

# DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

The articles collected in this issue were prepared for the Mormon Scholars in the Humanities 2019 annual conference, held in May 16–18 at Southern Utah University in Cedar City, Utah. The theme of the conference was “Ecologies,” and these papers present a stimulating and widely-varied set of responses from numerous perspectives within the humanities. The uniting factor in these scholars’ work here lies in their commitment to reading deeply, whether their text be a novel, philosophical essay, poem, scripture, artwork, or even the virtual landscapes of the internet, and it is in these readings that ideas are sparked and conversations initiated. As conference papers, these pieces serve as initial forays into fields of thought rather than final words on the subject. They are meant to engage their audience and prompt them to consider things from a fresh light and unanticipated perspective. As a journal committed to initiating and continuing conversations, *Dialogue* is pleased to present this collection of essays exploring ecologies of faith, care, and living in our world that shape Mormon life.

For more information on Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, please see their website: [mormonscholars.net](http://mormonscholars.net).



# DOMINION IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Christopher Oscarson

In the year 2000, Nobel Prize–winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen together with Eugene Stoermer published a short article in a professional newsletter cataloging the manifold ways that humans as a species have affected the geology and atmosphere of the planet. They wrote, “The expansion of mankind, both in numbers and per capita exploitation of resources has been astounding” and then proceeded to list ways that humans have impacted the chemistry and functioning of local and planetary systems including the widespread transformation of the land surface, the synthetic fixing of nitrogen, the escape of gases into the atmosphere (including, importantly, greenhouse gases) by the burning of fossil fuels, the use of fresh water, increased rates of species extinction, the erosion of the ozone layer in the atmosphere, overfishing of the world’s oceans, and the destruction of wetlands.<sup>1</sup> They concluded, “Considering these and many other major and still growing impacts of human activities on the earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ‘anthropocene’ for the current geological epoch.”<sup>2</sup> This was one of the first documented arguments for adopting the term *Anthropocene*, although others, including Stoermer, had used similar terms before.

The data Crutzen and Stoermer were using to describe the human impact on planetary systems are now almost two decades old, but even more recent data tells the same story about how humans continue to

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1. Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *Global Change Newsletter*, no. 41 (May 2000): 17–18.

2. *Ibid.*, 17.

fundamentally alter the functioning of both local and planetary systems. Will Steffen and a team of researchers, for example, published an important article in *Science* in 2015 that catalogs some of these changes and develops a framework for evaluating the collective stress human action places on the planet, referred to as the “planetary boundaries framework.”<sup>3</sup> This approach is meant to complement other work done on local ecosystems, waterways, and airsheds by considering, as they put it, “constraints at the planetary level, where the magnitude of the challenge is vastly different.”<sup>4</sup> They echo Crutzen and Stoermer in saying, “The human enterprise has grown so dramatically since the mid-twentieth century that the relatively stable, 11,700-year-long Holocene epoch, the only state of the planet that we know for certain can support contemporary human societies, is now being destabilized. In fact, a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, has been proposed.”<sup>5</sup>

The notion of planetary boundaries, although controversial in some of its specific implications, is nonetheless very effective for illustrating one of the key ideas of the Anthropocene: it recognizes that humans have historically had and will continue to have an impact on the planet. Most major planetary systems have—to a greater or lesser extent—been affected by human activity. The planetary boundaries framework provides a means of thinking about these systems that recognizes human impact on them by establishing what are considered to be safe operating spaces in regard to freshwater use, land-system change, genetic diversity, climate change, biogeochemical (mainly phosphorus and nitrogen) flows, ocean acidification, etc. The planet is far past the point of considering how these systems function outside of human activity; now the focus must be on how pushing beyond certain thresholds in

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3. Will Steffen, et al., “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet,” *Science* 347, no. 6223 (Feb. 13, 2015): 736–46.

4. *Ibid.*, 737.

5. *Ibid.*



any of these areas puts the planet at greater risk with high degrees of uncertainty about the future functioning of these systems. Insofar that the drivers of these changes are anthropogenic, we can begin talking about having entered into a new epoch: the Anthropocene.

This aim of this essay is to consider what might be some of the key theological implications of imagining ourselves as living in the Anthropocene. The term is unquestionably provocative for how it potentially normalizes human involvement in major planetary systems. Popular Latter-day Saint interpretations of the Judeo-Christian tradition has, especially in recent decades, most often demonstrated an indifferent (and among some even an outright hostile) attitude with regard to ecological concerns. A reevaluation of the unique Latter-day Saint doctrine about the Creation and its portrayal of human embeddedness in the world is long overdue.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I intend to look at the question of anthropocentrism and the doctrine of dominion in biblical Creation accounts and explore a potential LDS response that might work toward an interpretation that fosters an understanding of the risk and responsibility of living in a world that is increasingly changed by human activity.



The idea of the Anthropocene is controversial among geologists who govern the definitions of geological time units—the chrono-stratigraphic units that make up periods, epochs, and ages—yet the term has nonetheless gained tremendous cultural traction as a shorthand way of referencing the impact of human activity on various parts of the planet’s ecology. Among geologists, the debate about the Anthropocene has to do with more technical questions of classification and whether or not the stratigraphic trace of human activity is truly on par with the evidence of other past geological time units. The argument for this

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6. See George B. Handley, “Toward a Greener Faith: A Review of Recent Mormon Environmental Scholarship,” *Mormon Studies Review* 3 (2016): 85–103.

permanent geologic trace focuses on the evidence remaining from the detonation of atomic weapons, artificial fixing of nitrogen, biodiversity loss, deforestation, diversion and use of fresh water, industrial accidents, burning of fossil fuels, anthropogenic climate change, and the emission of other forms of pollutions, all of which leave a legible mark in the lithosphere potentially detectable for millennia to come. *Homo sapiens* as a species has only existed for a mere two hundred thousand years and practiced agriculture for the last 11,500 years—time frames that are uncomfortably short, in the minds of some geologists, to use as a basis for defining geological time periods. The ultimate acceptance of the term by the scientific community hinges on the question: have humans in their relatively short existence as a species become a geological force at a scale that has objectively and fundamentally altered the course of geologic history? The start date for a proposed Anthropocene designation range from the rise of agriculture and the Neolithic revolution twelve thousand years ago (renaming the Holocene) to the start of the Industrial Revolution to the Trinity test of the atomic bomb in 1945 and the period after World War II known as the Great Acceleration. In May 2019, the Working Group on the Anthropocene (WGA) made a formal recommendation to the International Commission on Stratigraphy to designate the current epoch as the Anthropocene with a start in the mid-twentieth century. The final decision is pending. It is possible that we may wake up one day soon to find ourselves in a new epoch.

The idea of calling the current age the Anthropocene has been controversial not just for stratigraphers and geologists but also for some environmentalists. To illustrate why, one need look no further than an article authored by Crutzen in 2002 in *Nature* entitled “The Nature of Mankind” that was a follow-up and expansion of the article from 2000 quoted earlier. He concluded the new article by saying,

Unless there is a global catastrophe—a meteorite impact, a world war or pandemic—mankind will remain a major environmental force for many millennia. A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers

to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behavior at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to “optimize” climate. At this stage, however, we are still largely treading on *terra incognita*.<sup>7</sup>

By recognizing the human species’ impact on the planet, Crutzen argued, one must likewise recognize the role of human beings going forward and take an active approach “to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene.”<sup>8</sup> Critics charge that this deliberate and managerial approach to nature through various forms of geoengineering smacks of the very technological hubris that fueled our environmental crises in the first place. Furthermore, encouraging future human involvement in these systems abandons the idea of a nature that exists outside of human agency and seems to justify human domination, exploitation, and destruction of the environment.

There are good reasons to be wary of geoengineering fixes, as these fixes seem to so very often to create other (sometimes worse) problems. Nevertheless, a benefit that comes with the idea of the Anthropocene is how the designation forces a recognition that humankind is not and never has been separate from nature—an ideological assumption that has informed much of modern Western culture, including many environmentalist movements. The origins of how humans began to think of themselves as being separate from nature is, of course, complex and a matter of some debate. Lynn White, in his oft-cited article from *Science* in March 1967 entitled “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” saw modern science and technology as manifestations of a medieval Christian anthropocentric worldview that had reduced nature to a spiritless resource and justified heedless exploitation of resources. White claimed that Western Christianity “was the most anthropocentric

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7. Paul J. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, no. 6867 (Jan. 3, 2002): 23.

8. *Ibid.*

religion the world has seen” and that whereas “formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature.”<sup>9</sup> Central to White’s argument and critique is a reading of Genesis 1:26–28 that justifies the exploitation and subordination of nature to human interest, thereby granting humans unqualified dominion over creation.

26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and *subdue* it: and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

29 And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

31 And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Mankind is set apart from the rest of creation in this passage by having the distinction of being the only creation made explicitly in the image of God.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the human position at the center of creation is

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9. Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967): 1205.

10. For summary of scholarship on *Imago Dei*, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2005).

underscored by the injunction to have dominion over the earth and to subdue it.

Research since the 1960s has suggested that White's characterization of medieval Christianity is somewhat reductive.<sup>11</sup> But even if White's thesis misses the mark in regard to some of the historical particulars of the current ecological crisis, the fact that he is cited as often as he is suggests that his basic argument about the exploitive mindset of Western culture vis-à-vis the environment somehow rings true in contemporary culture. Regardless of origins, White articulated the pronounced split today between humans and nature that pervades not only religious thought, cultural attitudes, and the practice of science but even, as indicated above, many environmentalist discourses. The colonialist mindset that sees nature only as a collection of inert resources to be exploited has its corollary in conservation movements (pace John Muir) that proclaim nature as sacred only when it has not been defiled by the presence of humans. In both cases, the view of nature is framed by a shared and faulty assumption that humans stand outside of nature. Whether or not Judeo-Christianity actually was the origin of this split, it has certainly been deployed by many, particularly in recent decades, to justify a certain indifference to key ecological concerns.

Lynn White concluded his critique of Western culture's devaluation of nature with an oft-overlooked second conclusion. White wrote, "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink

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11. See, for example, Jeremy Cohen, *"Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It": The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); Elspeth Whitney, "Lynn White, Ecotheology, and History," *Environmental Ethics* 15, no. 2 (1993): 151–69; Peter Harrison, "Having Dominion: Genesis and the Mastery of Nature," in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives—Past and Present*, edited by R. J. Berry (New York: Continuum, 2006), 17–31.

and refeel our nature and destiny.”<sup>12</sup> White recognized the important role religious traditions played in changing the human attitudes and behaviors necessary to improve the health and resiliency of local and global ecologies. For him, the human-nature divide and subsequent anthropocentrism was a major stumbling block to getting at the root of the problem. A significant step in overcoming the challenge he outlines is to revisit Judeo-Christianity’s anthropocentrism. LDS doctrine on the Creation is particularly well situated to reimagine anthropocentrism not as an impediment to creation care but as a means of renewing ecological thinking in the Anthropocene.

A good place to start is back in the passage from Genesis 1 quoted earlier. Much literal and virtual ink has been spilled over the interpretation of the words *dominion* (*radah*) and *subdue* (*kavash*). These verses certainly have been used to justify mankind’s superiority over nature and the license taken to heedlessly exploit natural resources with scant concern for the long-term consequences of such abuse. No matter how one squints to look at these words, they (and indeed the chapter as a whole) set up a clear anthropocentric hierarchy. Comparing the use of the word *radah* in Genesis to other instances in the Old Testament, Theodore Hiebert summarizes the situation well: “The entire picture of human beings in Gen. 1:28 in particular and in this creation account as a whole is one of power and authority. The human race is positioned at the top of a hierarchy of creation by virtue of its divine image and its divine mandate to rule over the earth and its life.”<sup>13</sup> Depending on one’s understanding of *dominion* and *subdue*, these verses from Genesis 1 have been used alternatively to critique as well as to justify human exceptionalism, exploitation, and indifference to nature.

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12. White, “Historical Roots,” 1207.

13. Theodore Hiebert, “Rethinking Dominion Theology,” *Direction* 25, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 19.

Lynn White's argument summarized above indicates how these terms might be used to justify exploitation. In contrast, reading this passage from Genesis as a critique of human exploitation of creation must begin with a careful reevaluation of dominion as call to stewardship. Hugh Nibley—for a long time one of the only significant environmentalist voices among LDS scholars—makes this argument forcefully in his article “Subduing the Earth,” in which he wrote, paraphrasing Brigham Young, “The dominion God gives man is designed to test him, to enable him to show to himself, his fellows, and all the heavens just how he would act if entrusted with God’s own power.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, he claimed, “The Ancients taught that Adam’s dominion was nothing less than the priesthood, the power to act for God and in his place.”<sup>15</sup> This understanding of dominion has been echoed more recently by other non-LDS scholars such as William Brown,<sup>16</sup> J. Richard Middleton,<sup>17</sup> and others. While this reading of dominion as stewardship is convincing, the fundamental inequity built into the hierarchy it established between humans and the rest of creation highlights a daunting problem. After all, dominion, according to Doctrine and Covenants 121, almost inevitably leads to *unrighteous* dominion.

While hierarchies can be problematic because of inequitably distributed power, in this case the very fact that the hierarchy is also a relationship forces women and men to recognize what might be termed an ecological embeddedness in nature. To underscore this point, it will be illustrative to reference an important correlative to Genesis 1’s so-called priestly account with Genesis 2, the Yahwist or J account (referred to as

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14. Hugh Nibley, “Subduing the Earth,” in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 90.

15. *Ibid.*, 88.

16. William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

17. Middleton, *Liberating Image*.

such because of frequent repetition of the name divine name YHWH), in which God is portrayed not as transcendent but within what William Brown has described as a “drama of dirt” in which God comes down to Adam and Eve in the Garden so that they might collectively get their hands dirty in the work of the garden.<sup>18</sup> The dominion granted to Adam and Eve puts them in inevitable contact and community with nature. Norman Wirzba argues that it was imperative that the first humans be involved in maintaining the Garden “because it is through the tending and serving of fellow creatures that the ‘*adam*’ practically proves and potentially learns to appreciate the range, depth, and responsibilities of interdependent life. . . . According to this story, it is crucial we keep our hands familiar with soil so that we don’t forget our need and dependence, but also our responsibility to care for the bodies we live through.”<sup>19</sup>

Reading Genesis in the context of the Anthropocene forces us to acknowledge that humans are indeed part of nature and affect—and are in turn affected by—nature, sometimes in disproportionate ways. This acknowledgement and rereading of Genesis’s anthropocentrism rejects attempts to ignore the facts of how we as a species have changed the local and planetary ecosystems. Many of these changes are disastrous both for human life as well as for the lives of the other creatures over which we are invited to have care. A call to embrace the Anthropocene should not be misinterpreted as a further justification of human abuse of the environment nor as resignation that it is too late or hopeless to act to save what is left. It is, however, about recognizing a fundamental fact of connectedness and a call to become more conscious and deliberate about how we live in and transform the world in which we and other living beings inhabit. Embracing the Anthropocene allows for us

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18. Brown, *Seven Pillars of Creation*, 79.

19. Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2015), 103–04.



to think around some of the fundamentally misanthropic implications of many environmental movements of the late-twentieth century that rightly mourned the disappearance of healthy ecosystems but had difficulty imagining a space for the human, as evidenced by the emphasis placed on such misanthropic propositions as population control or radical versions of wilderness preservation.

By not insisting that the only real nature is “pure” nature, cordoned off in a remote corner of the world, we can begin to inhabit the nature in and around us more fully. We can better deal with our own complicity in imbrication in the functioning of natural systems. Jedediah Purdy, in his book *After Nature*, writes:

The Anthropocene finds its most radical expression in our acknowledgment that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate. Because we shape everything, from the upper atmosphere to the deep seas, there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings. There is no place or living thing that we haven’t changed. Our mark is on the cycle of weather and seasons, the global map of bioregions, and the DNA that organizes matter into life. It makes no sense now to honor and preserve a nature that is defined by being not human, that is purest in wilderness, rain forests, and the ocean. Instead, in a world we can’t help shaping, the question is what we will shape.<sup>20</sup>

We are not left stuck between nostalgia and misanthropy but can move forward thinking about what is best for both the more-than-human world as well as the humans that make up an important part of this planet and our ethical stewardship, whether they be my neighbor in the city or state in which I live or my neighbor in cyclone-ravaged Mozambique, the warming Arctic, the disappearing islands of Kiribati in the Pacific, or post-Katrina New Orleans.

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20. Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2–3.

At least since Lynn White, many Judeo-Christian environmentalists have been embarrassed by the undeniably anthropocentric underpinnings of Judeo-Christian Creation accounts. But denying the anthropocentrism that is so obviously there is at best disingenuous and at worst quite dangerous in that it doesn't force us to confront the dangerous power humans collectively have. As Wallace Stegner wrote concerning anthropocentrism, "The Deep ecologists warn us not to be anthropocentric, but I know no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes. I know that it wasn't created especially for my use, and I share the guilt for what members of my species, especially the migratory ones, have done to it. But I am the only instrument that I have to access to by which I can enjoy the world and try to understand it."<sup>21</sup> Stegner's point is that to deny our unique way of seeing the world is to reject a fundamental truth about how we exist in the world and how our actions have consequences. Anthropocentrism does not necessarily lead to environmental degradation if it can be tempered by moderation, gentleness, meekness, respect, and reverence.

Elder Marcus Nash seemed to concur with this basic premise in a groundbreaking talk presented on behalf of the Church at the Wallace Stegner Center Annual Symposium at the University of Utah in 2013. Nash was unapologetic about the anthropocentrism that he claimed to be at the core of LDS doctrine. After quoting Doctrine and Covenants 49:16–17 and 1 Nephi 17:36 he stated, "[A]ccording to LDS doctrine, men and women are not mere interlopers or a side-show on this earth; rather, they and the children they bring into this world are central to its purpose."<sup>22</sup> He continued by explaining that although the creation is "ordained for the use of man" (D&C 49:19–21) that "humankind

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21. Wallace Stegner, "The Sense of Place," in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 201.

22. Marcus B. Nash, "Righteous Dominion and Compassion for the Earth" (lecture, 18th Annual Stegner Center Symposium, University of Utah, Salt

are stewards over this earth and its bounty—not owners—and will be accountable to God for what we do with regard to His creation. . . . So, how we care for the earth, how we utilize and share in its bounty, and how we treat all life that has been provided for our benefit and use is part of our test in mortality. . . . The unbridled, voracious consumer is not consistent with God’s plan of happiness, which calls for humility, gratitude, and mutual respect.”<sup>23</sup>

Nash underscored that the anthropocentricity inherent in this doctrine must be tempered by a recognition that all living things have a material and spiritual creation and are “living souls”: “Since both plant and animal life are living souls, they are capable of experiencing happiness as they fulfill the measure of their creation. . . . Plainly, all forms of life . . . have great value in the eyes of God, for they are the workmanship of His hand, and will be blessed by His redeeming power. This doctrine leads one to view plant and animal life differently, as living souls created by God.”<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Lynn White’s claim that “by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects”<sup>25</sup> does not hold true within the unique LDS interpretation of Christianity in which all living things, indeed perhaps even the earth itself (see Moses 7:48), has a spirit and place within a creation ordained by God. The anthropocentrism of dominion clearly does not justify exploitation; rather, it reminds us of our responsibility for creation. Nash concluded, “To the degree that religion teaches reverence for God, for His creations, for life, and for our fellowman, it will teach us to care for the environment. In short,

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Lake City, Apr. 12, 2013, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/elder-nash-stegner-symposium>).

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. White, “Historical Roots,” 1205.

the state of the human soul and the environment are interconnected, each affects and influences the other.”<sup>26</sup>

In summary, I return to Crutzen, where I started. In an article written for the online magazine *Yale Environment 360*, he wrote the following together with Christian Schwägerl:

Geographers Erle Ellis and Navin Ramankutty argue we are no longer disturbing natural ecosystems. Instead, we now live in “human systems with natural ecosystems embedded within them.” The long-held barriers between nature and culture are breaking down. It’s no longer us against “Nature.” Instead, it’s we who decide what nature is and what it will be.

To master this huge shift, we must change the way we perceive ourselves and our role in the world. Students in school are still taught that we are living in the Holocene, an era that began roughly 12,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age. But teaching students that we are living in the Anthropocene, the Age of Men, could be of great help. Rather than representing yet another sign of human hubris, this name change would stress the enormity of humanity’s responsibility as stewards of the Earth. It would highlight the immense power of our intellect and our creativity, and the opportunities they offer for shaping the future.<sup>27</sup>

There is still reason to be wary of Crutzen’s bullishness on the human capacity to manage planetary systems, but he articulates well the power of recognizing human participation and involvement in these systems—the very involvement that seems to be articulated in God’s first commandments to the only creatures made in his image.

As a religion, Christianity as a whole and Mormonism in particular, is decidedly anthropocentric. But rather than be embarrassed by this anthropocentricity in the face of environmental crisis, we actually need to learn to lean into it—not to consume and exploit more but to

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26. Nash, “Righteous Dominion.”

27. Paul J. Crutzen and Christian Schwägerl. “Living in the Anthropocene: Toward a New Global Ethos,” *Yale Environment 360*, Jan. 24, 2011, [https://e360.yale.edu/features/living\\_in\\_the\\_anthropocene\\_toward\\_a\\_new\\_global\\_ethos](https://e360.yale.edu/features/living_in_the_anthropocene_toward_a_new_global_ethos).

recognize how our consumption and use of resources is connected to our own physical and spiritual health as well as to the human and non-human worlds around us and to then take better care of the stewardship with which we have been entrusted. There is simply no firm theological grounding for a discourse that exploits the uniqueness of the human relationship to God to provide license to impoverish the health and vitality of creation. We have a unique stewardship over something of which we are also a part.

As individuals and as a species we have always been active participants in natural systems; we come from the earth, we depend on the earth, and one day our bodies will return to the earth, the very creation that God declared “good” (Gen. 1:31; Moses 2:31). Embracing the idea of the Anthropocene simply means being more deliberate about acknowledging and leveraging this participation. At its core, the Anthropocene is a model for understanding humanity’s emergence as a planetary agent and steward with an emphasis on scale and interdependency. It confronts facile segmentations of space and history by linking the local to the global, by stretching the temporal imaginary to incorporate geological epochs and eons, and by forcing a recognition of the intertwined relationships between God, his human children, and the creation.

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Doug Himes  
untitled

# “TO RESTORE THE PHYSICAL WORLD”: THE BODY OF CHRIST, THE REDEMPTION OF THE NATURAL WORLD, AND MORMONISM’S ENVIRONMENTAL DILEMMA

Gary Ettari

In his article “Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?,” Jason M. Brown suggests that Mormon environmental scholarship and activism focuses on what he calls the “retrieval” of “earth-affirming doctrines” with the hope that the retrieval of these teachings “will foster more environmentally minded orthopraxis among the Mormon faithful.”<sup>1</sup> Brown then goes on to suggest that those retrieved teachings about the earth can be divided into two traditions, the “stewardship tradition” and the “vitalistic tradition.” The stewardship tradition as Brown defines it assumes the notion of earthly stewardship as set forth in the book of Genesis: that humans are responsible for maintaining and treating respectfully the various flora and fauna that God provided for them. According to Brown, “stewardship thus maintains an anthropocentric view of creation, with the earth and its creatures ordained for prudent and respectful human use.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the vitalistic tradition, Brown claims, “consists of those Mormon teachings that hold in

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1. Jason M. Brown, “Whither Mormon Environmental Theology?,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 70.

2. *Ibid.*, 71.

common the implication of an intrinsic moral ontology regarding our relationship to the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Essentially, this approach argues that the earth and its creatures possess an intrinsic value in and of themselves merely because of the fact that they exist.

Brown’s categorizing of the two main approaches of Mormon environmentalism encapsulates a good deal of current Mormon thought and practice regarding the environment and humanity’s role in preserving it (or not). Brown is also correct, I believe, to point out the general ambivalence that Mormons have when it comes to the environment. Indeed, in the past twenty years alone, while there has been what some might call progress on the Mormon environmental front, there has also been a retrenchment of sorts, or at least a resistance to participating in what might broadly be termed “environmental practices.” This resistance is borne out in several studies, one of which is Lori M. Hunter and Michael B. Toney’s survey of Mormon attitudes toward the environment. After surveying a number of Mormons living in Cache County, Utah about the environment and then comparing those results to a nationwide, more general survey (the 1993 General Social Survey, conducted for the National Data Program for the Social Sciences at the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago), Hunter and Toney discovered that while the Cache County residents demonstrated a stronger belief that an individual could impact the environment, they were less likely to either contribute to environmental causes or to be a member of an environmental group.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to such surveys as Hunter and Toney’s, other authors remark upon Mormonism’s resistance to significantly engage in environmental causes. Richard C. Foltz, for example, highlights the tensions between Mormon culture, especially in Utah, and environmentalism.

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3. *Ibid.*

4. Lori M. Hunter and Michael B. Toney, “Religion and Attitudes Toward the Environment: A Comparison of Mormons and the General U.S. Population,” *Social Science Journal* 42, no. 1 (2005): 25–38.



Foltz remarks upon the July 24, 1999 incident in Escalante, Utah wherein the home of two environmentalists was vandalized, noting that “local Mormon bishop Wade Barney stated that the couple had ‘asked for it’ and were ‘lucky’ not to have suffered worse.”<sup>5</sup> Foltz also notes the generally dismal voting record of Utah politicians concerning the environment, reporting that, for example, Utah’s two Republican senators at the time, Robert Bennett and Orrin Hatch, each scored a zero out of 100 in the 1997/98 League of Conservation Voters voting report.

Such statistics are perhaps hardly surprising given Utah’s generally conservative political bent and the almost instinctive mistrust that Mormon culture expresses toward anything that is perceived to be radical or progressive, whether concerning the environment or other issues. There are others, however, who claim that there is progress being made on the Mormon environmental front. Indeed, fifteen years ago, Rosemary Winters expressed the belief that Mormons may not be as anti-environment as they are perceived to be. Referring to Chris Peterson, the then-director of the Glen Canyon Institute, and Richard Ingebretsen, the founder of the Institute, Winters expresses an optimism about Mormons and the environment, noting that “Ingebretsen and Peterson’s daunting mission—restoring river ecosystems and a sense of responsibility for the earth, in the land of the Saints—might not be so far-fetched after all. ‘Mormons are environmentalists—they just don’t know it,’ says Ingebretsen. ‘They just need to be shown the way.’”<sup>6</sup> Ingebretsen’s remark illustrates his belief that Mormons have within them an innate sense of environmental stewardship and implies that they only need to become more aware of how their beliefs are aligned with current environmental concerns in order to become more active and engaged in solving contemporary environmental problems.

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5. Richard C. Foltz, “Mormon Values and the Utah Environment,” *Worldviews* 4, no. 1 (2000): 1–19.

6. Rosemary Winters, “Being Green in the Land of the Saints,” *High Country News*, Dec. 22, 2003, <https://www.hcn.org/issues/265/14450>.

Similarly to Ingebretsen, George B. Handley expresses the belief that Mormons may be uniquely situated to solve today's environmental problems, remarking that "the LDS account of the Creation teaches that we can identify spiritually valuable and ethical uses of natural resources because they are facilitated by and enhance our sense of wonder of our spiritual kinship with the whole of the earth, stimulate a desire for deeper knowledge, and respect biodiversity; only these kinds of acts (ecological restoration comes to mind) are spiritually holy and redemptive; they enact the conditions of a Fortunate Fall."<sup>7</sup> Handley suggests that LDS narratives concerning the earth, specifically its creation, can remind Mormons of their "spiritual kinship" with all of God's creations. Such a kinship, Handley maintains, can lead to, among other things, "ethical uses of natural resources." Handley's assertions about Mormonism's creation narrative and its potential impact on Mormon thought resonates with Brown's ideas regarding what he calls the "vitalistic tradition"; Handley assumes that the creation both facilitates and enhances our "sense of wonder" regarding our relationship with the rest of God's creations. Such an assumption relies less upon the Edenic mandate to be a good steward to the bounties of the earth and more upon the innate sense of connection and kinship that all creations of God ought to share. In one sense, Handley's view relies upon empathy. In his paradigm, humans would take care of the earth and its flora and fauna because of the bond they feel between themselves and other living organisms.

While the debate continues about just how committed Mormons are to environmental causes generally, perhaps even more importantly, there exists another approach to the issue of Mormons and the environment. Brown's identification of the two main strains of Mormon thought regarding the environment are, I believe, generally correct. However, it is my contention that both the stewardship and the vitalistic models offer an incomplete picture of Mormonism's view of both the earth itself and

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7. George B. Handley, "Faith and the Ethics of Climate Change," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 29.

the resources, both animate and inanimate, found thereon. I propose that there exists a third possibility, one that has the potential both to alter current Mormon thought regarding the environment and to enhance Mormonism's role in conserving it. There is in Mormon theology a strain of thought regarding the earth and its inhabitants that has less to do with how or for what purpose they were created and more to do with the role that Christ played in both their creation and redemption. This particular line of thought links Christ's atonement with nascent Mormon teachings that considered the earth to be a living being. In this article, I suggest that the most powerful inducement toward Mormonism's greater involvement in environmental issues is more likely to be based on empathy for the earth as a living being and on its value as demonstrated by Christ's atoning sacrifice rather than on stewardship models based on God's Edenic decrees concerning "dominion."

Early Mormon leaders often considered the earth as both a gift from God and as having been redeemed by Christ's atoning sacrifice. Further, they often used the earth as a trope in order to glorify God. John Taylor, for example, sees the earth as a mirror in which one can see God reflected: "I love to view the things around me; to gaze upon the sun, moon, and stars; to study the planetary system, and the world we inhabit; to behold their beauty, order, harmony, and the operations of existence around me. . . . [E]verything is beautifully harmonious, and perfectly adapted to the position it occupies in the world. Whether you look at birds, beasts, or the human system, you see something exquisitely beautiful and harmonious, and worthy of the contemplation there was a God, [even] if there was no such thing as religion in the world."<sup>8</sup> Taylor sees nature as not only harmonious and beautiful, but also "perfectly adapted." The implication is that God, as the creator and organizer of the universe, emphasized harmonious organization on both a large scale ("the planetary system") and a small scale ("the human system").

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8. John Taylor, June 12, 1853, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:151–52.

Taylor's observations in one sense are hardly unique (one thinks of the Renaissance idea of man as microcosm, for example), but they indicate an alignment in early Mormon thought between the symmetrical and harmonious mind of God and the symmetry and perfection of his creations. Taylor even goes so far as to suggest that such symmetry, beauty, and order can lead one to consider the fact that there is some overarching organizing principle even if there were "no such thing as religion in the world."

While Taylor's observations are perhaps not terribly surprising given early Mormonism's rhetoric about the earth becoming purified at Christ's Second Coming and its emphasis on millennialism,<sup>9</sup> other early Mormon leaders made even bolder claims about the earth and the role it played in the lives of the humans who populate it. Brigham Young, for instance, links human conduct with the state of the earth itself: "You are here commencing anew. The soil, the air, the water are all pure and healthy. Do not suffer them to become polluted with wickedness. Strive to preserve the elements from being contaminated by the filthy, wicked conduct and sayings of those who pervert the intelligence God has bestowed upon the human family."<sup>10</sup> Young here emphasizes the link between human conduct ("wickedness") and the state of the earth itself. According to Young, the earth itself can become "contaminated" by the "filthy, wicked" conduct of human beings, thereby destroying its purity. The implications of such a statement are legion, but one significant consequence of Young's paradigm is that the personal conduct of the earth's inhabitants causes damage to

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9. See, for example, Orson Pratt: "What a happy earth this creation will be, when this purifying process shall come, and the earth be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the great deep! . . . Travel then, from one end of the earth to another, you can find no wicked man, no drunken man, no man to blaspheme the name of the great Creator, no one to lay hold on his neighbor's goods, and steal them, no one to commit whoredoms" (Orson Pratt, Aug. 1., 1880, *Journal of Discourses*, 21:325).

10. Brigham Young, June 10, 1860, *Journal of Discourses*, 8:79.

the earth itself. Further, the reference to the “intelligence” given to the human family by God being “perverted” implies that polluting the mind is equivalent to polluting the earth.

The notion of the earth’s purity is extended and expanded by other early Mormon theologians, notably Parley P. Pratt. At one point, Pratt, when discussing Christ’s atoning sacrifice, notes, “Now the object of a Savior to bleed and die as a sacrifice and atonement for sin, was not only to redeem man in a mortal sense . . . but it was also to restore the physical world from all the effects of the fall; to purify the elements; and to present the earth in spotless purity, before the throne of God.”<sup>11</sup> For Pratt, one purpose of Christ’s bodily suffering was to redeem the earth itself. Pratt appears to believe that one of Christ’s responsibilities as Redeemer was to both render the earth pure and to present it in its newly purified state to God the Father. Additionally, the Doctrine and Covenants states, “And again, verily I say unto you, the earth abideth the law of a celestial kingdom, for it filleth the measure of its creation, and transgresseth not the law—Wherefore, it shall be sanctified; yea, notwithstanding it shall die, it shall be quickened again and shall abide the power by which it is quickened, and the righteous shall inherit it.”<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, this passage not only affirms that the earth is in need of redemption (or at least sanctification), but also suggests that the earth itself is a living organism, noting that “it shall die” and then “it shall be quickened again,” presumably at the Second Coming of Christ. This passage helps illuminate the strain of early Mormon thought that claims that Christ redeemed the earth as well as the beings on it. In the paradigm set forth in these verses, the earth itself, because it is a living organism, requires redemption in order to be sanctified. Further, the declaration in Mormon scripture that the earth itself is a living being suggests that

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11. *Ibid.*, 56.

12. Doctrine and Covenants 88:25–26.

any Mormon environmental ethic must include the recognition of that fact, thus adding a new dimension to the stewardship tradition.

The notion of the earth as a living being has a long history not only in religious texts but also in the realm of science. The so-called “Gaia hypothesis,” for instance, developed in the 1970s by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis,<sup>13</sup> suggests that it is possible, and perhaps even beneficial for the purposes of environmental conservation, to think of the earth as an entity unto itself. As Lovelock and Margulis themselves put it: “the total ensemble of living organisms which constitute the biosphere can act as a single entity to regulate chemical composition, surface pH and possibly also climate.”<sup>14</sup> The main thrust of the Gaia hypothesis is the idea that the earth itself, because it can regulate certain aspects of the biosphere, can be considered a “single entity,” i.e., a living organism comprised of the total biomass that inhabits it. While the Gaia hypothesis had and continues to have its detractors,<sup>15</sup> this is perhaps one area where science and religion may be of one accord.

In a related vein, the earth as mother is a long-established trope, even within Mormonism. In the Pearl of Great Price, for example, we are told that during a vision, Enoch hears the earth itself speak: “And he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face?”<sup>16</sup> Mormon scripture in this case employs the trope of the earth as mother but goes even further.

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13. James E. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, “Atmospheric Homeostasis By and For the Biosphere: The Gaia Hypothesis,” *Tellus* 26, nos. 1–2 (1974): 2–10.

14. *Ibid.*, 3.

15. For a pithy overview of both sides of the Gaia debate, see Michael Ruse, *The Gaia Hypothesis: Science on a Pagan Planet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

16. Moses 7:48.

The passage clearly indicates not only that the earth is a living being, but that, as a living being, the earth can experience pain and fatigue. Here, the conception of the earth as a living entity capable of feeling is used to call humans to repentance, since it is their “wickedness” that causes the earth to require sanctification. However, the other implication of this particular passage is the immediacy with which we are meant to feel the earth’s desire for sanctification. The fact that Joseph Smith chose to render this passage in the first person suggests the importance of letting the earth speak for itself, indicating that both the original author and Smith wanted to emphasize that the earth is a living, feeling being and as such deserves and requires our empathy.

The relationship between empathy and the physical nature of both human bodies and the earth itself is a fundamental aspect of Mormon belief and, ideally, practice. In the context of Mormon teachings, one consequence of the earth being conceived of as a living, feeling being means that humans are therefore obligated to care for it as if it were any other sentient being. The model for this, unsurprisingly, is Christ himself, though perhaps not quite in the way we would expect. One aspect of Christ’s atonement that Mormon scripture emphasizes is the bodily nature of Christ’s suffering. This is not, however, merely to emphasize the depths of agony that he suffered for humanity. It is instead, according to Mormonism, designed to link Christ’s body with all other bodies and his suffering with all human suffering.

In one passage in the Doctrine and Covenants, Christ recounts the suffering he underwent during the Atonement: “For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent; But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I; Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto

the children of men.”<sup>17</sup> Here, the bodily descriptions of Christ’s suffering come into even sharper relief than they do in the New Testament. That Christ describes his own suffering lends an immediacy to the passage, but even more telling are the bodily references, particularly the link between bodily sensations and emotions. The “suffering” Christ endured because of the sins of humanity caused him to “tremble because of pain” and to “bleed at every pore.” Christ therefore not only marks his body as the locus of suffering for humanity’s sins, but also emphasizes the fact that his body suffers due to the sinfulness of others. The language in this passage, I would suggest, echoes quite closely the words that the earth itself speaks in the Book of Moses. The earth groans because of her wicked children, and Christ’s body is wracked with pain due to the wickedness of humanity.

I suggest that the early Mormon call for an empathetic relationship with the earth still retains its power and its mandate, particularly given Christianity’s spotty record concerning environmental consciousness. It is worth noting that a number of recent scholars have pointed out that Christianity in particular has arguably hastened the negative impact commerce has on the environment. Sallie McFague, for example, argues that “Christianity—at least since the Protestant Reformation, and especially since the Enlightenment—has, through its individualistic view of human life, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, supported a neoclassical economic paradigm and a consumer culture that has devastated the planet.”<sup>18</sup> McFague further claims that it is for this very reason that Christianity “should support an alternative ecological model, one in which our well-being is seen as interrelated and interdependent with the well-being of all other living things and earth processes.”<sup>19</sup> And Bartholomew I of the

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17. Doctrine and Covenants 19:16–19.

18. Sallie McFague, “New House Rules: Christianity, Economics, and Planetary Living,” *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 126.

19. *Ibid.*

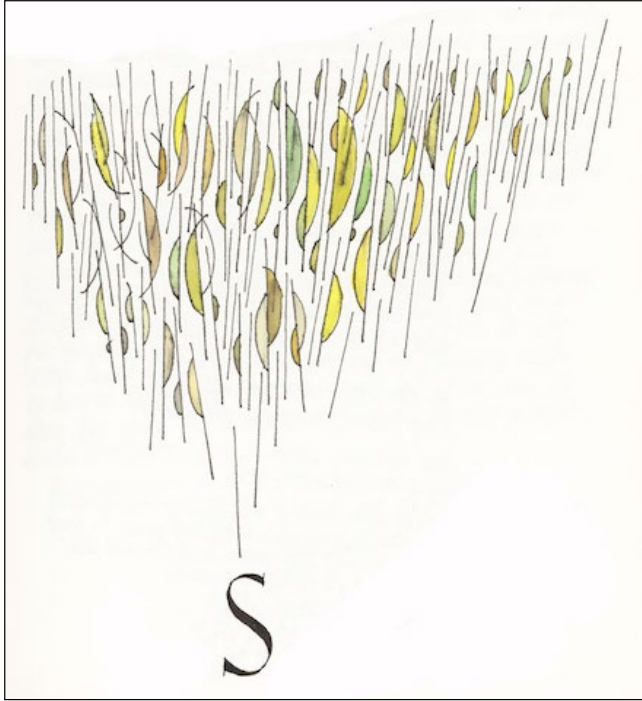


Eastern Orthodox Church wrote: "At stake is not just our ability to live in a sustainable way, but our very survival. Scientists estimate that those most hurt by global warming in years to come will be those who can least afford it. Therefore, the ecological problem of pollution is invariably connected to the social problem of poverty; and so all ecological activity is ultimately measured and properly judged by its impact upon people, and especially its effect upon the poor."<sup>20</sup> The connection Bartholomew I makes between ecological policy and activity and the economic consequences, particularly regarding the poor, links a fundamental concern of Christ's earthly ministry (caring for the poor) with environmental (and economic) ethics. It may be that things change only when we embrace the earth as a living being, when we access our compassion and empathy for it and for all of God's creations that we begin to exhibit the commitment required to save the earth and its limited resources. The redemptive, empathetic model allows, I believe, for a deeper connection to and a deeper concern for our living, breathing, and sanctified home.

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20. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *On Earth as it is in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 144.

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# READING THE WORD: SPIRIT MATERIALITY IN THE MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPES OF NAN SHEPHERD

Rachel Gilman

As a graduate student at the time of the 2016 presidential election, I felt the heightened tension of Utah's vote and the ensuing schism as political and religious beliefs played out on a national stage that foregrounded environmental issues, such as the overturning of land designations for national monuments like Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante. In an effort to defend the designations, I travelled to Washington, D.C. where I lobbied on Capitol Hill in the offices of Utah's representatives and senators such as Jason Chaffetz and Mike Lee. During this experience, I felt the cold reception of disagreement and dismissal to what I thought were both logically and emotionally appealing arguments. I naively believed that because I was a BYU student, that surely Congressman Chaffetz would see reason in my argument that a responsible land ethic was inherent in our shared belief system. If you're laughing, then you know how foolhardy that thought was. It obviously did not work.

I returned from that experience more aware of the different ways in which we practice our interpretation of religious doctrine and how two members of the same faith can both look at the same plot of land and see two very different values and uses for it. But I also returned keenly interested in how doctrinal truth about our environmental stewardship, and our ecological kinship, is communicated and perceived. This interest led me to ask: what is the Mormon sense of ecological kinship taught in

the scriptures? Can that sense of ecological kinship lead to a biocentric understanding of how we should relate to and reconcile ourselves to the natural world around us? My engagement with the Scottish author Nan Shepherd has informed an ecological and phenomenological language and rhetoric that influences how I reverence the natural world, and turned my faith, or my understanding of the scriptures, toward a biocentric view of my interrelation with an ongoing creation of the physical world and of myself. This view, I hope, can be seen as a general ethic inherent in our scripture and doctrine—one that is capable of being learned, but that is also meant to be sought after.

### I. Shepherd

Nan Shepherd's work *The Living Mountain*<sup>1</sup> labors at the intersection between organic and inorganic matter to apprehend the ways in which a mountain exists as a living entity. One of her contributions from this labor with the mountain is an upending of the Cartesian cogito—"I think therefore I am"—with her own participatory mode of perception and a cogito suited to the experience of the living mountain: "I walk therefore I am," as suggested of Shepherd's work by British nature writer Robert Macfarlane.<sup>2</sup> *The Living Mountain* is in part her resolution to a subjective problem, one rooted in a neo-romantic mode of thought that provides no relation to person or place. This mode of thought has also led to a rhetoric of disconnect with place, and can result in a rhetoric of dominion, property land ownership, and subduing the earth for man's use and pleasure without thought of an inherent value or right to life for animals, plants, and elements. Problems faced today in environmental thought remain steeped in this subject-object mode of experience, one

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1. Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain: A Celebration of the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Canongate Canons, 2011).

2. Robert Macfarlane, "I Walk Therefore I Am," *The Guardian*, Aug. 29, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/aug/30/scienceandnature.travel>.

in which the subject strives toward a connection to place through a conscious engagement with the natural world, but where tension still exists between the survival of self versus the survival of the natural world.

The scriptures teach an ecological kinship of belonging with and to an elemental world by presenting us with a biocentric way of thinking about our own spirit materiality. This approach allows us to reconcile and reverence God more completely. Shepherd offers a working model of an ecological sense of place by engaging with a mountain and representing its context of deep geologic time and its ongoing creation as a way to understand inorganic matter as the living qualities of a mountain and landscape. She perceives that this model requires a new language in order to recount the experience of being part of the mountain and articulates this need through her descriptions concerning how her senses connect her to Being. Ultimately, the model she develops leads her to engage a type of new phenomenology of materiality in the elemental world.

## II. Dust

An ecological kinship forms an integral part of LDS scripture as is most clearly seen in our creation process and purpose. If we are to achieve a biocentric view of all creation, perhaps the first step is recognizing that our composition is the same. God told Adam “For dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return” (Gen. 3:19) to remind him not just of his fallen state, but of his physical materiality being of the same stuff as the very ground he was meant to sustain himself with. In Moses, God explained (after detailing the generations of creation) how both heaven and earth—every plant, every herb, every creeping thing, the water, the air, *all* things—were spiritually created before they were naturally upon the face of the earth (Moses 3:5). His next comment foregrounds a material intermingling between the created flesh of man and the dusty debris of the earth itself: “And I, the Lord God, formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and

man became a living soul” (Moses 3:7). If we are to develop a biocentric empathy, it should derive from recognizing the order of this careful creation—an intermingling of the fragmented matter of all things in order to arrive at “the first flesh upon the earth,” which arguably appears here at the end of the creation in order to connect us back to the sustaining ecosystem of life on the earth.

Acknowledging that we are formed from the same material “stuff” as the rest of the created world in which we live, the creation narrative, rather than separating us from our environment, instead serves to situate our bodies within a familial spectrum of divinely-formed materials: both are of God. In this reading, the organic material and the inorganic material work together in kinship, the one with the other enabling us to fulfill the measure of our creation. That process motions for us to find our kinship in the material of the earth. As King Benjamin teaches, “Ye cannot say that ye are even as much as the dust of the earth; yet ye were created of the dust of the earth” (Mos. 2:25). In Doctrine & Covenants, “For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fullness of joy. . . . The elements are the tabernacle of God; yea, man is the tabernacle of God” (D&C 93:33, 35). Eternal elements are a tabernacle of God and so are we. That interrelation encourages us to liken ourselves to the elements, examining how our kinship informs the way that we can relate to them and to the natural world around us.

Shepherd observes that an elemental mystery like water in its simplicity, “does nothing, absolutely nothing, but be itself,” flowing and providing life, unheeding to economic or aesthetic concerns. She further acknowledges the selfhood of elemental consistency by saying that “elementals are not governable,”<sup>3</sup> a principle we see actively opposed in scripture when God or those acting in accordance with God’s will command the elements and they obey. But to what or whom do they

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3. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 3.

obey and not obey? Here perhaps lies not only our inequality of purpose but also our kinship of reconciliation: “O how great is the nothingness of the children of men; yea, even they are less than the dust of the earth. For behold, the dust of the earth moveth hither and thither, to the dividing asunder, at the command of our great and everlasting God” (Hel. 12:7–8). The dust obeys; the elements move at the power of His voice. And yet do we obey? Not all the time. And even we are admonished to be like the dust: “humble yourselves even to the dust, and worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, in spirit and truth” (Alma 34:38). Reading scripture attuned to dust foregrounds a certain ecological perspective centered on our material kinship with the world. When we adopt the perspective of the least of God’s creations—a turn to a biocentric empathy with the material around us—then we are able to be more worthy servants.

How can we cultivate a biocentric empathy with the elemental earth? Shepherd’s experience on the mountain, a place familiar to her, describes in words an interrelation between body, consciousness, and elements apprehended through the senses. As she concludes *The Living Mountain* she writes that among the pure elementals on the mountain there “then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body may be said to think. Each sense heightened to its most exquisite awareness, is in itself total experience.”<sup>4</sup> “Humbling ourselves to the dust” may require us to be in the dust, or as Shepherd is describing, living amongst elements, interacting with the features of a landscape that heighten our bodily awareness to an exquisite recognition of our own self intermingled with that matter around us. She captures this in saying each time I go to the mountain—the eye sees what it didn’t see before, or sees in a new way what it had already seen. So the ear, the other senses. It is an experience that grows; undistinguished days add their part, and now and then,

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4. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 82.

unpredictable and unforgettable, come the hours when heaven and earth fall away and one sees a new creation. The many details—a stroke here, a stroke there—come for a moment into perfect focus, and one can read at last the word that has been from the beginning.<sup>5</sup> Our essential matter enables us to worship and reverence our Creator because we can see with our eyes, with our bodies, that the creation is ongoing. Our consciousness is a product of our physical senses apprehending the natural world around us, attuning the body to a heightened awareness of our being.

### III. Sight

Our ecological kinship connects us with the elemental world, but our sensory experience and what it communicates to our consciousness provides the means of apprehending the truth of that experience. Shepherd's rhetoric of the senses describes how the eye grounds vision in bodily experience. She writes, "The eye brings infinity to my vision,"<sup>6</sup> and further questions, "How can I number the worlds to which the eye gives me entry?—the world of light, of colour, of shape, of shadow."<sup>7</sup> For Shepherd, the body is paramount, because it is through the senses that knowledge of existence is apprehended. Of that power in sight, she states:

It is, as with all creation, matter impregnated with mind: but the resultant issue is a living spirit, a glow in the consciousness, that perishes when the glow is dead. It is something snatched from non-being, that shadow which creeps in on us continuously and can be held off by continuous creative act. So, simply to look on anything, such as a mountain, with the love that penetrates to its essence, is to widen the domain of being in the vastness of non-being. Man has no other reason for his existence.<sup>8</sup>

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5. Ibid.

6. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 76.

7. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 79.

8. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 79–80.



Shepherd's sensory engagement of looking on the mountain in this case, is the "continuous creative act" that she claims holds off *non-being*, the very reason for existence. Perhaps another way of reading this passage is found in looking to Matthew: "The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light" (6:22). That "living spirit" or "glow in the consciousness" is an intermingling consciousness with the essential elements to comprehend joint creation. This intermingling is our ecological kinship, meant to both ground us and remind us of our materiality. Scripture echoes this understanding in Doctrine and Covenants, "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes. We cannot see it, but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter" (131:7–8).

Enoch and Moses were given "purer eyes" when they witnessed all of God's creations. For us to see matter in the way that they saw it truly would lead to a biocentric empathy with the natural world and lead to an ecological kinship with creation that recognizes how we are integrally the same. As Moses describes, "But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural eyes, but my spiritual eyes" (1:11). What caused the change? "And behold the glory of the Lord was upon Moses" (1:31). The "Glory" of God being intelligence or His Work—the immortality and eternal life of man—permits this vision to value all things the same, otherwise Moses might not have concluded, "I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed" (Moses 1:10). Valuing all of creation on an equal field is key to having empathy, because it is knowing that the matter itself has also chosen. The scriptures speak of matter both organic and inorganic as agentic. After the creation, "The Gods watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed" (Abr. 4:18). Here our material equality is echoed in that the collective we, both human and non-human agents, are all created by God from the same matter, and commanded by Him with the power and will to choose for ourselves.

#### IV. Sound

The suggestion that we, as material of the earth, are all capable of being commanded further denotes our ecological kinship, and indicates a specific understanding regarding how our finer matter *moves* and interacts in our shared space on this earth.

Because in this reading elementals actively hearken to God's voice, having chosen in the beginning to obey, I posit that there is an exchange between sound and creation. Consider the opening words to the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (1:1, 3). In the beginning, Christ was there to command, and he effected this command by *speaking*. The scriptures depict God as a being that issues forth sound: "And I, God, said: Let there be light, and there was light. . . . And I, God, called the light Day; and the darkness, I called Night; and this I did by the word of my power, and it was done as I spake" (Moses 2:3, 5). With the word "let," God's voice invites the elementals to organize and form a world, which is done "by the word of my power" (Moses 1:32). Word and voice are thus identified as catalysts for creation; they remain empowered to draw obedience from the material world:

Yea, behold at his voice do the hills and the mountain tremble and quake. And by the power of his voice they are broken up, and become smooth, yea, even like unto a valley. Yea, by the power of his voice doth the whole earth shake; . . . Yea, and if he say unto the earth—Move—it is moved. (Hel. 12:9–11, 13)

While we can listen and understand and reason God's voice, we still choose whether or not to hear it and understand it. But this choice also provides an invitation to be more participatory in the ongoing creation by interacting with language in a way that other creations do not because their selfhood is consistent with the measure of their creation. They have no need to create the tension we do when we resist commands,

but when there is obedience, our matter is reconciled with the dust to become a more worthy servant.<sup>9</sup>

Shepherd's physical contact with the elementals on the mountain lead her to conclude that the mountain and its landscape are *living*, and afford her 'grace' to "know Being" which is "part of the technique by which the god is sought."<sup>10</sup> She sees and experiences the same matter of life in the mountain which her senses key her to recognize more fully in and through her body. In this mysterious, intermingling realm of organic and inorganic matter, with her senses tuned to creation at work, she learns to quiet herself to listen to that ongoing work of the elementals. Shepherd notes that silence is seldom on the mountain, because "always something moves."<sup>11</sup> Sound can be understood as evidence of that movement and of ongoing creation. A physical presence, or immanence achieved by walking amongst an elemental landscape reveals a creator and creation that continues as we see it, immerse ourselves in it, and hearken to it. This leads to seeing our ecological kinship as an ongoing reconciliation of creation meant to lead to exaltation.

## V. Conclusion

In Alma, the prophet teaches that "all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" (30:44). Order and motion of creation are evidence of a Creator. God himself states explicitly that "all

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9. This same point is made in *Lectures on Faith*: "We understand that when a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force: it is by words instead of exerting his physical powers, with which every being works when he works by faith" (Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, [63], The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/71>).

10. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 84.

11. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 75.

things [are] created and made to bear record of me . . . things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath” (Moses 6:63). The earth can be understood in terms of a material record that both moves and responds to its Creator. The scriptures are clear in stating the life of matter both organic and inorganic is interconnected, and our experience with it as bodies are a “manifestation of its total life” as Shepherd writes it.<sup>12</sup> “Being” serves as a byword for creation, and if our purpose in the physical body is to know God, we must know his creations—both mountain and self. This ecological kinship can, as a general ethic, be learned by seeking those “best books” along with the doctrine of the scriptures to broaden the language of belief that can enhance faith. It is, as Adam Miller suggests, translating anew the scriptures into “[our] native tongue, inflected by [our] native concerns, written in [our] native flesh.”<sup>13</sup> The urgency of that task with our ecological crises seems pressing, and as a millennial, an inheritor of these crises with a desire to solve, mitigate, and improve, this seems an essential work of enacting my faith.

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12. Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 83.

13. Adam S. Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon*, second ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 27.

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

Michael Haycock

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

— *Moses 1:33–35*

## Things as They Really Are

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

## Animal Spirits, Bodies, Eternities

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### *Personal Interlude: 2015–2019*

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

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4. Doctrine and Covenants 77:3.

5. 2 Nephi 2:25.

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

7. See Numbers 22.





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





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

## Care for Animal Bodies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Evolution and Diversity of Bodies

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

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

12. Doctrine and Covenants 59:20.

13. Doctrine and Covenants 121:39.

14. Mosiah 2:17.

15. Doctrine and Covenants 110:15.

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

### High-Fidelity Models

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

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

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

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



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

### *Personal Interlude: 2005–2007*

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

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

### Evolved Humans in Zion

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

19. Mosiah 3:19.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

### *Personal Interlude: 2007–2009*

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

## Belonging in Zion

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

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

24. Personal journal entry, June 30, 2009.

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

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

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

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

### *Personal Postlude: 2013*

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

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27. Dan Zak, “‘Everything Is Not Going to Be Okay’: How to Live with Constant Reminders That the Earth Is in Trouble,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 24, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/everything-is-not-going-to-be-okay-how-to-live-with-constant-reminders-that-the-earth-is-in-trouble/2019/01/24/9dd9d6e6-1e53-11e9-8b59-0a28f2191131\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/everything-is-not-going-to-be-okay-how-to-live-with-constant-reminders-that-the-earth-is-in-trouble/2019/01/24/9dd9d6e6-1e53-11e9-8b59-0a28f2191131_story.html).

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



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



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

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

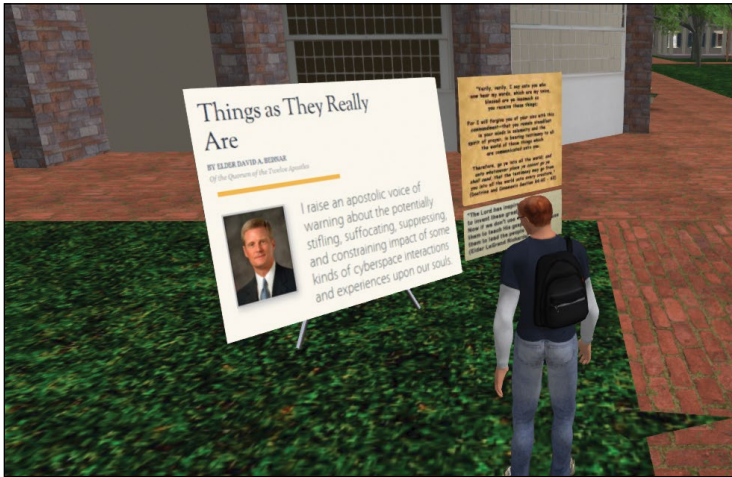


Figure 7. Screen shot from Second Life courtesy of Michael Haycock



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

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

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# BODIES MATERIAL AND BODIES TEXTUAL: CONFLATION OF WOMAN AND ANIMAL IN THE WILDERNESS

Sarah Moore

As a woman myself, I often wonder about the daughters of Ishmael. What did they think when their father suddenly decided to leave Jerusalem and follow Lehi and his sons into the wilderness? How did they decide who would marry Nephi, Laman, and Lamuel? What was it like giving birth in the wilderness without the life-saving expertise of the midwives in Jerusalem? Did Sariah know enough to guide them through this harrowing experience? I wonder these things because we do not know them—the Book of Mormon scriptures give precious little information about the women who traveled with Nephi and his brothers. We do know, however, that the wife of Nephi and his children pleaded with Laman and Lamuel to loosen his bonds when they were crossing the storm-tossed ocean. We know that they grieved the loss of their father, Ishmael. And we know that even though they had nothing but raw meat to eat in the wilderness, they gave “plenty of suck for their children” (1 Ne. 17:2).

Today I want to sit with that small, scriptural afterthought—these women, bearing children and giving suck in the wilderness—and ask what it means to have a woman’s body in the wilderness. In doing so, I hope to connect these women’s bodies with both animal bodies and textual bodies. The act of leaving Jerusalem—leaving the culture, the city, the history—is more than just a journey to the new land; it is an exercise in rethinking established social and ontological hierarchies. In

examining the connections between animal, woman, and text, I demonstrate how Nephi's choice to return to Jerusalem for the brass plates and the daughters of Ishmael reveals an interdependency between all things.

As a medievalist, I spend hours reading and studying manuscripts from the Middle Ages. Produced centuries prior to print culture, these manuscripts are materially central to our understanding of the received text today. Consider, for example, *Beowulf*, a poem regularly assigned in the classroom. There is only one extant copy of this text, the Nowell Codex from the Cotton library, which was badly damaged in the infamous 1731 fire. While most of the manuscript is in decent condition, parts of it sustained extensive fire and water damage, and some of the final pages are in fragments. When reading this poem, you must not only consider the translator's interpretive choices—which can vary wildly at certain points—but also the condition of the manuscript and what words are missing or filled in. Parchment, of course, is made from animal skins, most commonly sheep. If you look closely at the *Beowulf* manuscript, you can sometimes see veins, hair follicles, or places where the skin was overstretched and a hole appeared. There is an incredible intimacy between the medieval manuscript and the medieval text—every poem, every word we have today exists because the parchment of a manuscript managed to persist.

So too with the Book of Mormon. The first thing Nephi is sent back to Jerusalem for is the brass plates (the second is the women, but more on that below). Nephi and his father recognize that in order for their culture and religion to continue, they not only need to remember the words in memory, they need the material presence of the words. Nephi considered the brass plates to be so important, in fact, that he ultimately justified killing Laban to get them. Like the medieval manuscripts, the brass plates were a physical manifestation of the scriptural text, and their material presence is absolutely crucial to the continuation of religious understanding for the descendants of Lehi and Sariah. In both the medieval manuscript and the brass plates we can see how a material

object acts upon, or at least interacts with, us. Jane Bennett calls this *thing-power*, or “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>1</sup> Bennett here explores the necessity of acknowledging the importance of what we consider “things,” and how their presence (or absence) can dramatically affect our lives. She calls, as many ecologically-minded scholars do, for a recognition of the connections not only between human and animal, but between living and non-living. Thus, far from being mere inanimate objects, the brass plates interact with, and upon, Nephi and his descendants.

After securing the brass plates, Nephi returns once again to Jerusalem to convince Ishmael and his daughters to join them in their exodus. Lehi quickly realizes that it would do little good to have a record of the Lord’s dealings with their people if there were no people to share such dealings with (1 Ne. 7:1). Just as Nephi needs the brass plates to carry stories and create a culture in the new land, he needs women’s bodies to literally carry new life and create a people in the new land. Textual bodies and women’s bodies: both are necessary for the continuation of the people of Lehi. Much can be and has been said about the deep classical and exegetical anxieties surrounding the corporality of women’s bodies, and, although I do not have the space to explore such writings here, it is worth noting that such theories frequently situate the woman’s body as a passive receptacle of male will. At first glance, this certainly seems to be what is happening here: Lehi decides that his sons need wives, Nephi convinces Ishmael to join them, and everyone makes a grand exodus to the wilderness. However, I would argue that even if their thoughts and experiences were not recorded, the women of Ishmael were active participants in the management of their bodies. This is most vividly seen when they, living off raw meat in the wilderness, give plenty of suck for their children and become “strong . . . like unto the men” (1 Ne. 17:2). While this passage is troubling in that it measures the

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1. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.



women's strength in relation to male strength, it does reveal the capacity of women's bodies to bear an exodus, childbirth, malnutrition, and great loss. It reveals how these women's bodies, removed from Jerusalem and placed in the wilderness, gain a kind of power in becoming raw like the meat they consume.

I am always arrested by Nephi's language in this passage in which he describes the strength of the women and the raw meat. It is, perhaps, especially striking given the narrative flow that precedes it: having returned with Ishmael and his daughters, Lehi, and subsequently Nephi, immediately receive the vision of the tree of life, followed by several prophecies concerning the growth of the church in the new land. All of these visions speak to futurity and abundant fertility—the tree of life almost explicitly so with its glorious fruit, and the prophecies more indirectly as they sweep across the generations of people that will inhabit these lands. Nephi's immediate shift, then, to the welfare of his wife and the other women is understandable. His language, however, most clearly illuminates the linking between spirituality and physicality. He praises the women for their strength and their ability to “bear children in the wilderness” and give suck (1 Ne. 17:1–2). He admires them for consuming raw meat and, perhaps, for becoming raw themselves in the wilderness. In these two verses we see Nephi switch from the glories of the tree of life to the glories of the woman's body in its most animal of all states: childbearing.

Of course, when I think of woman-as-animal, I cannot help but be reminded of the medieval parchment made from animal skins. As I mentioned above, these manuscripts create a material connection between animal and text that makes real our dependence on *bodies* for everything, including, in this case, textual transmission. There is something incredibly visceral about studying a manuscript and reading not only the written text of the scribe's hand, but the animal text of veins, hair follicles, and skin discolorations. The daughters of Ishmael do similar textual work with their bodies in the wilderness as do the



animals of the medieval text. Their bodies bear the marks of their wilderness travels: they become strong, they live off raw meat, and they bear children. Childbearing marks a woman's body in very real ways—pelvic bones shift their positioning, the abdominal skin stretches, often leaving permanent marks, and scars are left from the birthing process. Not only do the women bear children, but they bear the writing of the childbearing process on their bodies. The bodies of the daughters of Ishmael have literally become a second text, a second witness to their travels in the wilderness. Perhaps not as long-lasting as brass plates, or parchment even, but no less significant.

In her groundbreaking reading of Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* Carolyn Dinshaw writes that "the Wife maintains that the literal text—her body—can speak for itself."<sup>2</sup> In this passage, Dinshaw explores how the Wife resists those who would try to gloss her—to contain her—by unapologetically insisting on the physical authority of her own body. I would like to extend this reading to the daughters of Ishmael, whose textual, womanly bodies have their own authority and voice in the wilderness. Nephi does not write that they became weak from their travails, but rather that despite—or perhaps because of—their added physical burdens in the wilderness, they became strong "like unto the men."

This reading, of course, runs the risk of implying that the women's strength comes from childbearing alone. While I do think that bearing children can be very empowering, my focus here is the ability of the women's bodies, like the brass plates, to act as a type of text in the wilderness. Nephi equates childbearing with strength because it is the difference that he lacks; fortunately, we have several other witnesses in the Book of Mormon where a woman's strength comes from her actions. What this moment does reveal is the interconnectedness of all things.

Nephi's departures and returns to Jerusalem reveal an interdependency between bodies that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Perhaps

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2. Carolyn Dinshaw, "'Glose/bele chose': The Wife of Bath and Her Glossators," in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 115.

if they had planned better and taken the time to gather their brass plates and (potential) wives before they left, we would not have these stories of returning, but they didn't, and in the first few chapters of the Book of Mormon we repeatedly trace the lines of interconnection between man, text, and woman. These lines reveal what Timothy Morton would call the enmeshment of all living (and nonliving) things: "All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings."<sup>3</sup> Morton explores here how all things are connected—how, for example, what we call the environment interacts with animals and us as humans. Or, to be more specific, how the exodus of Lehi was a gathering of animals, women, brass plates, children, men, weapons, cloths, tents, and eventually ships and "a round ball of curious workmanship" (1 Ne. 16:10). Thinking in the mesh requires thinking big and small; it requires recognizing the value of the cells in your body, the bricks in a building, and a hive of honeybees. It requires seeing the paths between interstate highways, the roots that connect the redwood groves, and the lines of ants. Thinking in the mesh disorients in that it removes hierarchies—not only cultural, but physical as well. When we think this way, we no longer see Lehi or even Nephi as the founder of a religious community in a new land, but rather as a member of an interconnected ecosystem moving across the land. We recognize, as Nephi did, that he was not going to succeed without the brass plates and women, to say nothing of the many other unnamed supplies that he took with him into the wilderness.

At the start of this paper, I wondered what it must have been like for the daughters of Ishmael in the wilderness. Here at the end, I wonder too what it must have been like for the entire company on their exodus, and not only them but also the abandoned city of Jerusalem and the anticipated new land. In tracing the connections between Nephi, the brass plates, and the daughters of Ishmael, I hope to have made apparent

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3. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 29.

the interdependency between all things—human, animal, and material. This is especially urgent given the ecological crisis we find ourselves in. Perhaps by thinking in the mesh we can trouble the hierarchies that have situated human needs over planetary needs. Perhaps in becoming aware of the connections between male, female, animal, and textual bodies we can rethink which voices we prioritize in our political and social discourse. And perhaps we can, like the daughters of Ishmael, become raw in the wilderness and find a way to give plenty to our children.

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Doug Himes  
untitled

# OUT OF THE GARDEN: THE NATURE OF REVELATION IN ROMANTICISM, NATURALISM, AND MODERNISM

Jonathon Penny

One of the defining preoccupations of the Romanticists—and of the Romantic poets in particular—is the idea that God reveals himself to the human most palpably in a natural setting: to experience the natural world in its wildness is to experience God in his wildness.

Naturalism is in some ways a radical, rationalist extension of Romanticism: natural space is sacred space, but not, as for the Romantics, because it brings the human subject into contact with the divine; rather, in nature the subject confronts itself, faces the limitations, as Jack London most often has it, of its own imagination, or of its intelligence, ability, preparation, or talent. Without guile, without meanness, and without—so far as we know—awareness, nature strips us of pretense.

By my reckoning, then, the naturalists were both stoic Romantics for whom nature—not necessarily bereft of the voluptuousness the Romantics worshipped—was an austere and insensible goddess and elemental modernists, not ready to despair. Naturalism thus becomes an essential link between the Romantics and the modernists, who would find in the urban, the hyper-industrial, the hyper-material, and the war-torn the wildness and austerity their predecessors encountered on the prairies, in the woods, on the seas, and above the tree line.

Already pronounced in the reverential apocalyptic of Romanticism is a growing disappointment in the institutions that had so long safeguarded and, more often than not, dictated the terms of humankind's

fragile relationship with God-as-image. I suppose this follows rationally from the long chain of disruptions that started with the Renaissance and carried on through the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the political and social tumults of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Latter-day Saint tradition seems to be one of those disruptions, or at least a consequence of them: early Mormonism is arguably the paternal twin of transcendentalism, the love child of Puritan and American exceptionalisms.

Besides Ralph Waldo Emerson and Joseph Smith, other figures were pushing back against the limits of traditional Christianity, claiming for themselves a right to, if not an actual experience of, direct, revelatory perception and speech. William Blake stands out, of course. Coleridge's forays into mythic spaces are well known.

But there are further variations. Keats was less mystically inclined, much more taken with a classical aesthetic, and his equation of truth with beauty, and beauty with truth, and his assertion that this equation was all we know and need to know tells us that his apocalyptic was already one of the world to itself. Shelley's gothic romance revealed a seamy horror on the underside of the science that was otherwise bringing the world into the light, and it did so without an overreliance on religious cosmology: Frankenstein's monster was both more than a creature of darkness and less than a created human, but perhaps only because the terms of his being in the world were set by the assumption that he wasn't, and couldn't be, wholly human or, in Mormon theological terms, a soul.

And even Wordsworth leaves out the traditional theology that was so important in the metaphysical poets two hundred years before him, or that would be again a century on, even if sometimes ironically. To be fair, much of Western literature had already only a passing, arguably cultural, connection with traditional belief: it was part of the setting, a fact of life, but not a major preoccupation in the novel or in dramatic works. Indeed, it would become much more a preoccupation in modernism than it had been for quite some time. And maybe that's wrong;

maybe that's a function of canon formation, and of the choices we've made in selecting and preserving texts that feel more comfortably secular. But my point here is that even Wordsworth, who steeps in inspiration, seems less concerned with a Christological experience in nature than a more intimately and abstractly religious one: the God he encounters in meadows and at lakesides, or before his hearth in a snug cottage, is *the idea* of God as creative force, as artist, and of natural beauty as truth—pagan, almost; and poetry its prophet—or prophecy its poetics.

Even Wordsworth, that is, seems less interested in communication than in communion, and less communion with a creative deity than with the creative impulse in himself.

If this is the case, then my thesis is more precise than it ought to be: maybe naturalism is only marginally distinct from Romanticism and modernism, less a particular step or stage and more a “natural” extension of the hippified indifference that had already characterized letters for a long time.

That sloppiness in the margins extends forward, too. Chris Beyers's entry in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, a chapter titled “Naturalism and Poetry,” offers the somewhat surprising observation that while twentieth-century poetry, at least in its intellectual and aesthetic aspirations, nearly opposes naturalist poetry, there is, in fact, a deeply naturalist current in modern poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Beyers interests himself specifically in the poetry of Crane, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Theodore Dreiser, Robinson Jeffers, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Sharon Olds. Other than Crane, that's a surprising list because it includes some figures who come quite late in the twentieth century: more properly classified as postmodernist in some cases, but even when temperamentally and aesthetically modernist,

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1. Chris Beyers, “Naturalism and Poetry,” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, edited by Keith Newlin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 445–62.

far removed from the naturalist fictionists that typically spring to mind when we think of a moment, a movement, or a disposition.

Which leads me to this further revision: naturalism seems to articulate an assumption about the cosmos—openly and without apology—that previous generations of writers may have decently and politely skirted, even if they themselves operated on that same assumption. Naturalism makes its subject the idea of godlessness matter-of-factly, without petulance, and in some ways celebrating the austere fragility of the human condition, the delicateness of being in a world insensible or even inimical to our existence. And the next generation or two of writers would shift the locus of that particular revelation sharply back to the philosophical, sociological, and political grounds of being in society: confronting what it means that we live godlessly, even when we claim belief in God.

In the time that remains, I'm going to take you on a whirlwind tour of poems from British Romanticism (1780s to 1830s) through to late modernism (1960s) that I believe represent at once the change and continuity I've been speaking about. I work with poetry because it's efficient, and all of the poems I've chosen here are heavily anthologized: you'll recognize them, and that serves both your interest in the material and my interest in canon formation as at least one of the forces that characterizes our literary inheritances, so we should both be happy.

Though Blake's first run of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789) is far less radical in its theology than his Swedenborgian *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which he composed in the early 1790s and published in the next decade, it points to perhaps the most overtly Christian sensibility in Romantic poetry. Take "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" as examples:

Little Lamb who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life & bid thee feed  
By the stream & o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,



Softest clothing wooly bright;  
 Gave thee such a tender voice,  
 Making all the vales rejoice!  
     Little Lamb, who made thee?  
     Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee!  
 He is called by thy name,  
 For he calls himself a Lamb:  
 He is meek & he is mild,  
 He became a little child:  
 I a child & thou a lamb,  
 We are called by his name.  
     Little Lamb God bless thee.  
     Little Lamb God bless thee.<sup>2</sup>

And

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
 In the forests of the night;  
 What immortal hand or eye,  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand, dare seize the fire?<sup>3</sup> (lines 1–8)

“The Lamb” is clearly and openly Christological and catechistic. It is traditional in its purpose and in its theology. Jesus is all over it. Then again, it’s a song of innocence. But “The Tyger”—as a song of experience—leaves the identity of the Creator, and of the Creator’s motive

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2. William Blake, “The Lamb,” in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, edited by David Price (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1901), 6. Originally published 1789.

3. William Blake, “The Tyger,” in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, edited by David Price (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1901), 51. Originally published 1794.

and character, in question. Not “who,” but “*what* immortal hand or eye” (line 3, my emphasis). And the poem is structured to leave us without closure or rest: there are only six stanzas, not seven. Further, even when Blake obliquely acknowledges the creator in the fifth stanza, he raises significant questions about the nature of a creative force capable of making something at once so beautiful and so terrifying: as the stars wept, Blake wonders, “did *he* smile, his work to see? / Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (lines 19–20). And if he did, then what does this say about him?

But there aren’t many Romantic poems that raise openly theological questions. Not really. Wordsworth ducks them in “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” which is presented in nearly every introduction to Romanticism that I’ve ever read as *the* movement-making, or at least consolidating, text of Romanticism—its manifesto or mission statement—and this, so far as I can see, is as close as he comes:

... with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things. (lines 47–49)

... For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.—And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods

And mountains; and of all that we behold  
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
 Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,  
 And what perceive; . . .<sup>4</sup> (lines 88–107)

Of course, this poem is at least Wordsworth's best articulation of his own theory of *poiesis*, among other things. But it is also the clearest articulation of the impulse we recognize as Romantic: the worship of God in the cathedral of nature, and better, the experience of a divine presence and intention in its wildness. But it is telling that in this sturdiest and staidest of Romantic poets, and in a poem of more than 160 lines, whatever there is of God is relegated to ten of those lines at best: "And I have felt . . ."—but then whatever testimony is being offered there, however intelligent the design Wordsworth worships, he immediately observes that the human eye and ear only "half perceive" and "half create" the world. There are two truths, in other words, about the natural beauty Wordsworth reveres: that God is wild, unruly, and knowable only in wildness *and* that we half create that world in our imaginations, and thus we half create God himself.

In two of his sonnets, Wordsworth comes at this doctrine more directly, expressing his skepticism at traditional modes of believing, or organizing the world around an image of God as clerk or accountant. In "The World is Too Much With Us," he laments our performed and fell devotion, our tendency to worship God with inside voices and not joyously, openly, confessionally; that we have given over the wildness and unpredictability of a natural god for an institutional one of rigid, cold practicality; that we have traded *aesthesis* for *legis*; have traded Genesis for Leviticus:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—  
 Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
 We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

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4. William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," in *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (London: Longman, 1798), 201ff.

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
 The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
 And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
 For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
 It moves us not. (lines 1–9)

And then this rather startling admission:

Great God! I'd rather be  
 A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.<sup>5</sup> (lines 9–14)

And in “Surprised by Joy,” just eight years later, he bewrays a very human doubt even in the structure of the metaphysical world we insist gives this one meaning.

Surprised by joy—impatient as the Wind  
 I turned to share the transport—Oh! with whom  
 But Thee, long buried in the silent Tomb,  
 That spot which no vicissitude can find?<sup>6</sup> (lines 1–4)

What that fourth line means I am not entirely sure, but it expresses what all true griefs do: the finality and absoluteness of the loss, the darkness of the unknown, and the unknowable silence and insensibility of death, whatever consolations we may seek for ourselves or others, whatever certainties of something more we claim. And this, too, is natural. My point here is that Wordsworth's Christianity—his faith in general—takes a backseat to something more profound in his experience of nature and his experience of his experience of nature, and that profundity merely *implies* God's participation, merely *suggests* some deeper experience of a

5. William Wordsworth, “The World is Too Much With Us,” in *Poems*, Vol. II (London: Longman, 1815), 183.

6. William Wordsworth, “Surprised by Joy,” in *Poems*, Vol. II (London: Longman, 1815), 191.

creative divinity, because Wordsworth wants to re-divert our gaze from the heavens to the earth's own surface, to the swell of sea and hill, the pulse of tide and wash of wind, to water and flower and leaf and soil: to see this place as not merely paradise but as the very heaven, green to its door, that we are told to seek elsewhere.

Even Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," a poem that unmistakably uses the backdrop of a wedding feast and, on my reading, laments the human complicity in the slaying of the Son of God, seems to want to say more about that complicity, hypocrisy, and darkness than it does the god who is, in the person of the albatross, sent to augur and redeem through suffering. At the heart of Romanticism, in other words, is the human heart, and maybe the encounter of the divine in nature, for good or ill, is therefore less about understanding the divine than seeing ourselves as at once blessed and cursed by the encounter, at once small and yet also grand in the seascapes and landscapes in which we wander; and that wandering, for good or ill, is worship.

We wander, of course, most in our own minds. Wordsworth knew that—that he half created God in his own thinking: put God's intention into scrub and pasture, meadow and fire smoke—and Elizabeth Barrett Browning knew it as well. These lines from *Aurora Leigh* suggest that maybe reverence is the problem, maybe awe and a too-quick genuflection or a reflexive sacred-making causes us to miss the truth of nature's wildness and our own: dims both our sight and our sense of possibility, dazzles us into submission to an idea of our smallness.

In those days, though, I never analysed  
 Myself even. All analysis comes late.  
 You catch a sight of Nature, earliest,  
 In full front sun-face, and your eyelids wink  
 And drop before the wonder of 't; you miss  
 The form, through seeing the light. I lived, those days,  
 And wrote because I lived—unlicensed else:  
 My heart beat in my brain. Life's violent flood  
 Abolished bounds,—and, which my neighbour's field,

Which mine, what mattered? It is so in youth.  
 We play at leap-frog over the god Term;  
 The love within us and the love without  
 Are mixed, confounded; if we are loved or love,  
 We scarce distinguish. So, with other power.  
 Being acted on and acting seem the same:  
 In that first onrush of life's chariot-wheels,  
 We know not if the forests move or we.  
 And so, like most young poets, in a flush  
 Of individual life, I poured myself  
 Along the veins of others, and achieved  
 Mere lifeless imitations of life verse,  
 And made the living answer for the dead,  
 Profaning nature. 'Touch not, do not taste,  
 Nor handle,'—we're too legal, who write young:  
 We beat the phorminx till we hurt our thumbs,  
 As if still ignorant of counterpoint;  
 We call the Muse . . . 'O Muse, benignant Muse!'  
 As if we had seen her purple-braided head. (lines 1–28)

As if we had seen! And then we miss the true, mundane delights, joys,  
 and fragile wonders of the world: the trees for the forest. She continues:

With the eyes in it start between the boughs  
 As often as a stag's. What make-believe,  
 With so much earnest! what effete results,  
 From virile efforts! what cold wire-drawn odes  
 From such white heats!—bucolics, where the cows  
 Would scare the writer if they splashed the mud  
 In lashing off the flies,—didactics, driven  
 Against the heels of what the master said;  
 And counterfeiting epics, shrill with trumps  
 A babe might blow between two straining cheeks  
 Of bubbled rose, to make his mother laugh;  
 And elegiac griefs, and songs of love,  
 Like cast-off nosebags picked up on the road,  
 The worse for being warm: all these things, writ  
 On happy mornings, with a morning heart,

That leaps for love, is active for resolve,  
Weak for art only. (lines 29–45)

That last bit feels like Emerson to me: a celebration of the active human, the poet who also digs and runs and climbs and weaves and chops and cooks and invents and investigates. We create only when we allow ourselves to be subsumed, immersed, claimed *in* a world creative, a world generative:

Or perhaps, again,  
In order to discover the Muse-Sphinx,  
The melancholy desert must sweep round,  
Behind you, as before.<sup>7</sup> (lines 67–70)

And later, as Aurora Leigh grows into her own, comes to understand herself, the revelation is of her organic connection and belonging to all that swirling brightness around her:

My soul was singing at a work apart  
Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm  
As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight,  
In vortices of glory and blue air. (lines 103–06)

Baptismal, that. And the deal seems to be that we ought to worry more about being comprehended and less about comprehending: that the revelation in nature isn't its creative hand, not directly, but of our belonging.

For Matthew Arnold, that belonging is bitter: that our political and violent natures half create a world not bent to us at all, not made for us, but whose darker instincts we have magnified and perfected. In "Dover Beach," the "Sea of Faith," once full (but when, he doesn't say) "withdraw[s]," "retreat[s]," "roar[s]" its distant way, and reveals "the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world" (lines 21–28). For

... the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,

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7. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, Book I (1857).

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;<sup>8</sup> (lines 30–34)

This is a general revelation. And Arnold—being a bit of a Dickie Downer on his honeymoon, as the story goes—sees the only refuge from all of that in human love.

I'd like to talk about Whitman here, and Dickinson: the first finding life biological or physiological itself miraculous, electric, and beautiful; the second, in her relief or in pursuit of relief from the stark, joyless, Godward doctrines of her youth, seeing beauty even in decay and death. I'd like to leap forward to Plath or Adrienne Rich and talk about naturalism as sociology, something akin to what Bruce Young gestured at last night in discussing the social and spiritual ecologies in *Heart of Africa*: that the most fragile ecology of all is that between persons, in the connections that bind and fray, that we deliberately and necessarily nourish or sever, or that are used to encircle or ensnare us in solace or in slavery: that lift or drag us. But my time is running short, and that's perhaps another pair of sleeves, as the Italians say. So let me, briefly, skip to Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, and Philip Larkin.

Hopkins we know best through his celebratory verse: his accounts of a nature and a language gushing with glory and vortices of every color, and in which the creative God is writ both great and small. This is evident in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”—

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;  
Keeps grace: *thát* keeps all his goings graces;

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8. Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach,” in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold, 1840–1867* (London: Oxford University Press, 1909), retrieved from <https://www.bartleby.com/br/254.html>.



Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
 Christ — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.<sup>9</sup> (lines 5–14)

—and in “The Windhover”:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
 dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
 Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
 High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
 In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
 As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
 Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
 Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!<sup>10</sup> (lines 1–8)

But in his terrible sonnets, even the celebrant not merely of intelligent but glorious design, who sees or tries to see the hand of God even in the tragedy he writes about in “The Wreck of the Deutschland” in terms familiar to us and our temple soteriology, waivers and is forced to confront the darkness of that world: its coldness and emptiness; its shrug of the shoulder. And the terms ring familiar, too, as Joseph-in-jail. In “No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,” his *de profundis*, he cries out

Comforter, where, where is your comforting?  
 Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?  
 My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief  
 Woe, wórl-d-sorrow; on an áge-old anvil wince and sing —  
 Then lull, then leave off.<sup>11</sup> (lines 3–7)

9. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 54.

10. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Windhover,” in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 29.

11. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,” in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 63.

He sees in this the workings of the mind: a mind God-made, though, for him, and therein the weighty revelatory experience. Hopkins confronts himself, and thus confronts his maker's darker intention, and finds no explanation for it:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
 Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
 May who ne'er hung there. (lines 9–11)

And in another poem, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day," in what is a stark contradiction to Kingfishers, selving, and a playful Christ, the shine is off creation, and all there is is the savor and the stink of mortality:

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree  
 Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;  
 Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.  
 Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see  
 The lost are like this, and their scourge to be  
 As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.<sup>12</sup> (lines 9–14)

I love that, of course: I am heartburn sometimes, too, and cast ironic eyes heavenward and wonder why this body that is meant to be temple and offering to God's creative genius and love—and this mind meant to be God's viceroy, as Donne called it—betrays us all at once or by degrees, the Judas-things. But I still love it: I think because it shows us to ourselves.

Hardy doesn't love it. Hardy is, for me, the link between naturalism and modernism. In "Hap" especially, he teeters on the edge between a forthright acceptance of "crass casualty" (line 11) and insensible and "dicing time" (line 12)<sup>13</sup> as mere if not essential facts of being and what's over the knife's edge: what Lukács referred to as a confrontation of a

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12. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day," in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, n.d., ca. 1900), 66.

13. Thomas Hardy, "Hap," in *Wessex Poems and Other Verses* (London: Macmillan, 1898).

world “abandoned” by God and thus God-haunted.<sup>14</sup> But the darkness and coldness of that world and Hardy’s stubbornness of feeling are best illustrated in “The Darkling Thrush,” where the landscape is “spectre-gray” and “desolate” (lines 2–3), the times a “corpse” (line 6), the sky a “crypt” (line 7), and the soil inert and sterile (lines 9–12). The thrush itself, “[in] a full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited” (lines 15–16), pushes back against the gloom, but Hardy finds “little cause for carolings” in “terrestrial things” (lines 21 and 23).<sup>15</sup> In nature, in other words, Hardy confronts the indifferent, inexorable hopelessness of meaning.

And Frost, that nature-addict, the working man’s Wordsworth, finds at bottom a futility of purpose: we do what we are meant to do: chop wood, mend walls, take this or that road and, later, give it meaning it never had—but not by some divine will, but by nature herself. Frost’s is an evolutionary being, a reckoning of the instinctual, impulsive, practical human being that lives in a world of incidental if nonetheless impressive delights. This is Elizabeth Barrett Browning brought out of contemplation and into ambulation: walking-in-the-world and brooking no bitterness for it is, Frost would tell us, what it is and that is enough. This is a stubbornness not of purpose but of purposiveness, and a resignation to the futility of meaning. In “The Wood-Pile”—

I thought that only  
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks  
 Could so forget his handiwork on which  
 He spent himself, the labor of his ax,  
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace  
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could  
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.<sup>16</sup> (lines 34–40)

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14. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, translated by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

15. Thomas Hardy, “The Darkling Thrush,” in *Poems of the Past and Present* (London: Macmillan, 1901).

16. Robert Frost, “The Wood-Pile,” in *North of Boston* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914), 133ff.

—and in “Mending Wall,” Frost’s neighbor, the “old-stone savage” (line 40) builds to build in the name of an inherited aphorism and in response to the tides of his own blood and the rhythms of his own muscle and bone.<sup>17</sup>

Which brings me, at last, to Larkin: and a stepping out of nature into *human* nature and a church reclaimed, stone and crux by stone and crux, for something rudimentary and ancient, shorn of the guilt and censer:

When churches fall completely out of use  
 What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
 A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
 Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
 Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
 To make their children touch a particular stone;  
 Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
 Advised night see walking a dead one?  
 Power of some sort will go on  
 In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
 But superstition, like belief, must die,  
 And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
 Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,  
 A purpose more obscure. . . .

. . . though I’ve no idea  
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

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17. Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” in *North of Boston* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1914), 11–13.

Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
 And that much never can be obsolete,  
 Since someone will forever be surprising  
 A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
 And gravitating with it to this ground,  
 Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
     If only that so many dead lie round.<sup>18</sup> (“Church-Going,” lines 22–38  
 and 52–63)

There is, I suppose, some consolation in the truth that we are food not only for weeds but for worms; and worms are food for other flexing, breathing, loving, eating, thinking things. We can believe in that much, at least. Still. For now.

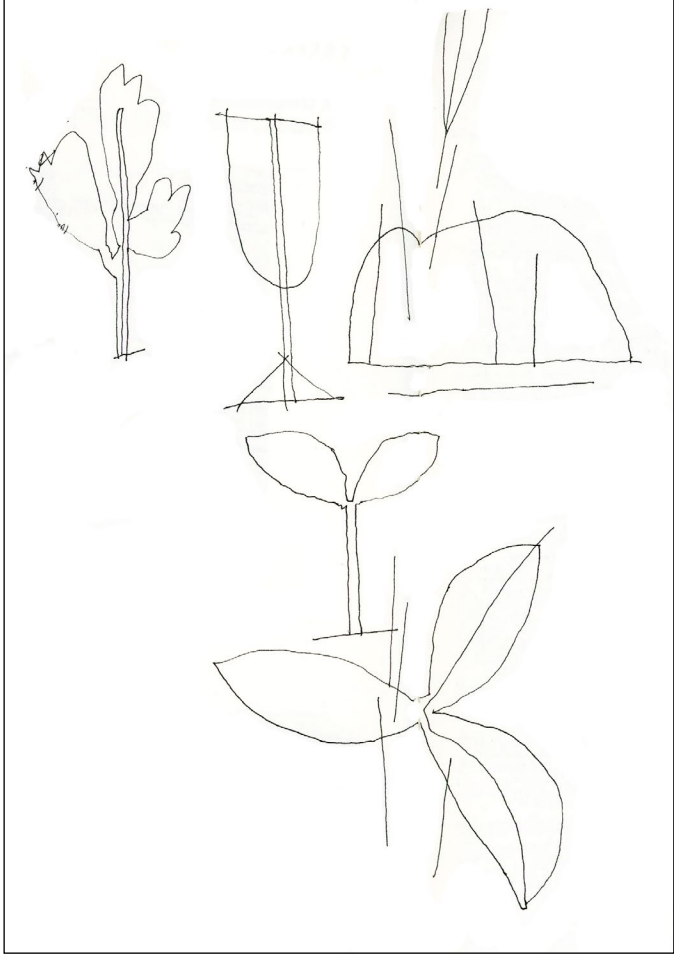
But what shall we do, we hapless believers, when even the cathedral of nature fails us, ruined by our greed for its wealth of mineral and space? When there is no more a church, no more a sanctuary, no more a whisper of the angel in the wonders and the cruelty reflected to us in the national park, the private copse, the houseplant, the flash of tiger-teeth, the roar uxorious, the predation, the pain, the piss-soaked alley? A glimpse of something sidelong that evades our understanding, and yet thrills the deep poetic heart of us? What rough beast, slouching toward Jerusalem, awaits us then, beyond the recking of our own and feckless rod?

I don’t know. But I imagine there’ll be poets still to worry it, and to discover whatever bitter or surprising truths it bears with it.

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18. Philip Larkin, “Church-going,” in *The Less Deceived* (Hessle, UK: Marvell Press, 1955).

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Doug Himes  
untitled

# BEING, A HOUSEHOLD WORLD

David Charles Gore

Being, a Household Word; Being a Household World

Did the Deuteronomist say, I have set before you plutocracy and democracy, therefore choose democracy? Or, I have set before you capitalism and socialism, therefore choose socialism? Or, I have set before you economics and ecology, therefore choose ecology? Or, I have set before you Earth System science or Gaia, therefore choose Gaia? Or, I have set before you acidifying oceans and fresh air, therefore choose fresh air? No, the Deuteronomist said none of those things. Instead, they said something both more compelling and more enigmatic: I have set before you life and death, therefore choose life.

What is at stake in choosing life is the subject I take up today. At the outset, it is important to mention that choosing life raises the problem: what kind of life am I to choose? The answer is always already there: choose life-affirming life! Yet, how can we choose life that affirms life? In the affirmation of life, should we include the life of whales, dolphins, manatees, jaguars, jackals, and jackdaws? I am persuaded by Bruno Latour that we should be looking for a place to land, which is to say we should be looking for how to take up life-affirming politics and land-affirming ways of living. Certainly, Latour does not mean a politics that blindly affirms life as we know it. Nor a politics that affirms the life of the would-be extraterrestrial plutocrats who have no self-restraint and who deny the terrestrial condition in their skyscrapers, yachts, and jets. Rather, it must be the politics of the earthy, of the terrestrial beings. It must be a politics of all species who love life on earth and who don't want to be conquerors

of other worlds, much less conquerors of this one. Can we learn to be content to live where we are, among those we have been given?

### Being Responsible

Such a politics, of course, by Latour's own admission, must call into question the modern project from which almost all of us have gained a great deal. This politics of being, as I might call it (although we could call it the politics of terrestrial friendship), means breaking new ground on the earth, seeking out new models for organizing our public and private lives. These new models must be less dependent on the system of production and more dependent on a system of engendering connections between terrestrials, fostering ties that bind them to one another and to the earth.<sup>1</sup> For Latour, this means starting from the value of dependency, which I would argue is the value of learning how to share the earth.<sup>2</sup>

Learning how to share the earth is no easy thing to do. It is the substance of every political and economic treatise since the dawn of time, to say nothing of every spiritual treatise that has sought to work out a way for us to love one another. In our contradictory, fallen world, where every terrestrial must kill to eat and where every death means another's food, it is well to remember at the outset our inability to solve every puzzle or to address every enigma. Still, finding ways to live together, which is always what we are talking about when we talk of the *oikos*—the household, whether of economy or ecology—is a real challenge. It is a challenge that constantly requires that we look at ourselves and that we look for ways to shoulder the burdens of our communities, human or animal. Of course, ironies abound, as my cohabitation with spiders and wasps has never gone especially well for them. And yet we might

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1. Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 82.

2. I borrow the phrase "sharing the earth" from Tarla Rai Peterson, *Sharing the Earth: The Rhetoric of Sustainable Development* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997).



hope for something better. Moreover, it isn't clear to me that I can live without wasps or spiders. I rather think that the opposite is true. And, therefore, we do well to reject any total solution to the challenges of sharing the earth, solutions that lead to eradications and extinctions, solutions that foreclose the need to share the earth in the first place. Totalizing solutions are, after all, too much like life as we know it in the modern world. Not to mention that totalizing approaches gesture too easily to the madness of mutually assured destruction. Rather the spirit of negotiation, of rhetoric, of working out zones of habitation, and of finding common ground for coexistence must be the name of the game.

The mutuality of shared existence is a big part of the point. Life begets life, and this seems true for the planet as much as it is for humans. “[S]ome studies suggest an Earth that had never had life would have undergone the runaway greenhouse fate of Venus by now; that is, it would have left what astrophysicists describe as the ‘habitable zone’ around the sun, where liquid water is present.”<sup>3</sup> Over millions of years, the atmosphere has learned to adjust to the living beings that dwell on the earth and vice versa. That seems to be the substance of the problem we face now in the new climatic regime in which, as Latour notes, the earth has become an actor on the political scene, and we have to decide if we are for or against it. The irony is that the habitable zone has always only ever been habitable at a cost to humans. We need clothes and shelter, even amidst the earth's hospitality. Yet our ways of householding, at least the predominant current forms, damage the earth's house-ability. How can we then come to grips with the sins of a carbon-fueled existence in the face of the Earth earthing? And yet again, how can we return to theology by employing the language of sin in the very moment when it seems God has forsaken the world? To dwell in a sphere that skews against dwelling seems a permanent crisis of Being. In the face of that problem, we have to keep returning to the thorny matter of what kind

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3. Bruno Latour and Timothy M. Lenton, “Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia Is So Hard to Understand,” *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2019): 13.

of beings we want to be. This also points to the matter of what kind of beings we are and what kind of world we are making.

The modern age, which began in 1455/1492 with the invention of the printing press and the European encounter with the Americas and ended five hundred years later in 1945/1968 with the dropping of atomic weapons and the invention of television and internet, had a great run. With it came the great isms of the last few centuries, including, especially, capitalism, which has surely made the world much richer than it would otherwise have been in monetary terms. At the same time, our approach to householding has created a runaway system of carbon emissions that is bringing on apocalyptic consequences. None of that was exactly intentioned, but all of it was built into the modern mindset and framework for thinking about how to dwell in the world. Our present is a function of what the modern mind was from its inception. We now live in a world where two-thirds of the population cannot and will probably never be able to afford an airline ticket and where the same two-thirds of the population is likely to suffer the greatest from catastrophic warming. Yet there will be no escaping the suffering of a climate that is in the process of becoming uninhabitable, and we are, all of us, responsible.

### Being Ecological

Timothy Morton's *Being Ecological* brings Heidegger's reflections on Being to bear on the Anthro-scene. By reinventing the genre of ecological thinking and writing, most of which seems trapped in a death spiral fueled by both inertia and panic, Morton seeks to address us where we are. At the moment, global warming is a pre-traumatic stress disorder. Suffering from a trauma that is only beginning is, Morton says, like dreaming "you were anticipating the approaching car at the exact moment at which you were crashing."<sup>4</sup> By drawing a distinction between individual behavior and collective action, Morton seeks to let us off the hook of our own defensiveness. After all, it is true that our individual

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4. Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2018), xxix.

carbon footprints are statistically meaningless in the face of what is brewing. At the same time, Morton wants us to see that responding collectively is the only way to avoid catastrophe. How, then, can we reconcile individual futility with collective urgency? Repeating the mantra “free will is overrated,” Morton highlights the weakness inherent in all arguments that focus on changing individual behavior. We are always already in the midst of the Anthropocene. How, then, can we think at the level of earth systems and collective action while at the same time not getting stuck on the hook of our own individual (in)action?

There are, of course, many signs suggesting that we are already in a post-traumatic stress moment: (1) rainfall levels in Houston during Hurricane Harvey were so great that they exceeded the National Weather Service color charts; (2) since 2015’s Hurricane Patricia, with wind speeds at 215 mph, meteorologists have begun to wonder if there should be Category 6 status for hurricanes; (3) in the summer of 2018, Sodankylä, Finland registered a record-breaking 90 degrees Fahrenheit, which is astonishing because it’s fifty-nine miles north of the Arctic Circle. That same month, Japan recorded its highest temperature ever, 106 degrees Fahrenheit, and Algeria hit 124 degrees Fahrenheit, a likely record for the continent of Africa. On June 28, 2018, Oman got in on the fun with a 109-degree-Fahrenheit reading that “amazed meteorologists because that wasn’t the day’s high temperature. *That was the low.* It was the hottest low temperature ever recorded on Earth.”<sup>5</sup> The list, of course, could go on and on about the terrors on the horizon of our carbon-fueled atmosphere. While it seems we cannot address problems on all these fronts, and we shudder even to think of them, it is well for us to remember that we did this. We, with our choice to pursue wealth and

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5. Joel Achenbach and Angela Fritz, “Climate Change is Supercharging a Hot and Dangerous Summer,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/climate-change-is-supercharging-a-hot-and-dangerous-summer/2018/07/26/cf960ba8-905c-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/climate-change-is-supercharging-a-hot-and-dangerous-summer/2018/07/26/cf960ba8-905c-11e8-bcd5-9d911c784c38_story.html).

power, we did this. Whether we can undo it or not remains very much up in the air. However, I do wish to conclude on a note of grounding.

### Being Grounded

To be earthy is to be grounded, close to the soil, with dirt on your hands and under your fingernails. To be worldly is to be cutting-edge, polished, in the mode of knowing and presenting. As upright, walking animals we are quite literally caught between earth and sky. Our elevation tempts us to put our heads in the clouds, to enter an elevated world of thought and theory. Yet our bodies are made of clay and our cultures are built on and out of the soil.<sup>6</sup> Our aspirations carry us toward a better version of ourselves that often does not wish to be tied down to the earth and sees the earth as, quite literally, tying us down. Witness the pyramids and the rocket ships we build to force our way into the heavens. We long to be free from earth stains and to leave far behind us life on the farm, with its noxious smells, hard physical labor, weeds, thistles, and thorns that afflict and torment. We easily forget that culture as we know it depends on agriculture and that the earth is our home and the world our construct.

The contemporary culture of the globalized few is working overtime to obscure its origins in the ground and to deny the least thought of hunting and gathering. As our systems of agriculture become more artificial—growing food indoors and manufacturing tastes in laboratories—so, too, our cultures wish to be scrubbed free of their origins on the farm. We are of the earth, earthy, but we long to build worlds that can purify the earth and remove us from the natural, help us escape into the artificial.

The global few have constructed what the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk refers to as the Great Installation, what one-third of the earth's seven billion people think of when they think of the "world." The Great

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6. For more on our unique position between earth and sky, see John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Installation constitutes hardly one-tenth of the total mainland area of the earth's surface and even less of its marine surface. This prefabricated, climate-controlled world, "a dynamized and comfort-animated artificial continent in the ocean of poverty . . . a 'lifeworld' shell for the faction of humanity with spending power" belongs to the 2.5 billion people on earth who can buy far more than they need and who emit carbon with abandon.<sup>7</sup> "Built on stabilized luxury and chronic overabundance," the Great Installation "is an artificial construct that challenges probability."<sup>8</sup> While seemingly of vast proportions, the Great Installation does "inspire a certain cosmopolitan romanticism, whose most characteristic media include the in-flight magazines of the major airlines," but its true tenuousness and improbability are always obscured.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, this worldly construct also obscures the earthy.

While some have and still seek adventure in the wilderness, many more are content with life indoors. The wilderness adventurers are, nowadays anyway, as often feeding a new kind of consumption with their synthetic suits and highly engineered "gear" intended more to "conquer" the elements than to make their wearers into wanderers and prospectors of this world of ours, out to find what only the earth can teach them. Whether we venture far from the confines of the Great Installation or we stay confined at home and work within climate-controlled artificial atmospheres, the worldview of worlding, of being impressed with and impressed by the artificial lifeworld we have constructed for ourselves, is hard to shake off. It is part of the taken-for-granted assumptions we have about the world in which we now live, that it is a new world and that we can put off the trappings (and curses) of the old world—especially the curse of sin and the trap of death.

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7. Peter Sloterdijk, *In the World Interior of Capital*, translated by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 196.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

Whether we have any intention of addressing this traumatic stress disorder or preparing ourselves or the earth for it remains to be seen, but early indications suggest that we may simply remain inactive, content with the status quo. Yet, simultaneously the cracks in the carbon-fueled social order of modernity are becoming ever more apparent. Can I really expect to have natural gas flowing, uninterrupted, to my hot water heater for the rest of my life? Or for the lives of my children and grandchildren? Will the logic of capitalism preserve for workers a steady stream of income? Or is there some kind of fundamental change, infrastructural change, both in terms of my mindset and my way of life that is necessary for any future at all for my children and grandchildren? And what about the future for the lives of all those dwelling on the earth? If I can't expect these systems of agriculture, infrastructure, and politics to last forever, and history certainly teaches me that I should not, what should I do? If I even begin to doubt my reliance on such systems, what am I to do about it?

Collective harmony with the earth and with earth systems means acquainting ourselves thoroughly with those systems, as Clive Hamilton has argued in *Defiant Earth*, and remembering the autonomy of objects to act in their own sphere. Becoming more acquainted with Earth System science means learning that warmer air holds more water, which means, paradoxically, both less groundwater and more rain. Becoming acquainted with Earth System science means remembering that the oceans will acidify as they work to pull carbon out of the air and into the water in a manner they have been doing for millions of years as part of what the earth does to regulate our atmosphere. Earth System science teaches us that the earth “is certainly not *one* system.”<sup>10</sup> That, in fact, the earth is large and contains many systems of interlocking agents acting in their own sphere and that we understand nothing if we cannot learn to see it all as a domain of freedom. Our task is to learn to inhabit the domain of freedom and of necessity at the same time.

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10. Latour and Lenton, “Extending the Domain,” 13.

## Conclusion

If, finally, ecology is the politics of life agents: what is agency and what is life? And how can we exercise our agency to choose life? And not only to choose life for ourselves, but also to choose life for the generations as yet unborn of dolphins, whales, manatees, and children, dogs, cats, and cows who will never be if we don't change what we're doing and what we are about? Is it possible that our sins of appetite and will are blinding us to earth's finitude? Is there any value in holding the acknowledgement of sin at the forefront of consciousness? Being is *always already* face-to-face with Non-Being, face-to-face with the catastrophe of everyone and everything not Being. How can we choose life in the face of the contradictory fall of every terrestrial? If "alreadiness" and attunement to "nowness" are the order of the day, that order begins in facing what we are doing. As James Baldwin once wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced."<sup>11</sup> Our facing up to the domain of freedom and of necessity is the same thing as facing up to how all living things are intertwined with one another, dependent on one another, and in need of support from one and all. We terrestrials must accept our lot as earthbound stewards of a glorious creation and work to foster life in every conceivable domain. Amity among the living is that for which human being must strive.

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11. James Baldwin, "As Much Truth as One Can Bear," *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 14, 1962, 38, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1962/01/14/archives/as-much-truth-as-one-can-bear-to-speak-out-about-the-world-as-it-is.html>.

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Doug Himes  
Dark Tower  
Mixed media



## Dry Tree

*Dennis Clark*

Luke 23

26 And as they led him away, they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country, and on him they laid the cross, that he might bear it after Jesus.

27 And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bewailed and lamented him.

28 But Jesus turning unto them said, Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children.

29 For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.

30 Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.

31 For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?

This year, for the first time in many years,  
we're thinking of hosting a dead and drying tree  
in some public room of our house, one garlanded  
in lights, the blossoms of dying winter—and hanging  
on its branches the fruits of this year's fiddling and fretting—  
all largely in celebration of a birth  
far in the past and mainly now forgotten,

that led to death—as all births must, and ought,  
this one fertilizing the whole earth  
despite the hustle of all our giving and getting

baubles, gauds, glittering, swinging, banging  
about as we bear this cross, bearing the bargain  
we made with death that made our dying free,  
laid on to bear it in our stumbling fears.

## Vernal

*Jonathon Egan*

what i wanted to say,  
but didn't get to:  
in the end, there is one great sphere  
that contains each lesser light,

and one great compass, needle pressed  
to center the circle in every heart,  
angle circumscribing all:

the bully in sixth grade  
who spat daily on my bike  
while it sat chained at school, and

saliva drying in the wind, and

the first time you kissed me  
(i kissed you first, but you like  
to say it was you—whichever it was  
i'm still glad).

this wondrous orb, euclidean, real,  
archimedes found could be described  
 $v = \frac{4}{3}\pi r^3$   
where 'r' also includes

my grandfather, walking pipelines  
for the gas company in winter, and  
his pneumonia, and  
his ferocious independence, and  
when he learned his daughter died and  
where, and  
when he wept and  
would have traded, and  
had to live—

encompassed and ablated by extraordinary arms.

## Third Watch

*Jonathon Egan*

### I. League of Miles

That time we drove from Idaho to LA  
and you spelled me after midnight,  
I didn't want you to think me ungrateful

for only fitfully napping. But how could I slumber  
when everything I loved best in the world—  
you, and the kids sacked out in the backseat—

hinged on the caffeine pill  
you took outside Vegas?

How do I just lay down the burden  
of tending with you  
the flame of wakefulness across the desert?

To let you shelter alone  
in the shadow of your hands  
that flickering flame against the gale?

### II. Specific Heat

And how could He bear to withhold  
the strength of His mighty arm  
when the universe poured  
unmitigated

through a person-shaped hole,  
to yield a sheen of iron-slick sweat  
from unblemished skin,

to change the state of nature  
and break the heart of God?

### III. Apocalypse

Yet in kindness and great mercy  
pressed down and shaken together,  
you cover my eyes

and bid me sleep now, and take my rest.

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JONATHON EGAN shares his poetry at the spectacularly mediocre website, Underwhelm (<https://underwhelmcloud.wordpress.com/>). In addition to writing, his creative work includes the faith-centered alternative and progressive rock album, *Godspeed* (2016), with the band Bravery Test. He is proud to be a “Roseburg Dad” ([roseburgband.com](http://roseburgband.com)). All Jonathon’s kids are cooler than he ever was, and his wife is smarter than him. Honestly, he is just glad to be here.



Doug Himes  
House and Garden  
oil on paper



## AN OPEN LETTER TO PROSPECTIVE FICTION CONTRIBUTORS

Incoming Fiction Editor Jennifer Quist

*Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* has been changing in 2019, including bringing on a foreigner as the new fiction editor. That's me. None of the fiction I've been curating will appear before this winter, which gives me time to read plenty of submissions—perhaps yours. Writers whose prose touches the Church: please send me something. Don't send me a novel excerpt unless it's been reworked and thoroughly adapted as a short story. I understand the appeal. I prefer novel writing myself. But chances are that I will be able to recognize a cut-and-pasted novel chapter, and that's not the form we're publishing. When it comes to short fiction, however, whatever you're working on: read it again, sleep on it, bring it to your writing group and have them strike out any references to flashing eyes and almost every mention of an erection (they're not actually very interesting), and then send that story to me. Submit soon to catch me while I'm still infatuated with this job and happy to provide feedback on your work. Art means risk and sacrifice. This is how it should be, how it has to be, so of course, submitting a story can be daunting. Let me share a few ideas that might give you confidence to press on with your submission to *Dialogue*, or the inspiration to keep working on it a little longer.

Whatever you do, don't hesitate to send your work to us due to questions of whether it's relevant enough to our subtitle about "Mormon Thought." I interpret the focus of our journal in a broad sense. A Mormon work of fiction doesn't have to have the Church or anyone tricked out like one of its members in it. If the Church is or has ever been a part

of you or people close to you, I expect it will inevitably be a part of the fiction you write. The Church is always there. Trust your readers to be able to see it. They will. There is no need to tack on superficial tokens recognizable to anglophone Americans as Mormon. These tokens not only run the risk of lapsing into cheap shortcuts, but they can also contribute to the privileging of anglophone American experiences over others, giving them a preeminence it is high time they yielded to—or, at least, learned to better share with—other cultural landscapes and voices. We can write as ourselves without nametags, even when writing outside our pet genres of science fiction or fantasy. As I've said elsewhere, there is plenty of middle ground between Rexburg and outer space. Write something beautiful on it.

That is not to say I don't want to read your science fiction and fantasy. For us, any genre will do. I have been delighted by the pile of submissions I inherited from the previous editor, even work that doesn't suit the venue and won't be published in *Dialogue*. Don't ever think editors pass on work because they don't like it. I once read a 110,000-word fan fiction based on an anime I'd never watched because it was written by a beloved teenaged family member, and I liked *that*. Believe me, I like just about everything and could be persuaded to publish any genre if the story was beautiful.

What are we looking for in our fiction for 2020? Something new and true. Allow me to explain.

I can say without exaggeration that all but one of the submissions I have read this year have been submitted by men. I suspect this may be due to *Dialogue* having to compete for contributors with great venues like *Exponent II* and *Segullah*. Please don't forget about us, non-man writers. We would love to see your work. For men who are submitting to us, thank you. What follows are words of caution about overworked themes and tropes in the writing we receive. Please accept them as opportunities.

Think twice before sending us stories of Americans who have lost touch with the institutional church since getting home from their full-time missions. These are stories where we enter the struggles of people (that is, men) wondering if they have transcended their former religious practices. They aren't sure but they think they might have outgrown going through the motions and are looking to live as people of faith in new ways. The reader follows them through their daily lives to see the ennui unfold as these men come to discover they still don't know where to go next. Though there is nothing wrong with this scenario, it's not new. We're super-saturated with it. Presented in a fresh, creative way this story might feel new again, but I haven't seen it yet, so proceed carefully.

Another frequently seen kind of American man story is the one where he gets help with a personal, perhaps even spiritual dilemma from a manic pixie magical minority character—gay, trans, non-anglophone, etc. Even when the magical character is written with a gritty backstory, they usually don't have much of an inner life beyond an interest in the man at the center of the story, and they make doing the heavy lifting in the man's process of self-discovery look easy, which emotional labor never is. This is delicate terrain ranging over vulnerable populations where the utmost care for their humanity, even as fictional characters, is required. Otherwise, it's not true. We still see plenty of standard manic pixie dream girls too. I recommend writers ask themselves if the women and minorities they write have any dimension other than as partners for American men, and if not, is it artfully acknowledged, somehow, that these male characters' shallow concepts of others are insufficient?

All of that said, gender flipping is not a problem in and of itself, especially since women and non-cisgender people have had to write from male points of view in order for their work to be considered non-niche or non-trash for ages. Hooray for people who attempt to take on someone else's point of view and write it with rich, believable dimensions. We will continue to enthusiastically read and publish well-wrought stories written by authors writing from points of view other than their own.

Where this goes wrong most often in our submissions is when men write from the woman's point of view, but she is a woman who is not like other girls. Apart from her, the story's other women are a bunch of breeder ewes. She becomes a self-insert for a male author posing as a woman acting out his distaste for how we live. This is neither realistic nor representative. Beware that in the very worst cases, a female point of view that pits a character against the rest of her peers of her gender reads as benevolent sexism, which is neither new nor true.

Those of us raised in the Church were raised with the ideal of journal keeping as an important historical and spiritual practice. This can be a literary goldmine, but that doesn't mean we can publish unadapted journaling. In fact, the habits of good journaling may leave us too committed to documenting events to allow fictional narratives based on them to blossom into what may be even truer stories. Journaling may enhance our drive to come to learn something through personal experiences. While this may be a productive personal practice, this kind of moral closure is not necessary outside writing fiction fables and nursery stories. Fiction does not require a "therefore what?" moment. When Boyd K. Packer asked this question, so the stories go, it was within the context of writing yet another literary form I am not looking to publish: sermons. While a valid question for a sermon-writer, short story writers do not need to consider "therefore, what?" in developing their ideas. No matter what book marketers are doing, our fiction program does not acknowledge "inspirational" as a genre, especially not when what one reader sees as an inspirational story is another person's idea of a ranting polemic. If a short story inspires, it's through an effect of good art unfolding, not through a clunky, didactic coda. The moral of this paragraph is: let the story find its way.

My final wish for our submissions may be the most delicate of all. Much of what we receive explores personal relationships to God as mediated by the institutional Church and by the family roles it recommends. As a loosely affiliated body of writers, we are good at writing this kind

of story. We typically approach it with sensitivity and open-mindedness, writing with insight and compassion about the realities of the cost of traditional family roles. What's missing from my submission inbox are stories exploring personal relationships to God mediated by the mediator he recommends within the text of the Church's scriptures: Christ. It's rather ironic since what links us together isn't our alignment with traditional family structure—this is common in many religions and cultures across the globe—but our connection to a church adamant that it is the Church of Jesus Christ. Despite this, outside of the genre of sermons and their allegories, and compared to the work of Christian-oriented writers more generally, few of our submitters are writing about it at this time.

At the risk of ending this letter with something too much like my own “therefore, what?” moment, I will hazard a soft call for stories dealing with everything we've been writing about all along—our missions, politics, love affairs, parents and siblings and babies, crops and herds—with the Jesus parts left in, left honest, made speakable, made art. There's no need for Primary clipart beards and halos, just an earnest willingness to open our artistic endeavors to the (small p) primary premises of the Church, a church which, however we may feel about it, made this journal, this thought possible.

I look forward to reading your submissions.

À bientôt,

Jennifer Quist

*Edmonton, Canada*

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Doug Himes  
untitled

PROVING SUBCONTRARIES:  
*IN MEMORIAM*  
G. EUGENE ENGLAND, 1933–2001

Bruce Jorgensen

This essay originally responded to a call in the announced theme for the 2009 Annual Conference of the Association for Mormon Letters: “Proving Contraries.” It explicitly honors, as the AML Conference theme implicitly honored, the memory of Eugene England, who first brought that phrase (from a June 1844 letter of Joseph Smith) to the attention of many, if not most or even all members of the LDS literary community. And it attempts to continue and extend some of Gene England’s effort to explore the tensions and even to heal some of the divisions in contemporary LDS community and experience by “proving contraries.” It consists of two history lessons and an elementary logic lesson, followed by some applications to LDS culture and literature.

History Lesson One: Recent Times

As far as I can tell, it was Gene England—in his October 1980 essay for an AML conjoint meeting with the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in Denver, “Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest”—who first introduced some of us to the remark by Joseph Smith that provided the AML 2009 Conference its theme: “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”<sup>1</sup> I was there to hear Gene’s essay, as well as Marden J.

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1. Eugene England, “Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest,” in *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Midvale, Utah: Signature, 1984), 10.

Clark's "Paradox and Tragedy in Mormonism,"<sup>2</sup> and those two essays still seem to me among the indispensable pieces of Mormon literary-critical thought. I still recall how forcibly Joseph Smith's sentence struck me, partly because Gene used it to bring into sharper focus something I'd suggested to him some years earlier, not long after his "Great Books or True Religion?" and my "Digging the Foundation" appeared as parts of a Roundtable on Mormon Literature in *Dialogue*, volume 9, number 4 (Winter 1974; actually published early in 1975). In a letter to Gene, I took issue with the claim (which he did not fully endorse) that "Many have said that Mormonism answers so well so many basic questions and provides such a satisfying way of life for most of its people that there is not sufficient tension or tragedy [to generate great literature]. What I have finally realized," Gene wrote, "is that there is no need to apologize. Religious success is certainly preferable to literary success."<sup>3</sup> In that essay, Gene had sketched some directions toward a nascent Mormon literary aesthetics, and my letter urged him not to overlook Mormon scriptures that do stress tension and at least the potential for tragedy, Lehi's "opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11) first of all. I suggested that "either/or"—as with the "or" in his title, which he acknowledged (in 1974) as an "offensive (and perhaps false) dilemma"<sup>4</sup>—might be too easy or evasive, and that "both/and" could generate all the tension one might wish.

In the preface to his last published essay collection, *Making Peace*, which he described as a "book about ideas and ways of thinking that can help make peace,"<sup>5</sup> Gene wrote:

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2. Marden J. Clark, "Paradox and Tragedy in Mormonism," in *Liberating Form* (Salt Lake City: Aspen, 1992), 131–46.

3. England, "Great Books or True Religion? Defining the Mormon Scholar," in *Dialogues with Myself*, 62–63. In 1974 he said "infinitely preferable."

4. England, "Great Books," 63.

5. England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1995), xi.



During a time of growing wonder at a universe of opposing forces and concepts that seemed to give existence its very tang and solidity, as well as its energy, I learned of Joseph Smith's remarkable statement, "By proving contraries, truth is made manifest." My heart and mind gave full assent. I remembered William Blake's claim that "Without contraries is no progression" and thought again of the teaching in the Book of Mormon about "opposition in all things." Lehi's unique effort to describe the foundations of being took on a new power for me. I began to see all about me, in particle physics and organic evolution, in the history of literary movements and political struggles, in theological debate and the battle of the sexes, evidence that without the enlivening power of contraries, "all things must be a compound in one . . . having no life" (2 Ne 2:13). And I realized the added paradox that often our failure to accept this contrary, oppositional structure of all reality, physical and moral and spiritual, tended to produce much violence, to be a chief impediment to peace.<sup>6</sup>

That "time of growing wonder" when he learned of Joseph Smith's sentence seems to have been sometime between 1975 and 1980, and I think it is reflected poignantly in the essay "Enduring" (written c. 1982), which Gene placed at the end of *Dialogues with Myself*, an evocation of a "mind besieged with woe and wonder."<sup>7</sup>

From 1980 on, Gene often recurred to Joseph Smith's "proving contraries" statement, and more often used its mode of thinking in his essays, joining the Latter-day Saint prophet to the English poet-prophet William Blake's dicta as well. When he published "Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest" as the first essay in his first collection, *Dialogues with Myself*, he quoted "proving contraries" in his Author's Foreword,<sup>8</sup> and used "oppositional" thinking in several of its essays written between 1975 and 1984: in "Obedience, Integrity, and the Paradox of Selfhood" (given as the AML Presidential Address in October 1980 and gathered as the second essay in *Dialogues*) to urge us to "endure in the struggle required to find [our]

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6. England, *Making Peace*, xi.

7. England, "Enduring," in *Dialogues with Myself*, 205.

8. England, *Dialogues*, ix.

true selves in relationships, in the challenge of covenant-making, in the true marriage of the contraries of obedience and integrity”;<sup>9</sup> in “How Can God Be Both Good and Powerful?” to address the ancient question posed in that essay’s title; in “We Need to Liberate Mormon Men!” to negotiate some of the tensions of male and female; in “Enduring” to endure a world no longer as “safe” as the valley he grew up in:

Reality is too demanding for me to feel very safe any more in the appalling luxury of my moments of utter skepticism. God’s tears in Moses, chapter seven, at which the prophet Enoch wondered, tell me that God has not resolved the mystery of being. But he endures in love. He does not ask me to forgo my integrity by ignoring the mystery or he would not have let Enoch see him weep. But he does not excuse me to forgo my integrity by ignoring the reality which daily catches me up in joy and sorrow and shows me, slowly, subtly, its moral patterns of iron delicacy.<sup>10</sup>

In the title essay of his next collection, *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel*, Gene used both William Blake’s (misquoted: “existence” rather than “progression”) and Joseph Smith’s dicta on “contraries” to describe how “the Church provides the best *context* for struggling with, working through, enduring, and being redeemed by our responses to those paradoxes and oppositions that give energy and meaning to the universe,”<sup>11</sup> and suggested that “by ‘prove’ [Joseph Smith] meant not only to demonstrate logically but also to test, to struggle with, and to work out in practical experience.”<sup>12</sup> In a later essay in that collection, “The Trouble with Excellence,” he wrote that

Excellence versus humility, striving to save our lives versus finding them through giving, winning the “race” for ourselves versus sacrificing all for others—these are indeed “contraries,” horns of a dilemma, poles of

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9. England, “Obedience,” 36.

10. England, “Enduring,” 204.

11. England, “Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel,” in *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986), 3–4.

12. England, “Why the Church,” 4.

a paradox. But they are unavoidable parts of a real universe in which there must needs be “opposition in all things” (2 Ne. 2:11) and where we can best learn how to live by thinking through the opposed values and reaching some new, transcendent way of living that preserves them both, despite the conflict.<sup>13</sup>

There Gene sounds closest to Blake, who warned in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that “whoever tries to reconcile [the specific contraries of “the Prolific” and “the Devourer”] seeks to destroy existence.”<sup>14</sup> In his third book of “personal essays on Mormon experience,” *The Quality of Mercy*, Gene directly quoted Joseph Smith’s “proving contraries” only once,<sup>15</sup> in the essay “Learning Mercy in Church,” largely reiterating (at some points virtually quoting) what he had said in “Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel.” But thinking with contraries plays in other essays there as well, as in “Mercy in Marriage,” which ponders “sexual differences”<sup>16</sup> and proposes that “perhaps we *still* don’t understand what it means that ‘male and female’ are alike unto God.”<sup>17</sup>

In his last collection, *Making Peace*, although he quoted and discussed “proving contraries” only in the preface, Gene rather obviously tested contraries in several essays: in “On Spectral Evidence, Scapegoating, and False Accusation,” where he opposed our tendencies, liberal and conservative alike, to “reduc[e]” others “to partial static version[s]” of themselves;<sup>18</sup> in “Perfection and Progression: Two Ways to Talk about God” to deal with

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13. England, “The Trouble with Excellence,” in *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel*, 72.

14. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, c. 1790–93, edited by Michael Phillips (Oxford: Bodleian, 2011), plates 16–17.

15. England, “Learning Mercy in Church,” in *The Quality of Mercy: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 67.

16. England, “Mercy in Marriage,” in *The Quality of Mercy*, 90.

17. England, “Mercy in Marriage,” 91, echoing 2 Ne. 26:33.

18. England, “On Spectral Evidence, Scapegoating, and False Accusation,” in *Making Peace*, 28.

our history of “stark contradiction[s] in authoritative statements about the Mormon concept of God,”<sup>19</sup> from Joseph and Hyrum Smith to Brigham Young and Orson Pratt, to Joseph F. Smith, B. H. Roberts, Joseph Fielding Smith, David O. McKay, and Bruce R. McConkie; in “On Bringing Peace to BYU, with the Help of Brigham Young” by appealing to the founder’s capacity for supporting “equal and sometimes conflicting values” and to his conviction that “it is actually necessary for opposite principles to be placed before [us], or this state of being would be no probation,”<sup>20</sup> no way to “prove [us] herewith” (Abr. 3:25); in “Why Utah Mormons Should Become Democrats” to urge the preservation of a vigorous two-party system in accord with the “insight and intention of the First Presidency” in 1891 when they arbitrarily assigned Utah Mormons to the two parties because “The more evenly balanced the parties become, the safer it will be for us in the security of our liberties; and . . . our influence for good will be far greater than it possibly could be were either party overwhelmingly in the majority.”<sup>21</sup>

I don’t mean to argue that Gene England’s career and oeuvre as a Mormon personal and critical essayist were one long playing out of Joseph Smith’s “proving contraries.” To test that claim would require a close analysis of each essay to discover whether and where and how it enacted the modes of oppositional thinking that Gene found both fruitful and healing, and I have merely marked on a rough map what I see as the most likely places to begin such analysis.

## History Lesson Two: Older Times

Joseph Smith’s “By proving contraries, truth is made manifest” is actually not a sentence, but an independent clause in the middle of a compound-

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19. England, “Perfection and Progression: Two Ways to Talk about God,” in *Making Peace*, 43.

20. England, “On Bringing Peace to BYU, with the Help of Brigham Young,” in *Making Peace*, 71.

21. England, “Why Utah Mormons Should Become Democrats,” in *Making Peace*, 86.

complex sentence that (in the text Gene England consulted and that, till recently, has been the only text most readily available) reads as follows:

Although all is not gold that shines, any more than every religious creed is sanctioned with the so eternally sure word of prophecy, satisfying all doubt with “Thus saith the Lord;” yet, “by proving contraries,” truth is made manifest,” and a wise man can search out “old paths,” wherein righteous men held communion with Jehovah, and were exalted through obedience.<sup>22</sup>

Joseph Smith was acknowledging receipt of a copy of Israel Daniel Rupp’s *He Pasa Ekklesia* (1844), a compilation that, according to its title page, offered “An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States Containing Authentic Accounts of their Rise, Progress, Ministers and Lay Members of the Respective Denominations.”<sup>23</sup> The book included an article by Joseph Smith on the origins and beliefs of the LDS Church (a version of his own history and the thirteen Articles of Faith as given in the Wentworth letter). Joseph thanked Rupp for the copy of the book, “so valuable a treasure,” in which “The design, the propriety, the wisdom of letting every sect tell its own story, and the elegant manner in which the work appears, [had] filled [his] breast with encomiums on it, wishing [Rupp] God speed”; and his letter promised “Your work will be suitably noticed in our papers for your benefit.”<sup>24</sup> Rupp was a close contemporary of Joseph Smith, born in 1803 on a Pennsylvania farm, and, like him, had little chance for education; but Rupp had mastered eight languages by age twenty and became a teacher and a prolific local historian.

In this text of Joseph’s letter, the phrase “by proving contraries” is enclosed in quotation marks; a closing quotation mark also occurs after “manifest,” but in the copy of *History of the Church* volume six that I could

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22. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1980), 6:428.

23. I. Daniel Rupp, *He Pasa Ekklesia* (Philadelphia: Humphreys, 1844). Available at [https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=CY8\\_AAAAYAAJ&rdid=book-CY8\\_AAAAYAAJ&rdot=1](https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=CY8_AAAAYAAJ&rdid=book-CY8_AAAAYAAJ&rdot=1).

24. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:428.

consult, no initial mark signals where a second quoted phrase begins in that clause. Gene England did not indicate, in any of his quotations of the “proving contraries” clause, that the key phrase was thus marked. I don’t fault him for that, since without more context than we have, it’s hard to tell what Joseph Smith meant by the marks, and they seem merely distracting. In this same sentence, “Thus saith the Lord” is also in quotation marks, for obvious reasons; but so is “old paths,” for reasons not immediately obvious.

Although all is not gold that shines, any more than every religious creed is sanctioned with the so eternally sure word of prophecy, satisfying all doubt with “Thus saith the Lord;” yet, “by proving contraries,” truth is made manifest,” and a wise man can search out “old paths,” wherein righteous men held communion with Jehovah, and were exalted through obedience.

Figure 1. Excerpt from Letter from Joseph Smith to L. Daniel Rupp—Book on Religious Sects. Nauvoo, Illinois, June 5th, 1844.<sup>25</sup>

In the online Joseph Smith Papers, or in the online (or DVD) Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church, we can consult a scanned facsimile of a handwritten draft of this particular “Mormon letter”; and when we do, we discover that the entire clause, “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest,” was enclosed in quotation marks (also that the transcriber for HC vol. 6 introduced a paragraph break, mistook an *I* for an *L* in the addressee line, and omitted *the* and an entire line from the sentence that concerns us).<sup>26</sup>

25. Joseph Smith, Letter to L. Daniel Rupp, Jun. 5, 1844, *History of the Church*, vol. 6., ch. 20 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950). Available at <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/volume-6-chapter-20>.

26. Smith to Rupp, Jun. 5, 1844, Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church, MS 55, box 2, folder 8 (Jun. 1, 1844–Jun. 16, 1844), Brigham Young University Library, [ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/erl.lib.byu.edu](https://ldsarch.lib.byu.edu/erl.lib.byu.edu). Full image excerpted in Figure 1 available at: “Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844,” 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-israel-daniel-rupp-5-june-1844/1>.

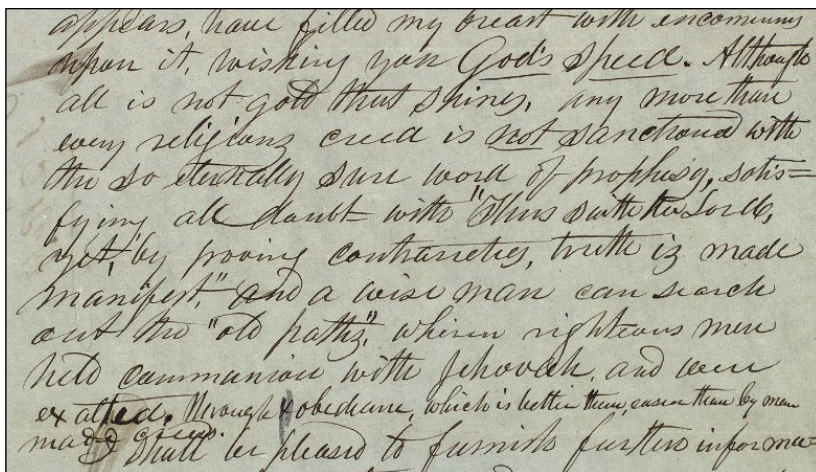


Figure 2

The initial quotation mark is single, the terminal mark double, perhaps a slip of the pen; or part of the initial mark may have overlaid the descender on the letter *g* just above, though this looks very doubtful to me.

But the startling thing is that the word W. W. Phelps wrote down for Joseph Smith was not *contraries* but either *contrarreties* (as the Joseph Smith Papers transcription reads it) or *contrarities*. The word clearly has two *t*'s, the second followed by the plural *ies*. Some of the other un-dotted *i*'s in the letter, including the one following the second *t* here, resemble some of the *r*'s. *Contrarreties* might be a misspelling, or a phonetic spelling. In any case, the word was not *contraries*, and I read it as *contrarities*. Which doesn't have as nice a ring and rhythm as *contraries*. But so it is. I'm content to go on with "proving contraries" because I like its sound better, and it matches William Blake's language. But I've lost my innocence in this matter.

Was "proving contraries" or "proving contrarities" a familiar phrase, a cliché? Or was it a term of art? It could be both; it could have become a cliché by being a term of art. To me it sounds like a term of art in logic or rhetoric or both, and thus a term that Joseph Smith could have learned in the "juvenile debating club" he sometimes attended as an adolescent

in Palmyra, to discuss “some portentous questions of moral or political ethics.”<sup>27</sup> (I wonder if historians and biographers have too easily passed over this as a significant rhetorical and logical component of Joseph’s education.) Or “proving contrarities” might have been a term used in the later School of the Elders or School of the Prophets.

Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* has no separate entry for the plural *contrarities*, but defines *contrariety* with two senses, plus examples of usage: “1. Opposition in fact, essence, quality or principle; repugnance. The expedition failed by means of a contrariety of winds. There is a contrariety in the nature of virtue and vice; of love and hatred; of truth and falsehood. Among men of the same profession, we find a contrariety of opinions”; and “2. Inconsistency; quality or position destructive of its opposite. How can these contrarities agree.”<sup>28</sup> In this second sense and its usage example, *contrarities* seems to mean about the same thing as *contraries*; and this may well be the sense and usage of *contrarities* in Joseph Smith’s letter to Rupp. Webster defines the plural noun *contraries* solely as “In logic, propositions which destroy each other, but of which the falsehood of one does not establish the truth of the other.”<sup>29</sup> The entry for *contraries* begins with the cross-reference “[See Contrary]”; and for *contrary* (as a noun) Webster gives only two senses, the second of which is “A proposition contrary to another, or a fact contrary to what is alledged.”<sup>30</sup> Unquestionably, then, Joseph Smith could have known the term *contraries* in its specific logical sense, and that could affect his understanding and use of *contrarities*.

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27. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 37–38.

28. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1828 ed., s.v. “contrariety,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/contrariety>.

29. *American Dictionary*, s.v. “contraries,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/contraries>.

30. *American Dictionary*, s.v. “contrary,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Contrary>.



The case is similar with *proving* or *prove*. Webster cites *proving* only as a present participle (“ppr.”) meaning “Trying; ascertaining; evincing; experiencing”;<sup>31</sup> but defines *prove* as a transitive verb with a series of senses (each with illustrative examples):

1. To try; to ascertain some unknown quality or truth by an experiment, or by a test or standard. [ . . . ]
2. To evince, establish or ascertain as truth, reality or fact, by testimony or other evidence. The plaintiff in a suit, must prove the truth of his declaration; the prosecutor must prove his charges against the accused. [Joseph Smith had ample experience with “contraries” in this kind of “proving.”]
3. To evince truth by argument, induction or reasoning; to deduce certain conclusions from propositions that are true or admitted. [ . . . ]
4. To ascertain the genuineness or validity of; to verify; as, to prove a will.
5. To experience; to try by suffering or encountering; to gain certain knowledge by the operation of something on ourselves, or by some act of our own. [ . . . ]
6. In arithmetic, to show, evince or ascertain the correctness of any operation or result. [ . . . ]
7. To try; to examine. Prove your own selves. 2 Cor. 13.<sup>32</sup>

Reading Webster, it’s not hard to guess where Gene England found a warrant for the claim that by “prove” Joseph Smith “meant not only to demonstrate logically but also to test, to struggle with, and to work out in practical experience.”

I learn from Gideon Burton’s *Silva Rhetoricae* website that the rhetorical figure *contrarium* means the juxtaposition of “two opposing statements (= antithesis) in such a way as to prove the one from the other”;<sup>33</sup> and that, as a “topic of invention” in rhetoric, “contraries” means to consider “opposite or incompatible things that are of the same kind [ . . . ]. Because contraries occur in pairs and exclude one another, they are useful in arguments because one can establish one’s case indirectly,

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31. *American Dictionary*, s.v. “proving,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/proving>.

32. *American Dictionary*, s.v. “prove,” <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/prove>.

33. *Silva Rhetoricae*, “contrarium,” <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Figures/C/CONTRARIUM.HTM>.

proving one's own assertion by discrediting the contrary."<sup>34</sup> Joseph Smith might have learned something of "proving contraries" in this way in that "juvenile debating club." But in logic such an argument would not be valid, since contraries cannot both be true but may both be false.

### Elementary Logic Lesson

Here, a brief lesson in the elementary logic of categorical propositions may help. I learned these things as a BYU undergraduate in a beginning logic course from Chauncey Riddle, and have "proved" their usefulness over and over since then. Categorical propositions occur in four forms (where S and P stand for subject and predicate terms): universal affirmative (All S is P), universal negative (No S is P), particular affirmative (Some S is P), and particular negative (Some S is not P). These four forms are traditionally designated, respectively, by the letters A, E, I, and O (supposedly from the vowels in the Latin verbs *Affirmo* and *negO*: "I affirm"; "I deny"). Their formal relations in logic are graphically represented in the "square of opposition," which is traditionally traced back to Aristotle's *Organon*. Draw a square in the air. Mark its four corners starting at the upper left and ending at the lower right: A, E, I, O. The A (All S is P) and E (No S is P) propositions are "contraries," and the relation between them is "contrariety": as Webster's definition of "contraries" implied, they cannot both be true but may both be false; indicate this with arrows pointing both ways on the (upper horizontal) A–E side of the square. The relation between the A and I and between the E and O propositions is "subimplication": if A is true (All S is P), so is I (Some S is P); if E is true (No S is P), so is O (Some S is not P). But this is a one-way relation, and it is not the case that if I is true so is A, or if O is true, so is E (this is the formal fallacy we commit when we generalize from *Some*—one or a few or even many—to *All* members of a category, as in stereotyping, vilifying, or demonizing those who differ from us or whom we fear or oppose); indicate this one-way relation

34. *Silva Rhetoricae*, "Relationship," <http://rhetoric.byu.edu>.

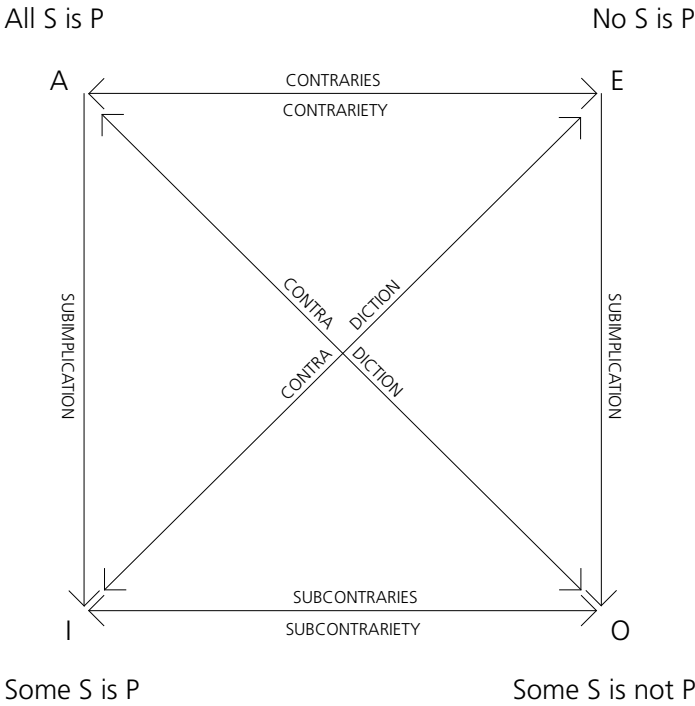


Figure 3. The square of opposition.

with arrows pointing only down on the (vertical) A–I and E–O sides of the square. The I and O propositions are “subcontraries” and their relation is called “subcontrariety,” meaning that both may be true (Some S is P, Some S is not P), but both cannot be false. Indicate this with arrows pointing both ways on the (lower horizontal) I–O side of the square. Now draw the diagonals of the square, A–O and E–I, with arrows pointing both ways along both of these diagonals. The A and O propositions and the E and I propositions are “contradictories” and their relation is “contradiction”: if A is true, O must be false, and vice-versa; if E is true, I must be false, and vice-versa. From this you can see why the subcontraries I and O cannot both be false: if I is false, E must be true; if O is false, A must be true; but if both are false, that results in “contraries” which cannot both be true.

From the square of opposition it should also be easy to see why the rhetorical “topic of invention” called “contraries” will not yield a valid argument: to disprove or discredit an A or an E proposition will not prove its contrary, which may also be false. So I doubt that “by proving contrarities, truth is made manifest” can refer to that rhetorical strategy. It *might* refer to it; but it is not logically the case that if I can prove one of a pair of “contraries” false I have thereby proved its contrary true; if I prove No S is P false, I have not proved All S is P true. I doubt that “proving contraries” or “contrarities” in this sense could make much truth “manifest,” though it might help.

But truth might be “made manifest” by “proving contrarities” in the sense of testing either or both of a pair of contrary propositions against the actual world by “material” rather than by “formal” criticism: given a proposition of the form All S is P, if I can “materially” show that in fact, in actual existence, Some S is not P, I thereby prove that All S is P is false. The same applies to No S is P and Some S is P. “All Mormons are opponents of same-sex marriage”? Here is one Mormon (and “some” means “at least one though not all”) who does not oppose same-sex marriage. “No Mormons are in favor of gun control”? Here is one Mormon who does favor gun control. The examples are made-up, of course, yet such universal, all-or-none claims are not all that far-fetched in my experience of Mormon conversations on controversial topics.

Contraries as universals (All S is P and No S is P) look like “words of power” (see Moses 1:32, 35; 2:5) because they make all-encompassing claims. But it should be clear that, although Some S is P and Some S is not P look like “weak things” (1 Cor. 1:27) by comparison, materially verified subcontraries, in their contradictory relationships to opposed contraries (across the diagonals A–O and E–I), have power to “confound the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:27), to expose the falsehood of universal affirmatives and universal negatives. If I show materially that Some S is P, that disproves No S is P; if I show materially that Some S is not P, that disproves All S is P. In this sense it does seem fairly clear that “by proving contrarities”—that is, by testing either or both of a

pair of contraries against the actual world of my experience—"truth is made manifest"—at least in the negative sense that the falsehood of one or another universal has been shown. But also in the positive sense that I have verified—shown the material truth of—one or both of the subcontraries. Truth is indeed "made manifest" when I recognize such subcontrary truths. Maybe about as much truth as a mortal human being can attain, or bear, in the mortal world.

This is a rather narrowly limited and "technical" reading of Joseph Smith's remark, and does not begin to exhaust the readings that Gene England gave it. Yet it does seem that the logic of subcontraries is the logic of a good deal of our mortal experience; that we live in a world where a lot of true propositions should take the forms Some S is P and Some S is not P. That is not a small thing to learn during our mortal sojourn. Perhaps it is a modicum of the truth that might make us free; it might help us to become more just and merciful.

### Some Implications and Applications, Cultural and Literary

Maybe we all—sometimes, or some of us all of the time—hanker for universals, for All S is P and No S is P. Perhaps for the assurance or security they seem to offer as "absolutes" in a contingent and chancy world, or for their apparent justification of our bias, our dismissal, our violence—listen to any pair of quarreling spouses flinging "You always" and "You never" at one another. The world of contraries, which "destroy" one another though both may be false, looks to me like a world at war, or a world playing out melodramas, power struggles. The world of subcontraries—Some S is P and Some S is not P—looks less warlike, maybe less melodramatic, since I and O logically can both be true, can coexist, and these also (if materially verified) are "absolute truths." (What if contrary I and You thought of ourselves, analogously, as I and O, subcontrary? Could we get along?) I do think the logic of subcontraries is the logic of a lot of our actual experience—Some but not All of it.

For there are, of course, a good many universal affirmatives and universal negatives. All "what goes up" is "what must come down"—at

least if what goes up does not achieve escape velocity or magically levitate (even then, it likely will “come down” somewhere, sometime). All human beings are moral agents (however impaired or constrained by circumstance). All motorists who exceed the posted speed limit are guilty of a misdemeanor—whether they are caught or not, and regardless of whether their speed caused no harm but only offended the majesty or dignity of the law. No man-made vehicle can achieve, much less exceed, the speed of light—unless (as in space fantasies) it has warp drive, hyperdrive, or what-have-you. No physical action can occur without an equal and opposite reaction—unless it’s a push or a pull by a magically endowed superhero. No one who has not passed the bar exam can legally practice law. “There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him” (Mark 7:15). A lot of our true universals are scientific (at least within certain domains of “hard science”) or juridical; some are definitional or stipulative. No irrational number can be expressed as the ratio of two whole numbers. The prosodic term “caesura” never applies to pauses at the ends of lines but only to pauses within lines. Every human child (so far) has two parents (somewhere).

Some universals, juridical in form, are ecclesiastical. For a long time in the LDS Church, no man of black African descent could hold the priesthood; after June 8, 1978, all worthy male members of the Church may hold the priesthood. No non-tithe payer can hold a temple recommend. No woman can hold the priesthood. Obviously, juridical universals, since we enact them (or most of them), are subject to amendment or ad hoc suspension. Indeed even the juridical universals enacted by God appear subject to amendment or suspension—by God, the agent who enacted them: to Moses and Israel, “Thou shalt not kill” (Ex. 20:13); to Nephi, “Slay him” (1 Ne. 4:12).

With a little attention, we can hear subcontrary language in the official discourse of the LDS community. In the October 2008 General Conference, Elder Quentin L. Cook remarked, “We know from the scriptures that some trials are for our good and are suited for our own personal development. We also know that the rain falls on the just and the unjust.

It is also true that every cloud we see doesn't result in rain."<sup>35</sup> For the first of these three sentences, Elder Cook cited D&C 122:7: "know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good." The first universal claim in that verse looks definitional: whatever befalls us will, by definition, "give [us] experience." But Elder Cook's more cautiously subcontrary "some trials" surely reflects an experiential awareness that not all experience necessarily does us "good," or at least we do not always manage to make "good" of it. He may have had in mind the conditional language of an earlier portion of the letter from Liberty Jail: "if thou endure it well" (D&C 121:8). The "if" acknowledges that sometimes some of us might not be able, or might not choose, to "endure it well."

In June 1829, according to David Whitmer's much later *Address to All Believers in Christ* (1887), when Joseph Smith had obtained the copyright for the Book of Mormon but could not yet raise funds for the publication and Hyrum Smith urged him to sell the copyright, the prophet used his seer stone to learn that if Hiram Page and Oliver Cowdery would go to Toronto, someone there would buy the copyright. The two men made the trip but came back empty-handed, and according to Whitmer, Joseph Smith remarked, "Some revelations are of God, some are of man, and some are of the devil."<sup>36</sup> (Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery include this anecdote of non-canonical subcontrary prophetic discourse in their biography of Emma Smith; Richard Bushman does not include it in his more recent Joseph Smith biography. Some scholars trust David Whitmer's account and some do not.)

Still, LDS scripture does include some striking instances of subcontrary language, the language of "Some but not All." "For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby" (D&C 46:11–12).

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35. Quentin L. Cook, "Hope Ya Know, We Had a Hard Time," Oct. 2008, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2008/10/hope-ya-know-we-had-a-hard-time?lang=eng>.

36. Quoted in Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 30.

These verses from an 1831 revelation initiate a long list of gifts given to “some” and to “others” (13–25), a long series of particular statements, which closes with a universal: “And all these gifts come from God, for the benefit of the children of God” (26). In similar language, revelations given through Joseph Smith one and two years later make a subcontrary statement about faith itself: “And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom” (D&C 88:118; 109:7). Some in the Church have—or are given—faith, some not. And any or all can seek to learn “out of the best books words of wisdom.” The community depends for its life on gifts, but no one has all the gifts; some have one, others have others, and all may nourish the community.

Within the church and its culture, some universals, usually held uncritically, might be called tribal presumptions. There’s a good example in Doug Thayer’s late novel *The Tree House*. When the young protagonist Harris Thatcher serves the first part of his LDS mission in postwar Germany, he and his German companion Elder Sturmer board in Giessen with a middle-aged non-member and non-religious German couple, the Meyers, a retired colonel and his well-educated wife who lost two young sons in the war. Over the months Harris lives in the Meyers’ household, he finds, mostly during evening conversations with Frau Meyer that were occasions to practice his German, that “She had opened his mind as no other person ever had.” And when he is to be transferred, he reflects that “He had come to love Mrs. Meyer. And perhaps he and Elder Sturmer had helped a little bit to ease the loss of her own two sons. Perhaps.”<sup>37</sup> Later, riding the train from mission headquarters in Frankfurt to his new assignment in Hamburg, watching out the window as he passes through Giessen, something occurs to him: “He’d always thought you had to be religious to be good, but he now knew this was not true.”<sup>38</sup> The logic of Harris’s reflection on his experience goes something like this: I believed that all good people are religious people (All S is P), but I’ve learned that Mrs. Meyer is a good person and is not religious (Some S is not P); thus

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37. Douglas H. Thayer, *The Tree House* (Provo, Utah: Zarahemla, 2008), 166.

38. Thayer, *The Tree House*, 171.



my previous belief, my “always thought” (as a universal claim), is proven by experience not to be true (materially falsified). One actual instance of a good person who is not religious disproves the universal claim (Harris’s tribal presumption) that all good people are religious people. But of course both subcontraries can be true, and are, as Harris might have learned from some of his experiences growing up in Provo as well as some of his experiences in Germany: some good people are religious people; some good people are not religious people. Insofar as we may regard *The Tree House* as a coming-of-age novel or Bildungsroman, a moment like his recognition on the train to Hamburg is a modest but important increment in Harris’s “getting of wisdom” or “understanding,” and it might go toward making him a better missionary and a better Christian. “Might”: not certainly will, but “perhaps”: in the contingent chancy world that novels normally represent, the world of *subcontraries* where agents are free to act, there are no ironclad guarantees.

Literature—I’m fairly confident I can say, especially of literature since the rise of the novel or (interestingly, about the same time as the Restoration of the Gospel) the Romantic poets or the invention of the short story—tends to particularize, to be “particularistic” or just plain particular, and even particular in a fairly strict logical sense. The stories it tells are, in the words Flannery O’Connor used to paraphrase her neighbor down the road, about “how some specific folks *will* do, *will* do in spite of everything.”<sup>39</sup> That is, if you will allow a theological pun, literature’s “scandal of particularity.” And that is why literature sometimes scandalizes some folks, some Mormon folks in particular, because some of us folks live in the tribal presumption that literature, as too many of us, Some but not All, have learned in school, is “universal.” Indeed literary works are “universalizable,” but some folks have misunderstood how this works, and so they suppose that Emma Bovary is not just Mme. Bovary but Everywoman, and Huck Finn not just “yours truly, Huck Finn” but Everyboy, or at least every American boy. They’ve learned to misread literature by translating or “uplifting” its particulars into “universals.” By supposing

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39. Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar, 1977), 90.

that particular characters somehow “stand for” All this or No that, they commit the formal fallacy I mentioned earlier: they “generalize” from a logical particular to, or toward, a logical universal. They “superimplicate.” So some folks might think that Harris Thatcher is Every Mormon Boy who gets drafted and goes to fight in a dirty unnecessary war against a rather spectral enemy (no less dangerous because of that enemy’s spectral projection of its enemy). Or that the catastrophically failing young temple marriage in “Thanksgiving,” the first story in Angela Hallstrom’s novel-in-stories *Bound on Earth* (2008), is an emblem, or more precisely a synecdoche, of the author’s judgment as to the most likely outcome of All temple marriages. And so on.

Some—all too many but not All—Mormon readers misread, all too often but not Always, in just this way. And they project a “specter” of the writer they misread in this way: he or she must not, cannot, be a real or authentic or orthodox or true or mainstream Mormon, the way I of course am. Some writers know that some—a few too many—members of their tribe do this, and some writers, when they know their work is likely to provoke such judgments, preemptively distance themselves from the Church. They “go inactive” or “apostatize” (Greek for “stand away”) from it, often as a necessary insulation if they are to go on writing at all. Sometimes they have heard official or quasi-official warnings—if B continues to write this kind of fiction, or if C uses that kind of language in his plays, he will no longer, etc.—and heeded them. Writers and readers alike are struggling, and in such cases failing, to live well in the very difficult tensions of “proving contraries” or “contrarities” within their tribe, and writers and readers alike may be making the difficulty more difficult by standing on contraries where subcontraries would offer better ground, and space for justice and mercy to meet and work together as they do in the creative redemptive economy of God.

Mormons of course are not the only tribe among whom such things happen. Read Philip Roth’s long-ago (1963) essay “Writing About Jews” for his account of how some more-or-less official spokesmen of his tribe

responded to his first (and National Book Award-winning, when the writer was just twenty-six) book of fiction, *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959) and its stories about some Jews, and his complex, writerly, subcontrarian response to that: “The story is called ‘Epstein’ because Epstein, not the Jews, is the subject . . .”<sup>40</sup> But back here at home, read Margaret Young’s introduction to her second book of short stories, fourth book of fiction, *Love Chains* (1997), an essay I’ve thought too anxiously placed at the front of that book, or included in it at all, though I know, as Margaret knows and knew, just why she felt she had to write that essay titled “Sharks! Or, You Mean You Hold a Temple Recommend and You Wrote That?” “By nature,” Margaret wrote, “we are in muddy waters. Though we may avoid dangers by keeping resolutely in shallow areas, the leap of faith implies risk and depth.”<sup>41</sup> I suspect she remembers, and hopes we will remember, that “deep water [was] what” Joseph Smith was “wont to swim in” (D&C 127:2). Near the end of the essay she remarks sadly, “I have seen several friends leave the church because they couldn’t deal with emergent ambiguities and were strangled by either/or dilemmas.”<sup>42</sup> (I would gloss Margaret’s “either/or dilemmas” as contraries: All vs. None.) And at the end she acknowledges, “So, though I believe in the Mormon vision, my fiction will always happen at the place where the vision collides with earthly, earthy reality—usually within the hearts of my characters,” and declares her hope that her fiction “will suggest not only fear but grace.”<sup>43</sup> (And here I would gloss “where the vision collides with earthly, earthy reality” as “proving contraries” by testing them materially, in experience.)

Mormon readers condemning their writers and artists (some wanting to see them “burn in hell,” as I know one member of a Mormon audi-

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40. Philip Roth, “Writing about Jews,” in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, 1975), 140.

41. Margaret Young, “Sharks! Or, You Mean You Hold a Temple Recommend and You Wrote That?” in *Love Chains* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 1997), ix.

42. Young, “Sharks!,” xiv.

43. Young, “Sharks!,” xv.

ence momentarily damned the filmmaker Richard Dutcher, then later apologized), or writers and artists leaving the Church to elude murderous either/or dilemmas: such things, I persist in believing, need not be, though I know we cannot always, perhaps cannot ever, entirely escape them in a contingent and subcontrary world of oppositions that “needs must be” if there is to be a world at all and if we are to be at all. We must endure them, must endure them as best we can—if possible, better than we have endured them so far. If we are indeed a “people of paradox” as Terryl Givens called us in a book’s title<sup>44</sup> (echoing the American historian Michael Kammen?), let us live the paradoxes as well—as justly and mercifully—as we can. In better words than I can write right now, let me give Gene England the last or latest word, for now:

Life in this universe is full of polarities and is made full by them. We struggle with them, complain about them, even try sometimes to destroy them with dogmatism or self-righteousness or a retreat into the innocence that is only ignorance, a return to the Garden of Eden where there is deceptive ease and clarity but no salvation. [...] Whatever it means that we will eventually see “face to face,” *now* we can see only “through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), and we had better make the best of it.<sup>45</sup>

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44. Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Note that Kammen’s *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1972) won the 1973 Pulitzer Prize in history.

45. England, “Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel,” in *Why the Church Is as True as the Gospel*, 3.

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# SINGING IN HARMONY, STITCHING IN TIME<sup>1</sup>

Karen Marguerite Moloney

*Plum Grove Township, Nebraska*

Spring 1911. Seated in her parlor on the farm they lease, Bertha Hansen shivers as she slips her needle through beige linen. Heinrich has booked a trip to Germany, a visit home, but as departure draws near, uneasiness envelops her like the white mist of their native marsh. Does danger await them, a great storm perhaps, and is the chill she feels a premonition? Or is it simple bad humor, a wife's irritation with a husband who squanders money on steamship tickets when they're saving to buy a farm?

Bertha stops mid-stitch, looks up from the letters she's embroidering on the new throw pillow. Might Heinrich be lying? Gripped by resolve even greater than when she chose orange wool for thread, she pilots the needle with renewed fervor. Her message to her sister Volina, *Forget Me Not*, must blaze among the blue forget-me-nots. Suddenly, as nimble stitches close the loop on the second *o*, they catch the sun. The *o* takes on the appearance of a small jewel, an amber nugget.

It may as well be crystal. Across a century Bertha sees me, Volina's granddaughter, miles from the prairie in my high desert home, lettering in tandem, interlocking our lives.



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1. Second place winner in the 2019 Eugene England Essay Contest.

*Schobuelli, North Friesland*

Summer 1972. With a distinct thud, I deposit the brown canvas suitcase I had to have, better-suited to a safari than a European tour, on the unpaved drive of the first farm north of Husum, a cozy-seeming harbor town. Like the novice traveler I am, I stuffed the bag so full it's painfully heavy.

The farm is a cluster of farmhouse, outbuildings, and gardens. A thick windbreak—birch and aspen, apple and plum—encircles it before giving way to pastureland in which placid cows loll or help themselves to abundant summer grass. Behind the fields, the farm is protected from the North Sea by something I've never seen before—the massive rampart of a steep-sloped dike, a band of worn green velvet.

Before I can make my way to a set of elaborately carved doors, one opens. Out onto the drive emerge a handsome, blue-eyed couple in their late twenties and two blond, wide-eyed boys. We exchange greetings as two women approach from a side entrance, the taller one reaching us with the no-nonsense stride of a Viking. A slower-moving woman arrives behind her, leaning on a cane. Her black, ankle-length skirt is matched to a long-sleeved blouse, black flecked with white flowers. Her hair, brushed upward and pinned at the crown, is the muted silver of my grandmother's. Wearing light mourning sixteen years after her husband's death, she's the portrait of an elderly German widow. I know in an instant this is the grand-aunt I've come to meet.

I'm a budding genealogist searching for my German roots, and Bertha is the only sibling of my grandmother's to return from America to live in Germany. Her face, lined and crinkled like fallen leaves, has even features. She greets me in English, and I'm relieved to see the gray-blue eyes, like a child's let out of school for summer, are lit with glee. Why, if you wave away the gray, the wrinkles, and the widow's weeds, she might be holding her big sister Volina's hand as they splash together in the North Sea.

"Can I stay about a week?" I ask, hoping not to seem presumptuous.

“*Du kannst en Jahr blieven!* You can stay a year!” replies the tall woman—she’s Grete, Bertha’s daughter-in-law—commandeering my bag like a Grand Tour porter as she whisks me inside. Her German sounds curiously closer to English than any I’ve heard before; it must be the Low German my mother told me to expect. We climb the stairs to Grete’s flat, where I’ll share her sunny bedroom with a view to Husum and the dike; Tante will join us from her downstairs flat for noon-day meals.

The parched landscape of Utah, where I’m a college student, is already fading from my mind, its midsummer browns and grays exchanged for a vibrant kaleidoscope: houses with steep roofs flank narrow streets while window boxes overflow with geraniums and petunias, lavender and lobelia. The windmill I saw as my train neared Husum appears again to offer its storybook thrill. Next, I picture six Nordic faces converging outside the gabled frontispiece of an eighteenth-century farmhouse. Last up, the image of that enormous dike amazes me as it foreshortens the horizon. “Climb to my ridge,” it seems to beckon, “and look west to the sea.”

Bertha and her family have transported me across their threshold into an older—and for me, mesmerizing—European world. If ancestral voices still echo in the shadow of the dike, I trust I can coax them into song.



I waken under a feather-filled comforter in a bed painted antique-white to find seven-year-old Holger waiting in his short summer pants. “One, two, three, four, six, seven, nine, ten,” he counts, then looks to me for approval. I clap readily. Grete comes from her kitchen to join us, two neat braids already wound around her head, and shoos Holger out so I can dress. I breakfast downstairs with Tante Bertha on brown bread spread with fresh tomato slices before she sends me off with Grete to the Lutheran parish offices.

The pastor, I learn, is on vacation for the next two weeks; no one else can unlock the safe. I make quick calculations. Staying here longer would give me time to climb the dike, walk the shore of the North Sea, and explore Husum—and get to know Tante Bertha and my cousins. I loved my mother’s stories about life on a farm—here’s my chance to live on one.

Grete’s way ahead of me. She tells me to join her.

Across from the offices, the church is surrounded by graves outlined in low hedges. I follow Grete as she crosses the road and navigates narrow pathways, stopping finally in front of a grave plot with three monuments. The most imposing—a black granite tombstone with gold engraving—tells me the plot belongs to “*der Familie Thomsen*” of Sterdebuell. Sterdebuell—my grandmother’s birthplace!

The black tombstone commemorates my great-grandparents; a smaller stone of gray granite is inscribed with the names of Grandma’s youngest brother and his wife; and Grete lets me know the third memorial, an iron cross without names, rests atop the grave of my great-great grandparents—all people I would have loved had I known them.



I came to Germany hoping to see the North Sea Grandma played in as a child, but I never expected anything like this.

Behind the *Schwein Stall* stretch some of the farm’s wide fields, grazed in by Grete’s cows. To cross them, follow Ingo, my five-year-old guide, and together we side-step cow pies, hop across drainage ditches and over fences, then scatter several sheep grazing on the steep landside of the dike. We climb to the top, where the horizon suddenly expands.

The dike’s seaward side slopes slowly into mudflats and shallow water—the coast-hugging North Sea, here called *das Wattenmeer*, the Wadden Sea. Across from me, reached by a causeway south of Schobuell, lies the large island of Nordstrand, home base for the trucking outfit that



employs Paul-Heinrich, Bertha's grandson and the boys' father. On the island's long east coast I can see a tall white silo as well as its reflection in the sea, and nearby, a windmill.

The intertidal clearing seems teeming with life. The seabed closest to me is hard-packed and sandy but shifts inevitably into vast, spongy stretches of brown-gray mud, black and gummy beneath—rich with silt, humus, and the tiny creatures, like sand-hoppers, that thrive in it.

The tide is swirling swiftly in with a sound new to me, between a sizzle and a low crackle; the air has a tang I've never smelled before. With Ingo, I descend the dike and enter the world of the Wadden Sea on *Lahnungen*, branches bound into bundles and lashed together to form low breakwaters. They're designed to catch sediment when the tides race in. Like the Dutch they imported to teach them, the people living on this low-lying coast are experts at land reclamation.

Perhaps as children my grandmother and Tante Bertha were fearless as Ingo on this coast, but I'm careful about my balance. The sea may be shallow here even at high tide, but I walk only a short way out over the water before I head back in.



From the Hansens' farm, I reach Husum by bike in twenty minutes. The town is small, the perfect size for someone who doesn't speak the language, and I never get lost. As a child at Disneyland, I loved pretending I was really sailing by windmills and thatched cottages on my Storyland Canal Boat, but make-believe isn't needed here. Boxes of colorful summer plantings highlight white, multi-paned windows on gray buildings as I walk the town's real cobblestone streets, ducking into and out of real shops.

In the museum I learn that, centuries ago, colossal floods swamped the land in front of Husum, and a quiet inland village evolved into a bustling harbor town. Today it's a draw for the German tourists with

whom I enjoy strolling beside the inner harbor—both when the colorful boats are floating at high tide and when the receding sea strands them on the mud floor. The outer harbor is equipped with locks, and when I walk out to see them, I ponder the immense fury of the storm that would lead to their closing.

I landed in Paris and will visit Copenhagen, Dublin, and London before I leave Europe, but I won't feel any more at home than I do in Husum. Wartime bombs missed the town's historic center, still lined with gabled houses and shops in the Dutch style. Some date from the early 1600s, and I picture Bertha and Volina entering the same shops as young women to finger bolts of cloth and purchase marzipan.

In the market square is a large fountain. Above it stands the bronze statue of Tine, a young woman in blouse and vest, long skirt, apron, and wooden clogs. Her hair is tucked inside a scarf against the wind; she's looking out to sea, holding an oar. Perhaps she's even standing on a dike. Holger and Ingo have come to town with me today, and though I snap a photo of them standing at the fountain rim, it's the image of Tine that I take away with me when we leave Husum.



Grete and I flip our kick-stands outside the parish offices. The pastor, a man of medium height and miss-nothing eyes, has finally returned, and he invites us into his office. He knows what I'm here for and agreeably lugs to the desk several of the parish's old registers—cool, brittle leaves bound in pigskin the color of raw amber.

I ask to see the death records for the early 1800s. After he opens to the entries and shows me how the list is arranged, our eyes move down the pages, pausing finally at a line of thin brown script. Vollig Volquardsen, mother of the great-great-grandmother buried beneath the iron cross, died on July 26, 1806, age thirty-four. Below Vollig's entry is one for her youngest child, a year-old daughter, who follows her three months later.

The thrill of pushing back our family tree another generation is tempered as I imagine my way into Vollig's too-short, hard-working life—the record reveals she bore five children before her early death. I want to see what her baptismal record can tell me. The pastor locates the list of babies christened over the stone font in July 1772—two hundred years ago. He explains that the larger, underlined name is the child's; the smaller names that follow are the parents'. Again our eyes move down the list of entries, until there it is.

“Vollig,” the pastor reads. “Daughter of Harre Volquardsen and Christina, daughter of Albert Hansen and Catharina.” I'm back two more generations, and, even knowing Vollig will grow up to leave five children motherless, the feeling is heady. Grete is smiling, too, but I know it won't do to keep her waiting while I page through old books looking for ancestors. I promise the pastor I'll be back.

At sacrament meeting, two rail stops away from Husum, I meet the friendly, English-speaking Sister Benn, a genealogist. She picks me up on Monday, and we drive to Hattstedt. Digging in, we locate many names, but like a gold prospector titillated by her first nuggets, I want more.

Three days later we're back again—more names, more gold, more gold fever. I vow to return to North Friesland to do more panning. I picture my future children climbing over the dike with me to wade into the Wadden Sea.

That evening, when I tell Tante I'll be leaving at the end of the week, she's visibly shaken. She thought we had more time.



The morning's shopping secure in my bike's basket, I set out for Schobuell. I'm sailing along the coast road, waiting to overtake the hedges of wild roses near the farm, when I puncture a tire. I walk the bike the remaining distance and arrive late for our mid-day meal. Tante is waiting in the drive, leaning on her cane with worry in her eyes—and a little ire. “Where

have you been?” she demands. “Why are you late? Grete prepared *Eis* for you, and it melted!” Neither Grete nor Bertha has a refrigerator yet.

Germans like their windows without screens, so later, with the enthusiasm of a big-game hunter, I track and swat flies in Tante’s flat. Whack! “Dead fly!” I exclaim in German. Whack! “*Tot Fliege.*” Whack! “*Tot Fliege.*” It’s the small entertainment I offer a very dear woman.

She tells me a linguistic researcher taped her years ago speaking Frisian, one of the last speakers of my family’s dialect. I want to hear the tape, but it’s somewhere in Kiel. I settle for listening to her sweet-talk Hansi, her pet parakeet.



One last time, as Tante and I sit together at the parlor table, she shares old family photos. I ask if I could perhaps take them to Husum to see about copies. I promise to be careful.

She pushes the photos toward me. “They’re for you.” She looks away.

“But we can make copies!”

“They’re yours.” She says it almost dismissively.

“Your family,” I protest. “Paul-Heinrich. The *kinder!* Surely they’d like to have these someday.”

She shrugs. She turns to look at me. Though her gray-blue eyes are moist, her gaze is steady.

Except for a soft, ever-present buzzing, the room falls silent. One large fly lands suddenly among the photos. I brush it away and take my grand-aunt’s hand. I say, “Grete thinks when I’m a *Grossmutter*, the young will ask me about our family. If they do, I’ll tell them about my summer on the Hansen farm. I’ll tell them about you.”



The car is here to drive me to the city of Flensburg on the Danish border, where trains depart for Copenhagen. Ingo has gotten up early so he can say good-bye. Grete carries out my bag, a little lighter since I winnowed its contents and mailed home a package. The bag also carries something new. Tante Bertha's photos travel now in my safari suitcase.

Tante is crying. As the car rolls down the long drive to the road, I watch Tante, Grete, and Ingo through the rear window.



### *Schleswig-Holstein and Salt Lake City*

2010–2013. I'm sitting at a computer in the Department of Frisian Studies, headphones covering my ears. As I listen, rain clouds putty the sky and lilacs purple the city's streets in copious bloom. After thirty-eight years, a voice I love is speaking again, words in my lost ancestral dialect fill the computer screen, and I want this moment I've waited for so long to last. The office is bathed in the timid sunshine of a Baltic spring. It is May along the fjord, and the city of Kiel has ushered in another day of gentle breezes and sudden showers.

Though I took my mother to meet Bertha five years after my first visit, she died a month before we could arrive. Today her voice is music to me, its cadences clear and strong, even confident. The department chair says he couldn't have prepared this surprise for me if, like the others in the project, Bertha had spoken off-the-cuff. The tape would have taken longer to transcribe, and the professors have few minutes to spare with research funds dwindling. Your grand-aunt, he tells me, must have written out her remarks before the chair's retired colleague, a Swedish linguist, showed up packing a reel-to-reel tape recorder.

I laugh as I recall the message on a pillow that found its way to me. I tell him Bertha Hansen, *née* Thomsen, *wanted* to be remembered.

No time remains today to translate Bertha's Frisian, but the professor believes I've made a friend of the retired linguist? Perhaps he can help me out? And so I leave by bus for the railway station, carrying my find, a Frisian printout, and I wipe away tears on the train back to Husum. So what if the transcript is code to me? What matters is the voice, louder than the ancestral echoes I once hoped for in the shadow of the dike, more enduring, ultimately, than the dike itself.

I'm delighted later when the Swedish linguist promises to translate the pages for me, but even a professor emeritus has many projects, and mine falls to one side.

Two years go by, and I move to North Friesland to write chapters of a memoir during my sabbatical. Suddenly, half-way through my leave, I fall dangerously ill with a rare diagnosis. Ambulances carry me from one hospital to the next, from Husum on the North Sea to Flensburg on the Baltic. A dedicated neurosurgeon operates. I come back from the brink. I will walk again; I will write.

A get-well card arrives at the hospital from the Swedish linguist and his Finnish wife. I missed a lunch with them when I became ill, and I take advantage of my situation now to ask a favor. Soon an attachment arrives in formal High German. After I return to North Friesland, a friend turns the German into English and I read Bertha's memoir in my own language.

In the spring a Danish journalist interviews me for his paper, and when the story is picked up, interest grows in my upcoming presentation. On a summer evening four decades after my first encounter with the North Frisian dikes, a crowd listens to me present an excerpt in English before Frisian actors read the German version of "Watermarked."

My sabbatical is ending now, and I visit the Hansen plot in the Schobuell churchyard to bid farewell to Tante Bertha—and to her grandson Paul-Heinrich, who died too young, and to willing-hearted Grete. The next day I travel home.

When I arrive, wilting in Utah's heat, I walk past the antique album my mother gave me, the one I filled with photos of the eleven Thomsen children and display on the tea cart my father loved. I climb the stairs. I pass the enlarged photo of the old Thomsen farmhouse in its dark carved frame, enter my bedroom, and, kneeling by the bed, pull out from under it two long cardboard boxes. I shake the dust from their lids, take the photos out, and make piles of them on the rug beside me.

I haven't unpacked yet, neither my suitcases nor the items I stored before I left for Europe. Inside its storage bag, Tante's beige pillow remains safe, still as it came to me with "Forg . . . Me Not" in threadbare orange, the missing letters torn away with a thin triangle of cloth.

I spread out the photos on the rug. Lifting my head a moment, I look across the room to the portrait I painted after my first visit to North Friesland. In it, an elderly woman stands at a table in her kitchen, now the spare room where last week I stored some boxes. Wearing a long black house dress, the woman extends her right arm over the table; her hair, swept up and pinned at the crown, resembles tarnished silver. Curtains of white gauze filter sunlight at the window; in the garden beyond, wind blows a black dress hanging on the line. It is morning on the Hansen farm, and while I sort the photos she entrusted to me, Tante Bertha waters her geraniums.

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Doug Himes  
untitled



## LAND AND LINE

Andi Pitcher Davis, Art Editor

Doug Himes is an artist whose work strikes me as both ethereal and earthy with the ability to speak in both lithe lines and grounding colors. In other words, his art exhibits a specific Mormon attitude, drawing the line between the realities of a heaven that comes to earth and vice versa. His works invite our eyes to dig in as they plant our minds in the fertile soil of beauty. A gift and a grace, and ultimately a garden.

Gardens link land with lines—row upon row, they criss and cross the earth in order to cultivate something new and living. Himes's lines perform the same feat: marks across paper generate fresh, fecund forms, inviting us to pause and really look at our surroundings and see them with new eyes. This generative and generous spirit drew me to Himes's work for this issue of the journal, with its focus on the ecologies that nourish our lives, our world, and our faith.

I asked Jay Griffith, whose trail running and writing place him in a similar thematic space, to respond to the garden (celebrated in the quintessential Mormon hymn “Adam-ondi-Ahman”) for this issue. The result—a poetic meditation on the garden we call earth—calls into question our own relationship with land and line. Are we gardeners? Are we Gods'? Are we cultivated? These questions are well worth considering—are we the land or are we the line?—both in art and life.

## Hymn #49

Jay Griffith

*“This earth was once a garden place,  
With all her glories common.”*

This morning I helped a friend bury her dog  
A dog that she once didn't want  
Taken in under duress  
But in time grew affection for.

Our tears mingled with the gray sky drops  
Falling gently on the mounds of shadow dark earth  
Freshly spaded and heaved to each side  
Of the chosen birth place for Jacksie  
To grow in entropy and resurrect new life  
In Lorene's garden of common glories.

“Dust to dust” she said.

Coincidentally (is not life so often curiously coincidental?)  
Just before this grace of being called upon  
To help my friend open the womb of Mother Earth  
And reverently return Jacksie back to Her care  
I had read these words of Saint Paul:

“We have this treasure in clay jars  
To demonstrate that this exceptional power  
Belongs to God and is not from us.”

Ah yes! We—these uncreated intelligences—

We cast about in our clay jars  
Flailing about to find the face of Jesus  
In the works of our hands rather than in our hearts.  
In our exceptional power rather than in the garden given—  
The place that God for us prepared—  
This Adam-ondi-Ahman.

*“Her land was good and greatly blest . . .”*

“Was” is the operative word.

And I wonder:

What has God repaired in this land once good and greatly blessed?  
What has Mother Earth rescued?  
So many species—remarkably evolved and pronounced “good”—  
Have come and gone long before we came.

But She stood still and let them extinguish.  
Lost pieces of creations puzzle.

*“Her fame was known from east to west,  
Her peace was great, and pure the rest.”*

And then on the sixth day  
In the very last moments in this long survival of the fittest  
Mother Earth gave birth to man and woman  
At Adam-ondi-Ahman.

Clay vessels bearing divine wine  
Spirits breathed and become earthy  
Thirsty for knowledge  
Hungry to become Gods

Remaking earth in our image  
An image of man mingled with scripture  
Of glorious beauty and invention and Jesus love  
Mingled with our exceptional power to degrade and pollute and extort  
Marring and scarring this glorious garden place  
This Adam-on-di-Ahman.

*“We read that Enoch walked with God,  
Above the pow’r of mammon,  
While Zion spread herself abroad”*

Yes. Zion is spread abroad. Thinly.  
Enoch and kin left the garden long ago.

“O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth  
thy hiding place?

“How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye,  
Yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs done”  
By thy people and of thy servants,  
And thine ear be penetrated with the cries  
Of Adam-on-di-Ahman?

We—whom you made Lords over all the earth—  
We are naming our dominions extinct at an unprecedented rate.

*“And men did live a holy race,  
And worship Jesus face to face”*

We—the treasure in holy jars of clay—do not mourn or reverently bury,  
These our dead.  
There are no sky gray tears for these lives we did not want.

Where is our affection born of time spent with them?

Sweet Jesus, more holiness give us, in this race against end times.

We are proud of our greatness and glory.

We think we can buy anything in this world with money.

And yet—and yet Father-Mother still stand still

Watching us purchase the dissolution of Adam-ondi-Ahman

As we journey far from our first covenant path.

*“Hosanna to such days to come,  
The Savior’s second coming,  
When all the earth in glorious bloom  
Affords the Saints a holy home,  
Like Adam-ondi-Ahman.”*

Will this God save us in our sins?

Or will She still be still—and wait—

Wait for us to pick up our shovels

And excavate our hearts

And bury our weapons of war

And pour new wine in our jars of clay

And rescue Adam-ondi-Ahman.

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JAY GRIFFITH is the owner and creative director at Blue Cairn Media. He also facilitates the monthly discussion groups ThinkAgain and FaithAgain (<https://www.thinkagain-faithagain.life/>) and is often asked to be a facilitator in community dialogues. He is an ultrarunner and writer. His life in both of these worlds is featured in the award-winning short film *Holy* (<https://upforairseries.org/media/>).

## Death in a Dry Climate

John Bennion. *Ezekiel's Third Wife*. Winchester, UK: Roundfire Books, 2019. 232 pp. Paper: \$15.95. ISBN 978-1-78904-095-1.

*Reviewed by Michael Austin*

Rachel O'Brien Rockwood Wainwright Harker—the narrator and eponymous heroine of John Bennion's new mystery novel *Ezekiel's Third Wife*, has four last names, none of which is superfluous. Together, they tell a remarkable story about our heroine in the years before the novel begins. Here is the digest version.

Timothy O'Brien, Rachel's natural father, was an abusive drunkard who Rachel's mother walked out on when she was eleven years old (she is twenty at the start of the novel). And Ezekiel Wainwright, the polygamous Mormon storekeeper to whom Rachel was married at eighteen, has been sent to England on a mission for the Church—where, in violation of the recent Manifesto by Wilford Woodruff, he has courted an even younger woman to be wife number four. Both men function in the narrative only as absences, but they are profound absences who leave behind gaps and holes that shape the narrative in important ways.

The other two last names belong to the most important men in both the story and in Rachel's life. The wealthy Mormon rancher and tracker J. D. Rockwood became Rachel's stepfather when her mother joined the Saints and became his fifth wife. When Rachel's mother died, J. D. kept Rachel in his home and treated her as a favorite daughter. In the community, which is also named Rockwood, J. D. is both feared and revered—much like the historical Porter Rockwell, upon whom (I strongly suspect) he has been very loosely based.

Rachel's final name comes from Matthew Harker, her childhood sweetheart from her days in Nevada, who finds her a year after she

marries Ezekiel and convinces her to become his legal wife, her marriage to Ezekiel being an ecclesiastical union only and not sanctioned by the law of the land.

*Ezekiel's Third Wife* begins just two weeks after this secret marriage. Ezekiel is still in England, J. D. is still tracking down bad guys, and the desert community of Rockwood has been rocked by a series of water disputes. In good Mormon fashion, the bishop has appointed one of his counselors to be the water master and to apportion the town's scarce supply. Crops are failing, and the entire community is threatened with starvation in the coming winter. Everybody needs water. Some people are willing to cheat to get it—and, just possibly (this is a murder mystery after all), to kill for it.

The dead body belongs to Ezekiel's second wife, Sophia—who Rachel finds quite dead in an irrigation ditch with a gash on her head. To make matters interesting, Rachel discovers Sophia's body on her way to a conjugal visit with her secret husband, who is now working as a wagon driver so he can manage occasional and highly secret visits to Rachel's family barn. When she finds her sister wife, Matthew is nowhere to be seen—but he has left his gentile tracks all over the crime scene to be discovered by J. D. Rockwood, whose tracking skills and penchant for rough justice are both legendary. All of this sets up the body of the novel, which consists of Rachel trying to find Sophia's real killer so that one of the most important men in her life doesn't kill the other.

One of the great strengths of the novel is that it refuses to traffic in either stereotypes or easy answers. With only a few tweaks, Rachel's story could become *Riders of the Purple Sage*—or any one of the dozens of dime novels upon which the Zane Grey novel is based. But Rachel is no Jane Withersteen. She loves her stepfather, respects the members of her community, and genuinely believes in the spiritual power of the Mormon faith. And Matthew Harker is no Lassiter. He has a last name, for one thing, and he is animated by a positive love for Rachel and not a bitter hatred of all things Mormon. Rachel must make serious choices



throughout the novel, but it never does us the disservice of portraying any of these choices as easy.

Polygamy especially is treated as the enormously complex institution that it was. Rachel does not entirely reject the institution of polygamy, which allowed both her and her mother to escape from an abusive man and enjoy the protection of nurturing family. And the community of sister wives created by Ezekiel's marriages provides a lot of support in his absence. One imagines that there would have been a lot more suffering in the world if he had only had one wife to abandon in the service of the Church.

What Rachel does entirely reject, though, is the patriarchal assumption that only men should be able to marry multiple partners. If she can be Ezekiel's third wife, she reasons, then there is no good reason that Matthew cannot be her second husband. What's sauce for the gander must be equally saucy for the goose. This assumption places her directly at odds with her community, but it also serves as a thought experiment to test all of the non-patriarchal defenses of polygamy that twenty-first-century Mormons have created to try to make their nineteenth-century ancestors seem a little less weird. Polygamy, we like to tell ourselves, made sure that everybody had a home and a family. It provided husbands for all of the widowed women and fathers for all of the orphaned children. And it allowed the Saints to prosper in the harshest of deserts. Perhaps, Rachel suggests, but all of these objectives would be served by allowing a woman whose husband has abandoned the family in the service of the Church to take a second husband too.

The polygamous families in Bennion's world work well sometimes, sort of, in a limited way, but they also have systemic issues that produce problems that cannot be solved. Much the same can be said of the community built around them. The defining characteristic of Rockwood is its lack of water. In response, the town's Mormons (and everybody in the town is Mormon) practice a strict rationing system—a sort of aquatic united order. This, they believe, is how you build Zion in the desert.

Except when it isn't. Because even faith can't prevent what Garrett Hardin described in 1968 as "the tragedy of the commons."<sup>1</sup> Simply put, creating a common resource incentivizes cheating by creating huge rewards for being the only one who doesn't follow the rules. When this happens in Rockwood, it exposes the fractures in the community and leads to scapegoating, ostracism, and, ultimately, murder. These things, perhaps, represent the downside of Zion.

But *Ezekiel's Third Wife* is not a treatise about early Mormon polygamy or the fault lines of communitarianism or the tragedy of the commons. It is a murder mystery, and we must ultimately judge it on how well it does the things that murder mysteries are supposed to do. This includes getting somebody killed, devising an interesting puzzle, raising the stakes for solving the puzzle, introducing a compelling sleuth, and creating an engaging theory of detection. Bennion does not disappoint in any of these areas. The puzzle is compelling, and the stakes could not be higher—and the detecting team of J. D. Rockwood and Rachel O'Brien Rockwood Wainwright Harker adds something unique to the annals of detective fiction.

It's not just that Rachel is a polygamous wife and J. D. is a gunslinging Danite—though one rarely sees such characters as anything other than stock villains in the mystery genre. Rachel and J. D. do their detecting through a wonderful synthesis of their very opposite characteristics. Rachel works through empathy and imagining herself in the shoes of the killer; J. D. works through physical evidence and deduction. J. D. is obsessed by justice; Rachel is consumed by mercy. J. D. works to please only God; Rachel tries to please J. D. And neither of them can succeed without the other, as Rachel herself articulates in a description of a previous case that they solved together:

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1. Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162 (Dec. 1968): 1243–148.

My approach had been to look at the people, trying to figure out who had reason to kill. My approach failed because everyone in Centre had reason to want the federal deputies dead. Everyone we talked to seemed guilty. What happened was that the killing was done for a reason no one thought of, a paradoxical reason. What led to the conclusion was belief that both the physical evidence, and the evidence of people's motives and character could solve the crime—that and reliance on the good sense of a meddling old woman in town, a woman J. D. had not respected. (170)

The story that Rachel alludes to here is told in Bennion's novel *An Unarmed Woman*, which was published earlier this year by Signature Books and which is set three years before the events in *Ezekiel's Third Wife* begin. By the normal conventions of the mystery genre, this would make *An Unarmed Woman* the first volume in a running series. But this is not, according to the author, how the two novels evolved. "I wrote *Ezekiel's Third Wife* first," Bennion reports, "then the idea for *An Unarmed Woman* came into my mind, and I knew it was about Rachel as an unmarried woman. So I went back and wrote that novel."<sup>2</sup>

Technically, this makes *An Unarmed Woman* a prequel—like *The Magician's Nephew* or *The Phantom Menace*. But what it really means is that these are two separate novels with two different publishers that (because different publishers work at different speeds) happen to have been published within a few months of each other in a sequence that mirrors the timeline of the storyworld. Neither one depends on the other, and they can be read profitably in any order. They are united only by a common set of characters and the considerable craftsmanship of their author.

And *Ezekiel's Third Wife* is, above all else, a well-crafted story. It takes on a lot of big issues—polygamy, desert communitarianism, water rights, patriarchal culture, loyalty, belonging, and Mormon identity—and never feels like it is trying to do too much. But it still manages to

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2. John Bennion, personal e-mail communication, May 26, 2019.

be a cracking good murder mystery with a completely logical solution that I, for one, never saw coming. And it is in every way that matters an enormously satisfying book.

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## “I’m Not Shaving My Legs Until We Baptize!”

Angela Liscom Clayton. *The Legend of Hermana Plunge*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent, 2019. 211 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1-948218-09-2.

*Reviewed by Joshua Dewain Foster*

Deep into the narrative and mission of *The Legend of Hermana Plunge*, a new memoir by Angela Liscom Clayton, in a chapter focused on the consistent catcalling and unwanted advances she faced as a missionary in the Canary Islands in the late 1980s, a short retort epitomizes the first-person narrator that drives the book, Hermana Plunge. When the assistant to the president notices her unshaven legs in the car and triple-takes, Hermana Plunge quickly informs him: “I’m not shaving my legs until we baptize!” (181).

This clever interjection isn’t just surprising and funny; it’s biting in its politics of gendered hypocrisy, as Hermana Plunge explains that a

certain group of elders had grown out their beards under the baptism ruse. This does a good job of getting the AP to stop rubbernecking and rein in his judgement. In reality, and no one's real business but her own, Hermana Plunge is growing out her leg hair so that she and other sister missionaries can go for their first waxing outing at a local salon on P-day, which doesn't go as well as even the snappy comeback did.

*The Legend of Hermana Plunge* is an experiential, journal-informed patchwork of Angela Liscom Clayton's proselytizing missionary experiences for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that runs chronologically from the time she receives her call while a BYU student—explaining her family's rich missionary heritage, her upbringing in Pennsylvania, and her desire to serve in France—to her arrival in the Canaries, and her work and experiences across four different islands with ten different companions. At every turn, Clayton does well to record the pre-2012 mission era as much different than the current one, in which Women could not serve until age twenty-one or older, and notes the many instances when she felt obligated and empowered to speak and stand up to problematic, leadership-focused, entitled young men. Throughout, Clayton recollects calling for change from everyone from the mission president to the junior companions, preaching a more egalitarian missionary message of Christian love and service. Her practices prove sound and productive, and on October 22, 1989, she and Hermana Simmons witness six of their investigators attend church and get baptized in one day, earning her mission-wide fame and the nickname "Hermana Plunge."

This unlikely transformation from Sister Liscom into Hermana Plunge is gratifying and surprising to read, especially as the author self-describes early on: "I always saw myself on the fringe, not fitting in at BYU or in LDS culture. I had short hair, three earrings in each ear, and wore Suicidal Tendencies and Violent Femmes t-shirts to class. I didn't dress or talk like people from Utah—no surprise, since I wasn't from Utah. I hadn't dated Mormon boys before Derek" (11). Paramount too is her individual account of what it was like to be a young, educated,

unmarried woman of the faith, debating that going on a mission would put her into the “unmarriageable spinster” category, or staying would mark her as a “superficial twit.” Before the mission, she prays for a boyfriend, gets one she’s not crazy about, but has a long letter-writing relationship nonetheless until an inevitable breakup and “boyfriend bonfire.” The narrative is full of devout, chaste flirtations—in the letters, on the islands, and with other elders. These flames form and fuel a competitive and gossipy but tight-knit group of elders and sisters, who are most interested in doing the work of the Church while having fun. New friendships, food, and foreign experiences forge these young missionaries together, and *Hermana Plunge* learns, gaffes, loves, and leads, growing and becoming a new person in the world, guiding her to a love she’d never imagined, one the reader never would guess.

As much as it is recalled and recorded narrative, *The Legend of Hermana Plunge* is critique too, and immersion through the problematic gendered experiences of the mission format of the past. It is not written to be a gilded mission memoir, but a transparent and honest one, where power imbalance is called such, hypocrisies are voiced and wrestled with, and the experience of a middle-class American woman isn’t isolated from the native country, or the contemporary moments and politics that the missionaries find themselves in. The book is filled with rock songs, classic movie and book allusions, drugs and poverty and heartbreak and sickness, conversions, doubts, and hopes that all speak to and with the Canaries and their communities.

Clayton’s—or Plunge’s—own magnanimous personal insights at the end of her service are striking, and worth championing:

I found myself defending the flaws I shared, but things like leaders berating others and being egotistical were flaws I wouldn’t defend. I defended people who felt like they were on the outside, disenfranchised by the mission, but not the flawed and inadequate responses of the leaders to the rule-breakers. I was capable of empathy for those converts who broke the law of chastity, which seemed normal to me, but not to

those who were too harsh in dealing with them, those who were prudish and preached a horror of the natural man. I didn't defend laziness or dishonesty, but I detested tattling missionaries or those who pried and spied on others, considering that the greater sin. Self-justification and hypocrisy were the sins Jesus had decried, after all. But maybe all of these were also just human shortcomings. (224)

*The Legend of Hermana Plunge* is a rollicking, humorous, sincere look at the missionary experience, and a valuable addition to the LDS mission memoir category of faith-affirming texts. Because what is more valuable than an honest take of that impactful span of early years as told by an inspired minority counter-culture participant, replete with the universal tensions of individual friction and freedom? The memoir's good faith is in its directness, and its good will is in the spirit of Clayton as an imperfect, effective, jaded missionary who is willing to tell it how it really happened, like it really was. As Clayton herself embraces after her first month in the mission: "I decided that the best way to deal with personal mortification was to own it and retell the stories to my fellow missionaries so they could enjoy the joke at my expense. It's a strategy that hasn't failed me yet" (25). Indeed, it's a strategy that hasn't failed her here, either.

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## The “Blackblue Heartguts” of Trees

Brooke Larson. *Pleasing Tree*. Arc Pair Press, 2019. 158 pp. Paperback. \$16.00. ISBN: 978-1733971911.

*Reviewed by Amy Takabori*

Brooke Larson is a tree hugger—literally.

She hugs a female ginkgo in Central Park after pissing at its base. This reminds her of a tree she once hugged in Jerusalem. She walks tree to tree down sidewalks in Salt Lake City.

Larson’s interactions with trees and other earth things are central to her “earthling” wanderings through the Arizona desert, New York City parks, and Israel in her collection of personal essays, *Pleasing Tree*. Throughout, Larson masterfully balances humor with profundity, using her insights into plant processes to explore questions like “how did I get here?”

The collection begins powerfully with “Ecology of Absence,” in which Larson recounts her experiences as a guide in a wilderness therapy program for “precarious” teens, which centers around a long walk across a wild stretch of Arizona desert. Walking is the process and the destination—there’s little else to do under the blazing sun. In between episodes about variously stubborn and pained teen walkers, Larson walks us through ruminations of Navajo tradition, Mormon pioneer heritage, Chinese aesthetic philosophy, and John Cage’s performances of silence. In doing so, Larson extols the virtue of blandness. “The bland is a full achievement: not the lack of flavor, but the possibility of all flavors” (8). The bland, the silent, the empty, and the arid: these are not states of lacking. They are states of possibility.

Our winding nature walk continues in “Plant Inter/eruption” as Larson loses herself in a crisis of post-Mormon transition, then finds solace in dewdrops on a plant. “I found myself dropped to knees to look into light. My heart beat prismatic, my finger tapped the leaf, the dew bounced its way down from blade to blade, never breaking, sparkling,



a self-contained sunburst. Good god! I exhaled. That there could be something so lit up” (44).

We keep walking with Larson in “Treehab” as she compares a kiss to a pea tendril. Plants respond to touch, but at their own pace. If you touch a chilled pea tendril, she explains, it will not move, but “as soon as it warms up, the tendril will curl as if you just stroked it. Plants don’t forget you out there” (57). The kiss is one she shared with a fellow trail guide in a tent before sunrise. “Under that rain shelter, then in sunlight, then beyond desert, in the city, across the country, on foreign couches and under wool blankets, from bored winters to barefoot road trips, long-distance phone calls, silence, sarcasm, ending, and not letting go, and ending again, finally, and forgiving—he and I will grow different for touching” (64). We are similar to plants, Larson shows us. Our shapes will take their time to reveal how even brief encounters will change us.

Larson’s steps are sometimes furtive, such as in darting down alleys as a “recreational urban urinator” (68), in “Piss on Heartbreak.” There are not enough public bathrooms in the city to meet her needs, so she makes a hobby of covert public urination. On one particular day she can’t avoid shitting her pants standing on a New York City sidewalk, and she strides triumphantly home for three miles—what else can she do?

Her wanderings cover more ground than I have space to cover here, but suffice to say her reflections on trying ayahuasca, on seasonal affective disorder, and the “manyfold worlds” (136) of Jerusalem are worth the trek.

Between the full-length essays are intermissions of concrete poems, or images composed by letters and symbols, and flash essays that are each a page and a half long. While these are mostly lovely, my only quibble with *Pleasing Tree* is with one of these flash essays, and it is a concern of stylistic preference. The hyper-alliteration in “brood” in lines such as the following were more distracting than melodic: “There is a graphic gravity to it, holding the letters together, making them a body—a space—where the convexities of convention converge with shivering content. That is to say the medium is the message” (48). My respect for Marshall McLuhan notwithstanding (this media theorist’s

legacy is “the medium is the message”), the unrelenting repetition was overwhelming. But I realize that is the point, so other readers may find that it delivers.

Otherwise, *Pleasing Tree* is a captivating and skillfully constructed collection of essays that will appeal to LDS and non-LDS readers alike. Larson explains Mormon culture and history so that the uninitiated will find her essays easily accessible. However, reading this collection with a Mormon background certainly does pack more punch into some of the stories. In fact, one of the most moving episodes of the entire collection resonated with my own feminist Mormon sentiments. Larson recounts her pioneer ancestress whose family reached a plateau in the Mountain West during a raging blizzard when she went into labor.

The husband tried to pitch a tent as she pushed. As the baby emerged, a hard slapping wind came and blew the tent upward. The woman reached up and held the pole down with one hand, the baby, now, in the other.

The desert is full of holy tents full of holy men and holy smoke of manly meats for the man-god behind the curtain. But when I hear the Lord dwelt in a tent, all I see inside is my foremother using her body as a stake as she pushes out human life. (32)

Larson identifies as an “ethnic Mormon,” which she explains is the “bland state” (17) between LDS and ex-LDS, and it is also, as she is likely highly aware, the term coined by David G. Pace in a 1999 essay published in *Dialogue*.<sup>1</sup> Although Larson’s ethnic Mormon identity is not the centerpiece of these essays, as an ethnic Mormon myself, I recognized myself in some of her experiences unique to that liminal identity. Many other readers will likely also hear echoes of themselves in Larson’s search for belonging. As the Church continues to grapple with how to make its community more inclusive to a wider spectrum of people, it is worth noting that Larson is making a meaningful contribution to the visibility of “ethnic Mormons” with this collection.

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1. David G. Pace, “After the (Second) Fall: A Journey toward Ethnic Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 85–95.

Ultimately, *Pleasing Tree* is written by and for wanderers searching for meaning. She asks, “How did I get here?” and the answer seems to be “by contrasts.” We need absence to highlight presence, she contends. We need silence so we can hear. Plants need dark periods to get nutrients from the light. It is by getting lost that we can find ourselves. After walking through desert and beauty and loneliness and light, Larson beams hopeful. “And sometimes I feel it, when I’m filthy through and through with my own blackblue heartguts: the world is pleased with me. I am doing human alright” (72–73).

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## Worthy of Their Hire? Mormon Leaders’ Relationship with Wealth

D. Michael Quinn. *The Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth and Corporate Power*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2017. 597 pp. Endnotes. Appendices. Index. Cloth: \$49.95. Kindle: \$9.99. ISBN: 9781560852353.

*Review by Christopher C. Smith*

Twenty-three years after *Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* and twenty years after *Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, the long-awaited third volume of D. Michael Quinn’s *Mormon Hierarchy* series extends his

study of Latter-day Saint General Authorities into the realm of *Wealth and Corporate Power*.

The volume's doorstopper size ought not intimidate the reader. Narrative and endnote text span only 157 of its 597 pages. The remainder comprises twenty-one detailed appendices that will primarily interest specialists as reference materials.

Typical of the *Mormon Hierarchy* series and of Quinn's work in general, the latest volume hews to a "straight story" style of historical narration, with little historical context or theoretical framing. A self-described "DNA Mormon" excommunicated in 1993 partly for airing the Church's dirty laundry in his historical work, Quinn writes as a reformer in quest of ecclesiastical transparency. The tale he tells may be of interest to social scientists and economic historians, but Quinn frames it solely in terms of Mormon history and Mormon theological commitments.

*Wealth and Corporate Power* is much better organized than the previous *Mormon Hierarchy* volumes. The three chapters—on "Personal Wealth," "Corporate Mormonism," and "Church Finances"—mostly stay on their titular topics. The lack of an introduction, however, forces chapter 1 to stray from personal finance to frame the book and to explain the structure of the Church's financial bureaucracy, including the nature of the "corporation sole" and of the offices of presiding bishop and trustee-in-trust (1–2, 4–8).

In chapter 1, on General Authorities' income and assets, Quinn highlights Mormon leaders' fraught relationship with wealth.

Even as Joseph Smith derided the "hireling priests" of Protestant denominations, he also proclaimed in prophetic voice that a full-time Mormon leader "is worthy of his hire" (D&C 31:5; 70:12; 84:79; 106:3). (2–3)

This tension in Mormon theology has caused conflict. In May 1838 the Missouri stake high council voted to pay Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, but dropped the resolution due to public outcry. In 1845 the Quorum of the Twelve voted to exempt itself from tithing and to pay

itself “\$2.00 per day, six days per week.” Two years later, when weary pioneers complained of the arrangement, Brigham Young rebuked them for “whining and babbling about the 12 [apostles], saying that Brigham oppresses the poor and lives off their earning.” To subsequent complaints he retorted, “I av [have] a carriage & can ride over you.” While Young generally acted in his own financial interest, other apostles had qualms about their salaries and voted to scale them back after Young’s death (8–11). Because Mormons pride themselves on having no salaried ministry, General Authority salaries have been called “stipends” or “living allowances” in most Church literature (3–4).

Quinn’s data on Church leaders’ income and assets show a strong correlation between wealth and hierarchy rank. Joseph Smith consistently owned more than two and a half times more personal property than the average Church member, and “Brigham Young and his counselors were among Utah’s highest income earners every year.” Several Church presidents died millionaires (17–29). In addition to sometimes six-figure ecclesiastical salaries, top-level General Authorities received pay from Church-owned corporations they helped manage (30–33). In contrast, many local Church leaders volunteered without wages, and rank-and-file missionaries paid for the privilege to work full-time for the Church for years of their lives. This includes service missionaries working as ranch hands and real estate specialists for companies owned by the Church (134–36).

Quinn’s provocative discussion of leaders’ wealth leaves important questions unanswered. He mentions, but does not interrogate, the blurring of lines between institutional finances and the trustee-in-trust’s personal finances in the nineteenth century (29–30). And he stays out of the complex details of leaders’ finances, such as Joseph Smith’s extensive borrowing from both members and non-members of the LDS Church. There is much fodder here for future research.

Chapter 2, on “Corporate Mormonism,” examines LDS leaders’ deep ties to business interests. The five most active businessmen in the early

Utah Church's hierarchy "had management roles in 95–150 enterprises," and another forty men had management roles in more than twenty enterprises (57–58). In Appendix 5, Quinn lists more than 1,800 for-profit enterprises with General Authority involvement (177–446). This detailed catalogue represents thousands of hours of research and affords a fruitful starting point for all future economic histories of Mormonism.

Church leaders' business management roles sometimes led to bad blood and cutthroat competition between individual General Authorities. Leaders also found themselves caught up in lawsuits and corporate scandals (60–62). Quinn does not mention labor disputes, but my own research has found General Authorities caught up in those as well. Corporate work also distracted from ecclesiastical responsibilities (73–75). This led even staunch Mormon defender Hugh Nibley to pen scathing critiques of the Church (85).

Church involvement in business was at first more about achieving economic and political independence from non-Mormons than it was about making money, but the profit motive grew in importance and filtered into Church theology. Increasingly LDS leaders taught that finance has a spiritual dimension, that tithes-payers are "business partners" with the Lord, that Jesus was "the founder of modern business," and that the Lord favors capitalist economics over united order-style communism (49–51, 67–69). Quinn gestures toward these developments, but it remains for some other researcher to fully chronicle this theological evolution.

Chapter 3, on "Church Finances," looks at how presiding bishops and Church trustees have managed the Church's money. I knew that the LDS Church had invested in private enterprise from its founding, but I was surprised to learn that until 1933 these investments "were mostly a drain on the church's resources, driving it to the edge of bankruptcy" (109). By 1900, the Church owed nearly \$2.2 million. Church leaders explained the debt as a result of anti-Mormon persecution by the US government, but in fact "losses to the government had comprised only

4.6 percent of the church's debt in September 1898. Bad investments produced the rest." Leaders lost particularly large sums on failed mining ventures (109–11).

Vigorous solicitation of donations from members restored the Church to solvency by 1907, but bad investments continued until counselor to the First Presidency J. Reuben Clark imposed fiscal discipline in the 1930s and funneled the Church's monies into low-interest bank accounts rather than speculative investments. The Church renewed its investments in 1951, when counselor to the First Presidency Stephen L. Richards took over financial management. However, here Quinn makes a misstep in his historical interpretation, for he takes Richards's investment in "commercial and financial company paper" to mean renewed "purchases of stock" (111–14). Commercial paper is more like a corporate bond, but with a shorter maturation period. In comparison to stocks or bonds, it's a lower-risk, lower-yield investment vehicle.

Regardless, fiscal discipline broke down in the 1950s and early 1960s as the Church resumed deficit spending to build large numbers of meetinghouses. Counselor to the First Presidency N. Eldon Tanner saved the day in 1963 with a moratorium on new construction and investment and with the establishment of a cash reserve. Tanner imposed modern principles of scientific business management, systematized the Church's investments, and turned the Church's deficit into a \$30 million surplus by 1969. The Church's financial management continued to professionalize with appointment of Alan Blodgett "as managing director of the investments department in 1980." Blodgett channeled the Church's investments into a combination of stocks and bonds, real estate, and agricultural businesses. This strategy has produced a sizable surplus ever since (120–24).

Of particular interest in chapter 3 is its discussion of the Church's noncompliance with tax laws. According to Quinn, by 1978 the Church "adopted a policy of not complying with tax laws until administratively *forced* to do so by governmental agencies." This policy has saved the

Church millions or perhaps billions of dollars on sales and property taxes in many countries where tax enforcement is somewhat lax (124–28).

Quinn makes another interpretive misstep as he seeks to extrapolate from decades-old Church financial data to the present. Based on the observation that “tithing was growing at a mean average of 12.9 percent annually in the 1950s” and the assumption that that growth rate remained constant until the present, he arrives at a “conservative” estimate that 2010 tithing revenue totaled \$33.7 billion per year. Yet Quinn’s own evidence shows that tithing growth slowed in the 1960s despite a baptism boom during that decade (139–41). Moreover, the assumption that tithing growth held steady ignores both economic and membership data. Median real household income in the US grew about 50 percent between 1950 and 1965, but remained relatively flat from 1965 to 1995. Meanwhile, conversion and activity rates trended downward, and a growing proportion of new converts lived in less affluent countries than the United States. In light of these factors, Quinn’s “conservative” estimate appears inflated.

This highlights *Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth and Corporate Power*’s greatest weakness: that Quinn is a better historian than economist. To adjust dollar values for inflation he cites an unofficial Consumer Price Index (CPI) calculator “on the Internet,” although CPI is a dubious benchmark for comparing nineteenth- and twentieth-century values over large geographic areas (2). He cites the early twentieth-century Church’s claims that General Authorities were “paid out of revenues derived from investments, and not out of the tithes of the Church,” but he does not discuss how the fungibility of money casts doubt on such claims (4, 493). The financially literate will benefit from reading with a grain of salt in their critical eye.

Even so, *Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth and Corporate Power* is indispensable for the Mormon reformer or economic historian. Quinn’s tireless research and exhaustive documentation lay bare an extraordinary history of religious finance and financial religiosity. Here is an engaging story



for the casual reader and a fertile field for the researcher. At \$49.95 for the hardback and just \$9.99 on Kindle, this Mormon product is worth the investment.

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## A Barometer for Mormon Social Science

Jana Riess. *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 328 pp. Introduction, tables, appendices, index. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780190885205.

*Reviewed by Ryan Bell*

Latter-day Saints studies has long remained the prerogative of scholars in the humanities, lacking commensurate scholarly attention in the social sciences. Periodically, however, a promising piece of social science research is promulgated by investigators seeking to understand the Mormon movement “on the ground.” Though usually insightful, these comparatively rare works vary with respect to ambition and sophistication. One such, *The Next Mormons*, emerged this spring. While laudable in its descriptive aims, the work falters on explanatory assertions due to gaps in its research design. Ironically, the book’s most interesting analyses fall prone to confounding that causal logic could have obviated. Despite

some methodological issues, author Jana Riess offers a commendable start to tackling important questions on intergenerational belief and practice in the contemporary LDS Church.

This review focuses on what the book demonstrates about the current state of Latter-day Saint scholarship in the social sciences. While there is cause to be encouraged, there is a long way yet to traverse in order to subject the LDS experience to more rigorous empirical social inquiry.

*The Next Mormons*, published in 2019, is based on a 2016 survey with a matching namesake, “The Next Mormons Survey” (hereafter NMS). The NMS was designed in collaboration with political scientist Benjamin Knoll. Over \$20,000 was crowdfunded in order to contract with Qualtrics, a Seattle and Provo-based survey firm to administer the survey to Mormon and former Mormon respondents.<sup>1</sup> By paying Qualtrics to recruit participants, the firm was able to use a panel-matching technique, a large improvement over the snowball sampling on which former researchers have relied.<sup>2</sup> Herein lies one way in which this book stands apart from other scholarship: the author and her research partner were able to collect data from a nationally representative sample. This is an encouraging, if expensive, step forward for Mormon social science research as it overcomes the prohibitive issue of non-generalizable findings (e.g., can the findings of the survey be imputed to the general Mormon and former Mormon population?). There is no shortage of studies and surveys seeking to describe the practices and beliefs of

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1. For anyone unfamiliar with the term, crowdfunding is soliciting donations from a large number of patrons usually via the internet.

2. Snowball sampling is a method by which a researcher asks respondents to recruit their friends or acquaintances as additional participants in the research project. Thus, by exponential growth, participation should “snowball.” Issues with generalizability arise by virtue of homophily. My friends likely have a lot in common just as do yours, therefore research participants recruited through networks likely differ systematically from the rest of the population. Because snowball sampling is nonrandom, we cannot be sure that we aren’t collecting data that is biased *ab initio*.

Mormons and former Mormons, the problem is that until now most of these weren't generalizable.<sup>3</sup> As such, the descriptive statistics given in the book can be taken largely to represent the Mormon population within stated margins of error. Riess is thus able to make contributions other social scientists have typically not been able to make.

While adhering to a general theme of exploring belief and practice among Mormons and former Mormons, this book covers a wide range of contemporary topics. From race and LGBTQ+ to views on religious authority and sexual practices, Riess reveals how several generations of Latter-day Saints differ from one another in terms of belief and practice. Categorizing the generations in tripartite fashion as Baby Boomer/Silent Generation, Generation X, and Millennials, Riess explores topics thematically, arguing that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a changing church at odds with its own longitudinal permanence.

It comes as no surprise that *The Next Mormons* details how Millennials are growing up in less fecund households than their predecessors or that they are generally more liberal in how they view race, sexuality, and gender. But notwithstanding the author's findings, the stability of some intergenerational disparities has yet to be demonstrated. It's difficult not to question whether Riess's conflation of age, period, and cohort effects annul many of her conclusions that differences are based so much on generational affiliation.<sup>4</sup> To take one example, will Millennials

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3. The exception of course are large-scale surveys like GSS and Pew among others, but these don't focus exclusively on Mormonism.

4. Stephen Cranney, review of *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*, by Jana Riess, *BYU Studies*, 58, no. 2 (2019): 177–83. For more on the issue of age, period, and cohort effects and the precarity these present Riess's conclusions, see Cranney's review of Riess's book. Cranney is indeed correct that the only way to solve this issue would be to employ a longitudinal research design.

become more conservative in social views as they age just as it appears Baby Boomers did?<sup>5</sup>

In terms of narrative, description is this book's mainstay. While rich in information, this became tiresome as page after page contained a rotation of bar charts, tables, and the occasional pie chart summarizing components of the survey with simple comparisons of relative frequencies and averages. In places this book reads more like a report of findings complemented by some qualitative data for richness. Rather than building a case for something, the narrative often felt like meandering through basic statistics. This simple comparison strategy left the reader to ask just how monumental differences between generations really were on many measures. For example, is a seven-point difference between Gen X and Millennials on *y* belief or practice a compelling one or not? More sophistication in statistical technique could have gone a long way toward helping the author distinguish what was a compelling contrast from what was not, rather than simply relying on so much comparison of frequencies and means.

In places where more data could have been strategically discussed, the interested reader could be left quite unsatisfied. For example, Riess captured my attention with the statement, "The NMS finds that a completed mission correlates well with staying Mormon for the long term, even among people who were not very active in the LDS Church growing up. In other words, eight in ten people who had been less active as kids were still Mormon in adulthood if they had served a full-term mission."<sup>6</sup>

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5. The debate rages on as to this point. As with many things in the social sciences, there are a host of studies on the topic, but a conclusive answer remains elusive. See James Tilley and Geoffrey Evans, "Ageing and Generational Effects on Vote Choice: Combining Cross-Sectional and Panel Data to Estimate APC Effects," *Electoral Studies* 33 (March 2014): 19–27 for an example of both an age *and* a cohort effect on intergenerational conservatism.

6. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 46.

A footnote follows this statement, leading to what one presumes will be a more in-depth discussion of the exciting finding. Rather than explicating the analysis or model which led to the result, the footnote says simply, “I am grateful to Benjamin Knoll for running this and many other analyses of the data.” *What* analyses? Was there a *statistical* correlation? What was the significance level? Or was this simply the case that, as the text suggests, the author observed that roughly 80 percent of less-active children who also served a mission reported maintaining their Mormon affiliation and *assumed* some sort of correlation? The precarity of such an approach is immediately obvious to any practitioner of statistics, yet the author leaves it to the reader to rely on the authority of her research partner’s analysis for this conclusion. Such a finding would be gripping and worthy of much further research, however, little stock can be placed in it based on how it was presented in the book. Perhaps it was just a poor choice of words, but based on the fact that more advanced statistical analyses were performed and reported elsewhere, why not here as well?

In another place, Riess did attempt a more robust statistical model in a section entitled, “Factors Associated with Greater Belief” near the end of the book’s first chapter. Empirically identifying factors promoting belief among Latter-day Saints would be a prodigious contribution to Mormon social science research. Methodologically, this section conformed to standard practice in the social sciences: Riess and Knoll used a multivariate logistic regression with a number of control variables, robust standard errors, and regression diagnostics including tests for multicollinearity and heteroskedasticity.<sup>7</sup> The author reports controlling for a litany of variables including: age, gender, race, income, education,

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7. Benjamin Knoll and Jana Riess, “Infected with Doubt: An Empirical Overview of Belief and Non-Belief in Contemporary American Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 1–38. In conjunction with Benjamin Knoll, the book’s author, Jana Riess, co-authored a paper in *Dialogue*, focusing on this portion of the Next Mormons Survey. It is from this paper which I draw details of their methodology for the analysis. The results were merely reported in the book with no real discussion on method.

frequency of church attendance, convert status, marital status, political partisanship, numbers of friends and family who have left the Church, and numbers of Mormons in one's close friendship circle and extended family.

These controls are all to ensure that the possibility of a confounder is eliminated, that is, to make sure what is influencing later belief isn't actually something unexpected like perhaps gender, race, or other variables. That way, the researchers can say, for example, that the only difference between respondents was whether or not they attended church and seminary to observe how each differed with respect to later belief.

The issue with the author's approach to this question is that belief was likely an influential factor in whether one attended seminary or church in the first place. Based on this analysis, there is no way to demonstrate that variation in later belief is attributable directly to attendance at church or seminary independent of prior belief. It is equally as plausible that those who attended seminary and church did so *because* they already believed—and thus their greater levels of belief later in life were *not* due to church or seminary attendance. Quite possibly these individuals, already believing, would have reported greater levels of belief without church or seminary attendance at all. This is a significant problem. Ancillary measures of activity such as serving a mission are not a satisfactory surrogate measure for actual belief in youth.<sup>8</sup>

This isn't splitting hairs or asking for the impossible. In fact, there are a few ways this could have been avoided, utilizing the vast literature extant on causal inference using observational data. Directed acyclic

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8. Knoll and Riess, "Infected with Doubt," 16. The authors briefly acknowledge the possibility of "dual-causation" in their article, however no satisfactory remedy is offered. In one place they state, "the fact that this analysis controls for other factors that are also correlated with strong activity growing up strongly suggests that attending seminary has at least some causative effect on the likelihood of being a Believer later in life." These gymnastics are unnecessary and unproductive, measuring prior belief would have been a more direct remedy to the problem.

graphs (DAGs) could have assisted in meeting Judea Pearl’s backdoor path criterion.<sup>9</sup> But this presupposes knowledge of the full graphical structure of the covariate set and their relations to one another—perhaps too strenuous a requirement given the subject matter. Therefore, covariates could be subjected to the disjunctive cause criterion simply by asking whether each is a cause of the treatment *and* the outcome.<sup>10</sup>

In either case, rather than constructing an eclectic model with a cacophony of control variables, more reasoned design by causal inference might have revealed the error and made for a more elegant, reasoned and valid model; then the confounder could have been eliminated by stratifying or conditioning on prior belief.<sup>11</sup> In terms of measuring prior

9. Judea Pearl, *Causality: Models, Reasoning, and Inference*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). It is helpful when designing a model to conceptualize it in a causal graph, sometimes called a directed acyclic graph (DAG), in order to visually tease out the logic of controls. Pearl is the household name for causal graphs.

10. Tyler J. VanderWeele and Ilya Shpitser, “A New Criterion for Confounder Selection,” *Biometrics* 67, no. 4 (2011): 1406–13.

11. The researchers could have directly measured an individual’s prior belief any number of ways and then conditioned or stratified on this. Simply conceived, such a strategy would be intended to calculate the average treatment effect among the control and the treated. The table following is to visualize the concept, I make no argument here as to ideal cutpoints:

	Treatment		
<i>Prior State</i>	Treatment = 1 [Attended church]	Treatment = 0 [Did not attend church]	<i>Total Outcome [Belief]</i>
Prior Believer			
Prior Doubter			
<i>Total Outcome [Belief]</i>			

Through standardization, we can also calculate the expected value of the observed outcome averaged over the distribution of the covariate of interest:

belief, the risk of social desirability and recall bias would have been no more threatening than on other constructs of the NMS survey and there are myriad ways such concerns could be allayed.<sup>12</sup>

As it stands, Riess's finding that seminary and church attendance are associated with greater belief later in life has little substantive significance. More attention to the logic of research design could have alleviated this problem and allowed for a truly interesting finding.

Imagine if Riess could have justifiably discussed in this book whether, *ceteris paribus*, seminary or church attendance really does influence later belief. That would have been something to write home about.

To conclude, *The Next Mormons* is intriguing in the snapshot it presents on intergenerational Mormon belief and practice, but falls short on deeper, explanatory analysis. This I would have hoped to get more of in a book published by an academic press of high esteem. This does not diminish the book's contribution in establishing many important facts, but it does reflect the current state of Mormon social science research. Description is a laudable aim, and the first step to establishing facts for further exploration.<sup>13</sup> To advance to the second step, though, social scientists engaged in Latter-day Saint studies will have to utilize more

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$E(Y^a) = \sum_x E(Y|A = a, X = x)P(X = x)$  where  $a$  is the treatment and  $x$  is the covariate, in this case, prior belief.

12. Gary King, Christopher J. L. Murray, Joshua Salomon, and Ajay Tandon, "Enhancing the Validity and Cross-cultural Comparability of Measurement in Survey Research," *American Political Science Review* 98 (2004): 191–207. Given the Mormon penchant for testimony and "true conversion" I would argue that individuals would reliably recall and relate their belief through time. If concerns remained, the use of vignettes has been shown as a promising way to standardize survey responses open to subjectivity or interpretive bias. Not only could this be of help here, but would likely have been a help on questions later in the book in which Millennials overestimated their own religious behaviors compared to more mature generations. Vignettes could also have assisted in closing the generational gap on the subjective interpretation of survey questions.

13. John H. Goldthorpe, *Sociology as a Population Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).



so-called quasi-experimental methods and techniques for observational data. In order to advance, researchers need to move beyond eclectic statistical models in favor of more reasoned research designs.

Despite the critiques, this book is a welcome addition to existing social science research in Latter-day Saint studies as one among few to even approach representative sampling. Pew, GSS, and a small handful of other well-funded research enterprises have been a boon to Mormon social scientists as nationally representative, but lack the flexibility required by Mormon researchers who are able to construct their own surveys. While the generalizable result is something to be emulated, it is unlikely that the NMS will be replicated anytime soon given the prohibitive cost. Most researchers simply aren't able to find donors willing to front \$20,000 for Mormon social science research.

It would be highly encouraging for the data and STATA code on which *The Next Mormons* is based to be anonymized and distributed freely. Replication is an important part of scientific inquiry. Sharing this data with other researchers could lead to many fascinating findings beyond what was raised in *The Next Mormons*. More eyes and minds on the NMS data can get a lot more mileage by sharing code, building models, replicating results, and collaborating on projects that would not be possible for most in the field to do in isolation. It is the same spirit of scholarly cooperation that motivates this review. Riess is clearly an excellent writer and motivated researcher who has procured useful data. Now let's gather the best ideas and methods from disparate ends of academia to learn as much from it as possible.

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## Lessons from Baltimore's Black Mormon Matriarchs on Discovering God's Compassion

Laura Rutter Strickling. *On Fire in Baltimore: Black Mormon Women and Conversion in a Raging City*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018. 197 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. Paperback: \$20.95. ISBN: 9781589587229 (hardcover), 9781589587168 (paperback).

*Reviewed by Patrick Hemming*

“Dear God, Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me,” Alice Walker’s main character Celie writes at the start of *The Color Purple*.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Georgia, a real-life Black Mormon woman in current-day Baltimore stands up in testimony meeting with a written poem in hand:

Heavenly Father  
I don’t understand  
why my tears  
fall on deaf ears.

In Laura Rutter Strickling’s new collection *On Fire in Baltimore: Black Mormon Women and Conversion in a Raging City*, Georgia and ten other Black Mormon women impart to us an impressive set of personal and spiritual narratives. Along the way, she ties each story together with a thoughtful and accessible narrative of Baltimore’s racial history, of evolving Latter-day Saint racial attitudes and practices, and of the fire that drives conversion and commitment for these urban Black sisters.

These stories paint worlds that are both familiar and jarringly foreign to white suburban Mormons like me and many of this journal’s readers. Even for those of us who have lived in and loved Baltimore or similar American cities, wide gaps frequently separate our own lived

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1. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982).

experiences and the experiences of our Black urban brothers and sisters. Strickling describes the foyer at church with some women discussing trips to Disney World and others discussing food stamps: “On the one hand, mothers were troubled about securing bail for a son in jail, and on the other, worried about sending a daughter to Europe” (xvii). In presenting these accounts, Strickling provides lived examples from our truly American Latter-day Saint faith tradition, burdened systematically throughout its history—just like the city of Baltimore—by the fundamental racial inequalities of our society.

Strickling states that she became intrigued by the way the African American women at church initiated vocal prayers, speaking to God about informal matters as though the prayer was not given in public. She spent over ten years collecting interviews in the context of regular interactions in church callings and meetings. Strickling writes “I found that much of their conversion to Mormonism had risen from racially entangled events that produced a kind of despair that I had not experienced” (xx). She describes several of these harrowing experiences of dire poverty, violence, and addiction that mark these lives like a hidden scar. At the same time, the narrative includes testimonies, visions, miracles, and healings. She writes that “these Black sisters possessed a burning trust—an unquenchable spiritual fire—that I was not acquainted with.”

*On Fire in Baltimore* grapples with the inherent pitfalls that arise from a white person recording and synthesizing the voices of Black women who have historically lacked such a platform of power from which to speak. Ultimately, this tension remains throughout the book. Strickling reminds the reader often of her struggle to be aware of and moderate the filter of her rural Western Mormon upbringing, which unconsciously adds judgments and biases to her narration. My sense is that most readers will appreciate her honesty and see in her writing the earnestness akin to any Latter-day Saint seeking—sometimes uncomfortably—to provide ministering and service in a culturally-sensitive manner to her church brothers and sisters. Yet the serious problem remains of a book published by a white woman that draws entirely from Black words.

Unfortunately, the format of the book leaves its remarkable narrators under pseudonyms, giving no authorship or credit to the women who created so much of the manuscript. The historical context of power imbalances in academic work should not be ignored or glossed over. I hope that future efforts in this subject will better address these inequities and find ways of appropriately giving authorship credit.

Despite these shortcomings, Strickling does demonstrate her clear love for words and language to make the stories of these women come alive. Drawing on her graduate studies in sociocultural linguistics, she replicates the speaking patterns of women. Each woman's voice is distinctive, and given flesh in descriptions like the following of ninety-four-year-old Dee, the oldest woman in the ward: "When she talks, she touches whoever is close by with a series of gestures. She caresses your arm when she is giving you background information; when the narration picks up she pats you with her fingers, and at the climax of the story, she'll give you a little push while simultaneously exclaiming, 'but I lived through it, yes indeedy—I sure did!'" (40). Street corners, public housing projects, and familiar sites like Baltimore's Washington Monument come alive in Strickling's prose:

Baltimore saw record snowfall the winter Dee passed away. . . . There were no rowdy teenage boys walking home from Digital Harbor High in front of my window, no tourists that occupied sidewalks or puzzled over parking signs. The cars that lined the street were transformed into unblemished, white mounds and a blanket of unusual calmness settled over every neighborhood. (52)

Each of the eleven chapters (with enigmatic titles like "Ain't Nobody Going to Drift Me," and "You Don't Serve God Then Drink With the Devil") stands well on its own. Dee's story, with its broad historical sweep incorporates many elements of the Great Migration: upbringing in the deeply segregated rural landscape of Maryland's Eastern Shore; the move to the city for economic opportunity; experience with the flourishing of Black urban culture; the decay of urban neighborhoods into unemployment and crime; disrupted family relationships all along

the way. Older women like Dee step in to raise children when parents fail. Dee shares the strange, macabre, and miraculous story of finding a baby crying in a dumpster and raising the child herself.

I must note here that I am not merely a casual reader of *On Fire in Baltimore*. I lived in the ward described in the book for several of the years when Laura Strickling was doing interviews, and I know her and each of the women described. One of the powerful themes of this book is the description of three of the ward's matriarchal figures (Sheera, Clara, and Helen). Sheera leads as a member-missionary who brought many family members into the Church. Clara, the long-term Gospel Doctrine class president, presided over each week's lesson connecting the reading assignment with the most recent events in Baltimore then summarizing the teacher's lesson before choosing the closing prayer. Finally, Helen—who in her early eighties always presided over fast and testimony meeting through opening the hour by always being the first person to hurry to the pulpit and bear her testimony. The final chapter of the book, "Pray for These Three Things," brings Helen vividly to life. Helen raises her hand in a Relief Society lesson on modern threats to the family to say "Mothers can't get government assistance if the father is living in the house. He has to leave in order for the mother to get food stamps. . . . This is an attack on the family" (147).

The political and racial dynamics of "On Fire in Baltimore," such as Helen's comments about government assistance, lay bare uncomfortable tension between the traditional proud self-reliance of Western Latter-day Saints and converts from marginalized communities like Helen's. Helen acknowledges the tension, but shrugs it off as a byproduct of a fallen world: "Lots of people, even here, at our Baltimore church, don't like Blacks. But that's the way life is. You have to go along with the program, try your best, and ask forgiveness. We're not going to see peace until Jesus Christ comes" (158).

These sisters simultaneously embrace bleak realism and transcendent spiritual deliverance. Georgia, as she stands to read her poem in fast and testimony meeting, begins by echoing Alice Walker's character Celie. Georgia reads:

So, tell me why my life is so hard.  
 Are you listening?  
 Where are you God?

But her answer contrasts sharply with Alice Walker's Celie, who writes bitterly "you must be sleep" in her last written message to God.<sup>2</sup> Georgia continues, narrating her Heavenly Father's response:

I will always mend  
 But you will be my masterpiece  
 In the end.

For white and suburban Latter-day Saint readers, *On Fire in Baltimore* may seem like attending their church meetings in an unfamiliar and foreign place. You may have never heard someone read a poem like Georgia's in a testimony. You may feel threatened when a class member in Relief Society shares a story about recently using cocaine or scratch your head when the woman closes class with a prayer thanking Heavenly Father that we all "woke up in our right minds" (xviii). But Latter-day Saint readers of diverse backgrounds will find themselves in deeply familiar territory as they listen to these Sisters faithfully implore an approachable, personal God. No matter what your geographic, religious, or social location is, many will find a warmth and connection to the stories of these women and the grace that they have welcomed into their deepest struggles.

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2. Walker, *The Color Purple*, 163.

## Rare as a Five-Legged Jackrabbit

Roger Terry. *Bruder: The Perplexingly Spiritual Life and Not Entirely Unexpected Death of a Mormon Missionary*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent, 2019. 242 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1-948218-10-8.

*Reviewed by B. C. Oliva*

In November 1976, seventeen months into his Hamburg mission and 152 pages into his memoir about that mission, Bruder (i.e., Elder) Roger Terry and his companion bicycled into the German countryside, seeking a farmer who may or may not have given them an actual, real address. They parked their bikes next to a Mercedes, in front of a two-hundred-year-old thatched roof farmhouse attached to an even older barn. To their surprise, Hans Winter, the struggling farmer they met while street contacting, opened the door. The Mercedes, they later learned, had no engine because Hans only bought it to keep corporate farming conglomerates from bothering him with buyout offers. Even more surprising (to Bruder Terry), it turned out Hans was married to a Ghanaian woman named Juliet. Hans may have been a “typically German agnostic” and as “spiritual as a log,” but Juliet was spiritually alive, fascinated by these Mormon missionaries, and eager to learn more about their message. Juliet asked to meet again with some friends, a couple from Nigeria who were also seriously interested in the Mormon gospel. At this point, Terry had yet to baptize anyone, no serious investigators, and never met people so obviously interested, let alone willing to invite friends. Three willing investigators landed in Terry’s lap, yet he had no idea how to proceed. Again, this happened in 1976, two full years before the revelation that finally allowed people of color to participate in the priesthood. “Terry knew at once that his mission was about to get more interesting” (152).

Terry prefers the understatement. And writing in third-person.

Were this any other Mormon Missionary Memoir (or “MMM,” to borrow Terry’s abbreviation), I’d expect an immediate account of the aftermath of this meeting, what happened, when, where, who all got involved, and the inevitable resulting spiritual growth. But this is not that kind of book.

*Bruder* does masquerade as a typical MMM. For the most part, it moves chronologically, beginning with Terry’s childhood growing up in North Ogden, Utah, sheltered from the rest of the world and that “terrible decade that starred so regularly on TV newscasts,” the 1960s (6). Terry was an excellent athlete and student, but never thought about going on a mission until his sixteen-year-old girlfriend announced she would only marry an RM. At this point, he addresses one of the great paradoxes of growing up a Mormon Utahn. Although he “didn’t smoke, drink, do drugs, carouse, steal, lie (very often), cheat, sow wild oats, or swear (very loudly or in public),” he had never been very religious (7). Exploring this dichotomy, and the issues facing today’s Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is the book’s actual project.

Terry’s admittedly atypical MMM is clearly interested in toying with the genre itself and his approach to storytelling is truly postmodern. Drawing inspiration from *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut’s own semi-autobiographical novel set in Germany, Terry conflates storyteller, author, and main character. Bruder Terry’s experiences are written using a close third-person point of view, while present-day Terry frequently interjects with a first-person narrator in order to contextualize, philosophize, and question. Terry’s explanation for this approach is that he is not the same person as naive Bruder Terry, who saw the world as black and white, us vs. them. Forty years spent working as an editor of *Liahona*, *Ensign*, and eventually *BYU Studies Quarterly* allowed Terry to study Mormon history, sociology, culture, organization, economics, and theology. “There are certainly scholars who know a lot more about certain portions of the Mormon pie than I do, but there may not be very many who sample as many corners of the tart” (x). More importantly, present-day Terry



is able to draw on this vast knowledge, put it in conversation with his mission experiences, and ask the tough (i.e., interesting and important) questions. Mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, the two Terrys are not the same person. Hence, the postmodern structure. I also suspect this approach accounts for the fairly spectacular subtitle. So it goes.

Typical to the genre, *Bruder* is organized by city and companion, reconstructed using journals, pilfered tracting books, and forty-year-old memories. But where other memoirs proceed linearly, developing characters and locations at length and detail, Terry builds his narrative recursively. In order to approach the discussions he's intent on having, and in order to ask the complicated questions he's intent on asking, Terry addresses many smaller issues and many smaller questions, cycling back through characters and situations in turn. For example, before picking up the Juliet Winter thread again, Terry devotes a chapter to the birth and death of his complicated thirty-year relationship with Frau Sevier (the most beautiful and golden soul of his mission) and her boyfriend James (the darkest soul he ever encountered). By the time Bruder Terry finally asks his mission president for advice on how to have the priesthood discussion with Juliet and her friend Leon, and he's told "Brother Terry, I'm just glad this is your problem and not mine," we're primed for a heavyweight and sincere discussion (171). And it's in those moments, where present-day Terry describes how and why everything Bruder Terry "told Leon that day was not just offensive to Leon but to the Lord also" (171), that the book is at its most relevant and heartfelt best.

The effect of this narrative accretion culminates in Terry's penultimate chapter "The Tongue of the Angels or the Mind of the Borg?" and afterword titled "Facing Reality." Both of which I would recommend on their own to anyone remotely interested in A) stellar Star Trek analogies and B) a sincere, informed, and honest examination of the Church's frustrating and perplexing structure and relationship to the contemporary world.

Now, instead of stealing any more of Terry's thunder, how about some hilarious chapter titles? "J-Dubs [Jehovah's Witnesses], DJ's, and Breaking into Apartments," "Dunking for Donny [Osmond]," and "Going to the Gynecologist." I already said this wasn't your typical MMM, which is why you need to read it.

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## DEALING WITH DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Roger Terry

The stake presidency has asked the high council to address the topic “reduce and simplify our lives to minimize the commotion prophesied by the Lord.” I’ve felt impressed to talk about a different kind of commotion today, one that the Church and its members are facing in our information-saturated world, and a different kind of simplicity, one that is very elusive and that may take a lifetime to find. I hope you’ll forgive me for following a written text fairly closely, but I’m a writer, not a speaker, and because of the sensitive nature of the topic, I want to make sure I am as precise as possible.

I realize that I am going to be talking to a small minority of you. But I think the topic is important. I won’t ask for a show of hands, but if I did and if I asked how many of you are struggling with questions about the Church’s history or doctrine or scriptures or policies, questions that may be causing you to lose some sleep, I’m guessing I would see a few hands. I would also guess that even more of you know someone—perhaps a family member or a good friend—who has left the Church because of such questions. It’s to you who find yourselves in either of these two groups that I am going to speak today. The rest of you can listen in, because the time may come when you too may find yourselves in one of these groups.

Some of you have known me for a long time. But most of you don’t know what I’ve been doing the past nineteen years. It was actu-

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This address was delivered as a high council talk in the Orem Heatheridge Third Ward on Feb. 18, 2018.

ally nineteen years ago last month that I took a job as a senior editor at the *Liahona*. After about three years, I was transferred to the *Ensign*. The two experiences were actually quite different, but I want to focus on one particular difference.

When I worked at the *Liahona*, the editorial staff subscribed to the *Salt Lake Tribune*, *BYU Studies*, and maybe *Newsweek*. When I arrived at the *Ensign*, I was surprised at all the publications they subscribed to. These included the *Salt Lake Tribune*, all three major news magazines, *Reader's Digest*, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, *BYU Studies*, *Dialogue*, *Sunstone*, *Journal of Mormon History*, *Utah Historical Quarterly*, *Pioneer* (published by the Sons of the Utah Pioneers), the Community of Christ's magazine, *Vision* (aimed at the Restoration Branches that broke away from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in about 1984), Billy Graham's magazine, the Seventh-day Adventist magazine, and probably a few more I can't remember.

I wondered why they subscribed to so many publications. And as I thought about it, I decided someone must have wanted us to be informed. Well, I wanted to be informed. So I read it, almost all of it, but especially the Mormon material. In the process, I discovered that I didn't know nearly as much about the Church and its history as I had imagined. I also discovered what we call Mormon studies. This is a field of study that is simply exploding nationwide. Most of the scholars in Mormon studies are active LDS. But some are lapsed LDS, and some are non-LDS. What they produce, however, is not anti-Mormon literature. Most of them simply want to understand Mormonism more fully. And there is a lot of really good scholarship being done.

In 2006, after about four years at the *Ensign*, I jumped ship and took a job as editorial director at *BYU Studies*, where we publish the oldest Mormon studies journal. Which puts me in the middle of a lot of very interesting material. I try to keep current—it's part of the job—but it is really impossible. There is so much being published. In addition to editing *BYU Studies Quarterly*, I also read the *Journal of Mormon History*, *Dialogue*,

*Sunstone*, and *Mormon Historical Studies*. I attend a few conferences and try to follow what's going on in the Bloggernacle. And I've read about seventy books on Mormonism in the almost twelve years I've been at BYU Studies. None of these is what you would call "Church books." These are mostly serious scholarship on Mormon history, scripture, organization, culture, or theology. So that's what I've been up to.

The challenge is that when you start digging into the details, you inevitably find that nothing is as simple as you thought it was. Our history is often messy. Our doctrine can be something of a moving target. Revelation, both personal and prophetic, is sometimes difficult to interpret. This is just the nature of life. If you get past the surface, pretty much everything is complicated.

The question is, how are we supposed to deal with this complexity? Let me quote Elder Ballard. Speaking to seminary and institute instructors two years ago this month, he said, among other things:

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, "Don't worry about it!" Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. . . .

It was only a generation ago that our young people's access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically limited to materials printed by the Church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life.

Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today—a day when students have instant access to virtually everything about the Church from every possible point of view. Today, what they see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith-challenging as much as faith-promoting. . . .

For *you* to understand the doctrinal and historical content and context of the scriptures and our history, you will need to study from the "best books," as the Lord directed. The "best books" include the scriptures, the teachings of modern prophets and apostles, and the best LDS scholarship available. . . .

When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. And, if necessary, we should ask those with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for help.

This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to my own questions that I cannot answer myself.

That's a rather remarkable statement from an apostle.

Let me add, though, that the best LDS scholarship will very often raise questions rather than answer them. And that's okay. As I said, life is complicated. Our history is complicated. Our doctrine is complicated. Church leaders are not infallible. This means that a simple approach to Mormonism is likely not going to produce very good results in the long run.

Years ago I came across a quote that has helped me a great deal. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." It's sometimes easy and comfortable to ignore the complexity, to be content with a simplicity that is more blindness than awareness. But there are dangers with this approach. Sometimes life doesn't allow us to be content with this easy sort of simplicity. But the simplicity on the other side of complexity has to be earned. The only way out is through.

So let me address three aspects of the complexity in Mormonism and try to give some helpful perspectives on dealing with LDS history, LDS leaders, and LDS doctrine.

### Messy History

When I started reading books and articles on LDS history, I discovered that my knowledge of Mormon history up to 1847 was rather superficial, and after that, it was pretty much nonexistent, because 1847 is where the

Gospel Doctrine curriculum mostly stopped. But the Church is radically different today than it was in 1847 or 1890 or 1930 or 1960. How did we get from there to here? Well, that's a long and complex story. But let me share something that has helped me in my effort to grapple with the difficult aspects of Mormon history. It's a very simple idea, but I find it profound. "Events do not tell their own stories." Let me repeat that: "Events do not tell their own stories." Instead, historians use their limited understanding of events to create stories about them. Which means that all history is interpretation. Let me repeat that: all history is interpretation. And all historians have an agenda. They pick and choose details, they add a little spin, they let their biases and opinions color their account. And most important, they leave things out. They have to. Sometimes they embellish; they add details.

The ideal, of course, is to have a history that is as objective as possible and as complete as possible. But we always fall short of the ideal. So every history is interpretation. And that includes the histories the Church has published. This is not a bad thing. It's unavoidable. But for many years, the Church published histories that left a lot of detail out, and this created biased or one-sided views of past events. And this has caused the Church problems in recent years, because once some of the details became public, it looked like the Church had been producing a sugarcoated narrative. We all like to put our best foot forward, but if we only talk about how wonderful we are, it's obviously an incomplete picture, because we are imperfect and history is messy by nature. Fortunately, the Church is doing better now. It is approaching its history in a much more open and balanced way, especially with the Joseph Smith Papers.

Still, since all histories are biased, in our search for truth we somehow need to find ways to recognize the biases and agendas and to see behind the curtain, as it were, so that we can filter out as many impurities as we can. And the only way I know to accomplish this is to simply read a lot of history. When you see events through the eyes of many interpreters, you start to get a more complete picture, you become aware of which

sources historians are using, how reliable those sources are, and how the historians are employing them. You also come to recognize the spin historians put on their accounts, or the choices they made in deciding what to emphasize and what to leave out, and this helps you sort out what rings true from what doesn't.

### Fallible Leaders

Now let me say something about fallible leaders. None of us would claim that our leaders, local or general, are perfect. No leader would claim to be perfect. President Uchtdorf addressed this idea a couple of years ago in general conference. But in practice, we tend to treat our leaders as if they were infallible. We treat them as if they are always inspired. This can cause some unrealistic expectations and some real complications when we discover that they aren't always inspired. I want you to think about the name of the Church. It has two parts. It is the Church of Jesus Christ, but it is also the Church of the Latter-day Saints. We sometimes think that it's just the Lord's church and that all inspiration has to come down the leadership pipeline. But Joseph Smith referred to the Church as a theodemocracy. We often act as if it is just a theocracy. Everything is top-down, and it's all inspired. So we neglect the democracy part. I've heard a few comments by General Authorities recently acknowledging the necessity of inspiration coming up from the rank and file. So this view is starting to change.

Several years ago, I published an essay titled "Why the True Church Cannot Be Perfect." I want to share a few paragraphs from it.

A basic principle that, if understood, would help [most Church members] is the notion that the Church not only *is* not perfect, but *cannot* be, at least not here, not now in this fallen world. If the Church were perfect, it would fail miserably in its mission, which is, in part, to perfect us. In essence, if God were to spell out specifically for his apostles and prophets and stake presidents and bishops and auxiliary leaders every step in the Church's onward march of establishing his kingdom on earth,



if he were to dictate every decision and inspire every policy, he would defeat his own purpose. What purpose? To help us become as he is.

As disconcerting as this idea might appear on the surface, both reason and experience suggest that God treats the Church in much the same way he treats each of us. As we strive to learn and grow and follow the Savior, our Heavenly Father intervenes periodically in our lives in ways that maximize our opportunities for growth and service. Sometimes when we pray for guidance, the Spirit gives us quiet promptings and confirmations. . . . But often when we pray for guidance or for knowledge in making decisions, the heavens are perfectly silent. In these perplexing instances, God expects us to use our own intelligence; his revealed word; the counsel of family members, trusted friends, and ordained leaders; the gospel values we've accepted; and our best understanding of the circumstances we're facing to make decisions on our own, and to trust that he will warn us if we go too far astray. And more often than many of us wish, he even allows us to experience the negative consequences of our unwise decisions—so that we will learn wisdom.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has taught: "What about those times when we seek revelation and do not receive it? . . . Sometimes we are left to our own judgment. . . . Our life's purpose to obtain experience and to develop faith would be frustrated if our Heavenly Father directed us in every act, even in every important act. We must make decisions and experience the consequences in order to develop self-reliance and faith. Even in decisions we think very important, we sometimes receive no answers to our prayers. This does not mean that our prayers have not been heard. It only means that we have prayed about a decision which, for one reason or another, we should make without guidance by revelation."

Someone once quipped, "Good judgment comes from experience; experience comes from bad judgment." Often this is how we learn, as difficult as it seems. . . . If Heavenly Father wanted to impede us in our progression, he would answer every prayer immediately and specifically, spelling out exactly what we should do in any situation. Likewise, if he wanted to cripple his chosen servants—prophets, apostles, stake presidents, bishops, quorum and auxiliary presidents, home and visiting teachers, and parents—he would tell them exactly what to do every

step of the way. If he led them by the hand and never let go, they would remain infants.

Because this must be so, we have to put up with each other's failures. And the prophets and apostles are not immune to this. And it's okay. I realize that this means we will sometimes have to deal with policies, on both the local and general Church level, that are difficult or that even cause a significant amount of pain, but there really is no alternative. So we must be patient with each other and help each other grow.

### Shifting Doctrines

This reality also affects our doctrine. Some Latter-day Saints have questions about various points of doctrine. I am one. In fact, there's probably not a single doctrine that I don't have questions about. Sometimes in the Church we get the idea that we have ALL THE TRUTH—bold, underlined, and in capital letters. But, again, reality is not so simple. Many of our fundamental doctrines have shifted or developed over time. Joseph Smith apparently found some of the doctrines in the Book of Mormon unsatisfactory, because he changed or expanded them. One particular doctrine, about what happens to those who don't hear the gospel in this life, went through at least four different changes to get to where it is today. The doctrines surrounding our understanding of premortality developed over a long period of time as we tried to reconcile the various things Joseph taught at different points in his life. I find it particularly significant that the version of premortality that most Latter-day Saints now embrace was first proposed by Elder B. H. Roberts early in the twentieth century, and at that time it was rejected by the First Presidency. So the notion that our doctrines were revealed from heaven pure and whole and perfect does not square with the historical record. Which, in my mind, is a wonderful excuse for us to acquire more humility about what we claim to know and to ask more questions. Joseph Smith was one of the greatest questioners in the history of religion. We could do worse than to follow his example.

So, with our doctrine, as with our history and our leaders, there is a lot more complexity than we sometimes like to imagine. And again, it's okay. Apparently, this is how God wants it. Religion, like life in general, is much more ambiguous than we want it to be. In Mormondom, we crave certainty, but certainty about some things is very elusive.

Way back in 1979, when Bruce Hafen was president of Ricks College, he gave a devotional address at BYU titled "Love Is Not Blind: Some Thoughts for College Students on Faith and Ambiguity." I would recommend you read it. When he talks about ambiguity, he means the gap between the ideal, which we focus on a lot in the Church, and the real, which is how things actually are. It is that gap I've been talking about today. Sometimes, when we have high expectations, and either the Church or its leaders or its doctrine fall short, we experience frustration. Today, this is often referred to as cognitive dissonance. Whatever we call it, though, it can damage our faith. Bruce Hafen offers a good perspective on dealing with cognitive dissonance or, as he calls it, ambiguity.

Borrowing terms from G. K. Chesterton, Brother Hafen talks about three kinds of people. The first group comprises those people Chesterton labeled optimists. They don't deal well with the gap between the real and the ideal, which causes them either to be blind to the real problems that exist or to actually erase them from their minds. For these people, everything is wonderful—and simple.

The second group comprises those people Chesterton labeled pessimists. They see the problems, the reality of mortality, but they focus so exclusively on it that they tend to erase the ideal. They see only how things are, not how they should be. Those who are troubled by imperfections in the Church or its leaders and leave the Church often fall into this category.

The third level, and this is where I hope we can be, is the group of people Chesterton called improvers. They see the ideal, they see the real, they recognize the gap between the two, but they attempt to do something constructive about closing the gap. I have recognized in my

own life that I can do a lot more to help change things that need to be changed in the Church, at both the local and general level, if I stay in the Church and remain loyal to its ultimate mission. Standing outside as a critic may be intellectually satisfying to some, but it's mostly fruitless.

So if you are struggling over some issue or are dealing with a loved one who is struggling, be patient. Don't bail out when you face ambiguity. Work through the complexity. Be an improver. We believe in ongoing revelation, not in infallibility, and sometimes even things we were certain would never change do change. God has certainly not revealed everything, and he may yet surprise us.

### Conclusion

Finally, let me cycle back to what I said about doctrine and offer maybe one insight into how we might reach that simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity. BYU professor Charles Harrell, who wrote a book detailing many of the changes in LDS doctrine over the years, made a very important point at the conclusion of his book. He said simply that nobody is saved by theology. This reminder always brings me back to what we really need to be concerned about, and maybe this is at least a portion of the simplicity we will find on the other side of complexity:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? Or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the king shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matt. 25:34–40)

I believe this. I believe this is what God wants of us. The Church may not meet our expectations of perfection in every way. But it does provide us a framework within which we can practice this type of Christian love. And practice is what we need.

So, hang in there. Be patient. It's okay to have questions. It's okay if some questions don't have good answers. At least not yet. Apparently, this is the way God wants it. So let's do the best we can and try to love and serve each other in ways that will make a difference.

God bless you all in your efforts to overcome the challenges of mortality, including the unavoidable complexity of many things.

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