

# DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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# "INFECTED WITH DOUBT"<sup>1</sup>: AN EMPIRICAL OVERVIEW OF BELIEF AND NON-BELIEF IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN MORMONISM

Benjamin Knoll and Jana Riess

Daniel, twenty-eight, is an active Church member and temple worker who served a mission and now holds a calling as a young single adult representative for his stake. He says he has both seen and performed miracles, and has a strong belief in Jesus Christ. But he has also struggled at times with doubt, which he says has "come along in many different forms" throughout his adult life. In part, his own questions were intensified by the fact that six of his eight siblings have left the Church—including his twin. "That was one of the most difficult times for me, when it seemed like one after the other, members of my family were leaving the Church," he says. "I had to go through every part of the gospel one by one: What

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1. President Henry B. Eyring used the phrase "infected with doubt" in an October 2013 general conference address titled "Bind Up Their Wounds": "The treasuring part of that scripture has meant for me a matter of feeling something about the words. For instance, when I have gone to try to help someone wavering in his or her faith about the Prophet Joseph Smith's divine calling, feelings come back to me. It is not only the words from the Book of Mormon. It is a feeling of assurance of truth that comes whenever I read even a few lines from the Book of Mormon. I cannot promise that it will come to every person infected with doubt about the Prophet Joseph or the Book of Mormon. But I know Joseph Smith is the Prophet of the Restoration. I know that the Book of Mormon is the word of God because I have treasured it." See <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/bind-up-their-wounds?lang=eng>.

makes us different from other churches? Why should it matter that I'm Mormon? What does it mean to have the priesthood? What is Christ in my life?" It was a lonely and challenging period, but he got through it by remembering all of the times he had felt the Holy Spirit and witnessed the power of God at work in priesthood blessings. He is grateful to feel like he is on the other side of that faith crisis now, though he also says he is "amazed that it came out the way it did."<sup>2</sup>

Daniel is far from alone in having doubts. After many years on the periphery of mainstream discourse, the topic of religious doubt has recently emerged onto the public agenda in Mormon culture. Many have noted how the internet has radically changed the traditional terms of who controls access to information about Mormon history and doctrine, giving rank-and-file Mormons access to arguments, evidence, and perspectives that contradict many traditional Mormon narratives. The institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has moved in fits and starts as it struggles to adapt to this new reality, sometimes embracing a new path forward (e.g., the Joseph Smith Papers Project, the release of several Gospel Topics essays dealing with difficult doctrinal and historical issues, new offerings from Deseret Book dealing with faith and doubt, and the restructuring of the youth Sunday School curriculum) and other times resisting and retrenching (e.g., high-profile excommunications of intellectuals and activists, warnings by General Authorities to be wary of information on the internet and Mormon blogs, etc.).

This topic is important because the introduction of doubt into a Mormon's religious worldview is often (although not always) associated with a change in one's relationship with the Church and level of activity. Understanding the prevalence, causes, and consequences of doubt is thus a critical question. To date, there have been a handful of attempts to answer these questions using public opinion surveys of varying designs

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2. Daniel, 28, telephone interview with one of the authors, Sept. 2, 2016.

and degrees of methodological rigor.<sup>3</sup> Survey data on Mormon behavior and attitudes in the United States are difficult to reliably measure because self-identified Mormons make up less than 2 percent of the US population,<sup>4</sup> complicating the process of finding a large enough sample size through the standard approach of random-digit telephone dialing to ensure that the results are representative and statistically valid.

Here we seek to add to our understanding of faith and doubt in contemporary Mormonism by examining fresh results from a study of Mormon attitudes and behavior called The Next Mormons Survey (NMS).<sup>5</sup> We designed this online survey, with input from multiple social scientists, to sample self-identified Mormons and former Mormons in the United States. The survey firm Qualtrics fielded the NMS from September 8 to November 1, 2016 using a panel-matching technique

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3. Examples: The 2011 Pew “Mormons in America” survey asked a representative sample of self-identified US Mormons whether they “believe wholeheartedly in all the teachings of the LDS Church” or if “some teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe.” The 2012 “Peculiar People Survey” by David Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson sampled 500 Mormons on a YouGov online panel and included questions on Mormon belief. John Dehlin’s 2012 “Why Mormons Question” survey employed an online snowball sample to gauge levels of belief among current and former Mormons. The 2014 “Mormon Gender Issues Survey” by researchers including Ryan Cragun and Michael Nielsen employed both an online sample of Mormons fielded by Qualtrics and a supplemental online snowball sample.

4. Gregory Smith, et al., “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>. From the General Social Survey, Darren Sherkat places the LDS population at 1.3 percent of the US population from 2000 to 2012. Darren Sherkat, *Changing Faith: The Dynamics and Consequences of Americans’ Shifting Religious Identities* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 7.

5. Jana Riess, “The Next Mormons: Who are the Millennials, and What Do They Want?,” *Religion News Service*, July 15, 2016, <http://religionnews.com/2016/07/15/the-next-mormons-who-they-are-what-they-want-and-how-the-lds-church-is-changing/>.

to achieve as representative a sample as possible.<sup>6</sup> In all, 1,156 self-identified Mormons were included in the final sample, as well as 540 former Mormons. A comparison of the demographic characteristics of the NMS sample with that of the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study (which was based on a representative telephone sample) showed that the NMS attained representativeness for currently-identifying Mormons on almost all demographic categories except for gender, education, and age. A statistical weighting procedure was used to correct for those sample biases.<sup>7</sup> The survey results reported here can thus be considered representative of the United States Mormon population as a whole. To our knowledge, the 2016 NMS is the most comprehensive and extensive sample of contemporary Mormon attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors collected by independent or academic researchers to date. For our current purposes, we take a close look at responses among those who currently identify as LDS in the NMS to explore the prevalence and consequences of doubt in contemporary American Mormonism.

The survey data are also enhanced by inclusion of several excerpts from Jana Riess's dozens of oral history interviews, mostly with members of the Millennial generation who are or used to be LDS. These ninety-minute interviews were conducted mostly by phone following a template that covered childhood, adolescence, missionary experiences (where applicable), temple experiences (where applicable), religious belief and behavior, and family life. All interviewees are identified here by first name only, either their given first name or one of their choosing to protect their anonymity.

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6. Courtney Kennedy, et al. "Evaluating Online Nonprobability Surveys," *Pew Research Center*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/files/2016/04/Nonprobability-report-May-2016-FINAL.pdf>. This shows that panel-matching online samples generally attain levels of representativeness comparable to telephone surveys.

7. The NMS oversampled women compared to men, more highly educated individuals compared to less educated individuals, and younger individuals over older individuals. The weighting procedure corrects for this oversampling and is a common procedure in public opinion survey analysis. See <http://www.applied-survey-methods.com/weight.html>.



How Many Doubters Are There?

The 2016 NMS asked respondents about their belief in the teachings of the LDS Church, prompting them to select one of five statements. Table 1 shows answers among all Mormon respondents:<sup>8</sup>

Table 1. NMS Responses Among Self-Identified Mormons on Belief in LDS Church Teachings

	<b>Which statement comes closest to your own views—even if none is exactly right?</b>
<b>49.1%</b>	“I believe wholeheartedly in all of the teachings of the LDS Church.”
<b>33.9%</b>	“I believe many or most of the teachings of the LDS Church.”
<b>12.2%</b>	“Some of the teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe.”
<b>3.1%</b>	“Many or most of the teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe.”
<b>1.8%</b>	“I do not believe in the teachings of the LDS Church.”

Here we see that the vast majority of self-identified Mormons in the United States report a strong level of belief in the teachings of the LDS Church. Nearly half say that they believe “wholeheartedly” in “all the teachings” and another third say that they believe many or most of the teachings. A little over one in ten say that some LDS teachings are “hard for me to believe” and roughly 5 percent say that they believe few or none of the teachings of the LDS Church. The question of “how many doubters” there are in the LDS Church depends to some extent on how one defines “doubter.” At a first pass of the survey results, about 17 percent of Mormons express at least a moderate degree of doubt in the teachings of the LDS Church.

8. In this and all tables throughout, figures may not add up to exactly 100 percent due to rounding.

Table 2. Levels of Belief Among Activity, Attendance, and Temple Recommend Status

	I believe whole heartedly in all of the teachings of the LDS Church	I believe many or most of the teachings of the LDS Church	Some of the teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe	Many or most of the teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe	I do not believe in the teachings of the LDS Church
<b>Very active (55% of all self-identified Mormons)</b>	72.2%	22.0%	4.9%	0.8%	0.2%
<b>Somewhat active (31% of all self-identified Mormons)</b>	28.0%	51.8%	14.4%	3.3%	2.5%
<b>Not very/at all active (14% of all self-identified Mormons)</b>	6.1%	41.1%	35.0%	11.7%	6.1%
<b>Attend church once a week or more (74% of all self-identified Mormons)</b>	61.9%	29.5%	5.7%	1.9%	0.9%
<b>Attend church once or twice a month (11% of self-identified Mormons)</b>	19.2%	58.4%	20.0%	1.6%	0.8%
<b>Attend a few times a year or less, seldom, or never (16% of self-identified Mormons)</b>	8.8%	37.6%	37.0%	10.5%	6.1%

	I believe whole heartedly in all of the teachings of the LDS Church	I believe many or most of the teachings of the LDS Church	Some of the teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe	Many or most of the teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe	I do not believe in the teachings of the LDS Church
<b>Currently hold a temple recommend (52% of self-identified Mormons)</b>	71.9%	24.0%	3.7%	0.0%	0.4%
<b>Currently do not hold a temple recommend (48% of self-identified Mormons)</b>	31.6%	39.2%	19.4%	6.2%	3.6%

Table 2 breaks this down further by self-described church activity level.<sup>9</sup> As one might expect, doubting is more common as activity decreases, with about 6 percent, 20 percent, and 53 percent of active, less active, and inactive Mormons saying that at least some Church teachings are hard for them to believe. (Combining the first two categories, 11.1 percent of those who say that they are either “very” or “somewhat” active also express at least a moderate degree of doubt.) A similar pattern emerges when examining self-reported levels of church attendance. Among those who say they attend once a week or more, only about 9 percent express at least a moderate degree of doubt, compared to 22 percent of those who attend a few times a month and 54 percent of those who attend a few times a year or less.

9. Respondents were asked, “Generally speaking, how would you describe your activity in the LDS Church right now? Very active, somewhat active, not too active, not at all active?” For simplicity’s sake, “not too active” and “not at all active” were combined into a single category in this table.

We can also see that only about 4 percent of current temple recommend holders report at least a moderate degree of doubt compared to about 29 percent of those without a current temple recommend. So, while about one in six self-identified Mormons in the United States claims a degree of doubt, only about one in ten of active members who attend church weekly and about one in twenty of those with current temple recommends express doubt in some, most, or all of the Church's teachings.<sup>10</sup>

### Personal and Social Characteristics of Doubters

We now turn to examine whether doubting is more or less common among various demographic and social subgroups of self-identified Mormons

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10. It is common in survey research to encounter a "social desirability" bias in responses on certain types of questions. For example, people are often hesitant to admit to surveyors that they have an attitude or engage in a behavior that society, friends, or family might frown upon. This may be the case here, given that there is a strong norm in Mormon culture against expressing doubt or disbelief. Levels of doubt may thus be *underestimated* in our sample. At the same time, this survey was conducted online where respondents were answering in the privacy of their own homes or other areas. They were assured on multiple occasions throughout the survey that their responses were 100 percent confidential and anonymous. No identifying information about the respondents was collected, and they were promised that it would be impossible to link them to their answers after the survey was completed. This suggests that respondents may well have been more candid with their answers than they might have been in a live telephone survey. Research has shown that online surveys tend to produce more accurate answers on questions that are socially sensitive or that would be embarrassing to the respondent (Frauke Kreuter, Stanley Presser, and Roger Tourangeau, "Social Desirability Bias in CATI, IVR, and Web Surveys: The Effects of Mode and Question Sensitivity," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72, no. 5 [Dec. 2008]: 847–65; Scott Keeter, "Methods Can Matter: Where Web Surveys Produce Different Results than Phone Interviews," *Pew Research Center*, May 14, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/14/where-web-surveys-produce-different-results-than-phone-interviews/>). Thus, we argue that because the NMS was conducted online, people were more likely to give candid and honest answers on questions dealing with adherence to Mormon cultural norms and expectations than they would have been in a telephone survey.

in the United States. To simplify the presentation and discussion of the results from this point on, we combine levels of belief and doubt into two categories: those who “believe wholeheartedly” and those who “believe many or most” Church teachings are grouped together as “Believers” and those who report that they believe some, few, or none of the teachings of the Church are grouped together as “Doubters.” We then show the frequency of Doubters among *all* self-identified Mormons in our sample, regardless of their activity level or temple recommend status. As can be seen previously in Table 2, though, self-described active members who attend church regularly are a strong majority of those in our sample.

Table 3. Prevalence of Doubting Among Demographic Subgroups

	% Doubter
Millennial (age 18–36)	17.2%
GenX (age 37–51)	17.2%
Baby Boomer/Silent (age 52 or over)	16.8%
Male	18.8%
Female	15.5%
Race: white	17.0%
Race: non-white	17.1%
Income: less than \$50K/year	18.3%
Income: \$50K–\$100K/year	15.6%
Income: over \$100K/year	16.0%
Less than college degree	20.1%
College education	9.7%
Post-graduate education	14.0%

	<b>% Doubter</b>
Native Mormon	18.1%
Convert Mormon	15.4%
Currently live in Utah	14.4%
Currently live outside of Utah	18.0%
Married or widowed	12.2%
Divorced or separated	28.4%
Never married	16.6%
Democrat and Independent-lean-Democrat	19.5%
Independent	30.5%
Republican and Independent-lean-Republican	13.2%

Table 3 reports the percentage of all self-identified Mormons who also say that at least some Church teachings are hard for them to believe among a variety of demographic subgroups. For the most part, there is not a substantial degree of difference based on several demographic categories including age, gender, income, race/ethnicity, or convert status. Despite higher-than-expected numbers of Millennials and GenXers who are leaving the Church,<sup>11</sup> those who remain and currently self-identify as Mormon are no more likely to be doubters than older Latter-day Saints. We do see that education makes a difference: those most likely to doubt

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11. According to Pew, the LDS retention rate in the United States was 70 percent in 2007 but had dropped to 64 percent by 2014, meaning that just under two-thirds of people who were raised Mormon still self-identified that way as adults. According to research by Darren Sherkat in the General Social Survey, Mormonism managed to withstand the membership declines that afflicted other US religions for some time, showing robust growth *and* strong retention for generations born prior to 1971. For generations born after 1971, loyalty dipped to 61 percent, making the religion “among the least loyal groups in the youngest generations” (Sherkat, *Changing Faith*, 62).

are both those without a college degree (20 percent) and those with a post-graduate degree (14 percent) compared to those with a college degree (10 percent). Those who are divorced or separated are more than twice as likely to be Doubters than those who are married or widowed (28 percent vs. 12 percent, respectively). When it comes to partisanship, those who identify as political Independents are much more likely to also identify as Doubters than either Republicans or Democrats (31 percent vs. 13 percent and 20 percent, respectively).

Table 4. Prevalence of Doubting and Mormon Social Networks

	<b>% Doubter</b>
None or few immediately family left the Church	11.0%
Some or more immediate family left the Church	22.1%
No immediate family are/were LDS	29.7%
None or few childhood/youth friends left the Church	10.5%
Some or more childhood/youth friends left the Church	20.6%
No childhood/youth friends are/were LDS	23.5%
Zero of closest friends are LDS	44.4%
Some of closest friends are LDS	17.9%
All of closest friends are LDS	3.9%
No LDS in extended family	34.9%
Some/most extended family LDS	15.9%
All extended family LDS	6.9%

Table 4 displays the frequency of doubting among people with varying levels of Mormons in their family and friendship circles. Here we see much more pronounced differences than was the case with demographic differences. In each case, the fewer Mormon family and friends someone has, the more likely he or she is to be a Doubter. This is most often the case for those who have zero close friends who are Mormon (44 percent) and zero extended family members who are Mormon (35

percent). Doubting also increases as the number of family members and friends who have left the Church increases—as we saw in the oral history interview with Daniel related in the introduction. We can also observe that doubting is least common among those whose closest friends are all Mormon (4 percent) and whose extended family are all Mormon (7 percent).

Table 5. Prevalence of Doubting and Youth Activity

% Doubter	
Attended church once a week or more growing up	13.1%
Attended church once or twice a month growing up	24.0%
Attended church a few times a year or less growing up	33.3%
Seminary: attended regularly	6.8%
Seminary: attended semi-regularly or less than four years	30.2%
Seminary: did not attend	29.8%
Served a full-time mission	8.5%
Did not serve a full-time mission	21.9%
Grew up in Utah	17.3%
Grew up outside of Utah	16.3%
Attending or have attended a singles ward	10.9%
Never attended a singles ward	23.7%

Table 5 focuses specifically on those who grew up Mormon or converted before age seventeen (or in other words, it excludes self-identified Mormons who are adult converts). It shows the frequency of doubting based on one’s level of activity growing up or level of involvement with various Mormon youth programs. We can observe here some interesting



differences. For example, about 9 percent of returned missionaries are Doubters compared to 22 percent of those who did not serve a mission. Doubters are also less common among those who attended singles wards compared to those who did not (11 percent vs. 24 percent). Table 5 also shows that participating in seminary makes a larger difference: only 7 percent of those who attended seminary regularly growing up now identify as Doubters compared to 30 percent of those who did not attend seminary or attended only infrequently. Frequency of childhood church attendance also makes a difference. Only 13 percent of those who attended weekly in their youth now identify as Doubters, compared to 33 percent who attended only occasionally. It is also notable that there is no difference in frequency of Doubters depending on whether someone grew up inside (17 percent) or outside (16 percent) of Utah.

Of course, there is likely a large degree of overlap between these various categories. We saw, for instance, that there are fewer Doubters among those who attended seminary regularly growing up but also among those who have more family and friends who are Mormon. It is also the case that those with more Mormon family members are more likely to attend seminary. So, which of the two is associated with levels of doubt once we have taken into account the effect of the other? To examine this question, we can statistically estimate the effect of each of the individual factors on the likelihood of identifying as a Doubter while simultaneously controlling for the overlapping effect of all the other factors that could also make a difference.<sup>12</sup> In other words, we can estimate the difference that one factor makes comparing two hypothetical people

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12. This was done using a multivariate logistic regression approach predicting the likelihood of identifying as a Doubter based on the following variables: age, gender, race, income, education, frequency of church attendance, convert status, Utah residency, marital status, political partisanship, number of family members who have left the Church, number of friends who have left the Church, and the number of Mormons in one's close friendship circle and extended family. The model was tested for multicollinearity and heteroskedasticity, the latter of which prompted the use of robust standard errors when estimating the model. The marginal effect of the statistically significant variables was derived using

who are identical on all other factors included in the analysis. This reveals that after controlling for each of the factors examined above, some factors make a difference while others do not.

Education: those with less than a high school education are 16.8 percent more likely to identify as a Doubter compared to 4.2 percent of those with a post-graduate degree.<sup>13</sup>

Frequency of church attendance: those who report that they never attend church services are 61.6 percent more likely to identify as a Doubter compared to 3.4 percent of those who attend more than once a week.

Marital status: those who are not currently married or who are divorced are 11 percent more likely to identify as a Doubter compared to 7.1 percent of those who are married, remarried, or widowed.

Childhood friends who have left the Church: those who say that all of their childhood friends have left the Church are 17.9 percent more likely to identify as a Doubter compared to 4.8 percent of those who say that all of their childhood friends are still members.

Close friends who are LDS: those who say that none of their five closest friends are LDS are 17 percent more likely to identify as a Doubter compared to 5 percent of those whose five closest friends are all LDS.

Family who are LDS: those who say that none of their extended family is LDS are 14.3 percent more likely to identify as a Doubter compared to 5 percent of those who say that all of their extended family are LDS.

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Stata's margins command, estimating the effect of each variable while holding all other variables constant at their means.

13. In other words, if we were to take two Mormons from the sample who are exactly "average" in terms of all the other factors included in the analysis (age, gender, income, etc.), the one with less than a high school education would be 16.8 percent likely to identify as a Doubter and the one with a post-graduate degree would be 4.2 percent likely to identify as a Doubter. We thus conclude that, all other things being equal, more education decreases someone's likelihood of expressing doubt by up to 12.6 percent.

In general, it seems that the two strongest factors of predicting doubt in contemporary Mormonism are church attendance and social networks. Those who attend regularly and have more Mormons in their social networks are more likely to be Believers, while those who attend less regularly and have more non-Mormons in their family and friendship circles are more likely to be Doubters. Those who are married and have advanced degrees are also more likely to be Believers than Doubters.

Aside from these factors, this analysis also revealed that age, gender, race/ethnicity, income, convert status, Utah vs. non-Utah residence, and political partisanship make no difference in predicting whether someone is a Believer or a Doubter. It is also notable that the number of *family members* who have left the Church does not make an independent difference in predicting the likelihood of someone being a Doubter once controlling for the other factors described above. Friends leaving the Church seems to matter more than family leaving the Church.

As a final analysis, we can examine the effect of activity growing up and participation in youth programs among those who were raised in the Church or converted before age 17. This was done by repeating the analysis above but including variables measuring how often the individual attended church growing up, their participation in seminary, whether they went on a mission, if they grew up inside or outside of Utah, and if they attended a singles ward. In this analysis, the only additional factor that independently predicts the likelihood of identifying as a Doubter in one's adulthood is attending seminary. Those that attended seminary all four years are nearly 10 percent less likely to identify as Doubters than those who did not attend (14.7 percent vs. 5.4 percent, respectively).<sup>14</sup> In other words, this suggests that consistent seminary attendance in one's youth can potentially triple the likelihood of identifying as a Believer in one's adulthood.

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14. The other factors identified above (education, marital status, church attendance, family, and friendship networks) also matter even after controlling for one's involvement in these youth programs and situations growing up.

While there is likely some dual-causation going on (seminary decreasing doubt in adulthood while those more likely to attend seminary are also more likely to be Believers regardless), the fact that this analysis controls for other factors that are also correlated with strong activity growing up (e.g., serving a mission) strongly suggests that attending seminary has at least some causative effect on the likelihood of being a Believer later in life. Many oral history interviews have anecdotally confirmed the “seminary effect” as well. Marie, 24, credits her seminary attendance in high school with the fact that she is still strong in the Church today. Gesturing to the other side of the room during an interview, she identifies a line on the carpet and uses it as a metaphor of a threshold. “My experience as a youth was to push me back really far this way, away from the line,” she explains. “But as I’ve grown intellectually and spiritually, I’ve gone closer to that threshold. And if I hadn’t been anchored in that way from seminary and Young Women, I would have passed right through that threshold.” While she recognizes that what is taught in seminary is a “controlled narrative” that does not include what she now understands as more complex truths about Church history and doctrine, the tasks of learning the scriptures intimately and having to prepare and lead devotions for her fellow students made an impact. “Those are important exercises that help you find a grounding. And there’s a lot of positive affirmation because it does fill your life with goodness, and it’s hard to forget that.”<sup>15</sup>

But the “seminary effect” is hardly a magic bullet. For example, Zach, now 20, has recently become inactive in the Church after attending release time seminary in high school and serving a mission from which he had to return early due to an intestinal illness.<sup>16</sup> While he enjoyed seminary and says he learned from it, he was also sometimes bored, sleeping

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15. Interview with Marie, 24, in person on June 2, 2017, in St. Louis, Mo.; completed by phone on June 13, 2017.

16. Interview with Zach, 20, by phone on Sept. 8, 2016.

through class if he felt particularly exhausted. For him, seminary might have been more helpful had it been a more complete education. After returning from his mission he became friends with a group of friends who exposed him to many things about Church history he didn't know, including uncomfortable facts about Joseph Smith's practice of polygamy. "I kind of knew that, but hadn't really *known* that," he says. "I was like, 'What else don't I know about the history of the Church that I never got taught in church?'" His research into polygamy led to other issues as well, including difficult realizations about the Book of Abraham, changes to the temple ceremony, and historical inconsistencies within the Book of Mormon. He prayed harder, continued reading the Book of Mormon, and went to the temple, where he asked Heavenly Father what he should do. Sitting in the celestial room, he received his answer. "I felt, as clearly as I had felt when I got a testimony of the Book of Mormon, that I was supposed to leave the Church." He now considers himself a "hopeful agnostic."

Zach's experience illustrates one aspect of the importance of social networks in the spectrum of belief and doubt. While some criticized President Eyring for using the phrase "infected with doubt" in a 2013 general conference address, it ultimately seems that the metaphor was appropriate at least in one way: doubting is statistically more likely to be associated with the Mormon composition of one's social networks than it is one's demographic characteristics or how engaged someone was in Mormon programs and activities growing up (though, as stated above, seminary is a bit of an exception). Those who have friends and family who are Mormon and stay Mormon tend to be Believers, while those who have friends and family who are not Mormon or stop identifying as Mormon are more likely to be Doubters. We can infer, then, that doubting may indeed spread like an "infection."

## Believers vs. Doubters on Mormon Belief, Behavior, and Identity

We now turn to an in-depth comparison of Mormon Believers and Doubters on a variety of outcomes of interest, specifically their levels of religious belief and behavior as well as their levels of Mormon religious identity. We will present the findings in a series of tables that indicate the proportion of Believers and Doubters who would either agree with the statement or match a characteristic in a given row.

### Religious Belief

The NMS presented respondents with a series of faith statements and asked them to indicate their level of confidence in each statement. Specific options were:

“I am confident and know this is true.”

“I believe and have faith that this is probably true.”

“I believe this might be true, but I have my doubts.”

“I believe this is probably NOT true.”

“I am confident and know this is NOT true.”

In Table 6 we combine the first two options together, so the table reports the percentage of both Believers and Doubters who would say that they are “confident and know this is true” or “have faith that this is probably true.” Also, the results in Table 6 should be read from left to right. For example, the first line in Table 6 shows us that 95.6 percent of Believers who are active in the Church are confident in their belief in God, compared to 67 percent of Doubters who are active.

Table 6. Confidence in Faith Statements Among Believers and Doubters

	% of Believers	% of Doubters
"God is real."	95.6%	67.0%
"God is an exalted person of flesh and bone."	84.1%	36.0%
"There is life after death."	93.7%	57.9%
"Joseph Smith was a prophet of God."	89.2%	28.9%
"Jesus Christ was literally resurrected and rose from the dead."	92.2%	61.7%
"Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world."	93.7%	56.3%
"The Book of Mormon is a literal, historical account."	87.6%	26.0%
"The LDS Church is the only true faith leading to exaltation."	80.5%	18.8%
"The priesthood and temple ban on members of African descent was inspired of God."	71.1%	18.3%
"LDS temple sealing ordinances are ultimately the only way for families to be eternal."	83.0%	20.9%
"The LDS First Presidency and apostles are God's prophets on the earth today."	86.9%	23.4%
"God's priesthood authority is reserved only for men, not women."	75.2%	28.9%

Earlier we defined Mormon "Doubters" as those who say that at least "some of the teachings of the LDS Church are hard for me to believe." Which beliefs specifically, though, are hard for the Doubters to believe? For the most part, we can observe that there is widespread belief in most of the basic tenets of Mormon doctrine and theology among

Believers, usually more than 85 percent. The only propositions where confidence drops below 80 percent occur when it comes to priesthood eligibility for certain groups: only about three-quarters of Believers are confident that the priesthood ban on blacks was inspired by God, or that the priesthood is reserved only for men.

On the other hand, Doubters are more confident of some Mormon faith propositions than they are about others. For example, roughly half to two-thirds of Doubters who are active in the Church are confident in the basic beliefs that Mormons share with other Christians, including the reality of God, the divinity of Jesus, a literal resurrection, and the expectation of an afterlife. On the other hand, only about a quarter to a third of Doubters are confident in the more unique beliefs of Mormonism, including the exclusivity of priesthood authority necessary to dispense salvific ordinances, the calling of Joseph Smith and contemporary General Authorities as prophets, the historicity of the Book of Mormon, and God's corporeal nature. Also, less than one in five Doubters believe the LDS Church to be the "only true faith leading to exaltation" compared to more than four out of five Believers.

In sum, both Mormon Believers and Doubters share a common faith in God and Christianity (broadly speaking), but they part ways when it comes to more uniquely Mormon interpretations of Christian beliefs and the exclusive nature and authority of the LDS Church and its leaders.

This is also evident by examining the degree to which Believers and Doubters look to Church authority as a guide for moral and ethical decision-making. Survey respondents were presented with two statements about deference to Church leaders and asked which comes closer to their view: "Good Latter-day Saints should obey the counsel of priesthood leaders even if they don't necessarily know or understand why," or "Good Latter-day Saints should first seek their own personal revelation on a matter and act accordingly, even if it is in conflict with the counsel of priesthood leaders." Among Believers, two-thirds (63.5 percent) said that good Latter-day Saints should obey priesthood leaders. This drops



to only one-third (36.6 percent) among Doubters. Thus, two-thirds of Doubters say that personal revelation trumps ecclesiastical authority.

Table 7. Moral Authorities Among Believers and Doubters

	<b>% of Believers (all members)</b>	<b>% of Doubters (all members)</b>
LDS General Authorities	56.7%	15.8%
LDS local authorities (e.g., ward bishop)	53.5%	23.9%
Scriptures	61.5%	40.1%
Personal conscience	63.4%	84.3%
Promptings of the Spirit	66.9%	40.6%
Philosophy / reason	24.1%	43.1%
Societal norms and values	14.1%	28.4%
Professional counselor or therapist	14.2%	22.8%
Family members	63.5%	73.0%
Friends/coworkers	26.1%	54.8%
Media	9.3%	9.7%
Celebrities (e.g. Brené Brown, Stephen Colbert)	6.7%	5.1%

We also asked respondents to rank their top five sources of authority that they “listen to when making moral decisions.” Options included LDS general and local authorities, personal conscience and promptings of the Spirit, friends and family, philosophy and reason, etc. Table 7 displays how many Believers and Doubters listed each moral authority as one of their top five most important sources when making moral decisions. We can see that the primary sources of moral authority for Believers are promptings from the Spirit, the scriptures, family members, and their own consciences, with general and local authorities not far behind. Looking at this another way, on a scale of zero to five (zero

being not in the top five and five being the most important source of moral authority), Believers on average rank personal promptings from the Spirit the highest at 2.5, followed by personal conscience (2.2), family members (2.0), and the scriptures and LDS General Authorities (1.8).

Doubters, for their part, are more likely to look to their own conscience as well as family members and friends as their key sources of moral authority. They are somewhat more likely to look to philosophy/reason, societal norms/values, and professional counselors and therapists than are Believers. About two in five Doubters trust in the scriptures or personal promptings of the Spirit and fewer than one-quarter list general or local Church authorities as one of their top five most important sources of moral authority. On the same scale of zero to five, Doubters on average rank their personal conscience as the most important source of moral authority at 3.5, followed by family members (2.4), friends and coworkers (1.6), promptings of the Spirit (1.4), the scriptures (1.2), and reason/philosophy (1.1). For Doubters, LDS General Authorities rank near the bottom at 0.4, lower than societal norms and values (0.7) and professional therapists and counselors (0.5). It is interesting to see that friends and coworkers rank as the third most important source of moral authority for Doubters, while for Believers they do not appear in the top five. This is significant considering what we have already seen about Doubters' social networks, that they have fewer Mormon friends than do Believers. It seems that Doubters have more friends outside the Church and they hold in high regard the moral authority of their friends.

One final aspect of Mormon belief we can examine is how Believers and Doubters compare when it comes to troubling issues with Mormon doctrine, history, and practices. The 2016 NMS asked respondents: "Below is a list of things that some Mormons (or those who were Mormon at one point in their lives) feel are troubling to some extent. Please indicate whether each of these issues is very troubling, a little troubling, or not at all troubling to you." Table 8 shows what percent of Believers and Doubters who say they are "very troubled" by each of

these issues. (Note that this is *not* the same as the percent of former Mormons who were asked which of these issues were responsible for their decision to leave the Church.)

Table 8. Troubling Issues Among Believers and Doubters

	% of Believers	% of Doubters
Joseph Smith's polygamy	20.4%	49.7%
Joseph Smith's polyandry	24.5%	57.4%
The use of seer stones in translating the Book of Mormon	13.7%	35.5%
DNA evidence that Native Americans do not have Middle Eastern ancestry	13.1%	28.4%
Multiple/conflicting accounts of the First Vision	16.0%	37.8%
Denial of priesthood and temple access to members of African descent before 1978	24.9%	50.3%
The Church's position on LGBT issues	19.1%	49.0%
The priesthood being reserved only for men in the Church	16.5%	31.6%
The Church's emphasis on conformity and obedience	15.4%	37.2%
The Church's strong culture of political conservatism	14.0%	32.0%
Lack of financial transparency with tithing, donations, and spending	19.3%	48.7%
Teachings about deification	14.4%	35.2%
Excommunications of feminists, intellectuals, and activists	22.6%	45.2%
Church teachings and practices changing over time away from how they were originally organized under Joseph Smith	16.3%	23.5%

The issues that seem to be most troubling for Doubters are Joseph Smith's polygamy and polyandry, and specific policies and practices of the contemporary Church. About half of Doubters say that they are very troubled by Joseph sealing himself to multiple women (50 percent), including women who were already married (57 percent), compared to only a fifth to a quarter of active Believers who say that they are very troubled by this (20 percent and 25 percent, respectively). We also see that about half of Doubters are very troubled by the Church's position on LGBT issues (49 percent), lack of financial transparency (49 percent), the priesthood/temple ban (50 percent), and recent excommunications of feminists, intellectuals, and activists (45 percent). It is especially important to note that Doubters are slightly more troubled by what the Church is doing *right now* than they are by most other historical or doctrinal issues, such as seer stones or multiple accounts of the First Vision. (For their part, somewhere between 15 percent to 25 percent of Believers say they are also very troubled by these issues, with the priesthood ban, Joseph Smith's polyandry, and excommunication of feminists and intellectuals being the top three most troubling issues for active Believers.)

## Religious Behavior

Table 9. Frequency of Religious Behaviors Among Believers and Doubters

	% of Believers	% of Doubters
Attend church once a week or more	81.2%	37.1%
Pray daily in private	72.5%	45.7%
Read scriptures daily	43.6%	12.2%
Feel God's presence and love daily	68.1%	34.5%
Hold a current temple recommend	59.4%	13.2%

	<b>% of Believers</b>	<b>% of Doubters</b>
"I used to hold a temple recommend but do not currently."	24.6%	41.1%
Regularly give 10% of income (either gross or net)	75.9%	28.4%
Made monthly visiting teaching visits over the last year (women only)	63.4%	22.0%
Made monthly home teaching visits over the last year (men only)	71.1%	24.6%
Stay in "church clothes" all day on Sunday, even when not at church	30.4%	9.6%
"At the end of church, I usually feel tired or burned out."	11.4%	60.4%
In the past month, I "watched television or movies" on Sunday.	52.6%	64.0%
It is appropriate to remove one's temple garments "when you don't feel like wearing them."	5.6%	34.0%
Saw an R-rated movie in the last 6 months	32.4%	59.2%
Saw an LDS Church video online in the last 6 months	56.6%	16.3%
Watched general conference in last 6 months	60.0%	20.3%

When it comes to religious behavioral expectations that are promoted by LDS Church leaders as normatively desirable and things that, generally speaking, good Mormons are "supposed" to do, we can see in Table 9 that Doubters are universally less likely to adhere to these behavioral expectations than Believers. One of the largest differences between Believers and Doubters is whether or not they hold a current temple recommend. About 59 percent of Believers say they have a current recommend compared to only 13 percent of Doubters, a difference

of about 46 percent. This suggests that a generally reliable predictor of whether someone harbors doubts about LDS Church teachings is whether their temple recommend is current. In fact, 41 percent of Doubters report that they used to have a recommend but no longer do. (This also suggests that a great many Doubters were likely at one time Believers.)

Otherwise, some of the clear differences in Table 9 between Believers and Doubters include making regular home or visiting teaching appointments (71 percent vs. 25 percent and 63 percent vs. 22 percent, respectively) and regularly paying a full tithe, whether calculated on net or gross income (76 percent vs. 28 percent). There is a clear difference when it comes to opinions about wearing garments. About a third of Doubters say that it is acceptable to remove your temple garments “if you don’t feel like wearing them” compared to only about 6 percent of Believers. Doubters are also about a third less likely to report that they pray and read their scriptures daily (although not even a majority of Believers report that they read scriptures daily) and are about 27 points more likely than Believers to say that they saw an R-rated movie sometime in the last six months. Believers are also about 20 points more likely to stay in their “church clothes” all day on Sunday, even when not at church, though this is not a majority activity even for Believers. In terms of church attendance specifically, roughly four-fifths of Believers attend church weekly compared to about two-fifths of Doubters. Also, attending church is a significantly better experience for Believers than for Doubters. More than half of Doubters (60 percent) say that they feel “tired or burned out” after church is over, compared to only about one in ten Believers.

In sum, this evidence suggests a broad generalization that Believers adhere to the behavioral expectations of an active Mormon lifestyle about two-thirds of the time, compared to Doubters who adhere to these behavioral expectations only about one-third of the time.

## Mormon Identity

Table 10. Mormon Concepts of Identity Among Believers and Doubters

	% of Believers	% of Doubters
Belief that Joseph Smith saw God and Jesus is essential or important to being a good Mormon	92.7%	60.1%
Not drinking coffee and tea is essential or important to being a good Mormon	74.2%	43.7%
Working to help the poor and needy is essential or important to being a good Mormon	95.8%	85.3%
Obedying counsel of LDS General Authorities is essential or important to being a good Mormon	95.7%	64.0%
Belief that Jesus Christ is the Savior is essential or important to being a good Mormon	96.4%	85.8%
Strongly or somewhat agree: "Being a Mormon is an essential part of who I am."	90.0%	38.3%
Strongly or somewhat agree: "When I talk about Mormons, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they.'"	89.7%	47.7%
Strongly or somewhat agree: "When someone criticizes Mormons, it feels like a personal insult."	79.8%	47.2%
"I make efforts to interact with ward members regularly throughout the week."	33.5%	14.2%
"I rely on my ward to be my primary social network."	23.0%	9.6%

For our final comparison of Believers and Doubters within contemporary American Mormonism, we can examine levels of personal identification with and affinities for Mormon identity, culture, and communities. First, we can compare in Table 10 how Believers and Doubters define what being a “good Mormon” looks like. A strong majority of both groups agree that believing in Jesus Christ as the Savior and working to help the poor and the needy are either essential or important to being a good Mormon. Only about three-fifths of Doubters, however, think it’s important to believe that Joseph Smith saw God and Jesus Christ in the First Vision or to obey the counsel of LDS General Authorities in order to be a good Mormon, compared to almost all Believing Mormons. Interestingly, both groups registered a drop in the percentage who see obeying the coffee and tea portions of the Word of Wisdom as important to Mormon identity, to about three-quarters of Believing Mormons and two-fifths of Doubting Mormons.

We can also see that a strong majority of Believers agree that being a Mormon is an essential part of their identity or that they talk about Mormons as “we” rather than “they.” In contrast, only about half of Mormon Doubters feel the same. There are also differences when it comes to interactions with their wards and branches. About a third of Believers try to interact with ward members throughout the week compared to only about 14 percent of Doubters. Neither group sees the ward as their primary social network; only about a quarter of Believers rely on their ward for socializing compared to about one in ten Doubters.<sup>17</sup>

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17. Notably, this also means a full two-thirds of Believing Mormons do not try to interact regularly with their ward members outside of Sundays and three-quarters do not rely on their wards as their primary social groups.



Table 11. Favorite Part of Being a Mormon for Believers and Doubters

	% of Believers	% of Doubters
Its emphasis on the Savior, Jesus Christ	51.1%	27.0%
The knowledge that families can be together forever	48.6%	38.1%
The comfort of having a prophet on the earth today	29.0%	9.1%
The opportunities the Church provides me to serve other people	21.6%	18.9%
The good health and freedom that comes with keeping the Word of Wisdom	15.7%	23.4%
The strong community I enjoy at church	28.7%	42.3%
The peace my faith provides me in hard times	43.0%	38.1%
The focus on children and youth	18.0%	30.1%
Temple worship	20.3%	7.6%

Survey respondents were also asked what their “favorite part about being a Mormon” was. They were presented with a variety of options and asked to indicate up to three. Table 11 shows that there is a good deal of diversity in terms of people’s favorite aspect of their participation in the Mormon community. Believers, however, tend to focus more on the belief-oriented aspects of its emphasis on Jesus Christ, eternal families, and providing peace in hard times. For example, a little over half of Believers list the Church’s focus on Jesus Christ as one of their top three favorite parts about being a Mormon. Doubters, on the other hand, are more likely to express appreciation for the strong community at church as well as the peace they find in hard times. For example, Doubters are about 14 percent more likely to list a “strong community”

and 12 percent more likely to list the “focus on children and youth” in their top three favorite things about being a Mormon than are Believers. It is interesting that more Doubters than Believers appear to value “the good health and freedom that comes with keeping the Word of Wisdom” as a favorite aspect of LDS identity.

One final way we can measure integration and commitment to the Mormon community is by respondents’ intended long-term relationship with the LDS Church. We asked members to indicate on a scale of zero to ten, “how confident are you that you will remain a committed Mormon throughout your life?” As we might expect, members who report being either very or somewhat active are more committed to life-long membership, with an average commitment of 8.9 on the zero to ten scale, with a majority (54 percent) indicating a full “10” and more than nine out of ten indicating a score of “6” or above. When we break this down among Doubters, however, we see that the average level of commitment to life-long membership is only a 5.7. Among Doubters specifically, about a quarter gave a score of a “5,” another quarter indicated a score of “0” through “4,” and about half indicated a score of “6” or higher. Only 11 percent of Doubters gave a score of “10.” It is safe to say that long-term commitment to membership is significantly lower among Doubters than among Believers. That being said, it is encouraging that a substantial portion of Doubters still indicate, on balance, an intention to remain committed members for the rest of their lives.

### Summary

To briefly summarize, a novel source of data on Mormon beliefs and behaviors shows that approximately 17 percent of self-identified Mormons in the United States express at least a moderate degree of doubt in the teachings of the LDS Church. That figure drops to 11 percent among those who say that they are at least somewhat active in their membership and 10 percent among those who attend church at least a

few times a month.<sup>18</sup> Mormon Doubters are hard to pin down by their demographic characteristics. Contrary to conventional wisdom, there is not a strong difference between Doubters and Believers when it comes to age, gender, income, or even political partisanship. Instead, Doubters are most common among those who attend church less often and those whose family and friendship circles are mostly non-Mormon or former-Mormon. There is also some evidence that one's level of activity growing up makes a difference: those who did not participate in or complete all four years of seminary are also more likely to be Doubters in adulthood, even after accounting for other likely variables.

In terms of personal belief, Doubters express the most doubt in many of the unique truth claims of the LDS Church and its exclusive claim to authority. While they are also less likely to express belief in God or the central tenets of Christianity than Believers, a solid majority of Doubters still express confidence in the reality of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When it comes to moral authority, Doubters are more likely to place confidence in their own consciences and the opinions of their friends and family, while Believers place the most confidence in personal promptings from the Spirit and the counsel of General Authorities. Doubters also report that they are most troubled by Joseph Smith's polygamy and polyandry, as well as the Church's contemporary stands on social issues such as same-sex marriage and race as well as its high-profile excommunications of feminists, intellectuals, and activists.

In almost every measurable way, Mormon Doubters have lower levels of religious behaviors that the LDS Church considers to be normatively desirable: they are less likely than Believers to attend church weekly, engage in prayer, fulfill their callings, pay tithing, and perform home or

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18. This is similar to the findings of other recent public opinion surveys of Mormons in America, see for example Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Choose the Right? Prof Says 10 Percent of US Mormons Lean Left," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sept. 4, 2014, <http://www.sltrib.com/blogs/faithblog/1532927-155/knoll-percent-mormon-mormons-degree-pew>.

visiting teaching. They are also less strong in their Mormon identities, as about half of Doubters talk about Mormons in terms of “they” rather than “we.” They say that their favorite part of being a Mormon is the strong sense of community at church and the peace their faith provides them in difficult times. And while they are less sure about their long-term affiliation with the LDS Church than are Believers, a little over half of Doubters still express confidence that they will remain active members through the rest of their lives.

### Discussion and Conclusion

These findings confirm some common stereotypes about Mormon Doubters but challenge some others. Specifically, anecdotal evidence has suggested that it is often younger Mormons or those with liberal political sensibilities that are more likely to express doubt than older members or political conservatives. Here, our findings are that Doubters are about as common among self-identified older Mormons as well as younger ones, and among conservative Mormons as well as liberal. What can we make of this? On the one hand, it could be the case that the anecdotal evidence is simply incorrect in the aggregate. It is possible that younger Mormons are just as strong in their testimonies of orthodox Mormon belief as older members.

On the other hand, our findings may also be attributable to the nature of the sample in the survey. Similar to surveys conducted by other organizations (Pew, Gallup, etc.), we rely on respondents to identify for themselves whether or not they are Mormons. This is different than how the LDS Church defines membership, as the Church includes those who were born members or who were baptized at any point, regardless of their present level of activity or association with the Mormon community. Many of those people the Church still identifies as members but who are inactive and have not attended Mormon church meetings for years may very well no longer identify as Mormons. This is also the case for those

who no longer consider themselves members of the Church, but have not had their names formally removed from the membership rolls. It is likely that many Doubters eventually leave the Church and no longer identify as Mormons, in which case they would not be included in the sample of those that this survey defines as current Mormons.<sup>19</sup> In this case, it is indeed entirely possible that younger people or political liberals are more likely to have left the Church because of doubts, meaning that they would no longer be included in the sample we analyze in this article; for example, there is evidence from the General Social Survey that Mormons born after 1971 have a ten- to fifteen-point drop in retention compared to older LDS generations.<sup>20</sup> In this scenario, we would then say that *among the Doubters who currently identify as Mormon, they are just as likely to be younger as older, or politically liberal as conservative*, but that younger and/or liberal Mormons may be more likely to stop identifying as Mormon when they have doubts.

We can briefly assess this possibility by comparing the Mormons in our survey with the 542 individuals in the same survey who self-identified as former Mormon.<sup>21</sup> These are individuals who reported that they

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19. There is strong evidence that this is the case. Currently, the LDS Church claims 6.5 million members in the United States, or 2 percent of the entire US population. The 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study, in contrast, shows that 1.6 percent of the US population currently self-identifies as Mormon, suggesting that at least a quarter of those that the LDS Church claims as members do not claim identification with the LDS Church in return. We can also compare results from the 2007 and 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study that showed that about 70 percent and 64 percent, respectively, of those who grew up Mormon continue to identify as Mormons as adults. This would put the figure closer to a third. See also David Stewart, "LDS Church Growth, Member Activity, and Convert Retention: Review and Analysis," *Cumoram.com*, [http://www.cumoram.com/index.php?target=church\\_growth\\_articles&story\\_id=21](http://www.cumoram.com/index.php?target=church_growth_articles&story_id=21).

20. See Sherkat, *Changing Faith*, 62–63.

21. As was done with the sample of current Mormons, a weighting procedure was used to correct for biases in gender (oversample of women) and education (oversample of more educated individuals) compared to corresponding levels

identified as Mormon for at least one year before age eighteen but no longer identify as LDS. When comparing current Mormons and former Mormons, we find that 32 percent of current Mormons identify as either Democrat or Independent-lean-Democrat compared to 46 percent of former Mormons. We also find that 57 percent of current Mormons identify as Republican or Independent-lean-Republican compared to 38 percent of former Mormons. This provides further evidence that political liberals are more likely than political conservatives to disaffiliate from their Mormon identities at some point in their lives, leaving the political liberals who continue to identify as Mormon about as likely to be Doubters as conservatives.

We can also briefly take a closer look at what age former Mormons tend to disaffiliate from their Mormon identities. Former Mormons were asked: “About how old were you when you stopped identifying as a member of the LDS Church?” Among all former Mormon respondents, the average age is 21. This does not vary much by age cohort, though there appears to be a trend for disaffiliation at younger ages: the average age of de-identification for former Mormons who are currently Millennials is 18.4, Generation X is 21.1, and those of the Boomer or Silent generation is 23.7. Clearly young adulthood is the age when most former Mormons leave the fold, regardless of what age they are now.

Given this additional information, our tentative conclusion is this: younger people and those with liberal political leanings are more likely than older individuals and conservatives to disaffiliate with their Mormon identities. Among younger individuals and political liberals that continue to identify as Mormon, they experience doubts at roughly similar rates to older people and political conservatives. *In sum, younger people are more likely to leave when they become Doubters, whereas older people are more likely to stay. Also, liberals are more*

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in the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study of those who said that they grew up Mormon but now identify as something else.

*likely to leave when they become Doubters, whereas conservatives are more likely to stay.*

It would also be worth considering these findings from a broader perspective. While we find that Doubters make up about one in five Mormons and one in ten active Mormons in the United States, other research has shown that doubting is much more common in other American religious traditions, especially Catholicism and Mainline Protestantism.<sup>22</sup> One could argue that Mormonism thus does a better job of encouraging belief and discouraging doubt among its members than other major American religious traditions. One could also argue, however, that there is more room within other faith traditions to have a wider diversity of belief among rank-and-file members. For example, a majority of US Catholics who are active in their faith believe that their church should allow its members to use birth control, permit priests to get married, and ordain women as priests, all in opposition to official Catholic teachings.<sup>23</sup> It seems that many US Catholics do not feel the same pressure as Mormons to disaffiliate with their religious identity when they doubt specific teachings of their church.

This suggests to us that more Doubters might continue to identify as Mormons if there were more room for them to do so in a way that was culturally acceptable within their religious community. We asked the former Mormons in our sample to indicate which factors were most influential in their decision to leave the Church, both doctrinal

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22. Michael Lipka, "Key Findings About American Catholics," *Pew Research Center*, Sept. 2, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/02/key-findings-about-american-catholics/>; 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Study: Mainline Protestants, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/mainline-protestant/>.

23. Abby Ohlheiser, "Vast Majority of U.S. Catholics Who Left the Church Can't Imagine Returning, Study Says," *Washington Post*, Sept. 2, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/02/the-vast-majority-of-u-s-catholics-who-have-left-the-church-cant-imagine-returning-study-says/?utm\\_term=.57cfb7de739c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/09/02/the-vast-majority-of-u-s-catholics-who-have-left-the-church-cant-imagine-returning-study-says/?utm_term=.57cfb7de739c).

and social. A full 38 percent of former Mormons indicated that one of the top three most important social or personal reasons for distancing themselves from the LDS Church was “I could no longer reconcile my personal values and priorities with those of the Church” with another 37 percent saying “I stopped believing there was one true church.” Another 30 percent said “I felt judged or misunderstood” as one of the top three reasons that they left. This would suggest that LDS leaders who wish to minimize attrition from the Mormon community might consider ways to “broaden the tent” so that individual members feel less pressure to have to choose between their beliefs and their place in the community.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, we are pleased to be able to report what we believe to be the most comprehensive and in-depth independent analysis of faith and doubt in contemporary American Mormonism collected to date. If national trends continue, it is not unreasonable to expect that doubting will only increase in the coming years and decades. Various national studies of the US population have confirmed a rising trend toward disaffiliation in American religion, with the youngest generation showing the most dramatic change. For example, when Pew conducted its 2007 Religious Landscape Survey, 16 percent of American adults had no religious affiliation; in its 2014 Religious Landscape Study, that had jumped to 23 percent among all adults, and more than a third of

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24. There are some encouraging signs of this coming from high-ranking Mormon leaders, such as Pres. Uchtdorf’s October 2014 general conference talk (“Receiving a Testimony of Light and Truth,” Saturday morning session). These types of messages, however, are significantly less common than those admonishing members for their lack of faith and failure to adhere to various behavioral norms of the Mormon community. For example, in an article in the June 2017 *Ensign*, Elder Hugo Montoya of the Seventy characterized doubt as a tool of Satan and said that those who voice doubts to their loved ones are merely “so-called friends” who are “asking hurtful questions.” Hugo Montoya, “Overcoming the Danger of Doubt,” *Ensign*, Jun. 2017, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2017/06/overcoming-the-danger-of-doubt?lang=eng>.



Millennials.<sup>25</sup> The overall growth in disaffiliation was caused not just by Millennials aging into the survey but by older Americans who had previously reported having an affiliation but decided to leave their religions between 2007 and 2014. Moreover, religious belief (which is not necessarily the same as institutional affiliation) also shows signs of softening in the general population, with declining percentages of Americans who say they believe in God without any doubts, pray daily, or attend church weekly.<sup>26</sup> Much (but not all) of our research in The Next Mormons Survey confirms that national trend, with Mormons overall still having exceptionally high rates of belief and practice but Millennial Mormons lagging behind the rigidity of their elders. These generational differences will be explored in depth elsewhere, but for our purposes here we will simply conclude by saying that Mormonism is one of many religious traditions in the Western world faced with the trade-off between enforcing orthodoxy or “broadening the tent.” Time will tell which course the LDS Church ultimately decides on.

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25. Paul Taylor and the Pew Research Center, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015), 163.

26. Sherkat, *Changing Faith*, 94.



J. Kirk Richards  
*Adam and Eve*  
Photo by Andi Pitcher Davis

# MORMONS PROBABLY AREN'T MATERIALISTS<sup>1</sup>

Samuel M. Brown

My mission was a complicated time for me. I was a Harvard undergraduate, newly theist but uncertainly Mormon, and I was living in southern Louisiana. I'd been a strident atheist for years before a conversion at age eighteen, and I'd managed to keep myself separated from much of folk Mormon belief, even as my family and I had been supported by wonderful Mormon folk in 1980s Davis County, Utah. I was finding my way to faith in the miserable, wet poverty of southern Louisiana, but it was a faith inflected by my lifelong skepticism and general readerliness.

I was working to understand the people whose lives I was sharing, both as a budding student of culture and as a novice theist hoping to love strangers. After a year, I felt that I'd come to understand how Louisiana Protestants saw the world (the Cajun Catholics rarely had anything to do with us). Understanding the worldview of those Christians caused me to worry when a new missionary arrived, anticipating the culture shock that both the green elder and the locals would experience.

I'm guessing it was November because the typical hot wetness is missing from this memory, which otherwise involves Louisiana's rural

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1. I presented early iterations of some of these ideas to audiences at conferences of The Interpreter, Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, and the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology in 2016. I'm grateful for such vessels for ritualized wondering and for the bright, good people who animate them. I also thank Eric Eliason, Clark Goble, Rachael Givens Johnson, Jason Kerr, Adam Miller, Boyd Petersen, Jana Riess, and Walker Wright for attempting to steer me to greater clarity of thought and exposition in this overall project, even as several of them disagree with me.

green tangles and a long walk on a road last graveled before I was born. I was on “splits” with an erstwhile athlete and current entrepreneur nearing the second half of middle age. We had a discussion scheduled with a new investigator. After an unremarkable recital of the missionary lesson (scripted then, in easy-to-digest paragraphs with associated pastel photos on a flipchart), I asked my Mormon companion, whom we will call Brother Jones, to bear a word of testimony. While two decades have blurred the specific language he used, my embarrassed befuddlement remains. After some good-natured verbal rumblings reminiscent of an old diesel engine turning over, Brother Jones gushed, “My favorite part is how we’ll be gods ourselves with our own planets after the resurrection. At first that blew my mind, but then I saw that it’s totally true, and it’s the best part of the gospel.”

We weren’t invited back.

Occasional similar episodes in the wards and branches of my mission made me wary about bringing fresh investigators to church on fast Sundays, when such mysteries could flow from the pulpit like lava, scalding any neophytes in their path. However much I, as a proselytizing missionary, wished that particular mystery would remain sealed in its volcano, I did sympathize with Brother Jones’s enthusiasm. Even if I wasn’t quite sure that I myself had a “testimony” of that explosive doctrine, the mere possibility of creating worlds thrilled me. Heady stuff, this afterlife vision of human gods.

This deification is perhaps only the most familiar and scandalous aspect of what is often understood to be a peculiar Mormon monism. Just as there is no ontological difference between gods and humans, we learn, there is no ontological difference between the spiritual and the physical. The entire universe is made of one thing; existence is unitary. It is, in the theological jargon, monist. The spiritual is the temporal and vice versa. Often this monism is described as materialism, the philosophical notion that there’s only one kind of substance in the universe, and it’s called matter. Many see us as anti-Platonists, passionately rejecting the

contrast of the God of immaterial order and the created world. Even what others call spiritual is in fact, in our hands, merely a “finer” type of matter.<sup>2</sup> Our monism (all existence is the same substance) in some quarters is as secure as our materialism (that substance is physical).

We Mormons aren't the only ones in the modern world to preach human deification and ontological materialism. But our bedfellows in this dramatic vision of human potential and the world in which it occurs aren't the people we'd expect. Humans as gods in a wholly material world is the core message of secular humanism.

Both Mormons and secular humanists would be surprised, I think, to hear how much they have in common theologically. I certainly was when I first realized how indebted both appeared to be to key recent assumptions about the nature of humans and the world. This odd juxtaposition pushed me into revisiting the documentary record and conceptual infrastructure of early Mormonism. I got curious about the question of whether the Latter-day Saints really are materialists.

Our specific way of thinking about the unity of existence is probably the central heresy that separates us from our Christian cousins (in honesty, it separates us from all three Abrahamic monotheisms). Our strain of monism appears to reject the God of classical theism. Where other Christians worship a God wholly beyond physical existence, we'll have none of it. We've even been known to brag about our refusal to worship such a God. This posture in deep antagonism to this God of the philosophers has become a historical and theological trope. Learned people know that Mormons don't believe in God the way other people do. We are a religion that, at least superficially, subverts the ancient order

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2. Smith's famous pronouncement that “all spirit is matter” just of a “more fine or pure” type is included in a canonized handful of aphorisms uttered in Ramus, Illinois in 1843 (D&C 131). The “Try the Spirits” editorial, which Smith likely oversaw, makes a similar argument the year before. The two texts appear to be part of the same basic impulse.

of gods and humans. We have no place, or at least so the story goes, for the God of traditional Christianity.

It's little wonder that Brother Jones scared our lapsed Baptist contact away from further encounters with LDS doctrine. Thing is, I'm not so sure that this familiar story about Mormon theology is actually true.

### Traditional Mormon Materialism

The traditional story is well-known but worth repeating, if only in brief. Joseph Smith taught two crucial doctrines that most of us Mormons see as gems of the Restoration and outsiders see as bizarre, even pagan, heresies: (1) God and humans are of the same species, and (2) spirit and body are the same substance.

I've called the first theological stance the divine anthropology. It began ambiguously but grew into reasonable clarity.

In the Book of Mormon, we meet a God who, on first reading, isn't obviously different from the Trinitarian God of traditional Christianity.<sup>3</sup> But the Book of Mormon only begins the story of God in Mormonism. Within months after the Book of Mormon was published, Smith's visions of ancient Hebrew history pushed toward a more distinctive theology. In his 1830 Prophecy of Enoch and Visions of Moses (later canonized together as the Book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price), Smith began to articulate more clearly a God who was as embedded in history and relationships as we humans are; famously, he is a God who wept beside the seer Enoch.<sup>4</sup> Whether Smith was just becoming bolder about announcing his heresies or his views were shifting over time isn't easy to determine, but within a couple years, the lineaments of Smith's divine anthropology were easily discerned in his 1835 Doctrine and

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3. See Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone* 10, no. 5 (May 1985): 8–18.

4. Terryl and Fiona Givens follow that interpretive line in *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012).

Covenants and 1835–1842 Book of Abraham.<sup>5</sup> This God was of the same species as humans. God wasn't just anthropomorphic, he was a divine human.

The ancient Hebrews saw God as able to manifest himself to humans as the angel of the Lord's presence.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly when Smith spoke of God, he spoke as if the angel of the Lord's presence was the Lord himself. Smith described this God explicitly in two public addresses in the last months of his life: the King Follett Sermon and the Sermon in the Grove. In the King Follett Sermon, Smith characterized "the great Elohim who sits enthroned in yonder heavens" as fully conspecific (i.e., of the same species) with humanity.<sup>7</sup> Rather than a God beyond physicality, the Ground of the Great Chain of Being, Smith's Elohim was the founding parent of a genealogical Chain of Belonging.<sup>8</sup>

The Mormon God found himself within a creation that either antedated him or at least (and this is the crucial theological point) existed independent of him. In Smith's most notorious exegetical act (placed within the King Follett Sermon), he argued that the first words of the Hebrew Bible (*Bereshit bara Elohim*) referred to God(s) whose act of creation was one of organizing preexisting material into the world we

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5. Samuel Morris Brown, "The Olive Leaf and the Family of Heaven," in *You Shall Have My Word: Exploring the Text of the Doctrine and Covenants*, edited by Scott C. Esplin, Richard O. Cowan, and Rachel Cope (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2012), 182–91.

6. James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of the Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

7. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 229.

8. I discuss this in "The Early Mormon Chain of Belonging," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 1–52. The currently most reliable transcript of the King Follett Sermon is probably still the Thomas Bullock transcription, published in "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15, Aug. 15, 1844, 614–15.

inhabit.<sup>9</sup> If Smith had been a learned Platonist or intentional student of Gnosticism, he might have preached that the demiurge (a supernatural being in Platonic and Gnostic thought that mediated between God and the material world and bore responsibility for terrestrial creation) was a false memory of his Elohim of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>10</sup>

In the subsequent Sermon in the Grove, Smith pushed the exegesis further, relying in part on the fact that *Elohim* is plural. He argued there that the Godhead required a plurality of gods, that God the Father had a Father (after all, Jesus obviously did, and he modeled his life perfectly on his Father's life), and, in the face of that plurality, the God we worshipped was the "one God pertaining to us."<sup>11</sup> Both God and Jesus were conspecific with humans; Jesus' life mirrored God's separate life. The Trinity—certainly in its Platonic sense—was wholly abandoned. Smith thus hovered between two heretical poles—the God of the Old Testament was either the one God in a lineage most closely tied to us or, contrarily, the word "God" referred to the entire lineage of divine beings. A divine metonymy permeates this divine anthropology and complicates attempts to summarize it.

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9. By most current scholarly readings, that initial phrase means something like "When Deity began creating." Essentially no scholars would endorse Smith's seeing a reference to a "head god" in the phrase, but the sense of a creation *in medias res* rather than *ex nihilo* does comport with many modern readings of the admittedly somewhat cryptic phrase. On the broader question of what Smith was doing in Genesis 1:1, see Kevin L. Barney, "Joseph Smith's Emendation of Hebrew Genesis 1:1," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 103–35.

10. Hereafter, I will italicize *Elohim* when the Hebrew word or the sense of divine plural is intended but leave it in roman when it's the proper name of the God of the Old Testament.

11. Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 378–84. Although the fit is imperfect, in this respect Smith's theology may thus overlap some with what Brian Davies calls theistic personalism in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 9–15. I thank Walker Wright for drawing my attention to this theological tradition.



A vigilante mob lynched Smith about a month after the Sermon in the Grove, stilling his personal voice and forcing his followers into bereaved crisis. Smith's disciples soon experimented with these late doctrines. William Phelps wrote a short story about "paracletes," his word for the divine-human species, detailing a web of such paracletes inhabiting and organizing the universe.<sup>12</sup> Brigham Young extended that notion into his subsequently anathematized Adam-God theology, in which the relevant God within the plural *Elohim* was in fact Adam. Eliza Snow (Smith Young) emphasized especially the proximate divinity of our heavenly parents, including the divine mother (emphasizing a dual *Elohim* that rested between the usual singular and plural). Orson Pratt and others pursued a panentheism that merged the plural *Elohim* with the entire universe.

Whichever interpretive line they followed, Mormons remained heretics. Smith often defamed (usually in caricature) the Calvinist God, arguing that a God who did not exist alongside us humans didn't exist at all. Some early Mormons argued in arch idiosyncrasy that mainstream Protestants were atheists because they believed in the traditional God, who, in the phrase of the Anglican Articles of Religion, had no "body, parts, or passions."<sup>13</sup> Along those lines, Mormons rewrote a popular hymn to announce that "the God that others worship is not the God for me."<sup>14</sup>

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12. Samuel Brown, "William Phelps's 'Paracletes': An Early Witness to Joseph Smith's Divine Anthropology," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 62–82.

13. [Unknown, perhaps John Taylor or William Phelps], "The Living God," *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 3, Feb. 15, 1845, 808–09. On similar arguments by Orson Pratt, see Craig James Hazen, *The Village Enlightenment in America: Popular Religion and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 40–41.

14. "Poetry," *Times and Seasons* 6, no. 2, Feb. 1, 1845, 799, with simultaneous publication in the *Nauvoo Neighbor*. The author of the parody remains unknown (Michael Hicks, "Poetic Borrowing in Early Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 [Spring 1985]: 136–37).

This formulation has stuck. We are, to use the familiar terms, gods in embryo, while God is a mighty oak grown from a human acorn. I suspect that many Latter-day Saints have believed precisely that formulation, even if recently some have been more reluctant to endorse a full-fledged divine anthropology.<sup>15</sup>

While this tradition is reasonably well established, Mormons have always known that times change—the generativeness of their model of the world might even embrace change. Each generation has something that feels new to say about the world. The same is true of Mormon monism.

### Current Views of Mormon Materialism

The last fifty years have witnessed an epochal intensification of cultural changes that have affected how we in the West—religious and non-religious thinkers alike—imagine the world.<sup>16</sup> In light of these changes, renewed or even novel triangulations have seemed necessary.

The literary critic and Mormon theologian Terryl Givens has argued recently for the priority of monistic materialism in the LDS tradition. He sees it as a major theological contribution, rejecting the West's reigning dualism. Givens sees this monism as nothing to be ashamed of and even theologically productive.<sup>17</sup> In this respect he extends and makes more literary the writings of the Mormon attorney-theologian

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15. The paradigmatic deflection from the full extent of Mormon divine anthropology came in Gordon B. Hinckley's 1996 interview on *60 Minutes* (DVD available at LDS Church History Library, item 2359001). The Gospel Topics essay "Becoming Like God" (February 2014, <https://www.lds.org/topics/becoming-like-god>) describes "a cartoonish image of people receiving their own planets."

16. Charles Taylor has told this story most perceptively over a string of books most conveniently summarized in the early and late chapters of his *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

17. Givens makes his arguments in *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 57–65.

Blake Ostler,<sup>18</sup> himself indebted to the Mormon philosopher-theologian David Paulsen.<sup>19</sup>

Mormon theologian and continental philosopher Adam Miller has responded that Givens smuggles in idealism and thus has not taken Mormonism's materialism seriously.<sup>20</sup> Miller suggests that allowing Mormon materialism to be radical requires the abandonment of any external force, essence, or order. He argues that Mormon materialism must be assiduously anti-Platonic, scrupulously avoiding the God of classical theism. To this end he argues that Mormonism could be comfortably placed in a tradition espoused by the French postmodern philosopher Bruno Latour.

Over several books and essays, Miller outlines a proposal to adapt a variant of Latour's version of what many term object-oriented ontology.<sup>21</sup> The crux of these proposals is that what we see as meaning and order in fact derive from objects. The cosmos is nothing but objects, and meaning exists *after* rather than *before* those objects. According to Latour's model, these objects can give or withhold themselves in relationship; the objects and their interconnections constitute networks embedded within

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18. Ostler's arguments are made in "The Mormon Concept of God," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 65–93 and his three-volume systematic theology, *Exploring Mormon Thought* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001, 2006, 2008), especially the third volume, *Of God and Gods*. Ostler advocates a "kingship monotheism" in which God the Father is the head of all gods. Ostler rejects both infinite regress and the God of classical theism. Ostler thus advocates only one of the three senses of *Elohim* that I see in early Mormon theology.

19. David Lamont Paulsen, "Comparative Coherency of Mormon (Finitistic) and Classical Theism" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1975).

20. Adam S. Miller, "A Radical Mormon Materialism: Reading *Wrestling the Angel*," in *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 57–64.

21. Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) and Miller, *Future Mormon*.

networks embedded within networks. These proposals thus fit within a “network theology.” This network-based approach, heavily indebted in my view to twentieth-century existentialism, resists hierarchy and master narratives as an ethical stance.

Endorsing the mutual constitution of networks through a giving that he characterizes as secular “grace,” Miller argues that God himself participates as an object among objects. From these networks arise phenomena of considerable complexity, according to Miller, presumably including the meaning toward which the networks at least transiently aspire.<sup>22</sup>

These flat networks propose to ground their constitutive objects *and* to bear the weight of their own grounding, reporting that they depend on no logic or order anterior to the objects of which they are comprised (or the larger networks in which a given, smaller network is embedded). Such objects and networks regress infinitely; it is “turtles all the way down” in the famous formulation of infinite regress.<sup>23</sup> Visibly and rightly enamored of God and grace, Miller proposes a radical Mormon materialism that appears to be at home with the fundamentals of Mormon deification and ontological monism.<sup>24</sup> The resonances with core Mormon theology should be immediately apparent: the shared ontology of gods and humans, our ineluctable relatedness, our affection for human agency.

I confess here that, despite my admiration and affection for Miller, I’m entirely unmoved by Latour. Because I think it’s better to do so,

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22. Note that the anti-hierarchical conception underlying the flat networks is wishful thinking. Because emergence is precisely hierarchy; that’s just what it is—a higher order supervening on a lower order. Even if one starts with an entirely flat network, if the network does anything at all, it introduces hierarchy.

23. The reference to turtles is part of a standard argument that self-grounding can be the only grounding, that there is nothing like God that serves as the basis for existence. This is often termed “infinite regress.”

24. This appears to me to be the primary argument of his *Speculative Grace*, amplified some in chapters 5, 6, 9, and 11 of his *Future Mormon*.

I want to emphasize first our areas of agreement. Miller's proposal strongly emphasizes our interdependency and the primacy of relation. I agree wholeheartedly with that focus, in many respects a postmodern rebaptism of Mormonism's adoption theology. I like Miller's emphasis on the possibility that the universe itself may take an unexpected turn (even if I'm not willing to embrace the Epicurean notion that the cosmic "swerves" cannot be intentional). I love also Miller's notion that grace is fundamental. On a great deal, we agree.

But on some core issues, we disagree. The more I consider the central assumptions of network theology, the flimsier they appear.

The basic notion of network theology borrows heavily from a para-scientific fascination among some philosophers with network effects observed in computer science and information technology, where complex, emergent phenomena are common. This "emergentism" is the notion that certain states or phenomena can supervene on constituents that are not reductively predictable on the basis of the attributes of those constituents. In more colloquial terms, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The intricate structure of a snowflake supervenes on collisions among dust, water vapor, and wind. The double helix as the blueprint of life supervenes on the structure of the individual nucleic acids. The swarming of schools of fish supervenes on the brains of all the distinct fish.

The emergence of mind on brain is the classic formulation of emergentism. Nothing important about consciousness itself can be predicted directly from a tangle of electrically charged cells sheathed in fat, bathed in blood, and stored in a skull. One can't summarize the attributes of neurons or even networks of neurons and thereby anticipate Wagner writing *Tannhäuser* or Bach his cello suites or any of us wondering what it means to love and sing and die. Because consciousness isn't predictable or explicable on the basis of the constituents of the brain; either mind emerges on brain (the standard physicalist account) or mind represents

something else/more than brain (a dualist account) or, as I suspect is more likely, a lot of both.

I'm sympathetic to emergentism. I even sort of like it. At the least, emergentism represents a way for scientists to grapple explicitly with the failings of reductionism to explain rich phenomena in their actual complexity.

Unfortunately, emergentism per se is miserably and notoriously circular.<sup>25</sup> *Why does this inexplicable thing happen? Emergence. Why did it emerge? Because it's emergent.* We have a promissory note but no actual explanation here. Some critics see emergentism as an obfuscating wave of a magic wand. And not without reason.

Many questions remain unanswerable, other than trivially, under an emergentist view of meaning. Take the basic point of emergence as an example. What does it mean when a whole appears to be greater than the sum of its parts? Appears to whom and under what circumstances? What does it mean to be greater? What defines the nature of the interconnections that bind the parts to make the whole?

Is emergentism just a sleight of hand to get materialism, including the network theologies, to work? Or is it a set of empirical observations about circumstances that defy reductionist accounts of mechanism? Could emergentism be better recast as influential absence or constraint, as in Terrence Deacon's impressive (if not entirely satisfactory) treatment of consciousness?<sup>26</sup> None of these answers is clearly spelled out in the

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25. Philip Clayton and Paul Davies, eds., *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

26. Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: Norton, 2012) is hard to summarize straightforwardly, but, working mostly within information theory, he explores the mechanisms by which constraint (a not-entirely-physical state of limitation) could direct the evolutionary course of physical matter and, crucially, could achieve iteratively more complex types of constraint. Deacon provides the most rigorous emergentist account to date of the rise of human consciousness. Whether he

network theology proposals, but these implications are the stuff out of which this theology must be built if it is to be meaningful.

One suspects that these accounts see the God of classical theism as an attempt to describe phenomena that emerge within flat networks. They bear substantial affinity with what some call teleotheism (a God who *comes into being* as we humans band together in love).<sup>27</sup> I'm sympathetic to that impulse, even as I find it incomplete as both metaphor and reality. Something does happen when we gather together in deep mutual regard, something that is constituted by our committed connection, and the network theology accounts appropriately draw attention to that fact. Whether what emerges from our shared love has no antecedent or gathers no power from outside itself or the shape of its potentiality is the much harder question that network theology only begs.<sup>28</sup>

On the harder question, the network theology proposals fall flat. Networks are units of complexity and adaptation; they aren't metrics of meaning. Networks can grow war or create peace. They can transform through love *or* hate. On the mundane level, witness the mysterious stops and starts of rush-hour traffic or the difficulty in getting an under-powered hotel wireless network to stream a favorite movie on Netflix as two ubiquitous examples of emergent network effects.<sup>29</sup> Emergent

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was successful is not clear to me and will likely take some decades to have a better sense for the persuasiveness of his schematic account of the possible evolution of consciousness.

27. The term was popularized by the economist and Unitarian-Universalist lay minister Miles Kimball, in a sermon in 2008 (<https://blog.supplysideliberal.com/post/27997728961/teleotheism-and-the-purpose-of-life>).

28. I'm fascinated by Eric Eliason's suggestion that the God of teleotheism might exist in a state of quantum uncertainty, rather like Schrödinger's cat, deified (Eric Eliason, correspondence with author, August 2016).

29. As is often the case (in my admittedly biased experience), the scientific phenomena occasionally favored by the philosophers for authoritative metaphors tend toward banality in their day jobs as scientific observations or fields of inquiry.

network effects are empirical observations about the behavior of systems, not a metric for knowing whether the system is healthy or ill, a beautiful child or a cancerous tumor.

Emergence doesn't obviously solve any of the residual problems of the infinite regress. Nor is there a sense in which the problem of self-grounding meaning is solved by emergentism. When it comes to questions of meaning, emergentism is primarily a hope for a *deus ex machina* that is all *machina* and no *deus*.

I agree with Miller that many traditional ways of talking about Mormon theology don't look monist or materialist, whatever its exponents say. I disagree that we ought to take the misapprehensions at face value by baptizing Mormonism in the waters of postmodernism. In fact, I think there's decent evidence, both textual and conceptual, that Mormonism isn't actually materialist.

### Mormonism's God as Ground: The True Light of *Agape*

Purely materialist accounts struggle to make sense of several hard, basic questions. What causes us? What grounds us? What makes us stand out from other bundles of energy and failures of entropy? What is the source of whatever meaning we may lay claim to? Does our meaning derive from the fact that we connect to other similarly constrained bundles of energy? If so, *what is the nature of those connections?* If we choose the language of emergence, how does that which emerges come to emerge, and how do we know whether what has emerged is the moral equivalent of a mind or a thirty-car pileup? While Mormons don't have as detailed an account of the God who grounds us as traditional Christians do, I believe we have a kernel that we oughtn't abandon. That very kernel may be crucial to navigating a changing social and cultural climate while staying true to our roots.

Joseph Smith offered several admittedly brief sketches of a power beyond God, an essence that could ground Elohim and the rest of us.



A sermon on atonement in Alma 42 argues that God must meet the demands of justice or “cease to be God” (verses 13, 22, and 25). Here justice appears to be able to constrain God the Father.<sup>30</sup> In his last year of life, Smith borrowed the imagery of the ladder to heaven from Jacob’s vision to describe a graded ascent to godhood. The surviving transcripts of this sermon aren’t entirely clear, but they suggest an infrastructure or scale along which gods and humans progress and/or differentiate.<sup>31</sup> If Elohim ascended that ladder to achieve godhood, then the ladder represents an order beyond him.

Beyond these spare gestures toward an order beyond God, Smith preached a consistent, albeit morphologically dynamic, essence beyond Elohim, an essence that represents the source of extra-divine meaning.<sup>32</sup> That metaphysical essence is made flesh in the bond between a parent and a child, a connection that Smith identified, at different times, with “priesthood,” “the light of Christ,” and the “true light.” The concept first appears in images of light.

As I read Smith’s written theology, the “true light” is that which is greater than we all, that which provides the structure for our Chain of Belonging.<sup>33</sup> Christ is the purest and most accessible vessel for it. The

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30. Admittedly this could also be a reference to logical coherence: if God is perfect, he can’t be internally inconsistent. This scriptural verse is as useful a place as any to indicate that Smith didn’t endorse what some have called the “divine command theory,” by which morality is defined by God’s will, regardless of whether it accords with some greater law.

31. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15, Aug. 15, 1844, 614–15. Smith might also have been appropriating Jacob’s vision for his quest for humans to climb the expanse separating them from God.

32. Without trying to make too strong a claim for similarity and with no claim for historical dependence, an analogy exists between the Kabbalists’ *Ein Sof* and Joseph Smith’s True Light. I thank Clark Goble for drawing this parallel to my attention.

33. I believe now that I was mistaken (through indifference, then, to this theological puzzle) in my book *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the*

Book of Mormon introduced the concept as the “light of Christ” in 1829 (Moroni 7:18–19). This essence was, crucially, the metric by which good could be distinguished from bad; it was the “light by which ye may judge.” In this early instance, one could be forgiven for not knowing whether this light of Christ referred to an individual’s conscience, the moral law beyond humans, something specific to Jesus or, more likely, all three at once. This concept of truth and light took greater shape over the next three years in Smith’s revelations.

Smith made his commitment to this essence beyond Elohim clear in his Olive Leaf revelation during the winter of 1832–33 (D&C 88). Smith began the Olive Leaf with a promise of guaranteed salvation, mediated by Jesus Christ, who is “the light of truth.” He then described this “light of Christ” as being “in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made.” He moved through the litany of celestial bodies that had constituted the backbone of The Vision, his revelation of the graduated heaven from February 1832 (D&C 76), and clarified that this “light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space” and, crucially, it is “the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things.” Smith moved quickly and at times seemed to be invoking the divine emanations of esoteric theology,<sup>34</sup> but he was also working through cosmic structure and the ground of meaning, not just a mystical power existing within the world. Note that in the Olive Leaf, this was the power of God who

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*Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62, when I claimed that the “true light” was material.

34. On the emanations, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106 and Catherine L. Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), 51, 178, 347, 260, 464.

resides in the bosom of eternity rather than God himself being that eternity. In an exegesis of the prologue of John within the Olive Leaf, Smith clarified that the world didn't comprehend God, but once they were quickened by him and in him they would be able to comprehend God. Specifically, "then shall ye know that ye have seen me, that I am, and that I am the true light that is in you. . . . Otherwise ye could not abound" (vv. 49–50).

Smith made a similar argument in a revelation of September 1832, equating truth, light, and the spirit of Christ (D&C 84:45–46). There again he sounded both somewhat esoteric and assiduously Christian. "Whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ." That "spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world."

Smith returned to the True Light in 1833, this time grappling directly with the New Testament. In Doctrine and Covenants 93, a modern revelatory encounter with the Gospel of John long in need of a non-numeric title, Smith quibbled with prior Christologies.<sup>35</sup> Where John depicts Christ as the eternal *logos* and light by which God brings life and truth to humanity, Smith propounded a view of Christ as the best and purest vessel for that light beyond us all. Smith thereby suggested that John had committed a metonymic error: the ancient apostle had unwittingly merged the light and its purest vessel, Christ, not realizing that they were in fact distinct.<sup>36</sup>

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35. Nicholas Frederick is correct that Doctrine and Covenants 93 departs from established Johannine theology, although I believe that he has misunderstood the nature of the departure. See his *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), chapter 4. In terms of the missing title, I respectfully submit that Doctrine and Covenants 93 should be called "The True Light."

36. Frederick is correct that Smith elaborates a "lower" Christology than John. In his treatment of the phrase "grace for grace," Frederick doesn't acknowledge that Smith used those odd terms in radically different ways.

Smith, though, separated the True Light into Christ and a power beyond Christ. This disambiguation, correcting John's mistaken metonymy, is central to the rewriting of John's Gospel that occurs in Doctrine and Covenants 93. The "true light" (v. 2) exemplifies the *agape* that unites individuals (vv. 3–4). All power arises as God and Christ dwell in each other (v. 17), a mutuality made possible by the true light, which appears to have an existence beyond God and Christ. In this text, Smith makes clear that humans grow toward divinity as they participate in a Christly relationship of mutuality guided by that light (vv. 20–22). He gestures to the concept as the "spirit of truth" (vv. 23–24), arguing that light and truth belong together (vv. 29–30, 36) and are uncreated. He then argues strongly that this light is anterior (logically and chronologically) to human meaning: "here is the agency of man . . . because that which was from the beginning [the true light] is plainly manifest unto them" (v. 31). Throughout this revelatory exegesis, Smith describes this True Light in terms other Christians use to describe the God of classical theism. This True Light is both source and metric of goodness, truth, and morality. It appears, to my eye, to exist beyond time and beyond any specific incarnation, of which there are many.

The notion of a true light beyond the God Elohim stayed with Joseph Smith throughout his life, often moving in and out of the related topics of priesthood, discernment, and the premortal experience (when the True Light apparently first touched us humans). When, in 1842, he revealed more about the Mormon theogony (birth of the gods) in his Book of Abraham, he subtly invoked the True Light as the mechanism by which *Elohim* (here explicitly plural, especially in the revised creation accounts of Abraham 4–5) "organized" the human intelligences into their next phase or "estate" of eternal life. The light of celestial bodies both settled them into a priesthood-like hierarchy and expressed their dominance over other, lesser lights (Abraham 3:4–10, 16–18).

Smith also expanded this theme in “Try the Spirits,” an 1842 anti-schismatic editorial on spiritual discernment that he likely supervised.<sup>37</sup> This editorial echoes the concept of the true light of Christ as a power, often called priesthood, that organizes spirits into communities. Invoking the Abraham theology, Smith argues that human “spirits are governed by the same priesthood that Abraham, Melchizedec [sic], and the apostles were” and that “they are organized according to that priesthood which is everlasting.” Tying, as the Book of Abraham does consistently, human genealogies to cosmic hierarchy, the editorial indicates that these human spirits “all move in their respective spheres, and are governed by the law of God.”<sup>38</sup> In this phrase Smith suggests that this True Light of *agape* contains “the law of God,” imposing an order on humanity (and perhaps on God himself, if “of” means “constraining”) that is crucial to our communal growth over the course of eternity. Parley Pratt, writing in 1838, made similar arguments in a somewhat more systematic way.<sup>39</sup>

I freely confess that later Mormon thought on this topic has been far from clear, and Smith himself often spoke impressionistically rather than systematically. God, Christ, and the True Light intermingle conceptually in his teachings. Later Mormons settled, more or less, on a wan flicker of the true light as the “light of Christ,” which they understood as the inborn human conscience.<sup>40</sup> This theological transition ultimately served

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37. Almost all of Smith’s published writing was coauthored or ghostwritten at this point, but one hears his voice reasonably clearly in many sections of the editorial, even as he likely relied on John Taylor and/or William Phelps for other sections and revisions.

38. Joseph Smith, et al., “Try the Spirits,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 11, Apr. 1, 1842, 745.

39. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 64.

40. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 127–29 briefly reviews the development of this idea. The first instance of this reasoning I have found is 26 August 1838; see Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders’ Quorum Record, 1836–1841* (Provo: Grandin Book Company, 1985), 49.

to differentiate the confirmation ritual bestowing the gift of the Holy Ghost from the general sense that God can guide all people, including non-Mormons. (Latter-day Saints may have gained thereby a way to mediate exclusivism and universalism.)

I'm not suggesting either that God is unavailable to non-Mormons or that the LDS ritual of confirmation doesn't matter. I'm aware that some Latter-day Saints love to think of a natural transition from that light of Christ to the gift of the Holy Ghost in their own conversions. I don't disagree with conceiving the light of Christ as the gift of human conscience; I just wouldn't leave it at that.<sup>41</sup>

This True Light of *agape* in Smith's revelations represents, in my view, a reasonable approximation to the God of classical theism, often distinct from Elohim, the Heavenly Father.<sup>42</sup> One could see this True Light as a distinctive updating of ancient Greek forms that accords with what the British philosopher Roger Scruton has called the "soul of the world"<sup>43</sup> or even the essential, divine force supporting human reason in Descartes's philosophy.<sup>44</sup> More to the question of Mormon materialism, this true light is not wrapped into Smith's later meditations on the materiality of spirit. This crucial point—that the light isn't material and both exceeds the God Elohim and works through him—has been missed

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41. Incidentally, this rhetorical move brought Mormons into better conformity with the assumptions about the human moral sense within Scottish Common Sense Realism.

42. The true light would thus approximate the abstract plural use of *Elohim* proposed in Joel S. Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 7–24. I thank Walker Wright for bringing this philological argument to my attention.

43. Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

44. Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 68.

in prior discussions of the relationship between Mormon divinity and the God of classical theism.<sup>45</sup>

In later teachings, aspects of this True Light as an active force came to be identified with priesthood. While Jonathan Stapley has elaborated useful gradations among early Mormon priesthoods of cosmology, ecclesiology, and charismatic healing, this sense of priesthood as the true light beyond all humans and gods—most closely tied to a cosmological priesthood—is somewhat external to Stapley's taxonomy.<sup>46</sup> This *agape* as priesthood represents the rules by which cosmological interconnection can operate. This priesthood was the power by which God created and animated the world. It was the force by which God could declare that his "work" and his "glory" was not, as the traditional Christian theologians would have it, the expression of his own unsurpassable majesty. Instead, it was "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life" of humans (Moses 1:39). Here is the kenosis—self-emptying—of parenthood writ large: Elohim follows the dictates of *agape*, just as Christ did.

This is the priesthood that the Pratt brothers, especially Orson, shaped into a Neoplatonic panentheism that strayed some from Smith's initial revelations.<sup>47</sup> This sense of cosmic priesthood is not so different conceptually from the aesthetic essence of the Romantics, as we see in William Wordsworth's 1798 "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey." Reflecting on the contrast between rural idylls and urban alienation, Wordsworth describes his entry into a mode of being in "harmony" and "joy," by which "we see into the life of things." He perceives there "a

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45. Thus, for example, Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 15–16.

46. Jonathan Stapley, "Women and Mormon Authority," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 101–20.

47. On Pratt, see Albanese, *Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 178 and McMurrin, *Theological Foundations*, 15–16. See also Hazen, *Village Enlightenment* and Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*.

sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused” in nature and human consciousness, “A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things.”<sup>48</sup>

Many Christian theologians have tended to think of this same phenomenon as God or, perhaps, *agape* (a kind of supererogatory love that overflows narrowness while creating a universal particularity).<sup>49</sup> Julian of Norwich seems to have seen something like this as the mark of Christ’s motherhood of all believers.<sup>50</sup> This *agape* is parental in its mechanics and its experience. Parents feel visceral identity with the child and can empty themselves out for the good of the child—the emptying out that the New Testament refers to as *kenosis*, especially with regard to Christ and what the Book of Mormon calls his “condescension.” Few people love anyone as much as they love their children.

The True Light is a template for, or perhaps the essence of, the parent-like act of belonging. Within Mormonism, it is the infrastructure for our communal salvation. This true light is the *what*, the *why*, and the *how* of the meaningful connections that network theology must rely upon. Whether the True Light can function as the ultimate grounding of the world of objects may require additional clarification in a brief philosophical tangent. I believe it can.

In personal communication with me, Adam Miller objects to the notion of a kenotic *agape* as the ground for the world of objects because *kenosis* presupposes the existence of objects (or, at a minimum, the

48. William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798,” in *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (London: J. & A. Arch, 1798), 201–10.

49. In Blake Ostler’s fairly Trinitarian phrase, as he was thinking through the nature of the Mormon Godhead, it is “intimate and inter-penetrating love” (“Re-visioning the Mormon Concept of Deity,” *Element* 1, no. 1 [Spring 2005]: 31). I’m aware of the risk of cliché in this formulation (love as the meaning of life has surely been the subject of many millions of awful poems and songs) but suspect that this is a case where cliché is truer to reality than ironic distance.

50. Christ’s maternity is an important theme of her *Revelations of Divine Love*.



possibility of plurality). In other words, love and relation require the existence of objects, so they can't be metaphysically prior to those objects. I'm glad for Miller's attention to a paradox all of us must grapple with, even as I think his objection is unpersuasive because it confuses an essence with its incarnation. One could easily imagine, for example, that metaphysical wholeness—dependent on no multiplicity of objects in its very nature—appears in the world of objects as a kenotic *agape*. When we speak of *agape* as kenosis, we are thus describing the most familiar of the incarnations of this essence beyond Elohim, not requiring that the essence itself be dependent upon object.

I understand Miller to be arguing that meaning must ground itself by emerging in a network. I believe that meaning can't bear that burden on its own. In fact, the network theology smuggles in a grounding (via unjustified assumptions about the nature of relation) while simultaneously refusing to allow such grounding to occur. The True Light, in my view, meets the needs for grounding that network theology cannot.

Joseph Smith used other language to describe the incarnations of this True Light in the material world. While priesthood means many things (including most controversially in recent decades which individuals should manage Church organizational structures), I see in Smithian Mormonism strong reason to understand priesthood as centrally a way to talk about the power inhering in the parent-child bond, the true light of *agape*. In other words, priesthood is the awesome, parent-like power from (and through) Elohim to bring together human beings into something greater than themselves, durably. Priesthood (as an expression of the metaphysical power of the love of a parent for a child) is the cement of the cosmos, a universal connector for conscious beings. I believe this was the sense intended when Smith told the Nauvoo Relief Society that “without the female all things cannot be restor'd to the earth[;] it takes all to restore the Priesthood.”<sup>51</sup> This priesthood that the male and

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51. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, May 27, 1842, in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, edited by

female quorums together constituted was the promise of *agape* made real in the material world.

Acknowledging the power of this True Light of *agape* makes explicit what is centrally ignored in the network theologies, the smuggling of meaning into the unremarked essence of the connections by which emergent meaning is to be generated. Without some metric or order or power, we can only report the behavior of such networks; we cannot fully describe them or know whether they are good or bad or both. Networks could as easily be traffic jams or forest fires as human societies. Networks could as easily end in post-apocalyptic cannibalism as in millennial peace. What matters is not that nodes in a network are connected to each other but what it means to be connected and what the networks become. These central questions remain largely if not wholly unanswered in network theology.

I note here again that this True Light was not included in Smith's materialism of spirit made from "fine matter," nor was the True Light demoted in the claims of the divine anthropology, which brought God and humans together into a single species. As best I can tell, Joseph Smith was disambiguating the God who grounds meaning from the Elohim who was the divine parent of ancient Israel and the supernatural entity to which Christ directed his exemplary prayers of "Abba, Father."

What could we as Latter-day Saints gain from such a disambiguation between the divine force or essence that grounds meaning and the heavenly parents? This contrast seems to meet the logical need for grounding while allowing the generativity of human deification.

To translate this specific position into more familiar Christian terms, Joseph Smith proposed an expanded understanding of Incarnation. The True Light is incarnate in Elohim, Christ, and all of us, to a greater or lesser degree. Elohim is not, per se, incarnate in Christ. He is Christ's Father. The True Light is incarnate in both Elohim and Christ, and they

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Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2016), 75–76.

call us to a similar incarnation of the true light of *agape*. In Smith's revelations, the miracle of Incarnation moves from the Son to the Father. Elohim, too, incarnates an essence beyond himself. He is a father (and his wife a mother, Smith's characteristically concrete updating of Julian of Norwich's teaching of the divine mother within the Trinity), and we are all called to be parents in one sense or another, whatever the specific details of our mortal family structures.<sup>52</sup>

Even with this background, the word *Elohim* contains ambiguities because it can be seen as both a proper name and a divine plural. Elohim can refer to our remote divine ancestor, both the male and female ancestor together, and all of us divinized humans, taken together (think here of Paul's body of Christ as a ready metaphor). The incorporation of both divine mother and divine father in the dual *Elohim* is hinted at in Genesis 1:26–27, in which a plural deity proposes creating male and female humans “in our image.”<sup>53</sup>

We could easily imagine the centrality of kenotic devotion in Mormonism as a lived exegesis of Philippians 2.<sup>54</sup> There Paul hopes that the Saints at Philippi will reject the spirit of narcissism and instead live together in love. Paul holds out the Incarnation of Christ—“let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”—as an example of kenotic *agape*. Christ emptied out even his divinity in being born human in the interest of an ontological humility that would allow him to become the infrastructure of our salvation. This is, after all, the central miracle of the New Testament (and the Book of Mormon): a god became flesh to be miserably below his inferiors, in order that they might all be united in

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52. I thank Phil Barlow for helping me see Moses 1:39 in a new light. Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* contain her meditations on the divine feminine.

53. This use of Elohim as a divine dual could be useful in discussions about the documentary record concerning our heavenly parents in scripture.

54. I thank Jason Kerr for making me engage this scripture.

him and the light that shines through him.<sup>55</sup> In Mormon terms, Christ made it possible for us to fully join the family of heaven. The power by which he did so is the True Light, that order and meaning beyond humanity, of which Christ is the perfect vessel.

God the Father/Mother (the divine dual) and all of us, the children of the Father, Mother, and the Son, are also vessels of that same *agape*, similarly enfleshed with them in the distinctive celebrations of Mormon theology. In Christianity, the God of cosmic order is enfleshed in the Incarnate Christ. In Mormonism, we human beings participate not just in Christ's Atonement but in his very Incarnation. For Christianity, God's parenthood (of Christ) is the mechanism by which God fully exists, and for Mormons that miracle of Incarnation propagates through our parenthood (recalling that parenthood, crucially, is not restricted to its biological forms), the core expression of *agape* that brings us from being into meaning. To say it again, *the love of (and as) a divine parent draws us into fullness*. We exist as potentiality that cannot be realized on its own, until *Elohim* (the divine couple) brings the organizing force of *agape* to us in the premortal realm. This is a process of mutual constitution, a multilateral Incarnation that may be unique to Mormonism.<sup>56</sup>

According to Smith, there is no obvious cause of our being kernels of potentiality. These potentialities have always existed alongside God.

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55. Nephi describes the Incarnation as the "condescension of God" in 1 Nephi 11. I wonder whether the uses of condescension in, e.g., 2 Nephi 4, 2 Nephi 9, and Jacob 4 might also have reference to a peculiarly Mormon view of Incarnation.

56. Other traditions also embrace variations on pan-human unity. They have not tended to use the language of Incarnation to describe humans as much as Christ, certainly not in their official theology. Stephen Webb correctly identifies the distinctiveness of Mormon Christology on this point in his *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

These kernels are self-existent but eternally potential, and eternal potentiality is ultimately meaningless. The cause of our coming into Being, the actualization of potential, is the true light of *agape* as wielded by *Elohim* and Christ.

In this particularly Mormon construal of Incarnation, we place at the very center of attention the ineluctable embeddedness in the nature of things. Everything that matters most about us, everything that spans for us the mundane and the heavenly, is in relation. We are nothing without relation. This is, I believe, the truth that network theologians are attempting to account for.

While the Mormon solution solves some tensions, it leaves others unresolved. The most straightforward approach to grounding Being has historically been the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, that all physical existence derives from God. God in this sense is the answer to the question, *Why is there something rather than nothing?* Smith's True Light straightforwardly grounds Meaning. That is its primary theological function. But Smith's True Light doesn't obviously ground Being. The question is: how could the True Light ground Being if physical existence is coeval with that True Light? Is it that the True Light is metaphysically distinct and thus can bear an ontological rather than chronological priority? Or could an atemporality be at play here? In other words, does this True Light exist outside time, and if so could it cause Being as such within time (where the sense in which we as physical beings are eternal is that we exist from negative to positive infinity on a temporal axis rather than being atemporal)? I suspect that something like this is true.

If it's true that even in our eternity the True Light grounds our being, then what does it mean for Elohim to have drawn us into communion in the premortal realm? I think that Elohim changed us from a materiality of potentiality to actuality, from atomic into molecular beings. Just as, on a much more limited scale of transformation, an infant just banished from the womb grows into a human being only through the constant, attentive love of other humans, so do we grow from potential

to actual in the constant, attentive love of God.<sup>57</sup> That is the miracle of Incarnation writ across the entire human family.

My interpretation of the True Light dovetails with Mormonism's adoption theology, in which we human beings are secondary saviors ourselves, the "saviors on Mount Zion" cryptically prophesied in Obadiah.<sup>58</sup> In his amplification of that old scripture, Joseph Smith made clear that we, as secondary saviors, would bring those we had saved with us to the grand millennial feast on Mount Zion after Christ returns. In this theology of secondary salvation, we not only are adopted, but we in turn adopt, serving as vessels for the propagation of this parent-like priesthood power of the true light of *agape*. We all, through our acts of loving as intensely as parents, become gods because the pure participation in *agape* is the definition of godhood. And as such gods we spread some small portion of the divine True Light that exists beyond us all. The storied infinite regress of gods familiar to Mormon theologians is, thus, the incarnation of the True Light, not the groundless infinite regress of the postmodern theologies.

And here we are again at deification—humans as gods, God as human. (Note here, as everywhere, the ways that this *agape* enwraps and elevates men and women equally in the conspecificity of gods and humans. Such is a straightforward if ambitious interpretation of Joseph Smith's preaching to the Nauvoo Relief Society in 1842: "Said Jesus ye

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57. I'm aware of bad parents, orphanages, and the tragedy of abandonment as well as the risk of circular logic here, but my point nevertheless seems secure. Without any human aid, an infant will die within a few days. The few children who have received only the barest nutrition and hydration survive biologically but in a state of psychological disarray that clearly represents a profound failure to actualize their basic potential as human beings.

58. On Smith's appropriation of Obadiah, see Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth*, 219–20.

shall do the work which ye see me do. These are the grand key words for the Society to act upon.”<sup>59</sup>)

I need to reflect on biology for a moment because I see this theology as salve rather than toxin. Not every biological parent is worthy of the title. My own father failed these duties, through a combination of mental illness and bad choices. I suspect that my own biological children will have cause to criticize my parenting at many points during their mortal course. And many non-biological parents deserve the title of mother or father.<sup>60</sup> While this following claim will be controversial (because it represents an aspiration rather than current reality and because many have experienced our rituals as exclusion), temple parenthood—having one’s children born under the covenant or adopted into it—is the template for adoption beyond biology. Although some observers characterize temple family as exclusive rather than inclusive, we Mormons have a profoundly universalistic streak made manifest in our vicarious ordinances, these Latter-day rituals of adoption. Perhaps, therefore, we can say that all who have loved truly will have their love sealed by temple rites in the present world’s last days. This adoption is not metaphor; it is ritual and power. It is, in the word favored by Joseph Smith, priesthood. It is the power we make manifest in the world as saviors on Mount Zion.

Humans are not the True Light; neither is Elohim. They are embedded within the world to which it gives order. And, as humans learn to love, they may serve as vessels of that light. The True Light animates humans, grounds them, and directs their aspirations. Through that parent-like connection of *agape*, they are children to God(s).

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59. Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book, May 26, 1842, in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*.

60. Consider, for example, Ardeth Kapp’s response to infertility in Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian’s Press, 2017), 191.

However the questions of *agape*'s relationship to natural law and the dichotomy of coarse and fine matter are settled (or, as is more likely, remain productively unsettled), adoption appears to be the vehicle by which *agape* is actualized. Adoption is calling human beings into eternal communion.

What, then, did *Elohim* do when they adopted us, as recounted in the theogony and anthropogony of Genesis 1–3, which Smith serially reinterpreted (especially in Abraham 3–5) throughout his prophetic career? My best guess is that Smith was trying to say that *Elohim* (the divine dual) is a vessel for an *agape* that grows ceaselessly in the creation of new bonds of love. And that adoption is the ritual (an action, brimming with the power of correspondence, that spans physics and metaphysics) that enfleshes *agape*.

We may ultimately need to decide whether adoption represents a metaphysical third (i.e., the universe is comprised of coarse matter, fine matter, and the True Light made manifest in adoption). Or, alternatively, metaphysics is really only concerned with the True Light as it is expressed in matter. Whether that matter is monistic (all matter is fundamentally the same) or dualistic (there are two types of matter, one spiritual and one physical, or one fine and one coarse) doesn't matter so much: the rest is physics.

On the precise question of materialist monism, Smith's dualism of fine and coarse matter would satisfy almost no materialists. It sounds more like Ptolemy's gradations of matter into spirit along a scale of coarseness than any sort of actual philosophical materialism.<sup>61</sup> With rare exceptions, materialists are not interested in positing another species of otherwise-unknown matter for what has historically been called spirit. That's just dualism wearing dark glasses, a wig, and a beard. One need

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61. On the Ptolemaic gradations, see Seigel, *Idea of the Self*, 52.



only glance at Mormon discussions about “having a body” as the core mission of mortality to see through the disguise.<sup>62</sup>

The Australian philosopher David Chalmers famously proposed that consciousness isn't really an emergence on other forms of matter but its own kind of matter.<sup>63</sup> I'm not sure that Chalmers realized how much like Joseph Smith and his fine matter he sounded, but most physicalist philosophers of consciousness have preferred to leave consciousness unsolved rather than allow Chalmers's or an equivalent updated dualism.

For Smith the big question is the nature of God and the integrity of existence. He seems to hedge his bets some about the formal philosophical problems. When he says that the spiritual and temporal are the same, he's talking about harmony and interdependence. He does not appear to me to be claiming strict physical materialism; his fine matter isn't really the same thing as his coarse matter. Independent of his apparent dualism, the True Light appears to be something else again.

Assuming the True Light is a metaphysical third, what are the mechanisms by which adoption occurs? Are these mechanisms primarily physical or metaphysical? Or is the pursuit of such material mechanisms a category error? Perhaps adoption doesn't require a material mechanism (e.g., the fertilization of an ovum by a sperm or the meiosis of chromosomal material within an individual cell) because adoption is structural/conceptual rather than itself material. Adoption could in part be a pattern, a constraint, a way that matter is organized.

We Latter-day Saints are still heretics and always will be. Our God of the Old Testament is as embedded as we are. In separating a deeper God from its incarnation in *Elohim*, Smith implicitly accuses Christians of a

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62. On the notion of “having a body,” see Stephen Taysom, “‘Satan Mourns Naked Upon the Earth’: Locating Mormon Possession and Exorcism Rituals in the American Religious Landscape, 1830–1977,” *Religion and American Culture* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 60–61.

63. David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

mistaken metonymy. They have called God what is incarnated in *Elohim*. In pointing out this distinction, Smith draws central attention to our embeddedness. (On this embeddedness Miller and I agree wholeheartedly.)

We Mormons acknowledge our interdependence, even embrace it. While individuals exist for Mormons, they do so in a web of interconnection. We no longer endorse the Chain of Being, that scientific and ontological foundation of almost three millennia of Western thought, but we have inherited its reformulation at the hands of Joseph Smith as the Chain of Belonging. This genealogical replacement for the ontological scale of hierarchy is a way to retain what is best (deep, personal situatedness) while jettisoning what is not (the ontological hierarchy of the Chain of Being, ramifying in our divisions into aristocrats and serfs, slave-owners and chattel slaves). In the case of the Chain of Belonging, what replaces hierarchy depends upon the bestowal of human love. As we learn to love the way God loves Christ and Christ loves us, we extend the scope of our kindred. There is no ontological caste system, only a history of expanding love. Each of us is both child and parent. God embodies (and embeds) that divine order of True Light/*agape*, based on the love of parent for child. This *agape* is the backbone of the universe, the founding principle of existence. It is the Grand Unified Theory for metaphysics.

This true light of *agape* and its emergent Chain of Belonging represent a direct rejection of modern narcissism. We matter not for our defiant solipsism, but for our love. The love that empties us into each other, the love that looks beyond itself. We love and are loved, and that is what we mean. The structure of our cosmic meaning is *agape* as expressed in sacred interconnection.

I suspect that when all is said and done, Mormonism will pose a conundrum for traditional accounts of secularity, with their Weberian emphasis on disenchantment and the removal of the transcendent.<sup>64</sup>

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64. I'm puzzling through these problems in my work-in-progress, *The Metaphysics of Translation in Early Mormonism*.

I can't always tell whether Mormon theology is blissfully or willfully unaware of the theological problems of its relation to the immanent/transcendent divide. Lately, I suspect the latter. Do we immanentize the transcendent or transcendentalize the immanent? Or, instead, did Joseph Smith say that the question of immanent vs. transcendent is the wrong question to ask, a misprision as deep as secularity? If we were to stick with this binary opposition of immanent vs. transcendent, we would be forced to say that Smith immanentized the transcendent *without exhausting* transcendence (which exists both as the grounding True Light of *agape* and as the emergent Chain of Belonging).

We are embedded in a fabric of mutuality. And so, apparently, is Elohim. I'm aware of the pastoral implications, ably explored by the Givenses, of a fully embedded God.<sup>65</sup> For many, the God of classical theism is too diffuse, too impersonal, too separated from our plight. Many sufferers would prefer to be succored by someone close to them in experience and vulnerability. Joseph Smith's Elohim, "the God who weeps," seems more accessible to believers than the God of classical theism. But this God who weeps, interpreted materialistically, creates for us a vulnerability in meaning, a potential groundlessness. The network theology seems to embrace groundlessness as if God were a beat poet, cigarette ash falling like existentialist dandruff onto his black turtleneck. Traditional Mormons anxiously sidestep the problem, unwilling to follow Miller into radical materialism, but not sure what to do about God as Ground. The True Light allows our ultimate grounding while expanding the miracle of Incarnation, making Mormonism a productive heresy.

## Conclusion

I've loved Mormonism for two and a half decades and wondered about it my whole conscious life. I'm glad that we are heretics, and even as I welcome connections to other believers and unbelievers I'm in no hurry

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65. Givens and Givens, *The God Who Weeps*.

to homogenize our odd theology. Still, as I think about our materialism, especially as my wise friend Adam Miller proposes a radical variant as a possible Mormon theology, I find myself unconvinced. The process of digesting this fibrous theology has allowed me to understand ways that Mormon theology has been historically misread.

To recap, Mormonism looks neither monist (except in a trivial sense) nor materialist (except as poetry), even as it draws from a kind of unifying interest in embodiment many of the favorable features of materialism. I think network theologies are centrally wrong, even as I love their reminder that we are always in relation. And I think that Joseph Smith really did believe in something like the God of classical theism even as he emphasized a broader Incarnation that separated the Gods we know from the infrastructure of our being and meaning.

Mormonism is, I believe, able to solve the blind ends of the purely material network theology. The modes and mechanisms and meanings of relations are hidden in the assertions of network theology, but they are revealed and grounded in Mormonism. Secularity's exclusive humanism calls for inherent human dignity without any grounding. Network theology makes roughly the same argument, albeit with more sympathy for fullness and embeddedness. (In Charles Taylor's terms, network theology may be closer to "open frame" as opposed to "closed frame" immanentism, depending on how emergent meaning is treated.<sup>66</sup>) Network theology sneaks in the most important thing (specifically, non-arbitrary meaning) but, in the process, abandons that very thing. Mormonism does not.

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66. "Closed frame" immanentism essentially says that there can be nothing beyond the immanent frame, and any such aspirations are absurd; "open frame" immanentism is more open to the quest for fullness while still rejecting the traditional account of transcendence. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550–51.

# A CAPACIOUS PRIESTHOOD AND A LIFE OF HOLINESS

Kristeen L. Black

As an offering in speculative theology, this paper reconsiders the current normative understanding of a male-only priesthood as presented in the Book of Mormon, specifically in Alma 13:1–20, and proposes that Alma presents a more capacious model. While this text is generally accepted as supporting the establishment and practice of a male-only priesthood (and a model of the Melchizedek Priesthood), I argue that Alma’s message was meant to expand the role of priesthood in society and to provide a way for an entire community to enter into a life of holiness.<sup>1</sup> The exegesis that this paper presents is not simply an attempt to bring women into the conversation but to expand the conversation for the entire community—the community of all believers: men, women, and the rest of us.

The foundation for this speculative reading is the nature of scriptures themselves. A remarkable element of scripture that remains constant over the eons is that its messages disrupt the status quo and invite us to consider new ways of thinking and being. Limiting the reading of Alma 13:1–20 as priesthood for males only misses this important element. Although the text itself does not explicitly limit the office of priest to

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This paper was originally written for the Third Annual Summer Seminar on Mormon Theology, sponsored by the Mormon Theology Seminar and held at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, June 1–15, 2016.

1. My reading of Alma does not include an analysis of the biblical basis of gendered hierarchies. For more on that topic, see Cory Crawford, “The Struggle for Female Authority in Biblical and Mormon Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 1–70.

males only, many readers assume that it does. A prime example is found in the short chapter summary, which claims that the text describes how “men are called as high priests” (Alma 13).<sup>2</sup> While this is only one possible interpretation, having it stated within the text of the summary may be a hindrance to our reading of the text, causing us to overlook some of its more remarkable elements. It is worth noting that in *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition*, in lieu of a summary, the chapter heading simply states “Alma Explains the Ordination of Priests” with no mention of the gender (and/or sex) of priesthood holders.<sup>3</sup>

While I grant that Alma’s intent may not have been to specifically include women in the priesthood, I am not convinced that his intent was to limit the priesthood to men only. I propose that Alma invites his listeners to consider an alternate *form* of priesthood. This new form is not based on tribal lineage as previous models had been, but is rather based on the divine lineage we all hold as children of God. Alma proclaims that when this new priesthood is extended to the entire human family, it enables the community of believers to exercise their faith, do good works, embrace a holy calling, become high priests obeying the commandments and teaching others, and finally entering into the rest of their God. As I offer my speculative reading of Alma, I will show that when a religious community thinks of itself as a near kinship group (an egalitarian human family) who has a common religiously centered goal that is facilitated and perpetuated by priests (an office that everyone in the community qualifies for), it is able to become a community of individuals living a life of holiness. Before I present my argument, I would like to briefly discuss my approach and the challenge of working with religious text.

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2. Italics mine. These chapter summaries are found in all copies of the Book of Mormon as published and distributed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1981).

3. Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 288.

## The Challenge of Working with Text

As a specialist in religion and society, I am most interested in how religious communities “do” religion and, in the process, construct meaning for themselves and their fellow believers. Most often I employ ethnographic methodology, which includes attending worship services with religious communities and interviewing individual congregants. Through participating in the summer seminar, I have been granted the rare opportunity to examine a religious community through its religious texts—perhaps becoming a *socio-theologian*. Just as I do with people, I approach text with a respect for the tradition that my exegesis sets out to critique. Although the source of my study is scripture rather than people, my goal of discovering how religion is done and how a community constructs meaning remains the same. That being said, working with text does present unique challenges.

Regardless of the perceived source of scripture, every text has a writer. Whether the writer is Paul and the text his letters, or Alma and the text his sermon to the people of Ammonihah, every text has a social context within which it was produced and a community it was meant to address. Although scripture is elastic enough to remain germane to the human condition across the wide expanse of space and time, reading it outside of that original social context can be challenging. Additionally, as the text is reproduced, there are many translators and editors, each bringing with them their own unique social location and cultural standpoint.

While we can assume that every effort is made to remain as objective as possible, we cannot assume that these individual socially-influenced positions do not find a way to creep into the text. A prime example of a social norm finding its way into the text is the gendered language of religious texts.<sup>4</sup> While using male-centric language in formal writing

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4. While some versions of the Bible strive for inclusive language, the King James Version, which is used in Mormonism (and other religious traditions), employs the use of male-gendered language.

may have once been the norm, in our current social context its use, as well as the overall absence of women in religious texts, is problematic. Feminist theologians such as Judith Plaskow note that Jewish women live in an uncomfortable liminal state—continually looking to Jewish texts and traditions for direction on how to live their best lives but finding themselves absent or excluded. Mormon women express similar concerns and say that such exclusion is why they often find the scriptures a source of spiritual pain rather than comfort.

Having scripture that is written largely (if not exclusively) using masculine forms of address can also cause confusion.<sup>5</sup> In some cases it may be clear that the word “men” is referencing literally men only, but in other cases “men” may be pointing to all of humankind. An example of scripture meant for men only would be Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5:31: “It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away *his* wife, let *him* give her a writing of divorcement” (emphasis added). We can allow that Jesus may have been talking directly and exclusively to men. Generally, however, we believe that it would be wrong to assume that the entire text of the Sermon on the Mount is meant only for male ears to hear, or that men are the only people to which the entire text of the sermon applies. Likewise, we do not assume when 2 Nephi 2:25 states “Adam fell that *men* might be; and *men* are, that they might have joy” (emphasis added) that the verse is literally referring to men only. In this case we commonly assume “men” to mean humankind in general.

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5. There is quite a bit of debate about the male-centric language of scriptures. To read further on this topic, see works such as D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive-Language Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998); Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?: The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender Accuracy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998); and Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy: Muting the Masculinity of God’s Words* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2000). In the context of Mormon theology, a theology with a gendered god, the debate takes on a unique added layer that exploring fully is beyond the scope of this paper.



Another confusing case with the exclusive use of male pronouns is the word “brethren.” This word can be read in several ways. For instance, it can be read literally. When we see the word “brethren,” it can literally mean the archaic plural form of “brother” (i.e., multiple biological brothers). Another option is to read “brethren” as a reference to the male members of a specific religious group, a longstanding practice that is still in use today. Lastly, it is conceivable that we could expand the term to include the entire religious community (men, women, and children) much like the way we can accept the use of “man” or “men” as shorthand for humankind. As we consider this particular passage in Alma, it is important for us to further consider the way Alma uses the term “brethren” specifically.

### Alma’s Community of Brethren

In the first verse of chapter 13, Alma addresses his listeners as “my brethren.” Within a current LDS context, this phrase is commonly used to address a gathering of LDS men. It can also be used in conjunction with “my sisters” to address a congregation, or even the general public. Given that this phrase is so familiar to Mormons, these words may be easily passed over without much thought. To avoid this mistake it is worth taking the time to unpack Alma’s address—“my brethren.”

To begin, the word “brethren” is important by itself. There is a certain warmth to the familial term that hints at the relationship’s being old and established rather than new and untried. It carries an intimate egalitarianism not found in more formal relationships or forms of address. For instance, the term “brethren” lacks a hierarchy of power that terms such as “followers” or “students” creates. Being placed in Alma 13:1 is important as it reduces the tensions of power between Alma and his listeners that created a shadowy undertone in the previous chapter. It also dissipates the tension between Alma and the interlocutor Antionah (Alma 12:20–21).

By calling the listeners “*my brethren*,” Alma is indicating possession and belonging. Through our own personal experience within our faith communities, we know that members of a religious order (or congregation) share a special bond and social link. This is especially noticeable in the LDS custom of addressing one other as “brother” and “sister.” By claiming his listeners as “*my brethren*,” Alma is pointing to such a link by indicating that he is a member of the group he is addressing.

While Alma’s listeners may have already thought of themselves as a certain type of group, Alma’s naming them as “*my brethren*” reclassifies them, and Alma then claims them as his own. We see how he constructs this new identity for them and himself in Alma 12:36–37 and 13:1. In 12:36, Alma is recounting God’s words to men and is using the same teaching style of address he has used in the previous verses—that is, using phrases such as “I say unto *you*, that if *ye* will harden *your* hearts,” etc. (emphasis added). In verse 37, he suddenly changes the address and says “and now, *my brethren*, seeing *we* know . . . let *us* repent” (emphasis added). This shift indicates that after having been taught certain principles, those Alma is addressing now know those principles as well as he does and he can use the words “we” and “us.”

The use of the term “we” is just as crucial as the label “*my brethren*,” for now Alma is counting himself among those he is addressing. He has inserted himself into their community. Also in chapter 13, verse 1, Alma reminds the people that they are God’s children. This is another signal that he is trying to establish an idea of an egalitarian community of which he is a member.

If he were not establishing an egalitarian community, Alma could have easily used other terms or forms of address such as “people of Ammonihah” or “friends.” As readers who know the ultimate fate of Ammonihah, it may not have surprised us if Alma were to have used other, less friendly forms of address such as “hard-hearted people,” or even “sinners.” Still, Alma chooses to use not just a friendly form of address but one of familial closeness and equality. This egalitarian ele-

ment is perhaps most apparent in verse 5, which can be read: to sum up, from the beginning everyone is on equal footing. Holy callings have always been available for those whose hearts are open to receive them. From this we can see that Alma's salutation has at once dissolved any hierarchy of power and acknowledged a shared bond. With the use of a familial term we get a sense that the shared bond is a special type of relationship, close enough to be kin or family.

### A Capacious Priesthood

Throughout Alma's address his focus is on repentance and the plea not to harden one's heart. This indicates a choice—a choice between opening your heart and mind to a new possibility, or hardening your heart and remaining closed in old ways of being. Surely, if one has a hard heart, she will not be open to new ways of doing things and certainly not prone to repent. If one has a hard heart, she will not be open to the possibility of new realities both temporal and eternal, and without repentance neither can become a new reality. I assert that Alma was attempting to present these new realities through a new, capacious priesthood.

Various religious traditions believe that the priesthood is found (and/or grounded) in a specific group of individual priests and that there are as many different priesthoods as there are priests. For those traditions, the priesthood does not exist outside of the priests—they are interdependent. Mormons, on the other hand, approach the priesthood as a universal, where men are priests because they hold the priesthood.<sup>6</sup> This means that for Mormons, the priesthood is not dependent on priests, but exists in and of itself.

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6. Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 17.

Alma's model of a Melchizedek Priesthood aligns with the universal model of priesthood that Joseph Smith presented in 1835.<sup>7</sup> According to Smith, the priesthood should be open to extend beyond lineage and time, thus universal. Smith illustrated this point by naming Adam as the first priesthood holder. Adam's lineage is God's lineage; as children of God, that lineage is shared by the entire human family.

In his writings on the history of the Church, Joseph Smith stated that "the Priesthood is an everlasting principle, and existed with God from eternity, and will to eternity, without beginning of days or end of years."<sup>8</sup> This is quite similar to Alma's words in 13:7, which reads, "This high priesthood being after the order of his Son, which order was from the foundation of the world; or in other words, being without beginning of days or end of years, being prepared from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge of all things."

A universal priesthood in which Adam, the "father of the human family,"<sup>9</sup> is the first priest is important to Alma's presentation of the priesthood. Alma begins chapter 13 by reminding his listeners that God gave the commandments "unto his children" (Alma 13:1). Alma is reminding people of the source of the commandments, but more importantly he is reminding them that, as receivers of the commandments, they are children of God. In essence, Alma is reminding his listeners that they are all part of the human family. For Smith and Alma, being children of

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7. Joseph Smith would apply this idea in 1835 to establish the LDS Melchizedek Priesthood, where one need not be a literal descendent of Aaron in order to hold the office of priest (D&C 107:16–17). Smith's construction of a Melchizedek Priesthood is still one of social and political power and is a hierarchical version of priesthood reserved for men only.

8. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 8. Smith originally spoke these words in July or early August 1839.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

God is the only prerequisite needed to be eligible for the office of priest and priesthood in general.

I realize that some may argue that Mormons grant sex and gender as eternal and a preexisting condition and believe that we are foreordained to certain roles restricted by sex, such as priest or mother. I argue that such restriction is a social construct rather than a divine constraint and that if an argument is valid for a capacious priesthood in this temporal life, it is also valid for the pre- and afterlife. While there is more to be said on that matter, for now I would like to set aside ideas of all preexisting conditions (including the theodicy of holiness and sanctification) to be met prior to ordination into the priesthood (either in the premortal life or in the current temporal life) and consider two possible ways to approach the priesthood as presented in Alma 13. The first is the traditional Mormon scenario, which divides humanity into two groups: male priests and/or priesthood holders and female non-priests who do not hold the priesthood.<sup>10</sup> The second is a more capacious model where the duties of priest are to teach the plan of redemption and every member of the human family is eligible for this office. Before we can consider this proposed model, it is necessary to review the form of priesthood Alma may have been trying to supplant.

The culture of the people Alma was addressing was one of priestcraft, where male priests held privileged paid positions and repentance was not a requirement for salvation. Evidence of the social, religious, and political power of the priests in that culture is reflected in the first chapter of Alma. There we read how Nehor introduced the people of Nephi to priestcraft. Nehor held that “every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people” (Alma 1:3). Alma, on the

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10. Defining females as non-priests designates them as “other” and is problematic. While defining and discussing the issues this definition includes is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that such issues are at play here.

other hand, felt that “were priestcraft to be enforced among this people it would prove their entire destruction” (Alma 1:12).

While Alma’s concern over the possible destruction of a people may be the motive for his emphasis on repentance, his equal emphasis on the source of the high priesthood may also be an indicator that he is aiming to present a new, more capacious idea of priesthood. Naming “the foundation of the world” as its source, Alma is presenting the idea that it is the priesthood itself rather than the priests (including their physical and socially constructed attributes or sex, lineage, and gender) that is eternal in nature. While priests must prepare themselves through exceeding faith, good works, and being called, the priesthood need not be prepared, laid, or called, it just was, and continues to be. If only the priesthood itself is eternal, and not the privilege of gender and lineage as requirements of obtaining the priesthood, then we can consider the form or order of priest in a more open and inclusive way.

A more speculative piece of evidence that Alma is presenting a capacious form of priesthood over a limited and gendered model is the destruction of the city of Ammonihah. The chief judge of Ammonihah ordered the destruction of holy scriptures and the massacre of all women and children who believed in Alma’s words (Alma 14:8). Certainly, if Alma’s form of priesthood had been available to women, it would have disrupted the established priestcraft culture of that city. Perhaps to avoid such disruption and civil unrest, those who would have been eligible for priesthood under Alma’s model, along with supporting scripture, were destroyed. This massacre would have insured that the status quo of privileged male priests could be maintained.

The final evidence that Alma is presenting a new form of priesthood is his emphasis on the manner, or holy order, in which priests are to be ordained. If Alma were offering a new idea of priesthood, he would also have to present a new model that would supplant the lineage-based model of Aaronic priestly offices. It is referred to as the Aaronic Priesthood since only Aaron and his sons qualify to be consecrated to the

office of priest (Exodus 28). Alma presents the new capacious model in the form of a Melchizedek Priesthood.

### Establishing a New Form of Priesthood

Alma presents the figure of Melchizedek as the model for a capacious priesthood. Given that the priestcraft Alma is supplanting is lineage-based, he must cite the authority of his new capacious priesthood. Alma accomplishes this by reminding the people that Melchizedek is a priest after the holy order of God and that he “preached repentance unto his people” (Alma 13:18).

Most often Melchizedek is referred to in conjunction with the role of a priest and the gathering of tithes. Given that redemption, not tithes, is Alma’s focus, I suggest Alma is using Melchizedek for other reasons. I propose that Alma is using this figure to accomplish three things. First, it is an attempt to tap into an existing collective memory of a form of previously established priesthood. He began his address in chapter 13 by asking the people to “cite your minds forward” (Alma 13:1), or to remember. Something remembered is not something new. Second, Alma uses an especially virtuous priest to emphasize the fact that the priesthood model he is suggesting is moral. This could be a counterpoint to his views that the priestcraft of Nehor is immoral. Third, by using the known figure of Melchizedek, Alma is showing them that the type of priest he is promoting is especially noble.

Overall, Alma also seems to be clarifying that the high priests he is referring to in his sermon are not the same as the high priests we know from Hebrews who are ordained for humankind in things pertaining to God. The use of Hebrews here can be a bit tricky; I feel that most often the crucial elements are too easily brushed over. Let me explain.

The mention of Melchizedek in Hebrews 5 specifically mentions *men* as priests. “For every high priest taken from among *men* is ordained for *men* in things pertaining to God, that *he* may offer both gifts and

sacrifices for sins” (emphasis added). While many religious traditions (including Mormonism) take this reference as justification for a male-only priesthood, the verse may actually be pointing to something more significant. To clarify, in Hebrews 5:1 we read of Melchizedek’s function as a high priest; that priests are men *for* men, and his function of offering gifts and sacrifices for sins. This point of “for men” is crucial. Commentators such as Warren Quanbeck see Hebrews 5:1–10 as describing the priestly qualifications of Christ, for Christ was chosen from among men to act on behalf of man. In this sense, the emphasis on men is not to disqualify women from priesthood but to qualify Christ as savior. With his emphasis on repentance and redemption, Alma’s use of Melchizedek may be pointing to the coming of a savior rather than bolstering a reason for an exclusively male priesthood.

Returning to the idea of a capacious priesthood, the use of Melchizedek offers one more important point. Alma clarifies that “the Lord God ordained priests . . . to teach these things unto the people” (Alma 13:1) and that Melchizedek was this type of high priest who “received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God” (Alma 13:18). This type of priesthood is not restricted to men as it is in Hebrews 5:1, for in Alma 13:1–12 we read how all members of the human family are God’s children and as such are on the same standing with their brethren. Hebrews 7:3 illustrates how lineage is not a prerequisite for priesthood, as Melchizedek was “[w]ithout father, without mother, without descent . . . but made like unto the Son of God.” So again we have the idea of a universal and capacious priesthood reinforced, but now with the added “according to the holy order of God,” the holy order being this radical new spiritual practice—a life of holiness.

### A Life of Holiness

As I mentioned at the beginning, I argue that Alma’s message is meant in part to provide a way for an entire community to enter into a life



of holiness. By a life of holiness I mean a life that is lived for a sacred purpose (e.g., holding a sacred office) and a life of righteousness. It is also a life that has a special relationship with the holy (i.e., God). Alma is talking about this type of life when he refers to the plan of redemption, which includes faith, repentance, and doing good works. Alma warns his listeners against hardening their hearts and emphasizes the importance of living the commandments, and in chapter 13 he gives more direct instructions on how priests help a community do those things. In other words, Alma is presenting a holy order in which priests can help themselves and others live lives of holiness.

Alma is emphasizing a priesthood that is based on a holy order. The word “holy” is used thirteen times in these twenty verses, most often in relation to the calling, ordination into an order, and the ordinances performed by the power of God. When we think of the word “holy,” we usually reflect on a state or experience that is beyond our temporal existence. However, when we overlay Alma’s appeals to repentance, faith, and good works, we see that Alma is calling the people into a radical new life of spiritual practice, a life of holiness—a new manner or way of being.

This new life of holiness is egalitarian rather than hierarchical; but a priesthood by nature must be ordered, so a capacious holy order of priesthood would seem a contradiction. To solve this dilemma, Alma introduces Melchizedek as a model. Now that a model is in place, the last necessary element is a communal practice of ritual—a manner, or way, to enact the function of the priests. In this instance, the needed ritual is good works.

I believe that the good works Alma is pointing to involve keeping the commandments. The commandments provide a solid list of things people should and should not do; this doing with religious intent is the act of ritual. Therefore, teaching about the commandments and how to keep them enables a community to participate in holy works.

The inhabitants of the city of Enoch are an example of a community who achieved a life of holiness. In Moses we read of Enoch’s leadership

and how the community achieved a unity of heart and mind. “And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them” (Moses 7:18). They achieved not only a life of holiness and equity, but created a city of holiness—a Zion.

I find that religious communities create meaning for themselves in part by embracing important narratives. In any communal narrative there is a need for storytellers—people who establish the narrative and pass it along to others, allowing it to be perpetuated. In this way the best storytellers are also the best teachers. In this text, Alma establishes these storytellers as ordained priests. Alma gives us this detail in verse 1, where he states that priests are ordained in order to teach. Priests teach the people about the commandments, and in doing so they also teach the people about who they are and what they should do.

Alma is constructing a narrative about the people and God. God gives the people commandments that the priests help the people learn how to follow. The connection between God and the people becomes a bonded link. God is promising rest and redemption, and the people are pledging adherence with soft hearts. The people then become a covenant (promise-making and -keeping) people, and God claims them as his own. “Therefore, whosoever repenteth, and hardeneth not his heart, he shall have claim on mercy through mine Only Begotten Son, unto a remission of his sins; and these shall enter into my rest” (Alma 12:34).

## Conclusion

Throughout this offering of speculative theology, I have invited the reader to consider a new way of thinking about Alma’s sermon regarding the priesthood. Alma reminds his listeners that they are children of God who, by choosing good and exercising great faith, are given a holy calling of priesthood and a life of holiness. I suggest that Alma’s intent

is to extend this holy calling to everyone—men, women, and the rest of us—by our divine lineage as children of God.

By conferring divine lineage on the entire human family, Alma at once dismantles a patriarchal hierarchy and unites a community into a single tribe. No longer restrained by circumstances of birth such as sex/gender and tribe (Aaron), every member of the community is now eligible for office of priest in Alma's Melchizedek Priesthood.

Our seminar reading began with the verse "Now it came to pass that when Alma had made an end of speaking these words, the people began to be more astonished" (Alma 12:19). In this short essay, I have suggested that Alma's ideas give the people a new way to think of themselves in community with each other and with God. He invites his listeners to consider a new form of priesthood and a way to live a life of holiness. Alma's capacious priesthood may be presenting the people with a chance to reconstruct their reality—and that is truly astonishing.



J. Kirk Richards  
*Adam and Eve*  
Photo by Andi Pitcher Davis

# COMMUNITY OF CHRIST: AN AMERICAN PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY, WITH MORMONISM AS AN OPTION

Chrystal Vanel

Most scholars of Mormonism focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah and currently presided over by Thomas S. Monson. However, according to Massimo Introvigne, a specialist in new religious movements, “six historical branches”<sup>1</sup> of Mormonism developed after the death of the founder, Joseph Smith, in 1844: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints led by Brigham Young; the Reorganized Church/Community of Christ; the Church of Christ (Temple Lot); the Church of Jesus Christ organized around the leadership of William Bickerton (1815–1905); the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that accepted James J. Strang (1813–1856) as prophet and king; and the Church of Jesus Christ that followed the leadership of Alpheus Cutler (1784–1864). I like to refer to these denominations as the “six historical Mormonisms.”<sup>2</sup>

As Mark Lyman Staker has shown, the terms “Mormons,” “Mormonites,” and “Mormonism” originally referred to believers in the Book

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1. Massimo Introvigne, *Les Mormons* (Maredsous: Brepols, 1991), 19–22.

2. Chrystal Vanel, “Des Mormonismes : une étude historique et sociologique d’une fissiparité religieuse américaine, 1830-2013” (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études–Sorbonne, 2013), 23.

of Mormon and their religion.<sup>3</sup> I thus argue that Mormonism exists wherever there is belief in the Book of Mormon, even though many adherents reject the term “Mormonism” to distance themselves from the LDS Church headquartered in Salt Lake City.

The plural term “Mormonisms” may have been used for the first time by Grant Underwood in 1986.<sup>4</sup> Since then, it has been used by sociologist Danny Jorgensen in a 1995 article on Cutlerite Mormonism<sup>5</sup> (following discussion with Jacob Neusner, a scholar of “Judaisms”<sup>6</sup>), by David Howlett in his 2014 book on the Kirtland Temple,<sup>7</sup> and by Christine Elyse Blythe and Christopher Blythe, who are editing a forthcoming book on Mormonisms.<sup>8</sup> My interest in the various denominations claiming Joseph Smith as their founder came after I read Steven L. Shields’s groundbreaking book *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*.<sup>9</sup> I first used the term “Mormonisms” in 2008, while writing my master’s dissertation under the direction of Professor Jean-Paul Willaime, a sociologist of Protestantisms. Taking into account the plurality in Mormonism, I simply pluralized “Mormonism” as my professor pluralized “Protestantism.”

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3. Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelation* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009), 72–73, 87.

4. Grant Underwood, “Re-Visioning Mormon History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (1986): 420.

5. Danny L. Jorgensen, “Conflict in the Camps of Israel: The 1853 Cutlerite Schism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 21, no. 1 (1995): 64.

6. Danny Jorgensen, e-mail message to author, Oct. 5, 2010.

7. David J. Howlett, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of a Shared Mormon Sacred Space* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

8. Christine Elyse Blythe and Christopher James Blythe, eds., *Mormonisms: A Documentary History, 1844–1860* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, forthcoming).

9. Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, rev. ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 2001).

This paper focuses on the Community of Christ (hereafter referred to as “CoC”), known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints (hereafter referred to as “RLDS Church”) prior to 2001. Headquartered in Independence, Missouri, the CoC has nearly 200,000 members worldwide and is the second largest movement whose roots go back to Joseph Smith. I argue that the CoC today is an American progressive Christianity with Mormonism as an option.

Research on the RLDS Church/CoC has been fruitful, though not as prolific as research on the mainstream LDS Church. Whereas nineteenth-century RLDS history tended to be defensive against other Mormonisms, especially toward the LDS Church,<sup>10</sup> since the 1950s it has opened itself to a more neutral academic approach, with groundbreaking studies such as Robert Flanders’s book on Nauvoo,<sup>11</sup> Roger Launius’s non-hagiographic biography of Joseph Smith III,<sup>12</sup> and the sociological studies of Danny Jorgensen.<sup>13</sup> The work of Richard Howard should also be mentioned, as he was the first professionally trained RLDS Church historian.<sup>14</sup> Mark Scherer succeeded Howard in 1994 and continued until 2016. Scherer’s three volumes on RLDS/CoC stand among the must-read books in Mormon studies because of their clarity and use of archival material, and Scherer’s research on RLDS/CoC globalization

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10. Inez Smith Davis, *The Story of the Church*, rev. ed. (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1955).

11. Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

12. Roger D. Launius, *Joseph Smith III: Pragmatic Prophet* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

13. Danny L. Jorgensen, “Beyond Modernity: The Future of the Reorganization,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 18 (1998): 4–20.

14. Richard P. Howard, *The Church Through the Years*, vol 1., *RLDS Beginnings to 1860* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1992); *The Church Through the Years*, vol. 2, *The Reorganization Comes of Age, 1860–1992* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1993).

and its most recent history is groundbreaking.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the John Whitmer Historical Association, founded in 1972, publishes historical research on the RLDS/CoC by authors from diverse backgrounds (academics, amateur historians, and institutional historians that some might sometimes consider as apologetics).

This paper is based on historical and sociological research grounded in observations made during several field research trips between 2009 and 2013 in Independence, Kenya, Malawi, Haiti, France, Germany, England, and The Netherlands (while working as a translator for the CoC), the consultation of historical resources (both primary and secondary sources) at the CoC library and archives in Independence, Missouri, as well as a survey distributed to the Colonial Hills congregation (in Blue Springs, Missouri, near the Independence headquarters) on October 12, 2010.

CoC leadership does not seem to consider academic studies to a significant extent. Thus, the works of scholars Roger Launius and Danny Jorgensen on the impact of the liberalization of the RLDS Church on the membership and its decline have been largely disregarded by the RLDS/CoC leadership. This shows that a religious institution does not have to be conservative to be somewhat anti-intellectual (or at least indifferent); a liberal religious institution can be too. In the case of CoC, one might wonder if this is not due to Mormonism's original populist theology. Even though I think religious institutions should benefit from faith-promoting and apologetic history, they should also take advantage of critical studies and observations from social scientists, and I would

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15. Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Restoration, 1820 to 1844* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013); *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization, 1844 to 1946* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013); *The Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946 to 2015* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016).



argue that the CoC's lack of doing so might also partly explain its current decline.

This article intends to show the theological evolution of the RLDS Church/Community of Christ in the larger US religious culture and under the direction of American leadership. The CoC has gone through three stages: first, it became a moderate, apophatic, and respectable Mormonism, then it evolved toward liberal Protestantism following World War II, and today it could be defined as an American progressive Christianity with Mormonism as an option. Because my paper is not apologetic, I want to make it clear that I do not give positive or negative meaning to words such as "liberal," "conservative," "progressive," or "fundamentalist." I use these words as a social scientist, not to judge or as a form of name-calling, but to describe what I observe.

### A Moderate, Apophatic, and Respectable Mormonism in Modern America

Following Joseph Smith's death in 1844, many charismatic leaders claimed the right to succession. But even though most Mormons were attracted by one of the charismatic leaders claiming to be the true successor of the founding prophet, some Mormons remained unconvinced or unsatisfied by those leaders.

Such was the case with Jason Briggs (1821–1899), pastor of the Mormon congregation in Beloit, Wisconsin. The Beloit congregation joined with other congregations and founded the New Organization in June 1852. In 1860, Joseph Smith III (1832–1914), son of the founding prophet, finally accepted the leadership of the New Organization, which became the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS Church) in 1872.

The RLDS Church claimed to be the one true Mormonism, faithful to Joseph Smith and early Mormonism. Thus, it believed in the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. Early on, the RLDS

Church rejected polygamy, arguing that Joseph Smith never practiced nor taught it, but that the apostate Brigham Young was its innovator. It was also the proud owner of the Kirtland Temple. The RLDS Church's chief argument for being the one true Mormon church was its being led by a descendent of Joseph Smith; thus, Frederick M. Smith (1874–1946) succeeded his father Joseph Smith III as RLDS Church president-prophet in 1860, followed by his brother Israel A. Smith (1876–1958) in 1946.<sup>16</sup>

From its birth in 1860 up to World War II, the RLDS Church could, then, in fact, be described as a moderate, apophatic, and respectable Mormonism in modern America. Historian Alma Blair called the RLDS Church a “moderate Mormonism” in a 1979 article, arguing that it did not endorse the most radical theological innovations of early Mormonism such as the secret temple rituals, the plurality of gods, and the plurality of wives.<sup>17</sup> Methodist theologian W. Paul Jones later argued that the RLDS Church was an “apophatic” denomination that tended to define itself by what it was not: it was “not Mormon” (for fear of confusion with the Utah Mormons) and it was “not Protestant” (considering itself not as a part of the Reformation, but as a restoration of the primitive Christian church).<sup>18</sup> And as a respectable Mormonism in modern America, the RLDS Church did not try very hard to flee away from modernity by building God's kingdom on earth, as sociologist Danny Jorgensen has shown.<sup>19</sup> Even though Church leaders have for a time encouraged the

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16. For the history of the RLDS Church from the succession crisis in 1844 to World War II, see Scherer, *Journey of a People: The Era of the Reorganization*.

17. Alma R. Blair, “Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints: Moderate Mormonism,” in *The Restoration Movement. Essays in Mormon History*, edited by F. Mark McKiernan, Alma R. Blair, and Paul M. Edwards (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1979), 207–30.

18. W. Paul Jones, “Theological Re-Symbolization of the RLDS Tradition: The Call to a Stage Beyond Demythologizing,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 16 (1996): 4.

19. Jorgensen, “Beyond Modernity,” 7.

“gathering” of Church converts to Independence, Missouri from North America, Europe, Australia, and French Polynesia in Zion, the RLDS Church did not create a separate, politically-organized community, as did followers of Brigham Young in the Rocky Mountains and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints led by James J. Strang on Beaver Island, Michigan. RLDS Mormonism was very much integrated into US society from its inception. As such, it consistently denounced polygamy, as historian Roger Launius has shown, and even collaborated with US officials in its fight against plural marriage in Brigham Young’s Rocky Mountain theocracy.<sup>20</sup>

### The Post-Second World War Internationalization and Liberal Protestantization of the RLDS Church

Three essential aspects define liberal Protestantism: a critical, non-literalist reading of the Bible that began with nineteenth-century higher criticism;<sup>21</sup> a refusal of timeless and universal creeds and dogmas coupled with a desire to adapt theology to its contemporary world;<sup>22</sup> and a positive outlook on humanity and the world.<sup>23</sup>

While sociologists may draw a distinction between liberal Protestantism and fundamentalist/conservative Protestantism,<sup>24</sup> theologians and believers might argue that such a dichotomy does not describe the more complex reality of Protestantisms. Thus, Protestant neo-orthodoxy tends

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20. Launius, *Joseph Smith III*, 247–72.

21. André Encrevé, “Libéralisme théologique,” in *Encyclopédie du protestantisme*, edited by Pierre Gisel (Paris-Genève: Puf/Labor et Fides, 2006), 763.

22. Laurent Gagnebin and Raphaël Picon, *Le Protestantisme: La foi insoumise* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), 189.

23. Jean-Paul Willaime, *La Précarité protestante: Sociologie du protestantisme contemporain* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1992), 78.

24. Steve Bruce, *A House Divided: Protestantism, Schism, and Secularization* (London: Routledge, 1990), 30–37.

to accept higher criticism while being somewhat faithful to traditional Christian dogmas such as the Trinity and the incarnation.<sup>25</sup> Historian and sociologist David Hollinger distinguishes between ecumenical Protestantism and evangelical Protestantism.<sup>26</sup> Hollinger underlines how American mainline Protestantism's encounter with diversity triggered "the intensity and range of the self-critique carried out by the intellectual leadership of mainstream liberal Protestantism during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s."<sup>27</sup> As part of this self-critique, Methodist missionary Ralph E. Dodge argued in his 1964 book *The Unpopular Missionary* that "missions had been too closely connected to colonialism and had tried to impose on indigenous peoples denominational distinctions that made no sense abroad."<sup>28</sup> The same call to cease imposing "denominational distinctions" abroad was voiced by some RLDS Church leaders after the Second World War, as Matthew Bolton has shown.<sup>29</sup>

Prior to World War II, the RLDS Church had a small presence in only a few countries outside the United States, such as Canada, Australia, French Polynesia, and Great Britain. The RLDS Church was indeed a Midwestern denomination: it had built an auditorium as its headquarters in Independence, Missouri and established Graceland College in Lamoni, Iowa. Like other American denominations, the RLDS Church

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25. Peter L. Berger, *L'Impératif hérétique: Les possibilités actuelles du discours religieux* (Paris: Van Dieren, 2005), 88; Robert M. Montgomery, "Liberalism and the Challenge of Neo-orthodoxy," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 15, no. 3 (1947): 139–42.

26. David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), xiii–xiv.

27. *Ibid.*, 23.

28. *Ibid.*, 26.

29. Matthew Bolton, *Apostle of the Poor: The Life and Work of Missionary and Humanitarian Charles D. Neff* (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2005), 35–56.

often took root where US military bases were built following the war. Thus, the moderate Midwestern Mormonism established itself in Japan, South Korea, and South America. But as the RLDS Church grew outside of the Mormon promised land, it also progressively lost core aspects of its particular, moderate Mormon identity. Some RLDS apostles, such as Charles Neff (1922–1991) and Clifford Cole (1915–2004), argued that the Reorganized Church's theology was too American and could not be understood across cultures. According to Neff, Japanese people not accustomed to Christianity could not understand the differences between the many Christian denominations, on the one hand, and between the Mormon denominations, on the other. It was difficult for them to grasp that the Reorganized Church was neither Catholic nor Protestant, and not even Utah Mormon. The Apostle concluded that only a simple Christianity, without the particularities of the RLDS branch of Mormonism, must be promoted by the institution during its missionary endeavors. A 1965 survey conducted by the Church leadership among 225 Church employees came to the same conclusion. The institution thus decided to define its objectives and theology more clearly. At the First Presidency's request, apostles wrote a statement on objectives that was presented in the 1966 world conference. The first objective called for a definition of a clear theology that might unite Church members from different cultures. The second objective asked for the adaptation of Church practices to individual cultural practices. The next objective called for a decentralization of Church administration. Finally, the last objective reinterpreted Zion as being the kingdom of God among all nations, and not only in Missouri.<sup>30</sup>

In order to respond to those objectives, especially the first one (definition of a clear theology), Church leaders and employees from the Department of Religious Education decided to gain some academic theological training from Saint Paul School of Theology, a Methodist

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30. Bolton, *Apostle of the Poor*, 48–49.

school, between March and December 1967. Some members from the Department of Religious Education had already received serious academic training in religious studies. For example, Verne Sparks studied at the Union Theological Seminary (New York), a liberal Protestant academic institution where liberal Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) taught.<sup>31</sup>

Following courses at Saint Paul and/or graduating from other Protestant seminaries, RLDS leaders then tended to focus on traditional Christian dogmas and to apply Protestant scholarship and theology to their particular tradition, as one can see in the works of RLDS theologians Harold Schneebeck and Roy Cheville. After gaining a bachelor of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary, Schneebeck taught religion at Graceland College. In his book *The Body of Christ*,<sup>32</sup> Schneebeck presents an ecclesiology that might be considered somewhat Protestant, defining the Church not as an institution but as a community: “the Church is unified, not by institutional structure but by the experience of the presence of Christ’s Spirit in the common life of the fellowship.”<sup>33</sup>

Whereas Joseph Smith defined the Mormon Church as the sole salvific institution, Schneebeck presents the Church as a community of believers. As Schneebeck emphasizes, since this community is founded on the memory of Christ as a servant, its members should also be servants,<sup>34</sup> working for justice and peace.<sup>35</sup> Schneebeck did not consider the RLDS Church to be the only true church, and his theology promotes ecumenism: “Our mission as disciples of Jesus Christ is to work in the world

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31. Richard B. Lancaster, “Religious Education and Change in the Church: 1954–1966,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 25 (2005): 118.

32. Harold N. Schneebeck Jr., *The Body of Christ: A Study of the Nature of the Church* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1968).

33. *Ibid.*, 37.

34. *Ibid.*, 38.

35. *Ibid.*, 52.

for its redemption. . . . To effectively attain this goal, we are becoming aware of the need for cooperation with other Christian groups, the necessity of ecumenical cooperation.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, Schneebeck invited the RLDS Church to work toward the betterment of the world alongside “other Christian groups.” This echoes the positive vision of humanity promoted by Protestant liberal theology.

Schneebeck was not the only RLDS educator whose theology seemed to have been influenced by (liberal) Protestant theology. Roy Cheville, a convert to the RLDS faith, got a PhD in religion from the University of Chicago Divinity School and wrote a book published by the RLDS Church entitled *The Field of Theology*.<sup>37</sup> Cheville argues that a “worthful theology must be up to date. It may not cling to the words and concepts of yesterday if these do not speak the language of today.”<sup>38</sup> Cheville here echoes Protestant liberalism and its intent to adapt theology to the contemporary world.

The First Presidency’s foreword to the book *Exploring the Faith*, first published in 1970 to present RLDS beliefs, is a good summary of the liberal Protestantization of the RLDS Church: “In more recent times it has been recognized that a more adequate statement of the beliefs of the church should be developed. Historical and traditional points of view needed to be expanded in view of the contemporary religious experience and scholarship. Recognizing that the understanding of religious experience is always qualified by the human nature of those involved, the church has traditionally avoided creedal statements.”<sup>39</sup> In openly saying that RLDS theology was reviewed in light of the contemporary

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36. Ibid., 82.

37. Roy A. Cheville, *The Field of Theology: An Introductory Study* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1959).

38. Ibid., 19.

39. The First Presidency, “Foreword” to Alan Tyree, ed., *Exploring the Faith: A Series of Studies in the Faith of the Church Prepared by a Committee on Basic Beliefs*, Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1987 [1970], 5

world and that no creedal statements would be presented, the RLDS First Presidency follows the trend of liberal Protestantism, which is adogmatic and adapts itself to the contemporary world.

As the RLDS Church was distancing itself from its Mormon roots and engaging with mainline American Protestantism, some big changes happened. In 1984, president-prophet Wallace B. Smith (great-grandson of Joseph Smith) gave a revelation to the Church, adding to its Doctrine and Covenants and opening the priesthood to women. The most conservative members—who refer to themselves as “Restorationists”—could take no more, and thousands left the RLDS Church or were excluded from it.<sup>40</sup> The liberalization of the Church thus had an impact on its membership. Sociological studies have shown that conservative churches tend to experience membership increases while liberal denominations tend to lose members.<sup>41</sup> In a study published in 1998 in the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal*, George Walton showed the decline experienced by the RLDS Church in terms of membership, financial resources, and numbers of individuals ordained to the priesthood that “point to a loss of about one-half of the active membership in North America in the last fifteen years.”<sup>42</sup> Since 1951, the number of baptisms has been declining in North America (US and Canada): there were an average of 4,877 baptisms between 1951 and 1965; 3,785 between 1966

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40. William Russell, “The Fundamentalist Schism, 1958–Present,” in *Let Contention Cease: The Dynamics of Dissent in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, edited by Roger D. Launius and W. B. “Pat” Spillman (Lamoni, Iowa: Graceland University Press, 1991), 125–51.

41. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Laurence R. Iannaccone, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1180–211; Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1995).

42. George N. Walton, “Sect to Denomination: Counting the Progress of the RLDS Reformation,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 18 (1998): 39.



and 1980; and 2,375 between 1981 and 1995. This membership decrease is not only due to a lack of baptisms, but also to a growing disaffection in North America: the RLDS Church experienced an average of 294 disaffections per year between 1951 and 1965; 335 average per year between 1966 and 1980; and 578 average per year between 1981 and 1995.

The decline of membership in North America has had an impact on the financial resources of the institution as “the general fund went from a regular surplus before 1983 to mostly deficit since.”<sup>43</sup> The diminishing of financial resources seems to have continued until today, as it has led to the sale of historic properties in Missouri to the LDS Church,<sup>44</sup> to the sale of the Book of Mormon printer’s manuscript for 35 million dollars to the LDS Church, and to numerous lay-offs of employees in recent years.

This loss of financial resources and members did not stop the RLDS Church from carrying on with its liberalization. The institution was actually able to carry on more freely with changes, as it was free from its most conservative members. In 1996, Canadian W. Grant McMurray became the first president-prophet of the RLDS Church who is not a descendant of Joseph Smith. Thus, one of the RLDS founding principles and identity markers, hereditary succession to the Church presidency, was given up. Under W. Grant McMurray’s leadership, the RLDS Church became the Community of Christ, thereby somewhat increasing the gap between them and “Latter Day Saintism” (Mormonism). McMurray resigned from the presidency in 1996 and was succeeded by Stephen M. Veazey, who serves today. During Veazey’s presidency, the CoC became part of the National Council of Churches, a US ecumenical Christian organization largely composed of mainline and liberal progressive

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43. *Ibid.*, 45.

44. Jamshid Ghazi Askar, “LDS Church Buys Farmland, Haun’s Mill, Far West, Kirtland property from Community of Christ,” *Deseret News*, May 5, 2012, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865555292/LDS-Church-buys-farmland-Hauns-Mill-Far-West-Kirtland-property-from-Community-of-Christ.html>.

Protestantisms. As the ecumenical CoC was radically departing from exclusivist Mormonism, it was thus also bringing itself nearer toward progressive Protestantism.

### American Progressive Christianity with Mormonism as an Option

American progressive Christianity finds its roots in the social gospel movement that was part of the larger progressive movement.<sup>45</sup> Between 1896 and 1916, the Progressive movement flourished as a reaction to US industrialization and urbanization. Journalists and writers denounced social and economic misery, both rural and urban, often seeing it as a consequence of capitalism.<sup>46</sup> The Progressive ideology had some influence on both the Democratic and Republican parties, and a Progressive Party even shortly appeared in 1912 and 1924.<sup>47</sup> The Progressive ideology also had some influence on American Christianity, through the proclaiming of the social gospel. Finding its roots in the abolitionist movement and in diverse socialist movements, the social gospel movement was motivated by the establishment of the kingdom of God through social reform.<sup>48</sup> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, progressive Christianity reappeared in the US as the “Christian left,” partly in reaction to the conservative Christian right.<sup>49</sup> Progressive Christianity focuses on peace and

45. Klauspeter Blaser, *Le Christianisme social: Une approche théologique et historique* (Paris: Van Dieeren, 2003), 37–40.

46. Jean-Michel Lacroix, *Histoire des États-Unis* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 317–20.

47. Yves-Vincent Nouailhat, “L’Amérique, Puissance Mondiale, 1897–1929,” in *Histoire des États-Unis*, edited by Bernard Vincent (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 219.

48. Blaser, *Le Christianisme social*, 37–40.

49. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 132–49.

justice issues such as women's rights, ecology, and abolishing poverty. As a particular brand of American Christianity, progressive Christianity is trans-theological and trans-denominational: progressive Christians are present among liberal, neo-orthodox, and evangelical denominations.

In the Community of Christ, progressive Christianity is mostly expressed by neo-orthodox theologians, whereas in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, liberal theologians—such as process theology specialist Bob Mesle<sup>50</sup>—had much more influence. For example, American theologian Tony Chvala-Smith is CoC scripture and theology consultant. A graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) and Marquette University (Jesuit), Chvala-Smith is an assistant professor of theology and scripture at the Community of Christ Seminary (at Graceland University's Independence campus). His book *Understanding the Way: Exploring Our Christian Faith* reflects Protestant neo-orthodoxy as it “echoes” the work of theologians like Karl Barth and Daniel Migliore.<sup>51</sup> Reflecting Protestant neo-orthodoxy, Chvala-Smith's theology is very much bound to the Bible:

The church keeps grounded in revelation through the witness of the Bible. Apart from the Bible we would know little of the sacred story and have little access to the knowledge of God. For the church, then, Scripture [with a capital s] is indispensable. . . . We sometimes call the Bible the “canon.” The word comes from a Greek term for a “yardstick.”

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50. A professor of religion at Graceland University, Mesle wrote on process theology. See C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993); *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*, with a concluding chapter from John B. Cobb (West Conshohocken, Pa.: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008). Mesle's theology seemed to have acquired some influence in the RLDS Church as some of his books were published by the institution. See, for example, C. Robert Mesle, *Fire In My Bones: A Study in Faith and Beliefs*, with a foreword by the First Presidency (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1984).

51. Anthony J. Chvala-Smith, *Understanding the Way: Exploring our Christian Faith* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 2011), 14.

To speak of the Bible as canon means that we use these texts to measure how faithfully we are walking in the Way.<sup>52</sup>

Even though Chvala-Smith briefly mentions the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants as scripture<sup>53</sup> (without a capital s), in this passage he only considers the Bible as being the “canon.” The recent “Reliable Tools for Serious Scripture Study”<sup>54</sup> presents a list of scripture resources offered by Tony Chvala-Smith and Charmaine Chvala-Smith in order to facilitate CoC individual and congregational use of scripture. Scriptural resources listed solely focus on the Bible, almost only from an American Protestant perspective. A mainline Protestant use of the Bible seems to be upheld by Chvala-Smith as he insists on the importance of scripture—focusing mostly on the Bible—while refusing the fundamentalist principle of scriptural inerrancy: “The claim that scripture is inerrant (without any kind of error) has never had place in Community of Christ. . . . Sound interpretation therefore requires both scholarship and faith.”<sup>55</sup>

Among the forty-nine CoC respondents to the survey I conducted during my PhD research, eighteen answered that the authority of the Church lies mostly in the Bible and personal revelations or those of other individuals, whereas ten answered that it lies mostly in the Bible and Church leaders. As in Protestantism, individual reading of the Bible seems here to take precedence. Only ten respondents considered the Book of Mormon as one of the two primary sources of authority. To the question “Do you believe in the Bible literally?” forty respondents answered “no,” while only six answered “yes” (three did not answer the question).

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52. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

53. *Ibid.*, 27.

54. “Reliable Tools for Serious Scripture Study,” Community of Christ, accessed Sept. 17, 2017, <https://www.cofchrist.org/some-reliable-tools-for-serious-scripture-study>.

55. *Ibid.*

Community of Christ theology reflects other traditional Protestant dogmas such as the Trinity. It is thus not surprising that forty-seven respondents to the survey answered “yes” to the question “Do you believe in the Trinity?” (one answered “no” and one did not answer).

While CoC progressive Christianity could be considered Protestant due to its emphasis on the Bible (*sola scriptura*), it likewise stresses the importance of grace (*sola gratia*). CoC’s first enduring principle states: “God’s grace, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ, is generous and unconditional.”<sup>56</sup> One respondent to our survey (female, aged 51–70, ordained to the priesthood) mentioned grace as she answered the question “Why are you a member of the Church?”: “I believe in the Grace of God and his acceptance of us all.”

CoC theology is also progressive due to its emphasis on peace and justice. Its Basic Beliefs proclaim the reign of God as “the coming triumph of love, justice, mercy, and peace that one day will embrace all of creation.”<sup>57</sup> In 2010, President Stephen M. Veazey presented to the institution its five “Mission Initiatives,” among which are “Abolish Poverty, End Suffering,” and “Pursue Peace on Earth.” Progressive theology is also reflected in the CoC’s “peace theology” embodied in the Independence Temple, consecrated in 1994. The Independence Temple serves as CoC headquarters and is considered by the institution as a symbol of peace open to all. A ten-minute daily prayer for peace takes place in its sanctuary.

CoC promotes progressive Christianity through various organizations such as the National Council of Churches in the USA (NCC) and Sojourners. The NCC often lobbies in the United States on issues such as war, immigration, gun control, and poverty. On November 17, 2016, the NCC issued a call to the president-elect Donald Trump, stating:

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56. “Enduring Principles,” Community of Christ, accessed Sept. 17, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/enduring-principles>.

57. “Basic Beliefs,” Community of Christ, accessed Jan. 24, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/basic-beliefs>.

“Now is the time for Mr. Trump to cease employing racist, misogynist, and xenophobic rhetoric. Great responsibilities rest on his shoulders.”<sup>58</sup> Sojourners is a progressive Christian organization founded in 1971 by progressive evangelical author and activist Jim Wallis. In a study on the Christian Left, sociologist Charles Hall defines Sojourners’ mission:

Eschatologically, Sojourners envision an ideal world where social structures and institutions will no longer be necessary—a complete destruction of the old order, characteristic of transformative movements. Beyond the apocalyptic rhetoric, however, is a more practical goal of reforming existing political and ecclesiastical structures a characteristic of reformatory movements. Sojourners also emphasize the conversion of individuals. The need for spiritual conversion and a personal identification with Jesus are prerequisites for social and political change. This reflects the movement’s evangelical roots.<sup>59</sup>

In 2006, Sojourners issued the document “Covenant for a New America.” Quoting from Old Testament prophetic books, the document calls America to strive for the abolition of poverty, arguing that military conflicts in the world distract the US from real social issues. The Community of Christ signed the document, along with other US progressive denominations and organizations such as Evangelicals for Social Action, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Protestants for the Common Good, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church.

Even though the CoC promotes progressive Christianity through its publications and its mission initiatives, not all members seem to agree with that particular brand of Christianity, and CoC is what Jean-Paul Willaime defines as a “pluralistic church”<sup>60</sup> having yet no official

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58. “A Call to the President-Elect,” National Council of Churches, Nov. 17, 2016, <http://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/a-call-to-the-president-elect>.

59. Charles F. Hall, “The Christian Left: Who Are They and How Are They Different from the Christian Right?,” *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 1 (1997): 29.

60. Willaime, *La Précarité protestante*, 114.

creed. Thus, even though CoC top leadership reflects progressive neo-orthodox Protestantism—with emphasis on such traditional Christian dogmas such as the Trinity<sup>61</sup>—other theologies can be found within its membership.

Pluralism is also present in the diverse acceptance of the Book of Mormon among the membership. The CoC First Presidency stated during the 2007 world conference that “belief in the Book for Mormon is not to be used as a test of fellowship or membership in the church.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, the Book of Mormon is only optional in the CoC. Currently, official Church publications barely refer to it. Even though it is used somewhat in congregations of some of the first countries where the RLDS Church was established (US, Canada, French Polynesia), it is almost never mentioned in other countries.

The Book of Mormon tends to not be used by CoC membership and leadership in Africa, Haiti, and South America. As many Community of Christ members and local leaders in those countries consider themselves Evangelical or Pentecostal Protestants, they tend to have a conservative interpretation of the Bible alone. Thus, progressive Protestantism also seems to be optional in the pluralistic Community of Christ. Whereas Communities of Christ in the US, Australia, and Canada mostly support gay marriage and ordination in the name of a theology of peace and justice—following the trend of current American progressive theology—Community of Christ practitioners in South America, Africa, and Haiti tend to strongly oppose it.

How, then, can the institution unite members who are not bound by a common creed, common scriptures, a common ethics, or even a

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61. As stated on the CoC website, “We affirm the Trinity—God who is a community of three persons” (“Basic Beliefs,” Community of Christ, accessed Jan. 23, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/basic-beliefs>).

62. Official Minutes Business Session, Wednesday, Mar. 28, 2007, <http://www.cofchrist.org/wc2007/minutes/032807.asp>. (URL no longer active; quoted in Chrystal Vanel, *Des Mormonismes*, 203.)

common history?<sup>63</sup> Like other mainline and liberal Protestantisms and Christianities, the Community of Christ strives at uniting its diverse membership through rituals. Sociologist Steve Bruce writes about how the revival of rituals helps to unify a diverse membership lacking common identity in some parts of ecumenical liberal Christianity:

It is interesting that the rise of liberalism and ecumenism has also been accompanied in places by a revival of interest in liturgy. The last days of the SCM [British and American Student Christian Movement], when its relativistic impulses had to be taken to the logical conclusion of having no restriction of membership, were accompanied by a revived interest in worship. The Wick Court commune, which housed the central office and conference centre, had a small bare room set aside as a chapel, and adorned, I recall, with only a Celtic cross. Two staff members wrote an “Order Book” before going off to join a single-minded religious community (another example of bridge-building defection). For an organization that was almost devoid of shared ideology, there was a considerable interest in shared acts of worship. There was also an interest in reinventing “traditional” forms of worship. There were even “services” with parts in Latin. The value of this renewed interest in archaic, if ersatz, forms of liturgy seems to have been that it allowed participants to avoid recognizing and confronting their lack of consensus. The rediscovery of Celtic Christianity allowed young Protestants and Catholics to overlook the Reformation and to ignore the fact that, if they believed anything at all, they believed different things. Similarly, the avoidance of the vernacular allowed them to evade the problem of stating clearly, in a language they could all understand, what it was they believed. To have faced that would have been to discover that there was little or nothing shared.<sup>64</sup>

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63. The history/memory of the Restoration (beginning with Joseph Smith’s presidency in 1830) and the Reorganization (beginning with Joseph Smith III’s presidency in 1860) are not equally accepted by American members. Whereas leaders and official historians tend to be very critical of their Mormon past (1830–1844), they tend to celebrate the Joseph Smith III legacy (beginning 1860).

64. Steve Bruce, *A House Divided*, 145–47.



Such a phenomenon is observable in the ecumenical Community of Christ. The institution emphasizes the importance of its eight sacraments (baptism, confirmation, communion, laying on of hands for the sick, marriage, blessing of children, ordination, and evangelist blessing). According to CoC apostle emeritus Andrew Bolton, these sacraments are the “international language of the Church” binding its diverse membership through common rituals.<sup>65</sup> As part of mainline/traditional US Christianity, Community of Christ uses a lectionary for its Sunday worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary conceived by US mainline Protestant churches and translated into French and Spanish for non-English-speaking CoC members. Following a current American ecumenical Protestant trend,<sup>66</sup> Community of Christ leaders encourage members to be involved in “ancient spiritual practices” such as the *lectio divina*, the practice of scripture reading, meditation, and prayer.

### An American Identity Despite a Promoted Multiculturalism (Exoticism?)

As records show, CoC membership in the Western world is currently still on the decline.<sup>67</sup> The British Isles Mission Centre counted 1,318 members in 2007 and 1,274 in 2016. The Western Europe Mission Center numbered 864 members in 2009 and 817 in 2016. In the Central USA Mission Center, where the headquarters of the institution are located, membership declined from 15,299 (2009) to 14,608 (2016). Despite these declines in the Western world, global CoC membership has experienced

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65. Andrew Bolton and Jane Gardner, eds, *The Sacraments: Symbol, Meaning and Discipleship* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 2005), 16.

66. Brian D. McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

67. The World Church Recorder sent me membership records for 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2013 (e-mail message to author, Jan. 22, 2013). As I was doing research on the CoC in Haiti, I had access to world membership records as of April 25, 2016 (e-mail message to author, May 16, 2016).

a modest growth: 195,517 members in 2007, 197,069 members in 2012, and 199,097 members in 2016. This growth could partly be explained by the growth the CoC experiences in Africa. Nigeria counted 5,831 CoC members in 2009 and 6,172 in 2016, while Kenya's CoC membership went from 2,948 in 2009 to 3,658 in 2016.

With membership in every continent, today's Community of Christ tends to project a multicultural image of itself. "Unity in Diversity" is one of its mottos. During Community of Christ's world conference, held every three years, delegates from many countries gather in Independence, Missouri for a big multicultural show. During the opening flag ceremony, flags from the various countries where the institution is present are unfurled, often by indigenous people from those countries wearing "traditional" clothing. A Tahitian choir, clothed in colorful traditional Tahitian dresses, sings hymns in the Tahitian language, while people in the assembly (most of them from North America) take pictures.

With almost 200,000 members worldwide and unbound by a common creed (although recent attempts have been made to define its beliefs and practices more systematically), the Community of Christ today is indeed a pluralistic church, the identity of which tends to change from one country to another. That is to say, CoC looks somewhat like a fundamentalist Protestant church in Haiti, while it often looks like a liberal Protestant church in Canada and Australia, as recent debates on homosexuality have shown. In light of such pluralism, *Communities of Christ* may be a much more appropriate name.

But is Community of Christ truly an international church? Are flags, traditional songs, and colorful traditional clothing enough to make a church truly international? Isn't the big multicultural show mere exoticism?

True, there is multiculturalism and pluralism in CoC. As already underlined, multiculturalism is promoted by the institution, which wants to appear as a "world church," an "international church." Cultural/theological pluralism in CoC is also due to a progressive/liberal theol-

ogy, which is non-creedal, and thus admits different theological views. Finally, pluralism is also a result of a lack of centralization, which might be due to a lack of financial resources.<sup>68</sup>

However, despite this pluralism, CoC remains a US denomination. Whereas the institution claims on its website that it has nearly 250,000 members in more than 60 nations,<sup>69</sup> and whereas I have often heard from members and leaders that the majority of the membership is outside of America, official membership numbers show that nearly 60 percent of the almost 200,000 CoC membership is from the United States.<sup>70</sup> Most of the leadership is American-born and/or has US citizenship. True, the Council of Twelve Apostles of the Community of Christ presents some multiculturalism with the presence of apostle Bunda Chibwe (born in Zambia and raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo), apostle Richard James (from Wales), apostle Carlos Enrique Mejia (from Honduras), apostle Mareva Arnaud Tchong (a woman from French Polynesia), and apostle Arthur Smith (from Canada). Thus, five of the twelve apostles are not originally from the US. But the president of the Council of Twelve

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68. Despite an enthusiastic desire to share the faith, the small presence of CoC in the world compared to the more important presence of other American denominations might be due to a fragile missionary program. For example, in 2012, whereas the LDS Church had around three hundred full-time missionaries in France alone, CoC has only around one hundred full-time missionaries worldwide as of 2014. Also, whereas missionaries from various denominations (evangelical, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, LDS) tend to learn the language of the countries they proselytize, CoC missionaries seem to lack language studies before they are sent out.

69. "A Worldwide Church," Community of Christ, accessed Dec. 2, 2016, <https://www.cofchrist.org/a-worldwide-church>.

70. According to the World Church Membership Enrolment Summary, as of April 25, 2016, the "enrolment grand total" is 199,097, with 21,812 members in the Southeast USA Mission Field; 27,919 in the Central USA Mission Field; 22,561 in the Northeast USA Mission Field; 11,268 in the South Central USA Mission Field; 17,665 in the North Central USA Mission Field; 18,111 in the Western USA Mission Field (e-mail message to author, May 16, 2016).

Apostles, Linda Booth, is from Independence, Missouri, and members of the First Presidency and Presiding Bishopric are all from the US.

Official Community of Christ institutional discourse and corporate identity are thus primarily defined and managed in the US by US leaders. The editors in chief of the *Herald*, the official periodical of the Community of Christ, are all Americans. The CoC scripture and theology consultant is American, as well as the whole faculty of Community of Christ Seminary (Graceland University, Independence) who teach CoC leaders from the US but also from Germany and Tahiti (even though cheaper and higher quality education would be available in the lands of Luther and Calvin). All Church historians have been white Americans. In January 2017, US prophet-president Stephen M. Veazey chartered a Church History and Sacred Story team. Whereas the official announcement emphasized that the team was composed of “three world church historians,” all of the team members are white Americans and only one is a female.<sup>71</sup> Thus, the past and the present is still institutionally defined by white Americans, and CoC membership outside the US receive training and literature produced in Independence, Missouri by an American leadership/authorship/teaching staff.

So even though CoC embraces multiculturalism, indigenization is in fact limited. There is indeed cultural diversity, as the institution and its American leadership allow and promote multiculturalism as part of CoC identity. But the product is still defined and managed mostly by white Americans. The delivery of the product from Independence to other places of the world might not be very effective, as CoC has no proactive missionary strategies and no correlation/centralization. Thus, one might see different Communities of Christ from one country to another. But the uniqueness of Community of Christ’s identity and history—its Restoration identity—seems to have not been indigenized

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71. “New Community of Christ Team Includes Three World Church Historians,” Community of Christ, Jan. 13, 2017, <http://www.cofchrist.org/official-announcements>.

outside the US. Whereas in French Polynesia, Protestant Tahitian theology is present in the Maohi Protestant Church and its theologians,<sup>72</sup> no such trend exists in the Tahitian Community of Christ, whose theology depends on what is developed in Independence, Missouri by white US theologians, themselves influenced by the current trends of American progressive Christianity. Communities of Christ around the world are still mainly made in the US.

## Conclusion

*“The only true and living Church upon the face of the whole earth.”*  
(*Doctrine and Covenants 1:5e*)

In 1830, Joseph Smith and his associates established the Church of Christ as the only true church on earth, partly as a reaction to American Protestant pluralism. The RLDS/CoC clearly departed from this exclusivist ecclesiology, as it is today fully part of the ecumenical movement through the NCC. While doing so, it seems that RLDS/CoC might have also melted down some of the specificities unique to its Mormon legacy, and even might have given up some specificities unique to its particular brand of moderate Mormonism.

And yet, whereas this was done partly in order to globalize itself more effectively, the RLDS Church/CoC did not succeed as well as the 15.8 million-member LDS Church, which kept strong unique Mormon identity markers (such as the Book of Mormon and temple worship) while adapting itself to modernity (abandonment of polygamy and of the political kingdom of God after 1890).<sup>73</sup>

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72. Bruno Saura, *Tahiti Mā'ohi: Culture, identité, religion et nationalisme en Polynésie française* (Pirae, French Polynesia: Éditions au vent des îles, 2008), 178–201, 391–402.

73. Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

While the LDS Church is not yet a world religion, it is a global denomination that presents itself in all places of the world with the same identity defined in Salt Lake City.<sup>74</sup> Did the CoC meet more success in its pluralization? Whereas the ecumenical Community of Christ left behind its Mormon exclusivist Americanized Christianity, it is still very much an American denomination. Even though the CoC does not promote the Book of Mormon and does not wait for Christ's Second Coming to take place in Independence, Missouri, it follows American theological trends—contemporary progressive Christianity—and its theology is defined in Independence primarily by an all-white, all-American leadership, even though no corporate identity is strictly shared by *Communities* of Christ around the world.

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74. Douglas J. Davies, *An Introduction to Mormonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 248; Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 221–22.

## THREE SEALINGS

Stephen Carter

My mother made spiral-bound books for the first few of her nine children: pastel-colored accounts (which she wrote, illustrated, and laminated) of how we had made our way from the spiritual realm to the mortal; how we became part of our eternal family, sealed together and destined for the celestial kingdom.

Gray and peeling from the attention of our little fingers, these books were childhood prologues to the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine & Covenants, and a thousand family home evening lessons where we learned about how our family was part of an all-permeating story—stretching as far into the future as it did into the past. Our eleven-person unit was a small army, marching in righteousness toward salvation, never to be separated. Sealed by the power of the priesthood.

At the center of that story stood a six-spired building: the Salt Lake Temple. Its portrait hung on the living room wall, golden and regal—the place our parents had been married for eternity. That temple, or one of its cousins, was our destination, the place each of us would someday enter to begin our own eternal family, our kingdom becoming larger and larger as more and more children joined this great chain of beings.

I was the first in line, marrying my high school sweetheart in the Salt Lake Temple just a few months after I got home from my mission. David got sealed in the temple, too, as did Lia, Angeline, and Michael. Each time, the number of siblings in attendance grew.

But then came Maddy's wedding.

She's the youngest. A bright, hopeful private marching at the end of our family's ranks. By the time Maddy had reached her 20s, only three of our nine siblings were still going to church. As her wedding date

approached, as we booked plane tickets, as we planned her reception, we kept bumping up against a stubborn reality: most of us would *not* be attending her sealing. Most of us would be waiting outside the holy walls.

We had never been all together inside the temple, usually because some of us were too young to have received our endowments (the reason none of my siblings attended my sealing). But sometimes it was because one of us was off on a mission, or simply too poor to travel across the country.

But this time, it could have happened. All of us had managed to make it back to Utah for the event and could have been united in the House of the Lord—finally together the way we perhaps once were in the pre-mortal life.

But over the years, the nine of us had travelled in nine different directions: various lives propelled by various souls over an ever-shifting sea of circumstance. Though, as I mentioned, many of my siblings had been sealed to their spouses in the temple, by this time, David was divorced and civilly remarried, Lia had left the Church, and Angeline and Michael were both on their way out. It seemed that the only thing we shared anymore was a past, from which we carried our own array of memories and interpretations, treasures, and horrors.

When the wedding day came, a few of us followed the giddy bride and groom into the Mt. Timpanogos Temple, and the rest adjourned to a nearby restaurant to wait out the ceremony.

The temple is a pristine place, glowing with light from its stories-tall opalescent windows. Elderly men and women dressed in white are stationed throughout the halls, ready to direct uncertain souls to their proper rooms. The rooms themselves are silent—the susurrus of slippers and the flutter of whispered instruction being the only disturbances.

The first time I had been in this temple was during its dedication about eighteen years before. Noelle and I had been married only a few weeks and were excited to take part in such a unique ceremony. After delivering a few sermons, some apostles led us in the hosanna shout.



“Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna to God and the Lamb!” we cried as we waved white handkerchiefs above our heads. It was a ritual that had its beginnings in the dedication of Mormonism’s first temple. Our enactment of the ceremony connected us with the many Latter-day Saints who had come before us.

As we waited for the bride and groom, Daniel and I sat on a cream-colored couch in an upstairs room—shoes removed, temple-booties donned. I was the oldest; Daniel was the third youngest. I had changed his diapers, spooned strained peas into his mouth, and introduced him to some of my mother’s least favorite rock bands. Despite this initial closeness, we hadn’t seen much of each other for a long time—maybe a decade. I had headed out on my mission when he was around six years old, and then married soon after returning. It didn’t dawn on me that he wasn’t a kid anymore until he came home from his own mission and started growing a beard.

So we began to talk, trying to find out who each other were after so much time. But a temple worker suddenly announced that it is disruptive to the spirit of the temple to cheer or clap when the bride and groom exit the temple doors after their sealing. All celebration should be carried out *away* from the temple where it is more appropriate. Then she moved our small group into the sealing room: Daniel, our parents, the groom’s parents, my wife, and me. We made only a small dent in the sealing room’s seating space.

A few minutes after Maddy and Ammon took their places at the front, an elderly man in a white suit came in and introduced himself. He was the sealer: the one empowered to bind on earth and in heaven. He delivered an informal sermon before starting the ceremony, talking about the covenants one makes in the temple. While he talked, I thought about my own sealing, years before: how an elderly man had also spoken and how I remember nothing of what he said. I wondered if Maddy and her future husband were as distracted as I had been.

But then we were all shocked to attention when the sealer warned everyone in the room that the definition of an unholy or impure practice—which temple-goers vow to forsake—includes anything one would not do in front of a room full of Primary children.

We blinked at him in amazement. Did he and his wife have children, we wondered? And if so, how had they brought them into the world?

After a few more words, the sealer began the ceremony. I struggled to clear my mind of his bizarre admonition and focus on the vows the bride and groom were making, on the way they clasped hands across the altar, on the way they looked into each other's eyes. I had come, after all, to be with them during this moment. This was about family, togetherness, and eternity.

At that moment, a mile or so away, the other two-thirds of our family had taken over a large, round table at the Blue Lemon. Though clean enough, the restaurant was not pristine. Its windows were only glazed. The cashiers and servers wore blue uniforms and took orders. Tiled walls amplified the chatter.

The scene was a version of what plays out at many Mormon sealings: those without temple recommends being relegated to the ceremony's periphery. But Ron, who hadn't gone to church since he left home at seventeen, looked around the table at his five disqualified siblings and shifted the entire scene in one sentence.

"I finally got my family back."

Ron had waited outside the temple during at least two sealings. He knew what it was like to watch everyone go inside. He knew what it was like to wait in the car. In many Mormon families, this would have been a table for one or two lonely souls. But the group sitting here was twice as big as the sibling group sitting inside the sealing room. This was where the warmth of bodies had coalesced.

Then a conversation unfolded: one that had never occurred before. Though each sibling had gone on his or her own journey and ended up in a different place, with different philosophies and experiences, it was

hard to talk about those journeys when the whole family was together. Could Lisa talk about bartending school without making some people uncomfortable? Could Ron talk about his death metal band whose name included a frowned-upon expletive? Could Angeline wear a tank top without eliciting side-glances? Not when Mormonism was there—and it was every bit as much a part of the family as anyone actually born into it. It was, in fact, the patriarch: presiding over every conversation, restraining its language, staring down non-conformity. But for these few hours at the Blue Lemon, that invisible family member was absent. And, for the first time, the majority of our siblings found out what it was like to connect with each other directly, rather than through their childhood religion.

I've probably misrepresented myself a little. It's true that I attended Maddy's sealing; it's true that I was an active member of the Church at the time—in fact, it's true that I still am. But my relationship with Mormonism is nothing if not fraught. Ron cut ties with the Church without a second thought the moment he ran away from home, but I was the first to question the Church itself. It's a story that has become commonplace with the advent of the Internet: boy reads outside the Church-correlated canon, boy has to wrestle with everything from polygamy to the racial priesthood ban; boy knows that if he says one thing about his reading and wrestling to his siblings and parents, they'll freak out, so he moves to Alaska and goes through a years-long faith crisis without any of them knowing it.

I never really came out the other end of that crisis—at least, not an end that I would have recognized during my orthodox years. Faith has become infinitely more complicated; as well as infinitely more simple. Translating my experience and beliefs (or lack thereof) into Mormon language is like trying to translate music into Morse code.

However, I hadn't realized how deeply this transition had affected me until I went into the Mt. Timpanogos Temple to see my sister get sealed. The feeling of alienation that hit as I walked inside stunned me.

Everything, from the building's sterility to the benevolently officious gaze of the temple workers to the sealer's oblivious sermon, left me cold and annoyed. Every possibility of connection seemed to get thwarted once we entered that building: We had to leave part of our family outside. Attempts at conversation were shushed. The musings of an old man we didn't know from Adam were deemed more important than anything a family member could have said to inaugurate this marriage. It seemed to me that the temple—its sealing rooms, its ceremony—was not about family; it was about itself. We were just grist for its mill. A batch of souls to process.

When my other siblings told me about their lunch together, I felt jealous.



Two sealings took place on Maddy's wedding day: one over a temple altar and one over a restaurant table.

But neither was complete. Our family was still divided.

And it would always be so if the mother-made books we had pored over and the many lessons we had listened to were to be believed. Family was held together by priesthood, temple, and belief. And since some of us didn't have all of them, none of us had any of them.

These promises of togetherness: what are they if they keep us apart during mortality? What are they if we can't be ourselves when we claim them? What are they if they can't reach beyond the edges of belief?

Our family is not perfect. It will never fit the Mormon mold. But it yearns to be together. This became apparent when Maddy started asking if there was anything special our family could do on her wedding day: something beyond toasting with fruit-punch at the reception. Something that was just ours.

I thought about her request for months. And one day while I was walking down an aisle at a Sunstone symposium, I saw something

that made me stop. Artist Jody England Hansen was selling decorated handkerchiefs she called prayer flags. Each bore fragments of an almost decipherable language and filigrees of intense colors. Though each piece was unique, their unity as a group was unmistakable.

They reminded me of my family.

On the morning of Maddy's wedding day, before she went into the Mt. Timpanogos Temple, our family met at a different kind of temple. One with no walls. Where trees grew. Where lovers made out. Where kids threw Frisbees. Where dogs pooped. We gathered—complete with our various hairstyles, skinstyles, lifestyles, lovestyles, and faithstyles—in a small grove of evergreens.

And then we built a ceremony, one we could all participate in without feeling as if we were infringing upon—or getting too close to—Mormon territory. Mormonism was not invited. Only we were.

Hands were important. Words were important. Differences were important. Love was important. Our ceremony couldn't be complete unless everyone was completely present.

I gave a decorated handkerchief to each family member, and then we asked Maddy and Ammon to stand in the middle of our semi-circle and hold each other's hand at waist height. In no particular order, each of us stepped up, draped their clasped hands with a handkerchief and wrapped their hands in ours. We each gave them a small blessing, one born of whatever priesthood we had cobbled together through our individual courses of illness and health, grief and joy, belief and doubt, brokenness and healing. This blessing was from someone who had always been single; this from someone divorced; this from someone decades married. Some of us said prepared words; others gave blessings off the tops of our heads. Some ended in tears, some in laughter, and all with a hug.

One was simply a quote: "And you know that time and gold were never meant to last, and when they fade someday, we're left with who we loved along the way."

Mormonism is right: families can be together forever.

But forever is now.

The temple worker had been right. The true celebration *had* happened away from the temple doors.

In a place made holy by family.

# CRY FOR THE GODS: GRIEF AND RETURN

California/Oregon/Washington/Montana  
September 10–27, 2016

Neil Longo

## Sacred Love

Fires were raging in the hills near Hearst Castle in the late summer of 2016. They spread and spread, consuming the Monterey pines and golden hills of the most remote area of the California coast, extending close enough to the castle that, at last, tours were cancelled and plans were made to remove the most precious art. From the darkened dining hall, the orange shadow of the flame cast an eerie half-light on the stone walls which, for the first time since their construction, shone no light, were hid by no tapestries, echoed no sound. The Mediterranean towers and domes once spoke of the power of humanity's conquest and wealth—now they stood abandoned, a desperate testament to the beauty humanity creates and is unworthy of.

Then the firefighters came, with their hoses and shovels, and the rains came too, and saw off the flames, and I received a call saying my grandfather would die of the cancer which, even then, was growing in him, and I too was doused and drenched and felt as though I were walking toward the sea.

I always remembered Hearst Castle in sunlight. It could be seen from the wooden deck of my grandparents' hilltop coast-side home in Cambria. It could be seen atop the land that jutted into the Pacific

northward in San Simeon. Its thousand orbs of soft electric light could be seen high atop the dark coastline and the frail ribbon of headlights along Highway 1 in the night.

I grew up along the golden grassy hills, Cambria pines, sea-breeze salty air, sandstone cliffs, and tide pools. I experienced absolute freedom in that fenceless open coastal country. I was blown with the crisp, fresh winds among the beaches and hills. Highway 1 brought in some hippies, road-tripping college students, retirees, but mostly it was a quiet and isolated country. The cattle in the hills and the anemones in the tide pools were my most constant friends. The sea covered everything in salt and the smell of seaweed. Everything seemed to shine, and once the morning fog blew off, every day was sunny and bright. Every sunset shone orange and pink over the sea.

My grandparents were the quiet custodians of my life along the seacoast. They lived with quiet dignity, shadows of a world untouched by the rattling buzz of technological modernity. For them were the simply joys of a walk along the shoreline, an afternoon of cribbage, a book read on the deck in the noontime light.

My grandpa was jovial, boisterous, presumptive. My grandpa was cautious, elegant, wise. They left me alone for the most part. I observed them more than I was observed by them.

I had passed through the final months of Church trials just days before we got the prognosis. Bishop Johanson had smiled and said he wanted me to be happy in the Church and I said thanks and went outside and lit another cigarette.

I don't know when I made the realization, but it was within a day of learning my grandpa's prognosis. It came upon me not as a possibility to be weighed by as a decision wholly formed, a truth to be accomplished. I needed to quit smoking and drinking, submit myself to the Church, and go through the temple for my grandpa.

So, on September 10, the five-year anniversary of my baptism, I swore off cigarettes. The next day, I was on my way to California.



At the south end of Big Sur everything opens up, the coastal range retreats from the cliff-lined coast, and the highway rolls smoothly on the grassy hills between the mountains and the sea. It is home to me. From Lucia to Morro Bay I know every barn and hamlet, every copse of trees, every rivulet, every beach and every hidden path down to it. It was golden-green and blue everywhere. It was always vibrant and bright.

What welcomed me was a barely-familiar landscape. The grass was dead and ocher, the skies dark and darkening, the sea was like grey-blue glass cut by a thousand white-capped blades, the road was full of yellow tractors and orange cones. Only the temple remained the same; the roads and the distance between roads, the silhouette of the ash-colored hills.

I drove up to my grandparents' house atop the hill. My heart was pounding as I took a breath before going up the stairs to the front door.

"Neill!" My grandma said with feigned, almost rehearsed enthusiasm. It's not that she wasn't delighted to see me, but that her world had grown so dark.

We made small-talk in their kitchen. We talked about my job. We talked about her volunteering at the library. There was a lot of silence. There were a lot of compassionate glances. There was a lot of love.

Grandpa came down the stairs slowly—his face still lively as he clung to railing, his typical pale blue flannel on. At the bottom he hugged me. It felt at once a softer and more powerful hug than ever before. He leaned on me, hung from me, his emaciated arms like limp leather around my back, and he wouldn't let go.

On the way to the doctor's office in San Luis Obispo he said "Look at my little chickadee. You'll be lucky if you can find one nearly as good as her, Neil. One in a million. I'm a lucky guy."

I walked grandma around downtown while grandpa was getting his biopsy. She was so stressed in the waiting room she was shaking. "That took so long I was really getting cross," she said. I put my hand on her shoulder.

We walked downtown as the sun was coming out from the clouds.

“Grandma, I hope you know I’m here for you. We all are.”

“Oh I know Neil, we love you very much. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone.”

“Grandma, you’re not a burden. We want to help.”

“That’s nice of you Neil.”

Exasperated, I followed behind her and we kept walking.

I saw a Habit burger grill across the street, and told my grandma how much I loved their cheeseburgers. She suggested we go, and we went. We split a burger—she tried to pay, but I wouldn’t let her. We were, for a moment, happy. It was like old times, or rather like how old times would have developed in a world that did not press upon us with deepening sorrow.

Grandpa was waiting outside the x-ray room, under a skylight in an otherwise dark hallway, wrapped in a coarse white blanket. He looked to be at pained peace, face stretched long, eyes closed, perfectly still.

It was as though we were in the waiting room of mortality itself.

It was as though we had joined him in the antechamber of heaven. There was peace.

When we returned, there was a spot of sun breaking through the clouds over the sea, causing a thin slice of the dark grey sea to shine white like the sun. The breeze came down from San Simeon through the pine needles and bit my cheek and I noticed the texture of the wood railing in my grip, at the tips of my fingers.

I turned through the open screen and called “Grandpa, it’s lovely out here” but he was asleep and would not wake up.

“Let’s take pictures before I go” I said, and we did, and grandma fiddled trying to figure out the camera, and we all laughed.

I sat in the car a moment before driving off. I looked at the photo. Grandpa stood in the rays from the skylight, slightly shorter than me, smiling in his goofy, surprised way. He looked happy.

That's how I remember him—happy. He was always cracking jokes with waitresses and gas station attendants. He was always pretending to pull coins out from my ear, smoking in the sunlight, saying “O boy!” when the dog, Brie, ran up panting with a new throwing stick in her mouth. His eyes were lined with the leathery evidence of eighty years of smiling—smiling despite watching his mother die of fifty years of arthritis and dementia, smiling despite dead dogs and business deals gone south. Smiling because the world was beautiful and his wife was beautiful and his sons were strong and because the sun shone in just such a way off the sea in the afternoon that made him feel alive.

“I'm lucky to have your grandma,” he said one night when I was a boy and we stood watching the stars from the deck and heard the sound of the waves booming on the shore through the night.

“I'm lucky I found you, chickadee,” he said as he woke on his leather armchair years later just before we took the picture.

I drove off and my grandma stood at the gate waving, and my grandpa walked back inside to sleep.

As I drove off I found another picture, taken my accident in the antechamber of heaven. My grandpa faces up in peaceful pain into the shaft of light, eyelids closed to the light. My grandma bends over him, her fearful and anguished face on his shoulder, her hand on his chest, her hand in his hand, holding him down as he flirts with flying into the light.

### Profane Love

I had drowned the anguish in alcohol in the best bars in San Francisco. I had tried unsuccessfully to hit on a girl after several absinthes at Vesuvio's, lost myself under the stained-glass lamps and '50s posters until it was all just a spinning whirl of dim light. I had sat among the crowded throngs of hipsters in the Tunnel Top bar, red lighting, adobe walls, craft whiskeys, a chandelier of Edison bulbs above it all, and overlook-

ing that from the balcony, an elegant iron mission-style cross at which I stared for hours.

I walked alone around the dark and fashionably industrial streets of downtown Seattle and couldn't stop thinking of Michael—Michael with whom I played pranks late into the suburban night in Glendora California, with whom I swam in the golden warm waters of Hawaiian afternoons strong, shirtless, laughing, youthful ... Michael who held me tight after my baptism, Michael who refused to come with me when I at last received my endowment at the temple, Michael who hadn't returned my calls when I was almost excommunicated and who was even at that moment was laughing with his pretty wife—a laughter I brought forth once and have longed for all since. Michael bore to me the seeds of Mormonism, alongside the seeds of those various griefs and frustrations which made my Mormonism unviable. He was the last friend from my childhood, and the first friend of my adulthood. My mind always wanders to him. I throw panicked looks around for him, shoot my arm out that he might grab hold before I am drowned, but neither hands nor eyes meet their aim anymore, and I drown myself in alcohol.

I walked into a bar and downed whiskey, one after another honey-colored glittering glass, until I felt death ripen in me, and I walked out back with the girl sitting next to me with the nice smile, and we kissed passionately, grabbing, groping, and caressing despite not knowing each-others' names, and despite the wrathful eyes of God watching from beyond the fluorescent-lit city above and the over-clean navy blue night hanging above that.

I was spinning through dark streets, steaming brick walls, and the hyper-iron eloquence of the city—spinning in my penthouse downtown hotel room—the judgmental lights of the tower southward pouring in like laughter from the great and spacious building—and I got high and spun and flew and every new reality seemed less friendly and I would sit on my bed detached from everything warm, naked unable to move as death laughed in the pit of my stomach.

I went every night to a hipster bar—dark and luxurious, though simply decorated. They had Rasputin Imperial Stout, and I got several each night.

I sat alone there every night until close, and several girls passed through the seats next to me. Some of them were pretty, some were happy, some were smart. Some I flirted with, some I didn't.

One I made out with, but I was drunk and don't recall the context but that the bartender told me it happened.

The bartender was a skinny brown-haired clean-cut guy with glasses and a piercingly smart, stoic, friendly face. He had dimples like Michael's, and Michael's mouth, but the squinty eyes, slim build, and the clean-cut parted brown hair of Johnny, my old buddy from DC. Something in his way was familiar. Something in his face was home.

"Rasputin, huh?" he asked.

"Yep, it's my favorite," I responded.

He scoured the bar silently.

"Pretty good stuff," he said at last. And, after a pause, "What brings you to town?" He raised his eyebrows, the first movement on his stone face.

"I mentor philosophy students," I said nervously, with a feigned air of distraction.

"Really?" he looked at me, brow raised higher. Then, looking away, "I majored in philosophy at Fordham."

We were soon deep in conversation about Kierkegaard, whom he had studied.

At the end of the night he gave me a glass of Braulio liqueur for free. "For your work for Philosophy." And so we carried on the next three nights—chatting about life at an empty bar in downtown Seattle—and every night he would give me a free drink.

That night after a chat about our experiences skinny-dipping I wrote my phone number and email on the receipt and walked out. He caught up to me and said his girlfriend, and his girlfriend's best friend

were going to a hot springs the next day, and asked if I wanted to join. He touched my hand as he asked.

“No, I’d better not,” I said.

He was disappointed—obvious even on his stoic face.

“Well, you’ll be back tomorrow night, right?”

“Yep,” I said and walked down the street.

“Neil?” he called after me.

I kept walking.

I knew I wouldn’t be back the next night and I knew he would never call me and I knew it was all a silly thing no one would understand.

I found an old brick alley, black iron pipes sticking out of cold brick walls, and I sat down, and I heaved sobs—weeping not for my poor grandpa or for my sins or for my country, but because of a nameless bartender and the times we would never share together. I wept sore until my throat burned and my chest ached, and kept weeping.

In the library of George Fox University was a copy of the St. John’s Illuminated Bible. The pages shone in gold, precise lettering spelled out the sacred words that have bound together our people, which kept hope in the hearts of my enslaved Irish ancestors. I felt very small, as though were I to look too confidently upon the sacred words of the book, they would somehow condemn me. I reverently snuck glances at the pages and walked on as a guard stood over the magnificent book.

That night I went to the apartment of a friend of mine, Graham Sorenson. Graham’s as granola as they come; a smiling bodhisattva of good vibes and weed. His blonde hair flows from under his beanie, and he thinks everything is funny. His roommate was there—a quiet, handsome guy with a beard and athletic clothes and a flat-brimmed hat, but with a certain sharpness in his face, an intelligence in the controlled way he shifted his gaze across the room from beneath the brim. Graham’s female friend was also there—a beautiful girl in the overdone, heavily made-up sort of way. She was quiet. She pretended to be dumb. She cautiously hid some past, giving no clues as to how she ended up in this strange place with these strange people.

The apartment is lined with Tibetan prayer flags and lava lamps. We passed the bong around, blasting ourselves into a relaxed cosmic reality more pleasant than reality. Time drew on and we grew quiet. I made eyes at the girl, the roommate left, and before long we found ourselves wrapping legs in Graham's room in a hot, disjointed, fleshy dance, devoid of shame and darkness.

That night we all lay in bed, me face up behind the girl, and Graham facing her across from me.

I was haunted by dreams. I saw the slums of downtown Seattle steaming, saw myself crying in the alleyway, saw strobe lights gyrating into the void and they seemed to be communicating something, as though through Morse code; I could not understand it, but it was sinister and I was afraid. All was dark and increasingly dark; chaotic and increasingly chaotic. A table sat in the midst of it, set with a fine dinner. The tablecloth was whisked away and beneath were three large reptiles gnawing at what remained of the legs of the table. In a moment their gnarled ugliness made clear that resistance or protest was futile, and that the foundation of comfort and security was suddenly gone. I saw the pages of the St. John's Bible as though they were alive, colors flaming and bleeding across my line of sight, and I saw monks in stone hovels on the coast of Ireland gilding the halo of Christ as the dark set in upon them, and I saw a bearded fellaheen man with a dirty face and fire in his eyes and he stared at me as from the storm clouds above the Nephilim came shooting down in flames to the earth. He held out his hand.

I awoke, packed my things quietly, kissed Graham on the forehead, and left.

### Cast Outward

I drove through the Cascades in the misty morning as the silhouetted mountains came forth from the brightening grey. I drove humbly. This time I was listening. The road directs us at first to ourselves, then out

of ourselves, to others, then away from others, and finally to God, who lies at the intersection of here and nowhere.

After hours of barren planes, pine-lined highways and bad drivers, I turned off at St. Regis Montana and drove the narrow windy roads through a place that seemed like it could be home to me. That part of Montana is all mountain valleys, open and golden in the late summer, framed and edged by pine-covered hills and mountains. The speed limits are fast and police nonexistent, so I sped as fast as I could go without losing control of the car. The afternoon was setting bright and the grass in the fields had the white glimmer of fall coming on.

It reminded me of the sort of scenery they show at the end of old Western movies to instill awe, just when the trumpets start playing and the guy in the white hat looks into the sun and says “see that weren’t too bad after all” and the kid chuckles and the mother comes up behind in her apron and admires it all with them.

It reminded me of afternoons watching John Wayne movies at my grandparents’ house, looking out the window and over the ocean when I got bored with the movie, sitting in the warm sunlight that flowed through the huge windows under the vaulted wood roof.

It reminded me of the beautiful landscapes of Utah and New Mexico with which God had calmed my racing, anxious, anguished heart when, as a college student, I began to realize that I was unloved and unloveable, utterly alone, and that my Mormonism, my community, my project, had failed utterly before it had even really begun. I would hit the road at that state of despondency beyond rage, but I would be calmed by the sunrise over Abiquiu or Flagstaff and God would hush me and remind me that the whole world was outside of me.

It was completely dark by the time I got out of the Rockies at the east end of the park and finally found a McDonalds, miles away in Cut Bank on the other side of the Blackfoot reservation.

I tried sleeping in the car, but there wasn’t a place dark enough in the parking lot, and couldn’t fall asleep for more than a little while at



a time. It was a run-down parking lot right by the side of the highway, lit by those obnoxious square fluorescent lights that seem too dim when you need them to see by, but too bright when you're trying to sleep.

Around 4 a.m. I drove back to the Blackfoot reservation. I pulled off the road. The air was cold and smelled of manure. I could see more stars than I have ever seen in the whole of my life—the whole Milky Way bright above me like a marvelous arch leading up to the infinite dark. The moon barely illuminated the outlines of the terrain—miles of flat land, the stony face of the mountains in the distance. The city of Browning lay at the foot of the mountains, some street lamps still on created a soft electric haze around the city. The stark contrast between yellow electric light and pearly moonlight was beautiful, but for the most part all was dark. After a while, a train came along the track half a mile to the north of me. Its horn sounded through the still night, and its rumble seemed to shake through the earth. Its light cut the darkness before it as it sped by.

It was that moment, under the stars, beside the train, away from the distant lights of town, in my Carhartt jacket against the cold of the dark night, that I remembered myself. I remembered the part of me I left on a desert roadside not much different from this in the wilds of northeastern Arizona. I had just been tamed then, was going to the Mormon temple before long, and would soon be in Washington, DC working for the United States Senate. I needed to put off the old ways, the nights drinking in my car, the random road trips whose cost could be counted more in grades than in cash, the lonely holidays, the cigarettes and beard stubble and smell of gasoline. Ahead I saw a life much more rooted, much more responsible, much more stable. I would forsake the image of homelessness, but become truly homeless, for homelessness had become my last home. I would surrender the image of irreverence, but become truly irreverent, for waywardness had become sacred to me. And so I stopped by the roadside outside of Winslow, Arizona as

the sun was setting. I left a piece of myself there, and promised I would return somehow.

There I was, between Browning and Cut Bank, and that piece of myself came up upon me swiftly with the breeze, and despite the cold and despite not having a friend within five hundred miles, I was at home. The train left, and all was silent, and I was silent, except for the words “thank you” whispered into the wind.

The sun was rising just as I skirted the mountains between Browning and Glacier. The sun rose green, then yellow, then bright red, then orange as the moon shone over Browning and the plains. It was one of the most beautiful sunrises I had ever seen. Before long, the colors were arrayed like a Navajo pot above the earth, all milky and smooth and distant in a way that made me realize how big the sky really is and how infinite the air and open spaces are in the West.

As I stopped to take it in, a man walked up the highway to my car. He couldn’t have been more than twenty-five, and was wearing a leather jacket. He was either a Blackfoot or a Flathead Indian.

“Hey man,” he called from far away. “Could I get a ride?”

“Where you going?”

“West.”

He hopped in and we drove off.

We got to St. Mary’s Lake just before 8 a.m. By this time the sky and the mountains were both a milky wash of gold and red and pink, and the whole world seemed illuminated by the dawn.

Glacier is the grandest of the national parks. Everywhere the mountains tumble off dramatically into deep valleys filled with aspen and pine trees. I couldn’t stop gaping open-mouthed at the scenery around me.

I dropped him off as we left the park and went on my way.

As I drove through Kennewick the idea of Portland seemed to loom large in my head before me. I felt as though I were driving into the Holy of Holies where lay the wrathful God who had remembered my history and who lay lurking amid the pines and the skyscrapers.

## Cast Inward

The first night in Portland I drove to Sara's house, where Graham and Sara sat in the backyard, with her beautiful view overlooking Vancouver.

"Welcome to my palace," she said, with her round sunglasses and dark lipstick on. "This is where I do yoga every morning—can you believe it?"

"I can almost believe it," I said, and Graham chuckled at the overly earnest way I said it.

We sat there, taking in the sunset, for a few hours.

"Man, I can't believe you went to Glacier dude," Graham said.

"Seriously, I was so freaking pissed you have no idea," Sara chimed in.

And we laughed there as the sun set green and gold over the Pacific Northwest.

We got burgers and went to a park, where Graham and Sara talked long into the night about where their childhood friends ended up. Graham left quietly, and Sara and I went on a hike down to a waterfall. A mile through the dark ferns we went and talked about love and loss and how healing could be had. We had met as staffers in DC, Westerners lost in the Kafkaesque hellscape of the East. We would sit on my porch back then and talk about the West and our desire to go home. I'm not very similar to Sara, and we've taken different approaches to healing, but we shared our wounds openly and felt real trust for each other. We sat there under the bridge over the waterfall, and it was dark, and I was jumpy, constantly thinking I heard footsteps over the din of the falls, and she kept calming me down and saying "You're at peace with the world, you're at peace with the world."

We walked back up the hill to the car and I kept thinking as my hand glided over the ferns, "I'm at peace with the world."

The next day I explored around Portland. I bought a new backpack at a hipster store near Powell's Books and spent an hour bitching about the East Coast with the woman behind the cash register. She thought I was into her at first, then thought I was gay, then realized I just needed someone to talk to.

I went to the Portland Oregon Temple. It was Monday, so the temple was closed and the parking lot empty. The Portland Temple is one of the truly otherworldly temples the LDS Church had built back in the '70s and '80s when the Mormons were more comfortable, more audacious, more willing to be different. It rises out of the pine trees overlooking the highway with six glowing white marble spires, round and angular, pointing upward like something out of a science fiction movie. The ferns and pines provide dark contrast with the brilliant white glittering marble building. The peculiar design of the building, with a low nave and six huge spires and two low domes on either side, make the building strangely deceptive. From some angles it looks massive, from others, quite humble.

I walked around the grounds in the sunlight and prayed. It hung over me that, in some inevitable future, I would be in the temple, doing the rituals for my grandfather. I would whisper his name through the veil, and sit in the presence of God enrobed in his memory.

I had quit smoking before the journey. I had acted in lust, smoked pot, cursed my way all up and down the coast, but I knew that this life was drawing to an end. I knew I would return to Pennsylvania, put off the old ways and return to the temple for my grandpa.

I never thought I would return to the temple after that day in Provo. I had only been endowed several months before, and had gone often, but I felt, as I drove through spring rains up to the Provo Temple with Michael, that this would surely be the last time. I was tired and aching and already my faith was being overrun by a need to escape, an anger toward the simple happy people, a desire for alcohol and sex. We went through that session and I tried to notice every detail; the way the patroness' dress hung off her knee, the way the old man in front of me crouched in his robes as beneath some weight, the orderliness of it all. We passed through the veil; Michael first, and since he was a veil worker, he was Elohim to me, and we grasped each other through the veil, and he, playing God, searched my hand and wrists for the wounds of Christ,

wounds which he, God, and he, Michael, had inflicted me with, and we embraced through the veil and I said those sacred words that always send me reeling, and I thought I could hang from the veil in the darkness forever. He drew me into the bright celestial room. There I had experienced so many miracles, sighed away so many of my problems, felt so much warmth, shed a few tears. Michael and I sat in the corner, enrobed and watching the silent happy people walk here and there in white like angels.

“Isn’t this place awesome?”

I nodded.

“Hey look, that guy was from my mission.”

I looked away.

“What’s your favorite temple?”

Finally, he was silenced, and looked around with that stupid grin on his face.

I looked him in the face.

“I love you like a brother,” I said.

He smiled.

“Always.”

And a while later;

“We will never be here again,” I said quietly.

“I don’t know about that.”

I knew about that.

And there I was in Portland, a year and a half later, faced with the premonition returning to the place I thought I could never return to, and the irony that it was my family that was driving me back to it, and I sat amidst the ferns beneath the ethereal tower and thought of how God had laid such strange seeds in the soil of my heart, and how tears are pointless after all.

I went straight from the temple to Graham’s apartment. I sat in the parking lot talking to my grandmother. She had been so strong in all of our previous conversations, but in this one she broke down.

"I just can't believe how quickly it's happening" she said, and I knew he wouldn't last the week. "I'm glad your Uncle Bob got here in time," but there was no gladness in her voice.

I sobbed in my car, composed myself, and went into Graham's apartment.

"Hey dude!" he said in his over-jolly way.

We passed the bong around, I took a huge hit, and was soon spinning in my mind again.

We drove to Sara's house, though I don't remember how we got there, and watched the Presidential debate, though I don't remember watching it. I don't remember how or whether I got back to the hotel. The next memory I had was landing in Philadelphia. There, around the time I landed, I checked my phone. I had texted Michael late the previous night;

"I love you dude."

He had just responded "I love you too."

The next morning, I awoke and went to work. It was my brother's birthday. I had stopped at the gas station in Kennet Square when I got a call from my mother. It was 5:30 a.m. there. She didn't need to tell me what had happened.

"It's your brother's birthday," she said, crying.

But I didn't cry. I tried to comfort her, then drove the long way to work, through the forests and old farmhouses along the creek. Fall was beginning, and more sunlight was poking through the yellowing leaves than I had ever seen before. I stopped and heard birds singing and the brook babbling and everything in harmony as the sun rose over Delaware.

"Take him, God."

I thought about how lucky he was to have had my grandmother. How lucky we all were to have her. She's one in a million.

I looked around at the ruin of a stone house overgrown with weeds, a tree growing in the midst of it.

For years I had prayed for reconciliation between my faith and my family, and when that had proven futile and my faith died, I prayed for death. Now I was my grandfather, and he was me, and we were dead together, and we were dead with God, who died for us, and the togetherness of it all is the only life we have left. I realized that my Mormonism could only have ever worked if it were in the secret service of my family, and that my family would get on regardless of my prayers or anguish, and that God had been working all along, planting the seeds of grief and redemption secretly, mischievously in the day of my comfort, watering them in the night of my grief. And all of it—my grandfather, Michael, Graham, my Mormonism—would all pass away silent and un-mourned but for me, and all that would be left would be this tree growing in this ruined-out house on the side of a road in Delaware, and maybe that's how it should be after all.

I felt my heart beating, felt the wind on my cheek, looked at a picture of my dear grandpa, heard his laughter rolling on the wind, and I smiled. Somewhere at that very moment, my grandma had collapsed into a chair and was sobbing as they took the body away, men and women were enrobed before the veil raising hands high to God and praying over the name of my grandfather and over my name, light crept over the coastal range to the pre-dawn Pacific as the sun made its westward course and once again discovered the waves booming on the shore of my home south of Big Sur, carrying this place we clung to slowly to the sea, and my grandpa flew with the gulls who laugh at the futility of it all; all this clinging, all this praying, when death and decay are really just part of life and grief is the falling out of some fiction, and the cold hard reality we fall into is Edenic and tender unlike anything we've ever known before. I thought of Michael awakening with his pretty wife and kissing her forehead before another day, my mother tenderly shaking my brother out of sleep into the reality he was about to awake to, Graham cleaning out the coffee machines in Vancouver before the

morning rush, and I stood there near an old ruin in the woods as the sun rose over the living and the dead.

“I’ve fallen in love with you, God.”

It felt like walking into the sea.



## Trevor at the Fountain

*Simon Peter Eggertsen*

Armed lightly with his dark English wit, and a shade of amber from Woodpecker Ale, Trevor's blue eyes glaze a smile as he reclines at the market fountain in Cambridge, just like a Roman soldier would resting in his rags after the long march from Colchester, Paxman's town. He inhales the musty air behind St. Mary's Church, where on wet days the gargoyles spit down on the market world below, wanting to wash it all away, restore it to the quiet of Evensong. The sight of him pushes hard against the rumour shuttling about the Commons that he was once a college don. Was it at Jesus, Christ's, King's or Queens'? Could be. Maybe not. Likely, though, it once dawned on him to feast at High Table. He sluffs against the font stones, looking for cover, like boulders do in the creek at Wildwood. With alcohol-twisted sentences, Trevor burbles now and then. His school-boy memory on full display, he peacock shrieks: "Stoppard, ahh marvelous, once wrote: 'The longest distance between two points is a trombone.' You should try to explain the geometry of that if you can!!" As Trevor professes, his tongue moves slower than the speed of the sounds. Red-faced and mussed, he waits for the fountain to cleanse him, the steeple's shadowed cross to bless him. "Only one request at a time please!" At noon, he rises to protest the twelve clangs of the chimes, sits himself on the stone fringe, smiles, and mumbles something about the noise. "Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for me! Ha! Ha! I'm done." His laugh is as slurred as his speech. Four steps away in the market, vegetables try to sell themselves—green leathery cucs, paling, globey Belgian sprouts, gypsied,

romany lettuce. There are Williams pears, yellow-white, Valencia tangerines, full-moon orange, the scaly flesh smell of North Sea fish, the gym-sock odor of English cheese—Wilton or Chilton, Stilton or Hilton? Trevor's mind is numb, alcohol warmed. As the west-leaning afternoon sun hits his mottled face, he wishes to sing. Why not something from Gilbert and Sullivan? "I am the Captain of the Pinafore! . . . And a right good Captain, too." He might have been, had he ever gone near the Norfolk coast. Instead, he was content to spend most of his life, like those modeled ships, trying to find his way mast down, horizontal into a clear-glassed bottle made for Irish whiskey.

## If Joseph Smith Had Been Born in California

*Theric Jepson*

The angel met him once every four years  
in what is now the Ina Coolbrith Park.  
The first time digging them up took longer  
than the angel had anticipated.  
José did not have to dig deeper, no,  
but broader, much broader. The plates had moved.  
They found the stone box a full four vara  
north of where he had left it. And the box  
had split, the rocks crumbled into gravel.  
The sword of Laban, ruined, as were the  
Urim and Thummim. The plates themselves were  
folded like a paperback in the rain.

## Domestiku

*Theric Jepson*

the blade that scrapes one face  
tomorrow scrapes another's legs  
smooth for each other

—

a child's shoe  
another child's socks  
a series of pairless pairs

—

the roar of air  
rushing through softened fibers  
yielding melted treasures

—

knockknockknockknockknock  
no one rings the bell  
not anymore

—

a pile of plates  
stained with powdered cheese  
tomorrow dried eggs

—

crawl into bed late  
back into my wife  
hope for a miracle

—

## Sonnet—For Solstice

*Theric Jepson*

Look:

My wife's distended belly reaches  
Into the room as if it wishes  
To announce a separate humanity  
In curves both out from and into her body.

Listen:

Darkness crackles the air like frost  
Or fire. We've turned from the sun and the cost  
Is cold air and condensation and night.  
Hear our wolves howl, our forest loom and bite.

But Feel:

As future Jepson pushes out  
Against its close warm tomb of filtered light  
And voices, unaware, in mere days, doubt  
Will crowd in—part of our shared human plight—

To relive the oldest pun in Christendom:  
And turn ourselves back to the sun, to the Son.

## Poema de Halloween, 2001

*Hugo Olaiz*

Hoy cayó Halloween en las montañas  
(el terror de un millón de calabazas)  
y las calles de Utah se poblaron  
de fantasmas y de brujas.

Tu abuelo Robert dice que la vida  
es un tango que hay que saber bailar,  
pero hoy la vida parece un carnaval,  
un desfile fatal de mascaritas,  
de cacerolas y de túnicas.

Celina Shaiel Olaiz, ¿qué más te cuento?  
Vos elegiste un año duro en que nacer  
—un año de derrumbes y de incendios—,  
pero eso tal vez tenga sus ventajas:  
Según una leyenda muy antigua,  
las niñas que nacen con revoluciones  
saben hablar un lenguaje muy secreto,  
edifican altares con piedritas de basalto  
y, de noche, corren carreras con los pumas.

Cuando yo tenía diez u once años  
edifiqué con ladrillos de juguete  
las paredes del Templo de San Pablo,  
y a los ladrillos rotos los ponía  
en la parte que se queda a oscuras.

Celina, hija de Venus y de Diana,  
ciudadana de la selva y de la espuma,

portadora del lenguaje misterioso  
que en el altar de Jackson, Misurí,  
le enseñaste a Adán con lecciones magistrales,  
pero que él nunca pasó de balbucear  
sino en un laberinto de señas y figuras:  
Todos los templos del cielo y de esta tierra  
tienen un cuarto que se queda a oscuras.  
Y aunque algunos sigan rompiendo porcelanas,  
cuando a vos y a mí nos toque el turno  
de reedificar el Templo de Nauvoo,  
las piedras solares las pondremos en la base  
y arriba irán las piedras de la luna;  
y en esa subversión universal  
de tierra, cielo, estrellas y culturas,  
restauraremos un lenguaje original  
y fundaremos una nueva arquitectura.

Celina Shaiel Olaiz, ¿qué más te cuento?  
A veces, en el milagro de un momento,  
el sol y la luna se saludan.



## Halloween Poem, 2001

*Hugo Olaiz*

*Translated from Spanish by John-Charles Duffy*

Halloween fell today in the mountains  
(a million pumpkins waging terror),



and the streets of Utah were occupied  
by goblins, ghosts, and witches.

Your Grandpa Robert says that life  
is a tango and you need to learn the steps,  
but today life looks more like Carnival,  
a deathly parade of revelers in masks,  
of saucepan protests and keffiyehs.

Celina Shaiel Olaiz, what can I say?  
You chose a tough year to be born in—  
a year of things crashing down and going up in flames—  
but perhaps that has its advantages:  
There is an ancient legend which says  
that girls born during revolutions  
know how to speak a very secret language.  
They build altars out of small black stones  
and, by night, run races with pumas.

When I was ten or eleven years old,  
I built out of toy blocks  
the walls of the São Paulo Temple;  
the blocks that were broken, I placed  
in the part that would remain unseen.

Celina, daughter of Venus and Diana,  
citizen of forest and foam,  
bearer of the mysterious language  
which you taught, with masterful lessons, to Adam  
at an altar in Jackson County, Missouri,  
yet he never learned to do more than stammer  
in a labyrinth of signs and figures:

In every temple in heaven and on earth,  
there is a room that remains unseen.  
And although some go on grinding up their china,  
when it comes our turn, yours and mine,  
to rebuild the Nauvoo Temple,  
we will place the sunstones at the base,  
and the moonstones will go up top;  
and in that universal subversion  
of earth, heaven, stars, and cultures,  
we will restore a primal language,  
a new way of building.

Celina Shaiel Olaiz, what more can I say?  
At times, in the miracle of a moment,  
the sun and the moon acknowledge one another  
with a nod.

## THE PEW

Alison Maeser Brimley

Helen realizes at church Sunday morning that still, after all these years, she does not have fond feelings for the chapel. She doesn't want to hold on to any grudges against it—she doesn't take it personally. She never has. But there is something about it that she can't let go. Like a lady who had said something mean to you once when you were a kid, when you both didn't know better, about how you were too fat or something, and still after all these years you can't forget about it, even though really, you've forgiven her and you're working together in the PTA and you like her fine. That's what the building is to her, she realized—an old bully. One she ought to be friends with by now but isn't.

She doesn't often think about the old tabernacle anymore—the beautiful old building that used to stand where this new chapel is. But something brings it back to her now. Then she realizes what: today is her birthday, she is eighty-four. The same age Inez Mayfield had been when she died.

Helen looks up at her son at the pulpit. He is the bishop. She isn't listening to what he's saying. She wonders whether he remembers the tabernacle at all. Tommy had been—what—five when they tore it down? Now he is fifty . . . fifty-eight. Or almost sixty. He looks very much like his father, but a little different. A little rounder than Alvin ever had been.

In the congregation, Helen is sitting next to Tommy's wife. Later that night she will go to their house for dinner. They had invited her for her birthday.

Really—she doesn't take the existence of this new chapel personally at all. She hadn't cared much about the tabernacle to begin with, but there was something about the squall that had swirled around it that

had reached out and pulled her in until she loved it, until she loved the building with her whole heart. She remembers that stake conference—fifty years ago almost—looking up at President Hoyt Pike when he announced that they would tear it down; she felt a little sting of sadness on her skin like touching a hot bread pan, but it faded quickly. She wasn't going to get all up in arms like the others—the people who hadn't come to church in years, but showed up just for that conference because there was a rumor going around. About the announcement.



Alvin had been held up that day for a few hours after the conference was adjourned. He was one of the counselors, a buffer for the president in this case. He returned home late, to a fully cooled plate of roast, mashed potatoes, green beans. The smell of Sunday dinner, built up over hours of afternoon labor, was not quickly vanished from the air. “Thanks, Helen,” he said, kissing her on the forearm as she set his plate before him on the table. Helen and the boys had already eaten.

“I’m sorry it’s cold,” she’d said.

“No—it’s fine.” He let a lump of congealed gravy slide out of its boat and onto his potato mound. “Quite a response we got to President Pike’s announcement.”

“I assumed that’s what held you up,” she said, sinking into the chair at the opposite end of the table. “What is he going to do?”

“What do you mean? Well, he’ll speak with them of course, but he’s not going back on his—the tabernacle has to go.”

“He can’t just decide that, though. It’s not his building. It’s our building—it’s Frandsenville’s.”

“It’s the Lord’s,” Alvin said, raising his eyebrows. She knew his tone well: he was quoting Pike directly. Once upon a time he had to preface his comments with, “President Pike said today . . .” but eventually that

became unnecessary; his voice changed when he was quoting, and they both recognized it now.

"That's true," Helen said. For several minutes, she watched her husband eat. Then she stood up to take off her apron and put it back in its drawer. "More roast?"

"Yes, please. Anyway, it wasn't President Pike's choice. The word came from Salt Lake. And we got to vote. We voted just this morning in high council meeting. No one voted to keep the tabernacle."

"Really—no one? It was fifteen to none, huh? Well, of course—who *would* vote against him."

"*Helen*," Alvin scolded. "Well, not fifteen. About eleven to none. Some abstained."

She served him more roast, and then went about tidying the kitchen for a moment while he chewed in silence, and then she said, "It is sad, though. It's such an old building. A pioneer building."

"It's the way the Church is going," said Alvin. "It's what they've done in Salt Lake City, too, and Lehi, and somewhere in Arizona, I don't remember. And they've just had to sell the one in Heber. They're simply expensive to maintain, and don't fit the needs of the people the way a stake center would."

"That's true," Helen said again. "It is sad, though." Alvin raised his empty water glass and only ice fell against his lips. Helen brought the pitcher and refilled it. "Inez won't be happy," she said. Alvin allowed himself a half smile, thinking of the old woman. Helen laughed but stopped herself.

Inez had seemed so old then. Impossibly, laughably old—older than Helen would ever be. Helen had loved her in the obligatory way, but hadn't liked her much. Now, she feels, if she could go back, she would be different with Inez.

The morning after the announcement, Helen's phone rang. "Helen, it's Inez." The phone cord wrapped around Helen's hips as she turned to face the kitchen window, where she was met with Inez's gaze burning

through two layers of glass. Inez had pulled back the curtains over her own kitchen-sink window, from which she peered across the lawn and into the rooms of Helen's house, as was her custom. "I need some help with something. Please." She hung up and smiled at Helen through the windows.

In less than ten minutes Helen was at the front door. "Hello, dear," Inez said.

"It's not your toilet again? We can get a real plumber over here this time, Alvin really didn't know what he was doing—"

"No. It's much worse." She hobbled into her own living room and slid onto the loveseat, leaving room for Helen beside her. "Listen—I was at the conference yesterday, you know. I decided to go after all. The Jensons gave me a ride because I was talking to Betty just the day before and she told me he might do it. So I went to see if it was really true. I was thinking we've got to put together a committee. The Save the Tabernacle committee—that's what we'll call it; that's the most obvious thing."

Helen's facial reactions lagged behind the conversation. "Oh, you went to stake conference? Good." Helen and Alvin offered Inez a ride to church every Sunday, and she always accepted, but called them Saturday night to say that her back was acting up or that her nose was plugged very badly and she didn't think she'd make it.

"Well, except it wasn't good, because what I heard there nearly broke my heart in *half*, Helen. They can't tear down our tabernacle! You know Christian Frandsen built that? He was the *chief* architect." Christian Frandsen was Helen and Inez's common ancestor. Inez knew exactly how they were related, and often took the opportunity to recite the genealogy that linked them, though Helen could never quite remember. "This tabernacle is almost younger than I am! I saw it dedicated. It's not ready to die yet. Not to mention that's where I've always gone to church."

"Well, me too, Inez."

“So—I don’t know—I’ve started drawing up some banners we can hang. You’ll have to tell me exactly how to . . . mobilize the forces. You’re good at that; you’re in the PTA.”

“Wait a minute, Inez. You know my husband is a counselor to President Pike. I can’t very well organize a rebellion against the man.”

“Says who,” Inez said. Helen thought Inez’s own husband had been gone too long; she didn’t really remember what it was like to have one. “Anyway—it’s not President Pike’s building. It belongs to the Lord.” Helen swallowed hard at hearing those words come out of her own mouth, but continued, “President Pike says it was a revelation.”

“Well I’ve had a *personal* revelation,” Inez said. “There’s simply no way God wants us to tear down that tabernacle. It’s a piece of history. And what would this city be without it.”

“I don’t know, Inez.” Helen said. She fiddled with the fringe that edged the cushions of Inez’s low pink couch. “I can help you with your drawings, though.”



Church is over now, and Tommy’s family has taken Helen home with them. His wife, Donna, is making the birthday dinner. It is fettucine alfredo, Helen’s favorite. Helen offers to help her, because that is what she is used to doing, but she knows Donna will refuse, because it is Helen’s birthday, and because it is her eighty-fourth birthday. She does not feel like getting up to help anyway. Tommy is at his computer. He is working on something that bishops have to do.

“You know what I was thinking about today, Tommy,” Helen says. “The old tabernacle. You remember it?”

“I remember the day it came down, yeah,” he says. “I remember me and Hyrum and Ron went out to see it come down. It was *early* in the morning. Dad woke us up to watch though—we ran out to the corner so we could see better.” Now he looks up from the computer.

"Mmm," Helen says.

"And I remember that Save the Tabernacle sign we had in our yard that year," he says.

"Yes. I was on the committee."

"Were you?" Donna says from the kitchen. "My mother was, too."

"Most of us ladies were. We all wanted to have something to do with it."

"But *my* mother was the chairwoman," Tommy says, affecting bravado.

"Were you?" Donna says again. "Why don't you tell us things like this?"

Why would I tell you, Helen thinks. Who in this world likes to brag about projects that they chaired straight to failure?



Twenty-one years after the first settlers came to Frandsenville, and two years after the Frandsenville Stake was organized by Brigham Young in 1877, ground for the new tabernacle was broken on the adjoining corner of Main and Center Streets. Christian Frandsen, seventy-four years old, who had joined the Latter-day Saints in Denmark and come to settle Cedar City before being sent to settle the new colony twenty miles south, drew up the plans like he'd been taught to in his homeland. Everything that went into that tabernacle, though, was one hundred percent Southern Utah, except the windows. Wood cut in Pine Valley, bricks burned east of town, two foot thick sandstone walls from the canyon.

The railroad had come through Utah a decade earlier, and that's how they got the windows there. With the railroad came tools and techniques that expedited the building process but still the Frandsenville Saints were outmoded; their tabernacle was of the Victorian Gothic style that was on its way out then, but even if they had been aware of this certainly they wouldn't have cared. Through the 1880s the Relief Society ladies



made two hundred quilts and the young women sold beets to earn fifteen hundred dollars to send for stained glass windows from Belgium. A young Swede who had arrived in Frandsenville just a month earlier and didn't speak a word of English laid on his back on the scaffolding for two weeks, painting each tree of the Sacred Grove on the tabernacle's ceiling. When you looked up it was like the roof opened to the sky, and you could see the sun shining through the trees, just like young Joseph Smith might have seen it. When everything was in its place they scrubbed the floor with homemade soap and rolled their homemade carpets out in the aisles and awaited their building's dedication.

Somehow, though they may never have sat in a class and learned it, everyone in Frandsenville had this story woven inside like a strand of his or her own DNA. Somewhere at the back of their consciousness, all of them knew about the Swede, even. His descendants, some of them, brought him up at every opportunity. And the building, still the tallest in town by 1967 when they brought it down, cast its shadow over every bank transaction, drugstore interchange, childhood playdate. Anyone could give directions to anywhere if they started with "Okay, so if you're heading east from the tabernacle . . ." and anyone could find you from there.

Helen Bennett had in her heart mourned the announcement of the tabernacle's destruction, but she had not planned to head the effort to save it. Even when she was elected chair of the Save the Tabernacle committee, she still did not plan to head the effort, not really. And sometimes she liked to feel victimized, or at least make a show of that in front of Alvin—she liked to feel she was Inez Mayfield's puppet; she was leading the committee because she knew that Inez really wanted to but didn't have the means or the appeal to gather support. At first she would tell Inez things like, "I don't even argue with my husband in front of the children, how can I do it in front of the whole town?" And later, when Inez would propose making a speech at the next committee meeting about the night she was visited in a dream by Christian Frandsen and

Joseph Smith together, Helen would tell her perhaps that wasn't the right rhetorical strategy—and Helen's heavy editing quickly turned into her writing an entirely new speech. She neglected the housework. She forgot to pick up her children from school at three o'clock. She remembered that she had been a good writer in high school, always gotten good grades, and she had liked it, too. The next day, standing on the stage of the high school auditorium, she found that she liked the act of giving the speech less, but not as much less as she would have thought. There might have been as many as five hundred bodies in that room, or a thousand—she was no good at estimating the size of a crowd. But certainly it was the biggest crowd she had ever talked to. The nervousness wore off in the first two minutes of speaking. She didn't need to look at her paper as much as she had expected to. And there was something about watching people watch her talk. Sometimes they smiled, sometimes nodded. Alvin was there, too, standing in the back of the room where it was too dark to see his face. And when she glanced down at her handwritten sheets again she was hit with the realization that she had kept none of Inez's words; these were her own, and she was not doing a favor right now. She had done her share of favors in the past; this was not one of them. It felt entirely different.

After the speech people stood up to clap, and it took her an hour to get out of the high school because so many people came up to congratulate her. Some of them were crying. Some of them just wanted to give her a speech of their own, a list of things they would have said in her place. Inez, clinging to her arm, said, "Looks like you are quite the public speaker!" Alvin had left early with the boys so he could put them to bed. Finally, the high school halls emptied and Helen took Inez home. Outside, it was snowing—it was January. Four months since the new stake center was announced. Six weeks to go to demolition day.

"You'd think he'd take this as a sign, wouldn't you?" Inez said, holding her breath as she lowered herself into the passenger seat of Helen's car. She brushed the flakes of snow from the shoulder of her wool coat.

Helen knew who she was talking about. “It doesn’t snow for thirty years, and now, this winter, it snows. You’d think he’d take it as a sign from God, wouldn’t you?”

“It snowed five years ago, Inez,” Helen said.

“No it didn’t.”

“Yes, the year Tommy was born. I remember—it was snowing while Alvin drove me to the hospital.”

Inez huffed and adjusted her coat. “Well I think it was thirty years before that.”

The thought of President Pike’s omnipotence haunted Inez most of the time, Helen observed. It seemed possible to her to blame most of what went wrong on him. There was something he could have and ought to have done about everything—the un-shoveled sidewalks, the new policy at the pharmacy where she had to show her ID to pick up her prescriptions every single time, even though she’d known that pharmacist since he was born. When it became clear that President Pike wouldn’t stand down, letters landed on the desk of the president of the church himself, which for weeks received no reply, until finally word came: the church would not continue to shoulder the cost of maintaining the building, but the tabernacle could be saved if someone else would buy it. The price was set: sixty-six thousand dollars. The committee took to the streets in fundraising efforts; Helen and Inez and the others made speeches before the city council, proposing plans to turn the tabernacle into a museum, or to move the city offices inside its doors. The efforts at least stalled the demolition. With the city still in lukewarm debate about the idea, and a month left to the scheduled demolition, the committee started a frantic campaign to get the tabernacle placed on the national register of historic places. When that failed, with mere weeks to go, Inez filed a restraining order against the demolition company. A judge overturned it in court a week later. And so, finally, every girl in Frandsenville who had planned to marry within the next six months rescheduled her wedding to take place within a month or a week so

that she could have her reception in the tabernacle—so she could get her pictures taken in a white dress in front of the Belgian stained glass windows, like her mother had, and her grandmother.



The dinner is ready. The room smells like alfredo. Donna has asked Tommy twice to please go get the extra dining room chair from the garage. Helen wants to pester him too, but she decides not to. Her turn to ask Tommy to do things ended forty years ago. Donna asks a third time—this time setting a dishcloth down on the counter and pausing emphatically while she asks. Finally, he sets down his computer and hurries to the garage. Donna scoffs and looks at Helen, as if to say, “Can you believe this?” but they both can believe it.

This is the kind of anger wives are inclined to admit later they are silly for feeling, because their husbands do not recognize it. Helen recognizes it. She is surprised that after all these years her memories of Alvin have not smoothed into one long string of blisses. She thought that was what would happen. She remembers the good, and she misses him in the way that seems to drop the back out from behind her heart when she lies alone in bed at night. But she remembers anger, too. This was her mother’s wedding-day advice: You can either be right or you can be happy. And Helen does believe that. But there was a time when, for six months, she thought certainly there were some things worth being right about—*only* right. She couldn’t quite figure out what those things were. There was one day years ago when she had handed Alvin the lunch she had packed and kissed him goodbye before work and he noticed her iciness. He said, “Is everything all right?” and she said “Oh—yes!” and pretended that frigidity was the biggest accident in the world, because how could she explain, “I can’t kiss you because you want the tabernacle torn down”? No, she would laugh at it herself before he could, and that didn’t feel like the right reason anyway.

Generally, when she felt inclined to iciness, it didn't carry over to the morning. It might have been inspired by an after-dinner offense, but a good night's sleep would often dissolve it. This, though, resurfaced every morning when they both woke up, the husband and wife, and he got right into the shower, saying only good morning dear, and nothing to comfort her. Alvin was more desperate than she knew for something else to say. At night he lay on his back looking up at the dark, and all he could think to say to her was something that ended with "Miss Teen Frandsenville." It was an old joke, the only jest that came to his mind now, as he lay beside her in bed and didn't touch her.



One hundred years to the day that Brigham Young and company rolled through Emigration Canyon and proclaimed "this is the place," as they say, two hundred and thirty-two miles southwest of Salt Lake City, the citizens of Frandsenville were sending off the floats they'd labored on for weeks. Alma Green, one of the bishops of one of the wards, was dressed up as Brigham, standing on a mountaintop of plywood and cardboard covered in paper grass and rolling down 100 South. Behind him, sixteen-year-old Helen stood waving to onlookers with a graceful flutter of the hand she had practiced for weeks, atop a platform labeled in sequined letters, "Miss Teen Frandsenville." Her crown was the same gold as the waves of her hair.

Alvin Bennett knew who she was when the float passed him by and he caught a little of her smile. He knew her name, though she wouldn't know his until the Pioneer Day dance later that night, when he would meet her in the dimly-lit dance hall filled with the sound of a little jazz orchestra and would ask her to dance. She was sunburned from standing on the float in the July sun all day. She had the prettiest teeth he'd ever seen, when she smiled.

Sometimes, now that they were married, he called her that, to tease her or to compliment her: “How did I get so lucky as to end up with Miss Teen Frandsenville?” he would say sometimes, instead of “thank you.” Or, when she finally flew down the staircase after having taken too long to get ready for church and made them all late, he’d put on his announcer voice—“Here she is, boys: the beautiful Miss Teen Frandsenville!”

So, this was the only thing that came to his mind now most nights—something light, to make her smile her perfect smile, though he wouldn’t even be able to see it. The words ran around his brain, rubbed it raw, like a belt on a conveyor—“Hey . . . Miss Teen Frandsenville.” He said nothing. He would kiss her on the shoulder and roll over and sleep.



Helen eats too much alfredo, though her appetite is gone and has been for ten years. She hadn’t let herself eat it much when she was young. Now she does not care about how much butter is in the sauce. She is eighty-four.

They remind her of that by bringing out the cake—mercifully, it does not have eighty-four candles, but only two: one in the shape of an eight and one in the shape of a four. They sing to her and she blows out the candles. She does not get them both in one breath. Donna slices the cake—it is white under its chocolate frosting. Helen had hoped for chocolate all the way through.



Inez Mayfield died at eighty-four. Helen does not remember much about the day she died, but she remembers the day she almost died. At 6:53 in the morning the phone rang in the Bennett household. It was someone at the hospital, calling to say that Inez was dead. Helen, who had stumbled in a haze down the stairs to answer the phone in the

kitchen, rested her back against the counter and looked across room to where her window met Inez's. She threw her hands on top of her head and pressed down; she didn't know what else to do. Alvin, at the foot of the stairs now, said "What's the matter?" The phone rang again and the woman at the hospital said no, she wasn't dead, it was a heart attack.

Helen told Alvin he'd have to call in and say he'd be late to work and get the boys to school. She went into the bathroom and fluffed up her hair, put on a little blush, a dress, shoes, coat, and kissed him goodbye.

Inez was not awake when Helen arrived, but a machine beside her bed beeped its congratulations every time her heart beat. That was reassuring. Helen sat in the chair at the foot of the bed and determined to wait there until Inez woke up. A nurse appeared in the door frame—someone Helen recognized from the committee meetings—Sandra, she thought her name was.

"Are you Helen?" Sandra said. Helen nodded.

"Oh, she'll be glad to see you."

"How long has she been here?"

"She called the ambulance herself at about 5:30. Said she was feeling short of breath, pain in her arm. At about quarter after, her heart"—the nurse dropped her voice as if she didn't want Inez to hear what had happened—"her heart stopped. Flat lined. It had already started again by the time we called you, but word travels too slow around here I guess."

Helen wanted to smile, but she still didn't quite believe this was happening. The nurse seemed to sense this. "She's stable now. You're welcome to stay. We'll be in and out to check on her." The nurse stood next to Inez, made note on a clipboard of something, and then slid toward the door again.

"Excuse me—can I ask a question?" Helen said, catching the nurse lightly by the arm. "Am I her emergency contact?"

The nurse nodded slowly, as if that were not a question she had been asked before. It made sense, actually, Helen realized. Inez had no one else.

The sun was coming up now, stretching its faint fingers of February light through the blinds and over the bedsheet, drawing stripes across the little lump of Inez's body. Now, without warning, Helen was getting ready to cry, as if the grief of hearing Inez pronounced dead was catching up with her only after she knew that the woman was still alive. She wiped at tears. A crash from outside startled her and made her jab herself in the eye.

Right—it was demolition day. And the tabernacle, which could not now be shielded from the blows of its own caretakers, had let its first sandstone block fall to the earth. Inez had talked of chaining herself to the red rock pillars that bordered the tabernacle's front door. Helen had advised her against it but at the same time contemplated it herself. Now they were both in a hospital room instead, and Helen considered getting up to open the blinds and watch the demolition take place. At the very least, she deserved this—she deserved the satisfaction of seeing her efforts decisively destroyed, rather than quietly debated and dismissed as they had been for months. But she worried the noise might wake Inez and then kill her again. She couldn't let Inez see.

But after another crash she couldn't sit in her chair any longer. She parted the blinds and peered down Main Street, where she saw a cloud of orange dust rising from inside the chain-link fence that surrounded the demolition site. The claw of a machine rose and grabbed another handful of the tabernacle, throwing it to the ground. A crowd gathered across the street with cameras.

Helen stood there and watched the building come down like she might have watched a movie in a theater. She realized an hour had passed. When the sound of the crashing sandstone stopped, she could again hear the faint beeping of Inez's heart monitor.

She hurried to the front desk and asked to use their phone. "I'm not sure when I'll be home," she told Alvin. "I want to be here when she wakes up. I don't know how long it will be."

"Of course," he said.



“Did you hear the tabernacle come down? Did you watch?”

“I—heard it. The boys ran out to the corner; they could see a little better.” He paused. “Tommy was very concerned about you. He said, ‘But I thought Mommy didn’t want that to happen!’” Alvin tried, cautiously, to chuckle.

And Helen had to decide whether to agree that this was funny or take it as a personal attack. So she let out a little laugh, the kind that only comes like a smile and a hard breath through the nose.



When Hoyt Pike arrived at the hospital carrying an enormous wooden bench, he received some uncertain looks. But all the staff knew who he was. They shrugged their shoulders and let him pass. The bench was too long for the elevator. He and his counselor Dave Dunford each took an end and hefted it up three flights of stairs to their destination, Dave huffing all the while and joking that it was not a job for two old men. After every turn of the staircase they set the bench down to catch their breath. Finally, they arrived at the third floor and inched the bench along the floor until they reached room 306.

Hoyt pushed open the door to find Helen Bennett asleep in a chair, and Sister Mayfield unconscious in her own bed. They began to push the bench inside, turning it at an angle so that it would clear the door frame, but still it banged against the walls and woke Helen.

“President Pike?” she said, standing up and brushing the hair off of her face. “What—”

“It’s a gift for Sister Mayfield,” Hoyt whispered. “They didn’t tear down *every* piece of that tabernacle.”

“A pew?” Helen said. “You . . . saved her a pew?”

“She’ll like it, won’t she.” Hoyt stretched his fingers to iron out the grooves in his hands from the old pine pew.

Helen kept her eyes on the bench. “I don’t know,” she said.

“Thank you for coming to be with her,” Hoyt said. “I know she appreciates that.”

Helen nodded her acceptance.

“You don’t need to get up for us,” said Brother Dunford. “We’re just dropping by. Hoped we’d catch her awake. But we won’t bother you. Give her our well wishes.”

They pushed the pew against the wall, where it was out of the middle of the room but stood in the way of the door opening fully. Dave started to back out the door, but Hoyt lingered. He laid a hand on her shoulder and said, “Sister Bennett, I know you worked hard to keep the tabernacle standing. I’m sorry that it didn’t happen for you.”

She looked up at him and offered a tight smile. “No—of course. Thank you.” Hoyt got the impression that she wasn’t being transparent with him, but he knew he couldn’t concern himself with that; she would come around.

“Know that this was the Lord’s plan for Frandsenville.”

She nodded, shifting her eyes to Inez now.

“So no hard feelings, I hope.”

Inez rolled onto her side and snored one soft long snore, but didn’t wake up. Helen looked directly at the president then and sat down on the pew, planting her hands on its surface as if trying to soak something up through them. “It’s just that I’m afraid for her to wake up. I don’t know what I’m going to tell her. Of course, she knows what she’s waking up to, but—I can just hear what she’s going to say. I’m going to fuss over her heart and ask how she’s doing and she’s going to say something like, ‘My heart? They ripped my heart out when they tore down that tabernacle!’ And I’m going to have to tell her, No, Inez, that isn’t your heart, it’s a building—” She cut herself off.

Hoyt Pike’s palms had started to sweat. It didn’t happen often, but when it came upon him—the feeling that he had no idea what to say—his palms started to sweat. He wiped them once against the front of his

pants. “She will be stronger for it,” he said, and though he felt that was true, he didn’t really know what it meant.

“But you know what?” Helen said. “I was sitting here all morning thinking—before I fell asleep—I was thinking, we fought so hard and cared so much about this building because our pioneers built it—that’s what we said anyway—but they never would have fought for a thing like this. Because they moved on. They always moved on. They knew when it was time to go, and when it was time to let your hard work get thrown all over the floor like a—toddler’s block tower.”

Hoyt tried a smile and said, “It is the Lord’s work,” and though he knew it was the wrong thing, he was relieved because she didn’t seem to need him to say anything.

“I suppose.”

Inez’s monitor beeped, as if to remind them that she was still there. “Thank you for the pew,” Helen said. “I think it would be better if you weren’t here when she wakes up.”

Hoyt left the hospital with Dave. When he reached the parking lot he saw the dust swirling over the tabernacle lot and remembered that he hadn’t pointed out the get well soon card he’d left in the little box in Inez’s pew where the hymnals used to go.



Tommy and Donna live in Inez’s house now. This is the house in which Helen is eating the eighty-fourth birthday cake of her life. Inez had gotten out of the hospital but died a few weeks later. She left her house to Helen and Alvin, who were shocked until they remembered that she had no one else. For a few weeks, they tried to sell it, but it didn’t sell, and they stopped trying. When Tommy got married they sold it to him, very cheap. The two houses’ backyards face each other; they are close, but Helen almost felt closer when Inez lived there. Back then, the house needed her all the time. Now no one calls from the house and leaves the

blinds open so they can look at her while they're talking to her, making sure she's really there. They call her cell phone, and she doesn't even have to be standing by the kitchen window to answer it. She could be anywhere. She calls to ask for things for them.

And Helen remembers the pew now—how Alvin and someone else from the ward had driven it back home for Inez, and she kept it in her living room for those few weeks back at home, and sat on it whenever she felt well enough to get out of her bed. She celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday there. Helen sat on it with her sometimes. Helen didn't think so at the time, but President Pike was right—Inez loved the pew, though she said several times, "I wish he would have saved me a stained-glass window instead."

Setting her fork down after polishing off her cake, Helen casually asks, "Do you still have the pew from the old tabernacle in here?" but after the words are out of her mouth her chest seizes up with panic that their answer will be no.

"That pew—it's from the tabernacle?" Donna said. "Yes, I think it must be in the attic." She looked to Tommy, who said, "Yes, it's in the attic. I didn't know that's where it came from either. Maybe we should put it up for sale online? Someone around here would probably pay a good amount of money for an old relic like that."

Helen knew he was joking, halfway joking at least, but she said sharply, "Don't. No one who would want it is still alive." Helen thought about asking for them to bring it to her and put it in her living room, but decided against it. What would she do with it? Donna started clearing the plates. Then they gave her a present in a bag—a sweater—and Tommy drove her home.

# DUTIES OF A DEACON

Theric Jepson

I never got to do it when I was a twelve-year-old Mormon boy even if it is, technically, as much a duty of a deacon as passing the sacrament—and I doubted anyone in my presidency ever did it when they were twelve either. Certainly, the boys we're responsible for had never done it so, when the bishop referred Jake Miller's widow to me, at first I wasn't sure I'd heard her right.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"It's just a little one, mind. Digging up my tulip bulbs. Pretty little thing, but still."

"A little what?"

"Orangey-purplish, I suppose, but I don't see how that makes a difference."

I've been told that once Sister Miller starts calling you she never stops. I was starting to understand the tone of voice that this intelligence was always shared in.

"I'm sorry, Sister Miller. An orangey-purple *what* is digging up your tulips?"

"Dragon. Haven't you been listening?"

"You're sure it wasn't a squirrel?"

"Squirrels digging up tulips?" She laughed.

"My wife says last week she had one—"

"Please, Brother Mamamama. Perhaps inadvertently now and then, but squirrels do not as a matter of course dig up tulips."

"It's Mamawala."

“When can you get some deacons over?”

I crunched my face and thought. “I’ll bring some Wednesday night. About six.”

She grunted and hung up. I thumbed through my contacts and called my second counselor and brother-in-law, Tare Williams.

“I dunno, man. That sounds more like a gig for a home teacher.”

“The bishop sent her to us. It’s in the Doctrine and Covenants.”

“I dunno, man.” He was obviously eating chips. “All right.”

“Let wee President Wilkins know, would you? Have him pick another deacon to go with us. I’ll pick them up quarter to six. You want a ride?”

“Nah. She’s close by. I’ll just take my bike.”

“We’ll have to go straight to Mutual.”

“Ah, yeah. Good point, man. But nah, I’ll meet you there. Give me a ride to Church though? Bring your rack?”

“Yeah, all right.” And there went twenty minutes getting that stupid bike rack back on my Yukon.

I got to the Wilkinses’ at 5:40 and Deacons Quorum President Tim Wilkins ran right out wearing his full Boy Scout uniform, including merit-badge sash and beret. He’s as short as a short seven-year-old and as serious as the middle manager who indexes every draft of every memo.

“Hello, President Mamawala,” he said as he clambered into my SUV’s front seat. Possibly illegally. My own children are too young for me to have ever looked up the front-seat laws of Oregon. “I’m very excited for us to engage on this priesthood duty.”

“Oh, me too, President Wilkins. Me too.”

He directed me to the Pilner residence where both Harry and his twin sister Melinda shoved through the front door and raced to the car. Harry got through their door first, but she had her seat belt on before he even got to the sidewalk.

“Hello, Brother Mamawala.”

“Hi, Melinda. How are you?”

“My Mom said she’s not driving just one of us, so I’m afraid that obliges you.”

“That’s quite all right.”

Harry pulled himself panting and red-faced into the seat on the other end of the bench from her, glaring.

“Harry doesn’t think I should be allowed to come.”

“She doesn’t have the priesthood! And this is a priesthood duty. Tim told me. He like gave me a scripture and everything.”

“Which,” Melinda said cheerily, “he never looked up.”

“It was in the D&C. I can’t find things in there.”

I saw my front-seat compatriot almost speak, but he bit his lip and pressed his back into the seat. He was getting better at this.

“Anyway, I can come, right, Brother Mamawala?”

“Of course, Melinda. We’re just headed over to Sister Miller’s. Do you all know her?”

They knew her.

When we arrived, Tare was melting over his bike’s handlebars and talking to Sister Miller who did not seem impressed. When I pulled up, she looked at me and gestured at her face in what I think was a question about his goatee.

The kids piled out and ran over to Sister Miller. She frowned at Melinda. “Please tell me you’re not a deacon,” she said.

“I’m better,” said Melinda. “I’m the Beehive class president. I’m Tim’s counterpart.”

Her brother shoved her with a bit of shoulder. “No you’re not.”

“Sure I am. Remember when the bishop called Sister Korematsu? He said the Relief Society president is the bishop’s partner in keeping up the temporal and spiritual health of the ward.”

“No he didn’t.”

“How would you know? You and the other deacons always read comics during ward business. I’m surprised Tim’s okay with that.”

“I’m not okay with that! C’mon, Melinda! You know I’m not!”

"As we're on church business, I would think you of all people would call me President Pilner."

Sister Miller looked ready to speak so I jumped in. "So, dragon? Where was it seen last?"

"You've done this before, I assume?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Sall right, sister," said Tare. "Did one on my mission, you know. Big mother. Two days after I was made zone leader too, so I had no idea what I was doing. Pretty raw, though. Lost a hecka good tie. Trainer called it hash paisley. Man, I miss that tie. I had that, might still wear one to church."

If I can read minds—and my wife tells me I can't—Sister Miller was reconsidering her opinion of our bishop. "This way."

She had a strip of dirt alongside the driveway on the south side of her house. Mostly marigolds, but patches where something had been digging through it. "You see?" she said. "Dragon."

I nodded as wisely as I knew how. "Sure."

Tare crouched down. "Yeah, it could be." He pulled up what I guessed was a tulip bulb. "Check it."

The kids rushed in front of me, but I got a sense of some scratch marks on the bulb. Tim spoke first. "But how do you know it was a dragon?"

Harry had the answer: "Duh. Nothing else's got claws like that."

Melinda was skeptical: "Don't duh him. You don't know anything about claws. Plenty of things have claws."

Tare held up a hand. "Hush. If you look in there—Hang on." He took a step back into a patch of sunshine, then twisted his wrist. As the sun caught the bulb's scratches, they reflected a weird iridescence. I felt my stomach drop. The kids though . . .

"Cool!"

"Can I see it?"

"Will it hurt if I touch it?"

"Stop it. You're not a deacon."



"I'm better than a deacon."

"That's ridiculous."

"Anyone saying anything is better than anyone else in the household of Christ is being ridiculous."

"Shut up, Tim."

"Don't tell him to shut up!"

"I told Mom this would happen! You always take each other's side!"

"That's not true!"

"Sure it is. False friend. False sister. Why don't you just kiss already!"

"Shut up, Harry!"

"Ew. I hate you!"

All this happened in no more than six seconds. Preteens are exhausting. If the bishop gave me this calling to prove that Belle is right and three kids are plenty for us, it was working.

Tare snapped his fingers. I didn't know snapping was something to excel at until I saw Tare chase off a coyote, but trust me—it is. The kids froze and looked at him.

"Look. Yes, catching dragons is priesthood jive. Doesn't make it exclusively so. Deacons are supposed to keep the chapel clean, but who polished the baseboards for Mutual last week?"

"That was us!"

"You bet it was. Same with dragons. We can do this together."

"You'll be great at it, Melinda."

"Thanks, Tim."

Remember, she's like two feet taller than him.

I cleared my throat. "What do we need, Tare?"

"Nothing, man. It's cool. Sister Miller. Hey. You got, like, a paper bag, like from the store?"

Sister Miller just looked at him. "You served a mission?"

"Yeah, you bet. Adriatic South Mission, 'eleven to 'thirteen. All in Kosovo. I was there when—when—but nah, story time later."

"I thought you were married?"

“Yeah, crazy, right? I totally did not think she would wait for me. But those Mamawalas are faithful folk, eh, big bra?” And he slugged me in the arm.

“Brother Mamamama. Are you in charge here?”

“Yes, ma’am. Just waiting on that paper sack.”

“Paper—oh yes! Dear me. Let me get that.”

She clattered inside and Tare broke down the plan with fewer surfing metaphors than expected. I’ve always loved the guy, but half the time I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’m not sure if I’ll more miss him or just be glad when he takes my sister back to BYU this fall. But since he’s joining her in the accounting program, I may well be seeing them both down the hall in my dad’s offices soon enough.

When Sister Miller came back, Tare had Tim and Melinda hold the bag. Melinda chose the back and Tim the opening. Then the rest of us formed an awkward polygon around the bag’s opening and started clapping. It took a while to get the rhythm right.

“Yeah, I don’t know why, but it works best when you’re at the same speed as the human heart. Which by hecka cool coincidence is the same beat as ‘Stayin’ Alive’—still a raw song. Though not an appropriate movie and you should totally not see it.”

He got us at the right rhythm just as some judgmental neighbor walked by. I felt like I was part of the lamest breakdance circle of all time. Then. There it was.

Just like that.

Orangey-purple but really more silvery-rainbow than anything.

Sister Miller screamed, but she kept clapping. I heard she was the organist for years and years until she decided that the sacrament hymns needed to swing. Maybe it’s true.

“Okay, then.” Tare made eye contact with his three clappers. “Let’s move back. Slowly. Slowly, Harry. There you go, man.”

The dragon followed us into the bag. Shortly, we were behind Melinda who squealed and said, “I can feel him!”

Tare nodded at her. "Go."

She grabbed onto the dragon through the paper and Tim folded down the opening with maddening meticulousness.

"Faster, Tim!"

He crumpled it down, smashing the opening into a ball, then he pulled it away from Melinda and stood, holding the bag above his head. Melinda, still crouched on the ground, looked up at it. And we all watched as the dragon thrashed a bit, then was still.

"Huh," I said.

"Told you it was cake, man."

"So you did."

"After Mutual, if it's cool with y'all, I'll bike it up to the hills. Or maybe down to the coast."

"Okay," I said, echoed by the kids.

"Just so long as I never see it again," said Sister Miller. "Awful little thing."

"I thought he was pretty," said Melinda.

"I never said he wasn't pretty," snorted Sister Miller. "I'll call the bishop and tell him his irregulars pulled it off."

"Thanks much, Sis Mill." Tare held up his hand, but she just glared at him and stomped inside. The kids didn't leave him hanging though, and each slapped him five. He loaded his bike onto my rack and took the front seat before President Wilkins could—busy, as he was, trying to hold the door for Melinda and make it seem incidental.

She sat between the boys. As I started up the car and Tare fiddled with the a/c, she said, "See? That wasn't so bad. I was a big help."

Harry grumbled.

"You were," said Tim. "Really. The best. Could not have done it without you."

"Sure we could have."

"C'mon, Harry," I said. "Won't kill you to thank her for her help."

"Yeah, thanks, whatever."

“Hey, Brother Mamawala?”

“Yeah, Melinda?”

“I didn’t know Sue was your sister.”

“Suhrita? Really? We look, like, exactly the same.”

Melinda shook her head at me in the rearview mirror. “C’mon, Brother Mamawala. Don’t be racist.”

So I just drove. All was silent for a while, until Melinda spoke again. “So, we make a pretty good team.”

Even in the already red summer evening, I could see Tim blushing in my mirror. “Yeah. You bet . . . President Pilner.”

“We should, like, do more service projects together. I mean—with everyone else too.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll talk to Sister Benson about it. You’ll talk to her too, right, Brother Mamawala?”

“That would be great.”

She was silent a moment, then had another brainstorm. “Hey, Tim. Maybe we’ll both get called to the Asiatic South Mission! Catch more dragons together!”

Tare turned around in his seat. “Adriatic, little sister. But heck yeah you two made a good team. For sure. Maybe your brother will even be as cool as my buddy Sanjay here someday.”

“Yeah,” said Melinda.

“Yeah,” said Tim.

When he turned back around, I growled, “Thanks a lot, Tare. You’re going to the next Bishop’s Youth Council. And you’re sitting between them.”

“For sure, bra.” He raised his right hand to the square. “I always sustain you, don’t I?”

## Anything but Orthodox

Matthew James Babcock. *Heterodoxologies: Essays*. Butte, Mont.: Educe Press, 2017. 204 pp. Paperback: \$17.23. ISBN: 978-0-9965716-3-0.

*Reviewed by Elizabeth Tidwell*

I was nineteen years old when I first learned about the essay form. I was enrolled in an introductory survey of creative writing, sitting in a middle row of pocked and drab desks in a windowless classroom when the instructor drew a daisy on the board to illustrate the agility of the essay form—how distinct petals of thought all encircle and emerge from the central theme and become something more beautiful in juxtaposition and conversation. That moment was a lightning bolt moment for me: *This is how my brain works!* And so I became an essayist.

The instructor that day was Matthew James Babcock, or Brother Babcock as I knew him at BYU–Idaho. That day was just a few months shy of ten years ago and my first lesson in the essay, but not my last. Before graduating from BYU–Idaho, I took a second class with Brother Babcock, this one focused solely on writing the essay. His lessons have stayed with me, shaped me. So, when I heard about his recently published debut essay collection, I couldn't wait to learn from him again. Within minutes of opening *Heterodoxologies*, I felt Babcock's presence almost tangibly. The collection is reminiscent of my classroom experiences with him at the helm: moments of profound insight sprinkled with healthy doses of goof. But this time the only prerequisite for the course is being human, of any variety: a music lover; a seventh grader; a bowler; a thinker; a dad; a dreamer.

These essays span time and experience in satisfying and surprising ways. From the relative barbarism of elementary and middle school

in “The Handicap Bug” and “Boogaloo Too” to the poignant, aching reflections on fatherhood in “My Nazi Dagger” to the quotidian scenes of community in “An Evening of Mortality at Teton Lanes,” nothing is out of Babcock’s reach. He includes dream scenes, imagined scenarios, letters with no hope of an answer. His “Short Address to the Assassins of the World” zings with a pestering playfulness: “First, why the three names? Must everyone in the club be immortalized as a black-hearted triptych? . . . James Earl Ray. John Wilkes Booth. Lee Harvey Oswald. Mary Kay Letourneau” (29). We’re set up with expectations for the essay with Babcock’s wit and faintly surprising depth of knowledge on the subject. By midway, we’re hooked in this conceit. “Consider Mehmet Ali Ağca: socked his killer stock in the three-name thing, ignored presentation and reputation, and after flubbing the papal dustoff got taken down by a nun. If you get body-slammed by a vigilante nun, you might want to turn in your assassin license and take up pigeon breeding” (30). But Babcock isn’t finished with us yet—this isn’t a quick commercial break from our regularly scheduled program of essays in the collection (even if at first glance his brief lighthearted essays may appear as such). He takes us deeper and deeper into a conversation with the assassins of the world, getting more and more personal with the masterful use of second person point of view, investing us with a humanizing, jolting leap into his own shoes on a day when he witnessed a girl enter a public library asking for help but was turned away by the indifferent librarian: we peer into Babcock’s own mind as he debates jumping in to offer help, worrying about being “taken for a creeper”—until we stop short at the ending, breathless: “Maybe the day you let your victim live is the day you start thinking for the rest of your life, *God, I hope she’s alright*” (31). We are left far more than simply entertained. We are enlightened.

In fact, it’s this nothing-out-of-reach quotidian approach that strikes me the most. Babcock is not afraid to take a roundabout path

to insight. He is unapologetic in offering his quirks, transcribing his dreams, discussing scabies, analyzing the objective value of virginity, and disclosing his struggles in connecting with his daughter amidst her own struggles. “Hey, I want to tell you something” (38) he says to his daughter, but also to us. And here is the beating heart of this collection. Babcock wants to tell us something, anything, to connect. And we can’t help but lean forward and listen.

Babcock invites us to not only listen, but look. “Aficionados of nineteenth-century American art history will tell you that the Hudson River School . . . became known for their sweeping landscapes that inspired awe and filled viewers with a limitless expanse of vision. Somehow, these painters walked into the world . . . and found that art was a matter of recording what you saw, and that what you saw in the outside world could enhance your inner life” (102). Amidst the skating rinks and hormones and road trips, this is what Babcock offers us: a look at life. There’s something artful and exalting here.

Before inviting us into his world, Babcock includes a Tolstoy epigraph: “If then, I were asked for the most important advice I could give, that which I considered to be the most useful to the men of our century, I should simply say: in the name of God, stop a moment, cease your work, look around you.” And this collection delivers on all counts. We stop and look around us at the world and truly see. In the name of God. This isn’t the latest Sheri Dew or Gerald Lund—no, nothing that overt. These are other praises to God: bold, bizarre, unapologetic heterodoxies. Babcock’s essays show there are countless ways to see the divine in this mash-up of a life. You don’t have to spell it out or even look hard. I am that I am.

In “Poetry and the Art of Rulon Gardner” Babcock describes a transcendent moment for the future Olympic wrestler: “Minute by minute, it became clear that Gardner had become a different entity inside, that he had remained the same physically but that his spirit had

flown the limits of the physical” (115). I can’t help but think Gardner isn’t the only one experiencing this flight of spirit. Through Babcock’s frank and wondering takes on the small but expansive moments in a life, we glimpse the sublime.

The daisy Babcock drew on the board that day in creative writing class was a representation of beauty, but not the deep red rose or elegant symmetry commonly associated with aesthetic pleasure. This simple, two-dimensional daisy had petals of different sizes and shapes and scribbled notes tendriling from it. But the daisy represented the truest expression of beauty I know: authenticity. And in this collection, Babcock is a master of the authentic beauty in the everyday. Although there were moments when I wished he’d take a more direct approach to his subjects, mostly I wanted the collection to hold more than these eleven essays. Matthew James Babcock taught me the essay twice before. With *Heterodoxologies*, he’s taught me the essay all over again.



## Judith Freeman: A Remarkable Memoir of an Unremarkable Life

Judith Freeman. *The Latter Days: A Memoir*. New York: Pantheon, 2016. 366 pp. Paperback: \$8.64. ISBN: 978-0-345-80608-6.

*Reviewed by Darin Stewart*

Judith Freeman’s *The Latter Days: A Memoir* is a remarkable memoir of an unremarkable life. The American novelist ticks all of the standard



boxes when recounting her childhood—abusive father, distant mother, disowned sibling, youthful indiscretion—none falling outside the boundaries of a common coming-of-age narrative. She accomplishes nothing particularly noteworthy and does nothing particularly dreadful. What makes the memoir fascinating is the context in which these non-events occur. Freeman grew up in a small, uniformly Mormon town in 1950s Utah. That backdrop elevates her beautifully written narrative from mildly diverting memoir to insightful social and religious commentary.

It is clear that Freeman did not set out to write a book about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the memoir is not intended as a polemic against Mormonism or the culture it engenders. Nevertheless, the LDS Church is so pervasive in the author's upbringing that it is hard to miss the underlying current of criticism that runs throughout the book.

Readers unfamiliar with Mormonism will find the idiosyncrasies of that culture fascinating if not outright exotic. Those with experience in the LDS community will likely recognize with some discomfort the "careful sameness of the Mormon culture" (21) that permeated the author's childhood and "strove to make us all the same in thought as well as deed" (35). Faithfulness and devotion to the Church were taken for granted, and if necessary enforced, within Freeman's family and community. This proves to be the first chink in Freeman's faith. At age fifteen she realizes "you couldn't believe in something when you'd never been given the chance not to believe" (175).

In a small town where everyone knows everyone else's business, as well as the social standard everyone is expected to maintain without exception, contradictions inevitably arise. Eventually, these expectations and contradictions drive Freeman from the faith and into the wider world. When the author and her husband relocate to St. Paul, Minnesota to seek medical treatment for their son, she encounters,

for the first time, life unconstrained by ecclesiastical expectations and religious norms.

A visit to a Unitarian church, her first non-Mormon religious experience, is revelatory. “I saw how the Unitarians, as opposed to the Mormons, were unafraid to promote questioning and free thinking,” she recalls. “They encouraged individuals to follow their moral conscience. It wasn’t about obeying religious authority” (280). This notion that life could be self-determined rather than lived out of sheer obedience and expectation may be the central message, if there is one, of Freeman’s memoir.

Those looking for insight into how a young woman from rural Utah became a leading American novelist will not find it here, other than understanding the circumstances informing her later fiction. When Freeman first begins to consider the possibility of a writing life, her family is neither supportive nor obstructionist. Her father simply forbids her to write about family and religion. Of course, those topics are the central focus of most of Freeman’s novels including *The Chinchilla Farm*, *Red Water*, and her collection of short stories, *Family Attractions*. The lyricism developed in Freeman’s fiction is on full display here in her memoir. In essence, her entire body of work is an exploration of the themes forbidden by her father.

*The Latter Days* is at its heart the narrative of a young woman making the transition, as she describes it, “From the bucolic to the knowing. . . . From the Edenic to the worldly. Innocence bleeding into knowledge as I prepared to . . . make the transition from one world to another” (113). At no point in Freeman’s story is there a dramatic break with her family and heritage. Rather there is a gradual drifting away. Her view of the religion of her childhood and the constraints it imposes slowly shifts from seeing it as not helpful, to not necessary, and ultimately not relevant. The events along the way are nothing out of the

ordinary. The overall journey and the manner in which it is conveyed, however, make this memoir remarkable.



## Problem Plays that Cultivate Compassion

Melissa Leilani Larson. *Third Wheel: Peculiar Stories of Mormon Women in Love*. Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2017. 142 pp. Paperback: \$9.95. ISBN: 978-0-9986052-3-4.

*Reviewed by Julie Bowman*

*Third Wheel: Peculiar Stories of Mormon Women in Love* brings together two plays by award-winning playwright Melissa Leilani Larson: *Happy Little Secrets* and *Pilot Program*. The plays are presented chronologically by premier year. *Happy Little Secrets* premiered at the New Play Project in 2009, *Pilot Program* at Plan-B Theatre Company in 2015. Each won the Association for Mormon Letters award for Drama.

The book's deceptively bright cover, illustrated with a young girl in a solo game of hoop rolling, belies the complexities and maturity of the plays in this compact edition. With hoop rolling as a metaphor for keeping things going, we may take *Third Wheel's* cover as cautionary. The plays are thought problems that take us in a bit of a circle. The endings endorse a quiet kind of endurance. There's nothing wrong with endurance, but it can be frustrating if one wants a conclusion that arrives at a point of view on either of the highly-charged issues that comprise the plays' central conflicts: same-sex attraction and polygamy.

In *Happy Little Secrets*, a twenty-something returned missionary, Claire, recounts her memory of reuniting with her best friend, Brennan,

after the two women return from their missions. Rejoining each other as roommates at BYU, the two women spend all of their time together until Brennan meets her future husband, Carter, on campus one evening. If it seems like a stereotypical BYU roommate story, where one roommate gets a boyfriend-fiancé-husband and the other becomes the third wheel, it isn't. We know from her opening soliloquy that Claire is in love with Brennan. Each burst of feeling for Brennan that Claire shares with us possesses the electricity that all of us who have ever been in love will recognize. The play's movement toward its climatic scene is gripping and breathless in its intensity, while the denouement offers little by way of resolution, instead proffering a world of small miracles, that to some might not seem like miracles at all, as fuel for continuing.

Like *Happy Little Secrets*, *Pilot Program* tests faith-in-action with the principle of plural marriage. Set in a hypothetical, but near, future, *Pilot Program* imagines the restoration of polygamy in the LDS Church. Abigail, a professor, married, but without children, and her husband, Jacob, have been invited to be early practitioners in this new era of plural marriage. Compelled by a flash of testimony and perhaps feeling inadequate as a wife after three miscarriages, Abigail pushes the project forward. She selects a wife for her husband—her former student, Heather—attends their sealing, sends them off on a honeymoon night, leaves teaching to take care of the child that they have. It's uncomfortable reckoning with the day-to-day realities this hypothetical arrangement forces us to consider, such as setting the days of the week Jacob spends with each woman. To watch a family arrangement awkwardly emerge as these three stumble through even the language to talk about it forces us to reckon with what eternal families might really feel like when we are so accustomed to singular monogamy.

Love and marriage plots and relationship interlopers are not new themes for the stage, but Larson's plays offer a particularly Mormon treatment of marriages with a third lover. As a pair, these plays prod, gently, at the circumstances that interfere with the characters' easy alignment with

the church they believe in. Each woman's particular struggle is largely what we expect it might be given their faith, and they are never angry. At points despairing, they are largely patient and longsuffering, even if that sometimes seems too good to be possible. Still, they give us grounds for their reactions. Their narrations provide privileged access to their thoughts. These interventions create intimacy and interiority. This intimacy is the critical strength of these plays. By design, the narrations bind us to them, and, as a consequence, we experience their vulnerability. Their candor fosters engaged concern with the feelings they navigate.

To say that neither play resolves is more observation of content than complaint of form. I'm in agreement with Eric Samuelsen's claim in his foreword to this collection: these are problem plays. Like Shakespeare's problem plays, they present the reader with social and ethical dilemmas that are not easily resolved. Akin to the problem comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, which strains justice and mercy in the treatment of Shylock, the community outsider who exits the stage unwell, stripped of his religion and his fortune, *Third Wheel* shows us characters with pain points that prompt us to discuss their conditions. These dilemmas matter a great deal to the spectrum of conversations currently underway in the LDS community. It's worth reading, staging, and discussing these plays. Doing so will cultivate compassion for the conflicts that arise at the intersection of the LDS doctrine, faith, and lived human experience as they invite us to ask, "What ought we to do when we see suffering?"



J. Kirk Richards  
*Adam and Eve*  
Photo by Andi Pitcher Davis

# THE SONG OF THE RIGHTEOUS IS A PRAYER UNTO ME

Originally delivered in Yale Ward sacrament meeting  
October 9, 2016

Sariah Toronto

One of my favorite types of sacred music is the music of the Russian Orthodox church. It has its origins in Byzantine chant, but developed its own distinct style called Znamenny Chant. It is sung in Old Slavonic, so I cannot understand it with the exception of a word here or there that is similar in modern Russian, but I find it incredibly beautiful. Sung in resonant sacred spaces as part of worship services, you hear the devotion in the music. Not only are the sounds and attitudes of the singers imbued with beauty, the music is part of a rich symbolism, together with candles and incense, that help the worshipper to look upward to the divine. Other religious traditions have similarly beautiful elements involving music. For example, a *muezzin* calls out the *adhan*, or call to prayer, from the mosque five times during the day; a *hazzan*, or cantor, is a trained musician who sings prayers in the synagogue.

The primary focus of music in our own worship services, similar to much of the rest of Western Christianity, is less on the beauty that a single musician or specialized choir brings to the service, thereby deepening and enriching the worship experience for congregants, and more on the participatory nature of the music. While we have a strong tradition of and a key place for choral music in our worship, even more prominent and more fundamental is the role of congregational hymnody, or hymn singing. A hymn, by its very nature, is a song written for the purpose of adoration or prayer; the word “hymn” itself comes from the Greek

and means a song of praise. In 1830, the Lord asked Emma Smith to compile the first hymnbook for the newly established church, noting in the process: “For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me” (D&C 25:12).

If you’re like me, the words “adoration,” “prayer,” and “song of praise” usually do not cross your mind during the three and sometimes four points in a typical Sunday worship service when it is time for congregational singing. Rather, you realize it’s time to sing, you search in the back of the pew in front of you or on the floor or on the pew next to you for a hymn book, you look hurriedly up to the front of the chapel or shuffle through papers to find the printed program to see what the hymn number is, you race to find the right page and as soon as the piano or organ finishes the introduction, you start singing. You then sing all two or three or four verses of the hymn and sometimes you are caught off guard when you’ve sung all the verses on the musical staff and have put your hymnal away—only to realize the chorister has indicated that you should sing additional verses printed below the staff.

As I reflected on the role that congregational hymn singing plays in my own worship, I was struck by how very formulaic and mundane it typically is. And by how very far away it is from being a song from my heart, and a prayer to God. For the next few minutes I’d like to share some thoughts I’ve had as I’ve reflected on the notion that hymn singing is a mode of communication with God—and the notion that doing it all together is a fundamental element of our worship.

This idea of music being a vehicle to take our thoughts and prayers heavenward is not new. In several of the psalms, which are themselves prayers which were typically sung, we are admonished to “make a joyful noise unto God.” Psalm 98, for example, encourages us to “make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise,” while Psalm 100 speaks of “[serving] the Lord with gladness” and “[coming] before his presence with singing.” Alma speaks about “[singing] the song of redeeming love” and the Lord reveals to Brigham Young, as recorded in D&C 138, that we



should “praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing, and with a prayer of thanksgiving.”

The Old and New Testaments both provide rich examples of communal singing as a form of worship and prayer. In Exodus 15, we read of the Israelites singing praises to the Lord for delivering them from Egypt, including Miriam the prophetess leading the women in singing to the Lord, “for he . . . triumphed gloriously.” In Ezra 3, we read that the people “sang together . . . in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord” and “shouted with a great shout . . . because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.” 2 Chronicles 5 tells us that the glory of the Lord was called down to the temple of Solomon through music. And in the Gospels we learn that Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn together at the conclusion of the Last Supper.

So what is it about singing hymns together, as a group of Saints, that is so foundational to our approach to worship that we spend roughly a quarter of the time that we’re together in sacrament meeting doing it? Congregational singing is at once wholeheartedly communal and thoroughly personal. In no other aspect of our worship are we so literally united as we are during the five or so minutes that we sing the same words to the same notes of the same hymn from the same page in the same book. We start together, we end together; we are, for those five minutes, one. And yet, those same five minutes are entirely individual. You and only you open your mouth to form the words and sing the notes with your entirely unique voice. You bring your individual set of experiences and circumstances and needs to hymn. Those same five minutes thus have the potential to be an intensely personal communion with the divine.

There is thus something very symbolic and beautiful about this practice of uniting around a single set of words set to a particular hymn tune. It strikes me that our hymn singing is emblematic of the notion that we are collectively the body of Christ—each of us individual and unique, all of us unified around a common purpose of loving and serving like Christ.

Let me mention a few other thoughts on congregational singing that we could explore more fully if we had the time. How does intoning someone else's words constitute prayer on my part? Many of the lyrics in our hymnal are poetry; many are thoughts expressed in ways we might not on our own consider or be capable of, but that can help us understand a truth or experience beauty or feel closer to God. And let's be honest, not all hymns are created equal. Some are likely more compelling to you musically or in terms of their lyrics than others; some may speak directly to you and others not at all. And lastly, in the Lord's statement to Emma, he notes that the "song of the righteous" is a prayer. Does that mean our hymn singing is prayer only if we are spotless? Of course not—we are all sinners; no one of us is thoroughly righteous. I therefore read the Lord's comment as, "the song of the person who is striving toward me, whatever that might look like, is a prayer unto me."

The final part of Emma's revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 25 is a promise that singing from the heart "shall be answered with a blessing on [our] heads." What sorts of blessings does congregational singing potentially bring us? I offer some thoughts based on my own experience. Singing hymns together can unify us. It can give us as individuals a sense of strength—have you ever sung a hymn like "The Spirit of God" in sacrament meeting or in a stake conference or even perhaps at a temple dedication and felt the strength and power of not only the music but of knowing that you are not alone in your strivings to be closer to God? Remember how the people singing together called down the Lord's glory to Solomon's temple? Our hymn singing can summon the spirit of God to our meetings and to our hearts. I believe singing with one another can strengthen our resolve and our commitment to lead a Christ-like life. It can bring peace and calm to our soul in troubled times. And the hymns we sing together can bring inspiration and answer to prayers, either in the moment or as we reflect on them later on.

An experience from many years ago reminds me of the power of congregational hymn singing. My friend Cathy was serving in the

Peace Corps in northwestern Kazakhstan while I was in Ufa, Russia, as a missionary. At the time, there was no church presence in Kazakhstan so Cathy took an overnight train to Ufa to spend a few days with me and my companions, with the primary intention of attending a church service, her first in almost a year. As we sang a hymn to open sacrament meeting in our little rented schoolroom, I turned to Cathy and saw her singing with tears streaming down her cheeks. We were just a couple of lines into the hymn, but already Cathy felt a unity, a strength, a peace, and the Spirit of God in a way she had not felt in a very long time. If only I could value the blessing of singing hymns together every time I open the hymnal the way Cathy did that Sunday.

In closing, in our religious tradition we do not have candles or incense to physically remind us to shift our gaze heavenward. Nor do we have professional singers leading the musical portions of our services, helping to deepen and enrich our worship experience. What we do have is the opportunity to join together and sing from the heart, to offer prayers and praises to God. We also each have the opportunity to decide how our approach to congregational hymnody will deepen and enrich our own worship. I hope that we can think about how to more fully sing from the heart, and that, like Paul, we can say that “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Cor. 14:15). As we do so, I know that the Lord will answer with rich blessings.



J. Kirk Richards  
*Adam and Eve*  
Photo by Andi Pitcher Davis

## CONTRIBUTORS

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STEPHEN CARTER {stephen@sunstone.org} is the editor of *Sunstone* magazine and *Moth and Rust: Mormon Encounters with Death* (Signature Books, 2017). His books include *Mormonism for Beginners*, the *iPlates* graphic novel series, and *The Hand of Glory* (a YA horror novel about polygamous ghosts). He has a PhD in narrative studies from the University of Alaska–Fairbanks and spends a lot more time than he ever thought he would managing his daughter's dance schedule.

SIMON PETER EGGERTSEN {speggertsen@yahoo.com} was trained as a lawyer (Virginia and Cambridge) but has spent his working and teaching life in the field of international health. He comes late to poetry, something that would completely stun his high school English teachers. This poem was prompted by a rather curious character, Trevor, who inhabited the market square in Cambridge in the late 1970s. A set of Eggertsen's poems appears in *Fire in the Pasture*, another won the *Irreantum* Poetry Contest (2012). Several of his verses have been finalists for prizes, including the Fish Poetry Prize (Ireland, 2013, 2014) and the Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry (Nimrod, 2009). His work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Nimrod*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *Vallum* (Canada), and *New Millennium Writings*. He has one chapbook to his credit, *Memories as Contraband* (Finishing Line Press, 2014).

THERIC JEPSON {theric@thmazing.com} has had fiction and criticism appear in *Dialogue* before. This is the first time his poetry has appeared here. He is the lead editor of Peculiar Pages, whose publications include *The Fob Bible*, *Fire in the Pasture*, *States of Deseret*, and upcoming volumes of criticism, work from Segullah writers, Heavenly Mother poetry, and more. He can be found all over the web by googling thmazing.

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NEIL LONGO {neil.longo@verizon.net} was raised in California and attended Brigham Young University. He was baptized into the LDS Church during his first month at BYU and developed a strong interest in Mormon theology, history, and sociology. After graduating with a BS in political science, he interned for the Senate Judiciary Committee

Staff of Senator Orrin Hatch in Washington, DC. He currently works for an academic nonprofit and is applying to PhD programs. He lives in Portland, Oregon, loves to hike and camp, and hopes to study Russian religious thought from the late nineteenth century.

HUGO OLAIZ {HugoRDU@gmail.com} was born in La Plata, Argentina, where he studied literature and classics. A third-generation Mormon, he served a mission in Paraguay. He later moved to the US for graduate work in Spanish and linguistics. He is a former webmaster for *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* and a former news editor for *Sunstone* magazine. He lives in Oxford, Ohio with his husband John-Charles Duffy and an aging Beagle mix named Patches. He wrote this poem in 2001, shortly after the birth of his niece Celina.

JANA RIESS {riess.jana@gmail.com} is a senior columnist with Religion News Service and has a PhD in American religious history from Columbia University. She is the author or coauthor of many books, including *Mormonism and American Politics* (Columbia University Press) and the forthcoming *The Next Mormons: The Rising Generation of Latter-day Saints* (Oxford University Press).

J. KIRK RICHARDS attributes much of his love for the arts to an early emphasis on musical training in his parents' home. Turning then from music to visual arts, Kirk studied with painters Clayton Williams, Bruce Hixson Smith, Patrick Devonas, Hagen Haltern, Gary and Jennifer Barton, James Christensen, Wulf Barsch, Joe Ostraff, and others. Two years in Rome influenced Richards's palette, which often consists of subdued browns and rusts. Kirk is best known for his contributions to the BYU Museum of Art exhibit *Beholding Salvation: The Life of Christ in Word and Image*; for his contributions to Helen Whitney's PBS Frontline Documentary entitled *The Mormons: An American Experience*; for the cover image of Jeffrey R. Holland's book, *Broken Things to Mend*; and

for his imagery on the cover of *BYU Studies* and in the *Ensign*, *Liahona*, and *Upper Room* publications.

ELIZABETH TIDWELL {elizabeth.ann.brady@gmail.com} received an MFA in creative nonfiction from Brigham Young University in 2015. Her writing has appeared in *Santa Clara Review*, *Brevity*, *BYU Studies Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She taught creative writing, composition, and yoga at BYU for five years and currently lives in Pleasant Grove with her husband, James.

SARIAH TORONTO {sariah.toronto@gmail.com} is not Canadian but would happily accept citizenship if offered. A nomad by birth, she grew up in Latin America but has lived longest in Manhattan. After a West Coast stint, she is now living the landlocked life in Salt Lake City, where she consults on strategy, measurement, and evaluation in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, and hikes whenever she possibly can. She also plays the organ whenever possible; in deciding where to live in SLC, Sariah's family employed the chapel-must-contain-a-pipe-organ litmus test, which the Yale Ward handily passed.

CHRYSTAL VANEL {vanel.chrystal@gmail.com} is a postdoctoral researcher (GSRL-Paris). He has a PhD in sociology (EPHE-Sorbonne), an MA in religious studies (EPHE-Sorbonne), a BA in history (University Paris 1-Panthéon-Sorbonne), and he is currently completing a BA in theology (University of Geneva). He also studied and taught at Washington University in St. Louis (Fall 2007). His PhD research was on "Mormonisms: A Historical and Sociological Study of a Distinctive American Religious Fissiparousness (1830–2013)." His current research is on Mormonisms and Protestantisms. He has a special interest in the exprotestantization and reprottestantization of Mormonisms. He is currently coorganizing an international academic research project on the legacy of the Reformation in Europe.