair for Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University School of Religion. 2003: BYU cosponsored conference at Yale University Divinity School, "God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History." 2004: the LDSCMS sponsored a conference on academic study of Mormonism, "Positioning Mormonism in Religious Studies and American History" at Claremont Graduate University School of Religion. 2005: BYU cosponsored "The Worlds of Joseph Smith" at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. 2005: The LDS Church and the LDSCMS cosponsored "Joseph Smith and the Prophetic Tradition" the second conference on Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University.

major progress has occurred in the Church's public engagement with scholarship and feminism. For example, feminist theology of the LDS Mother in Heaven was surveyed in *BYU Studies* in 2011.<sup>26</sup>

Why did this shift occur? Likely, several reasons: a maturation of scholarly and feminist work happening inside the Church; non-LDS scholars showing more interest in Mormon studies and historical documents; access to Church archival documents increasing in-house and online; changing times and culture wherein feminism became a given for women, the cultural norm; and the influence of the internet with its Mormon blogs, feminism, and candid Mormon history. Even excommunication confronted fears as dissenters and leaders faced each other. Conflicts between leaders and scholars/feminists in the 1990s crossed so many boundaries, it took a decade to complete the "purge of 1993," paradoxically closing that chapter of conflicted relations and opening the way for a new chapter in relationships after 2000.<sup>27</sup> All of this helped shift boundaries after 2000.

In 2007, Bruce Hafen wrote an *Ensign* article entitled "Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners," noting that "For too long in the Church, the men have been the theologians while the women have been the Christians. To be equal partners, each should be both a theologian *and* a Christian."<sup>28</sup> Previously, in 1993, Hafen, unlike other

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26. See David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "'A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 71–97, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/mother-there-survey-historical-teachings-about-mother-heaven>.

27. The excommunications of 1993 continued through the 1990s, with Janice Allred, Brent Metcalf, and David Wright, ending with Margaret Toscano in 2000, which completed what began as the purge of the 1990s

28. Bruce C. Hafen, "Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners," *Ensign*, Aug. 2007, 24–29, available at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2007/08/crossing-thresholds-and-becoming-equal-partners?lang=eng>.



male leaders, had acknowledged the validity of at least some feminisms.<sup>29</sup> I saw his *Ensign* article as a major shift forward in positive attitude toward feminist theology. This progress was evidenced in 2009 when the Church published the Relief Society minutes online—the visible return of women’s canon and feminist theology.

This decade, from 2000–2011, reflected an institutional shift from fear to embrace, inaccessibility to availability, censorship to transparency. Topics we couldn’t talk about in public and documents we couldn’t see ten years earlier were going online. Also, beginning in 2009, President Julie B. Beck gave a series of talks about women’s access to priesthood power and authority, using words like “ministry” and “priesthood” applied to women and describing their authority as parallel with male priesthood quorums.<sup>30</sup> I noticed this because as general Relief Society

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29. See also Bruce C. Hafen, “Teach Ye Diligently and My Grace Shall Attend You,” BYU Annual University Conference, Aug. 25, 1993, [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-c-hafen\\_teach-ye-diligently-grace-shall-attend](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-c-hafen_teach-ye-diligently-grace-shall-attend); and Bruce C. Hafen, “Women, Feminism, and the Blessings of the Priesthood,” Ricks College devotional, Jan. 10, 1984. The same address was given at BYU Women’s Conference, Mar. 29, 1985, though the title has been changed on the BYU Speeches website: “Women, Feminism, and the Blessings of the Gospel,” [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-c-hafen\\_women-feminism-blessings-gospel/](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-c-hafen_women-feminism-blessings-gospel/).

30. See, for example, Julie B. Beck, “Relief Society: A Sacred Work,” Oct. 2009, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2009/10/relief-society-a-sacred-work?lang=eng>; Julie B. Beck, “Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society,” Oct. 2010, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2010/10/daughters-in-my-kingdom-the-history-and-work-of-relief-society?lang=eng>; Julie B. Beck, “What I Hope My Granddaughters (and Grandsons) Will Understand about Relief Society,” Oct. 2011, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2011/10/what-i-hope-my-granddaughters-and-grandsons-will-understand-about-relief-society?lang=eng>; and Julie B. Beck, “The Vision of Prophets Regarding Relief Society: Faith, Family, Relief,” Apr. 2012, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/the-vision-of-prophets-regarding-relief-society-faith-family-relief?lang=eng>; and Julie B. Beck, “Why We Are Organized into Quorums and Relief Societ-

president she was engaging terms, ideas, and boundaries that a decade earlier were dangerous or forbidden for feminists.

In 2012, another boundary shifted when a member of the “September Six” returned to the Church. Like the shroud of shame in the 1980s, the clouds of censure, rejection, and mistrust in the 1990s loomed like an impenetrable storm. Again, I felt compelled and called to challenge that barrier in 2012, as I had 1992—crossing a line of excommunication and alienation. Someone had to cross that boundary and close that gap; I did it not just for myself, but on behalf of others. A higher wisdom required it. The empowering truths in LDS theology and ministry, including feminist theology, deserved to be recovered and embraced. The previous boundaries imposed against feminist theology were dissolving and truly have shifted in the past twenty-five years, although many younger Mormons and critics don’t see that transition.

In the 1990s we couldn’t talk about feminist theology or women’s relationship to priesthood in public without censure or threat of discipline. Today, we can do feminist theology by name and in public. We can argue and debate it, arm wrestle with each other, and publish it. Even Church leaders high and low are talking about women’s theology and relationship to priesthood. Members are advancing feminist theology in an explosion of articles, books, blogs, and groups like Feminist Mormon Housewives and Ordain Women.

Unfortunately, in 2014 we saw the return of Church discipline after some OW feminists attempted to enter the men’s priesthood session on Temple Square. Church discipline asserted a boundary in response to dissent that challenged that boundary publicly, physically, and theologically. The Church reiterated its boundary in a First Presidency statement on June 28, 2014, saying that “Only men are ordained to serve in priesthood offices.” The statement added that “[m]embers are always free to ask . . . questions and earnestly seek greater understanding” but

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ies,” BYU devotional address, Jan. 17, 2012, [https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/julie-b-beck\\_why-we-are-organized-into-quorums-and-relief-societies](https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/julie-b-beck_why-we-are-organized-into-quorums-and-relief-societies).

not to act “in clear, open, deliberate public opposition to the Church or its faithful leaders, or persisting, after receiving counsel, in teaching false doctrine.”<sup>31</sup> This also implied that only men can attend the general conference session designated as “priesthood meeting.” Ordain Women had challenged these boundaries and as a result Church discipline of Kate Kelly and other OW members enacted the boundary on their membership.

Personally, I felt no call to cross those theological boundaries (of requesting ordination to male orders and offices or attending men’s priesthood meeting) since my view of women’s ordination differed; however, I cared very much about the women who did, so I supported them personally and pastorally.

Other than this boundary battle about women’s ordination, progress has moved forward for scholars and feminists since 2000. However, not so for LGBT members. Recently, an entirely new punitive act of exclusion was asserted in the November 2015 Church policy for gay couples and their children, which views them as apostate and thus unable to receive Church ordinances. This new boundary has generated intense suffering, concerns, dissent, conflicts, and exits among members. I felt called to cross this boundary—to minister to gay members and their families as part of the body of Christ (as I minister to members of Ordain Women). As members struggle with this new boundary, or leave the Church, it’s easy to forget that such dilemmas existed the past and are always engaged in the present. There is no avoiding the challenge.

However, coexisting alongside this new harsh boundary against gay members are other statements that demonstrate that some positive shifts continue forward in feminist theology.

In 2014, Elder Oaks said, “We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings,

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31. Statement of The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, Jun. 28, 2014, <https://www.lds.org/prophets-and-apostles/june-first-presidency-statement?lang=eng>.

but what other authority can it be? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a priesthood function. The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church organization under the direction of one who holds the keys of the priesthood. Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.”<sup>32</sup> This again signifies a shift forward for feminist theology, making points similar to ones Michael Quinn and I raised in 1992.<sup>33</sup>

So, in closing, what have we learned, or what have I learned, through some of this boundary shifting? I’ve learned that Church boundaries do shift, as do our personal boundaries. Progress is needed, yet progress is not simply about pushing forward, but higher—unfolding greater wisdom and inclusion. We have simultaneous boundaries of progress and contraction, but if we see only the contraction or only the progress, we’re not seeing the whole picture. For some members, boundaries signify a need to make an extreme either/or choice to be all-in or all-out, to conform or reject, stay or leave, one or the other. For others, boundaries signify an invitation to practice engagement on a case-by-case basis as a personal spiritual discipline, discerning which boundary one will honor and which boundary one will violate or cross. Tension or dissonance between personal boundaries and group boundaries is normal in every group or organization; tension is an inescapable reality. Our individual paths, identities, and ethics may overlap with the group or may depart

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32. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” Apr. 2014, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

33. See Hanks, “Introduction,” xi-xxx; Hanks, “Sister Missionaries and Authority,” 315–34; and D. Michael Quinn, “Mormon Women Have Had the Priesthood Since 1843,” 365–410, all found in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

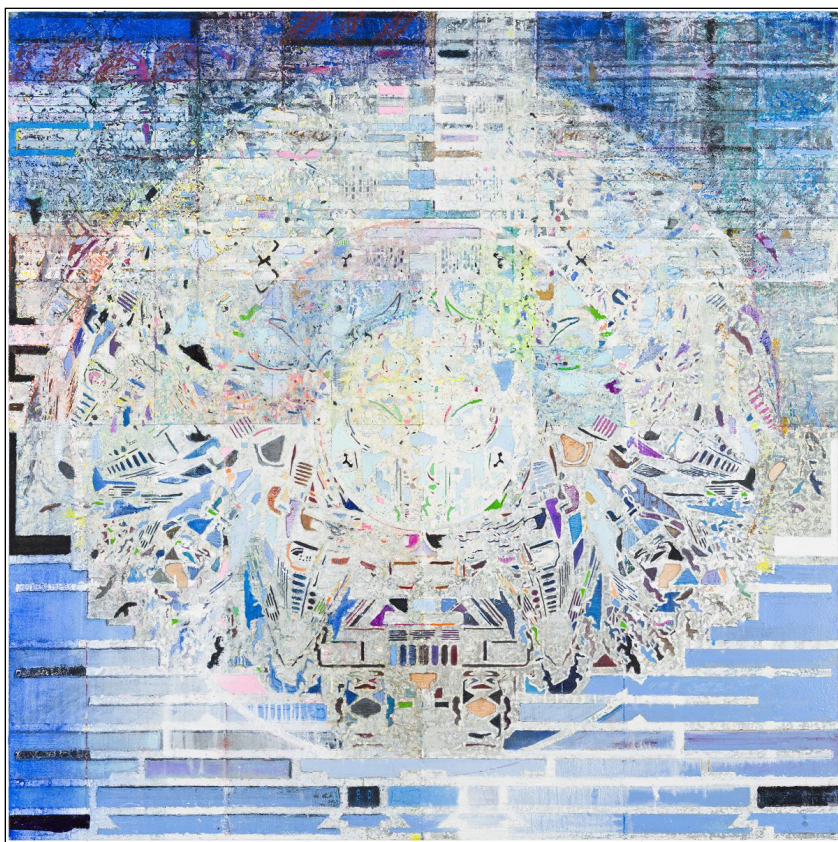
sharply, and we all have to live and work with that, and give each other permission to do so. A boundary is a signifier of choice, yet it's not a true choice unless you have real freedom to consider both options—the agency to choose either one—because sometimes the right choice is to cross a boundary, violate it, and other times the right choice is to honor it. I think the most crucial issue is not whether we cross a boundary or honor it, but whether that decision is truly our own—and whether we can give each other the space to navigate these boundaries and narratives individually.

We are all continually making and changing boundaries in our decisions, personal ethics, and identities. As I wrote in 1992, it's “not about a power struggle, but about finding identity. . . . We shift and choose what we believe in many moments of personal revelation and choices, continually identifying what we will reject and retain of our own upbringing, culture, and theology. The challenge is to keep these as personal decisions, rather than surrender our voice to another.”<sup>34</sup>

So today, yesterday, and looking forward to the future, I still see this as the most crucial issue facing members of the Church and former members: our personal agency to discern our own ethical boundaries, and distinguish truth from error in our history, theology, doctrine, worship, culture, practice, and policies. Our ability and need to engage boundaries or cross them, to honor them or reject them, to change our view or position without punishment from each other, is a sign of our divine agency. We have been given this gift from a wise God so that we may decide for ourselves what we will do as we strive to refine and improve both our religion and ourselves.

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34. Hanks, “Introduction,” xxviii.



Lane Twitchell  
*Century's End*  
oil, polymers, and wax on cut material mounted to panel  
60" x 60"  
2016

# WHEN FEMINISTS EXCOMMUNICATE

Mette Ivie Harrison

If you're aware of social media, you probably saw a post going around last week about Kim Kardashian. Some feminist called Kim out for posing nude and calling it "feminist." No, the feminist insisted, it's not feminist just because you said it is. It's just recycling the old sexist stuff and pretending that because you're in charge, it's OK now. If the women are getting paid for it, then it's all right? Of course it isn't.

And a couple of years before that, it was Miley Cyrus being taken down by Sinéad O'Connor because she was allowing herself to be degraded by putting herself in a music video with a disgusting sexist who was also making Miley a ton of money. Sinéad promised Miley that she would regret this later in life and offered her advice from an older, wiser perspective: to have more respect for herself and her body.

These are only two examples of the feminism wars currently going on. And I remember participating in the war. I cheered Sinéad O'Connor and re-posted her letter to Miley. I was disgusted by Miley's actions and considered her a deluded teenager who was being used by the men around her. Only now, it seems maybe it wasn't quite that simple an equation. I'm not trying to either glorify Miley or excuse her here. My point is that there seems to be a particular brand of feminism which is the "right" brand and which feels self-righteous enough to go around pointing the finger at all the other kinds of feminism and telling them that they aren't "right." Women having power isn't enough. They have to have the "right" kind of power. They have to do it in the "right" way, the feminist way, the equality kind of way.

Do you remember the feminist backlash against *Twilight* and against its Mormon creator, Stephenie Meyer? You may also recall that the



backlash was a hundred times worse against the women who loved *Fifty Shades of Grey* and against its creator, E. L. James. These two women wrote about female characters who find power in their relationships with the men in their lives. They wrote primarily to female audiences. They made a ton of money doing it. But they didn't do it the "right" way. They just fell back on all the old stereotypes about men and women. They weren't the "right" kind of feminists.

It reminds me of a former friend of mine who wrote an angry comment on one of my *Huffington Post* essays saying that I wasn't a "real" Mormon anymore. Who decides who is a real Mormon? Well, there's an official process for this in Mormonism, an authority who decides if you get kicked out. But being a "real" feminist or not is fraught with many more complications. There is no council of proper feminists. Nor is there an appeal process if you think you've been treated badly.

And yet, I am as guilty of pointing the finger at other women and saying they aren't feminists as anyone else. I am still processing the reaction to a couple of my feminist posts at *The Huffington Post*, one called "If We Don't Feel Oppressed, Are We?" and another "What It's Like to Be a Mormon Woman."<sup>1</sup> The first one I wrote in an attempt to speak to Mormon women who complain that, since they don't feel oppressed, the fault must be in the women who do feel oppressed, or not in the system itself, but in the local male authorities (leadership roulette). I'm afraid that what I did instead was to make women feel as if they weren't "real" women or that their way of finding power and wielding it wasn't "real."

In the second essay, I meant to describe what it would be like for a non-Mormon to slip into the body of a Mormon woman and what differences might surprise them. I'm afraid that it came off as condem-

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1. "If We Don't Feel Oppressed, Are We?," *The Huffington Post*, Jul. 22, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mette-ivie-harrison/if-we-dont-feel-oppressed\\_b\\_7834070.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mette-ivie-harrison/if-we-dont-feel-oppressed_b_7834070.html); "What It's Like to Be a Mormon Woman," *The Huffington Post*, Sept. 29, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mette-ivie-harrison/mormon-woman\\_b\\_8208328.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mette-ivie-harrison/mormon-woman_b_8208328.html).



natory and even mocking, as if I were saying that the habits of being a Mormon woman are ridiculous and outdated and that our modesty habits are silly.

I realized after reading some very angry reactions from traditional Mormon women that I had made them feel very much the way that I felt when I read a statistical analysis of the attitudes of working men toward working women. The report castigated women who choose to stay at home because it makes their husbands statistically more likely to treat women badly in the workplace. I felt I was being blamed for being a “bad” feminist and choosing what was right for my life, which was, in my opinion, staying home with my children. All of the sexist men in the world were my fault because I wasn’t working, or so it seemed.

The reality is that if you look at a long list of women who have used their own power in their own lives, you get a wide range of choices. Think about the following. Do they count as “real” feminists?

Jane Austen?

Harriet Beecher Stowe?

Emma Watson?

Beyoncé?

Taylor Swift?

Ruth Bader Ginsburg?

Gloria Steinem?

Chieko Okazaki?

Kate Kelly?

Neylan McBaine?

Marjorie Pay Hinckley?

Bonnie Oscarson?

Who has the right to decide which of these women count as real feminists and which do not? Do any of us?

When I was in graduate school writing a dissertation on a forgotten woman author of eighteenth-century Germany, I was told on multiple occasions that I wasn't feminist enough. Why?

First, I had changed my name when I married. My decision was made after months of careful consideration. I could see no real way in which I could take my mother's name. Her last name was, after all, her father's, and on and on forever. I could only choose between keeping my father's name (with whom I had a very strained relationship) and taking my husband's (who helped empower me in many ways). I chose to take my husband's name.

Second, I got pregnant when I was in graduate school. On purpose. And planned to alter my career aspirations to care for my child.

Third, I was writing about a woman writer (Sophie von La Roche) who had eight children and, after her husband's death, supported them financially with her writing—which was all about traditional girls empowering themselves with traditional femininity.

Fourth, I knitted in class.

Fifth, I was a Mormon. One of my professors, Elaine Showalter, once told me that the greatest cause of women's oppression was religion and it was the first thing one had to give up to be a feminist.

Sixth, I read and wrote romance novels, which were the most repetitive and unliterary and repressive of all genres.

So for a long time, I wasn't sure I counted as a "feminist." While I was busily writing young adult novels with "strong female characters" to the ever-growing audience of young adult and adult female readers, raising three daughters to question stereotypes of femininity outside and inside of Mormonism, I tried to find other words for my ideas about gender non-conformity.

About a year or so ago, I had an online conversation with another YA author in which she insisted that everyone really was feminist and

we should all just admit it. I said that I had long had trouble with the term “feminist” and wasn’t sure what she meant by it at all. She said that feminist just means that you believe men and women are equal. When I asked her what equal means, she stopped responding. This seems to happen a lot because people imagine that “equality” is a simple term and that I am being argumentative in asking for a definition. But I actually think that defining equality is very difficult—perhaps even impossible.

Does “equality” mean:

- Equal pay for equal work?
- Equal treatment under the law?
- Equal treatment by the health care system?
- Equal opportunity in education?
- In military combat?
- Free access to birth control?
- Alimony payments?
- Shared custody of children in a divorce?

That is to say, is equality ignoring physical differences in men and women? Or is it trying to ameliorate them? Is it believing that men and women are essentially the same? Or seeing them as essentially different and in need of different assistance?

I am concerned about the ways in which I see patriarchy swallow up the demands of feminism and use them against women. Each time we gain something, it is turned in the service of the patriarchy. I’m thinking of things like women starring in more television shows—but what kinds of roles are they given? I’m even thinking of something as basic to American political white feminism as abortion, which has become a new kind of oppression for some women who are forced into abortions by the very men who are abusing them sexually.

The reality is that there isn't just one kind of feminism that serves all women equally well. I want to talk about two types of feminism, with the understanding that these are not the only kinds of feminism but that they are two opposing kinds and are at work frequently in Mormonism. The first kind of feminism is one I call "American political white feminism." The second I call "French feminism."

American political white feminism is, as a male friend of mine described it, feminism that demands men and women are the same in every way that matters. It denies the body and it denies traditional femininity as having any value. Male virtues tend to be the ones that all should aspire to. This means that women who are more masculine tend to get more power and women who are traditionally feminine are sometimes mocked or pitied. If you want to have power, you just have to act more masculine. Stop apologizing, stop wearing makeup and dressing in provocative clothing. Stop having children and changing your name when you marry. Stop staying home as a child caregiver. Get a job and continue to climb the ladder of the corporate world until you reach the glass ceiling and can break it open. Don't let men talk down to you. Call them out on sexism. Be aggressive. Point out when you're being treated badly simply because you're a woman.

But French feminism—and I'm using that term a little loosely here, I admit—is a feminism in which traditionally feminine qualities are applauded and valued. The female body and its cycles are spoken of openly, written about in artistic ways, drawn, and sculpted. Femininity is applauded in male bodies as well as in female ones. There is no rule about who is allowed to be feminine and who isn't. Makeup, soft voices, childbearing, alluring clothing, feminine mystique—all are part of femininity and are treated as worthy of investigation and equal treatment as traditionally male qualities such as power and aggression.

When I first heard about French feminism, I thought that it fit well within Mormonism and our ideas of a Heavenly Mother who embodies divinely feminine qualities, and Eve, who took the fruit because she

understood the need for mortal life with its pain and was willing to be the vessel of the human race. But French feminism (and traditional Mormon feminism) are not without problems. As many before me have pointed out, this feminism can simply reify the polarity between men and women. It can feel like a prison to women who do not fit into traditional feminine modes and it seems to emphasize the body above all else.

Indeed, I could argue that the early days of the Relief Society were very much along the lines of French feminism, with separate spheres for male and female spiritual work. It has only been correlation that has put women in a subordinate position to male priesthood authority. Perhaps. Or perhaps it is correlation that has caused us to reconsider the value of separate spheres in the first place. Do we want to go back to separate spheres or do we need to find another model entirely? And what might that new and different model look like?

Let's go back to American political white feminism, which has been criticized much lately for its lack of intersectionality, or the desire to include women of color and transgender women. When I was talking online about this speech last week, one of my friends said in a parting comment meant to inspire me, "Crush patriarchy." All I could think of was that it was a particularly patriarchal thing to say. War-like metaphors and the goal of crushing a political structure are masculine ways to think and interact in the world. If we, as women and feminists, are trying to crush patriarchy, aren't we just falling back into patriarchy by assuming that the only power to be had is masculine power? How can we imagine a system outside of patriarchy when our dream of success is so enmeshed in patriarchal views of the world?

In conclusion, let me talk about Mormon feminism. There are many strains of Mormon feminism currently at work:

- Ordain Women
- Let Women Pray

- Heavenly Mother feminists
- Mother Eve feminists
- Mormon historians excavating Mormon women's history

And then there are women within the Church who would never think of themselves as “feminists” (because that is a dirty word) but who regularly use their power (dare we call it priesthood?) to bless the lives of others, male and female, around them. Is one of these kinds of feminism better than the others?

I am hoping that there is some way that we can find it within ourselves to listen more to other women with their own diverse ways of being feminist, even if they don't call themselves feminists at all. I am hoping that we stop excommunicating each other for being “not feminist enough” and try instead to celebrate women around us whom we find worthy of celebration, in all their different wonders.

In doing so, I hope to make feminism more inclusive and more affirming. The very idea that someone else's idea of right living in the world as a woman is too small and needs to be bigger is surely one of the most masculine ways of seeing the world—and one of the least useful. Instead of proving who is best in some weird phallic contest that makes no sense for women anyway, let's invite everyone who wishes to join and learn even from those who don't call themselves feminists about ways to be women, to have power, and to act out our own desires in the world.

In the end, I find myself turning back to the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, whom I studied in graduate school in perhaps the most sexist institution that has ever existed, Princeton University. When I went to Princeton from Brigham Young University, I imagined I was entering an elite, liberal bastion of education where there would be no more sexism and no more assumptions about what women could or couldn't do—or should or shouldn't do.

Instead, I found that there were *no* tenured female faculty members in our department. When asked why not, the professors told us with all

sincerity that there simply weren't any women *on the planet* who were qualified to teach at Princeton. And so they were going to develop them in-house. There were three assistant professors who were women while I was at Princeton. All of them left after experiencing some terrible form of sexism from the other professors, who continually told them that their work on women writers wasn't worthy of Princeton University. I was told I could not do my dissertation on an obscure female writer unless I compared her to the greatest male German writer of all time, Goethe. Of the twenty greatest works of German literature we were tested on for our candidacy, none were written by women. And when I was in a class on German Romanticism by the Dean of the Graduate School and asked him why there were no women on the list, he said we didn't have "time" for minor writers.

Back then, I hated Theodor Adorno's insistence on critique. He refused to endorse any political party or any candidate. He refused to describe what a utopia would look like. He did this because he still felt he was enmeshed in the old system and anything he did to try to point to a new one would be tainted. I find myself in my older years feeling very much like Adorno as I try to describe a new feminism. I criticize more than I support any one system. Which one is right? They are all wrong. But they each have things to teach us about who we are and about what might come after (if I may end with such a religious image) this world is washed away.



Lane Twitchell  
*Cross of Smog*  
(glut mandala #2)  
oil, polymers, and wax on cut material mounted to panel  
36" x 36"  
2016



# MORMON WOMEN AND THE ANATOMY OF BELONGING

Neylan McBaine

I'd like to start by sharing two stories: the experiences of two different women, both raised in the Church and fully claiming to belong to the global sisterhood of Mormon women. The first came in the form of an email comment I received while I was a guest on a local radio show about a year ago:

As a forty-four-year-old stay-at-home mom, I am sorely tempted to blame my LDS culture for significantly narrowing my life choices. My youngest of five children entered first grade two months ago. I'm home today using craft paint to fix the dings in my fall-themed pottery and planning my lavish Christmas decorations on Pinterest. I'm mad. How did I get here? I guess I have to own my choices and stop playing victim. Yes, I was strongly socialized to choose the path that I did. Yet, I have friends . . . *who managed to pursue a professional course that I now envy.* [These friends mention] the powerful female role models they had at home. I think my biggest regret is not being that role model now for my four daughters.

The second story I draw from my personal experience being the daughter of a professional opera singer. My mother sang as a soloist at the Metropolitan Opera the whole time I was growing up and had an illustrious tenure at the San Francisco Opera before I was born. One time I was asking her about her youth and how her career got started, and she told me a remarkable story. She told me about singing a solo recital at Brigham Young University soon after she had graduated from there and was teaching music at a local junior high school. This was about 1965. She was starting to audition as a soloist and getting some

attention at this time, and she would soon move to California to dedicate herself to a solo career. She was unmarried. After the recital at BYU, Hugh Nibley came up to her to congratulate her on a job well done. “But Sister Bybee,” said the towering campus hero, “how do you expect to be able to continue with this singing and be a wife and mother? You know it will be impossible to do both, so you should give it up soon.” Stunned, I looked at my mother. “Wow, Mom, what did you say? I mean, this was Hugh Nibley!” My mom just gave me a surprised glance and dismissively said, “Well, I ignored him of course!”

Why my mother, in 1965 under the disapproving eye of the likes of Hugh Nibley and presumably others, was able to be so confident and clear in the path that was right for her is a mystery I’ve sought to unpack my whole adult life. What is the difference between my mother and the woman from the radio show who, despite several decades of presumed social liberalization, found herself socialized into a path that was not authentically hers?

Both my mother and the woman from the radio show define themselves as “Mormon women.” Speaking for my mother, at least, those are the first and most important descriptors of who she is, as they are for most of the more than three hundred women we’ve interviewed for the Mormon Women Project, a collection of interviews with LDS women from around the world published at [mormonwomen.com](http://mormonwomen.com). Those descriptors provide a beloved binding force that holds together millions of women around the world. They appeal to the essential human need to belong to a community, a tribe, with whom we have things in common and from whom we expect mutual respect. Our community goes beyond just a social club, though, as President Linda Burton reminded us at a recent general women’s session. We “belong” to a divine sisterhood, circumnavigated by a range of binding factors—from as little as a shared knowledge of Primary songs to the dedication demanded by

temple covenants.<sup>1</sup> So even though these two qualifiers—“woman” and “Mormon”—are potent definers of belonging for many of us, they are also remarkably broad in today’s contemporary Church: a new convert in Zimbabwe is just as much a “Mormon woman” as a mom of five in Draper, Utah. And so I am interested in what defines “belonging” to this worldwide sisterhood. What shape does belonging take? What are its essential parts? How do those parts function together? What parts are extraneous? What is the heart of belonging, and what is the appendix that can be removed without damaging the whole?

In looking at the definition of Mormon womanhood, it seems to me that the boundaries of that community have shifted over the past almost two hundred years from being initially proscribed by the institution, in the early days of the Nauvoo Relief Society, to essentially being defined by the Mormon women themselves in today’s modern global Church. Let me explain what I mean. Let’s start with a look at the Nauvoo Relief Society, established 174 years ago. The organization acted as a sub-community within boundaries of Mormon womanhood, one to which a woman applied for membership. The recently published *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History* revealed to me a previously unknown detail about membership in the inaugural Relief Society: new members had to receive the endorsement of two peers, testifying to their virtue and worthiness, before they could be admitted into the organization. In other words, the boundaries of Mormon womanhood were drawn institutionally around a tight subset of women whose behavior was morally uncompromised. Learning about this recommendation process made me uncomfortable because it feels antagonistic to the welcoming spirit of Relief Society gatherings many of us experience today. It’s as if the early Mormon women were saying, “This is what belonging is. This is what it looks like.” A standard of virtue and morality was the essential element

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1. Linda K. Burton, “I Was a Stranger,” Apr. 2016, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2016/04/i-was-a-stranger?lang=eng>.

that gave the sisterhood its shape at that point. I can understand the institutional boundary-drawing better when I put it in the context of temple preparation—the women were preparing the subset to receive and perform ordinances, so membership in the Relief Society was then more like receiving a temple recommend than entering the embrace of a community of fellow sinners, but the Nauvoo Relief Society provides the starkest example of Mormon womanhood being strictly defined by a set of behavioral markers.

Although the recommendation process was not continued with the reorganization of the Relief Society in Utah, early-twentieth-century Mormon womanhood had its own unofficial behavioral markers for establishing belonging in the sisterhood. For example, the behavioral practices around motherhood replaced peer recommendations as ways to gauge a woman's tether to the sisterhood's gravitational pull. Even though Mormon womanhood had increased in numbers since the Nauvoo days, Church membership was still homogeneous enough that institutional and cultural markers drew the boundaries around acceptable belonging. Mid-century American women stayed home with children, canned food, and made quilts, sometimes basing their actions on doctrinal principles but mostly out of tacitly agreed-upon cultural markers of what made a "good" Mormon woman. The consistency of those practices among a majority of women created a sense of belonging and drew a boundary between those who participated in these same behavioral markers and those who didn't. Similar to the Nauvoo Relief Society, women themselves seem to be the best police of who is within the boundaries and who is outside, even though the twentieth-century version of inclusion was less official than the nineteenth century's.

So, moving into the twenty-first century, who is determining the boundaries today? Who today is defining what belonging to the mainstream sisterhood of Mormon women looks like? I propose that the growth of the Church and the rapid pace of social, technological, and economic progress over the last several decades has produced a new era

of boundary-drawing, one in which belonging can be defined by fewer and fewer universal behavioral practices across the group, and instead belonging is simply claimed by the members of the group themselves when they enter that most universal of covenants: baptism. The new convert from Zimbabwe belongs to the sisterhood of Mormon women because she is a woman and because she has made baptismal covenants. Those may be the only common denominators she has with the mom of five in Draper, but the sense of belonging comes from their willingness to embrace and be embraced, not exclusively from their participation in practices institutionally deemed appropriate for female members of the Church.

But perhaps this vision of belonging as simply a willingness to embrace and be embraced is a little too futuristic; maybe that transition isn't quite yet complete, where sisterhood is a choice we nurture to make the diversity of our membership thrive. Perhaps there are some of us who still feel like we need to participate in social or behavioral markers in order to be in the fold: we need to be married, we need to have multiple children, we need to not have too successful of a career, we need to dress demurely, we need to have our lives together and functional. In reality, even though we are theoretically widening our embrace to expand the boundaries of belonging in the twenty-first century, many of us do still feel a bright line between being "in" and "out." So let me restate my thesis about the mainstream Mormon woman's choice to belong: In my observation, I have seen a pattern in that women who have healthy, happy relationships with the Relief Society and Church institution as a whole are those who have set firm boundaries for themselves around what it means to be a Mormon woman. They have acknowledged that they will disappoint someone, they will make waves, they will not live up to a behavioral ideal, and they are okay with that. They have internalized the idea that the baptismal covenant keeps them tethered to other women, and they have limited their commitments to any socialized expectations beyond that. They belong on their own terms and enjoy

the fruits of belonging while acknowledging that the tribalism that is often a byproduct of belonging has its limits for them. Importantly, they have done this while respecting that the Church also needs to set boundaries in order to function, and some of those boundaries will not encircle them.

Referring back to the story of my mom from the beginning of my comments, my mom—whether she knew it or not—had set boundaries for how Mormon womanhood would define her. I can testify that she took the best parts of our global sisterhood and then acted with integrity on her own choice to belong. She was not married in the temple, only had one child, was a full-time professional, and yet acted every day like she was the most belonging believer there was.

In this observed pattern, those who have less happy and healthy relationships with Mormon womanhood have been less boundaried about what they will and will not embrace from the institution. From my anecdotal experience, many of my friends who have left the Church believed while active that everything Church leaders taught needed to be accepted and internalized. Their belonging necessitated allowing the Church institution to push them in ways that felt uncomfortable or wrong, resulting in a complete break with the Church when belonging devoured all ability to be individual agents. In the language of my friend from the radio program, belonging looked like crafting and decorating from Pinterest because these are behavioral indicators of belonging, but they left her resentful and mad. She had absorbed a definition of herself that was perhaps unexamined, and thus the choice to belong hadn't been a choice at all but rather a default.

Why is it some Mormon women are naturally more boundaried than others? What is it that allows some women to say, "I choose to belong on my own terms," sometimes in the face of severe cultural pressures? Dr. Susan Madsen, a professor of leadership and ethics at Utah Valley University, recently wrote in the *Journal of Leadership Education* about four perspectives that inform a Mormon woman's perception of

herself, and I think these four perspectives are useful in this discussion. The perspectives are, first, an Eternal perspective, meaning a dedication to lifelong learning and progression, continuous improvement, and development. Second, a Motherhood perspective, meaning a belief that raising children in love and righteousness is the most important role a woman has on earth. Third, a Community perspective, meaning a belief that serving and helping others is central to one's life purpose. And, fourth, a Personal Revelation perspective, meaning finding answers for oneself through direct communication with God.<sup>2</sup>

As a people, we have the tendency to assume that baptismal covenants result in a group alignment of these perspectives, where we share the weight and prioritization of each perspective uniformly. We tend to overlook the fact that spiritual personalities come in as many forms as earthly personalities, with some perspectives more naturally and easily exercised than others. We do this especially with women. If we were to map my mother along these four different spiritual perspectives—à la Myers-Briggs or some other sort of personality test—I would think that the Personal Revelation and Community perspectives would jump off the charts for her, whereas perhaps the Motherhood perspective would be less emphasized. Although my mom wanted to have more children and couldn't, her sense of belonging wasn't jeopardized because she felt confident in her ability to contribute other, equally important perspectives. She somehow instinctively realized she couldn't be all things to all people, and her contributions to the group were still sufficient to be a full-fledged believer on her own terms. Like any successful work team where personality tests are so often used to ensure rich group dynamics, our global sisterhood thrives off of the varied spiritual strengths, perspectives, and contributions of our Church membership. Unfortunately, we too infrequently think or act along these lines.

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2. Susan R. Madsen, "Latter-day Saint Women and Leadership: The Influence of Their Religious Worldview," *Journal of Leadership Education* 15, no. 2 (2016): 58–73.

If we were to similarly profile my radio friend, her spiritual personality might not have looked very different from my mom's in theory, but in practice the Motherhood perspective had trumped all others and seems to have given her a lopsided profile that wasn't in line with her authentic self. She let herself be too extensively defined by her Mormon womanhood rather than defining Mormon womanhood for herself. We Mormons aren't great at establishing or respecting personal boundaries, of saying, "This is what I can give to my membership and this is what my membership gives to me." We are afraid we will disappoint others or the Lord; we conflate perfection with cultural markers. Boundaries are not easy. But I believe that as we have more conversations about how to make inspired and loving boundaries with both other Church members and the institution, our sense of belonging will actually blossom rather than wither. We will be able to acknowledge the various spiritual personalities—those with eternal perspectives, those with motherhood perspectives, those with community perspectives, and those with personal revelation perspectives—and confidently accept that our spiritual personalities will result in varied offerings to the group. What one person brings to the table is something another cannot; what is comfortable for one person to accept blindly is not comfortable for another.

The famed research professor Brené Brown talks extensively about the relationship between boundaries and compassion, stating that the most compassionate people she has interviewed are also the most boundaried.<sup>3</sup> And what does compassion have to do with belonging? Well, in this present and future age I'm describing, when belonging to Mormon womanhood is a choice to embrace and be embraced by others with whom we may have little else in common, compassion for each other is the very glue that will keep our global sisterhood tethered together. We are no longer tethered to each other by universal, traditional Americanized wifehood and motherhood. We are no longer tethered by what our

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3. See, for example, Brené Brown, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).



kitchens look like or what we do at homemaking activities. Compassion for each other will be the defining characteristic of belonging, and that compassion flourishes when we have a personal understanding of what we bring to the table, what we don't bring to the table, what's okay for other people to do to us, and what's not okay. Brené Brown uses the BIG acronym to describe the relationship between boundaries and compassion: She asks herself, "What Boundaries need to be in place for me to stay in my Integrity and make the most Generous assumptions about the people I interact with?" Generosity, she claims, can't exist without boundaries, and in our modern global Church, belonging can't exist without generosity. "I'm not as sweet as I used to be," says Brown of the changes she made after establishing boundaries for herself. "But I'm far more loving."<sup>4</sup>

Imagine the sisterhood that could exist if we honestly defined our boundaries: which spiritual perspectives we excel at and which others we simply do not; which part of the institution's cultural practices enrich our lives and which do not. What if we were at peace with those boundaries and generously acknowledged that others are living with their own boundaries? The heart of our belonging is our covenant-keeping—the compassion that comes from embracing and being embraced.

I don't think I've ever quoted Dr. Seuss publicly before, but I'm going to here today. In his brilliant story "The Sneetches," Seuss explores the human tendency to look for external markers of belonging. The story tells about two groups of Sneetches who live on a beach; one group has stars on their bellies and the others don't. The ones with stars on their bellies think they are better than the plain-belly sort and actively exclude the Sneetches without stars from their group. There is a clear boundary dividing those who are in from those who are out, despite the fact that they are all Sneetches. A character named Sylvester McMonkey

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4. Brené Brown, "Boundaries, Empathy, and Compassion," YouTube video, posted by "Kalli Laskari," Jun. 2, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTLH3ZK56M>.

McBean arrives with a fantastical machine that will give stars to those Sneetches who have none, which is thrilling to the plain-bellies, until those who had stars at the start realize that it's no longer special to have a star, and that now *not* having a star needs to be the marker of belonging. Chaos ensues as each group of Sneetches pay to race through the machine having stars put on or taken off depending on what the other group does. Seuss writes in one of my favorite lines that the Sneetches ran through the machine "until neither the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew / whether this one was that one . . . or that one was this one . . . / or which one was what one . . . or what one was who."

McBean leaves convinced that "No, you can't teach a Sneetch," but happily the story ends with the exhausted and penniless Sneetches unifying on the beach, realizing that there is no "in" and "out" but simply a shared identity to appreciate.<sup>5</sup>

Today, the Lord asks us to create unity without stars, without the behavioral or social or cultural markers we've relied on in the past to establish belonging.

It's a grand experiment, a latter-day challenge to maintain that cohesive global community without as many measurable standards. The Sneetches learn to do it after much struggle. Are we yet at the place where we can say, "I don't have a star, and that's okay" or "She doesn't have a star, and that's okay"? Can we rely on compassion and covenant-keeping as the only needed tether?

And by the way, it's never too late to craft a more personal definition of Mormon womanhood. A year after our correspondence, my radio friend is now enrolled in law school.

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5. Dr. Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1961).

# LE TRAIN À GRANDE VITESSE

R. A. Christmas

*... we are passengers on the train of the Church ... the luxury of getting on and off the train as we please is fading. The speed of the train is increasing. The woods are getting much too dangerous, and the fog and darkness are moving in. —Glenn L. Pace*

I

Where the *hell* was Kitty?

Elder and Sister Robinson were standing on a platform at the Geneva, Switzerland train station with their luggage, waiting for Kitty to arrive and accompany them to Paris on their way home to the United States. The train was leaving in ten minutes, and Kitty was nowhere in sight. Elder Robinson could feel his exasperation—and probably his blood pressure—rising. It was another of those awful moments in Europe he tried to avoid. But he knew he should have expected it, knowing Kitty. The girl was impossible. Where *was* she?

He knew his companion was also concerned, but only about Kitty. Something had gone wrong because, as he often pointed out, things always went wrong with Kitty. His wife, he knew, didn't care a fig about going to Paris. She was interested only in people, especially people who needed help, like Kitty, the most difficult Church member they'd worked with during their mission. They were going to Paris simply because Sister Robinson thought he wanted—no, needed—to go to Paris because he'd never been there, and because he was a former college professor and a poet, and that's what she thought such people did. Attending to people's needs was what she did, and she did it well.

Elder Robinson knew that getting him to Paris was his wife's way of rewarding him for eighteen "beardless" months of sacrificial service, mostly on her behalf. For her "stuck-in-the-sixties" former "Jack Mormon" husband, it hadn't been easy.

Fidgeting beside her, he also knew she'd be saying a silent prayer for them all, especially Kitty. He was anxious to get on the train; but he'd heard—and believed—so many horror stories about rude waiters, the confusing Metro, tourist jams at the Louvre, high prices, that he'd refused to go to Paris without a guide. Kitty had volunteered, and his wife had accepted, in spite of his misgivings.

Kitty was Chinese, but she was qualified. She spoke fluent French (she'd had a disastrous marriage to a Frenchman). She'd been to Paris several times, and for the most part Sister Robinson could manage her. So Elder R. let himself be persuaded. Besides, Kitty knew where the budget hotels were and made their reservations. But now, standing in befuddlement, all of his initial fears, which were legion, returned, amplified. Something had to be done, and fast. They had airline reservations from Charles de Gaulle to Salt Lake City in three days. If his companion was praying hard, he was worrying even harder.

The TGV, *le train à grande vitesse*, the high-speed train to Paris, stretched in front of them, left and right, and, having no experience with European trains—they'd driven a VW during their mission—the Robinsons didn't know where to board. Elder R. was clutching three second-class tickets for *Voiture 17*, but they were opposite car 1430. And he pointed out that if they took off in the wrong direction they could be in big trouble. Sister R. replied that she was prepared to board the car directly in front of them and let the train-people sort things out, and she added that she wouldn't board at all if the Spirit told her Kitty needed help.

"Why don't you ask somebody?" Sister Robinson said—what she always said in situations like this because she didn't speak French. Elder R. did speak French, but poorly.

There were a few people nearby. It was a weekday afternoon. Travel was light. But to Elder Robinson they all looked unapproachable. Asking, even in his hesitant French, was a simple thing, but it was always agony. He'd freeze. If only Kitty would come bounding up the stairs and put an end to this!

"What did she say when you called her?" he asked his wife.

"She said she was about to leave," Sister Robinson said, re-dialing.

"No answer," she added after a pause.

"Big surprise," he sighed. "She probably went back to sleep. I'd better go down and take a look."

"Maybe you'd better," Sister Robinson said.

"I'll have to come back through Control," he said.

"You have your passport," she said.

"I know, I know."

Elder R. took off into the terminal. Going by the checkpoint he saw no line—great, no delay coming back. He went quickly through the corridors, half-jogging, pretty good for an out-of-shape sixty-five-year-old. Thank God for those Saturday tennis matches with the branch president! He skipped stairs down the escalator, scanned the restaurants, shops, ticket counters, even dashed out front for a few seconds, where the tram stops were. Still no sign of the girl.

What a catastrophe! Her round-trip ticket, totally wasted! As he scurried back, a vision of Kitty's missed appointments, lame excuses, and emotional melt-downs flashed through his mind. What possessed people like her to join the Church in the first place? OK, he wasn't thinking like a missionary. But Paris without her couldn't be worse than this.

As he went through Control he calmed down enough to ask the officer, "*Avez-vous vu une Chinoise?*" His vocabulary was good. He knew the French for "Chinese woman." The man shook his head.

Elder Robinson had less than three minutes, by his Timex. He decided to risk one last look around. But before he reached the bottom of the

ramp, Kitty came around the corner in her red beret, boots, and trench coat, dragging a carry-on, her straight black hair flying.

"Sorry late!" she exclaimed. "Car don't start. Bus very slow. Life so crazy. Ha ha!"

"That's OK," he said. "We've got to hurry."

"Where Sister Robinson?"

"Up top, waiting. Let's go!"

They got through Control and up the stairs. And his wife had the answer: second-class was to the left, toward the engine—which seemed nuts, but he went with it. Sister R. gave Kitty a quick hug, and they hustled forward with their luggage, Kitty helping, and after they'd passed a few cars the numbers began to make sense. At last, and with less than no time remaining, they reached *Voiture 17*, clambered aboard, and stowed their bags. The car contained only a few travelers to witness the stumbling arrival of these two older, and obvious, Americans, in dark suit, blouse, and dress, with black-and-white nametags, and their incongruous companion. They were choosing their seats when the TGV began to move.

## II

The car was divided into restaurant-like booths, facing bench-seats with small tables in the middle. This coach was practically empty: two gentlemen up ahead, in the center, on the opposite side, and a handful of travelers at the far end. The ladies chose the first available booth, and Elder R., at his wife's suggestion, the next one forward, all to himself.

After they visited the nearby *toilette*, he slid across his seat to the window with his back to the girls so he could watch the passing scene in the afternoon light. Soon he could hear Sister Robinson and Kitty deciding that if he didn't partake of a sandwich immediately, he would starve, so away they went on an expedition to the snack car, somewhere in the middle of the train.

Elder Robinson found himself suddenly blessed with the prospect of a half-hour alone—so suddenly blessed that at first, he didn't know what to do with it except to sit watching an increasingly lovely landscape glide by.

Geneva had a big name, but it was compact, wedged between two low mountain ranges and a river at the south end of Europe's largest lake. When you left the city, in any direction, you plunged at once into a green world of trees, fields, and family farms. A bonus for the Elder at this moment was that the westward track out of Geneva ran parallel to the Rhone, bluish-brown and widening, seeming not to be moving at all, but in fact spilling out of Switzerland into the south of France, taking aim at Marseilles. There were memorable snapshots, combinations of foliage, river, outcroppings, and light—and Elder Robinson, weary after the stress of boarding, was soothed, hypnotized. He removed his suit coat and laid it on the seat opposite.

It was refreshing to be alone for a change. Mormon missionaries, by rule, weren't supposed to be out of sight of each other, which made sitting alone on a train in the middle of Europe and sight-seeing unusual—*risqué*. But he was enjoying it.

It wasn't that he and Sister Robinson hadn't been apart during their mission. Elder Robinson always took his morning walk alone, which ended with a visit to a *tabac*, where he'd purchase his *International Herald Tribune* and a stop at a tea room, where he'd have a *Coca-Cola light* (unbeknownst to Sister R., who would have disapproved) along with his daily *pain aux raisins* while he read his paper, especially the US sports news, and then a chapter in his French Bible—his attempt to repent of all this guilty pleasure. In addition, as he strolled through nearby sunflower fields, he'd say his prayers, aloud, in his almost-French. Piety and practice, as well as piety and pleasure, in the tea-room were thus blended. After that, Elder R. would rejoin his wife in their apartment, where he'd find her at her own guilty pleasure, writing e-mails

to children, grandchildren, and friends in the States. He'd be back in an hour and their day as an LDS missionary couple would begin.

When they first arrived at their apartment in Ferney-Voltaire, Elder R. found a list, left by the couple they were replacing, of "members who need love." Kitty's name was at the top of that list.

### III

While Elder Robinson was sightseeing, the train arrived at Bellegarde, just across the Swiss border in France, and Kitty and his wife came back.

They brought muffins, yogurts, salads, Perrier, and a large *jambon* baguette for Elder R., and dessert too—*éclairs*. They laid it out on their table, and Sister Robinson passed the sandwich and a bottle of Perrier to her husband to the tune of Kitty's chatter, which was giddy because it was about food.

"This all terrible food. Next time I make spring-roll for you," Kitty was saying, her voice like the chirp of a five-year-old. "Spring-roll and dumpling I going to make today, but I have no time. Brain not working. You should hear what I say to that bus driver. Going so slow, like snail. Faster, faster, I shouting, like crazy person. I report you. Here, I give you twenty Euro. Now go fast. (Hee hee haw haw). Finally made it. Don't know how."

"We're very happy you made it," Sister Robinson said. "Aren't we, sweetheart?"

"We certainly are," Elder R. said obediently.

"But you shouldn't have made such a fuss with the bus driver," Sister R. continued. "They can only go so fast."

"He make me mad," Kitty half-shouted. "He threaten throw me off bus. I say, 'You just try. Go faster, I shut up. Go slow, I make bigger noise.' Everybody on bus scream at him too."

Elder R. was imagining how that must have been for the other passengers. Kitty was oblivious when she went ballistic. Inappropriate French



just exploded from her mouth, which might come in handy at some ugly moment in Paris. But taking her along was like packing a grenade.

Kitty kept going on, through mouthfuls of salad, about that “stupid, stupid” bus driver. And Sister Robinson, as usual, kept trying to calm her, teach her some emotional control, help her understand that her anger wasn’t compatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. He’d overheard this conversation a hundred times, without result. But Sister R. never gave up. Which amazed him; she never gave up on anybody, including himself.

Halfway through their mission, Elder Robinson had been the target of one of Kitty’s rages, and he wasn’t over it. For four months, Kitty had refused to speak to them, or to answer Sister Robinson’s e-mails or his forced apologies on her voice mail, nothing. Kitty had left off attending church; she wouldn’t even talk to their bishop, who was dragged into the middle of it by—guess? His wife.

Elder R. had written Kitty off as irredeemably insane. And the members didn’t care; they’d had enough of her outbursts before the Robinsons arrived. Only the by-now-famous Sister Robinson, who made soup every Sunday at the ward for the hungry and homeless, only Sister R. kept calling, e-mailing, praying, until with the help of the bishop and some ex-pats who’d known Kitty for years, she came around. And that had been only two months before the Robinsons were headed home.

This outrage was too recent and terrible for Elder Robinson to get over. He was still where he was *before* it happened, trying to figure out why Kitty was such a space-case, without even liking her, much less loving her. How could you? She was so hysterical!

What happened was this (and the cause was incomprehensible compared to the uproar that resulted): One Sunday, while Sister Robinson was busy with her soup, the young sister missionaries had asked him to baptize two huge Nigerians (drug dealers, it turned out, who ended up in prison). In the process, he forgot to pick Kitty up for church at the Ferney round-point in France—a necessity because her car, with its

Singer sewing machine motor, was so small she couldn't legally drive it into Switzerland.

Earlier that morning, he'd called Kitty to remind her about the pickup. She'd groaned and mumbled about feeling sick, which made it sound like she wasn't going. So they went to church, and he forgot about her. But his companion didn't. After sacrament meeting, Sister R. reminded him to call to see if Kitty wanted to come to the baptism. But when he did she didn't answer, and he figured—wrongly, it turned out—that Kitty had turned off her phone and was asleep. After all, she'd done it before; in fact, several times he'd waited at the round-point and she hadn't showed up. And not only that, she'd never apologized for not showing up, just waved it off with her "Sorry about that. Too tired. Brain not working." So he wasn't prepared for what happened after the baptism.

Sister Robinson caught up with him in the hall, when he was headed back to the chapel.

"I wish you'd gone to pick up Kitty at the round-point," she said.

"I called her, but she didn't answer. I figured she was asleep."

"I guess not," his wife said. "You better watch out. She came screaming into the kitchen about how you didn't pick her up. She started walking until some lady gave her a ride. I had to drag her into the bathroom and tell her to stay there and wait for me, she was making so much noise. I thought you might try to pick her up after priesthood."

"We had to practice," Elder Robinson said.

Both Africans were over six feet and two-hundred pounds, and even after he'd shown them the hand-holds and how to bend their legs, they'd almost taken him under, twice.

"She'll be looking for you," Sister Robinson warned.

"Oh, great."

"I'll try to keep her in there until it's over," she said.

But that was the best she could do. Coming out of the chapel, he ran into Kitty in the foyer.

"You lie to me!" she shouted. "You promise pick me up. You not there!"

"You said you were sick," he countered.

"I said I *resting!*" she yelled. "Come later! You suppose pick me up. Like always. You lie to me!"

"I called you, Kitty. You didn't answer. I had no idea."

"I no want talk to you. You bad missionary! You lie to me!"

And on and on, with the members milling around, looking the other way, and Kitty screeching, "You bad missionary! You lie to me!" over and over, in front of God and everybody, chasing him down the hall like a harpy after his moment of triumph, baptizing two Nigerians as big as NFL linebackers.

Elder Robinson knew he was a bad missionary. He hadn't served a mission when he was young, though he could have. And he hadn't taught and baptized anyone as a senior missionary. And none of his seven children from two previous marriages were "active" members. In fact, he hadn't been much of a Mormon himself until he'd married Sister R. He knew he was the epitome of a "bad missionary." He just didn't want it announced in church.

Finally, Kitty stomped off to the cultural hall, where she continued her tirade, mostly in Mandarin, thank heaven, to any Chinese member within earshot. He felt like killing her. She was such a twerp, a hopeless case. What a crock a mission could be sometimes.

The whole sorry business proved what Elder Robinson had read somewhere: A senior mission is how Mormon masochists go on vacation.

Fortunately, Sister Robinson got the expat Hendersons to take Kitty home to France. Elder R. could hear her ranting about his wickedness out the door. But Ben and Sue already knew about that, and understood, and forgave. They were from San Francisco, and Sue had spotted him for a beardless "beatnik" the moment she'd first laid eyes on him.

#### IV

It wasn't long—Elder R. was still munching away—before Sister Robinson had Kitty involved in one of her "tapping" sessions, a technique she'd

come across on the internet for getting rid of destructive emotions by repeating, “Even though I (insert ‘don’t like to fly,’ or ‘feel like killing my husband,’)” and then add, “I deeply love and appreciate myself,” while tapping one’s head, face, chest, and side with the fingers.

It was called EFT, Emotional Freedom Technique, and it had worked wonders for Sister R. when she’d fallen into a deep depression at the beginning of their mission. So, in addition to teaching the gospel basics and loving and strengthening the members and investigators (*amis*), she recommended EFT and taught the technique to the willing (usually women, Elder R. noted) at every opportunity.

Kitty was willing, so while Elder R. was chewing at his window, Sister Robinson began using EFT to “deconstruct” Kitty’s episode on the bus, one disgusting emotion at a time.

“Even though I felt like killing that stupid bus driver, I still deeply love and appreciate myself.” Sister R. supplied the phrasing with variations, which Kitty repeated as they faced each other across the table, both of them “tapping,” like in a mirror.

Elder Robinson had been persuaded to tap a few times, but he couldn’t do it with a straight face. “Even though I’m a serial killer” was the sort of thing that would run through his mind while his wife was helping him lower his blood pressure. (It worked, by the way.)

But listening to a reluctantly contrite Kitty repeat out-of-character statements while she prodded herself, Elder R. couldn’t help smiling. He did attempt to “deeply love and appreciate himself,” at least a little, without losing an eye. And he admired and appreciated his companion because she *could* help it. Elder R. knew that without his wife’s willingness to dig deep, to cut close to spiritual bone and artery, their mission would have been a formality. Sister Robinson wasn’t exactly “sweet,” like the other senior sisters they knew in the mission. She didn’t have a plastered-on *smile* or a “take a backseat” approach to her priesthood-toting husband. She could be overbearing and was always relentless. If *amis* were still drinking, or needed to get married; she called them to

repentance. She got results in cases where other missionaries gave up. And the members loved her because they knew she loved them, particularly the weird, the less-actives, the shunned.

If Elder Robinson entered any room in the church alone, chances were the first thing he'd hear was, "Where's Sister Robinson?"

Now they were doing the "reversal process," starting with negatives and turning them, by repetition, into positives. "Hate the bus driver, hate myself, hate people yelling at me. Late. Miss train. Tap it out, get rid of it. Tap it away. Always on time. No problem. Bus driver a good man. He try hard, make money for his family. Forgive everybody. Love other people. Forgive everybody. Love myself. No reason to worry about anything." And so on. It was self-hypnosis, Elder R. suspected, knowing his wife didn't care, as long as it worked.

He polished off his sandwich. Then he must have dozed, because he was startled by Sister Robinson, who suddenly slipped in beside him and took his arm.

## V

"Where's Kitty?" he said, glancing at the empty booth behind them.

"I sent her to the bathroom to cool off," his wife said. "She got upset when I told her she'd have to stop arguing with Howard about money."

Big surprise. Howard was Kitty's latest internet boyfriend. She'd met him on some LDS singles website. He lived in Michigan, and Kitty had flown over to visit him and his teenage boys. And while she was there, for some inexplicable reason, the man had proposed. But Howard turned out to be miserly. And Kitty was a spendthrift. And the boys, apparently, were couch-potato video game addicts. Obviously, it wasn't going to work.

"Let's hope you can tap it out," Elder Robinson said.

"I'll try when she calms down and comes back."

"If she comes back," he said mordantly.

"She will. She's doing better. Now I can spend some quality time with my husband," Sister R. said, laying her head against his shoulder.

"Don't make her *too* angry," he whispered. The prospect of being dumped in Paris without knowing how to get to their hotel was not pleasant.

"She can't jump off," his companion laughed, which caused Elder Robinson to shift his awareness to the sway and speed of the train. It didn't seem like they were going very fast, but he knew they were. The cars they passed on the highways were creeping.

"Just be careful," he said. In three days, he wouldn't care what happened to her. But he didn't dare say it.

"That's your job," his wife was saying.

Well, somebody has to make sure the trains run on time.

"What would you like to do when we get home?" she went on. He knew she was changing the subject because he was peevish.

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it."

"C'mon. Wouldn't you like to play golf every day? Shall we go on a cruise?"

A cruise? Trapped on a floating hotel with boring rich old white people? Where all you could do was eat and play shuffleboard and watch bad entertainment and stop at tourist-trap ports and buy overpriced trinkets—while forbidden, of course, to smoke or drink alcohol? And probably get food poisoning besides? Whole shiploads were barfing and crapping their guts out. He'd read about it in the *IHT*.

"Sounds OK," he said. And golf—imagine hacking around with geezers in Ben Hogan hats with faces like the bottoms of dry lakes, in \$10,000 golf-carts with Mercedes-Benz grills and American flags fluttering. A summer of that and he'd be shooting 150, and himself.

"Once a month would be fine," he added.

"What's wrong with once a week?"

"Nothing. I need some new clubs. We'll see how it goes."

He might play golf a little more when they got home; and who knows, his wife could probably drag him on a short cruise. But what would probably happen is they'd go back to selling real estate, having Church callings, and "family life," one crisis after another.

"I know what you're afraid of," Sister Robinson said, with that frightening intuition of hers. "The grandkids! You're afraid you'll get smothered."

Well, that was a concern. Not his grandkids, who were scattered all over. He seldom heard from them, or their parents. But all of hers lived close by and were everlastingly needy. How many thousand hours had he gotten stuck playing cars with Brian? And now there was little Glenn and his Lincoln Logs to contend with. And April over every other night, telling him she wouldn't go to bed. And the new baby that was driving their daughter-in-law crazy. What were they supposed to do, raise it?

"I guess," was all he could manage.

"I'll protect you. You can have as much free time as you want."

"I know."

"You know what I want to do?" she went on. "First, I want you to help me get started on my genealogy. And then I want us to write a book about senior couples going on missions. I think we ought to tell the members what it's like and encourage them to go. We could speak at firesides. You're such a good writer. I think it's time to use your talent to do something for the Church."

Hearing this, Elder Robinson cringed. Doing her genealogy he could handle; he'd done some of his, and she didn't have the patience, or computer skills, to do hers. It would be a sacrifice, but he could do it. But writing a book? Some pasteurized tract put out by, say, Bookcraft? He was insulted she would even ask.

"We'll call it *Senior Moments*," she said.

"I think *you're* having a senior moment," he said right back.

His heart had practically stopped. His wife's idea of good writing was something she might come across at Deseret Book while shopping

for drippy pictures of Jesus for the grandkids' bedroom walls. The idea of writing a book for someone else went against his Flaubertian principles and sensitivities, the cobweb he'd been spinning for fifty years.

"I think it would be better," he ventured (he'd have to tread gingerly here), "if you wrote that sort of thing yourself."

"You know I can't write," she fired back. "But it'd be easy for you."

"It's never easy," he went on, carefully, "to write something that's not natural for you to write. You're the one who knows the most about going on a senior mission. I'm just your 'designated driver.' If you'll just write your thoughts down, I'd be happy to polish them up. I'll be your editor."

"What if I just tell you what to say? Why don't we just talk about it, and then you write the book? You know I have no talent as a writer. I think that's the way we'll do it."

"But I'm not a ghostwriter," he said, as firmly as he dared. "I'd be happy to help you organize your ideas, and I'll contribute what I can. But I don't write books for other people."

As soon as that last sentence was out of his mouth, Elder Robinson knew he'd crossed the line. He didn't know what was coming, but it would be bad.

"I'm not *other people*," she said. "I'm your wife."

"I'm aware of that."

"I appreciate knowing where I stand."

"Good grief," he sighed. "I was just trying to explain. I didn't mean it that way."

"What good is your talent," Sister Robinson said, "if nobody understands what you write? Or they're shocked by it? Or if nobody publishes it?"

"I don't know," was all he could say. He was aching for this to be over. But he'd take his punishment.

"Couldn't you spare a little time," she went on, "to help me tell seniors what it's *really like* to go on a mission?"



"I'm sure our run-ins with the mission president would be welcome news," he countered drily.

"I don't know why I talk to you about these things," his wife said. "I just wish that for once you'd say, 'Yes, sweetheart, I'd be happy to write your book,' instead of making excuses. It makes me feel like you don't love me."

"All I'm asking for is a rough draft. I need something to start with, that's all."

"What's wrong with me telling you what to say?"

It was so like her—to talk him into writing the whole thing. No matter what, he wouldn't get talked into that.

"I'll help you write your book," he said.

"I'll write it myself," his wife said. "I wish I'd never brought it up."

In the midst of these sad exchanges, Kitty had quietly crept back. Sister Robinson gave Elder Robinson a peck on his cheek and slid out of his booth.

"I love you anyway," she said.

## VI

He doubted it. How could anyone love the jerk he'd been during the last few minutes?

Now he was depressed. What a way to start a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Paris, arguing about something that wouldn't happen if he hadn't made a fuss. Back in the States she'd get caught up with kids and grandkids, church, and real estate, and that would be the end of it. She'd be too distracted to write a pamphlet, much less a book. Now for sure he'd get finagled into writing it, which was more depressing because it seemed inevitable.

Elder Robinson stared out of his almost-dark window. All he could see whipping by was an expiring twilight of trees, lights here and

there, and low buildings, industrial parks. They were in eastern France, somewhere.

Behind him, Sister Robinson was preparing Kitty to tap out her rage at Howard's miserliness and her blindness to her own spend-thriftiness, if that was a word. Elder Robinson could see that Sister R. wasn't about to let Kitty blow a chance to marry an elders quorum president in Michigan. If Howard wouldn't, or couldn't, change—well, Kitty must, and fast!

But at least Kitty was honest. She blurted her feelings right out, whereas he resented silently, secretly. He wouldn't sacrifice his sacred talent, not even for his wife, much less for his Savior. He was worse than Kitty because he knew better.

Maybe, he thought, I still have too much James Joyce in me, like some callow undergrad. He had to admit that he still lusted to be an Olympian author, revered by adoring readers, aloof and "paring his fingernails."

At that reflective moment, on the bullet train to Paris, Elder Robinson might have expected a Joycean "epiphany," a profound artistic awareness of the meaning, or meaninglessness, of his life. But it didn't come. All he saw was the bland interior of a hurtling high-tech European railroad car, all he felt was its speeding sway, all he heard was his wife and Kitty, tapping.

Listening to the ladies, he was reminded, comically, of Edgar Allan Poe's Raven, the bird that came "tapping" at midnight on a poet's door, while he was grieving over the loss of some woman (Lenore—that was her name) and then leaving the poor slob, mystified as ever, with only an enigmatic "quoth": *Nevermore!*

That was more Elder R.'s style, the sort of message that left you worse off than before. He was amused by the absurdity of his situation (his entire life, actually); but at the same time, he knew full well that behind him, his "third-time's-a-charm" wife was striving with all her might, mind, and strength to rescue Kitty's soul. The stark contrast between himself and his missionary companion was suddenly so obvi-

ous, and so troubling, that he felt—unexpectedly—contrite. In short, it broke his heart.

He'd forgotten that Kitty was worth saving, that she had no reason to feel bad about herself, no reason to keep repeating, "No time," "Brain not working," or "I'm a crazy person." He had no reason to feel bad about himself either. So what if he sucked down two Diet Cokes a day, fed the young elders forbidden sports news from the States, and was half in love with a Filipina convert? Probably wrong, true; less than perfect, certainly. But what right did that give him to mope around, like Kitty, saying, "I'm a bad person" and to feel like a loser? Or to hate Kitty because she couldn't help it? Or to resent his wife because she needed help writing a book that would encourage Mormon seniors to go on missions?

Behind him, he could hear Sister Robinson and Kitty doing the reversal process again. They were repeating, "There's plenty of money . . . enough for Howard . . . enough for me . . . enough for food . . . no need to worry or argue about money any more . . . there's enough and to spare . . . tap it out, reverse it . . . tap it all away."

What Elder Robinson was repeating (to himself) was, "Repent—and fast. Start enjoying this trip, even with Kitty in tow. And when you get home, write that book, or something, for your companion. The results won't be perfect. Kitty might come unglued on the Metro, and what you write probably won't satisfy your wife or her sisters in Relief Society. There will be surprises and setbacks, but make a start. You're in too much pain not to. Oh, and almost forgot, say a prayer that Kitty and Howard can overcome their differences and maybe even get married. Who knows? With God all marriages are possible (even mine and Sister R's!)."

But at the same time, the thought of having to poke his body morning and night for who-knows-how-long made Elder R. feel tired—very tired.

He needed a catnap to gather strength for all this before they arrived, so he stretched out in his booth and curled up his legs, while Sister Claire J. Robinson and their friend Kitty Wu went on talking, and tapping, and laughing.

Outside, *le train à grande vitesse* had reached the main line from Lyon to Paris, had swung to the northwest, and was now at maximum speed—close to 300 kilometers per hour—as it barreled through the blackness toward the so-called City of Light.

## VII

*Hello dear Sister Claire*

*Howard and me have a most wonderful wedding in the Church last week. I cook a lot of Chinese food. Egg roll, dumpling, another thing.*

*The wedding is so beautiful. The member here they plan every thing for us. Howard's father walk me in the chapel. We have opening hymn and pray. And best friend of Howard, well also a member, give a talk about marriage. And he did a very good job. After the Choir sing for us, and a sister sing solo of "Marriage Pray". Really very beautiful. After the singing have our wedding. President Stone host the wedding. We sign the marriage document. After President Stone give a talk. After is closing song and pray.*

*We took some photo after we came out of Chapel. Member here help me decorated the gym two day before. I took some photo. But the most of the photo still at one brother home. He going to make the photo in to a CD-Rom. After most of the sister help me put the food on the table. And after a pray. We have a very nice lunch. Every one like the food. But I think I cook too much. Haha. But every enjoy it.*

*Howard's mother May buy a very nice wedding cake. So we have a nice sweet after food. I didn't sleep before the wedding. I am too busy to cook and nervous. So I just eat very little food. After the lunch there a lot of member helping cleaning every thing. And that is wonderful. I just don't know we can do this with out the church member help. Every thing going well. After we have a lot of sleep. I didn't make it to the church the second day. haha. Feeling sorry. But I am too tired. I was fall to sleep on the sofa of the church when I finish cleaning. Haha. I don't even know how I came back home. Too tired.*

*But the good thing is every is done. So now I feeling much more relaxe. haha. We going to seal at Temple next year. I think now I more know about Howard. I love him more now. Now I don't feeling the money is any problem. He give all the wedding money to me. And it is a lot. haha. But we also have gift but not too much. Tomorrow I going have my Braital shower. Sister Lou Ann make this shower for me. She is so nice. I can't believe just a few week. I making so many friend here. And we going have a Relief Society with the General R.S. Broadcast at this Saturday. That is really nice to be a member. The church everything is the same. Only the people there is not the same but with same faith and love. That really touch me a lot.*

*I just doing fine. I am very happy here. I doing the right choose. Because Howard don't have a lot of money. But he love me very much. He is very gentle to me. And I love him too.*

*Take care*

*Love you*

*Kitty*



Lane Twitchell  
*Milk in the Honey Cave*  
oil, polymers, and wax on cut material mounted to panel  
60" x 60"  
2016

# THE DARKEST ABYSS IN AMERICA

William Morris

*“Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.” —Joseph Smith*

## SAN FRANCISCO

### *Mormon Pioneers of Sound*

*With The Darkest Abyss set to launch a US tour, can a popular, ground-breaking noise band made up of Mormon musicians lead to a thaw in US–Nipponese relations?*

—head and subhead from the lead article of the *San Francisco Evening Post*’s Culture section, May 19, 1989



Honri, the first elder of The Darkest Abyss, answered most of the questions at the press conference. He still wasn’t sure if he had been anointed

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*A 2016 Dialogue Fiction winner.*

My thanks to commenter Stan on the *Juvenile Instructor* post “The Mormon Reserve” (Nov. 20, 2013) for introducing me to the initial idea that sparked this story. See <http://juvenileinstructor.org/the-mormon-reserve/#comment-348648> and Sandra T. Caruthers, “Anodyne for Expansion: Meiji Japan, the Mormons, and Charles LeGendre,” *Pacific Historical Review* 38, no. 2 (May 1969): 129–39.

first elder because the Brethren trusted him more than the other elders of the band or because he had the best English. He had prayed for confirmation. The only answer had been: seek not the why—seek the how so you may fulfill the duties to which you are called.

It didn't matter the reasons, though. The Americans saw him as the lead musician of the band, which meant it was only natural that he be the one to do the talking.

Thankfully, between his efforts and the interventions of Jim, the tour manager they had been assigned by the US State Department, the reporters soon came to realize that any questions intended to read the tour as political tea leaves would be deflected and so they moved on from the politics of the situation to the pleasant mundanities of the tour itself. Honri was happy to get through the onslaught unscathed. His primary instruction from the Brethren had been: "Don't start an international incident." He joyfully explained the logistics of moving a fifteen-member band and all its equipment, expressed the band's eagerness to see America, and explained their surprise at their popularity in the West.

When those topics were exhausted, the reporters moved on to personal questions. One even expressed surprise at this ability to speak without a translator and asked, "How is your English so good?"

"Many years of study," Honri replied. "And countless hours listening to American and British rock music as a teenager."

The laughter that followed wasn't unexpected, but he still found it nonsensical. Why wouldn't he have listened to rock music as a teenager?

After the press conference, there was a whirlwind photo-op tour of the city, including all of the members of the band posing around a small, worn plaque marking the arrival of the ship *Brooklyn*.

After the performance at the Warfield, Satoshi asked if he should send the message to the shinobi brethren.



Honri prayed silently in his heart. His mind reached out and met only confusion. “Not yet,” he said. He felt frustration and relief. He knew more of those same feelings were to come. The tour had just begun.

## LOS ANGELES

On the LA tour stop, they visited a children’s park named after Fort Moore. One of Sister Emi’s ancestors had served in the Mormon Battalion. Once this was discovered, the *Los Angeles Daily Times* requested a photograph of Emi sitting by herself in one of the swings with her arms folded and head partially bowed.

“No individual photos,” Honri said. “We are a band and ask to be treated as such.”

Jim pulled him aside and explained the importance of working with the media, especially an outlet as important as the *Times*. But after a quick glance at Emi, who frowned and shook her head, Honri held firm.

On the ride back to the hotel, he discussed the request briefly with Emi and Chiko, both of whom served in the presidency of the sister musicians. They spoke in Nihon-go but in whispers because Honri suspected that some (or perhaps all) of the members of their security detail knew the language.

“Maybe we should let them,” he said.

“No,” Emi said. “We are not here to feed their stereotypes.”

“Maybe if they had built a museum to the battalion brethren instead of a play park for children,” Chiko said. “Maybe then.” A smile spread across her face. “Especially if they let Emi pose with a Winchester rifle.”

“Pointed at the camera,” Emi said. “Yes, I would do that. That would be punk rock.”

“Maybe too punk rock,” Honri said. “We’re not here to cause an international incident.”

“Why not? Why shouldn’t we?”

Honri grimaced.

"I'm not being serious," Emi said. "But doesn't it make you angry? They drove us out and now they want to make nice?"

"That was a long time ago," Honri said. "I still feel the wounds. I think we all do. But I think our best response to that pain is the music."

The two other sisters nodded.

"The music is good," Chiko said. "The chance to play it here is a blessing."



Things went better at the meeting with Monte Cale. At Honri's suggestion, Jim had tracked down a copy of the May 1987 issue of *New Musical America* in which Cale had reviewed *This Tabernacle*, the band's first album. Honri read the review out loud for the TV cameras:

*Numinous clamor that reminds you that the Mormon landscape—whether it's the Colorado Plateau or Hokkaido—is always one of rugged, sparse, operatic spaces. This is noise that even pop music fans can grow to love. The second side almost sludges toward devotional choral music but never quite reaches the syrup of the milquetoast US Midwest version, cut as it is with the searing drone of Honri's electrified samisen and the incessant drive of the immense rhythm section, especially Josetsu's mosquito drumming. Much more than an orientalist curiosity. Difficult to find for obvious reasons; try your favorite underground Nipponese importer.*

He then thanked Cale for introducing The Darkest Abyss's music to America and asked him to sign the page with the review on it so it could be framed for presenting to Prophet Hunter when they returned to Hokkaido. After the photo op was over, Cale insisted on being introduced to every member of the band. Honri obliged. The other fourteen musicians lined up to shake the critic's hand and say a quick thank you. When it was his turn, Josetsu pretended to play a rapid-fire air drum solo on Cale's outstretched hand. Everyone laughed. Silence descended after the introductions were complete. Honri wanted to fill

it with questions: how did you first hear our album? What made you decide to review it? Is it true that you have Mormon ancestry? But Jim quickly broke in with a steady patter about the state of the American music business, and the moment slipped away.

## SALT LAKE CITY

The band members barely spoke all the way from Vegas to Salt Lake City. They pressed their foreheads against the bus windows and watched the desert landscape fly by.

Jim kept asking if they wanted to get out and take pictures. Honri finally told him that they weren't just being shy when they demurred. They were anxious to get to Salt Lake. He nodded as if he understood.



Their first stop was the tabernacle. The press had turned out in large numbers. The click of camera shutters opening and closing filled the air. Honri wondered if seagulls would appear and carry the photographers away.

The tabernacle's furnishings were worn, but the woodwork was still beautiful.

"They hold Rotary Club annual meetings here," Jim said as they walked in. "Great acoustics."

Honri wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

The members of the band crowded around the pulpit and sang "Come, Come, Ye Saints" in English to a crowd of local dignitaries and their spouses and then were served a late lunch of barbecued chicken, corn bread, and cowboy beans. Honri found himself oddly unmoved by the whole thing. He didn't even feel any ghosts. It was as if the Saints had carried all of them with them—along with the granite blocks that had formed the temple—when they had been relocated to Hokkaido.

The tabernacle was the one thing they had left behind. Perhaps it had been in gentile hands so long the consecration had worn off of it.

Would he feel the same about the Nauvoo Temple cornerstone? He wouldn't have the chance to see it in person. It wasn't close to any of their tour stops. He would have to make the decision based only on his intellect and the communications of the Holy Spirit. He quietly mentioned to Satoshi to let the shinobi know that they should put together the first phase of the plan.



The concert later that night had sold out the day before, but the seats at the Salt Palace's concert hall were only half full. Honri asked Jim about it after the performance.

"Our friends in the State Department made sure all the tickets were sold," Jim admitted. "An effort was made to give the tickets away, but to be honest your music is a bit of an acquired taste. You play much better on the coasts."

"Please tell our friends at the State Department that we would rather they not afford us such graces," Honri said. "We are here to connect with our fans—we're not worried about revenue."

"Of course," Jim replied. "No problem. We can always move the concerts to smaller venues if ticket sales are sluggish. But I don't think it's going to come up again. Things are looking very good in the rest of the cities."

"That is good to hear."

"They're looking very, very good," Jim said. "To be honest, if it wasn't for the, uh, the historical connection, we never would have booked SLC in the first place. We should have just bypassed it entirely and gone straight to Red Rocks."

"It was good to see the tabernacle," Honri said.

Jim nodded. “Just a blip,” he said. “A minor miscalculation. We’ll put this behind us and go on to better things, I’m sure of it.”

“Good,” Honri said. “We look forward to the rest of the tour.”

## NEW YORK CITY

New York City was like a shabbier, more desperate Tokyo. All nervous, barely bridled energy poised to express itself creatively or recklessly or dangerously. He liked it. It felt like the real America. The America his home government distrusted. Not that he trusted it either. But he liked it more than the other cities they had toured since Salt Lake City. Those had all seemed busy but single-mindedly so with no weird edge to cut against the unfettered commercialism. No gaps for an underground (music, art, religion).



The band and their minders took the ferry to Ellis Island, where the tour guide promptly led them to a small display case in the immigration museum that held a small exhibit on the “Mormon Danes” of the 1860s and early 1870s—the last wave of Mormon immigrants that came to America before the resettlement.

The band listened attentively to the tour guide. They asked no questions, made no comments—even when prompted to by the guide. Honri thanked her when she was done and gave her a copy of their album on digital audio tape. The press who had tagged along seemed disappointed when it was over. Perhaps they had expected tears.

There had been tears, especially as the tour had worn on. But they were private tears shed silently late at night in hotel rooms when no press or minders were there to witness. Honri had done what he could but much of the burden of comforting those sister vocalists and drummers who were having a difficult time had fallen to Sister Emi and her

counselors. The brethren had been less open about their feelings, but he had noticed Satoshi and Josetsu having quiet conversations with several members of their quorum. He felt guilt over this, but Satoshi and Emi had gifts for such service that he did not. And the overall dynamics were easier as well. Honri's status as the presiding priesthood holder, the leader of the band, and the best speaker of English created a distance between him and the others that he did not like but accepted as necessary. The most he could do was help them channel their feelings into the music. That night at the Bowery Ballroom, the band played with a ferocity and speed that delighted the crowd—that Honri had no choice but to ride the crest of. They, as the Americans would say, left it all on the stage.

But after the lights dimmed and curtains fell, something lingered in Honri's soul. It trailed him through a post-concert performance/appearance at the Knitting Factory—the one thing he had truly been looking forward to on the tour—where he, Josetsu, and Chiko played Beatles, The Clash, and Angry Disco covers along with American musicians into the wee hours of the morning. It was still with him back at the hotel and on the long bus trip to upstate New York. He tried not to identify it—that dislocated feeling. Some allergic reaction to the lush, rolling hills. To the tidy farms and small towns. To the American-ness of it all. It was a cousin to what he had felt traveling through the desert to the Salt Lake Valley. It was as if he were coming home from his mission again: coming back to a place that had moved on without him, that he knew only from memory. Familiar, similar, but without a clear place for him.



It wasn't until the visit to the Smith homestead that Honri realized that the feelings that had been building up inside him throughout the tour had flared into rage. It wasn't the sensationalized account of the Prophet Joseph's life. Or the condescending attempt to present an even-handed view of the literary and theological merits of the Book of Mormon (com-

plete with Mark Twain quotes). Or the quaint and folksy costumes. Or the fact that the history abruptly stopped with Brigham Young entering the Salt Lake Valley. It was that the Sacred Grove wasn't mentioned at all. That the farm house had been preserved as a curiosity but the actual place that changed the course of human history was elided—no nod at all to the event that precipitated the entire Restoration. After the tour and the photo ops, Honri abruptly strode to the west edge of the parking lot, Jim nonchalantly following, and scanned the landscape. There were a few small stands of trees here and there, but they all looked to be attached to hobby farms.

“Looking for something?” Jim asked.

“No,” Honri replied. “Just looking around.”



Later that night, Honri turned that rage inward—let it condense into sorrow—and from there he felt the Holy Spirit confirm the decision. Even if the Americans were willing to give the cornerstone to the Church, something would be lost in the transaction, the sacred tangled up in negotiations and political posturing. The temple cornerstone belonged to them. They should take it in secret. This land had long ago become full of slippery treasures. It would not miss the cornerstone. If, of course, The Darkest Abyss could smuggle it out of the country. He gave Satoshi permission to give the signal.

## CHICAGO

Honri paced backstage at Cabaret Metro in Chicago. The shinobi brethren would soon arrive with the cornerstone. He resisted the urge to help Satoshi re-check speaker 6—one of a stack of eight the band always traveled with. The receptacle was not the issue. It was fine. Satoshi would see to it. Honri should not draw attention to it. No, the issue he needed

to deal with was the guards and techs and roadies and managers and personal assistants and journalists that swarmed the backstage. There were many of them. The shinobi brethren were capable men with many gifts, physical and spiritual, but even they had limits to what they could achieve. All it would take was a roadie noticing a strange shadow and the whole plan would fail. If the shinobi brethren were discovered, it would stall the First Presidency's plan to finish and dedicate the replica temple in Hokkaido. It would also surely deal a blow to the thawing but still frosty Nipponese–American relations, which then could lead to a backlash against the Church's increasingly prominent position in Nippon. The Brethren had said no international incidents, but they had also made provisions for certain covert actions should Honri decide they were worth the risk. This is the one he had decided on. Now it was up to him to mitigate the risk.

So what to do about all the people? He had been taken aback by the number of them when the band had arrived for their opening gig in San Francisco. He soon realized that that was just the way Americans do things.

As he had all tour, Jim lurked nearby, all bland American nonchalance in his dark suit and loosened tie. He would be the key to creating an opening for the shinobi. Honri nodded at him.

The minder took the gesture as an invitation to talk. "Big night," he said. "Last show."

"Yes," Honri said. "I understand the venue is sold out—truly sold out."

"Chicago is a great music town. It's a pity you can't stay longer and enjoy it."

"Yes. That would be nice. Maybe next tour?"

Jim laughed. "No promises," he said. "But if your government continues to play nice with my government, then another tour is certainly possible."

"I have no control over that."



Jim laughed again. “Neither do I, son. Maybe your prophet can ask a higher authority than us to intervene and keeps things calm.”

“He already has.”

Jim straightened up. “Of course, of course,” he said and wandered off to talk to one of the publicists.

As much as he disliked Jim, Honri had not meant to create discomfort between them. He had not meant to be so literal and serious when clearly the man had thought they were joking around.



Satoshi emerged from the stage. Honri waved him over. “Did you get the amps fixed?”

“All good.”

“Now about that chord change on ‘Butter and Honey; Briars and Thorns’?” Honri slowly lowered his voice to a whisper.

“It’s ready. And I made enough of a fuss about the equipment that the roadies won’t be messing with it,” Satoshi whispered. “How far away is Nauvoo, anyway?”

Honri shrugged.

“What do we do when it gets here?” whispered Satoshi.

Honri shrugged again. “We didn’t plan this part beforehand. We didn’t exactly know what we would face here.” He swiveled his eyes toward their security detail. The faces had changed throughout the tour, but somehow a full pack of four always showed up—bulky men with close-cropped hair who projected interested disinterest and gentle menace. He suspected that at least one of them spoke fluent Nihon-go. At one point, Josetsu had suggested they use Deseret Ainu, but Honri had rejected the idea. He had wanted to raise no suspicions needlessly. But time was running out. Perhaps now was a moment for boldness. They had been compliant all tour. In fact, several of the crew had remarked

on the lack of drama. Some in a tone of relief; others disappointment. Yes. It was time to act like a rock star.

“Satoshi! Get Josetsu. And sisters Emi, Chiko, and Minori. They were all off in rehearsal.”

Satoshi nodded crisply and then rushed off to round up the third elder and the presidency of the sister musicians.

Jim sidled up. “Everything okay?” he asked. “You go on in thirty minutes.”

“There was some disunity in rehearsal,” Honri said. “I need to speak to some of my band members alone.”

“Well, now, I’m sorry to hear that. Anything I can do?”

“Find us a quiet, private place to meet. We don’t wish to alarm the rest of the band, so we can’t kick them all out of the green room or the costume room.”

“Sure thing,” Jim said. “Anything for band unity.”

“Thanks,” Honri said. He didn’t know if the security team reported to Jim or him to them, but he had to assume that they would have to be quick. Satoshi soon returned with the others. Honri led them into a small dressing room that Jim had asked the backstage manager to open. It smelled of stale beer and incense. Jim tried to follow the sisters in. “Band business,” Honri said. He shut the door in the tour manager’s face. Satoshi wedged a chair under the handle.



“We must meet with haste,” Honri said. “But we will begin with a prayer. Sister Emi?”

After the prayer, Honri explained the situation in as oblique terms as he could. The two presidencies discussed a variety of options. Each person spoke in turn. They quickly discarded—Josetsu most reluctantly—the more complex and violent ideas.

“We must use our foreignness to our advantage,” Chiko finally said. “And our faith.”

The plan came together quickly after that. When the details were set, Honri felt a warmth distill in his chest and well up to meet the newfound clarity in his mind. “The Lord is with us in this thing,” he said. “Let’s go. But first, and I’m sorry about this. . .”

The elders and sisters yelled scripture mastery passages at each other in Deseret AINU sprinkled with English music-isms borrowed from the rock documentaries they had watched as teenagers at the Zarahemla Cinema in Sapporo. Josetsu got too much into the spirit of things and broke one of the chairs against the dressing room counter. It was all intense enough that Honri wasn’t sure that the tears and flushed faces were simulated. They let Jim pound on the door for half a minute before they opened it.

The American had a look on his face that was part exasperation, part amusement. The security detail was arrayed behind him. “Everything okay? I was about ready to step in,” he said.

“Sorry about that,” Honri said. “But all is in order now. Sometimes it’s necessary to let your feelings out. We learned that from watching your TV sitcoms.”

Jim’s laugh was almost convincing. One of the security officers snorted, which got him dirty looks from the other three.



At fifteen till curtain, Honri insisted that every single person backstage join *The Darkest Abyss* for a prayer in the green room. The band members and crew and journalists crowded in. Honri worked the room, expressing thanks to the American crew members and telling them that he was pleased they were willing to join the band for a special pre-show ritual. The other members of *The Darkest Abyss* intermingled in his

wake, offering what thanks they could express in English and passing out cards printed with the Articles of Faith.

It took some diva-level loud whispering, but Honri and Chiko convinced Jim to herd the reluctant techs and security team in as well. Satoshi slipped off to meet the shinobi brethren.

Honri gave the prayer in English. With a loud voice, he blessed the instruments and the equipment. He blessed the band that they would find unity in rhythm. He blessed the crowd with safety and that they would be inspired to live more worthy lives. He blessed the crew that they would be protected and in synch with the band. He blessed Chicago that the gift of noise they were bringing it would dampen the violence that had been so prevalent on the city's streets that summer. He thanked God for Joseph Smith. He thanked God for the American president. He thanked God for Hunter Jiro Daikancho.

He prayed on—asking for more blessings, being thankful for more things—until Jim placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered, “Wrap it up. Five till curtain.”

Honri finished in the name of Christ. There followed a chorus of amens. Even some of the Americans joined in.



On the evening of July 23, 1989, The Darkest Abyss took the stage before a sold-out audience for the final concert of their first and only North American tour. The four drummers began pounding a driving beat. The two bassists thumped a pulsing line. The three guitarists chimed in with a buzzing drone. The five vocalists hummed eerily.

Honri waited until the crowd began chanting his name. They could barely be heard over all the noise his band members, his fellow Morumons, were creating. Honri nodded to Jim and walked onto the stage. The crowd got louder. So did the band. Honri raised both arms in the air, stretching his hands toward heaven. He stepped over to Satoshi, who

leaned in so close the fretboard of his bass thrummed against Honri's chest. "The cornerstone is in place," Satoshi yelled beneath the clamor. Honri clasped his second elder's shoulder firmly, gave a thumbs up to the other instrumentalists and vocalists, walked to center stage, plucked his electric shamisen from its stand, and strummed a dissonant chord.

The crowd went wild.



## Exploring the Unfamiliar Realm of Religion in Young Adult Literature

Julie Berry. *The Passion of Dolssa*. New York: Viking Books for Young Readers, 2016. 496 pp. Hardcover: \$18.99. ISBN: 978-0-451-46992-2.

Jeff Zentner. *The Serpent King*. New York: Crown Books for Young Readers, 2016. 384 pp. Hardcover: \$17.99. ISBN: 978-0-553-52402-4.

*Reviewed by Jon Ostenson*

Modern young adult literature traces its roots to 1967, when S. E. Hinton's book *The Outsiders* was published and subsequently devoured by young readers who were desperate for literature that spoke to them and reflected the realities they saw daily. In the ensuing years, young adult literature has bravely explored controversial topics like class struggle, mental illnesses, drug abuse, and sexuality, all in the name of allowing teen readers a chance to explore the "real" world. One element of teens' lives, however, that has often been overlooked in the literature is religion and spirituality. Despite the results of the recent National Study of Youth and Religion showing that nearly forty percent of teens report actively participating in organized religion, religious characters and explorations of spirituality are rarely treated in young adult literature.

The two titles I review here, *The Passion of Dolssa* by Julie Berry and *The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner, counter this trend, presenting characters who wrestle with issues of faith and belief as they navigate the challenges of their world. Both titles examine the potential for abuse of authority in organized religion. Both titles feature protagonists struggling to come to terms with the connection between belief and signs of God's approbation or a plan that he has for us. And both, I would

argue, raise broader questions about the role that portrayals of religion and faith should play in literature written for teenagers.

*The Passion of Dolssa* takes readers back to the time of the Inquisition, when the Catholic Church attempted to enforce orthodoxy through violence. We spend most of the book inside the perspective of Botille, one of three sisters who make their living brewing ale, telling fortunes, and matching up eligible singles in their small village in southern France. Their lives are disrupted when Botille rescues a nearly dead young woman whom the sisters nurse back to health; they soon learn that they've brought in a heretic, a mystic named Dolssa who is wanted by the Inquisition. The sisters' efforts to shield her identity are foiled when she performs several miraculous healings in the village and her fame spreads across the countryside. A showdown between the clergy, intent on eradicating the heresy Dolssa has spread, and the villagers, cowed by the Church but in awe of this young lady's devotion and power, thrusts the sisters into the limelight of an official trial whose outcome serves as the climax of the book.

Based on the mystics of the medieval era, Dolssa proves to be a means for exploring matters of religious belief and the way those beliefs influence life. In intercalary chapters inserted between those written from Botille's point of view, we learn more about Dolssa, a young woman with unwavering faith in Jesus, a man she calls her "beloved" and for whom she feels as a woman might for her love. As the narrative unfolds, this relationship becomes more complicated as Dolssa experiences doubts about her beloved when she finds that, after barely escaping a fiery punishment for her alleged heresies, he ceases speaking to her. Rescued from death by Botille, she must exercise faith and patience before he returns to her, as evidenced in the miracles she begins to perform among the villagers.

Likewise, Botille struggles to understand the nature of Dolssa's faith and the signs that follow her. Not a strictly observant believer, Botille nevertheless has a reverence for spiritual things, and it's this reverence that encourages her loyalty to Dolssa, despite the consequences that are sure to come her way. It's through her eyes that we question the true



nature of spirituality and belief, and how that belief should inform our lives. Berry contrasts the simple, abiding faith in Jesus displayed by Dolssa, and her consequent compassion for those in the village, with the authoritarian, obsessive devotion to orthodoxy of the Catholic clergy and the violence they bring.

Berry's use of the word "passion" in the book's title is fitting. The most obvious connection is to the passion of Christ, a parallel evoked by Dolssa's unswerving devotion to Jesus and the sacrifice she makes at the book's climax. Her story introduces readers to a medieval world where women, shut out from the patriarchy of the Church but desperate to have a relationship with Jesus, framed that relationship in the language of love and marital union. But passion is also central for Botille and her sisters, in the form of fierce sibling affection that unites them in their struggles against a world that first seeks to thwart them for being women and then to demonize them for being caring and compassionate to Dolssa. And this is all contrasted with the Dominican friar who relentlessly pursues Dolssa in the name of the Church and doctrinal purity. Love and loyalty, whether to God or to an ideology or to one's neighbor, are the threads that Berry weaves expertly throughout the novel. Although its events are hundreds of years in the past, the emotional conflicts and spiritual questions of this book will be recognizable to today's young readers, and especially so for those who see themselves as believers.

The setting for Zentner's book draws from the more contemporary snake-handling tradition of certain Pentecostal groups in the southern regions of the United States. In *The Serpent King*, Dillard (Dill) Early, son of the pastor of a "signs church" in rural Tennessee, begins questioning his faith when he finds one Sunday that he cannot bring himself to handle a poisonous snake. Shortly after this failure to demonstrate his belief, Dill's father is arrested for possession of child pornography and, as the book opens, is incarcerated after Dill refuses to lie in court and say that the images were his. At the start of his senior year in high school, Dill finds himself alienated from his church, struggling with his relationship with his parents, and able to count on only two friends,

Lydia, a fashion blogger who is desperate to escape their small town, and Travis, himself a misfit who finds escape in a series of fantasy books.

Doubts and fears haunt Dill throughout the pages of the book. He dislikes visiting his father in prison but does so out of a sense of biblical duty; the visits are dominated by his dad's attempts to alternatively manipulate Dill into pursuing the "signs ministry" and stoke Dill's guilt at playing a role in his incarceration. At home, Dill feels torn between familial duty (his mother wants him to drop out of high school and work full-time to help with their legal fees) and his own growing desire to seek out a different, better future away from their small town and out from under the shadow of his father's scandals. But his greatest fears center around Lydia, whose eagerness to leave behind their small town for the chic world of fashion in New York City post-graduation leaves Dill feeling hurt and betrayed.

Told in chapters that shift between Dill's, Lydia's, and Travis's perspectives, the first half of the book centers primarily on Dill and Lydia's relationship. Dill struggles to accept a potential future without Lydia, and she struggles to understand Dill's conflicted feelings about leaving their small town; both aren't sure how to deal with their growing romantic attraction. Zentner compassionately and authentically portrays these teens, and the alternating chapters told in third person give us sympathetic insights into their thoughts and feelings. All three seek escape from their seemingly bleak present: Dill through writing music (a talent that he originally honed in the signs church but is now turning to as a way of dealing with his complicated feelings about Lydia), Lydia through her blog and her applications to colleges, and Travis through an online community attached to the fantasy books he loves. But a startling tragedy that affects all three forces Dill and Lydia in particular to confront the realities of the present.

In spite of his parents' devotion to the ministry, Dill finds little solace in his belief in God, nor does he actively seek God's help in his struggles, except when he prays for calm nerves before performing in a school talent show. Dill's answers to his doubts instead are found in his growing self-confidence from the positive response to his music on

YouTube and in the glimpse of a possible future he gains from applying for college, counter to his parents' selfish objections. Dill's story is one that can inspire young readers who feel plagued by insecurity about the future—a common theme of fiction written for this audience.

Dill's distancing himself from religion and spirituality are not surprising given how foreign the practices of snake handling and drinking poison seem and how his parents use religion as a weapon to guilt Dill into compliance. Yet I can't help feeling that Zentner could have done more here with Dill and his search for answers. I wonder if Dill could have struck out more purposefully and sought God in his own way? Could he, for example, have seen the commandment to honor his parents in less black-and-white terms and reconciled his choices with God's commandment? Could the other adults in Dill's life have encouraged him to find meaning in faith outside the rigid, unforgiving views of his parents? In the novel, Dill often refers to the pithy quotes ("No Jesus, No Peace. Know Jesus, Know Peace.") on the sign of the local Baptist church; the limited depth of what can be posted on a church marquee seems at times to mirror the shallowness of Dill's forays into a meaningful encounter with God. In his bittersweet and moving final confrontation with his mother, Dill claims to have learned important truths about God and his plan, but readers don't get to see Dill's struggle to reach those truths.

Perhaps the betrayal Dill has experienced is too great for this to happen. And my quibble here might place an unfair burden on an author who wants to stay true to his characters. It certainly should not take anything away from the rich characters that Zentner has created, nor from the authenticity with which he portrays characters like Dill, especially, and the complicated tension he feels between a future outside the influence of his father and the love and sense of duty he feels toward his mother. These are characters who have stayed with me after I finished the book and who, I suspect, will continue to provoke my thoughts for a while.

Incorporating religion and faith into books for a teenage audience, typically viewed as vulnerable, is a fraught endeavor. Authors who seek to explore these issues must do so in authentic ways that honor both

the passion that religion can evoke and the rights of readers to not be preached to. Regardless of the challenge, it does seem clear that authors owe it to young readers to broach what might be a sensitive topic in the name of portraying reality. Julie Berry and Jeff Zentner have ably and courageously done so in these books, and readers will find themselves in richly imagined and finely drawn worlds of authentic characters encountering thought-provoking dilemmas.

It is worth noting that here are two LDS authors who do not write about their own religious tradition, even though they write of struggles and crises that are real for LDS faithful, too. Writing about a minority faith could limit the appeal of these books, or it may be that Berry and Zentner don't want to be seen as proselyting for or being critical of their own faith. Patty Campbell, a scholar of religion in young adult literature, has suggested that these concerns often limit the presence of religion in books for a younger audience. In her work, she has also called for more work from writers with "religious literacy" who understand intimately the ways that young people wrestle with issues of faith and who can portray these honestly and sensitively. In the case of Julie Berry and Jeff Zentner, we have two writers who answer Campbell's call admirably and two characters in *Botille* and *Dill* who will resonate with readers young and old.



## Just Saying

Stanton Harris Hall. *Just Seeing*. Self-published, 2016. 109 pp.

*Reviewed by Mary Lythgoe Bradford*

Stan Hall was one of *Dialogue's* most enthusiastic volunteers back in the '70s when I was its editor. We published some of his poetry then and were sorry when he moved back to his home turf in the Northwest. I

was therefore happy to see that he had continued to hone his poetic gift in his privately published collection *Just Seeing*. The quality of this work causes me to hope that it will be read beyond his family circle, extending even into a second volume, perhaps entitled *Just Saying*.

Hall is a poet on whom nothing is lost—whose gimlet eye misses little in nature or in human nature. His fine brush strokes recall the Japanese masters of the haiku. He is adept at sketching the place where nature meets its creator as it dreams of “taking the soul in hand / and twisting / like lime or sassafras / release the dry corona-white spirit / from the body’s moist darkness / the spirit freed / the child reunited” (50).

A geologist could do no better than Hall’s description of “Sandstone” and its slow sculpture of time’s hands on earth while asking the question: “Is destruction wrapped in the spiral lace / at our very center / transcending sediment / breeding true” (51)?

The collection is divided into three sections: the first, “So Close,” covers youth and family life; the second, “Looking Beyond,” and the third, “Seeing from the Known.” Altogether it constitutes a poet’s luminous biography beginning with “Looking East”—“East” being Idaho, the land of his birth, and moving to a description of the Sawtooth Range of the Rockies, where he “would go to be healed” (4). The poems recount his childhood, including the mother’s loss of a baby girl and his own beginning loss of his hearing, along with a moving tribute to his mother, with bows to friends and family. “Leaving you / leaves me wishing / I could hold you / like a small stone / in my pocket / an agate / velvet smooth and clear / to caress and hold / to sunlight / whenever longing starts” (35).

Hall goes on to examine the roots of faith, asking “why God prizes / even rewards / the broken heart” (4). He searches for an answer: Is it because he knows that “We caught in a world of opposites / will never inherit the power of creation / presumably that pinnacle of joy / if not built upon the solid rock of contrition” (40)? Moroni speaks: “And I, Moroni / deny not the Christ / therefore I wander” (42). Profound thinking in few words! In “Knowing and Doubting,” he declares that there is in doubt “a knowing suffused with burning fingers / and lingering death”

and because of that, “I still believe” (43). He delights in writing of the “boy Joseph” who kneels with a “simple question / but one of quantum significance” which is “the ultimate allegory of renewal” (54). The poet ends this section with a praise song to “The Word.”: “The words of the Torah, the Book of Mormon, and all the words of the prophets, where “we await night / and the songs of stars / singing the word / His word / Oh, praise Him” (56). The ancients joined poets and prophets—rightly so.

In his third section, Hall deals honestly with some of life’s most compelling problems. He declares that there is a “Place deep inside us / where the friend never treads / nor the mother or daughter / the priest / It’s the place that we are, neither feather nor star / . . . that we understand least” (63).

He moves into vivid word paintings of a perfect new moon “balanced on its reflected smile” (63) to the month of March “searching for / the tiny broken hillock / marking crocus advent / and spring” (67). He is equally adept at love songs, painting lovers in the light of a “Single Candle” with “the thigh’s hollow / in concave yellows / shadows moving / in sheltered union / time leaping through / moistened sparks” (82).

In “Sunstroke: Warming to Life,” the poet addresses the sun: “I feel you pushing out dark dreams / dark days and dark notions / I feel you in her breast molded to mine / the heart pushing heat to heat” (89). I wish I had said that!

Hall’s ability to paint word landscapes inspires me to compare him to the Japanese master Hiroshige, recently honored with an exhibit in Washington, DC. In a reviewer’s words: “He fixed for all time the shifting details and fleeting lives on this pathway through the floating world.”<sup>1</sup> This is also a fitting tribute to Stan Hall’s poetry.

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1. Mark Jenkins, “Utagawa Hiroshige’s Vision Opened up the World for Everyday Japanese,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 3, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/museums/utagawa-hiroshiges-vision-opened-up-the-world-for-everyday-japanese/2016/11/03/35c7de82-9baf-11e6-b3c9-f662adaa0048\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.1c36ae0f71f9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/museums/utagawa-hiroshiges-vision-opened-up-the-world-for-everyday-japanese/2016/11/03/35c7de82-9baf-11e6-b3c9-f662adaa0048_story.html?utm_term=.1c36ae0f71f9).

## Faith, Family, and Art

Jack Harrell. *Writing Ourselves: Essays on Creativity, Craft, and Mormonism*. Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2016. 156 pp. Paperback: \$18.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-754-0.

*Reviewed by Jennifer Quist*

The back cover of Jack Harrell's new collection *Writing Ourselves: Essays on Creativity, Craft, and Mormonism* describes the book as a continuation of "a conversation as old as Mormonism itself." It's a fraught phrase, bringing to mind the image of an academic, artistic, and social in-group that has been conversing among themselves for a very long time. It isn't the in-group's fault that the conversation happens in the absence of non-members and newcomers to the Church, neither is it their fault that it goes on without writers, readers, and scholars unconnected to the American Mormon heartland. None of this is the in-group's fault, but perhaps all of it is their problem. Many in the in-group strive to, in Harrell's words, "giv[e] the church and its religion a human and literary face" (99). However, we can't understand what our own faces look like without relying on the reflections and perceptions of people and objects outside ourselves. Perhaps Jack Harrell, as a previous outsider to not just the Mormon literary world but the Mormon world altogether, is especially well-suited to put himself forward to articulate what Mormon letters are and what they ought to be and become.

The notion of "a conversation as old as Mormonism itself" is daunting and possibly counter-productive, backward-looking, exclusive. However, Harrell moves toward cutting it down to size when he provides an overview, a primer, of Mormon literature's history, movements, and canon. This guide appears early in an essay buried late in the book entitled "Toward a Mormon Literary Theory." Harrell credits the substance of this section to Eugene England's 1982 essay "The Dawn-

ing of a Brighter Day: Mormon Literature after 150 Years.” Recalling his first reading of the essay in a literature class at BYU in 1991, Harrell says the “essay . . . came as a revelation to me—as it did for most of the students in the class” (98). The story of Mormon literature is not retold enough if even within the in-group—literature students at the Church’s flagship university—it can still come as a revelation. Harrell’s retelling is concise and elementary but also vital. It signals to newcomers to the “conversation” that it’s alright for us to sit down knowing very little about what’s been discussed before we arrived. Harrell is willing to act as a wise, patient, and badly-needed guide.

In the same book, however, there is plenty to ruminate upon for those with more ravenous appetites for Mormon literary theory, those wanting more than a basic orientation. “Making Meaning as a Mormon Writer,” which first appeared in *Sunstone*, ventures from critiques of “traditional Christianity” and postmodernism all the way to an exegesis of the Book of Abraham. Harrell addresses connections between God’s creative work and our own artistic work, making ambitious and provocative claims such as, “The making of meaning through science, art, and literature aligns ideally with Mormon theology. Our desire to make meaning results from seeing the universe as God does” (71).

The book’s fourteen essays can be classified into three main types: personal essays, discussions of the craft of creative writing, and theoretical treatises like the ones mentioned above. The personal essays are vignettes from Harrell’s family history and his early life in rural Illinois before his Mormon conversion. With candor and warmth, the essays relate elements of social life that have lost their taboos in mainstream American culture—divorce, cohabitation, cannabis and the rest of teenage partying—in matter-of-fact ways, sparing readers any sermonizing and, conversely, any defenses or rationalizations. They are stories told in the clear, tender but restrained voice of good memoir writing. They are exercises, as Harrell says elsewhere, in “seeing things anew—seeing



inside things, behind things, below things, above things" (146), which, Harrell argues, is what creation means. The personal essays also serve to show readers who may not have as varied a background as Harrell's that the hearts, minds, and desires of people outside the cultural Mormon heartland are very much like their own and that there is little need to be self-conscious and guarded. In "Verne and Gusty," the fineness of the detail he relates gets tiresome, communicating the grind of farm life a little too well. Still, these familiar human experiences help make the case for two important premises of the book: that "the rules of aesthetics and craftsmanship are no respecter of persons" (47) and that "good writing can be born out of ordinary ideas" (48).

The second type of essays are those on craftsmanship. They range from extremely basic tips—a numbered list in which the first item is "Make time to write"—to more thoughtful and empirical examinations such as an adaptation of Harrell's doctoral thesis on "the illusion of independent agency, or IIA" (73). IIA is the sense some authors have of experiencing characters they write the same way children with imaginary friends experience their playmates: as if they act on their own. Generally, these essays were for me the low points of the book. Harrell's data for the IIA study was conversations with professional fiction writers. In that case, mark me down as one who thinks IIA is a fancy that fuels our vain pursuit of mystique, protects our field by discouraging beginners who don't relate to it, and makes us look silly.

Overall, the balance of Harrell's text is original and insightful, at times daring. I may have cheered when in "Human Conflict and the Mormon Writer" he calls out some Mormon writing for its "expurgated sameness . . . [its] will toward conformity and conventionality" (90), its overuse of "stereotypes, cardboard conflicts, cheap resolutions" (91), and its "shallow tags" (95) used to oversimplify piety with superficial markers such as facial hair grooming. He speaks of a "Zion culture" (112) we ought to aspire to in place of the Mormon culture we're stuck with for now.

In this collection of essays, Harrell has invested the most precious and personal parts of his humanity: faith, family, and art. Unfortunately, the quality of the editing of the book doesn't measure up to the quality and confidence of the essays. The order in which each piece is presented is problematic. While Harrell's text itself encourages Mormon writers to "embrace [our] weirdness" (45), to unapologetically make art that's open to the peculiarities of Mormonism, the book's structure is striking for its keen self-consciousness of those peculiarities. It reads as a book that is, first and foremost, bent on allaying misgivings. Once the book moves past the introductory personal vignette and settles into discussions of theory and craft, it begins by presenting work plucked from Harrell's curriculum vitae—papers with publication and presentation credits in mainstream venues. There is certainly nothing wrong with the papers. "What Violence in Literature Must Teach Us" is excellent and puts forward a perspective on writing darkness and violence that is sobering and morally mature in a way seldom seen in contemporary fiction. Harrell explains:

Gratuitous violence confounds our aesthetic and moral senses because it is a contradiction, an oxymoron—because it isn't true. The writer who gratuitously takes a life in a story misunderstands the very nature of both life and story. (25)

I am a better writer for having read an insight like this one. Maybe I am a better Mormon for having read it. However, padding the beginning of the book with secular-friendly essays still seems like a move meant to assure readers that Harrell's credentials are legitimate and recognized by an academic community at large, not just within Mormon circles.

If there is any need for such reassurances outside the author biography on the back cover (and I'm not convinced there is), it ought to come secondary to delivering on the discussion of "Mormonism" promised in the book's title. The essays that provide this explicit discussion come too late. "Toward a Mormon Literary Theory" should be the first essay in the book, not the eleventh. Readers who pick up this book rather than

merely clicking through generic advice for writers on blogs and Twitter feeds will have chosen it not in spite of its having the word Mormonism on the cover but because of it. With this readership, there is no need to establish a résumé in order to engage us.

It is unfortunate that the Mormon aspects of Harrell's perspective, study, and experience were not deemed powerful enough to open the book. They are. The frank, at times ecstatic, messages of Harrell's material contradicts the cautious self-consciousness of the editing. It's ironic and unnecessary. Harrell's readership arrives prepared to enter the inner rooms of a book where we can finally indulge in bald-faced discussions of Mormon doctrine, experience, and art. Trust us, trust the author, leave us to it.



## Asking the Questions

Julie J. Nichols. *Pigs When They Straddle the Air: A Novel in Seven Stories*. Provo: Zarahemla Books, 2016. 148 pp. Paperback: \$13.95. ISBN: 978-0-9883233-5-3.

*Reviewed by Emily Shelton Poole*

In her full-length debut, *Pigs When They Straddle the Air: A Novel in Seven Stories*, Julie J. Nichols presents the interconnected lives of various women living in Salt Lake City over a span of thirty years, mostly during the 1970s and 1980s. Each of the seven stories focuses on a different main character until their lives become so entangled that the narratives converge in tragedy, heartache, and eventual healing. Some of these stories appeared previously in other publications, including *Dialogue*.

Nichols wrote the stories as part of her dissertation for a PhD in English from the University of Utah. Two of the stories were controversial enough that Nichols lost her position as a creative writing instructor at Brigham Young University. I speculated, briefly, about which stories could have brought about Nichols's dismissal from BYU—was it the lesbian teaching Primary or the woman calling on Heavenly Mother to bless a nearly-drowned child? The reference to abortifacient herbs? Or the faith healing without the official exercise of the priesthood? Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Each one touches, to some degree, on the fringing edges of Mormonism, and while the stories are fiction and easy to dismiss in an academic way, the existence of actual people on those fringes is a far different matter to consider. In their first iterations, she says, they were unrelated, but many explored "the difficulties of being an educated, unorthodox woman in Utah Mormon culture."<sup>2</sup>

Unorthodox doesn't adequately convey the breadth of Mormon experience portrayed in *Pigs When They Straddle the Air*: faithful, practicing LDS Adela; earthy, mystical, lesbian Riva and her partner, Nina; Riva's daughter, Katie, caught between her traditional LDS father and decidedly non-traditional mother; Riva's sister-in-law, Suzanne, conservative but curious; Annie, a poet and faith healer, unofficially adopted by Riva and Nina as a child; rigidly polygamous Jean and Peggy, and Peggy's young daughter Leeny; and even Riva's grandmother-in-law, portrayed only through her journals. Nichols approaches the lives and choices of each woman with the eye of an omniscient but benevolent observer, completely devoid of judgment or aspersions. Individual devotion is, Nichols asserts, exactly that: shaped individually by unique combinations of cultural bias and life experience.

While Nichols's clear-headed and even-handed approach to her portrayals of Mormon life may provide interesting fodder for book club discussions, it doesn't actually serve the characters that well. They

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2. Julie J. Nichols, "About the Book," <http://www.juliejnichols.com/about-the-book/>.

are known to the reader, but developed deeply only in narrow trenches, with crystalline, efficiently emotive prose, while the more pedestrian aspects of their lives—the very details that might cause a character to imprint more memorably on the reader—are ignored in favor of the more sensational characteristics that make them different. I find this interesting in and of itself: Nichols's purpose seems to be to demonstrate the Venn diagram overlap among all of these different Mormon lives, but the only parts she really uncovers are the isolating ones.

Because of this lack of full character development, the character list at the beginning of *Pigs When They Straddle the Air* is absolutely essential to keeping all of the relationships straight. I found myself drawing family trees with connection lines across generations, trying to cement those relationships in my mind; and what is either a math error or a typo became the subject of a minor obsession as I struggled to reconcile the age difference between two characters.

At its heart, though, *Pigs When They Straddle the Air* is about ideas, and the characters are more like archetypes of unorthodoxy who exist to serve a philosophical end. All people are connected, and the connections are strong but mysterious to both reader and characters. Nichols also wants readers to think about the big questions, some of which cannot be answered: Is there room in the Mormon community for a broader definition of devotion? Can we embrace those who doubt with love rather than judgment? Does an acknowledgment of Heavenly Mother undermine the priesthood or strengthen it? Is Mormonism, at its root, any less mystical than other religious traditions?

In *Pigs When They Straddle the Air*, Nichols deftly draws threads of connection between the traditional, conservative Mormon community and the souls who inhabit the gray area around the edges. Her characters, like the Gadarene pigs alluded to in the title, who received devils cast out of a madman by Jesus, straddle the air in that weightless space between choice and consequence, doubt and devotion, tradition and change. Faithful people straddle worlds and traditions and question their own motives and purposes every day. As Nichols herself said

in her profile on *Mormon Scholars Testify*, “Questioning does not have to lead to divorce or mayhem.”<sup>3</sup> Clearly, for Nichols, compassion and understanding are essential elements of faith, especially when helping others to define theirs. *Pigs When They Straddle the Air* may not hold the answers, but it does, at least, ask the questions.



## The Fruit of Knowledge

Thomas F. Rogers. *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand: Reflections on Faith, Reason, Charity, and Beauty*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016. 349 pp. Paperback: \$21.95. ISBN: 978-0-8425-2976-1.

*Reviewed by Mahonri Stewart*

As a book of short, religious, and academic non-fiction, Thomas F. Rogers’s *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand* is extremely valuable to the Mormon intellectual community; but as a reflection of a devoted disciple and a soulful artist, it goes beyond even that to be authentically moving. In a modern world where spirituality and religious belief is a place of tension and contention, Rogers has written from his place of the faithful agitator—pushing our culture’s boundaries where needed and then turning around to help the Mormon community reach inward and pull the wagons around shared principles.

Working from that place of “proving contraries,” as Joseph Smith recommended, Rogers has often been put under scrutiny by the orthodox, but he has also been championed as a defender of the faith. He

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3. Julie J. Nichols, *Mormon Scholars Testify*, May 2011, <http://mormonscholarstestify.org/2445/julie-j-nichols>.

writes from an accumulation of vantage points—as a BYU professor, a playwright, a linguist, a historian, an LDS mission president in Russia, an activist, an apologist, a skeptic, a patriarch, a family man, an intellectual, a spiritualist, a man of nations, and a man of God—that are truly representative of the idea of proving contraries. Rogers weaves his far-flung—even at times contradictory—experiences into the unifying principles boiled down in the book’s subtitle and the mantra of the collection: “Reflections on Faith, Reason, Charity, and Beauty.”

Editors Jonathan Langford and Linda Hunter Adams have scoured Rogers’s very active and varied writing life and chosen from a huge spectrum of genres and subject matter. Langford and Adams had an eclectic literary cornucopia to choose from—essays, poems, reviews, personal letters, speeches, journal entries—of a rich and long lifetime of writing. Although that does make for a slightly cafeteria-like experience—you’re able to sample a little bit of this, a little bit of that—I, for one, have always enjoyed diversity on my plate.

For example, I enjoyed Rogers’s thoughtful analysis and reflection on Donna Hill’s classic biography on Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (which was to Rogers in his day what Richard Bushman’s *Rough Stone Rolling* has been to many of this generation, in the way that it challenges preconceptions as it spiritually and intellectually nourishes). Reading *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand* can be a little dizzying given the book’s wide-ranging, even scattered, sensibilities: “Letter to a Doubting Former Student,” “The Image of Christ in Russian Literature,” “Insights from a Patriarch’s Journal,” “Why the Book of Mormon is One of the World’s Best Books,” “Coping with Orthodoxy: The Honors Student Syndrome,” “An Insider’s View of the Missionary Training Center, 1993–1996,” “The Gospel of John as Literature,” or the devotional “Discovering Ourselves in Others.” Yet, again, that’s part of the collection’s adventurous charm and soul-searching openness.

However, as a dramatist, I was most drawn to his essays about his playwriting. Among his plays, *Huebener* and *Fire in the Bones* are the most famous, and classics of Mormon drama. When I edited *Saints on*

*Stage: An Anthology of Mormon Drama*, Huebener was one of the first plays I made sure was included, due to both its success and its influence.

I had first encountered *Huebener* when peers performed a scene at a BYU high school drama camp in 1995, and it made a distinct impression. When I later found a collection of Rogers's plays at the BYU bookstore, I immediately picked it up and have held onto the now badly time-worn, weathered—but treasured—volume ever since.

There are some strong corollaries between the historical protagonists in *Huebener* and *Fire in the Bones*—Helmuth Hübener and John D. Lee—and the stances that Rogers makes for himself in *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand*. Both Hübener and Lee were deeply invested in Mormonism. In Hübener's case, he was willing to sacrifice his own life for his deeply held beliefs; in Lee's case, he was willing to sacrifice the lives of others. Their zealotry, however, made others around them wary, and officials within the Church eventually offered up both of them as scapegoats and sacrifices.

Helmuth Hübener was a fifteen-year-old Mormon boy in World War II Germany, where he and some fellow youthful compatriots fought against the Nazi influence with a propagandistic printing press hidden within the LDS meeting house. Unfortunately for him, his branch president was a Nazi, and someone within his branch reported on Hübener and his friends. Despite being one of the most diligent members in his branch, as well as one of its most intelligent and one of its most shining examples of integrity, Hübener was betrayed and eventually executed by Hitler's government for his crimes of conscience. Adding even more to the tragedy, his branch president excommunicated Hübener, making him a double martyr, politically and religiously.

John D. Lee, however, is a harder sell as a noble figure, as he was one of the chief participants in the infamous and tragic Mountain Meadows Massacre. As one of the perpetrators of one of the deadliest acts of religious zealotry in the nineteenth century, it is a tough task to place him in the same league as the conscientious Hübener. Yet Rogers



does accomplish a sympathetic and moving portrayal of Lee as a tragic figure in *Fire in the Bones*, though one I still find highly problematic considering his status as a mass murderer of innocent men, women, and children. Like Shakespeare, who can even give Richard III a sympathetic twist when facing his death at the end of that famous tragedy, Rogers digs deep to find the human, even in the darkest parts of our natures.

After the Mountain Meadows Massacre, John D. Lee, while initially protected by Mormon leadership—especially Brigham Young, who saw the zealous and devoted Lee as an adopted son—was, like Hübener, scapegoated and offered as a sacrifice to the US government to deflect the attention off the rest of the community. Also like Hübener, Lee was excommunicated from the church he had sacrificed so much for, even the sacrifice of his honor and eventually the sacrifice of his life. In two essays and an interview, Rogers gives us a good deal of the context and consequences behind the writing of these honest, spiritual, but dangerous (at least according to some past overly-orthodox sources) plays.

*Huebener* was one of the most overwhelmingly successful plays to ever run at BYU, with an extended run and over five thousand audience members. Despite such an encouraging enthusiasm, Rogers was asked not to perform the play again, as some Church leadership expressed concern that the play might have a revolutionary effect if spread among Latter-day Saints in the Cold War political reality of the time. If this act of censorship weren't enough, Rogers was released early from his responsibilities with the BYU Honors Program, and it did seem as if, like Hübener and Lee, his very membership in the Church might have been in jeopardy.

Here's one of the most interesting things about Hübener and Lee, though: both had their memberships reinstated after their deaths. Once cooler minds and warmer hearts within the Church leadership had a chance to review their cases, their stories had a more redemptive bent. The same can be said of Rogers. Though there were some who were threatened by his honest and unvarnished portrayals of our tragic

natures, there were others who eventually lauded and praised him for such clear-eyed spirituality and integrity. The Church eventually trusted him with deeply responsible positions, as he was called to be the mission president for the Russia St. Petersburg Mission and was assigned as the traveling LDS patriarch in eastern Europe.

In the short term, spiteful fate seems to punish honesty. Yet the long arm of God's grace catches up with such injustices. *Let Your Hearts and Minds Expand* is some of the fruit of Rogers's authenticity and true-eyed faith. As Terry Givens writes in the foreword, Rogers "reminds us, without saying so explicitly, that Latter-day Saints too often forget our legacy that sets us apart: we are supposed to believe the adventure loomed *outside* the Garden" (xiii). Knowledge may lead to penalty, but it is also the first step on the road to eternal life.



## Lapsing into Daredevilry

Shawn Vestal. *Daredevils*. New York: Penguin Press, 2016. 308 pp. Hardcover: \$27.00. ISBN: 978-1-101-97989-1.

*Reviewed by Julie J. Nichols*

It's a hard truth: you have to be damn smart to be a writer of good fiction. If you're dumb, forget it. You have to hear words in your head—and who doesn't? But you also have to know how to put them together in a sentence that's not only grammatical but original in its context, truer than any other sentence could possibly be. Then you have to do that with paragraphs and chapters in the service of a whole whose shape knocks readers right out of unconsciousness, makes them alive, blasts their eyes open so they see the world new.

Shawn Vestal is smart. He's so smart he could write *Daredevils*, which is about three daredevil kids on the run, two of the daredevil bad guys they're on the run from, and Evel Knievel, who was the quintessential iconic daredevil of the United States in the 1970s. He figures just enough in this story to be real. Or almost. One of the best episodes (248) in this book comprised of sharp, quick episode after sharp, quick episode is itself comprised of a series of questions, whose culmination is: is this guy Evel Knievel or isn't he? At first Jason is sure he is. But then he's not so sure. The excellence of the novel as a whole lies at least partly in moments of shifting certainty—wary recognition that the answers to life's most piercing questions aren't what you expect. Nevertheless, the questions must be asked. Ultimately the answers, though unexpected, are inevitable and must be reckoned with.

The three daredevil kids are Loretta, fifteen-year-old youngest daughter of struggling Mormon fundamentalists, who “wants to fly into her future, but . . . feels she must be very careful, must be precise and exact, or she will miss it” (7); Jason, a high school senior in Gooding, Idaho who has spent his mission money on “eight-track tapes [to play in his Chrysler LeBaron] and hamburgers at the Oh-So-Good Inn” (50), son of goodly Mormon parents but grandson of a rule-breaking grandpa who believes in “a little fun when you get a chance” (21); and Jason's half-Native-American friend Boyd, more street-savvy than Jason, a little less obsessed with leaving Gooding, a little more willing to fly. Evel “addresses an adoring nation” throughout, until he actually shows up. Or not.

One of the daredevil bad guys is Dean, Loretta's father, a “stern but halfhearted” half-caste (7) who left his fundamentalist home in Short Creek, Arizona when he was a teenager but came back with his family when his last daughter turned eight and he saw he couldn't baptize her into “normal” Mormonism. The other bad guy is Baker, who has another name at the beginning of the novel. These two are in uneasy cahoots, partly because of Loretta. Dean is dealing in rotten business, and Baker

knows it. He sticks with Dean partly because he's pretty sure he can profit from Dean's fraud but partly, also, because of Loretta.

All these characters, and an excellent supporting cast as well, come together because of Loretta. Will she escape them? Will she thwart their designs on her? Even the good kids have designs on her. Even Evel has designs on her. But she's a daredevil, and we learn not to doubt her resourcefulness. It's believable. She's not a superhero. Neither are the boys she runs with. Dean and Baker (well, and Evel too) have a certain authority just because they're grown men, but one of the questions the book requires us to ask is: is that condition by itself ever enough? Is there legitimacy in confronting and upstaging that tiny modicum of authority if there's nothing behind it but weakness and self-absorption? And of course, the more insistent question is: if not, what must be done?

What Loretta and Jason and Boyd collectively feel about the lives that have been thrust upon them drives them to run; what they collectively know may be all that will save them. Props are judiciously employed: cars, motorcycles, hidden cash. Brains. From the first page, where Evel addresses the nation, to the first appearance of each character, to the perfectly-structured crisis growing between the kids, who know they must flee, and the bad guys, who want them for their own purposes—all the way to the painful, glorious, barely-in-control climax, Vestal's writing is in marvelous control.

*Daredevils* does not show epiphanies or moments of enlightenment hard-won and hard-fought (though it is about kinds of wisdom, and how some kinds facilitate the future while some certainly do not). This is not a story about crises of faith and joyful returnings. In an Amazon.com interview with Jess Walter, Vestal says that his "lapsed Mormon faith" figures in his fiction "more in the lapse than the faith." But, he says, Mormonism is his heritage, and he appreciates its richness.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the day, *Daredevils* is, deliciously, a great story about the seventies, about kids growing up in Mormon communities where

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4. Shawn Vestal, "A Q&A with Shawn Vestal and Jess Walter," <https://www.amazon.com/dp/0544027760>.

they don't fit, a couple of men who can't even get their wrongness right, and one quick-witted young woman who cuts the Gordian knot. At one point Boyd says to Loretta, "I don't get you. How do you become you, living the way you've lived?" 'I'm creative,' she says. 'I'm smart'" (222). If there's a theme in this book more emphatic than the theme of striking out to meet your future head on, it's the theme of being smart. The dumb ones might make it partway down the road, but the smart ones get away, however they can.

*Daredevils* is a smack-your-lips-with-pleasure kind of read. Every sentence is intact, every image finely balanced with its corresponding action, every scene the only one that could follow the one that came before. It's a must-have. I can't think of anybody (except maybe a die-hard plotless-enigma Beckett fan) who wouldn't be highly entertained and pleasantly excited by this novel. It makes you smarter, more able to meet your future. It keeps you turning pages, not wanting to miss a beat, smiling all the way through. Don't miss it.



## A Book Full of Insights

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870*. New York: Knopf, 2017. 512 pp. Hardcover: \$35.00. ISBN: 9780307594907.

*Reviewed by Benjamin Park*

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich is one of the most decorated historians of early America. Her book *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Knopf, 1990) earned her both the Bancroft and Pulitzer prizes, as well as a MacArthur Fellowship.

Her corpus of work epitomized a social history movement of the late-twentieth century that not only integrated women's voices into traditional narratives, but also revised those very narratives by demonstrating the ideas, actions, and allegiances of the forgotten half of America's story. At the same time, Ulrich was part of another crucial cultural movement: the resurgence of Mormon feminism during the 1970s, as illustrated by the resurrected *Exponent* and the appearance of *Dialogue's* "pink issue." It is fitting that these two worlds converged with her most recent monograph, *A House Full of Females*, which is a monumental contribution to Mormon, gender, and American historiography.

The subtitle for the book, however, is somewhat misleading: *Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism*. Though the introduction and final chapter that frame the text indeed focus on Mormon women arguing for "women's rights," that particular theme is much subtler and, at times, subservient throughout the story. Ulrich is, of course, arguing that the notion of "rights" is much more malleable than traditional, male-centric definitions, but that tension is never explicitly investigated. And while the jolting paradox of the title—how could women who participated in polygamy simultaneously believe in women's rights?—is readily apparent, "rights" seems a bit too restrictive for what Ulrich is doing. Further, plural marriage is not always the sole focus of the volume: the early chapters that precede Joseph Smith's introduction of the practice, as well as the later chapters that focus on male missionaries abroad and missionary wives at home, are as interested in monogamous relationships as they are polygamous ones. This is to say, the subtitle of *A House Full of Females* sells the volume's importance short: more than a history of polygamy and women's rights, this is a revisionist social history of Mormonism between Kirtland and 1870, as seen through the eyes of the women who lived it. Ulrich is asking a provocative question: what would the history of Mormonism during the tenure of its first two prophets, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, look like if its leading men were re-cast as *supporting* actors?

The answer to that question is one that the Mormon history community has needed for quite some time. Though many of the events and circumstances are well known to historians of Mormonism, they will appear new given that they are here told almost solely through the vantage point of women. Even figures like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young are seen through the lens of Zina D. H. Young and Patty Sessions. This should disrupt traditional narratives and frameworks. By re-casting seminal moments, some elements of the story (the emotional and physical struggle, the restlessness, the camaraderie) are highlighted, while others (the radicalism, the boldness, the certainty) are subverted. Post-martyrdom Nauvoo appears strikingly different through the eyes of Zina D. H. Young, as does Winter Quarters through the perspective of Patty Sessions and the Utah War through the experience of Phoebe Woodruff. Throughout, the Mormon story takes on a new hue.

Ulrich's tale follows a growing cast of characters as the decades progress and the events climax. The first few chapters focus on Wilford and Phoebe Woodruff and the trials they faced during his many missionary and ecclesiastical duties. Woodruff then remains a constant presence throughout the book even as more women (like Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. H. Young, and Augusta Cobb) take a more prominent role. But men like William Clayton and Hosea Stout retain frequent appearances. It might seem odd for a book focused on women's ideas and experiences to spend so much time on male leaders. And in some ways, it is. But figures like Woodruff, Clayton, and Stout allow Ulrich to focus on two key themes: first, the importance of written records, given these men's notorious reputation as diary keepers; and second, the personal relationships through which plural marriage was lived. Ulrich is not just interested in polygamy as an institution, but rather the entire culture through which it was introduced and lived. The diaries of men and women are consistently blended together to provide a much more comprehensive view of Mormon society.

Most of *A House Full of Females's* chapters focus on one theme, event, or context, along with a concomitant set of players. The chapters on polygamy in Nauvoo are arguably the best accounts of that secretive and tumultuous period, as Ulrich painstakingly reconstructs the fraught nature of polygamy's origins. Men and women struggled to understand the practice's meaning and implementation, as relationships were tested, torn, and reaffirmed. Clayton, like a handful of other Mormon men, yearned to initiate a godly union that simultaneously balanced his sexual desires, need for approval, and penchant for drama. In Winter Quarters, Ulrich focuses on the triumvirate of Stout, Sessions, and Mary Richards, whose contrasting perspectives give a sense of the complex yet temporary refuge. During a few years where the center of Mormonism consistently shifted east and west, how did women find a sense of solidarity and community? Once in Utah, Augusta Cobb, a wife of Brigham Young, takes a prominent role as her independent streak is contrasted with other polygamous wives, including those within the Young family. Later chapters explore the creation (and dissolution) of local Relief Societies, missionary trips across the Pacific, as well as the conflict with the United States government. The story climaxes as Mormon women join fellow American suffragists in fighting for women's rights. At every point, there is an awareness of and emphasis on the diversity of opinions and experiences. There was no single model for a Mormon polygamous life.

But in trying to capture so many different viewpoints, the narrative at times becomes disjointed. Ulrich moves from one record-keeper to the next—the chapter on the westward trek features a dozen diarists—while introducing new backgrounds and anxieties all along the way. The reader is prone to get lost. One of the hallmarks of Ulrich's acclaimed book *A Midwife's Tale* was its focus on the tedious yet revealing elements of a singular diarist's life; charting similar analysis from literal houses full of females is a tougher task. Perhaps the book's strongest and most poignant section is chapter 11, which focuses on the lived dynamics of the Woodruff family in the early 1850s. While Ulrich brings in develop-



ments of other leading Mormon families, her ability to focus on one household demonstrates how these broader tensions played out in a particular context.

Besides the book's general narrative, there are two persuasive arguments in *A House Full of Females* that deserve recognition, one explicit and one implicit. The explicit argument concerns the nature of authority as practiced within the Mormon community. While Ulrich acknowledges the strict and at times alarming patriarchal tone of leaders like Brigham Young, she insists that these men emphasized their authority so often because they felt it was threatened. That is, their rhetoric was more representative of their anxiety than it was of their reality. "From the outside," Ulrich explains, everything "appeared to be under Brigham Young's control." But from the inside, "his genius lay in an ability to embrace what he could not command" (290). Throughout Mormonism's first half-century, Mormon women organized, protested, and gathered by their own accord, often leaving men to adapt in response. This more cooperative framework for Mormon participation offers important revisions for the field. As Ulrich summarizes in the book's final pages,

Latter-day Saint women built the Church that claimed their loyalty. They sustained its missionary system, testified to its truths, and enhanced its joyful, performative, and playful elements. . . . Without earnest female coverts, Mormonism's meetings would have been less colorful and its revelations less intimate and personal. . . . They gave birth to the children who sustained the kingdom.

Certainly, there could have been no such thing as plural marriage if hundreds of women had not accepted "the principle" and passed it on to new generations. . . . Living their religion, they learned wisdom by the things that they suffered, and when the opportunity came . . . they defended the right to speak for themselves. (387)

One only hopes future works in the field can be similarly colorful.

The second, more subtle argument concerns sources. What historical remnants are left behind, how do these varying artifacts reflect their makers, and how do historians choose which to focus on? Besides

examining diaries and letters, Ulrich emphasizes that historians have overlooked equally revealing sources: the doodles in Wilford Woodruff's diaries, the token Eliza R. Snow gave the Young family, the album kept by Sarah Kimball, the quilts woven by local Relief Societies, and even the Relief Society halls built by female leaders—all these relics were tokens of friendships, relationships, and allegiances that exemplify the communities in which they were created. Dissecting this material is crucial to reconstructing the lives of those outside official written records. The publishers at Knopf are to be commended for allowing so many detailed images and illustrations throughout the text, which brings the stories, anxieties, and lessons to life.

*A House Full of Females* is a master historical work by a master historian. This is a narrative of the LDS tradition deserved by an age that is focused on inclusion and diversity. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich demonstrates what Mormon history can look like when we integrate women's voices, concerns, and experiences into our larger narratives. And in doing so, she issues a clarion call for how Mormon history should be written in the future.

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TRULY CHRISTIAN?

Paul Nibley

The bishop is taking a risk letting me speak because I have a reputation of being a bit different, but he has reviewed my talk and doesn't think I'll do much damage. I have also noticed that I am taking the place of the youth speakers, and he has scheduled a choir number to put out any fires I might start, and there are two other speakers to clean up the mess. If I should stray, he has promised to set me straight.

To start, I must explain my personal point of view. In section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants is a passage that has given me great comfort.

To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world.

To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful. (Doctrine and Covenants 46:13–14)

There follows a list of gifts that some have and others do not: faith, healing, prophesy, miracles, and many others.

At a time when I was very troubled about what I believed and didn't believe, and what I was and was not capable of as a member of the Church, this scripture let me know that it is all right to be less than what I had imagined I should be. I was struggling with doubts, having trouble with my "testimony."

There are words in any language that have more than one meaning. Testimony is one of those words. The word "testimony" comes from Latin and translates literally as "witness." In the scriptures, as in law courts, "testimony" means a recounting by a witness of what one has seen, heard, or experienced. In that sense, a testimony is neither weak

nor strong and shouldn't wax or wane; it just is. In a religious sense, "testimony" has come to mean something closer to "faith."

At that troubled time in my life, I looked closely at my "testimony" from both definitions. I had to admit that I had never witnessed a miracle, or had a vision, or received a burning in the bosom, or had an inexplicable answer to a prayer. In a court of law, I would not be a good witness of the gospel because my testimony is the absence of witnessing.

In the religious sense of "testimony," I felt equally useless. Most people's testimony, or faith, is founded on some kind of experience that I hadn't had. My faith, or, if you prefer, my testimony, didn't exist.

However, I know that all of you have "a testimony" and that it is dear to you and gives you great comfort, even as it grows and shrinks. Most of you are very fortunate because you *have* seen, heard, or experienced wonderful things of which you can bear witness. I have not, but I believe that most of you have. Section 46 tells me that to me it has been given to believe your words, that I also might have eternal life if I continue faithful.

Now that you know where I'm coming from, let's get back to being truly Christian. I have heard that a true Christian is someone who tries first to understand Jesus Christ, second to emulate his actions, and third to follow his teachings.

I have struggled for years to understand Jesus and have come to the conclusion that he, and the culture he came from, are so far removed from me and my culture that I can only get a vague, incomplete, and flawed understanding. So in this first task I have pretty much failed as a true Christian.

The second task is to emulate Jesus' actions. He spent his ministry traveling the countryside working miracles and healing the sick and the lame and spiritually possessed. I haven't had any success at this task either, though for a long time I tried.

But when it comes to teachings, I have the scriptures, and, with diligent research and study, I can find and follow what Jesus taught. Here even someone with very limited gifts has a chance.

One day Jesus was questioned by a Pharisee who asked him how to obtain eternal life. Jesus, knowing the man was an educated lawyer, turned the question back on him and said, “You know the law. What do you say?”

And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.

And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. (Luke 10:27–28)

Here the lawyer tried to get Jesus into a debate. He asked, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus answered with the parable of the good Samaritan. You all know the story. A man was attacked, robbed, wounded, and left for dead on the road. A priest saw him and passed by without helping. A Levite did the same. Then a Samaritan, a man not related to the Jews and considered by Jewish priests and Levites to be inferior, came and helped the injured man. The lawyer had to admit that the unworthy, inferior Samaritan was the better neighbor.

Jesus taught repeatedly that the second great commandment, in the same class with the greatest commandment, is to love our neighbors as ourselves. And his parable implies that our neighbors are the undocumented immigrants, the new age crystal-gazers, the Baptist missionaries, the people who voted the other way in the last election, the people who play their car stereo so loud it shakes all the other cars at the stoplight, and even people who mind their own business.

This is what I think it means to be truly Christian. This is something that even a person with meager spiritual gifts like me can do. But, always

a skeptic and rarely satisfied with the easy answer, I ask why. Why should I love my neighbor? Why did the Samaritan help when the others didn't?

Huckleberry Finn asked his temporary guardian, the Widow Douglas, why she did "good" things, like taking him in when his father died. She told him she did it to make sure that she would go to heaven and not hell. This, to Huck, and to me, is disingenuous. The Samaritan did not hold the same beliefs that the robbery victim did. He did not act out of fear of punishment or for hope of a reward.

This empathy is not a uniquely human nor, necessarily, a religious trait. A primatologist was studying chimpanzees in a zoo in Holland when he noticed some altruistic behavior. An aging, arthritic female chimpanzee was finding it harder and harder to move. The other chimps seemed concerned. They would try to help her when she tried to get food, and one brought her water by carrying it in his mouth and then spitting it into her mouth.

The scientist was thrilled to see this because it meant that our animal relatives were recognizing that members of their community needed help and were helping, without any concept of heaven or hell. There was no way that they could ever count on being rewarded for what they selflessly did. Likewise, there was no punishment expected if they did not help.

Then one day the scientist witnessed an act of neighborly love that went beyond kindness between well-acquainted chimpanzees. A bird had flown into the area where the chimpanzees lived and, mistaking the reflection in a large window for a tree in the distance, it flew into the window and was knocked unconscious.

One of the chimps witnessed the bird hitting the glass and hurried over to where the bird lay on the ground. She picked it up carefully and examined it. After a few moments, the bird began to move. The chimp, holding the bird carefully, climbed up a tall tree. She gently opened the bird's wings with her fingers and tossed it into the air. The bird flew away. This chimpanzee was empathetic enough to help a member of a different species.

My point here is that loving one's neighbor is something that can happen without any religion involved. I think this is what Jesus meant, even as he neatly slipped out of the Pharisee lawyer's rhetorical trap. The good Samaritan was not thinking of what was in it for him any more than the good chimp was. He saw someone in need and helped.

So, to be "truly Christian" is to love one's neighbor as one's self and recognize that we are all neighbors—everyone. I'm happy to report that everyone I have come across in this neighborhood has treated me in a truly Christian way, even though I am different. I commend you all and thank you in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.



Lane Twitchell  
*Buddhascreen*  
oil, polymers, and wax on cut material mounted to panel  
48" x 48"  
2016



## THOUGHTS ON LANE TWITCHELL

Brad Kramer

*"I don't know how you were diverted  
You were perverted too  
I don't know how you were inverted  
No one alerted you"  
—George Harrison*

*"If being an egomaniac means I believe in what I do and in my art or  
music, then in that respect you can call me that. . . . I believe in what I  
do, and I'll say it."  
—John Lennon*

The German painter Gerhard Richter once wrote: "I like everything that has no style: dictionaries, photographs, nature, myself, and my paintings. (Because style is violent, and I am not violent)." Lane Twitchell is an artist whose particular skillset produces immense works that are both furiously energized and so stylistically distinctive that one could recognize one of his paintings even if obscured by the most impervious haze the Wasatch Front is capable of generating. By contrast, Lane also sometimes makes pictures that self-consciously eschew "style" with a commitment very likely borne of his first direct encounter with Richter's work, visiting a Virginia gallery a missionary for his natal religious tradition in the mid 1980s. So Lane works in two very different but not unrelated modes, each tied in its own way to his distinctive creative tools. Lane's work is ferociously intelligent, frenzied, brimming with ideas, occasionally political, and above all a sheer pleasure to look at.

For the purposes of this show let's say that "inversion" carries *three* separate, but not unrelated, connotations. As an obsolete sexological term, *inversion* curses the homosexual with the mark and stigma of mental illness. Sexual inversion was a kind of inborn reversal of gender traits and behaviors that included "same sex attraction." Many of the smaller works on paper (and there are many) in the show are autobiographical—not just in the sense that they depict bits of Lane's personal story but in the sense that the pictures themselves date to formative periods of his life. Whatever psychosexual dynamics might be present in these images I leave to the viewer to judiciously decode. Or not. I will, however, return briefly to a Freudian vocabulary below in discussing the larger, more abstract, and more stylistically distinctive paintings displayed in the main gallery.

"Inversion" also connotes dualistic variation, the photo-negative, a reverse symmetry, a thing as an inverted version of another thing. This pattern features somewhat obviously and explicitly in several of the works of the show. It also informs how the show is organized on several levels. First the above mentioned modes, the distinct bodies of work stitched together. Small works on paper, largely representational, often text based, which signify the artist's history in multiple senses. And massive abstract paintings, nearly three-dimensional in their textured concentration. Both, in their own way, are self-psychoanalytic. Both move us into the artist's head. But they also bring us into contact with someone else's head: Joseph Smith Jr's. We see Lane's brain not just on visual display but engaged in a kind of dynamic and confrontational tension with Smith's brain (literally and figuratively). Yet far from a mere foil, Smith is an ineffaceable presence here more than anything else as an artist, the creative force depicted so iconically in Harold Bloom's *American Religion* (books and texts versus pictures and images is another inverted parallel central to the exhibition).

Finally, "inversion" is a phenomenon that is simultaneously natural and anthropogenic, distinctively present in the valleys of the Wasatch

Front, and inevitably political. Maybe the unfortunate meteorological byproduct of an otherwise ineffably beautiful natural landscape, maybe the fault of an “industrious” people uncomfortably comfortable participating in the workings and sharing the spoils of late capitalism, inversion is an inescapable toxicity emanating from the headquarters of the Mormon kingdom. It obscures natural beauty, refracts our landscape. It is also a political and even cultural flashpoint, an entry point into a fraught and often angry conversation about economy and ecology, Man and Nature, stewardship and public health, regulation and management. It is the dark side of the Mormon Kingdom in the American West, the stuff of Holy Wars and Great Divides.

These themes too make their way explicitly into a number of works in the show. If landscape is the signature art form of the American West, middle-class consumer culture is its lifeblood. In Lane’s expert hands the American Landscape is transformed into something that reflects back the impulses behind and beneath American consumerism. Combined with oil paint and assorted polymers, immaculately folded and cut paper and polyester films project landscapes coated over with visual traces of suburban life, from houses to churches to gas stations. The result presses an iconic emblem of bourgeois life—the hand-crafted, quilt-like, expansively self-reproductive forms of papercutting—into a recursive and re-iterative exposition of the concurrent projects of American and American Religious Expansionism and their confluence in the trappings of consumer capitalism.

Still, a mere exposition of the ideas found in Lane’s show do a tremendous disservice to the work itself. More than anything else these are objects of almost limitless visual gravity. Kaleidoscopic, richly patterned, explosively textured “landscapes” that hit the brain with the force of electrodes (too soon?). Forget color theory and unusual technique: these are paintings you want to rub your face against, images you’ll never feel capable of completely taking in. For all of Freud’s now notorious focus on psychosexuality, it is a less well-known Freudian insight—this into the

nature of religion—that strikes me as most relevant to the show: he saw the obsessive and repetitive attention to micro-detail common to both formal ritual and private “compulsive” behaviors as not just analogous but cognitively isomorphic. As literally processed along identical neural pathways. If Lane’s own journey from Christianity to Buddhism (from, in now-Jungian framing, the angular, rectilinear, hard-logical form of “western” thought to the circularity and transcendent self-referentiality of “eastern” metaphysics) is unmistakably depicted in this show’s most substantial works (a round Buddha figure literally floating above an inverted crucifix in “A Cross of Smog”), it is almost certainly true that the detail-obsessed, perfectionist, jot-and-tittle protestant ethic of his native religion has been spiritually translated (is anything more Mormon?) and is now expressed in the almost ritually intense, fervent, neurotic, fanatically pulverized granularity of these staggeringly beautiful paintings.

Which is to say, for a gay ex-Mormon, Lane Twitchell has produced some of the most vividly religious objects I have ever encountered.

—Provo, Utah  
January, 2017

## CONTRIBUTORS

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Frances Lee Menlove is one of the five founders of *Dialogue*, and the journal's first manuscripts editor. Later she enjoyed a long career as the chief psychologist and director of human resources at the University of California Los Alamos National Laboratory. In addition to a PhD in psychology, she has an MDiv from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. A book of her essays and devotional writings, *The Challenge of Honesty: Essays for Latter-day Saints by Frances Lee Menlove*, was published by Signature Books in 2014. The collection's title is drawn from a seminal and highly referenced essay she wrote for *Dialogue's* first issue.

William Morris {william@motleyvision.org} is the author of *Dark Watch and Other Mormon-American Stories* and the founder of the Mormon arts blog A Motley Vision, which won an Association for Mormon Letters award for criticism. He has also edited two Mormon genre fiction anthologies for Peculiar Pages—*Monsters & Mormons* and *States of Deseret*. His fiction and criticism has appeared in *BYU Studies*, *Irreantum*, and *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. He lives in Minnesota with his wife and daughter.

Paul Nibley {paulnibley@digis.net} grew up in Provo in a liberal intellectual household as the oldest of eight children. He is a veteran of the Coast Guard and served a mission in Italy, Switzerland and Yugoslavia. He married a Czech refugee, Bronia, and they have five children and twelve grandchildren. The best definition he can give of himself is that he is a person who makes things. Here is a partial list of things he has made: Houses, Boats, Cars, Doors, Coffins, Furniture, Sundials, Cabinets, Prototypes, Gadgets, Family, Scenery, Props, Movies, Friends, Enemies, Filmmakers, Mistakes.

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S. E. Page {gossamerpage@gmail.com} is a Pushcart Prize nominee and a 2013 recipient of *Dialogue's* New Voices award for poetry. Her poems have been published in several journals including *Connecticut River Review*, *Star\*Line*, *Fresh Ink*, *NonBinary Review*, and *Noctua Review*, and included in the anthology *Fire in the Pasture*. She is the co-editor of *Young Ravens Literary Review*. She blogs at iffymagic.com.

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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." 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. In the piece that appears here, Peterson pays homage to the first issue of *Dialogue* and its original cover.

Emily Shelton Poole {inkmome@gmail.com} writes, makes music, runs a business, enjoys the mountains, and raises four kids with her husband

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Kylie Nielson Turley {kmnturley@hotmail.com} has taught writing courses at BYU since Fall 1997, and has, more recently, enjoyed teaching BYU's "Literature of the LDS People" course. A believer that one should "practice" what she "preaches," she uses her spare time to write about Utah and Mormon history, pre-1900 LDS literature, herself and her family, and—her current obsession—Alma the Younger. Her five children strongly suggest that you not ask her about Alma unless you have a solid hour to sit and listen.

Lane Twitchell is a New York based artist, born in Murray, Utah and raised in Ogden. An early interest in landscape painting has resulted in a working process and style which incorporates intricately cut paper into kaleidoscopic "landscapes" whose richly textured patterns form endlessly iterative combinations of the visual ephemera of the American unconscious, his own personal biography, and something like cosmic narrative contours not unrelated to the Rocky Mountain Mormonism of his upbringing. Lane Twitchell holds a B.F.A. from The University of Utah, which he attended on A Special Departmental Scholarship and

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Terresa Wellborn {[teresaw@gmail.com](mailto:teresaw@gmail.com)} is an advocate of libraries, bricolage, and her four children. She reads faster than she hikes, runs faster than she writes, and has often been mistaken for Miss Frizzle. Her writing appears in various journals and anthologies. When not on a mountaintop, she prefers to dwell in possibility.

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# 2017 EUGENE ENGLAND MEMORIAL PERSONAL ESSAY CONTEST

In the spirit of Gene's writings, entries should relate to Latter-day Saint experience, theology, or worldview. Essays will be judged by noted Mormon authors and professors of literature. Winners will be notified by email and announced in our Winter issue and on *Dialogue's* website. After the announcement, all other entrants will be free to submit their essays elsewhere.

Prizes:

First place, \$300; second place, \$200; and third place \$100

Rules:

1. Up to three entries may be submitted by any one author. Send manuscript in PDF or Word format to [englandcontest@dialoguejournal.com](mailto:englandcontest@dialoguejournal.com) by September 1, 2017.
2. Each essay must be double-spaced. All essays must be 3500 words or fewer. The author's name should not appear on any page of the essay.
3. In the body of the email, the author must state the essay's title and the author's name, address, telephone number, and email. The author must also include language attesting that the entry is her or his own work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not being considered for publication elsewhere, and that it will not be submitted to other publishers until after the contest. If the entry wins, *Dialogue* retains first-publication rights though publication is not guaranteed. The author retains all literary rights. *Dialogue* discourages the use of pseudonyms; if used, the author must identify the real and pen names and the reasons for writing under the pseudonym.

Failure to comply with the rules will result in disqualification.

# DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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Colleen McDannell, "Mexicans, Tourism, and Book of Mormon Geography"

David Grandy, "'In Christ All Things Hold Together': A Christian Perspective on Quantum Entanglement"

Gail Houston, "Dreaming in the Age of Trump"

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