

DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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CONFRONTING MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Suzanne E. Greco

An undercurrent of violence against women and girls (VAWG) exists in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church professes commitment to support victims of sexual abuse and its declared policy of zero tolerance, which mirrors the position of numerous religious organizations. These sentiments, while suitable for formal declarations, websites, and public addresses, stand in contrast to the Church's actions, which are not aligned with its professed Christian tenets.¹ The church in actuality fails to encourage members to report abuse to legal

1. "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to child abusers. When abuse is suspected, the Church directs its members to first contact the legal authorities and then their local bishop for counseling and support. The Church cooperates fully with law enforcement in investigating incidents of child abuse and bringing perpetrators to justice." "Child Abuse," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://news-uk.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/child-abuse>. "Abuse is a matter the Church takes very seriously. When we learn of abuse, our first priority is to help the victim and stop the abuse. We train local Church leaders and provide resources to stop and prevent abuse and to keep individuals safe. We provide resources to help members know they are safe to come forward and get help if abuse has occurred." "How the Church Approaches Abuse," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/how-mormons-approach-abuse>:

authorities and does not train its leaders in appropriate response protocols.² This article urges the Church to address the existing dissonance and align its actions with the policies it has formally established and its Christian doctrines and practices.³ As bell hooks poignantly articulates, the impact of patriarchy—manifested as male domination over women and children—constitutes a considerable obstacle to the experience of love.”⁴ Patriarchy does not align with Christ’s construct of divine love.

Violence against women and girls stands as a pervasive violation of human rights on a global scale, unfolding relentlessly each day in myriad manifestations. Defined by the United Nations, VAWG is “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering of women, including threats of such act, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”⁵ The repercussions of such brutality are profound, casting shadows of short-term and enduring physical, financial, and emotional tolls upon women and girls. The enormity of its impact, in the lives of individuals, family units, and communities, defies quantification. In secular and religious contexts, women or girls seeking protection from such harms find themselves caught in a patriarchal vortex of androcentric laws and policies and male leaders.⁶

2. Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, “Court Cites Clergy-Penitent Privilege in Dismissing Child Sex Abuse Lawsuit Against Mormon Church,” *AP News*, Nov. 8, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-sex-abuse-de446ad8212b6ca50ecbaaf222c35e7e>.

3. Ronaldo V. Miller, “Lawsuit Information Center,” Miller and Zois, LLC, accessed Aug. 11, 2024, <https://www.lawsuit-information-center.com/sex-abuse-lawsuits-against-lds-church.html>.

4. bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (William Morrow, 2000), xxiv.

5. UN General Assembly, Declaration of the Elimination of Violence against Women, A/RES/48/104, UN General Assembly, Dec. 20, 1993.

6. Diane Rosenfeld, *The Bonobo Sisterhood: Revolution Through Female Alliance* (Harper Collins, 2022), 84–108.

I employ the term “vortex” to describe the victim’s experience ensnared in a system that not only gaslights them but also subjects them to a violent, chaotic, and perilous environment. Within this tumultuous swirl, individuals find themselves disoriented and powerless, struggling to navigate a reality fraught with fear and unpredictability, where their capacity to influence their circumstances is profoundly limited. Victims who dare to speak the reality of their situation will be sucked into the vortex, equivalent to an act of suicide, or a cutting off of social and familial ties.⁷ Judith Herman, a leader in child sex abuse, asserts that the impact of the violence extends beyond the actions of perpetrators to bystanders and institutional enablers who perpetuate a social ecology of violence that is tolerated or rendered invisible.⁸

This article delineates three major areas for reform. First, it advocates for legal changes in clergy-penitent laws.⁹ Second, it advocates for women’s ministry, that female leaders minister to women and girls who experience VAWG, not male ecclesiastical leaders. Empowering women and girls through female-to-female alliances overcomes patriarchal vortexes and redresses power differentials, thereby facilitating

7. Jorunn E. Halvorsen, Ellen Tvedt Solberg, Signe Hjelen Stige, “‘To Say It Out Loud Is to Kill Your Own Childhood.’—An Exploration of the First Person Perspective of Barriers to Disclosing Child Sexual Abuse,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 113 (2020): 104999, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104999>.

8. Judith Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice* (Basic Books, 2023), 3.

9. “Rated by survivors the most ‘unhelpful and unsupportive in their responses to sexual assault survivors’ disclosures include police/legal personnel, physicians, and clergy.” Sarah E. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society’s Response to Survivors*, 2nd ed. (American Psychological Association, 2023), 87–88.

access to essential support mechanisms.¹⁰ Third, it underscores the imperative for comprehensive education and training initiatives on ministerial and community levels. Specialized training is required for ministers to effectively provide counseling to both survivors and perpetrators.¹¹ Training is also essential to identifying victim-perpetrator dynamics and behaviors.¹² Community-level educational initiatives must encompass discussions on credibility issues and consent as a fundamental human right in intimate relationships. These measures are crucial in the efforts to prevent VAWG.

Unveiling My Journey: A Personal Tale

My journey to initiate structural and policy changes within the Church commenced as a response to having been caught in the system. My life began in toxic circumstances, subjected to child sex abuse by both my father (former bishop, stake presidency counselor, high counselor, and current active member of the church) and my grandfather at a very young age. Struggling to stay afloat in the face of the relentless abuse,

10. "In summary, studies of informal support providers show that they are often recipients of sexual assault disclosures (at least in college samples which are most often studied) and are helpful to survivors of sexual assault, especially if they are female and friends as opposed to male and significant others, respectively. This is perhaps due to the greater identification of women with victims of sexual assault, which may lead them to be more supportive, whereas men may be more likely to respond negatively, perhaps because of their greater rape myth acceptance. Also, women say they know more about how to respond to victim disclosures than do men, which may make them better helpers." Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 88. See also Rosenfeld, *Bonobo Sisterhood*, 145–71.

11. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 110.

12. Samantha J. Dodson, Rachael D. Goodwin, Jesse Graham, and Kristina A. Diekmann, "Moral Foundations, Himpathy, and Punishment Following Organizational Sexual Misconduct Allegations," *Organization Science* 34, no. 5 (2023): 1938–64, <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2022.1652>.

and enduring deep physical and emotional wounds, I observed daily others gliding by seemingly untouched by my turmoil.

After college and a mission, a friend of my father, nine years older than myself, was introduced and we married. We had three children, and when my parents moved a good distance away and I began to feel safe, the unconscious buried rubble surfaced. Child sex abuse amnesia, a common symptom, eventually fades away, only to be relived again until the toxic waste is integrated. As symptoms surfaced, and love and support were needed, my husband's behaviors turned abusive, and a darker side revealed itself. The cycle of abuse continued. Amid the ensuing chaos, one of the children jumped ship, leading to the ultimate fracture of our family. I faced the daunting task of keeping my other two children afloat all the while my then-husband continued to abuse.

In these circumstances, I was understandably desperate. I was joined in my fight to find a way out over a decade ago by my newly ordained stake president, David F. Holland. Many words of encouragement and blessings were offered, serving as beacons of hope amid the turmoil in my dire circumstances. Regrettably, President Holland's hands were tied at times, bound by protocol that constrained his ability to intervene due to the system and policies in the Church. Amid the bustling activities and responsibilities that demand attention for those living in comfort, Church leaders often remain mere bystanders. The institution becomes an enabler.

Despite Holland's urgent pleas for my then-husband to cease his violence, he was indifferent to his entreaties. The realization sank in that no external intervention would come to my rescue. Overwhelmed by the physical and emotional toll of the ordeal, I wanted to just let go. My will to persevere waned in the wake of nursing deep wounds, trying to care for my children, and the continued abuse. Both body and spirit were shattered. The weight of the suffering was unbearable, overshadowed by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

When I initially made my disclosure to my priesthood leaders, I was met with disbelief because my abusers were respected men in the Church community. I was stigmatized and labeled mentally ill by my community and by both of my perpetrators, who painted a very different picture by manipulating and controlling the narrative. According to Sarah Ullman, victims experience harmful reactions from both social networks and formal support sources in patriarchal societies.¹³ Due to all of this, I found it imperative to distance myself from my ward community to safeguard both my mental well-being and my spiritual convictions. It was only when another courageous victim disclosed that my experiences were acknowledged with the gravity they deserved. Holland took charge and assumed a proactive stance. He engaged a seasoned professional to conduct training for leaders, enlightening on the task of ministering to both victims and perpetrators and addressing the lacunae present in the Church instructional materials.

In order to be taken seriously, I had to achieve incredible levels of credibility. It was not until my acceptance to Harvard and studying VAWG in a religious context; my involvement with the United Nations; and my audience with Pope Francis for the inaugural and subsequent events for the World Day for the Prevention of and Healing from Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, and Violence that my assertions were finally given serious consideration within my community. The fact that these credentials had made me more powerful, thus credible, speaks directly to the nature of the social dynamics and credibility issues. These prominent external affirmations served to dispel the unfounded notions of my supposed false allegations and “mental craziness,” instead illuminating the authenticity of my testimony regarding the harrowing reality of what had been done to me. Female voices are simply not believed when it comes to VAWG.¹⁴ Any woman or girl who comes

13. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 10–11.

14. Deborah Tuerkheimer, *Credible: Why We Doubt Accusers and Protect Abusers* (Harper Collins, 2021); Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 102–103.

forward about VAWG puts their own life and reputation at risk, not the perpetrators.

Throughout these advocacy endeavors and openness about my past, I have had many conversations with survivors of abuse and have come to more fully understand that the struggle for validation, and the desire to have their injuries ministered to, is a shared experience among women and girls who have endured similar trauma in our Church communities. Yet trauma is not only inflicted by the actual perpetrators, but also by ecclesiastical leaders, institutional enablers, and their respective Church communities, due to no educational training on VAWG.¹⁵ Amos Guiora, an Israeli American professor of law specializing in institutional complicity, enabling culture, and sexual assault, refers to this phenomenon as the “armies of enablers.”¹⁶ Jeffrey C. Alexander, a sociology scholar at Yale University, asserts that traumas are socially constructed through interactions, cultural norms, and beliefs.¹⁷ This points to the fact that trauma extends beyond the individual experience and is deeply intertwined with the broader social environment.

My experience reflected broader truths. Institutional religious organizations function in dual roles in relation to VAWG. They possess the capacity to serve as both a shield against and a conduit for

15. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 4; UN Women, “When It Comes to Consent, There Are No Blurred Lines,” United Nations, Nov. 18, 2019, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/11/feature-consent-no-blurred-lines>; United Nations Population Fund, “Five Things You Need to Know About Consent,” United Nations, Sept. 1, 2023, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/five-things-you-need-know-about-consent>; Amos N. Guiora, “Sexual Assault Enablers, Institutional Complicity, and the Crime of Omission,” Utah Law Faculty Scholarship, Sept. 2021, 302, <https://dc.law.utah.edu/scholarship/302>.

16. Amos N. Guiora, *Armies of Enablers: Survivor Stories of Complicity and Betrayal in Sexual Assaults* (ABA Publishing, 2020), 6–17.

17. Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Polity, 2012), 13.

the perpetuation of harm.¹⁸ Religious convictions have the potential to foster psychological resilience and facilitate healing and have the capacity to promote programs and structures that combat VAWG. Conversely, patriarchal structures with power imbalances, sexism, androcentric ideologies, and theoretical constructs within religious institutions perpetuate VAWG.¹⁹ While the beneficial aspects of religious affiliations are widely recognized, I aim to illuminate the less favorable realities inherent in the Church's centralized, patriarchal, and hierarchical organizational structure and policies. In this sphere, the imperative emerges regarding the role the Church, its leaders, and its community have in addressing VAWG.

18. Mandy Truong and Nafiseh Ghafournia, *Understanding Spiritual and Religious Abuse in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence*, March 2024 policy paper (Australian Institute of Family Studies), 4–6, <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-06/CFCA-Spiritual-Abuse-Paper-Jun24.pdf>; Nancy Nason-Clark, Barbara Fisher-Townsend, Catherine Holtmann, and Stephen McMullin, *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence: Understanding the Challenges and Proposing Solutions* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2; Florin Dolcos, Kelly Hohl, Yifan Hu, and Sanda Dolcos, “Religiosity and Resilience: Cognitive Reappraisal and Coping Self-Efficacy Mediate the Link between Religious Coping and Well-Being,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 4 (2021): 2892–2905, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01160-y>; “The Role of Faith/Spirituality in Healing from Abuse,” VAWNET: An Online Resource Library on Gender-Based Violence, accessed July 23, 2024, <https://vawnet.org/sc/how-faithreligion-can-best-meet-needs-abuse-survivors-those-who-cause-harm/role>; Sandy Bauer and Caroline Campbell, “Christian Faith and Resilience: Implications for Social Work Practice,” *Social Work and Christianity* 48, no. 1 (2021): 28–51.

19. Truong and Ghafournia, *Understanding Spiritual and Religious Abuse*, 4–6; Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 14; Janet Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will: Shedding Light on Religious Child Maltreatment* (Prometheus, 2011), 24, 34–35, 59; Sandra Pertek, Karen Block, Lisa Goodson, Pakinam Hassan, Jeanine Hourani, and Jenny Phillimore, “Gender-Based Violence, Religion and Forced Displacement: Protective and Risk Factors,” *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* 5 (2023): 1058822, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2023.1058822>.

Eventually, I made it out with my children. Now, here I am, advocating as a survivor, standing in solidarity with other survivors of domestic and child sex abuse, and with male allies, to initiate much-needed change.²⁰ My belief is that Christ supports women and girls. He has supported me, and He wants change.

Faith Under Fire: Confronting VAWG in Religious Communities

These problems are not unique to Latter-day Saints but reflect a global issue. According to the United Nations, sexual and gender violence is a global problem and a “preventable pandemic.”²¹ In a study encompassing 161 countries, UN Women found that “45% of women reported that they or a woman they know has experienced VAWG. Seven in ten women said that they think that verbal and physical abuse by partners has become more common. And six in ten felt that sexual harassment in public spaces has worsened.”²² Additionally, UN Women found that “less than 40% of women who experience violence seek help of any kind. . . . [A]mong women who do seek help, most look to family and friends and very few look to formal institutes, such as police and health

20. “Advancing the view that survivor-led initiatives are both more transformative than and best realised in tandem with survivor-centred approaches, the report develops a continuum reflecting levels of engagement with survivors in which survivor-led interventions are ideal.” Brenda K. Kombo, “From Survivor Centered to Survivor Led: Lessons from Promising Survivor-Led Gender-Based Violence Accountability Initiatives,” Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence, Nov. 25, 2024, <https://www.gbv.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ICGBV-Survivor-Led-Accountability-Paper-1.pdf>.

21. UN Academic Impact, “The Preventable Pandemic: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence,” United Nations, Feb. 25, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/preventable-pandemic-sexual-and-gender-based-violence>.

22. UN Women, “Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19,” United Nations, Nov. 24, 2021, <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/vaw-rga>.

services. Fewer than 10% of those seeking help report to the police.”²³ According to the World Health Organization, one in three women have been subjected to some form of violence by an intimate partner or non-partner or both.”²⁴

Most crucially, these forms of violence most commonly occur in the home. The World Health Organization has stated that women are at greater risk of harm in intimate relationships than elsewhere, “challenging the notion that home is a safe haven.”²⁵ Also, according to Childlight, a Global Child Safety Institute at the University of Edinburgh, “11% of men in the US, 7% of men in the UK and 7.5% of men in Australia report that they have engaged in online behaviors at some point in their lifetime that could be classed as online child sexual abuse offending.”²⁶ The culture of VAWG is a global pandemic.

There are several challenges that we face when seeking to understand the extent of the problem as it affects Latter-day Saints. There are no actual statistics, task forces, or training about sex, consent, and gender-based violence within the Church.²⁷ What we find instead is a system constructed to protect the interests of the Church at the expense of victims due to existing policies, closed-door access, and lack

23. UN Statistics Division, “The World’s Women 2015: Trends and Statistics,” United Nations, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/worldswomen2015.html>.

24. World Health Organization, *Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018—Executive Summary* (WHO, 2021), <https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240022256>.

25. World Health Organization, *WHO Multi-Country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence Against Women: Initial Results on Prevalence, Health Outcomes, and Women’s Responses* (WHO, 2005), <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43309>.

26. University of Edinburgh and the Human Dignity Foundation, *Searchlight 2023: Childlight Annual Flagship Report*, https://www.childlight.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Childlight-Flagship-Report-2023_1.pdf.

27. Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 42–43.

of accountability mechanisms. The fact that we do not know how extensive VAWG actually is within the Church points directly to its doctrine, culture, and patriarchy. In other words, without proper oversight, there is no opportunity to shine light into these places and to expose root causality.

To be clear, this is a structural and doctrinal problem, framed in patriarchy maintained by Church theological tenets, embedded in teachings, practices and rituals, which actively produce and negotiate inequitable power relations among men and women. According to Catherine Bell, "Systems such as ritual both realize and regulate the structure of social relations. Like forms of speech, forms of ritual are 'transmitters of culture, which are generated in social relations and which, by their selections and emphasis, exercise a constraining effect on social behavior.'"²⁸ Rituals should not be understood solely as mechanisms of social control: rather, they represent one of many strategies employed to reproduce and manipulate the foundational cultural structures of a community. These structures are not merely abstract concepts but are experienced, embodied, and perpetuated by individuals within the society. Theological tenets embedded in LDS Church rituals cultivate a distinctive dynamic in social relations, particularly in the inculcation of beliefs. According to Bell, such practices are intrinsic to the very production and negotiation of power relations within a society.²⁹ The androcentric, rather than Christocentric, positionality of the Church, coupled with its misogynistic policing of women, cultivates an unhealthy ecosystem for all members of the Church community—men, women, and children alike.

There may be some sources that indicate the extent of the problems as they affect Latter-day Saints. They reveal significant risks to Latter-day Saint women and girls. In Utah, 61 percent of the population

28. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 178.

29. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 186–95.

identify as members of the Church.³⁰ Utah statistics are rough estimates used to illuminate VAWG among Latter-day Saints, but they do not explicitly provide an inside view of what is actually happening in the LDS Church. That being acknowledged, the data provide a mere glimpse of the situation at hand. In Utah, sexual violence is being committed by male perpetrators whom the victim knows, and more horrifically, “many victims of sexual assault and sexual violence in Utah are children, and they are victimized by a family member.”³¹ Statistics show that rape occurs in Utah at a rate higher than the national average.³² In 2022, the reported rape rate in Utah was 59.5 per 100,000; the national average is 40.³³ Rape is the only violent crime for which Utah’s rate is higher than the national average, and this has been the case for the past twenty-five years.³⁴ For all other types of violent crimes, Utah’s rates are lower. Yet according to the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, only 11.8 percent of women actually report crimes

30. “Mormon Population by State 2025,” World Population Review, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/mormon-population-by-state>.

31. Susan R. Madsen, Tiffany Turley, and Robbyn T. Scribner, “Sexual Assault Among Utah Women,” Utah Women Stats Research Snapshot, Utah Women and Leadership Project, Nov. 7, 2016, <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/snapshot/15.pdf>.

32. “Table 4: Crime in the United States, by Region, Geographic Division, and State, 2013–2014,” FBI Uniform Crime Reporting, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/table-4>.

33. “Reported Forcible Rape Rate in the United States from 1990 to 2023, Statista, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/191226/reported-forcible-rape-rate-in-the-us-since-1990/>; “Health Indicator Report of Sexual Violence,” Utah Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Indicator Based Information Systems, July 10, 2024, <https://ibis.utah.gov/ibisph-view/indicator/view/Rape.Cnty.html>.

34. Madsen et al., “Sexual Assault Among Utah Women.”

of sexual violence to law enforcement in Utah.³⁵ This means 88.2 percent are not being reported compared to the national average of 63 percent.³⁶ These findings indicated that acts of sexual violence are substantially underreported and that the investigation and prosecution of these crimes are not being pursued.

While the Church contributes to the lack of clear information about the frequency of VAWG by not collecting or reporting data, there are other barriers as well. Part of the reason that women and girls do not often report their abuse is that they generally must report it to men. Female credibility issues are embedded in patriarchal ideologies and misogynistic policing. Male-to-male alliances appear to be at the heart of this underreporting, under-investigating, and under-prosecuting.³⁷ Moreover, ministers who lack training in the nuances of consent frequently misinterpret reports of sexual violence disclosed by women. They may mistakenly perceive these reports as violations of Church doctrine, leading to an inappropriate focus on punitive measures rather than understanding the situation's complexities. Women and girls in the Church appear to be in graver danger due to a deeply ingrained and embedded sexist culture positioned within the patriarchal Church structures, culture, and doctrines.

One of the structural issues that contributes to the perpetuation of VAWG is the process by which victims seek help from the Church. Male ecclesiastical leaders currently are first responders for women and girls

35. Madsen et al., "Sexual Assault Among Utah Women."

36. Callie Marie Rennison, "Rape and Sexual Assault: Reporting to Police and Medical Attention, 1992–2000," Bureau of Justice Statistics Selected Findings, August 2002, available at US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, accessed May 5, 2025, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/rsarp00.pdf>.

37. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 55–75; Tuerkheimer, *Credible*.

seeking to report and receive help in most religious institutions.³⁸ This is in line with standard Church procedures. Current guidelines specify that women or girls in abusive situations are directed to seek assistance from their bishop or stake president.³⁹ In many instances, the male ecclesiastical leader, as such, is in a position to act however he best sees fit. This usually is done through Church guidelines, inspiration, and the lens of his personal worldview.⁴⁰ In the current regulations, the male ecclesiastical leader is also instructed to call the Church's helpline (established to guide and protect ecclesiastical leaders and the institution) to facilitate how the leader should proceed.⁴¹ Furthermore, the Church's call center primarily serves the institution itself as its primary

38. Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 30; Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 303–4; Ally Kern, “The Role of Pastors: The Vital Link in Stopping Domestic Violence,” *Reflections: Yale Divinity School*, fall 2018, https://reflections.yale.edu/sites/default/files/reflections_fall_2018_02.pdf

39. “Responsibilities: The Relief Society president has the following responsibilities. Her counselors assist her. Under the bishop’s guidance, counsel with adult members of the ward (see 31.1 and 31.3). Only the bishop counsels ward members about matters of worthiness, abuse, and approval to use fast-offering funds. See Counseling Resources. For information about abuse, see 38.6.2.” “Relief Society,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, General Handbook, sec. 9.3.2.2, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/9-relief-society?lang=eng#title_number15.

40. “Why Is Sexual Abuse Common in the Mormon Church?,” *California Business Journal*, Mar. 28, 2023.

41. “Preventing and Responding to Abuse” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 24, 2024, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/abuse-how-to-help/preventing-and-responding-to-abuse?lang=eng>. See also General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 38.6.2.1, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number2; and “Abuse Helpline,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Safety and Health, Feb. 25, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/callings/church-safety-and-health/abuse-help-line?lang=eng>.

client, rather than prioritizing the needs of victims.⁴² If the call center were truly oriented toward the victims, individuals in need would have the ability to reach out directly for the assistance and legal counsel they require. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

This realm of personal discretion for men leads to wide discrepancies. Church leaders may or may not communicate victims' rights within the Church and legal or civil realm to the abused. How the leader shares knowledge received from the helpline with the victim is entirely at his discretion. Church leaders often do not communicate with the victims about Church sanctions against the abuser or their legal rights. Victims seeking care are then often placed in precarious situations, wherein their well-being is jeopardized.⁴³

These current conditions are not necessarily surprising. Even though men see and hear injustices done against women, many avoid getting involved and confronting injustice. As James Newton Poling has observed, "silence shares complicity in acts of sexual violence."⁴⁴ These acts of collusion are devastating to women and girl victims. Also, in discussions had with females seeking assistance, ecclesiastical leaders often protect one another by referring to "inspired counsel" or saying "I am sure the ecclesiastical leader did not mean that" or "the counsel was positioned on revelation received." The female's sanity, her own

42. Peggy Fletcher Stack and Tamarra Kemsley, "Does the LDS Church's Sex Abuse Helpline Protect the Faith or the Victims? Debates Continues," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 15, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2022/08/15/whom-does-sex-abuse-help-line/>; "Why the Mormon Church Abuse Hotline Hasn't Helped Victims," Hurley McKenna & Mertz, P.C. Trial Lawyers, Mar. 23, 2021, <https://www.hurley-law.com/chicago-injury-lawyers/why-the-mormon-church-abuse-hotline-hasnt-helped-victims/>.

43. "When she went to her bishop for counseling after she had been raped by her (Mormon) cousin, he told her it was her own fault." Emily Benedek, *Hometown Betrayal* (Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2024), 71.

44. James Newton Poling, *The Abuse of Power: A Theological Problem* (Abingdon Press, 1991), 157.

intuitions, her own received revelation is often questioned, juxtaposed against a prominent leader's counsel. This institutional gaslighting further entrenches the victims in psychological darkness.⁴⁵

There are no easy solutions to these problems, but there are some helpful directions available. Ullman's recent book *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society's Response to Survivors* emphasizes the significance of transforming societal attitudes through sexual assault education. Ullman asserts that while altering perceptions and attitudes is pivotal in the fight against VAWG, a more fundamental shift involves reforming the structures and conditions that foster the prevailing culture. It is imperative to not only educate but also challenge the social norms that perpetuate sexual violence against women and girls and unfairly assign blame to victims. Combating the entrenched culture of VAWG through structural reform and education in providing support to the victimized in everyday situations are essential components of this multifaceted approach.⁴⁶

Solution 1: Legal Changes

An April 2022 general conference talk given by Elder Patrick Kearon addressed the Church and sexual abuse: "We must deploy everything we can to help those who have been mistreated in the most dreadful ways, heal."⁴⁷ While the Church has not lived up to this promise, there are areas where it may improve. The first major area for reform that we might seek would address the way that clergy-penitent laws have contributed to VAWG by not involving secular legal authorities. The

45. Truong, and Ghafournia, *Understanding Spiritual & Religious Abuse*, 4–6.

46. Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 10–11.

47. Patrick Kearon, "He Is Risen with Healing in His Wings: We Can Be More Than Conquerors," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 24, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2022/04/24kearon?lang=eng>.

record books show that male ecclesiastical leaders and the Church have refrained from acting in the best interest of abuse victims.⁴⁸ One of the main reasons is that clergy-penitent law and other legal liabilities cause complications for the institution and those ministering in ordained leadership positions, and clergy-penitent privilege has the unintended consequence of enabling harm in cases of child sex abuse.⁴⁹

Recent cases have revealed the significant problems that these laws have created. In the highly publicized August 2022 *Associated Press* report by Michael Rezendes, a bishop in the LDS Church did not report child sex abuse to secular authorities. He did this on the counsel of the Church's hotline as advised by the Kirton McConkie law firm—the largest law firm in Utah, which has long served as the LDS Church's external legal counsel. The sexual abuse continued for over seven years while Church leaders were fully aware that it was ongoing and no protections were put in place for the victim. All parties involved—the bishop, the Church helpline, and the Kirton McConkie law firm—enabled the perpetrator.⁵⁰

48. Associated Press, "Nearly 2.3B Awarded in Sex Abuse Lawsuit that Had Named the LDS Church," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 27, 2023, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2023/04/27/nearly-23b-awarded-sex-abuse/>; Jason Dearen and Michael Rezendes, "Former Mormon Bishop Highlighted in AP Investigation Arrested on Felony Child Sex Abuse," *AP News*, Mar. 13, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-aedc8cfc9175ebadb18420ec25a5f99c>.

49. Amos N. Guiora, Diana Pogosyan, and Matylda Blaszcak, "Sacred Secrets Enabling Child Sex Abuse," March 2, 2024, University of Utah College of Law Research Paper no. 589, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4746169>; Tad Walch, "Should Clergy Report Sex Abuse of the Penitent? A Look Inside Priest-Penitent Privilege," *Deseret News*, Aug. 19, 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2022/8/19/23297074/should-clergy-be-required-to-report-sex-abuse-cases>.

50. Michael Rezendes, "Seven Years of Sex Abuse: How Mormon Officials Let It Happen," *AP News*, Aug. 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/Mormon-church-sexual-abuse-investigation-e0e39cf9aa4fbe0d8c1442033b894660>.

This case exposed significant weaknesses in the Church's approach to treating sexual violence in ways that extended beyond the individuals involved. The extensive investigative work conducted by Rezendes and Jason Dearen regarding the legal maneuvers reveal how the Church acted to stifle rather than support victims.⁵¹ In December 2023, audio recordings captured Church leaders protecting the Church against a child sex abuse claim and discussing payments to silence the victim. These audio recordings from meetings held over four months, obtained by the Associated Press, shed light on the conduct of Paul Rytting, the director of risk management at the LDS Church. Despite expressing concern over child sex abuse that had occurred, Rytting deployed a risk management strategy that has enabled the Church to maintain secrecy concerning cases of child sex abuse. This included Church legal counsel advising against the bishop providing testimony in the victim's case by invoking clergy-penitent laws. Consequently, in the absence of his testimony, prosecutors opted to dismiss the charges. More telling is that

51. Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, "Recordings Show How the Mormon Church Protects Itself From Child Sex Abuse Claims," *AP News*, Dec. 12, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-9c301f750725c0f06344f948690cafl6#>; Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, "Take Aways from the AP's Investigation into the Mormon Church's Handling of Sex Abuse Cases," *AP News*, Dec. 4, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-4db829616a5c5cfa351a2e95d778ae9e>; Michael Rezendes and Jason Dearen, "Former Bishop Highlighted in AP Investigation Arrested on Felony Child Sex Abuse Charges," *AP News*, Mar. 13, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-investigation-child-sex-abuse-aedc8cfc9175ebadb18420ec25a5f99c>; Michel Rezendes, "4 Takeaways from AP's Mormon Church Sex Abuse Investigation," *AP News*, Aug. 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/mormon-church-sexual-abuse-takeaways-f01fba7521dddf8a89622668b54ac10>; Deepa Bharath, "New Member of Mormon Church Leadership Says It Must Do Better to Help Sex Abuse Victims Heal," *AP News*, Jan. 23, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/church-jesus-christ-latter-day-saints-leader-patrick-kearon-088f1de01f91122070e1f95755dcd66e>.

Rytting verbally conveyed he was authorized to pay out up to \$300,000 to the victim and her mother for their silence, governed by a confidentiality agreement.⁵²

Silencing victims is institutional betrayal and further traumatizes victims.⁵³ Confidentiality agreements have the potential to inflict additional harm by impeding the public disclosure and broader societal recognition of victims' experiences, while also serving as a shield for wrongdoers. These protective measures create an environment conducive to perpetrators acting with impunity, secure in the knowledge that their actions will be safeguarded from scrutiny. By insulating wrongdoers from the repercussions of their actions, such agreements erode the efficacy of social mechanisms designed to enforce accountability and instigate behavioral change. By offering silencing agreements, religious organizations' actions mirror the behavior of perpetrators, in silencing and shaming victims, thus obstructing the path to healing.⁵⁴

While contemplating the unfathomable nature of these atrocities may be distressing, it is imperative to recognize that clergy-penitent privilege laws persist in jurisdictions worldwide. In a hopeful turn of events in February 2024, the legislative bodies of the Utah senate and house of representatives jointly approved a bill that bestows upon clergy members equivalent legal safeguards as other mandated reporters of child abuse. This legislation pertains specifically to situations where instances of abuse are disclosed during a religious confession by a

52. "Recordings Show How Mormon Church Kept Sex Abuse Claims Secret," *PBS News*, Dec. 4, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/recordings-show-how-mormon-church-kept-child-sex-abuse-claims-secret>; Rezendes and Dearen, "Recordings Show."

53. Carly Parnitzke Smith, Jennifer J. Freyd, and Norman B. Anderson, "Institutional Betrayal," *American Psychologist* 69, no. 6 (2014): 575–87, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037564>.

54. Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 82.

perpetrator. Additionally, the bill seeks to educate clergy by delineating the distinctions between adherence to church policies and legal obligations. Proponents assert that the bill serves an instructive purpose, clarifying to clergy that they can safely report abuse from a confessional.⁵⁵ While this proposal seems promising, Guiora suggests more extensive legislation. He advocates for the removal of child sex abuse from the confines of clergy privilege, proposing that any confession made must be reported in all instances, regardless of circumstances.⁵⁶ Passing this bill and supporting others that are more aggressive will help change the legal landscape for victims and end the ecclesiastical shield for perpetrators.

Solution 2: Women's Ministry

As noted above, the current procedure of the Church is that victims of violence speak to their male bishop or stake president. Church leaders play a vital role in this process. Ally Kern, a survivor of domestic abuse, stated in an article in *Reflections*, a Yale Divinity School journal, that “survivors most often reveal their experience of abuse first—and often only—to their pastor. This puts pastors in the place of first responders.”⁵⁷ Kern’s statement is affirmed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and religious scholars, such as Nancy Nason-Clark and Janet Heimlich.⁵⁸ Yet ministers, for the most part, are not trained to

55. US News, “Utah Legislature Expands Ability of Clergy Members to Report Child Abuse,” *Associated Press*, Feb. 29, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/utah/articles/2024-02-29/utah-legislature-expands-ability-of-clergy-members-to-report-child-abuse>.

56. Guiora et al., “Sacred Secrets.”

57. Kern, “Role of Pastors.”

58. Nason-Clark, et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 30; Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*.

understand how to shape their pastoral care to respond effectively to VAWG.⁵⁹

As men are more likely to be ministers, women reaching out to men for help and protection against other men is precarious and is known as the “male protection racket.” Women are promised protection from men though none is actually provided, as men are often predisposed to protect their peers. Women then find themselves entrenched in the patriarchal vortex and the cycles of subjugation and harm continue.⁶⁰ Compounding these problems is a culture of doubt about women’s claims of abuse.⁶¹ When the abused can vocalize the reality of an

59. Committee on Women & Security in the Church and The Committee on Marriage & Family in the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, “When I Call for Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women,” Nov. 2002, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.usccb.org/topics/marriage-and-family-life-ministries/when-i-call-help-pastoral-response-domestic-violence>; Samantha Kilpatrick, “4 Reasons Your Church Needs Domestic Violence Awareness Training,” Lifeway Research, Oct. 20, 2023, <https://research.lifeway.com/2023/10/20/4-reasons-your-church-needs-domestic-violence-awareness-training/>; Nason-Clark et al., *Religion and Intimate Partner Violence*, 30; Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*.

60. Diane Rosenfeld, “Sexual Coercion, Patriarchal Violence and the Law,” in *Sexual Coercion in Primates and Humans: An Evolutionary Perspective on Male Aggression Against Females*, Edited by Martin N. Muller and Richard W. Wrangham (Harvard University Press, 2009), 429–30. See also Benedek, *Hometown Betrayal*, highlighting how an entirely Latter-day Saint community in Northern Utah covered up rape and child sexual abuse for decades with law enforcement protecting each other.

61. Tuerkheimer, *Credible*; Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 3–4; Judy Woodruff, “Why We Don’t Often Believe Women Who Report Sexual Assault,” *PBS News Hour*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-we-often-dont-believe-women-who-report-sexual-assault>.

abusive situation, her testimony will often be incredulous because she is a female.⁶²

I propose shifting the responsibility to women Church leaders to overcome such barriers. Male-to-male alliances would no longer stand in the way as a barricade to credibility issues and to seeking needed assistance from men when being abused by a man. Granting women this authority should also improve a victim's access to much-needed help and resources, not only for herself but also any children involved.⁶³ Additionally, alliances forged among females may offer more protection and support to women, given that the majority of violence against women and girls is committed by men. This has been exemplified in the work of Diane Rosenfeld, the founding director of the Gender Violence Program and a lecturer on law at Harvard Law School. Without systemic change, the prevailing social environment and entrenched rape culture will persist unabated.⁶⁴

Solution 3: Training, Ministering, and Raising Awareness

Finally, comprehensive education and training initiatives on ministerial and community levels are vital. Specialized training is required for ministers to effectively provide counseling to both survivors and

62. Tuerkheimer, *Credible*; Heather Savigny, *Cultural Sexism: the Politics of Feminist Rage in the #MeToo Era* (Bristol University Press, 2022), 116; Jodie Murphy-Oikonen, Kareb McQueen, Ainsley Miller, Lori Chambers, and Alexa Hiebert, "Unfounded Sexual Assault: Women's Experiences of Not Being Believed by the Police," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 11–12 (2022): 8916–40.

63. Mercy Amba Adoyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections in An African Woman in Christianity in Africa* (Orbis Book, 2004), 99; Doreen Ajiambo, "Holy Cross Sisters Help Ugandan Women Resist Domestic Violence," *American: The Jesuit Review*, Jan. 11, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/01/11/holy-cross-sisters-help-ugandan-women-resist-domestic-violence>; Rosenfeld, *Bonobo Sisterhood*.

64. Rosenfeld, *Bonobo Sisterhood*.

perpetrators. Training is also essential to identifying victim-perpetrator dynamics and behaviors. Community-level educational initiatives must encompass discussions on credibility issues, and consent as a fundamental human right in intimate relationships. These measures are crucial in the efforts to prevent VAWG.

Lack of educational training represents a broad cultural shortcoming. Formal training of ministers in addressing VAWG is notably absent, not only in higher education institutions such as divinity schools that offer formation programs for chaplains globally, but also within religious organizations. The LDS Church is no exception. It is imperative that training and education on this matter address victim-perpetrator dynamics, which are tied to credibility issues foremost. In many cultural contexts, disbelief and skepticism are deep-seated biases against female survivors who courageously share their stories with male ministers. Abusers exploit these biases. For example, a perpetrator will frequently seek to manipulate both private and public accusations against them by casting aspersions on the mental health of the woman or girl.⁶⁵ This is known as coercive control or DARVO. Jennifer Freyd, professor emeritus of psychology and founder and president of the Center for Institutional Courage, describes DARVO as “a reaction of perpetrators of wrongdoing, particularly sexual offenders, may display in response to being held accountable for their behavior. DARVO stands for “Deny, Attack, or Reverse Victim and Offender.” The perpetrator or offender may deny the behavior, attack the individual doing the confronting, and reverse the roles of victim and offender such that the perpetrator assumes the victim role and turns the true victim—or

65. Savigny, *Cultural Sexism*, 116; Ullman, *Talking About Sexual Assault*, 102–3.

the whistle-blower—into an alleged offender.⁶⁶ An initial stride toward countering DARVO involves education. Merely acquiring knowledge about DARVO can serve to diminish its potency. In instances where perpetrators employ DARVO, individuals well versed in these tactics are inclined to lend credence to victims while harboring skepticism toward perpetrators. This knowledge also proves efficacious for victims themselves, being less prone to internalize self-doubt. The act of identifying and labeling DARVO can wield significant influence as a potent antidote.⁶⁷

There is also a great deal of inconsistency in the way that Church leaders may handle these cases. Seeking help from ecclesiastical leaders may be compared to purchasing a lottery ticket. An ecclesiastical leader usually provides counsel and will act based on the Church's position as well as his personal worldview.⁶⁸ Preconditioned perspectives are often positioned in lived experience, in which the leader will, in turn, position their prescribed counsel. Such counsel is often centered on androcentric perspectives and Church ideologies that are not easily broken free from and can often impede validation and credibility, the procurement of safety for the female, and the female's ability to acquire the information and knowledge regarding her rights, hindering her ability to make best judgments and decisions.

When sexual abuse is such a ubiquitous and ever-present problem and leaves not only physical and psychological injuries but deeply

66. Sarah J. Harsey and Jennifer J. Freyd. "Defamation and DARVO," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 23, no. 5 (2022): 481–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2022.2111510>; Sarah J. Harsey, Eileen L. Zurbriggen, and Jennifer J. Freyd. "Perpetrator Responses to Victim Confrontation: DARVO and Victim Self-Blame," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 26, no. 6 (2017): 644–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2017.1320777>.

67. Eric Patterson and Heide Moawad, "DARVO: Deny, Attack, Reverse, Victim, and Offender," *Choosing Therapy*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.choosingtherapy.com/darvo/>.

68. "Why Is Sexual Abuse Common in the Mormon Church?"

spiritual and moral wounds, why then, we must ask, are ecclesiastical ministers not being trained in how to minister to victims and perpetrators? How can untrained ministers act effectively without perpetuating additional harm when dealing with such difficult complex issues?⁶⁹

Abuse survivors are confronted with the spiritual and psychological issues of dealing with their relationships with Christ and God, as both are males, and the two faces of the Church. For example, perpetrators are often upheld in callings and leadership positions despite testimonials provided against them. Perpetrators freely move from one ward to another and across stake boundaries without their histories being passed on, and women and girls are often left wondering how God's Church allows such injustices. This is a systemic institutional problem that facilitates moral injuries. Moral injury is the damage done to one's conscience when experiencing an act that transgresses one's moral beliefs, values, or ethical codes of conduct.⁷⁰

Other churches have begun to address these issues by recognizing the problems. In 2023, the University of Notre Dame's McGrath Institute produced a white paper initiating a formation program in pastoral ministering to victim-survivors of sexual abuse: "Today as a Church we are called to minister to a world in which sexual trauma of one sort or another is commonplace. Formation programs must reflect this reality."⁷¹ In other words, this is a call for a sea change. Might we consider strongly gleaning from those who have walked through the fire?

69. Kern, "Role of Pastors."

70. "What Is Moral Injury?," Syracuse University Moral Injury Project, accessed Apr. 4, 2024, <https://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/about-moral-injury/>.

71. Margaret Scroope, "Fully Equipped for Every Good Work: A Proposal of Twelve Competencies in Ministering to Survivors of Sexual Abuse for Seminary Formation Programs," University of Notre Dame, McGrath Institute for Church Life, Nov. 9, 2023, <https://mcgrath.nd.edu/news/fully-equipped-for-every-good-work-a-proposal-of-twelve-core-competencies-in-ministering-to-survivors-of-sexual-abuse-for-seminary-formation-programs/>.

As imperative as it is for the institutional Church to train ecclesiastical leaders in how to minister to moral injuries and identify victim-perpetrator behaviors in VAWG, drastic changes are also needed to bring conscious awareness at the community level as well. The lack of institutional involvement to enable more conscious social awareness on these issues perpetuates stigmatization and biases and keeps the reality of our collective and individual lived experiences in darkness.⁷² Both victims and those encircling them in shared *communitas* must embrace our lived realities of harm being done in our very own homes by the men in our own Church communities as the initial step toward preventing the further demise of women and girls.

Listening to the stories of abuse can itself have a transformative effect. Conscious awareness raising can expedite healing and reorient flawed worldviews of stigmatization. In the words of Howard Zehr, an American criminologist and pioneer of the modern concept of restorative justice:

In addition to restitution and answers, victims need opportunities to express and validate their emotions: their anger, their fear, their pain. Even though such feelings may be hard for us to hear and may not square with what we would wish them to feel, these feelings are natural human responses to a violation of crime. Anger, in fact, needs to be recognized as a common stage of suffering, and one that cannot simply be short-circuited. The suffering and pain are part of the offense and need to be expressed and to be heard. They need to have their “truth” heard and validated by others.⁷³

Here Zehr speaks clearly to both parties bearing the pain of the sexual crime committed, both parties in a posture of vulnerability. Conscious awareness can only be rendered in the open daylight, not behind closed doors. According to A. W. Sipes, a psychotherapist and expert

72. Dodson et al., “Moral Foundations.”

73. Howard Zehr, *Changing the Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Herald Press, 1990), 45.

in clerical sexual abuse, “Power depends on keeping certain realities private. The thrust of spirituality propels itself in exactly the opposite direction—toward exposure of truth and complete self-revelation and total accountability.”⁷⁴ Consciousness is pivotal to healing. If we as survivors are heroic to share, why is it, then, that others are not heroic enough to bear the burdens of the crimes forced upon us by the very institution and men whom women and girls have supported? How long will our own families, communities, and society allow, foster, enable, and promote such acts of sexual violence?

Additionally, consent in any intimate partner relationship is both a human right and not fully understood. Just because one may be married does not mean they have the right to demand or coerce sex from their partner. Human rights treaties such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women include the guarantee of freedom from sexual violence, coercion, and discrimination as well as control over one's own body and over the involvement in sexual interactions with an intimate partner.⁷⁵ Education on consent is essential in the Church's patriarchal context.

I close on a hopeful note. In working with Teddy Hickman-Maynard, associate dean of ministry studies at Harvard Divinity School, he has committed to integrating mandatory education on sexual abuse into the curriculum beginning in fall 2024, and to pursue curriculum development for a course focused solely on this pressing issue. Dean Teddy is leading out, working to reimagine a formation curriculum that will include VAWG training. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints needs to do the same.

74. Zehr, *Changing the Lenses*, 89–90.

75. Dana Sophia Valentiner, “The Human Right to Sexual Autonomy,” *German Law Journal* 22, no. S15 (2021): 703–17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2021.35>

Conclusion

VAWG is a plague that is actively alive, harming our own women and girls, families, and communities. There exists a patriarchal vortex that facilitates VAWG both structurally in the institution and in Church ideologies, enabling pernicious harms to perpetuate. Religion plays a two-fold role in both facilitating healing and perpetuating harm. Legal issues (clergy-penitent laws), credibility issues, and male-to-male alliances are key components of the patriarchal vortex in which abused women and girls find themselves trapped. Shifting the role of ministering to women and girls who experience VAWG to women leaders is one means of addressing such hurdles. Additionally, ministers and communities are uneducated and untrained in VAWG. This must change. Conscious awareness bringing to light the reality of VAWG in our higher education institutions, religious organizations, and our own communities must be openly addressed. It is essential to adopt a multi-faceted approach that encompasses not only the provision of education but also the reformation of the systems and policies that perpetuate VAWG within the patriarchal vortex.

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“SAVING THE CONSTITUTION” WITH WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM: EZRA TAFT BENSON, W. CLEON SKOUSEN, AND THEIR ATTEMPT TO SOLICIT THE HELP OF FBI DIRECTOR J. EDGAR HOOVER

Matthew L. Harris

When Mormon apostle Ezra Taft Benson moved to the nation’s capital in 1953 to begin his duties as the Secretary of Agriculture, he had a secret to keep. The president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, David O. McKay, who called communism the “anti-Christ,” had given him a special blessing before he departed. He blessed Benson that he “might see . . . the enemies who would thwart the freedoms of the individual as vouchsafed by the Constitution” and instructed him to “be fearless in the condemnation of these subversive influences.”¹

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1. McKay, quoted in “Civic Groups Hear Talk on Thanksgiving, Freedom,” *LDS Church News*, Nov. 29, 1952, 54; Benson blessing, quoted in Matthew L. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower: Ezra Taft Benson and the Making of the Mormon Right* (University of Utah Press, 2020), 32. See also David O. McKay, diary, Nov. 29, 1952, box 30, folder 6, David O. McKay Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

McKay uttered these powerful words during the turbulent Cold War, and Benson interpreted them as “a call from God.”²

Benson was not the first person the president asked to help preserve American freedom. Benson’s close friend, W. Cleon Skousen, received a similar call and during his sixteen-year employment at the FBI (1935–1951) he sought to capitalize in that position as he gained valuable insights into the “threatening clouds of communism.”³ In subsequent years, Skousen and Benson would combine their energies and efforts to warn Americans that democracy and capitalism were under siege—and could only flourish if they followed the teachings in holy scripture, which they insisted the nation had strayed from. Citing a ubiquitous Mormon prophecy, they proclaimed that “Mormon elders”—a majority white male patriarchy bearing the priesthood—would “save the Constitution” as it “hung by a thread.”⁴

When Benson and Skousen advanced this exceptionalist narrative—a narrative that would intertwine free market economics with Mormon theology; and one that deemed liberal president Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs a precursor to communism and socialism that presaged the End Times (some Christians called him

2. Ezra Taft Benson, oral history interview with James B. Allen, October 1974–May 1975, 55, James H. Moyle Oral History Program, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT. See also Mark E. Petersen, “Ezra Taft Benson: A Habit of Integrity,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1974, 22–23.

3. W. Cleon Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 3rd ed. (1939; Desert News Press, 1948), x; see also 19–41. For McKay and Skousen, see “Conversations with President McKay,” undated, box 177, folder 16, Ernest L. Wilkinson Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections (hereafter Perry Special Collections), Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

4. Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 41–43. For the prophecy in Mormon discourse, see Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *The Papers of Josph Smith: Journals*, vol. 3, *May 1843–June 1844* (Church Historian’s Press, 2015), 12n27; Brigham Young, July 4, 1854, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:15; Orson Hyde, Jan. 3, 1858, *Journal of Discourses*, 6:152; and Donald Q. Cannon, ed., *Latter-day Prophets and the United States Constitution* (Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1991).

"the anti-Christ")—they realized they needed more.⁵ Given what was at stake, Benson and Skousen turned to the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, in their ambitious effort to save the Constitution. Enamored with Hoover's bold vision of a white Christian patriarchy at the vanguard of communist resistance, the Mormon duo sought to share this timely message with anyone who would listen, especially members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Benson's and Skousen's FBI files, now declassified, reveal their relentless efforts to enlist Hoover's help. They also reveal that, because of Benson and Skousen's affiliation with the John Birch Society, an anticommunist fringe group, the director shunned them.⁶



When J. Edgar Hoover became the nation's sixth FBI director in 1924, the world was mired in political and social upheaval. Only a few years earlier the Bolsheviks had established a communist state in the wake of a bloody civil war.⁷ Subsequent efforts to establish communism in other

5. Matthew Avery Sutton, "Was FDR the Anti-Christ? The Birth of Fundamentalism Antiliberalism in a Global Age," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 4 (2012): 1052–74; Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 113. For Mormon exceptionalism, see Reed D. Slack, "The Mormon Belief of an Inspired Constitution," *Journal of Church and State* 36, no. 1 (1994): 35–56; and Philip L. Barlow, "Chosen Land, Chosen People: Religious and American Exceptionalism Among the Mormons," in *Mormonism and American Politics*, edited by Randall Balmer and Jana Riess (Columbia University Press, 2016); J. Reuben Clark, *Stand Fast by Our Constitution* (Deseret Book, 1962), 6–8.

6. For the John Birch Society, see Matthew Dallek, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (Basic Books, 2022); Edward H. Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life: Robert Welch, the John Birch Society, and the Revolution of American Conservatism* (University of Chicago Press, 2021); and D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014).

7. Mark D. Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution, 1905–1921* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Revolution: A New History* (Basic Books, 2017).

European and Asian countries floundered. By 1921, only two states—Russia and Mongolia—were ruled by communist parties. But by 1954, three decades into Hoover’s tenure as director, communist regimes had been established in most of Eastern Europe, all of the Soviet republics, as well as China, Mongolia, North Korea, and North Vietnam. There was even fear that communism would take hold in the United States, but this was met with stiff resistance from right-wing groups and the federal government.⁸

Hoover’s tenure as FBI director paralleled the rapidly growing struggle between Washington and Moscow in which competing visions of capitalism and communism dominated global politics, creating a bipolar international system that triggered a global Cold War.⁹ Hoover, like all Americans, was affected profoundly by the Cold War’s potent reach, which, in turn, shaped everything he did leading the agency. Indeed, over the course of his directorship until he died in 1972, Hoover argued vigorously that Americans could only defeat communism by living Christian teachings and by recognizing that the nation’s laws were biblically based. Raised in a devout Presbyterian household, he proclaimed the “United States a Christian nation” founded by “Christian men.”¹⁰ For Hoover, this meant that the country’s natural order

8. George W. Breslauer, *The Rise and Demise of World Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 12; Maurice Isserman, *Reds: The Tragedy of American Communism* (Basic Books, 2024), 34–38; Michael Willrich, *American Anarchy: The Epic Struggle Between Immigrant Radicals and the US Government at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (Basic Books, 2023), 339–51. See also Jonathan Haslam, *The Spectre of War: International Communism and the Origins of World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

9. Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War: A World History* (Basic Books, 2017); Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (Hill and Wang, 2007), chap. 1; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford University Press, 1997), chaps. 2–3.

10. Hoover, “Time for Decision,” Nov. 24, 1964, copy in box 171, folder 3, Wilkinson Papers. For Hoover’s faith, see Lerone A. Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover: How the FBI Aided and Abetted the Rise of White Christian Nationalism* (Princeton University Press, 2023), chap. 1.

was biblical, meaning that it was white, Christian, patriarchal, hetero-normative, and authoritarian—the essence of what scholars would call white Christian nationalism.¹¹

In subscribing to this political and cultural framework, Hoover “viewed segregation as part of God’s law and order.”¹² This explains why he refused to crack down on violent protestors who rejected the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* or why he failed to dispatch federal agents to protect embattled Freedom Riders in the South. It also explains why he was reluctant to investigate the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacy groups unless the president ordered it. All of this clashed with his perceived natural order.¹³

To this end, Hoover ensured that the FBI remained both “lily white” and male dominated. Of the eight thousand agents on the FBI payroll, wrote Bill Sullivan, Hoover’s assistant director, only seventy of them were African Americans while 99.4 percent of the bureau was

11. For excellent studies on white Christian nationalism, see Martin, *Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover*; Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright, 2021); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020); and Michael O. Emerson and Glenn E. Bracey II, *The Religion of Whiteness: How Racism Distorts the Christian Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

12. Martin, *Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover*, 110; Emerson and Bracey II, *The Religion of Whiteness*, 43.

13. James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (University Press of Kansas, 1991), 167; Patricia Sullivan, *Justice Rising: Robert Kennedy’s America in Black and White* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 102, 110; Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 164–65; Karen S. Anderson, “Massive Resistance, Violence, and Southern Social Relations: The Little Rock, Arkansas, School Integration Crisis, 1954–1960,” in *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction*, edited by Clive Webb (Oxford University Press, 2005), 210. Linda Gordon writes that Hoover was “hardly known for his liberalism to act.” Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright, 2017), 192.

white and male.¹⁴ Sullivan further acknowledged that Hoover “hated liberalism, blacks and Jews,” adding that “he had a great long list of hates.”¹⁵ Hoover’s racism was most evident toward Martin Luther King, whom he personally loathed and whose influence he sought to curb. The director ordered wiretaps on King’s home and office in a devious attempt link him with communism. Historian Paul Harvey perceptively writes, “Hoover’s prurient style of Presbyterianism, his self-image as an upright defender of ‘Christian Renewal’ against ‘Soviet Rule’ turned him from a spiritual Cold Warrior to a domestic stalker.”¹⁶

But it was not just King that Hoover loathed. He held condescending views toward Black people in general, fueled by an unshakable conviction that they were uninformed and uneducated and could be easily duped by propagandists within the Communist Party. Hoover therefore saw civil rights organizations as targets for communist subversion and as a danger to national security. In short, he warned that communists used racial discontent to advance their agenda.¹⁷

14. Sullivan to J. Edgar Hoover, Oct. 6, 1971, in William C. Sullivan [with Bill Brown], *The Bureau: My Thirty Years in Hoover’s FBI* (W. W. Norton, 1979), appendix C, 265–77.

15. Sullivan, oral history interview with Ovid Demaris, 1972, in Ovid Demaris, *The Director: An Oral Biography of J. Edgar Hoover* (Harper’s Magazine Press, 1975), 226. Scholars have also chronicled Hoover’s racism. See David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Penguin, 1983), 153; Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover, The Man and the Secrets* (Penguin, 1991), 500; and Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (Viking, 2022), 657.

16. Paul Harvey, *Martin Luther King: A Religious Life* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 128. For Hoover linking King with communism, see Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 40–43; Sullivan, *Justice Rising*, 189–90; Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (Simon and Schuster, 1998), 150–54; and Jonathan Eig, *King: A Life* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023), 511–12.

17. See, for example, “Communist Infiltration of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” Dec. 13, 1954, FOIA 61-11376-852, NAACP FBI File; unidentified memo to J. Edgar Hoover, “Communist Influence in Racial Matters,” Jan. 20, 1964, FOIA 100-438794-64, Southern Christian

These themes converged acutely in Hoover's 1958 book *Masters of Deceit*, the most popular anticommunist book ever published in the post-World War II era. Four years later Hoover capitalized on the publicity by publishing *A Study of Communism*, which he wrote for high school students as part of their "patriotic curriculum."¹⁸ In both books, Hoover declared that Americans of all ages needed the tools to recognize communist tactics and methods and he intended to provide them. He said that communists had infiltrated the nation's churches, schools, businesses, and governments and then identified several "communist front groups" that masqueraded as friendly institutions.¹⁹

Hoover's most provocative section in *Masters of Deceit* is when he contrasted Christianity with communism. He not only called communism a "false religion," but he avowed that Marxists could not coexist with Christians because they wanted the "utter elimination of all religion."²⁰ From that logic, Hoover claimed that communism posed a full-throttled attack on all traditional values, which included not only religion and capitalism, but also the nuclear family. In contrast, Hoover said that liberals were lukewarm in fighting communism.

Leadership Conference FBI File. See also "Hoover Says Reds Exploit Negroes," *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1964. For civil rights and national security, see Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 87–89, 102–4.

18. Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (Free Press, 1995), 281. See also Gage, *G-Man*, 462–63; and Matthew Cecil, *Branding Hoover's FBI: How the Boss PR Men Sold the Bureau to America* (University Press of Kansas, 2016), 124–27.

19. J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958), chap. 18; J. Edgar Hoover, *A Study of Communism* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), chap. 11.

20. Hoover, *Masters of Deceit*, 319–20. See also Dianne Kirby, "J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI, and the Religious Cold War," in *The FBI and Religion: Faith and National Security Before and After 9/11*, edited by Sylvester A. Johnson and Steven Weitzman (University of California Press, 2017), 73.

Whereas religious conservatives like Hoover emphasized Bible study, church attendance, and prayer as an antidote to communism, liberals promoted art, poetry, and cinematic innovation to educate Americans on how communism threatened cultural freedom. Liberals believed that communism was best fought by promoting artistic expression.²¹

Hoover, of course, rejected such ideas and believed that Hollywood producers, liberal academics, and civil rights groups were part of the problem. Indeed, they were among the “communist front groups” he had warned about in *Masters of Deceit* and *A Study of Communism*.²² And yet, despite these purported threats, Hoover predicted that Americans would emerge triumphant through their faith and devotion to scripture. “With God’s help,” he averred, “America will remain a land where people still know how to be free and brave.”²³

Hoover had been touting white Christian nationalist tropes for years before he met W. Cleon Skousen, a devout Latter-day Saint who would become one of Mormonism’s most popular writers and professors at Mormon-owned Brigham Young University (BYU).²⁴ It was a quirk of history that brought the two together. Skousen applied to the FBI on a whim, encouraged by a roommate who already worked at the

21. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, rev. and exp. ed. (Basic Books, 2017); Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (Basic Books, 2015); Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

22. Hoover, *Masters of Deceit*, 229–30, 237–38; Hoover, *A Study of Communism*, 165–69.

23. Hoover, *Masters of Deceit*, 337.

24. A full-length biography on Skousen has yet to be written, but readers can consult Jo Ann Skousen and Mark Skousen, eds., *There Were Giants in the Land: Episodes in the Life of W. Cleon Skousen* (Ensign, 2023) for context to his life. This book is based on Skousen’s unpublished letters and journal entries.

bureau.²⁵ Skousen quickly garnered the notice of the director and other upper-level administrators, who praised his energy and efficiency. After a sixteen-year tenure, Skousen left in 1951 to take an administrative position at BYU, and Hoover promised he would always have a job at the FBI if he wanted to return.²⁶ Skousen's fondness for the director, nourished by years of close contact with him, was reciprocal. Skousen called Hoover "a great friend and one of the truly superior human beings I have known in my life." Nowhere was this affection revealed more vividly or powerfully than when Skousen expressed "warm admiration" for the director in a book he dedicated to him.²⁷

Their close ties led Skousen to invite Hoover to deliver the commencement address at BYU in 1955. The director carefully considered it because he liked the Mormons. Four years earlier he had attended a concert by BYU singers in the nation's capital, and before that he allowed the Mormons to publish one of his speeches in a church periodical. Hoover also recruited Mormons. He liked their clean-cut, wholesome image—and their courage. He said that the most courageous agent he ever hired was Mormon Samuel Cowley, the son of LDS apostle Matthias F. Cowley, who was killed in a shootout with the notorious bank

25. W. Cleon Skousen, "J. Edgar Hoover as I Knew Him," speech commemorating Hoover's life, Boston, Massachusetts, 1972, in *Favorite Speeches of W. Cleon Skousen*, vol. 1 (Ensign, n.d.), no. 10.

26. C. R. Davidson, memo to Mr. Callahan, subject: W. Cleon Skousen, May 23, 1961, FOIA 61-69602-1, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 68.

27. Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 72; Skousen to Hoover, Apr. 19, 1962, FOIA 94-69602-33, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. The book Skousen dedicated to Hoover is entitled *So You Want to Raise a Boy?* (Doubleday, 1962).

robber George “Baby Face” Nelson.²⁸ But Hoover declined the invitation; he said he was about to retire. Whether this was true or not is difficult to say. Nevertheless, the invitation flattered Hoover, and he told Skousen and the LDS church president, David O. McKay, who supported it, how much he appreciated them taking a “personal interest” in his work. Hoover even sent McKay an autographed copy of *Masters of Deceit*.²⁹

In the midst of trying to get Hoover to Utah, Skousen was busy writing his own book on white Christian nationalism. He had flirted with these ideas since at least 1939 when he published a book entitled *Prophecy and Modern Times*. In it, Skousen told fellow Mormons that the United States had a special destiny. The country’s place in world history had been prophesied in Mormon scripture, for the United States was where, in Skousen’s words, “the gospel” would be “restored” and where Jesus Christ would return to usher in the End Times.³⁰ He called the United States an exceptional nation, with an exceptional Constitution, and an exceptional destiny. Moreover, having come of age in a culture that treated the Constitution as “a fetich,” to borrow the words of historian Michael Kammen, Skousen believed that it was his divinely ordained mission as a Mormon elder to save the Constitution from “secret combinations”—the name of a stealthy group of modern-day

28. See J. Edgar Hoover’s tribute to “Samuel Parkinson Cowley,” Nov. 1, 1971, box 1, folder 11, Samuel P. Cowley Papers, Special Collections, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, UT; “Big Holdup Balked by Nelson’s Death,” *New York Times*, Dec. 2, 1934. For Hoover and the BYU singers, see Ernest L. Wilkinson and Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 3:389. For Hoover’s published address, see “Men of Tomorrow: The Chief of the ‘G’ Men Talks to Boys,” *Improvement Era* 42, no. 11 (1939): 661, 690, 693–94, 697–98, 701, 703. For the FBI and Mormons, see Matthew Bowman, “A Vast Infiltration: Mormonism and the FBI,” in Johnson and Weitzman, *FBI and Religion*.

29. Hoover to Skousen, March 21, 1958, FOIA 94-47463-35, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; McKay, diary, June 6, 1958, box 10, folder 6, McKay Papers.

30. Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 19–41.

communists and socialists prophesied about in the Book of Mormon. Thus, influenced by sacred scripture, Skousen grimly warned that "secret combinations were seeking to overthrow the freedom of all lands, nations and countries." By this, Skousen claimed that Franklin D. Roosevelt and other big-government liberals were destroying the country with their corrosive policies, government welfare programs, and conniving schemes to lift up the poor—all of which risked turning the federal government into a leviathan state.³¹

Skousen expanded on these themes with greater urgency in *The Naked Communist*, published two decades after *Prophecy and Modern Times*. With the Cold War rapidly escalating, Skousen sought to expose the "secret combinations" that he claimed had infiltrated the federal government. He covered much of the same ground as *Masters of Deceit*, published a few weeks earlier in 1958, and arrived at many of the same stark conclusions. Skousen drew on *FBI Reports* and Hoover's public addresses to support his bold claims. The two books were so closely aligned in both tone and temperament that Americans praised them for going "hand in hand." Even national magazines and conservative outlets recognized their similarities and promoted them together. Soon, both books became bestsellers and Skousen was suddenly thrust into the national spotlight.³²

31. Michael Kammen, *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 251. See also Mary Ann Franks, *The Cult of the Constitution: Our Deadly Devotion to Guns and Free Speech* (Stanford University Press, 2019). Skousen quoted from Ether 8:25 in the Book of Mormon in Skousen, "A History of Secret Combinations," n.d., *Latter-day Saint Conservative*, https://latterdayconservative.com/files/w-cleon-skousen/W_Cleon_Skousen_on_Secret_Combinations_and_Freedom.mp3; see also Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 41–43.

32. John E. Olson Jr. to J. Edgar Hoover, Apr. 19, 1962, FOIA 94-47468-50, Skousen FBI File. For national periodicals extolling the books, see *US News and World Report*, Feb. 2, 1959, and *The Evening Star*, Feb. 14, 1959; Gage, *G-Man*, 512; Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 160–61.

Skousen was pleased to ride the director's coattails. Having his book linked with Hoover's not only bolstered sales but also his reputation. In the mid-twentieth century, Hoover was one of the most popular public officials in the United States. His popularity soared during two menacing Red Scares when he ordered his agents to arrest anarchists, communists, and immigrants, feeding off of a wave of American xenophobia.³³ In 1949, his reputation soared even further when *Time* magazine featured him on their cover and when Hollywood producers made a film about him called *Walk East on Beacon*, which offered a flattering depiction of the director and his so-called "G-Men." A 1954 survey indicated that 78 percent of Americans viewed him favorably.³⁴

Skousen shared Hoover's concern that the country was "in serious trouble."³⁵ The rise of global communism, along with the perceived threat of communist subversion at home, troubled him. He accepted Hoover's remedy that only by following biblical precepts and protecting nuclear families could Americans find sanctuary. He also accepted Hoover's belief that Black people were inferior to people of other races. Skousen was reared in a majority white Christian church, run by a majority white male priesthood that privileged a majority white theology, which aligned with Hoover's Christian nationalism. During Skousen's coming-of-age in the church, his Mormon leaders spoke frequently of "inferior races" and "favored lineages," which consigned Black people to the margins in a clearly defined racial hierarchy.

33. Willrich, *American Anarchy*, 298–99, 339–42; Powers, *Not Without Honor*, 40–42, 225–27; Isserman, *Reds*, 29. For Hoover's reputation, along with the Bureau's, see Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), esp. chap. 9.

34. For Hoover, see the cover of *Time* magazine, Aug. 8, 1949. For the film about Hoover, see Powers, *Not Without Honor*, 253. For the FBI in popular culture, see Powers, *G-Men*; and Cecil, *Branding Hoover's FBI*. Gallup survey, May 1954, quoted in Eig, *King*, 392.

35. Unidentified writer to J. Edgar Hoover, Jan. 20, 1971, FOIA 100-106670-389, Martin Luther King Jr. FBI File.

Mormon apostle Bruce R. McConkie bluntly noted that “negroes are not equal with other races,” echoing a well-entrenched Christian view that Black people bore a biblical curse. Labeling Black people this way led Mormon leaders in 1852 to deny them the priesthood and access to the faith’s temples—restrictions that were both important cornerstones and defining markers in the faith’s racial theology.³⁶ Significantly, these white-centered theologies were so tightly ensconced in Mormon culture that some LDS leaders proclaimed that Black people would have to shed their “curse” and revert to their primitive state of whiteness before they could qualify for the “Celestial Kingdom”—the highest degree of salvation in the Mormon afterlife.³⁷

Skousen accepted these teachings uncritically and eagerly promoted them. His writings are studded with biblical references in which he referred to Black people as “the seed of Cain.”³⁸ He also asserted that when dark-skinned people converted to Mormonism they would “no longer be backward, mischievous, and unattractive,” but “white and

36. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Bookcraft, 1958), 477. See also George Q. Cannon, journal, Feb. 1, 1881, George Q. Cannon Papers, LDS Church History Library; Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection: Short Discourses on Gospel Themes*, 5th ed. (1931; Genealogical Society of Utah, 1945), 101, 108–9. The LDS priesthood and temple ban lasted from 1852 to 1978. For the origins of the ban, see W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (Oxford University Press, 2015), chap. 5. For Christians and race, see Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justifications of American Slavery* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

37. See Matthew L. Harris, *Second-Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 4, 16–17, 71, 189, 311–12; and Matthew L. Harris, “Racialization of Black and Brown Members in Scripture, Prophetic Pronouncement, and Popular Culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” in *Engaging Modernity: Secularism, Culture, and the Latter-day Saints*, edited by Catherine A. Jarvis, Dan Cere, G. Eric Jarvis (McGill-Queen’s University Press, forthcoming).

38. W. Cleon Skousen, *Treasures from the Book of Mormon*, vol. 2 (Publisher’s Press, 1971), 2239.

delightsome,” by which he meant they would gradually lose their curse, thereby triggering a literal change in their appearance. Skousen’s white supremacy was not just confined to theology. He called Martin Luther King “a top Kremlin agent” and accepted Hoover’s shocking claim that the civil rights leader was a major cog in a vast international communist conspiracy.³⁹

Recognizing that his views would be controversial, Skousen carefully avoided discussing race and civil rights in *The Naked Communist*, though both hovered over the book like a thundercloud. Infused with white Christian nationalist themes, Skousen implored Americans to save the Constitution from communism by reading the Bible daily and keeping the Sabbath day holy. Honoring the “Judaic-Christian code” would “frighten a Communist,” he asserted, and reaffirm the United States as a “god-fearing” Christian nation. Skousen, moreover, implored “strong family solidarity,” for that was the best antidote to fight communists who sought to destroy traditional American values. And lastly, echoing Hoover, he reaffirmed that Christianity was the source of America’s strength: “As parents and teachers, we need to recognize that if this pillar of our culture collapses our own children will be the casualties. This disintegration must stop. George Washington knew what makes us strong; Jefferson knew: ‘This nation, under God, cannot fail!’”⁴⁰

Skousen’s most outrageous claim occurred when he asserted that Harry Hopkins, a close adviser to Franklin D. Roosevelt and one of the chief architects of the New Deal, had sold the nation’s nuclear secrets to the Russians. Skousen also said that KGB agents had infiltrated the US government, posing an existential threat to American institutions. Another bold claim had the Russians stealing the designs of the Sputnik by pilfering top-secret documents from the United States.⁴¹ Years

39. Skousen, *Prophecy and Modern Times*, 54; Skousen, memo to Ernest Wilkinson, Jan. 23, 1970, box 177, folder 16, Wilkinson Papers.

40. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Naked Communist* (Ensign, 1958), 368, 372–73.

41. Skousen, *Naked Communist*, 126, 166–67, 230.

later Skousen would expand on these themes in an equally controversial sequel called *The Naked Capitalist*. There, he drew on longstanding anti-Semitic tropes to posit that a cabal of international bankers had advanced communism to create a "one-world government."⁴²

Skousen failed to provide a shred of evidence, or at least credible evidence, for any of these astonishing claims. To those who knew him, this was not surprising. He always "had a flare for entertaining teaching," recalled David Kennedy, a friend. Another friend, Mormon apostle J. Reuben Clark, called *The Naked Communist* "very entertainingly written."⁴³ Like Hoover, Skousen had mastered the fine art of popularizing anticommunism and was so proud of his work that he sent Hoover a personalized copy. He told the director that he felt "honored to have his work come out about the same time as yours."⁴⁴ Hoover promptly responded, thanking him for sending the "handsomely bound copy" and told Skousen he was "grateful" for his "favorable statements concerning the FBI" and the "Bureau's role in the fight against communism."⁴⁵

Hoover's praise aside, not everyone thought highly of *The Naked Communist*. Some of Skousen's harshest critics came from within the

42. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Naked Capitalist* (Ensign, 1970). For anti-Semitic tropes, see Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2013), 153–56; Fred-eric Cople Jaher, *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 245–46; and Niall Ferguson, *The House of Rothschild: Money's Prophets, 1798–1848* (Penguin, 1999).

43. David M. Kennedy, oral history interview with Gordon Irving, Mar. 22, 1982, 100, Moyle Oral History Program; J. Reuben Clark to W. Cleon Skousen, Mar. 28, 1958, box 403, folder 12, J. Reuben Clark Papers, Perry Special Collections.

44. Skousen to Hoover, Mar. 24, 1958, FOIA 94-69602-38, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

45. Hoover to Skousen, Apr. 2, 1958, FOIA 94-47468-39, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

Mormon community itself. BYU history professor Richard Poll condemned it for its “extreme partisanship” and “inaccurate historical narrative.”⁴⁶ Another critic assailed Skousen for “taking some small fact, blowing it up out of proportion, and presenting it as a fact.” Some resorted to ad hominem attacks: They called him a “nut” and a “charlatan.” Still others found Skousen’s claims fantastical to the point that they were “almost unbelievable.”⁴⁷ Skousen countered his critics by trying to enlist the director’s help. He told Hoover that by attacking him critics were also attacking the director since their books were so closely aligned. The director, however, saw through this ruse and refused to be used this way. Hoover was also irritated when he learned that Skousen told his critics that he was once Hoover’s “top aide,” in what was a clumsy attempt to give his imaginative claims credibility. When word got back to Hoover what Skousen was doing, he instructed his staff to inform his former agent not “to inject the FBI” into political matters. The director testily noted that Skousen had taken advantage “of his former Bureau connection,” which undermined the positive, non-partisan image he sought for the agency.⁴⁸

For their part, Latter-day Saints received *The Naked Communist* with an uneasy mix of excitement and caution, Poll’s critique

46. Skousen to J. Edgar Hoover, June 12, 1962, FOIA 94-47465-58, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. For Poll’s critique, see “This Trumpet Gives an Uncertain Sound” (1962) and Skousen’s response trying to enlist Hoover’s help (1962), both in FOIA 94-47465-59, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

47. Quimby Melton Sr. to J. Edgar Hoover, Nov. 27, 1962, FOIA 94-47468-63, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; unidentified critic, quoted in “Skousen Convincing, Dangerous; Views Need Considerable Airing,” *Valley News*, n.d., FOIA 94-47468-64, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Rev. Harry H. Feistner to J. Edgar Hoover, May 17, 1962, FOIA 94-47468-54, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

48. Cartha “Deke” DeLoach, memo to John P. Mohr, July 28, 1960, FOIA 94-47468-22, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Milton A. Jones, memo to Cartha “Deke” DeLoach, June 22, 1962, FOIA 94-47465-59, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. For Hoover’s careful manipulation of the bureau’s image, see Matthew Cecil, *Hoover’s FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau’s Image* (University Press of Kansas, 2014).

notwithstanding. The senior Church leadership urged members to read it, touting it as a useful encapsulation of the dangers the US faced. Skousen's biggest supporters included President McKay and apostle Ezra Taft Benson. McKay's support was expected; after all, he asked Skousen to write it and promoted the book in the Church's general conference. A Cold Warrior himself, McKay had warned repeatedly of communism's menacing effects claiming that it clashed with both scripture and Mormon conceptions of "free agency."⁴⁹ Benson's endorsement was expected too. Not only was he Skousen's close friend, confidante, and collaborator, but he praised him for invoking Hoover—a tactic Benson would later emulate in his own book. Calling Hoover "the best-informed man in the United States on the growing Communist conspiracy," Benson instinctively recognized how the director could benefit Latter-day Saints. In sermons and civic addresses, the apostle implored Latter-day Saints to read *Masters of Deceit*, *A Study in Communism*, and *The Naked Communist* in tandem. In Benson's judgment, these books would help them understand why they had to save the Constitution before it was too late.⁵⁰



49. Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 45–46. David O. McKay, *Statements on Communism and the Constitution of the United States* (Deseret Book, 1966); Matthew Bowman, "The Cold War and the Invention of Free Agency," in *Thunder from the Right: Ezra Taft Benson in Mormonism and Politics*, edited by Matthew L. Harris (University of Illinois Press, 2019). Skousen informed J. Edgar Hoover that *The Naked Communist* "came about as the result of an assignment" he received from David O. McKay. Skousen to Hoover, Mar. 12, 1958, FOIA 67-69602-24, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File.

50. Ezra Taft Benson to Hugh B. Brown, Sept. 18, 1962, box 3, folder 3, Hugh B. Brown Research File, Perry Special Collections; Benson "The Internal Threat Today" (1963), in Ezra Taft Benson, *A Title of Liberty: A Warning Voice*, compiled by Mark A. Benson (Deseret Book, 1964), 33, 40. For Benson's other references to Hoover, see "We Must Be Alerted and Informed" (Dec. 1963) and "Race Against Time" (Dec. 1963), both in Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 42–60, 61–85.

In the fall of 1952, Benson requested a background check from Hoover before he embarked on his government service as the secretary of agriculture. This was not required at the time, but Benson wanted to prove his loyalty.⁵¹ Over the next eight years, the two men would grow close, as both recognized they shared similar values in confronting communism. The apostle was an avid reader of the “FBI Crime Reports”—the special report the Bureau published providing statistics on violent crimes—and he shared the director’s emphasis on “law and order.” Benson, in fact, frequently quoted from the crime reports in his sermons and recommended them to friends.⁵² Most important, he found the director’s warnings that subversives had infiltrated the federal government deeply troubling. “For thirty years,” Benson wrote, “we have aided the cause of atheistic, socialistic communism by permitting communists in high places in government.” He lamented that high-ranking government officials had knowingly “permitted the insidious infiltration of communist agents and sympathizers into almost every segment of American life.”⁵³

To be sure, these were explosive allegations. Benson claimed that Alger Hiss, Harry Dexter White, Wolf Ladejinsky, and Klaus Fuchs, all one-time federal employees, were subversive, and he even accused one of the men under his employ, Ladejinsky, of being a communist spy. These allegations—some of which proved to be true (Fuchs and

51. J. Edgar Hoover to Ezra Taft Benson, Nov. 24, 1952, FOIA 77-54629-02, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. For Benson’s background file, which spans dozens of pages, see FOIA 77-54679-20, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

52. Benson’s collection of the “FBI Crime Reports” can be found in reel 6, Ezra Taft Benson Papers, LDS Church History Library. For Benson quoting from the “FBI Crime Reports,” see Reed A. Benson, comp., *So Shall Ye Reap: Selected Addresses of Ezra Taft Benson* (Deseret Book, 1960), 105, 119, 200–201; Ezra Taft Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, compiled by Jerreld L. Newquist (Parliament Publishers, 1969), 198–99; and Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 26, 70.

53. Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 5. See also Ezra Taft Benson foreword, in John J. Stewart, *Mormonism vs. Communism* (Mercury, 1961), viii.

Hiss were actual Soviet spies)—led Benson to conclude that other communist conspirators lurked within the government, including the agriculture department, where Hiss and Ladejinsky had once worked.⁵⁴ Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy also stoked fear. The tendentious senator claimed that the communist conspiracy was better planned, better organized, and further along than most observers had recognized. Communists and communist sympathizers, he boldly charged, had infiltrated the US State Department, the Hollywood motion picture industry, universities, businesses, and places of worship. His allegations created a whipsaw of suspicion in the nation's capital about who might lean Red. While Eisenhower and Hoover both believed that McCarthy's claims were specious and opportunistic, Benson found the senator credible. McCarthy saw things, Benson later insisted, that no other government official saw.⁵⁵

With the nation ensnared in anticommunist hysteria, Benson's time in Washington had convinced him that the country was imploding from within. One of the culprits destabilizing the country, he asserted, was Martin Luther King, the upstart Baptist minister whom Benson

54. Ezra Taft Benson to H. Roland Tietjen, May 22, 1962, box 7, folder 3, Alumni Association Records, Perry Special Collections; Benson, *So Shall Ye Reap*, 43; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 34–37; Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Little, Brown, and Co., 1998), 179–80; G. Edward White, *Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars: The Covert Life of a Soviet Spy* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 227–30.

55. Ezra Taft Benson, "McCarthy in Retrospect," June 30, 1977, copy in box 55, folder 1, Leonard J. Arrington Papers, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University. See also Ezra Taft Benson to Robert Welch, Sept. 18, 1967, Ezra Taft Benson Correspondence, John Birch Society Headquarters, Appleton, WI. For Eisenhower and McCarthy, see William I. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s* (Simon and Schuster, 2018), 125–47; and Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (University Press of Kansas, 2006), 89. For Hoover and McCarthy, see Gage, *G-Man*, 433–36; and Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes*, 259–60.

alleged was a pawn of the Kremlin. There is no evidence that Benson's fellow apostles shared this sinister view, but Benson tried repeatedly to win them over to his position. He told them, though he never offered any evidence, that King was the leader of several "communist front groups"—a dubious claim he gleaned from Hoover. Benson called this a "carefully documented fact."⁵⁶

Benson opposed the larger civil rights movement as well, claiming that it was riddled with communist sympathizers. That belief led him to oppose Eisenhower's 1957 civil rights bill and the president's enforcement of the *Brown* decision. Likewise, years after he left the cabinet, Benson revealed his opposition to civil rights in even more stark terms when he accepted an invitation to run on a third-party presidential ticket with Strom Thurmond, one of the nation's most prominent segregationists. When that failed, he asked permission to join a presidential ticket with George Wallace, another strident segregationist, but President McKay told him no. Just as significant, Benson wrote the foreword for a book in which the authors placed a decapitated head of an African American on the front cover. Engraved on the image was a hammer and sickle—the communist symbols representing solidarity between workers and peasants. The book's main message matched Benson's foreword, conveying that communists had infiltrated the civil rights movement.⁵⁷

56. For Benson and communist front groups, see Council of the Twelve Minutes, Nov. 4, 1965, box 64, folder 8, Spencer W. Kimball Papers, LDS Church History Library; Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, 310; and Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 72. King aggressively rebutted these allegations. See "Dr. King Rebutts Hoover's Charges; Offers to Discuss Criticisms—He is Supported by Negro Rights Leaders," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1964; Eig, *King*, 388; Gage, *G-Man*, 604–5.

57. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower*, 239; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 73–76; Newell G. Bringhurst, "Potomac Fever: Continuing Quest for the U.S. Presidency," in Harris, *Thunder from the Right*. Benson, foreword to Wes Andrews and Clyde Dalton, *The Black Hammer: A Study of Black Power, Red Influence, and White Alternatives* (Desco Press, 1967), esp. 13–23. The authors

Like Skousen, Benson's white supremacy flowed from LDS teachings and right-wing politics, which shaped his views on racial equality and the larger civil rights movement. This was never more realized than when white Mormon women complained about sitting next to Black Mormon women at church and Benson retorted that the Black women would need to segregate themselves from the white women.⁵⁸ This segregationist impulse, and his larger views about white supremacy, naturally aligned with Hoover's, and the apostle sought to do all that he could to nurture the relationship. When the popular Mormon Tabernacle Choir, for example, came to Washington, Benson asked Hoover to join his wife at the event (Benson was out of town). On another occasion, he asked the director to hire his son Reed for a position within the bureau. Of course, Hoover appreciated the friendly gestures. He called Benson a "good friend" and kept in regular contact with him during his government service.⁵⁹ When Benson fell ill and was admitted to the hospital to recover from surgery, the director asked Benson "if there was anything we can do to help you." Hoover was equally thoughtful when Benson's stepmother died. "All of us in the FBI are thinking of you in your loss," he assured him. And most telling, when Benson left

write that "Benson generously offered his address as the basis for the introduction to *The Black Hammer*" (13). Benson also opposed sending federal troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to integrate African American students. See "Benson, Graham Rip Wheat Sale," *Deseret News*, Oct. 28, 1963.

58. Ezra Taft Benson, "Trust Not the Arm of Flesh," *Improvement Era* 70, no. 12 (1967): 55; First Presidency to Ezra Taft Benson, June 23, 1942, in *Minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve and First Presidency*, 4 vols. (Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2010), 4:393. See also Kennedy, oral history interview with Irving, 95.

59. Benson to Hoover, Oct. 16, 1958, FOIA 94-38023-17, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, June 18, 1957, FOIA 94-38023-14, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. For Hoover and Benson's friendship, see William H. Webster (FBI director) to Ezra Taft Benson, June 29, 1978, FOIA 94-38023-74, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

his cabinet post in 1961, the director sent him a warm note praising him for “years of devoted service.”⁶⁰

If white Christian nationalism shaped their response to the Cold War, Hoover’s uncanny ability to promote its principles is what most impressed Benson. It helped, of course, that he was already well versed in its language. Ever since he was a young man, Benson quoted liberally from Mormon scripture affirming the Constitution was divinely sanctioned. His favorite verse derived from the Doctrine and Covenants—one of four books of Mormon scripture—which publicized the fact that the Constitution “was established under the inspiration of heaven by wise men whom the Lord raised up.”⁶¹ In later writings, Benson called the United States “a choice land” founded “on the truth of Christian principles” and extolled the nation’s Christian roots in even more direct terms to Ronald Reagan: “This nation is the Lord’s base of operations in these latter days. It is where the gospel of Jesus Christ was restored.”⁶²

In the 1950s, as the Montgomery bus boycotts, the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board* decision, and the Little Rock high school integration crisis convulsed the nation, Benson became singularly focused in promoting white Christian nationalism. The “Mormon elders,” which included himself and Skousen, had to save the Constitution from

60. Hoover to Benson, Oct. 26, 1959, FOIA 94-38023-21, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Oct. 23, 1958, FOIA 94-38023-18, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Jan. 12, 1961, FOIA 94-38023-29, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Nov. 10, 1970, FOIA 94-38023-60, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

61. Benson, address to the general Relief Society Conference, Sept. 28, 1949, in Benson, *So Shall Ye Reap*, 223; D&C 101:79–80. See also Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 28.

62. Benson, *Conference Report*, Oct. 1954, 120; Benson, “America: A Choice Land,” *Improvement Era* 47, no. 11 (1944): 674; Benson to Reagan, May 29, 1984, box 7, Latter-day Saints (Mormons) file, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA.

liberals demanding racial equality. This is precisely the moment when he sought Hoover's help. After reading *Masters of Deceit*, the apostle became riveted by the book's core message, which prompted him to invite Hoover to Utah to speak to Latter-day Saints. An FBI memo captured the substance of the request: "Benson is a Mormon, and he has asked the Director to speak on a number of occasions and has invited him to programs presented by different organizations in that church."⁶³ Benson also invited the director to speak to the "All American Society"—an anticommunist organization in Salt Lake City that Skousen founded. Hoover turned both requests down; he was busy.⁶⁴

When Benson failed to get Hoover to Salt Lake City, he decided to write his own book popularizing anticommunism, doing essentially what Skousen had done in *The Naked Communist*. In 1962, a year after his government service ended, Benson published *The Red Carpet*. Included in its pages were a dizzying array of quotes from *Masters of Deceit* that nearly overwhelmed the text. Calling Hoover "fearless and distinguished," he wanted Mormons to know that Jesus Christ was the only way to save the nation from "godless communism." Quoting Hoover repeatedly, Benson wrote that "our faith in democracy and our fellow man is rooted in a belief in a Supreme Being," declaring that "Christian principles . . . made this nation great." From that reasoning, he proclaimed that American democracy and capitalism was rooted in "a belief in a Supreme Being." Americans, he said, had to "serve the God of this land, who is Jesus Christ. There is no other course of safety."⁶⁵

In this lively book, Benson kept the focus squarely on the welfare state, claiming that the nation's fiscal policies were slowly plunging the

63. Milton A. Jones, memo to Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, Nov. 10, 1959, FOIA 94-58023-24, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

64. Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, memo John P. Mohr, Sept. 18, 1961, FOIA 94-38023-33, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

65. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Red Carpet, Socialism—The Royal Road to Communism* (Bookcraft, 1962), 55–56, 298–99.

country into economic ruin. Not only were welfare programs unconstitutional, he reasoned, but they led to a dangerous concentration of power that put the United States on the “royal road” to communism.”⁶⁶ The worried apostle implored Americans to understand that this was un-American and that basic political and economic rights in the United States were rooted in a “fundamental belief in God.” The last page of the book tied in neatly all the themes that he had articulated in *The Red Carpet*. He quoted from a creed utilized by former presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Herbert Hoover entitled “The American Way of Life.” It listed over a dozen political and economic rights for Americans, but it read more like a religious manifesto linking free market capitalism with the divine. What is striking is how Benson equated American rights with Jesus Christ, whom he averred was central to “The American Way of Life.”⁶⁷

Invoking Jesus Christ, of course, was not unusual in the Cold War years. Scores of conservative businessmen, clergy, and politicians promoted a white Christian nationalist culture that fused free market economics with a biblicist worldview. Here they wanted to assure a secular world of America’s fidelity to Christianity, capitalism, and democracy. Their biggest accomplishment was putting “In God We Trust” on the nation’s currency and formally codifying “One Nation Under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance. With the nation’s capital awash in religious symbolism, Benson had simply capitalized on this by linking anticommunism to Christianity and laissez-faire capitalism. Proud of his work, he sent Hoover a copy of *The Red Carpet* with an inscription that read: “To J. Edgar Hoover—Distinguished American

66. Benson, *Red Carpet*, 83.

67. Benson, *Red Carpet*, 321. For background and context to “The American Way of Life,” see Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, 70–71.

patriot and courageous defender of our freedom.”⁶⁸ It must have pleased the director when his agents reviewed the book and wrote: “Benson . . . makes numerous favorable references to the Director and quotes extensively from *Masters of Deceit*, as well as from articles and speeches by the Director.”⁶⁹

A few years later Benson touted these themes again, in what was his most forceful address to date on white Christian nationalism. He titled it “The Christ and the Constitution” and urged “Christian Constitutionalists” to save American democracy from communism. He offered five suggestions to preserve the nation’s “Christian Constitutional legacy.” The first was “spirituality.” Americans could only “remain free” as long as they worshipped “the God of the land—Jesus Christ.” Second, they needed “balance.” “A man has duties to his church, home, country, and profession.” Third, they needed “courageous action”—that is, they needed to join “those valiant patriots of the John Birch Society” to pool their efforts to fight the enemy. Fourth, they needed to be educated. This meant studying the Bible and patriotic literature like *American Opinion* magazine—an official Birch publication—that would amplify “crucial concerns to free men.” And lastly, they had to “be prepared.” “A man should not only be prepared to protect himself physically, but he should have on hand sufficient supplies to sustain himself and his

68. The inscription can be found in an unidentified FBI memo of Apr. 18, 1962, FOIA 94-38023-42, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Hoover to Benson, Apr. 20, 1962, FOIA 94-38023-39, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. For conservatives, free-market economics, and religion, see Kruse, *One Nation Under God*, esp. 102–4, 240–42; Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2011); and especially Matthew Avery Sutton, “Redefining the History and Historiography of American Evangelicalism in the Era of the Religious Right,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 92, no. 1 (2024): 37–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfae063>.

69. R. W. Smith, memo to William Sullivan, May 17, 1962, FOIA 94-38023-42, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

family in an emergency.” In the closing pages, Benson called on every American citizen to be a “Christian Constitutionalist.” They had to look to “Christ and the Constitution” to save them.⁷⁰

By the mid-1960s, as Black Power militants, a burgeoning feminist movement, and a vibrant anti-Vietnam War counterculture roiled the nation, Benson felt that the nation needed Hoover’s message more than ever. He would start with his own church. First, Benson tried to get Hoover’s writings into the Church’s adult priesthood manual that Skousen had written. He wanted the Church’s white patriarchy to be educated on communist tactics and methods. But some apostles opposed it. They feared that criticizing communism and socialism would stymie the Church’s missionary efforts, especially as Church leaders tried to proselytize behind the Iron Curtain.⁷¹ Second, Benson tried to get Hoover to speak in the LDS Church general conference, but he declined. Third, Benson requested permission from Hoover for Deseret Book, the Church’s publishing house, to publish his speeches. Hoover declined again.⁷²

Benson did have luck, however, convincing Hoover to allow the Church to publish two of his speeches.⁷³ Hoover’s 1947 article “God and

70. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Christ and the Constitution,” *American Opinion*, Dec. 1964, 41–45, copy in box 21, folder 29, John Birch Society Records, University Archives, Brown University, Providence, RI. Benson delivered a slightly revised version of this address in the LDS church general conference and changed the title to “Prepare, Then Fear Not,” *Improvement Era* 70, no. 6 (1967): 57–60.

71. See First Presidency Minutes, Nov. 19, 1965, box 61, folder 4, and Apr. 18, 1968, box 67, folder 4, both in McKay Papers. Skousen titled his proposed course of study “The Perfect Law of Liberty”; copy in box 1, folder 4, Hugh W. Nibley Papers, Perry Special Collections. For Skousen as the author of “The Perfect Law of Liberty,” see Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 316–17.

72. Milton A. Jones, memo to Robert E. Wick, Apr. 13, 1966, FOIA 94-38023-58, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

73. Benson to Hoover, Oct. 22, 1965, and Hoover’s reply, Nov. 4, 1965, FOIA 94-38023-54, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

Country or Communism" was republished in a 1966 Church periodical, which presented Mormons with a stark option: They could either embrace "Communism—the scourge of our generation," along with its militant "atheism," or they could embrace "a theistic philosophy which holds sacred the dignity of each human being." Sprinkled throughout the text were quotes from the Bible leaving readers with an unambiguous conclusion as to which religion he was referring. Benson followed up this article with another one of Hoover's. In 1968, with Hoover's consent, the Church published "The Evils of Obscene Materials," which attacked pornography as one of the nation's scourges.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, in 1967 and 1968, as race riots erupted in dozens of American cities, Benson and Skousen alleged that "Black Marxists" had planned them. The riots were, in their judgment, the fulfillment of prophecy in Mormon scripture—the result of "secret combinations" colluding with civil rights groups to thwart freedom. The vigilant apostle called this ruse a "tool of communist deception" and vowed to expose their tactics and methods. With the country mired in racial discontent, Benson and Skousen turned again to Hoover.⁷⁵ Hoover's teachings, they reasoned, would benefit college students, especially at BYU, a majority white institution, where they feared that Mormon students might align

74. Hoover, "God and Country or Communism," *Improvement Era* 69, no. 1 (1966): 17, 47; Hoover, "The Evils of Obscene Materials," *Improvement Era* 71, no. 5 (1968): 15. See also McKay, diary, Oct. 21, 1965, box 61, folder 2, McKay Papers.

75. Peter B. Levy, *The Great Uprising: Race Riots in Urban America during the 1960s* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 124–26, 165; Benson, "Erosion of America" (May 13, 1968), in Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, chap. 7. For Skousen and Benson's views on Black Marxists fomenting race riots across the United States, see Benson, "Civil Rights—Tool of Communist Deception," in Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, chap. 13; and Skousen, "The Communist Attack on the Mormons," March 1970, National Research Group, American Fork, UT. For their views on "secret combinations," see Benson, "Civic Standards for Faithful Saints," *Utah Independent*, Apr. 14, 1972, 4; Skousen, "History of Secret Combinations."

with civil rights groups. In 1971, the anxious duo made a final appeal to get the director to Utah. Benson read one of Hoover's recent addresses and hoped that "it might appear in every magazine in America and every newspaper." He used the address as a pretext to invite Hoover to give it at BYU. The director declined.⁷⁶

Hoover never told Benson and Skousen why he kept rebuffing them, but when Benson's and Skousen's FBI files became available to researchers in 2010, his reasons were clear. In 1961, only months after Benson's government service ended, he and Skousen began to affiliate with the John Birch Society—an anticommunist advocacy group that peddled far-out conspiracy theories. The Birchers shot to prominence in the 1960s when they claimed that communists had infiltrated the United Nations, that Black and Jewish leaders were communist sympathizers, that the space program was funded and orchestrated by communists, and that communists had assassinated John F. Kennedy because he was not aggressive enough in pursuing civil rights. None of these allegations, however, rose to the level of audaciousness as when Birch founder Robert Welch branded American statesman George C. Marshall a communist, along with Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren and President Eisenhower and his inner circle of advisers, which included the secretary of state, the CIA director, and other notable figures. Distraught over Eisenhower's failure to curtail Franklin Roosevelt's liberal New Deal programs, Welch took to the pages of *The Politician*, his signature book, to attack him. He called the president and his inner circle "conscious, dedicated agent[s] of the communist conspiracy."⁷⁷ As one might expect, these extraordinary claims were

76. Benson to Hoover, Nov. 19, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-66, and Hoover's reply, Nov. 24, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-69, both in Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

77. Robert Welch, *The Politician*, unpublished manuscript, 1958, 267. For Bircher conspiracy theories, see Dallek, *Birchers*, 33–35, 108–9; Miller, *A Conspiratorial Life*, 5–8, 161–65; Mulloy, *World of the John Birch Society*, 33–34, 123–30.

met with extraordinary resistance, not least from Hoover himself, who hotly noted, "Anybody who will allege that General Eisenhower was a Communist agent has something seriously wrong with him."⁷⁸

Hoover was not alone in finding Welch unhinged. A 1963 poll revealed that only 5 percent of the 1,250 adults surveyed held a favorable view of the Birch Society. Even the conservative senator Barry Goldwater, the GOP's 1964 presidential nominee, influential right-wing pundit William F. Buckley, and other prominent conservatives condemned the Birch founder, dismissing him as a "credible observer of political reality."⁷⁹ For them, Welch's conspiracy theories had no place in the Republican Party. There was nothing to be gained by vilifying an American hero like Eisenhower or his cabinet, or casting aspersions on elected officials with whom they disagreed. The Birchers' conspiracy theories, they argued, would not neutralize communism or curtail big government or return the nation to God. They were distractions at best, at worst a launching pad for anti-Semitism and anti-Black vitriol. Thus, mainstream conservatives did not want to be aligned with the Birchers, even though they shared a common concern about the expanding welfare state, labor unions, communism, and civil rights. (They opposed the latter for federal reasons—not because of communist subversion.)⁸⁰

78. Benson to Hoover, June 15, 1965, FOIA 94-38023-51, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; J. Edgar Hoover testimony before the Warren Commission, Nov. 23, 1964, in *Hearings before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, 26 vols. (US Government Printing Office, 1964), 5:101.

79. John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 167; David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 71.

80. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard*, 167; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 76–77; Steven Hahn, *Illiberal America: A History* (W. W. Norton, 2024), 271; Farber, *Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism*, 71, 105; and Matthew Continetti, *The Right: The Hundred Year War for American Conservatism* (Basic Books, 2022), 155–57.

Most mainstream conservatives, rather, leaned into Hoover's white Christian nationalism to oppose communism, which consisted of Bible literacy, staunch church attendance, and reaffirmation of the nation's Christian roots. They viewed Welch and other far-right ideologues as "fright peddlers," "apostles of hate and fear" and part of a "paranoid style in American politics." Buckley called them "the Loonies," and mainstream news outlets deliberately avoided giving them air time.⁸¹ And while their conspiracy theories failed to gain acceptance among mainstream conservatives at the time—a fact that would dramatically change by the early twenty-first century—Benson and Skousen eagerly defended the society.⁸² When, for instance, criticism of the society soared in the mid-1960s, they doubled down to defend it. During a national swell against the conspiracy organization, Benson sent Hoover a copy of *The Politician*, declaring that he would "never know in this life why [Eisenhower] gave help to the conspiracy." He also sent letters to scores of elected officials—and to Eisenhower himself—defending the Birch Society as a patriotic organization. Skousen, equally outspoken, stoutly defended the Birch leader in a widely circulated pamphlet, downplaying Welch's conspiracy theories as just an "opinion" that was "never part of the Society's policies or principles."⁸³

81. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard*, 167–68; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1965); Carl T. Bogus, *Buckley: William F. Buckley Jr. and the Rise of American Conservatism* (Bloomsbury Press, 2011), 174.

82. For this point, see Dallek, *Birchers*, 15. For an opposing viewpoint arguing that mainstream conservatives and far-right ideologues built a coalition since at least the 1930s, see David Austin Walsh, *Taking America Back: The Conservative Movement and the Far Right* (Yale University Press, 2024).

83. Benson to Hoover, May 28, 1965, FOIA 94-38023-49, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; W. Cleon Skousen, *The Communist Attack on the John Birch Society* (Ensign, 1963), 8, copy in box 23, folder 14, Birch Society Records. Benson to Eisenhower, Dec. 9, 1965, Principal File, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KA; Benson to Richard Nixon, Dec. 9, 1965, box 3, Ezra Taft

Declassified FBI memos reveal that, even though the director "had very cordial relations" with Benson and Skousen in the past, their allegiance to the John Birch Society had shattered their relationship.⁸⁴ When they spoke at Birch rallies in the early 1960s touting Welch's conspiracy theories, it infuriated Hoover. And when Skousen tried to cash in on his fame by representing himself as Hoover's "top aide" during his bureau employment, it sparked a blizzard of letters to FBI headquarters from skeptical Americans demanding to know if it was true. Some of these skeptics had clout. Admiral Chester Ward, a US Navy judge advocate, asked Hoover about his former agent even though he had already formed his own opinion. After hearing Skousen speak, Ward called him an "unprincipled racketeer in anticommunism," "money mad," and one "who is doing anything and everything to exploit the subject."⁸⁵ Skousen's antics also angered Hoover, and he told inquisitors that his former agent was not a top aide but a low level "clerical employee" he barely knew. Benson fared just as poorly. Hoover hid in his office anytime the former secretary or his son Reed visited Washington seeking a meeting. His aides counseled Hoover to avoid his old friend: "It is not

Benson folder, Wilderness Years: series I:S, subseries A: 1963–1965, series 238, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, CA.

84. DeLoach, memo to Jones, Nov. 10, 1959; Milton A. Jones, memo to Cartha "Deke" DeLoach, Nov. 9, 21, 1962, FOIA 77-54679-40, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; G. E. Malmfeldt, memo to Tom Bishop, Aug. 22, 1968, FOIA 94-47469-88, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. See also Jones, memo to Wick, Apr. 13, 1966.

85. Ward's response is conveyed in William C. Sullivan, memo to Alan H. Belmont, Jan. 2, 1963, FOIA 97-69602-338, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File. For Skousen's speeches on the Birch speaker's circuit, see Lee C. White, "Confidential Memorandum #9," John Birch Society Propaganda, Civil Rights during the Kennedy Administration, 1961–1963, part 3, The Civil Rights Files of Lee C. White, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. For Benson's speeches at Birch functions, see "Let Us Live to Make Men Free" (Sept. 28, 1963), in Benson, *Title of Liberty*, 1–21; and "Strength for Battle" (July 4, 1966), in Benson, *An Enemy Hath Done This*, chap. 4.

believed that the Director should take time to schedule to meet with Mr. Benson.”⁸⁶

Despite shunning them, though, Benson and Skousen remained unremittingly loyal to Hoover. In 1971, when he came under heavy scrutiny for his involvement in COINTELPRO—a controversial FBI counterintelligence program that targeted civil rights activists—the pair blithely defended him despite newspapers publishing hard evidence that Hoover had violated the Constitution by illegally wiretapping civil rights leaders.⁸⁷ Characteristically, Benson and Skousen rushed to Hoover’s defense, impervious to the new facts that just came to light. To President Nixon, Benson wrote: “I have noted with deep concern the reoccurring attacks on that truly great American, J. Edgar Hoover. . . . I know of no finer example of patriotism, devoted public service, and far-seeing imaginative management of our most vital agency, the FBI, than he has given. To me, he is a symbol of the best there is in America.” Benson echoed the same sentiments to BYU students and at the faith’s general conference. He even titled one of his books *God, Family, and Country* after one of Hoover’s addresses. Skousen, likewise, defended the director. He told Latter-day Saints that Hoover was “the most

86. J. Edgar Hoover to Mark J. Stewart, Nov. 13, 1961, FOIA 97-69602-317, W. Cleon Skousen FBI File; Milton A. Jones, memo to Tom Bishop, Nov. 11, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-66, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File.

87. Betty Medsger and Ken Clawson, “Stolen Documents Describe FBI Surveillance Activities,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 24, 1971; “Mitchell Issues Pleas on F.B.I. Files: Asks Press Not to Publish Date on Stolen Papers,” *New York Times*, Mar. 24, 1971; and especially Betty Medsger, *The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover’s Secret FBI File* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014). For COINTELPRO, see J. Edgar Hoover, memo to FBI Field Offices, August 25, 1967, FOIA 100-448006, COINTELPRO FBI File. See also Martin, *The Gospel of J. Edgar Hoover*, 264–65; Gage, *G-Man*, 583–84, 608–13; Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 182–90; Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (University of California Press, 2016), 210–11.

outstanding public official that we've had in the United States Government in our time." He was "a great man."⁸⁸

Their blinkered allegiance to Hoover led them to overlook his faults. When Benson was ordained LDS Church president in 1985, for instance, he was still praising Hoover, even though the director had been dead for nearly thirteen years.⁸⁹ In fact, during his presidency, Benson delivered a steady stream of sermons touting white Christian nationalism, much of which echoed Hoover. With the Cold War still raging, Benson seized on the Constitution's bicentennial in 1987 to remind Latter-day Saints that God had sanctioned the Constitution as a precondition for the Mormon gospel to flourish. In a well-publicized address, he called the Constitution a "sacred document" and avowed that "its words were akin to the revelations of God." Notably, Benson implored Latter-day Saints to fight government programs that were sapping Americans of their "constitutional freedoms." Benson, as with other illiberals and conservatives, became alarmed when President Reagan failed to eradicate Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson's welfare programs, fearing that these programs were hastening the country's descent into communism. Of even greater consequence,

88. Benson to Richard Nixon, May 12, 1971, FOIA 94-38023-63, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File; Benson, "God's Hand in Our Nation's History" (1977), in Ezra Taft Benson, *This Nation Shall Endure* (Deseret Book, 1979), 23; "The Inside of 'Mr. FBI'—Interview: W. Cleon Skousen," *BYU Daily Universe*, May 4, 1972; W. Cleon Skousen lecture at BYU, "Know the Truth to Stay Free," 1971, transcript in author's possession; Skousen, "J. Edgar Hoover As I Knew Him." See also Ezra Taft Benson to Clarence Kelly, June 4, 1976, FOIA 94-38023-71, Ezra Taft Benson FBI File. Benson's book Hoover inspired is entitled *God, Family, and Country—Our Three Great Loyalties* (Deseret Book, 1974).

89. See Ezra Taft Benson, "The Book of Mormon is the Word of God," address to the Annandale Stake Conference, Annandale, VA, January 5, 1986, copy in box 199, folder 1, Sterling M. McMurrin Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Benson alleged that “the number of agencies” who run these programs were growing at a staggering rate under Reagan’s watch. “What many fail to realize is that most of these federal agencies are unconstitutional,” he complained. For Benson, the remedy was simple: Mormons had to “save the Constitution” by electing conservatives to public office who would end the welfare state.⁹⁰

Benson remained conspicuously silent on the role of Black people in saving the Constitution. While the LDS Church’s priesthood and temple restriction was lifted in 1978—a position Benson initially opposed then came to support—there is no evidence that he envisioned a role for Black people in Church governance. And whereas two decades earlier he condemned the civil rights movement for its alleged communist ties, now he kept quiet. His fellow apostles pressured him, convincing him that branding civil rights supporters communists was harming the Church’s missionary efforts in majority Black countries.⁹¹ Nevertheless, even as Benson accepted modest efforts to welcome Black people in the Church, he refused to support the Martin Luther King

90. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Constitution: A Heavenly Banner* (Deseret Book, 1986), 11, 25, 30–31; Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon is the Word of God,” Regional Representatives Seminar, Salt Lake City, UT, Apr. 4, 1986, quoted in *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Bookcraft, 1988), 56. For conservative disillusionment with government welfare programs, see Continetti, *The Right*, 290–92; Hahn, *Illiberal America*, 302; Julian E. Zelizer, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Lyndon Johnson, Congress, and the Battle for the Great Society* (Penguin, 2015), 322–24. For the persistence of New Deal welfare programs, see Eric Rauchway, *Why the New Deal Matters* (Yale University Press, 2021), 175–78.

91. Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, chap. 7. Helvécio Martins, a Black Brazilian, was called to be a general authority in 1990 when Benson was president. However, Thomas Monson, his counselor, issued the call—and it is unknown whether Benson supported the move since his health was rapidly declining. For Martins, see Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 274–75. For efforts to crackdown on Benson, see Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 65–66, 88–89, 102–3.

federal holiday, which prompted some Black Latter-day Saints to scoff that he never purged himself of anti-Black racism.⁹²

Skousen, too, continued to invoke Hoover. In the 1970s, the former FBI agent founded an anticommunist organization called the Freeman Institute (it later morphed into the National Constitution Center), which incorporated many of Hoover's teachings in its founding charter. Under the aegis of the institute, Skousen and his conservative allies traveled the country giving lectures about the Constitution in a program billed "The Miracle of America." Although Skousen claimed that the speakers would "make it easier for everyone to gain a greater understanding of the Constitution," the lectures were nothing more than thinly disguised ideological tracts advancing the principles of white Christian nationalism.⁹³ They drew interest from a diverse cross-section of people, including the Rev. Jerry Falwell, one of the country's most prominent evangelical ministers (and himself an enthusiast of white Christian nationalism). He "warmly endorsed our program," Skousen proudly noted. Similarly, Ted Turner, the founder of the prominent cable news network CNN, was "very impressed" with "The Miracle of America" and pledged support. Congressman Larry McDonald, a Bircher, also

92. Chester Lee Hawkins, oral history interview with Alan Cherry, Mar. 1, 1985, 22–23, African American Oral History Project, Perry Special Collections. See also Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 259–60; and Matthew L. Harris and Madison S. Harris, "The Last State to Honor Dr. King: Utah and the Quest for Racial Justice," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2020): 5–21.

93. W. Cleon Skousen to "Fellow Patriots," Oct. 1984, box 1, folder 3, Freeman Institute Records, 1963–1980, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

attended the lectures, as did other members of Congress. Even Ronald Reagan offered warm praise of Skousen's work.⁹⁴

Skousen managed to bundle his lectures in a book entitled *The Five Thousand Year Leap* (1981), in which he asserted that the Bible was at "the heart and soul of American political philosophy." He posited that Anglo-Saxons and "ancient Israelites" had influenced the Constitution, yet overlooked the fact that no direct evidence tied the Founders to the Bible at the Constitutional Convention.⁹⁵ Furthermore, he claimed, anachronistically, that the Founders supported prayer in public schools, clearly perturbed by a 1962 Supreme Court ruling that outlawed it: "The Founding Fathers would have counted this a serious mistake." Four years later, on the eve of the Constitution's bicentennial, he published *The Making of America: The Substance and Meaning of the Constitution*. He asserted that the nation was drifting away from the Founders' principles of faith and free markets. "It would be a disastrous loss to all

94. For Falwell and the Freeman Institute, see box 18, folder 37B, Jerry Falwell Papers, Liberty University Archives, The Jerry Fawell Library, Lynchburg, VA. For McDonald and the Freeman Institute, see box 124, "Freemen Institute" folder, Lawrence Patton McDonald Congressional Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA. See also Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 334–35, 354–59, 368–69, 382–83, 397–98.

95. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap: Great Ideas That Are Changing the World* (National Constitutional Studies, 1981), 15, 92. For the Founders and the Constitutional Convention, see Matthew L. Harris and Thomas S. Kidd, eds., *The Founding Fathers and the Debate Over Religion in Revolutionary America* (Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 3; and Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton University Press, 2003), chap. 9.

humanity if these great principles were allowed to become neglected or lost," Skousen wrote.⁹⁶

Skousen also remained ambivalent about Black people following the Church's new priesthood and temple inclusion policies. He ostensibly supported priesthood ordination for Black men, but he never sermonized on it or publicly endorsed it. And, while he helped to convert former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver to Mormonism in the early 1980s, he did not believe the Church or the government should address systemic injustices relegating people like Cleaver to second-class citizenship. Civil rights, Skousen declared, was for people who needed "to be secure in their lives, their property and their privacy," which presumably meant white people, since not even decades of oppression against Black people were enough to convince him that the government had a role to play in addressing racial injustices.⁹⁷ If Black people wanted to be respected in their churches and communities, he stated, they would have to do it on their own through education and entrepreneurship. (This is precisely what the famed Black leader Booker T. Washington taught.) Not surprisingly, and perhaps to the shock of no one, Skousen continued to oppose the Martin Luther King federal

96. Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap*, 256; W. Cleon Skousen, *The Making of America: The Substance and Meaning of the Constitution*, 2nd ed. (National Center for Constitution Studies, 1985), ix.

97. W. Cleon Skousen, *The Third Thousand Years* (Bookcraft, 1964), 620. For Cleaver's conversion to Mormonism, see Newell G. Bringham, "Eldridge Cleaver and W. Cleon Skousen: Mormonism's Odd Couple," *The John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 43, no. 1 (2023): 133–47; Skousen and Skousen, *There Were Giants in the Land*, 348–51; and Justin Gifford, *Revolution or Death: The Life of Eldridge Cleaver* (Lawrence Hill Books, 2020), 263–65.

holiday. Like Hoover and Benson, he never wavered in his belief that King was a communist.⁹⁸



The Cold War came to an abrupt end in 1989, yet Benson's (d. 1994) and Skousen's (d. 2006) legacies remain as vibrant as ever in the Mormon community. Hoover remains influential as well, his voice still flickering through the writings of Benson and Skousen. Collectively, their views have influenced a new generation of Mormon politicians, writers, artists, as well as preppers consumed with the End Times. These range from Utah Senator Mike Lee to preppers Lori and Chad Daybell to radio and TV personality Glenn Beck.⁹⁹

The most prominent Latter-day Saints to embrace white Christian nationalism include artist Jon McNaughton and former Homeland

98. Skousen, *The Five Thousand Year Leap*, 108–9, 231–32; W. Cleon Skousen and R. Stephen Pratt, "Reverend King's Ministry: Thirteen Years of Crisis," *Freemen Digest*, Jan. 1984, 15–20. See also Willard Woods, "Martin Luther King Day," *Freemen Digest*, Jan. 1984, 21–24; and Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

99. Sean Wilentz, "Confounding Fathers," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 18, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/18/confounding-fathers>; Jeffrey Rosen, "Radical Constitutionalism," *New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 26, 2010, 34; Franks, *The Cult of the Constitution*, 53–54; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, 119–25. For LDS writers quoting Benson and Skousen, see Jerreld L. Newquist, comp., *Prophets, Principles and National Survival* (Publisher's Press, 1964); Richard Vetterli, *The Constitution by a Thread* (Paramount Publishers, 1967); Jerome Horowitz, *The Elders of Israel and the Constitution* (Parliament Publishers, 1970); H. Verland Andersen, *The Book of Mormon and the Constitution*, compiled by Hans V. Andersen (Sunrise Publishing, 1995); Jack Monnett, *Awaking To Our Awful Situation: Warnings from the Nephite Prophets* (Nauvoo House Publishing, 2006). For the Daybells, see Leah Sottile, *When the Moon Turns to Blood: Lori Vallow, Chad Daybell, and a Story of Murder, Wild Faith, and End Times* (Twelve, 2022).

Security agent Timothy Ballard. McNaughton's paintings depict White Mormon leaders saving the Constitution from the "scourge" of Barack Obama's presidency, which is a troubling reminder of how white Christian nationalism has seeped into the Mormon community. His paintings, ever popular among ultraconservative Mormons, capitalized on the Tea Party movement to present his white-centered art as a foil to the nation's first African American president.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Ballard, who founded "Operation Underground Rescue" purportedly to save children from sex trafficking, cashed in on his fame when he published ultra-patriotic books on George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in which he linked them to Mormon exceptionalist tropes, where white Christian nationalism ideologies dance around the edges.¹⁰¹

What is most disturbing, though, is the extent to which Latter-day Saints have embraced white Christian nationalism—which offers both a witness and a warning to the power of Benson and Skousen's enduring influence. A 2023 poll from the Pew Research Center revealed that four in ten Latter-day Saints identify with white Christian nationalism. The poll came shortly after right-wing zealots, in support of former

100. See Jennifer A. Greenhill, "Trump's Court Artist," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 13, 2019; and Jon McNaughton, *The Art of Jon McNaughton: Images of an American Artist* (McNaughton Fine Art). See also Benjamin E. Park "The Unlikely Alliance of Mormonism and Christian Nationalism," *Journal of Media and Religion* 23, no. 1–4 (2024): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348423.2024.2395227>; Nicholas Shrum, "Mormon-American Nationalism and the Religiopolitical Art of Jon McNaughton," *Journal of Mormon History* 50, no. 2 (2024): 43–77; and Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

101. Park, "Unlikely Alliance," 6–7. Shannon Power, "'Sound of Freedom' Inspires Donald Trump's New Policy," *Newsweek*, Nov. 9, 2023; Anne Branigin and Herb Scribner, "Tim Ballard, of 'Sound of Freedom' Fame, Accused of Sexual Misconduct," *Washington Post*, Oct. 10, 2023. For Ballard's books, see *The Lincoln Hypothesis* (Deseret Book, 2014); *The Washington Hypothesis* (Deseret Book, 2016).

president Donald Trump's disgraced effort to overturn the 2020 election, stormed the capitol on January 6, 2021, to prevent the peaceful transition of power.¹⁰² Among the supporters were Latter-day Saints, but they were not alone, neither in their embrace of Trump nor in their support of white Christian nationalism. As the Pew poll indicates, and as recent scholarship attests, Evangelicals and mainline Protestants have seen white Christian nationalism surge in their faith communities. These sects not only oppose LBGTQ+ and immigration rights, but they support voter suppression tactics aimed to keep Black and Brown Americans from voting.¹⁰³

Ironically, as a startling number of Latter-day Saints identify with white Christian nationalism, Mormon leaders have taken measures in the opposite direction. First, they repudiated their longstanding race theology on the Church's website. Second, they denounced white supremacy in a sharply worded public relations statement. Third, they gave millions of dollars to the NAACP to fight racial inequality. Fourth, they denounced racial bigotry in their sermons and writings. And fifth, and most important, they have distanced the Church from the fiery Cold War rhetoric of Benson and Skousen, which includes all mention

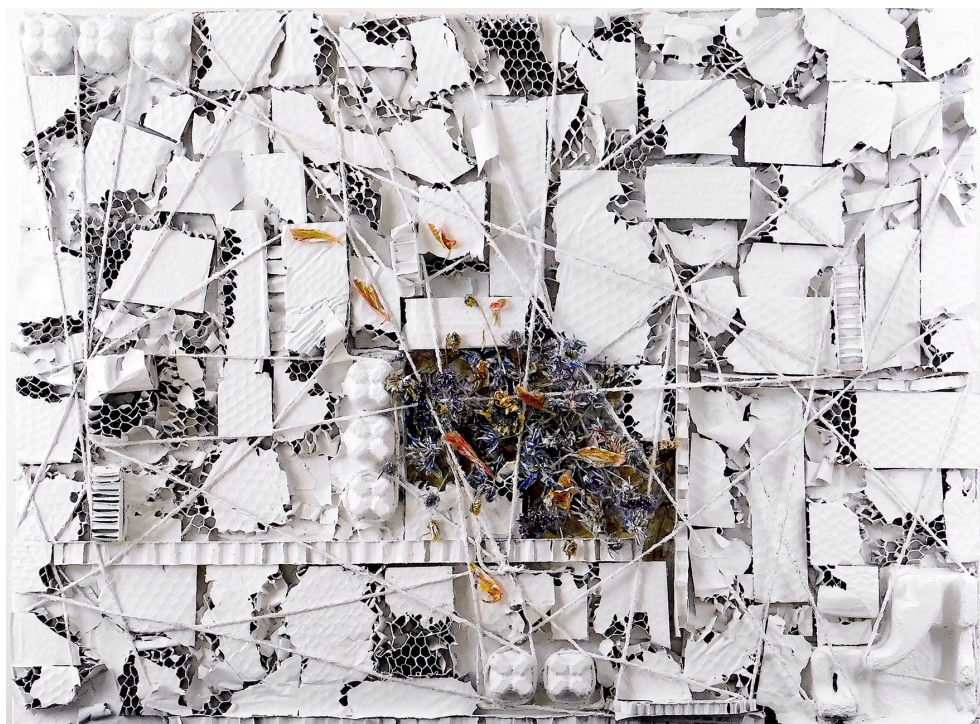
102. For the poll, see "A Christian Nation? Understanding the Threat of Christian Nationalism to American Democracy and Culture," PRRI, Feb. 8, 2023, <https://www.prri.org/research/a-christian-nation-understanding-the-threat-of-christian-nationalism-to-american-democracy-and-culture/>. For the 2020 election, see Lawrence Lessig and Matthew Seligman, *How to Steal a Presidential Election* (Yale University Press, 2024).

103. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Emerson and Bracey II, *Religion of Whiteness*; Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*. See also the incisive essays in Julian E. Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of Donald Trump: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton University Press, 2022); and Carol Anderson, *One Person, No Vote: How Voter Suppression is Destroying Our Democracy* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

of Mormon elders "saving the Constitution."¹⁰⁴ With the current church membership now at seventeen million, and with most of its members living outside of the United States, Church leaders have rejected white Christian nationalism in order to make the Church more inclusive of its global membership.

104. Harris, *Second-Class Saints*, 313–15; Harris, *Watchman on the Tower*, chap. 5. For Latter-day Saints' political views, see David E. Campbell, John C. Green, and J. Quin Monson, *Seeking the Promised Land: Mormons and American Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). For a broader discussion about how Latter-day Saint political views have evolved over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Benjamin E. Park, *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism* (Liveright, 2024).

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Paola Bidinelli, *Lockdown*, 2020,
mixed media on canvas,
36" x 48" x 4"

SECRET SOCIETIES AND THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF JOSEPH SMITH'S REWRITTEN SCRIPTURE

Colby Townsend

The rise of anti-Masonry was a significant historical and political occurrence in the United States in the late 1820s while Joseph Smith, Jr. worked on the Book of Mormon in 1829.¹ Scholars often invoke anti-Masonry as crucial early nineteenth-century context for understanding the composition of Smith's early scriptural projects, and even early believers in Smith's claims saw and understood these connections.² For instance, Martin Harris, one of Smith's associates, stated that the Book of Mormon was an "anti-Masonick Bible" soon after the book's publication.³ Outsiders also understood that the book engaged in these

1. Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Book of Mormon* (E. B. Grandin, 1830); David G. Hackett, *That Religion to Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (University of California Press, 2014), 111–24; Spencer W. McBride and Jennifer Hull Dorsey, eds., *New York's Burned-Over District: A Documentary History* (Cornell University Press, 2023). Quotations from the Book of Mormon in this article are from the 1830 edition. I include the current chapter and verse system used by the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for ease of reference.

2. Massimo Introvigne, "Freemasonry and New Religious Movements," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Jan A.M. Snoek, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 8 (Brill, 2014), 308–9; and Dan Vogel, "Mormonism's 'Anti-Masonick Bible,'" *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 9 (1989): 17–30.

3. *Geauga Gazette*, Mar. 15, 1831; and Dan Vogel, "Mormonism's 'Anti-Masonick Bible.'"

broadier political and social issues. One newspaper, reprinting a short article from the *Geauga Gazette*, noted that, “The Mormon Bible is Antimasonic, and it is a singular truth that every one of its followers, so far as we are able to ascertain, are antimasons.”⁴ These observations raise the question of the connection of the rhetoric of anti-Masonry with the broader discourse about secret societies during the period from the founding of the United States to the 1820s.

I will argue that anti-Masonry is not the only important context to consider when analyzing the composition of both the Book of Mormon and Smith’s additions to Genesis 1–6 in the Book of Moses. The broader movement against secret societies in the wake of the French Revolution and the literature that accompanied it in the transatlantic world of early America provides that crucial context, when anti-Jacobinism played such a major role in the formation of early American national identity. Born out of the French Revolution, Jacobinism was viewed by many Americans as the archenemy of order and good government.⁵ Purely anarchistic in nature, Jacobin history was believed to have brought the downfall of civilizations since the Miltonic War in Heaven prior to the creation of the world.⁶ The political and social turmoil caused by the transatlantic revolutions inspired new applications of the Eden narrative in America that would inform how Smith and his contemporaries used and interpreted the story themselves. For Smith this would mean that the Eden of the Book of Mormon would reflect some of these social and political shifts. Smith would rewrite the story of Adam and Eve as

4. “Antimasonic Religion,” *The Ohio Star*, Mar. 24, 1831.

5. Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

6. “Barruel Amended, No. 1,” *Commercial Advertiser*, Oct. 21, 1799, 2; “Barruel Amended, No. 2,” *Commercial Advertiser*, Oct. 23, 1799, 3. The *Commercial Advertiser*, originally titled the *American Minerva*, was founded by Noah Webster in 1793. See Joseph J. Ellis, *After the Revolution: Profiles of Early American Culture* (W. W. Norton, 1979), 198.

well as the Cain and Abel story so that Genesis 1–6 would address the role secret societies play in the world.

Eden and Anti-Jacobinism

The biblical Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel were important figures in long eighteenth-century political theorizing about good government. Many authors in the transatlantic world found these myths to be a place to trace the genealogy of different forms of government, both good and bad. Between the years 1797 and 1799 and while in exile in Britain, the French cleric Abbé Barruel published his four-volume *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, which purported to expose the history and crimes of the Jacobins.⁷ Before Americans collectively understood the phrase “secret combinations” as an allusion to Freemasonry, conservative American patriots had been fighting against a mostly imaginary enemy that in reality had been an open and public social and political club in France in the wake of the French Revolution.⁸ A series of myths were built up around the Jacobins that centered on all of the very worst of the acts of revolutionaries like Robespierre and his associates in the National Convention. Fear of a populist uprising that could destroy the hard-earned unity of the early republic fueled the development of early American political action against secret societies.⁹ By the late

7. Abbé Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism, A Translation from the French of the Abbe Barruel*, 4 vols. (Printed for the Author, 1797–1799).

8. Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

9. For the classic treatment of this history, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1965; Vintage Books, 2008); and David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 1971). See also Bryan Waterman, “The Bavarian Illuminati, the Early American Novel, and Histories of the Public Sphere,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., vol. 62, no. 1 (2005): 9–30.

1820s conservative Americans were well equipped to organize into a new movement against their perceived enemies, Freemasons, and to rapidly create a strong anti-Masonic movement.¹⁰

The Jacobins were a political debate club that grew out of the French Revolution to eventually include chapters in several nations, including France, Germany, Britain, the United States, and elsewhere in the 1790s.¹¹ Conservative commentators had already begun to blame the French Revolution on the Illuminati, a similar club founded in Bavaria a couple of decades prior that had been shut down by the elector of Bavaria, Karl Theodor. According to Michael Lienesch, “As early as 1793 pamphlets were being printed that purported to expose the [Illuminati] Order, which was described as alive and more active than ever, secretly recruiting Freemasons, reformers, and writers to the revolutionary cause.”¹² This larger theorized plot to destroy European governments and rid the countries of conservatism was then tied to the Jacobins, and, as Lienesch goes on to describe, all of the pseudohistories and conspiracies regarding the Illuminati, Freemasons, and the Jacobins were synthesized into one grand “history” by the Abbé Barruel in his *Memoirs*. Lienesch explains how “for Barruel . . . the Jacobins were only the last in a long line of villains, and the Revolution was but the present phase of a much more deeply laid and larger plan, a campaign whose

10. Both the larger fears of conspiracy and the existing print networks helped anti-Masonic newspapers to represent “an astonishing one-eighth of the nation’s newspapers” in 1830. Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 184.

11. Eckhart Hellmuth, “Towards a Comparative Study of Political Culture: The Cases of Late Eighteenth-Century England and Germany,” in *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century*, edited by Eckhart Hellmuth (Oxford University Press, 1990), 23–24.

12. Michael Lienesch, “The Illusion of the Illuminati: The Counterconspiratorial Origins of Post-Revolutionary Conservatism,” in *Revolutionary Histories: Transatlantic Cultural Nationalism, 1775–1815*, edited by W. M. Verhoeven (Palgrave, 2002), 155.

aim was the destruction of religion, monarchy, and society itself.”¹³ For Barruel, the threat this campaign offered did not just apply to religion, government, and society in Europe. Instead, he explicitly warned the new republic in America that the Jacobins (and Illuminati and Freemasons) were preparing to overthrow the United States as well. This was a long battle that all societies would have to face, and at its heart it was satanic.

Many of Barruel’s first readers connected the historical chronology he claimed to reconstruct with their own readings of biblical history, some going back to the earliest history in the Book of Genesis. The same year that Barruel’s last volume was published, an anonymous American book review sought to praise Barruel’s work on the origins of Jacobinism and also extend his history in a lengthy review titled “Barruel Amended.” The reviewer described what were, from their perspective, the true biblical origins of Jacobinism.¹⁴ According to this anonymous author, Jacobinism did not begin in France in 1789 but instead in the War in Heaven they believed was depicted in Jude 1:6, Revelation 12, and Isaiah 14. These themes are best described in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, since, as the author states, “Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, is the finest satire upon Jacobinism, in the English language.”¹⁵ According to this reviewer, the real origins of Jacobinism go back to when Satan or Lucifer led one-third of the host of heaven away from the righteous government of God. This was the crucial first step, but Satan had to introduce Jacobinism into the newly created world after the War in Heaven as well.

There were other points that linked the Jacobins’ rebellion against good government to their Satanic origins. The author describes when Satan deceived Eve in Eden to get Adam and Eve to rebel against God and be expelled from the garden. Satan is “that arch Jacobin,” the one

13. Lienesch, “Illusion of the Illuminati,” 155–56.

14. “Barruel Amended, No. 1,” 2.

15. “Barruel Amended, No. 1,” 3.

that “raised an insurrection in Heaven.”¹⁶ The serpent was either Satan himself or a pupil or emissary. In any case, the motive behind the deception seems clear to the reviewer: “It is true that in many instances, the Jacobin who attacks the possessor of wealth and office, does it because he wishes and expects to obtain the same advantages; but the history of Jacobinism furnishes parallel instances of men who plot day and night, to ruin the happiness of others, when they have no idea of ever coming in possession of it themselves. That is they do mischief for the sake of mischief.”¹⁷ Jacobinism, then, is anarchic, chaotic, and loaded with jealousy over the property or possessions that others have but they do not have themselves.¹⁸

Part of the reason that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century political theorists opposed the Jacobins was that they believed Jacobins had an inverted view of liberty. In this religious reading of their origins, Satan is the arch democrat, acting just like a Jacobin when he assumes the role of a friend in approaching Adam and Eve as if he only wanted to help them to be at liberty. According to Barruel’s reviewer, it was also a classic Jacobin move for Satan to go after Eve, “the person most credulous, most easily deluded by his fascinating speeches.”¹⁹ This was not only about gender. The reviewer believed that working-class men and women were taken advantage of by Jacobins just the same as Eve fell so easily to Satan.²⁰ From this perspective, people of the lower classes were

16. “Barruel Amended, No. 2,” 3.

17. “Barruel Amended, No. 2,” 3. Jacobins were similarly described as servants of Satan in the *Gazette of the United States and Daily Evening Advertiser*, Mar. 23, 1795, 3.

18. Matthijs Lok, *Europe Against Revolution: Conservatism, Enlightenment, and the Making of the Past* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 87–89.

19. “Barruel Amended, No. 2,” 3.

20. The reviewer remarked that Satan was likely only able to deceive Eve because she was “absent from her husband, who might defeat his insidious wiles.” “Barruel Amended, No. 2,” 3.

not being helped by Jacobins in France of the 1790s but were instead being taken advantage of because of their lack of training and knowledge. The author believed that calls to “liberty” and “democracy” were Jacobinic, and thus satanic in origin. Pointing out wealth inequality and class conflict was seen as a smoke screen for the true intentions of the Jacobins, which were to either profit off of the destruction of the current government or to make everybody miserable, especially the wealthy, like they themselves were.²¹

Besides the War in Heaven and the Fall, this anti-Jacobin review makes another biblical genealogy of the origins of the Jacobins. In order to get what they want, Jacobins “rob, steal, plunder, and cut throats.”²² This murderous bent of the Jacobin is seen, according to the reviewer, most clearly in the story of Cain and Abel. Satan is a “foreign intruder,” advising against following the laws and government.²³ A satanic Jacobinism then worked through Cain to influence him to secretly plot against his brother Abel because Abel had the favor of God—the head of the government—and property that Cain did not have. Cain killed Abel in the field because of jealousy and the fact that he was miserable after God rejected his offering. According to Barruel’s reviewer, Jacobins of the Romantic period were just like Cain and were essentially servants of Satan.²⁴

21. In England in the 1790s, these issues became so serious during the war with France that radicals could potentially be charged with treason and sentenced to death. Carl B. Cone, *The English Jacobins: Reformers in Late 18th Century England* (1968; Routledge, 2017), 159.

22. “Barruel Amended, No. 2,” 3.

23. “Barruel Amended, No. 3,” *Commercial Advertiser*, Oct. 25, 1799, 3. This is likely a reference to the Jacobin clubs formed in America in the 1790s, initially from French Jacobins moving to the United States and attempting to extend the movement from France across the Atlantic.

24. Lok, *Europe Against Revolution*, 247–48.

For this reviewer, it was obvious that Jacobinism had at its root all of the worst of modern and ancient politics. Jacobinism, democracy, and calls for liberty, equality, and freedom were blatant deceptions and their origins were satanic. Beyond individual identity formation, particularly if one identified as anything like a Jacobin in the early republic, this depiction of reality had serious implications for the development of national identity. According to the reviewer, the new United States had to be as cautious about Jacobins as if they themselves had been among the host of heaven who had been approached to join Lucifer's insurrection, or if they had been Eve and were invited by the serpent to eat from the tree, or if they had been Abel and were made aware of the danger posed by Cain. Not only were American lives at stake in the early republic, the future destiny of the nation could be in ruins if Jacobins or those fighting for democracy were allowed to be in control or to work in secret to gain power.

Numerous publications during this period regularly used the term "secret combination(s)" to describe the inner workings of the Jacobin movement.²⁵ A brief commentary on the political moment in the *Vermont Courier* in 1834 is representative. The author of the note claims that he had at one time not found the notion that there were secret societies working in the dark very convincing, but his mind recently changed. According to the author, "Demagogues are getting up secret clubs all over the state, to tamper with the suffrages of a free people.— One of these Jacobin coteries held a meeting in this village a short time since. . . . High officers from abroad, and a leading member of one of our churches . . . were present at this political junket on sabbath-night!!! These demagogues have entered into a 'Secret Combination' to do that, which they dare not do in the open day!"²⁶ All of the elements of the

25. See "For the Watchman. No. II. *To the Freemen of Vermont*," *The Watchman*, Aug. 25, 1809, 2; and "The Political Monitor—No. II," *Dedham Gazette*, Apr. 8, 1814, 4.

26. *Vermont Courier*, Aug. 22, 1834, 3.

fear of secret societies are here in this brief notice. Secret combinations of Jacobins, in secret meetings after dark (even held on the Sabbath), were being set up to destroy local government, religion, and society. Patriotic early Americans would resist these secret groups and their violence and focus on engaging society and government during the day, out in the open, and in ways that eschewed violence.

Many anti-Jacobin early Americans wanted to warn their new nation of the potential dangers that secret societies posed to their country. In another example from 1796, “an old Farmer” sent “A Caution to the Citizens of America” that was published in the *Albany Register*. After offering a rereading of the Genesis story, where the serpent’s argument is given greater length in the voice of a Jacobin, the “old Farmer” goes through a list of biblical stories where characters murder for gain. According to the author, “The time would fail to tell how Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and all their followers, perished in attempting to overthrow Moses; and how Absalom, though the murderer of his brother, could by his wicked dissimulation, steal the hearts of his venerable father’s subjects to that degree as to nearly overthrow his kingdom—and how Hazael could kill his master that he might reign in his stead—and for more recent examples of the like kind, we could tell how the Jacobins in France misled the people so as to make them mistake their friends for their enemies.”²⁷ This larger conservative movement against secret societies was not monolithic but instead represented a variety of ideas and approaches to the political and historical moment that these early American authors found themselves within, but these different readings of Jacobinism into the biblical text share much of what we find in Smith’s rewriting of the Eden and post-Eden text of Genesis. Contextualizing the ways that Joseph Smith interacted with the text of Genesis in his revisionary project of the Bible through the larger genre of anti-Jacobin literature helps us to

27. An Old Farmer, “A Caution to the Citizens of America,” *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia, PA), Jan. 27, 1796, 2.

better understand the broader theological and political undertaking that Smith was engaging in.²⁸ Suffice it to say that for the reviewer of Barruel's four-volume work, and for Smith, the vitality of civilization and Christianity was at stake if secret societies like the Jacobins were allowed to destroy and ultimately end it.

The Book of Mormon and Anti-Jacobinism

Political commentary was never far from the overall story of the Book of Mormon's thousand-year history of a group that emigrated from Jerusalem to the New World circa 600 BCE. Upon arrival the group splits into two factions and becomes two nations after the death of the patriarch of the family, a visionary prophet named Lehi who led his wife, children, and the family of a man named Ishmael away from their homeland. The two groups, the Nephites (the fair-skinned protagonists) and Lamanites (the dark-skinned antagonists of the Nephites), are constantly battling each other throughout the narrative, culminating in the eventual annihilation of the Nephites circa 400 CE.

Joseph Smith Jr. dictated the text of the Book of Mormon during the late winter of 1828 and into the spring of 1829. Like anti-Jacobin literature, the Book of Mormon uses the fall to reflect on themes of liberty and to describe the deceptions of Satan. At points throughout the narrative of the Book of Mormon, Smith brought together Isaiah 14, Revelation 12, and Genesis 3 in order to understand the identity of the

28. On this broader genre, see M. O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). On Jacobin ideas, see Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780–1805* (Oxford University Press, 1976); Nancy E. Johnson, *The English Jacobin Novel on Rights, Property and the Law: Critiquing the Contract* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830* (Oxford University Press, 1981).

serpent that “beguiles” Eve.²⁹ This serpent convinces Eve to not only eat the forbidden fruit herself but also persuade Adam to eat it as well. It was common for Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to weave these verses together to describe a War in Heaven, particularly in a milieu that was saturated with Miltonic biblical interpretation.³⁰ Though the Book of Mormon does not describe a war in heaven, it does describe Satan’s fall from heaven, reading this larger Christian tradition—and Milton’s rewriting of it in *Paradise Lost*—into the Book of Genesis. Lehi, the grandfather of all Nephites and Lamanites, explains that he is convinced by “the things which I have read . . . that an angel of God, according to that which is written, had fallen from Heaven.”³¹ This angel-turned-devil from Revelation 12 became miserable and, in the next sentence, wanted to make everyone else miserable as well. In order to do that he convinced Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, which in turn caused them to be expelled from the garden.³²

In a November 6, 1802, letter to the editor of the London-based *Anti-Jacobin Review*, “E. O. J.” provides an allegorical reading of the Garden of Eden and the Fall. In the allegory, the garden is the Christian Church, the tree of knowledge of good and evil is the approach to understanding the Old Testament by scholars like Herder and Geddes (whose work was popular among Jacobins), the serpent tempting

29. These three chapters were routinely brought together to form a depiction of Satan in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For example, see Daniel Defoe, *The Political History of the Devil*, 6th ed. (Printed for W. Strahan, J. and F. Rivington, W. Nicoll, and S. Bladon, 1770), 34–35; and Thomas C. Upham, *Jahn’s Biblical Archaeology* (Flagg and Gould, 1823), 226.

30. See George F. Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton University Press, 1964); K. P. Van Anglen, *The New England Milton: Literary Reception and Cultural Authority in the Early Republic* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); and Keith W. F. Stavely, *Puritan Legacies: Paradise Lost and the New England Tradition, 1630–1890* (Cornell University Press, 1987).

31. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 64 (2 Ne. 2:17).

32. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 64 (2 Ne. 2:18–19).

Eve is the Jacobin periodical *The Monthly Review*, and the angel that “drove Adam and Eve out of Paradise, *might be* a type of the Anti-Jacobin Review chastising those Christians who have adopted such interpretations!”³³ Anti-Jacobins equated Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the garden with a warning against the deceptions of the Jacobins, reading the fall as something that might have been avoided if Adam and Eve, like their transatlantic successors, would have heeded the call of more reliable and Christianly information, like that which was published in *The Anti-Jacobin Review*.

While also wanting to get these same Christians to heed its own warning, the Book of Mormon takes a different approach to understanding whether or not it would have been preferable for Adam and Eve to stay in the garden for all time. Lehi argues that if Adam and Eve had not fallen and been expelled from Eden they would not have had children and would have “remained in the same state which they were, after they were created; and they must have remained forever, and had no end . . . they would have had no children . . . they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery: doing no good, for they knew no sin.”³⁴ In an exclamation in verse 25 that has had great influence in the reception history of the Book of Mormon, Lehi states, “Adam fell, that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.”³⁵ The purpose of man’s creation—to have joy—is destroyed under the government of Jacobins. As one British anti-Jacobin put it in 1793, Jacobins, whether in France or England, “were making rapid strides to

33. E. O. J., “To the Editor,” *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, Dec. 1802, 439–43.

34. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 65 (2 Ne. 2:22–24).

35. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 65 (2 Ne. 2:25). On the influence of verse 25, for example, the LDS Scripture Citation Index lists 141 uses of 2 Ne. 2:25 in speeches by LDS general authorities from the present back to Joseph Smith. This only includes a small group of mostly men in the hierarchy and does not include the influence on the general population of Mormonism. See Scripture Citation Index, accessed Dec. 10, 2024, <https://scriptures.byu.edu>.

involve us in a state of misery and confusion.”³⁶ The Book of Mormon’s focus on the idea that Satan wanted humans to share in his misery parallels the anti-Jacobin argument that Jacobins, through Satan’s influence, were seeking the same thing.

The rewriting of the Eden narrative and expulsion from the garden in the Book of Mormon goes beyond the story of Adam and Eve. Just as important to the major narrative arc of the Book of Mormon is the idea that since the beginning of time, Satan, the “father of all lies,” has been instructing corrupt or wicked individuals like Cain to know “secret combination(s)” in order to gain financially or politically, to get revenge, or make people miserable like himself.³⁷ All throughout the Book of Mormon, Smith alluded to the idea that “secret combinations” pose a threat to society and have been the downfall of many past civilizations.³⁸ One key example of the rewriting of the Cain and Abel story in the Book of Mormon is the Gadianton Robbers. By the time the reader of the Book of Mormon makes it to Helaman, this group of robbers or banditti has already caused major problems for the Nephite civilization.³⁹ In the Book of Helaman, Satan “did plot with Cain, that if he would murder his brother Abel, it should not be known unto the

36. Thomas Moore, *An Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain on the Dangerous and Destructive Tendency of the French System of Liberty and Equality* (G. Peacock, 1793), 28.

37. The phrase “secret combination(s)” appears eighteen times in the Book of Mormon, and the phrase “the combinations of the devil” appears once.

38. I will analyze many of these in the rest of this essay below.

39. Although never directly referred to as “bandits” or “banditti” in the Book of Mormon, the Gadianton Robbers are labelled a “band” numerous times. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 408, 410, 411, 423, 424, 425, 428, 431, 436, 437, 438 (Hel. 1:12; 2:3–6, 8, 10, 11; 6:18, 21, 22, 24, 37; 7:25; 8:1, 28; 11:2, 10, 26, 28, 30). Deriving largely from the artwork of Salvator Rosa, images of banditti appear frequently in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century transatlantic literature. Erin Mackie, *Rakes, Highwaymen, and Pirates: The Making of the Modern Gentleman in the Eighteenth Century* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 181.

world. And he did plot with Cain and his followers, from that time forth.”⁴⁰ It is precisely through these satanic methods that the Gadianton Robbers cause the most anarchic violence against the Nephites. This concept is dependent on unique early American mistrust of secret societies and political and social radicalism in the wake of the French Revolution based on a particular reading of Cain’s action of murdering his brother Abel.

In particular, although the entirety of the Book of Mormon relies on a version of Eden that includes Cain making oaths with Satan, clarifying a major literary issue that has perplexed readers for millennia, there is nothing in the text-critical history of Genesis 3–4 to suggest this relationship between Cain and Satan.⁴¹ It is simply unknown why the author of Gen. 2:4b–4:26 decided to depict God as accepting Abel’s offering and rejecting Cain’s. On the other hand, there are clear examples in the political literature of the early republic, particularly in the wake of the French Revolution and the demonization of Thomas Paine and Jacobinism, that provide important context to the stories about “secret combinations” among the Gadianton Robbers. These religio-political motifs provided a backdrop that would fulfill Smith’s need to describe the way that civilizations can collapse, an integral aspect of the Book of Mormon’s description of the fall of Nephite civilization.

In the Book of Mormon, this interpretation of the Cain and Abel story is extended in a passage in the Book of Ether. Ether is a small addition to the text of the Book of Mormon—a story within a story, a common literary technique in long eighteenth-century transatlantic literature—that follows a narrative outside the thousand-year history

40. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 424 (Hel. 6:27).

41. Ronald Hendel, *Genesis 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Yale University Press, 2024), 239–40.

of the battles between the Nephites and Lamanites.⁴² Heightening the disconnect between history and the story of the Book of Mormon, this group came to the New World soon after the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel described in Genesis 11. The narrative describes how a man named Jared and his brother, only known in the book as the brother of Jared, leave the ancient Near East, build boats, and cross the oceans to the Western Hemisphere. Once settled, the family creates great civilizations that end up fighting and killing each other just like the Nephites and Lamanites. Most significant for the focus of this article is the idea in Ether that “secret combinations” bring the downfall of civilizations, particularly beginning with the daughter of Jared, a different Jared than the one previously mentioned in the Book of Ether.

The allusions to the Cain and Abel story in Ether warn about the potential evil power of secret combinations, and the passage says in part: “And Akish did administer unto them the oaths which was given by them of old, who also sought power, which had been handed down even from Cain, who was a murderer from the beginning.”⁴³ Smith’s revision of the Bible alludes to Book of Mormon passages like this one in Ether when Smith has the Lord say in his revision of Genesis to Cain, “It shall be said in times to come that these abominations was had from|cain for he rejected the greater counsel which was had from God.”⁴⁴ The warning found in Ether represents an important turning point in a small narrative arc in the book that will lead to the destruction of the Jaredite nation.

42. Katherine Binhammer, “The Story Within the Story of Sentimental Fiction,” *Narrative* 25, no. 1 (2017): 45–64; Clayton Carlyle Tarr, *Gothic Stories Within Stories: Frame Narratives and Realism in the Genre, 1790–1900* (McFarland, 2017).

43. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 553 (Ether 8:15).

44. Joseph Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 9 (Moses 5:25), The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-1/11>.

In this narrative, a wicked prince named Jared usurps his father's throne and places the king in jail. His brothers, angry at his actions, fight against him and destroy his army. The kingdom is returned to the rightful king and Jared's life is spared, but he is brooding over the fact that the kingdom was taken from him. His daughter approaches him with a plan where she will dance for a man named Akish, who she believed would want, after seeing her dance, to ask her father to allow him to marry her. This would allow Jared to request "the head of . . . the king" in return.⁴⁵ His daughter asks the rhetorical question, assuming that he had read their shared version of the Book of Genesis: "Hath he [her father] not read the record which our fathers brought across the great deep? Behold, is there not an account concerning them of old, that they by their secret plans did obtain kingdoms and great glory?"⁴⁶ Jared's daughter learned how to be cunning and devise a plan to take back power by reading similar stories in an apparent early version of the Cain and Abel episode.

Later in the passage, she explains that these oaths or secret plans had been handed down since Cain.⁴⁷ Smith retrojects this unique rewriting of Cain and Abel into the Book of Mormon narrative at a time around the Babylonian exile, when he believed a group of lost Israelites might have had some of the five books of Moses like that in the Book of Mormon. Taking it further, he places at least the beginning stories of Genesis into the hands of another group in the New World that had been disconnected from the ancient Near East since the Tower of Babel, which Smith's contemporaries would have dated to sometime

45. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 553 (Ether 8:10). There are obvious connections between this story and the New Testament story of Herodias using her daughter to dance for her husband Herod and convince him to kill John the Baptist. See Matthew 14 and Mark 6. The idea in Smith's revision of Genesis (Moses 5:50) that someone would scheme and kill for "the oath's sake" is found only in Matt. 14:9 and Mark 6:26.

46. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 553 (Ether 8:9).

47. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 553 (Ether 8:15).

in the third millennium BCE.⁴⁸ The secret oaths and combinations that Jared's daughter introduces to Akish create an underground society of murderers and assassins willing to kill for power, money, and the society that made them swear oaths, but the desire for power sometimes overrides loyalty to members of the secret group. Another part of the Book of Ether also alludes to the actions "of the ancients," that is, Cain, Lamech, and others who began the secret oaths with Satan.⁴⁹ In this passage, only two chapters after the story about Jared and his daughter, a group of robbers appear in the Jaredite land that "administered oaths after the manner of the ancients."⁵⁰ Akish, Jared's new son-in-law, later kills his father-in-law in order to take the throne, and violence in the kingdom eventually brings not only its downfall but also the end of the Jaredite civilization itself.

All that is left of their society by the time the Nephite people find their remains are bones, ruins, rusted metal swords, breastplates, and twenty-four plates of gold that have writing on them.⁵¹ These ruins of Jaredite civilization draw on fears of the loss of civilization in the transatlantic world of the early nineteenth century.⁵² The Jaredites are described this way in order to focus on the perceived potential negative outcomes in the early United States of allowing secret societies to become normative within Western civilization. The new American republic had to be especially wary of groups like the Jacobins or Masons,

48. Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary* (Joseph J. Woodward, 1826), 112.

49. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 555 (Ether 9:5).

50. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 561 (Ether 10:33).

51. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 172 (Mosiah 8:8–11).

52. John Havard, *Late Romanticism and the End of Politics: Byron, Mary Shelley, and the Last Men* (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Jason T. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); John Hay, *Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); John Howard Smith, *A Dream of the Judgment Day: American Millennialism and Apocalypticism, 1620–1890* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

organizations that might attempt to overthrow the government in the name of anarchy or democracy, and the potential threat of a member of a secret society murdering someone in or out of the group and revealing the group's secret oaths and covenants.⁵³ Early Americans viewed both the Jacobins and the Masons as having the potential to do all of the above. Many Americans believed the Jacobins had committed rampant murder during the Reign of Terror and that Masons had murdered William Morgan.⁵⁴ As described earlier, the Book of Mormon calls upon the Fall, and especially the idea that secret oaths and combinations started with Cain, using similar terminology and filling in the exact same gaps in the biblical record as Smith would revise and clarify as he revised the Bible in 1830, only months after the publication of the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Moses and Anti-Jacobin Themes

After the publication of the Book of Mormon in March 1830, Smith began a large revisionary project on the Bible in June that would continue until mid-1833, when Smith and his associates claimed at the time

53. A good example of a story about a secret group murdering a person because of secret oaths or covenants the group practices is the popular case in the late 1820s of the disappearance of William Morgan. Previously a Mason, Morgan planned on publishing an exposé of Masonry and its secrets, and soon after finding a publisher disappeared in 1826 under mysterious circumstances. It was believed widely by Americans in the early republic to be a clear case of the Masons in New York killing to protect their oaths, brotherhood, and secret rituals. It emboldened Americans of the 1820s and 1830s against Masonry and reminded them of their fear of secret societies. Anti-Masonic political parties and newspapers sprang up all over the United States, and Masons had to go into hiding for several years due to the danger of their lodges and temples being destroyed by mobs. See William Preston Vaughn, *The Antimasonic Party in the United States, 1826–1843* (University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 1–9.

54. David G. Hackett, *That Religion to Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (University of California Press, 2014), 112–19.

to have completed the project.⁵⁵ During the latter half of 1830, Smith began to edit the version of Eden found in the Book of Mormon into the text of Genesis itself.⁵⁶ This would have provided, if it had been published in full during the 1830s, a version of the Bible for readers of the Book of Mormon that presented the same story of Eden as they encountered throughout the pages of the Book of Mormon. Smith worked on the text that would later become the Book of Moses from that time until February 1831.⁵⁷

Although scholars today argue that the Book of Genesis includes two separate accounts of creation written at different times by different authors centuries after the life of Moses, Smith and the majority of his contemporaries, especially in the United States, read the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 as consistent and written by Moses himself.⁵⁸ As dozens of cases throughout Smith's revision of the Bible highlight, Smith, like other early nineteenth-century Americans, read the Bible harmonistically. Since the Bible was the word of God, it contained no real errors (even though they believed the printed edition in their hands did), enabling Smith to recognize the problems inherent in the transmission history of the Bible but also believe in a perfect or idealized form of the text that he needed to restore. Like scholars of the previous three hundred years, he would utilize a hermeneutic that

55. Robert J. Matthews, "A Plainer Translation": *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 38–39.

56. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University, 2004), 63.

57. The Book of Moses is a revision of Genesis only up to chapter six. See Faulring, Jackson, and Matthews, *Joseph Smith's New Translation*, 63–64; and Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit Dirkmaat, William G. Hartley, Robert J. Woodford, and Grant Underwood, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Documents*, vol. 1, *July 1828–June 1831* (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 150–56.

58. Hendel, *Genesis 1–11*, 4–10.

sought to get back to the earliest version of the text, but he went about his project in the opposite direction by adding to and revising the text through revelation—instead of early manuscript evidence—in order to smooth over and correct the issues he believed had crept into the text over the centuries. Therefore, unlike most other early American Protestants, Smith harmonized the Bible by adding to the text of the Bible itself. The addition of these extra texts to the “word of God” meant the introduction of more passages that would need to be harmonized with one another and the Bible, especially because the Book of Mormon interpreted certain sections of the Bible in ways that varied from traditional readings of the received text or cited versions of passages of the Bible that simply were not in the text itself.

As shown earlier, the creation and fall were one area where the Book of Mormon did not align with the text of Genesis 1–6, but his rewriting of these chapters does connect with many readings of Genesis offered in the broader transatlantic movement against secret societies in the Romantic and early republican period. In his revision of Genesis, Smith transfers the Book of Mormon’s focus on joy and the possibility of never having children from the voice of Lehi to the mouths of Adam and Eve. After Adam and Eve had been expelled from the garden, they came to the same theological conclusion as Lehi about their experience in Smith’s revision.⁵⁹ For Adam the fall was a positive event in this addition because his “eyes are open,” echoing Gen. 3:5 and 7, and that he can now “have joy” “in this life.” Exactly like Lehi, Adam reads the ability to have joy into the experience of the Fall. He and Eve are no longer innocent and are now able to know joy and pain.

In the same addition, Eve picks up on Lehi’s rhetoric at the point where Adam left off. Eve heard Adam’s exclamation about joy and then said, “Were it not for|our transgression we should never had seed &

59. Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 8 (Moses 5:10–11).

should never had known good & evil & the joy of our redemption.”⁶⁰ Eve’s response encapsulates the structure and terminology of Lehi’s statement, moving from the idea of not having children if they had stayed in the garden to the idea that they could only have joy after being expelled from Eden. Eve’s comment that “we should never had seed” parallels Lehi’s “they would have had no children,” following the shift from third person in Lehi’s statement to first person in Eve’s. The suggestion found in the Book of Mormon that children and joy are the most important effects of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the garden is not found in the KJV text of Genesis, but after Smith revised Genesis 2–4, this specific interpretation of Eden can be found in his revision manuscripts.

Once this version of Eden and the expulsion from the garden were cited throughout the Book of Mormon, Smith felt the need to edit the version of Eden and the Cain and Abel story in the Book of Mormon into the biblical text of Genesis 2–4. Smith understood either consciously or subconsciously after the Book of Mormon had been published that readers of the book would come in constant contact with a depiction of Eden and Cain’s murder of his brother Abel that was simply not in the biblical record. Again, there is no description in Genesis 4 of Cain plotting with Satan in a “secret combination” to kill his brother Abel, but in Smith’s revision of the story we find this plotting added to the story.⁶¹ In June 1830, three months after the publication of the Book of Mormon, Smith would begin to revise the story of Eden in Genesis to incorporate the specific version of Cain found in the Book of Mormon in his Bible revision manuscripts.

In this passage, Satan makes Cain swear by his throat to enter into a covenant with him, and to get his brothers, presumably other

60. Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 8 (Moses 5:11).

61. Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 9 (Moses 5:28–33, 38–39).

children of Adam and Eve besides Abel, to also swear to not tell the secret or else they will die.⁶² If Cain agrees to do this, then Satan swears to “deliver thy brother Abel into thine hands.” Later, Cain glories after he kills Abel because, as he says, “I am free surely the flocks of my brother falleth into my hands.”⁶³ Smith revises the text of Genesis to include the plotting between Cain and Satan alluded to in the book of Helaman, in a way that reflects anti-Jacobin sentiments.⁶⁴ Smith has Cain say that he is “free” after he murders Abel, an idea steeped in the rhetoric against democracy, Jacobinism, and the French Revolution.⁶⁵ Cain is free because his brother can no longer hold him back from the bounty of the flocks he now claims as his own. Just like the Jacobin of the anonymous author of “Barruel Amended,” it is the fact that Abel had possessions and the support of the divine government that Cain allowed pride to turn to envy and hate, which led to his killing Abel.

The Book of Moses also picks up on the theme of secret combinations found in the Book of Mormon’s interpretation of Genesis. In the book of Helaman, part of the purpose of the plotting between Cain and Satan was that Cain’s actions would be hidden from the world.⁶⁶ In Smith’s revision of Genesis, Cain laments that his actions “are not hid

62. According to Thomas Scott, a popular late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century commentator on the Bible, “Adam and Eve had very many more children than are mentioned in this brief narrative; which was principally intended to record a few important particulars, and to trace the history, from the beginning to the time of Moses.” In *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, According to the Authorized Version; with Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References*, by Thomas Scott, Rector of Aston Sandford, Bucks, vol. 1 (Samuel T. Armstrong, 1824), 46.

63. Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 9 (Moses 5:33).

64. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 424 (Hel. 6:27).

65. Lok, *Europe Against Revolution*, 4.

66. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 424 (Hel. 6:27)

from the Lord.”⁶⁷ Further, Smith used similar wording to describe the actions taken by Cain in his revision of Gen. 4:24–25. Smith revises the text to say that Lamech became a “Master Mahon of that great secret which was administered unto Cain by Satan.”⁶⁸ Apparently, Cain only thought about hiding his secrets from other human beings and did not consider how God would still know about his plotting with Satan to murder his brother Abel. This version of the Cain and Abel story meant to provide a warning to any secret society that thought their wrongdoings would go unpunished; even if they got away with murder, God would be just as aware of what members of the secret societies were doing as he was of Cain killing Abel.

Conclusion

Whether Smith consciously or subconsciously edited the version of Eden as found in the Book of Mormon into the text of Genesis is probably impossible to prove. The point of this article has been to show that, whether or not Smith purposefully edited this version into the Bible to ease the dissonance between the two texts, the simple fact is that his additions and revisions to the Bible harmonized the Eden narrative in both the KJV and the Book of Mormon once he was done editing the text of Genesis 2–4. The added voices of Adam and Eve in his revision of the Bible are synonymous with Lehi’s voice in the second book of Nephi, and the depictions of the secret societies in Helaman and Ether find their way into the text of Genesis 4 as well.⁶⁹ Where there was no “plotting” between Cain and Satan before Smith edited the biblical text, you have a full narrative explaining why Cain’s offering was rejected (i.e., he made the offering at the instruction of Satan, not God)

67. Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 9 (Moses 5:39).

68. Smith, “Old Testament Revision 1,” 10 (Moses 5:49).

69. Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 64 (2 Nephi 2).

as well as how Cain and Satan came up with a plan to get rid of Abel quietly. These additions depend upon specific historical developments in Christian theology leading up to the nineteenth century.⁷⁰ This is not a case of the Book of Mormon using as its source an urtext of Genesis on the Brass Plates nor are the revisions made independently from the Book of Mormon as if Smith was restoring Genesis to its former condition. Instead, both the Book of Mormon and Smith's revision of Genesis 2–4 build upon the English version of Genesis and share the same source in the person that dictated both: Joseph Smith Jr.

Previous scholarship has connected the Book of Mormon description of secret combinations and murders with the American anti-Masonic movement of the late 1820s. While that context is useful in explaining many of the ideas in and verbal connections between the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses, it does not adequately explain other aspects of these texts. Examples include the idea that the origins of secret societies go back to the Milonic War in Heaven, the fall of Adam and Eve, and Cain's decision to kill Abel. It likewise does not describe the message at the heart of the Book of Mormon: Secret societies lead to the destruction of civilizations, and the young American nation needed to be aware of that danger through the writings of the anti-Jacobins. For this part of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Moses, it is necessary to move from the negative reactions to Masonry in the 1820s back in time to American and transatlantic reactions against the French Revolution in the 1790s and its aftermath. It is this larger transatlantic context that provided the intellectual landscape

70. Contra Noel B. Reynolds, "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, vol. 2, *Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday 27 March 1990*, edited by John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 136–73.

to the anti-Masonic movement in America, its language, motifs, and literary, political, and print networks.

Since Smith grew up in the center of this political fighting and was working on his dictation of the Book of Mormon in the middle of it, it is understandable that he would pick up on the broader language and motifs of American angst against these groups in a narrative that he would author. The book would describe the destruction of a thousand-year-old civilization based on the development and success of a secret society inspired by Satan in the same way that he inspired Cain to kill Abel and taught him the ancient, satanic methods of murdering to profit, get revenge, or simply cause anarchic chaos. This message from the Book of Mormon against allowing secret societies to take hold of nations was a warning from Smith to his contemporary Americans—at the same time many anti-Jacobin and anti-Masonic authors were warning about the same thing—to not allow what happened to the ancient white American race, that is, the destruction of their civilization by the dark-skinned ancestors of the Native Americans, to befall the contemporary United States.⁷¹ Once that message

71. Contra Jared Hickman's reading of the Book of Mormon that sees its "Amerindian apocalypse" as "not only undo[ing] the white supremacist apocalypse of many Euro-American biblicists; it opens onto a globalist apocalypse whose standard of judgment is truly ecumenical." Hickman, "Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse," in *Envisioning Scripture: Joseph Smith's Revelations in their Early American Contexts*, edited by Colby Townsend (Signature Books, 2022), 301–2. Not only does the narrative of the Book of Mormon continue white supremacist ideas by suggesting that wherever Jesus's gospel might be the righteous will be fair skinned and those who convert will turn white (Smith, *Book of Mormon*, 456 [3 Ne. 2:14–15]), it continues and extends the reading of Native Americans as potentially destructive to the new nation. See Jason Colavito, *The Mound Builder Myth: Fake History and the Hunt for a "Lost White Race"* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2020).

was securely placed in the narrative context of the Book of Mormon, its foundations and its ultimate source—the first several chapters of Genesis—needed to support this argument as well. After Smith completed editing Genesis, Smith's new version of the Eden narrative in his revised Genesis could then support the allusions to the stories of Eden and Cain and Abel in the Book of Mormon because they now shared the same, rewritten story.

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MORMON TARBUTI

TL Cannon

As teenagers, my friend Brian and I would sit in front of our Latter-day Saint chapel in New Jersey, watching men in yarmulkes and dark-haired women in sheitels and black dresses walk to and from Shul. Reform and Conservative Jewish kids attended public schools with us, but we knew very little about the Orthodox Jewish children that walked by. None of my friends at school spent nearly as much time in church activities or followed as many rules as I did, but I knew these passerbys' devotions had an even greater intensity than mine.

I saw my Orthodox Jewish neighbors as a colorful part of world religions, a tapestry of which Mormonism occupied a small space—a space in which I took great pride. I felt our faith was incredible, but felt no need for it to be exceptional. When adults and children stood up in front of our congregation and said that they knew that our church was the true church, I wondered if the bearded dads that walked by were telling their children the same types of things.

“Why are there not Orthodox Mormons?” we once asked my father, who was the bishop.

“None of us are orthodox,” he said. After pausing, he added, “Or maybe we all are.”

If we weren't Latter-day Saints, Brian and I probably wouldn't have been friends. He was short, uninhibited, and unconcerned about what others thought of him. I was tall and self-conscious. Brian was in a social group we called “Ginkers.” It seemed to be a pejorative term unique to central New Jersey, which was roughly defined as troublemakers in black jeans and heavy metal T-shirts who embodied the *Beavis and Butthead* characters. He was likely at the apex of the ADHD spectrum and was a terrible student with little support at home.

Since we were the only Mormon boys in our grade, and since being Mormon was (and is) an immersive experience, we were extremely close. We grudgingly participated together in scout camp, road shows, mutual, and temple trips to Washington, DC. We drove to seminary in the dark New Jersey mornings to memorize scriptures and listen to lessons. Many were from Utah, transplanted men who used faux curse words and taught in the hyperbolic CES style that ruled the era—telling us how “awesome” Book of Mormon prophets were with tearful testimony. Though difficult to make sense of what was being taught, we felt that the adults in our church truly cared about us. While the staff at the high school were incredibly wary of Brian, the adults at church saw his mischievousness as non-malicious and even recognized some level of genius.

Brian was an object of deep curiosity at our school. He had six brothers and lived in a small house on the humble end of our town. It was the type of working-class New Jersey neighborhood described in Bruce Springsteen lyrics: factory smells in the air, chain-link fences, and old Chevrolets parallel parked everywhere. In my memory, it was always gray. I would enjoy sleeping over at his house, despite the *Lord of the Rings* atmosphere. There were holes throughout the dry wall and urine stains on the wall. His brothers would argue incessantly about meaningless topics like whether their dad could swim to Staten Island, how high you had to drop a quarter from to kill somebody, and how long a colon was. Kids at school, hearing that I had slept over, would ask me whether his father was a polygamist and why they didn’t believe in birth control. My answers were angry and defensive. Besides him being one of my favorite friends, our journey through Mormon life together made us seem almost as close as siblings.

Some of his infractions of rules were creative and universally appreciated among peers, like when he commandeered the school’s PA system, circulated rocks in the fan vents of unpopular teachers, or snuck inappropriate CDs into the DJ disc changer at church dances.

Other more impulsive infractions were less appreciated, like when he took off his shoe and smashed a hanging hallway clock between periods. Our school was one where ninth graders were studying for the SATs and identifying their college reaches, targets, and safeties. His antics began to grate on this population of serious students. I was quiet and well behaved, so our friendship was confusing to them. They didn't understand how Mormon we were, and how tight of a community that exists therein.

In high school, our friend and co-priest Ed, who attended a different high school, died. From my understanding, it was an overdose of something. Brian, having attended multiple wrestling camps with Ed, was closer to him than I was. I remember sitting next to Brian at his funeral, watching him stare at the ceiling in deep thought, as speakers spoke in rambling generalities about a teenager so young that effective eulogy was impossible. Our priest's advisor, Brother McCullough, became more determined than ever to keep us on the straight and narrow.

The Sunday after Ed's funeral, instead of teaching another conventional lesson from the handbook, he chose to show us a replay from the ninth inning of the Yankees game from the day prior. It was a no-hitter thrown by the one-armed Yankees pitcher Jim Abbott. We watched as, in a manner incongruent with the mood of our devastated quorum, Abbott was hoisted in the air triumphantly by catcher Matt Nokes after the final out of the game. Brother McCullough exhorted us to always lift each other up. He seemed to be looking at me more than anybody else, as if he was hoping that I would be Brian's Matt Nokes.

Brian did indeed become more elusive over time. The image he projected, as he entered his late teens, was a caricature of an anti-hero in a 1980s seminary video. He had purple hair, nose rings, and increasingly irreverent behavior. Brother McCullough would still always stop by to check on him and drive him to various events—whatever Brian would agree to attend. He would bring ice cream to his house and stop

by Brian's restaurant to teach gospel lessons. I was often there as well, playing the role of peer cheerleader for the church and our quorum.

Late in our high school years, after Brian had been left back a grade, we drifted slightly apart. I would see him in the back of the student parking lot as I walked by with my friends in varsity jackets. He would be slouching near the chain-link fence, a familiar face in a dark background of Metallica T-shirts and cigarettes.

We met at Vinny's pizza one Saturday late in high school, when his church attendance had become more sporadic. Brian predicted that I would go on a mission and get married very quickly, and that he would still be working at Taco Bell when I returned. There was nothing wrong with that life path, from my point of view, but it was the first time I had detected a fatalistic tone in his voice. Though I don't remember having a religious anxiety about his lack of church activity, I was extremely sad not to see him there. Church seemed more boring and less palatable without my friend.

About one month after that meeting, he showed up to school with a somewhat lewd symbol shaved in his head, or at least that was how the haircut was interpreted by our school administrators. He was suspended indefinitely and dropped out, never graduating. This event began the lowest days of Brian's life. His parents kicked him out of the house. He worked two jobs for a total of eighty hours per week at Denny's and Taco Bell. He lived in his car for some of the winter of 1995, in between restaurant shifts.

Brian came to my mission farewell, which was the first time he had attended church in eighteen months. When the meeting was over, I saw him walking in the parking lot. Butterflies were rising in my gut as I considered two years away from home in a white shirt and tie, while the non-LDS friends that attended my farewell would be returning to their dormitories with Scarface and Shaquille O'Neal posters hanging on the wall. I could not help vainly shuddering at the image of a future balder version of myself returning in two years wearing a poorly fitting

CTR T-shirt. It felt like youth was ending abruptly that week. Seeing him was an incredibly welcome distraction from my fears. I caught up with him, and we stood next to the oak tree that we used to climb on to the roof of the church as kids.

“Can you write me a letter and let me know how it is out there?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“Brother McCullough is still suggesting I work toward going too.”

“Are you considering that?”

“Not really.”

Brian serving a mission felt like a ludicrous proposition at the time, but I knew that I should write him anyways. I wrote a reminder to myself in the front of the red missionary journal that I had purchased at Deseret Book.

On an October day in 1996, long after the infectious religious fervor of missionary work had been incorporated into my personality, I was riding my bicycle through the narrow streets of a city in western Taiwan thinking about Brian. As my companion and I pedaled past the bustle of the train station, through the pungent scent of bean curd being sold by street food vendors, and between the beechnut stands with Chinese characters in neon lights, I began to describe Brian’s family. I told him about nine kids in a tiny house in a New York suburb, and that we were the only two Mormon boys in our huge school. He was intrigued. Over the noise of mopeds, Elder Wilson asked if I had written Brian. How had I forgotten this promise I had made fifteen months earlier?

At nearly the same time, Brian received a call from his mother while on a shift at work. The stake president and the area General Authority had decided to make select visits to people in the stake, and Brian was on their list. They were at Brian’s house when she called.

Understanding from the tone of her voice how badly she wanted him to come, he asked a coworker to cover for him. He took off his

apron quickly, spit out the snuff in his mouth, and drove home. He only stayed five minutes and made no eye contact but agreed to meet with President Baxter on another occasion. Two weeks later, he drove to President Baxter's house after his Taco Bell shift.

"Brian," President Baxter asked, "Tell me what you are doing with your life now?"

Brian noted that he was working three jobs, taking classes at the community college, and had a girlfriend.

"OK," he said, "Those are all good things . . . what is your goal in life?"

"What do you mean by goal?"

"What can you see yourself doing in 10 years?"

"Well," Brian said, "I don't really know . . . maybe move up the chain at a restaurant?"

President Baxter showed Brian the paper he was writing on. In the top left corner, there were three small words written: "school," "girlfriend," "work."

"Does this seem like a full life to you, Brian?" he asked in a slow, whispering voice.

Not really clear on what a full life meant to President Baxter, other than that it would include participating in church, he asked him to explain more.

"What about getting married in the temple, serving a mission, pursuing a career? I know you well enough to know that you are a smart kid. You could do anything you wanted to."

As Brian was considering this statement, President Baxter picked up another paper and started frantically writing, in large letters, the goals that he thought would be attainable for him. He was writing rapidly, with multiple exclamation points. As he wrote, he was bobbing his head up and down like the conductor of an orchestra. Every goal he wrote down was punctuated with an exclamation mark.

"Stable and loving family life!," "Community Service!," "Graduate degree!," "Stable Job!," "Business Leader!"

President Baxter felt that it all started with a mission.

In the aftermath of his writing, President Baxter was perspiring. His short and spiky hair was damp. Brian had seen numerous displays of passion from adults, but none started and ended with his potential.

Brian showed up to church a few weeks later and told Bishop Guarnieri that he wanted to work toward a mission. Surely skeptical of the proposition, the bishop still appeased him by reviewing the necessary steps. By the next week, Brian was confessing infractions and submitting his tithing in cash piled inside a CD case (he had no bank account). Two weeks before I returned from my mission in Taiwan, Brian left for a mission to Europe.



More than twenty-five years have passed since Jim Abbott's no-hitter, and I am standing at a corner on Market Street and thinking about contacting Brian. I follow his social media peripherally and know that he lives here. My career takes me to San Francisco every January, and every year I think about calling him, but always decide against it. Not feeling like the same kind of Mormon I was previously, I can't stomach the idea of being a familiar face in a dark background to Brian.

I saw him occasionally over the first few years of his marriage and then not at all after he attended my own wedding a few years later. That was nearly a decade before November 2015, when my family's religious life seemed to become more complicated. We have had different experiences in Mormonism and, like hundreds of other families, have different ideas about how to proceed in the face of another ungraspable policy.

I try to speak with my Jewish and Catholic friends about the difficulties of navigating Latter-day Saint and family life. These friends clearly can't understand because they are unable to fathom a religion that is oriented around literal belief, full immersion, and converting

others. They wear their necklaces with the Star of David or a Cross, enjoy holy days with their family, attend mitvahs and communions, and sing the songs of their people. Worrying about their degree of belief in the particulars is not a part of their experience. There is one day where a Jewish friend tells me about her “Mormon” coworker, who I discover lives a not-so-Mormon life. I tell her that he “used to” be Mormon, and she looks confused. Religious identity is not fluid in her world.

These friends of other religions, regardless of specific personal beliefs, retain their religious identity, while the ex-Mormons and inactive Mormons I know seem to swim in the identity of what they are not. My wife and I attend a few functions with dozens of newly disillusioned and/or disenfranchised Mormons, who get together and blow off steam about gratuitous historical and political topics, in between the sad stories of painful falling outs with ardent family members. I meet many people trying to keep their family intact. There are those who don’t wish to attend but their spouses do, those who wish to attend and their spouses don’t, and couples in which neither wish to attend resulting in bitter conflict with their extended family. I have never been more grateful for my family, both immediate and extended, but I still feel the need to sort things out with therapy. A web search yields dozens of LDS psychologists that specialize in “faith transitions,” yet they are so in demand that I find it hard to get an appointment with any of them at a convenient time.

Trying to forge a future that involves worshipping Jesus Christ and conveying religious morality to our kids, we try other churches, sometimes directly after our LDS services. At one point, we find ourselves as one of five to ten LDS families that attend a community-service oriented Unitarian church with floor to ceiling windows, wondering if we can find inspiration from a symbolic chalice that represents the “warmth of community.” We try other churches with rainbow flags hanging from their eighteenth-century stone edifices and smiling pastors in Air Jordans. They are all uplifting places, but none feel quite like

home. They are not singing our songs or praying in a style that is familiar to us. At BYU, I would always hear people say that they disliked the culture but loved the gospel, and I would nod my head in agreement. That statement makes less sense to me now. I try to remember why we said that, and why we tried to generally deemphasize the idea that there even is a Mormon culture. In a faith that seems to emphasize belief at least as much as values, I can see how the disenfranchised and skeptical feel like there is little common currency left to share with their families.

I begin to listen to the types of podcasts that interview the giants of that burgeoning wing of intellectual Mormonism that is less dogmatic and uses terms like “our faith tradition.” They are the authors whose books are an analgesic to Latter-day Saints around the world that look around at their congregations and wonder if they have gone mad, looking for some company to share the burden of acknowledgement that the type of belief we strive for seems elusive. Many of them normalize doubt while defending the faith—sometimes in ways that feel like creative obfuscations about the basic facts of sticky historical issues like the Book of Abraham, but at least tackle the issues with an acknowledgement of how hard they are to understand and accept. I am energized by this new language and relatable point of view, but I find that the discussions in podcasts only nip at the edges of tough issues, and never get too raw. As I consider my own situation and the plights of the families I have recently met, the conversations begin to sound like viewpoints of people who never *really* had to choose.

One day at work, my fellow oncologist, a member of a Reformed Jewish congregation, expresses astonishment about an inactive Latter-day Saint patient with a terminal illness, who says she is estranged from most of her family because of religious disagreement. After I tell him that most LDS families are not like this, I begin to wonder if that is truly a strange occurrence across other religions. I can’t help looking at Mormonism through the lens of Judaism and, for a short time, become

obsessed with the history of Judaism, wondering whether the fears of a watered-down version of Judaism were realized after the reform movement of the early 1800s. The religious history is too different for a useful comparison, other than providing a rough sketch of the various ways that religions can be meaningful to people.

Disturbed by this view from the other side, I want to feel the wonder of a quintessential Latter-day Saint story of redemption, faith, and growth. I tell myself it is silly and selfish, after all that Brian has been through and overcome, to avoid him because of my own sheepishness. I decide to call him. He agrees to meet me at a sushi joint on Market Street. He will come over from work.

He greets me as if I am a business acquaintance. He is wearing the type of millennial-inspired Bay area business wear that everyone else walking around San Francisco seems to wear. His tight jeans are not a denim color, and he has a button up shirt under a fleece that zips down at the top. The human part of him looks the same, but the clothes seem too large, or maybe his face looks too much like the Brian I knew to wear something like this. He has a beard, which is sort of auburn colored. It is as if adulthood grew onto him, as opposed to him growing into adulthood.

His eyes still shift constantly as he speaks, just as I remember. His manner of speech, fast paced and heavy on details, is not typical for the Mormons I know. Yet I find that he is speaking a lot about church things. We rehash memories of our New Jersey life for nearly two hours.

He works eighty hours a week and has a high position at one of the most profitable companies in the world. His limited spare time is spent between his bishop duties and shuttling his four kids around. He seems extremely happy and is a willing and sympathetic listener who clearly grasps the complexities of church life and has thought deeply about them. His life seems perfect. It is not just the worldly success that strikes me. There is a remarkably empathetic and kind look in his eye.

I have no doubt that he has been a Brother McCullough–like figure to many struggling kids.

As I speak with him, it strikes me that orthodoxy is a two-edged sword. Could a church of nonliteral believers have changed Brian's life so dramatically? The same sort of orthodoxy or immersive nature of the church that seemed to save Brian and propel him into orbit is the very same force that seems to have repelled many other families. The magnitude of the seismic shock of disaffiliation in our faith seems far out of proportion to other faiths, but look at what that orthodoxy has done for Brian. The visit does leave me with a reminder of how remarkable this faith can be. Sharing stories about our past in New Jersey and his mission experience leaves me with deep feeling of inspiration and nostalgia. As beautiful as all of that is, I feel a slight distance between us, and I can't decide if it is rational.

I return home from the trip and am considering why I feel this distance. I am having a conversation with a Jewish patient who asks me if I can give a speech about cancer to her "Jewishly" group at the Jewish community center.

"What does 'Jewishly' mean?" I ask.

"To me, the word represents all of the people within the realm of Judaism. Those who are religiously Jewish, Yehudi Tarbuti (culturally Jewish), or participate in Jewish events with family and friends."

The idea of having a gathering that bonds all sorts of people under one broad religious and cultural umbrella is foreign to me. My Latter-day Saint friends say there is no such thing as a cultural Mormon because there is no singular Mormon culture. They recite the oft-repeated comment that our identity really is as a child of God. But I think they are missing one point. There is also no singular culture of Daoism, Catholicism, Judaism, or Buddhism, yet people in those groups can attend their niece's weddings together in mixed company. Their leaders, to the best of my knowledge, are not making well-meaning directives to avoid

counsel from a family member who does not believe literally. If there are leaders making those types of statements somewhere, they don't have a high degree of visibility among the members. There is not the tacit exclusion of those who find the history of the religion unlikely, or the gender roles untenable.

Mormons lack the distinct sartorial characteristics of the Orthodox Jews. There are no earlocks or dark hats and very few cultural emblems. Does the combination of intense immersion without acknowledging a culture exacerbate the thud of leaving the Church? We are not even supposed to say *Mormon* anymore. Several generations of LDS families, many of which are enormous, seem to have an increasingly varying style and degree of belief. I wonder if these families dream of baby blessings that emphasize family more and priesthood authority less and of family weddings that everybody could attend. People who leave, feel like they are gone.

From this point of view, thirty-five years after I tried to make sense of Mormonism in our Jewish neighborhood, it is my dad's second answer that seems most accurate to me—only orthodoxy lives outside the shadows. This does not change how grateful I am for the joy that many of us, especially Brian, have derived from the current system. I tell my Jewish colleague, after he asks me a series of questions based on the premise (fair or not) that the LDS Church is uniquely alienating to those who are not *all in*—that many religions have probably wrestled with the question of whether or not this joy and growth would be at risk if the seminal religious events were executed in a way that acknowledged and accepted that the same religious ceremony can have deeply literal meaning to some and mostly cultural to others. I selfishly hope that the answer is that it would not.

My meeting with Brian in San Francisco led to other meetings, sometimes with his brothers. Several of Brian's younger brothers followed behind him on a similar path. They tormented teachers and administrators at our high school, most of them never graduating,

before making their own Mormon-fueled comebacks. They achieved the graduate degrees, marriage, career success, and the other measurables that seem to be beyond the reach of their troublemaking peers who didn't have the church support or the mission experience. It is hard being Mormon, but it is not easy to not be one either.

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Paola Bidinelli, *Tree of Life*, 2020,
mixed media on wood panel,
10" x 18" x 5"

IS GODLY LOVE ENOUGH? REFLECTIONS ON AN ACE MARRIAGE

Name Withheld

It is a great irony of my life that my wife identified as queer but I was the one that felt sexually trapped. We were in a mixed-orientation marriage. She is asexual, or Ace, and I am straight. To say there was a disparity in desire is something of an understatement. My needs were largely invisible, even unknowable to the person to whom I was supposed to be closest. For a time, I felt that if my family fell apart, it would be due to my fundamental identity and needs. In other words, it would be my fault.

Like many Mormons, I grew up in a sexually repressive environment. I'd wager mine was worse than most. For instance, I never got any version of *The Talk*. When couples kissed on TV, my mother, who was so kind and good in so many ways, would change the channel. I became deathly afraid of bringing up the word "girls," lest my mother find out I knew that boys and girls were different. Shame was a regular companion—as a result, pornography became one, too. That's the great irony of that parenting approach.

But I got myself reasonably well adjusted before getting married and was excited for a healthy sexual relationship. My fiancée and I bought a newlywed book and read it out loud together in preparation for the big night. We learned in detail how each other's bodies worked. I thought we were ready to start exploring.

Our wedding night came. Like many LDS couples, our night ended without the fireworks we anticipated. The attempt at sex was too

uncomfortable, too painful, and things sort of closed up for my wife as a result. But unlike most LDS couples, we didn't have intercourse until nearly a year into our marriage. It didn't stop being painful or uncomfortable for her until after the birth of our first child, several years later. When pornography entered the void of sex, I informed her—and remarkably, she wasn't angry with me at all.

But I was angry with myself. I thought it was all my fault. I hated myself for relying on porn and fought that battle with myself up and down for many years. It didn't loosen its grip on me until I stopped hating myself, stopped feeling shame, and realized how normal my sexuality actually was, and how abnormal my marriage was. Turns out, it's very normal for a straight man to want to have sex with a woman, and that's why we have marriage and push it so hard on our young adults. It's an essential part of life, even our doctrine.

As I saw and understood the sex-shaped gap in our marriage, I developed a deep testimony of sex. It is so much more than just an outlet of physical need, though that is how it manifests at its core. Whether you look at the physical sensations experienced, the emotional bond formed, or the human life created, happy sexuality is a celestial order.

And sexual attraction is about more than just intercourse. It's the force that drives a couple together when the tumult of life would tear them apart. It makes it easier to forgive and look past faults in times of conflict. Regular physical contact breeds more than just children, it breeds trust and warmth. A couple without that attraction binding them cannot easily be one flesh, one soul.

When I confessed to my wife about my pornography use, she gave me a hug but didn't really say much. I was relieved there wasn't further shame. But I learned much later that she also felt a deep sense of relief. After all, if I had porn, I had a sexual outlet that wasn't her. She would no longer feel the obligation to have sex with her husband. I didn't know anything about her orientation at the time, and she didn't know

the words for it, herself. But that's the mentality that permeated our sexual relationship.

It went on as long as it did because it seemed like we gradually found some success. From the wedding night on, I always sought her satisfaction first. Always. I could not personally be fulfilled if she wasn't. And eventually it worked. As she told it to me, an Ace can still feel sexual feelings, including orgasm. However, it is more like a bodily function than the sensual experience that tempts and teases, a pressure that, like a sneeze, can nonetheless feel pleasurable when it is released. I did everything I could to invoke this throughout our marriage. But the eroticism that gives deeper meaning to such feelings and connects two mates never materialized for her. The release alone did not add up to much, and eventually, all she felt was the pressure.

So it was no surprise to me when she finally did come out as Ace, about twelve years into our marriage. It sounded simple enough to understand at first and made sense. The encounters we did have were few and only ever initiated by me, the passion was one-sided, and my own body had never been of any interest to her—all sources of great sadness for me. I'd seen asexuality every day of my life for over a decade before it got the name.

And when I finally saw what psychological pain my attempts at a sexual relationship brought on her, including my attempts to meet her needs, I put a stop to those attempts, making a firm commitment never to hold any sexual expectations of her again. It was one of those stupid bravery moments when life grants you the opportunity to be a martyr. I don't regret volunteering to do it, but I was not prepared for everything I was about to experience—or stop experiencing. It was the end of so many things, not just sex. An entire life, a worldview, a stability I'd been building and relying on for twelve years. The marriage changed, and would not change back.

As we learned over many years of trying, our coupling was something unnatural. My own body, my sexuality, were obtrusions, always

an invasive force. It could work if it absolutely needed to; we did have two children after all. She could tolerate me and my drive to a point, but any intimate touch at all was either painful or uncomfortable in some way, and eventually I realized that my sexuality had become smothering. Facing the fact that your expression of love is actively harming its recipient was very difficult, but I decided to pull back.

Within a week of my commitment not to seek sex anymore, she expressed how much happier, more relaxed, she was, and I could see her standing up on her own two feet. In truth, I found her new independence unsettling. I felt less relied on for emotional support than I used to be, and physical contact was limited to comfort hugs, and even those tapered off. We became mere roommates. She asked that, whatever my sexual needs were, I fulfill them . . . elsewhere, however I had to. And she was happier this way.

Suffice it to say, this was not a recipe for a healthy marriage. But it was worse than just a crumbling relationship. My foundational understanding of my marriage, of marriage in general, of sealing ties, of the entire gospel was suddenly destabilized. No, it fell apart. Covenants were designed with a certain kind of relationship in mind. When that relationship fundamentally changes, shouldn't the covenants? But they didn't, and God didn't come out and deliver any replacements or answers. I wasn't told what I should do, where I should go, what He expected of me in this special situation. I was shoved up against my covenants like bars on a cage.

I realized my choices lay in three different directions. Which was the least important to me: my covenants, my children, or my sexuality? I could keep my family and have extramarital affairs but break my covenants. I could divorce my wife and remarry, breaking up my family but rediscovering my sexuality and stay within the rules. Or I could somehow just stay in this marriage and keep my family and my covenants but give up an essential part of myself and open myself up to immense temptation and loneliness throughout my life. Which

blessing was I most willing to sacrifice on the altar? Which aspect of my identity?

The problem churned endlessly in my mind. Every day felt like a unique challenge. I didn't know how I'd get to the other side of each day emotionally or spiritually intact. The feeling of powerlessness was unmatched. I could take nothing for granted and had to request new manna from heaven every morning. The daily efforts of dealing with so many unknowns left me utterly exhausted. Temptation beset me on every side; surely the rules were different for me in this bizarre situation.

But there was no plan for people in my position. There were no theological mechanisms in place to solve my problem. My situation was not to be found in scriptures, and no solution has been proclaimed from a pulpit. My friends had no answers. I skipped my bishop and went straight to my stake president. He had no solution. I even spoke with a member of the Seventy. There was no balm of Gilead that could soothe those wounds.

The fulcrums of our lives don't have to tip us forward. While trials are not optional, growth is. This martyr moment was not simply going to be an act of endurance; it was something I'd have to either endure well, or not at all: grow and develop and shed so many of my flaws and insecurities, or fail, and fall, and self-destruct spiritually. It wasn't a leap into the darkness—I was pushed.

As so often happens after falling through such darkness, God eventually visited me with some light. It came in the form of a few certain talks by Elder Neal A. Maxwell. As I listened to him speak, two things happened: first, I felt God's eye on me, His thoughts on me, His ears listening to me; second, I could see the plan of salvation stretching eternally in both directions, premortally and celestially, and I knew my place in it, and the place of my loneliness. There was a purpose to it, I absolutely knew it, and in that moment, my testimony of the gospel crystallized. I had no doubts. Like when you're in love and all the songs on the radio suddenly make sense, so did my trials make sense in

this gospel of Jesus Christ. I could even see myself more clearly in the mirror of my choices.

God never did provide a ram in the thicket. I had to make a choice, and so I did. I loved my wife, and I decided to remain at her side for the foreseeable future. I spent a year training my heart and body to love my wife without desiring her. By her request, I peeled away my physical attraction to her, though I still felt attracted to women in general. Even if it was harder to know this new person, she was the real version of the woman I thought I knew all these years, and it was better to know and love the truth. That was the choice I made.

I still haven't told many people about all this. I am afraid of explaining it imperfectly, of my journey being judged unrighteously. Asexuality is so hard to understand without getting intensely personal. There is so much room for subjectivity, it is so easy to judge or outright deny for those for whom it is not a reality.

And so, I don't judge anyone for a different decision in a similar situation. Anyone who has ever felt trapped with eternal consequences at stake has my respect for the hell they've endured no matter what they did to get out. There was a time when I seriously considered going outside my covenants. Multiple times. I don't know what God's ultimate plan is for His sons and daughters in other such situations, or what He expects of the rest of them. That's between them, not me and not you.

Frankly, I don't believe all His covenants were made for all of His children the way they're set up now. Because whatever we preach from the pulpit doesn't change the cold hard reality: there simply *are* multiple sexualities. I can't deny the forces of identity that are transforming my life, my family, my eternity. Like the many queer children of God stuck between the Church's teachings and the sexuality that defines their existence, I can't preach it away or pray it away. And I've done a lot of praying.

I have learned intimately the experience of those beautiful queer saints, and how few solutions there are to be found. Some have tried to

force heterosexuality on themselves, locking themselves into the same cage I found myself in, having created children and formed eternal bonds but still torn asunder by the forces God put inside their bodies. Some literally break themselves trying to be and do what the Church asks.

Why did He send so many of His children down to perform this impossible mission? I crave an answer to that question. I heard of a gay man who wrote in his suicide note, “I’m going to ask Heavenly Father why he made me this way.” No child of God should have to ask God that question to His face.

Sexuality is inescapable. How we deal with our sexual impulses and identity will define our entire lives. The consequences are immense. That’s why rules and lines abound, why we have instituted marriage as the defining sexual relationship of our lives and placed so much cultural and theological emphasis on sexual roles and responsibilities—father and mother, dating and marriage, chastity and covenants. So when someone is homosexual or asexual, it should also matter. It shouldn’t be something we try to ignore or sweep under the rug or ask them to keep quiet.

God instituted marriage as the proper place for the sexuality with which He gave us. But what about the other sexualities He created? What do we do with them? Where was mine supposed to go? Like the rest of the body, you can argue with your sexuality, but if you don’t learn to work with it, you will lose. We are told to bridle our passions, not destroy them. And yet some of us seem to be expected to, in fact, destroy them.

I don’t know why God made my wife Ace, or why asexuality even exists, but it is a real thing, and I had to deal with it in my real life; I could not simply play theologian in the pews. I pray for and await another grand revelation. This is the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times when nothing shall be withheld, when all that was once kept hidden should be revealed and made known. Whether there be one sexuality, or many sexualities, they are plainly being manifest.

My wife did not know about her sexuality before marriage. How could she? A sex drive can have many degrees, and most unfortunate of all, asexuality can look like righteousness in our culture. My wife told me that after Young Women's lessons on chastity as a teenager, because she wasn't tempted by sexual things at all she felt at the time she must be righteous! I would have thought the same thing in my youth (and indeed felt the exact opposite). It is deeply unfortunate that we associate sexuality so much with sin.

Maybe if we as a church are open about the complications of sexuality and stop pretending that if our young people simply keep the law of chastity everything will work out for the best, and encourage them to actually understand themselves sexually, fewer well-meaning but naive young Saints will lock themselves into eternal covenants that they can't possibly understand at the time—covenants that may not be meant for them. I don't regret the thirteen years of my marriage, but if I'd known back then about the asexuality, I probably would not have entered into it. My wife wouldn't have, either. It's not a fair situation! Not to me, and certainly not to her—an asexual person should not be compelled by ignorance to enter into the obligation of sexual engagement that the partnership of marriage entails.

So I don't blame my wife, but neither do I blame God. It would be easy to. Sometimes life feels like God has thrown us into a cage with a dozen hungry monsters, but I believe He never fails to throw a knife in with us. Looking back, it is clear God ensured I had the resources to survive my trial. My weapon was a lesson I needed to start learning immediately: godly love. The love that transcends sexual attraction. I had a friend placed very purposefully in my life who admonished me to learn to love my spouse no matter what, even if it's unreciprocated or one-sided—and how to sacrifice without building up resentment. That's what real love is. God loves us even when he receives no love in return. Christ sacrificed for us before we ever loved or worshiped him.

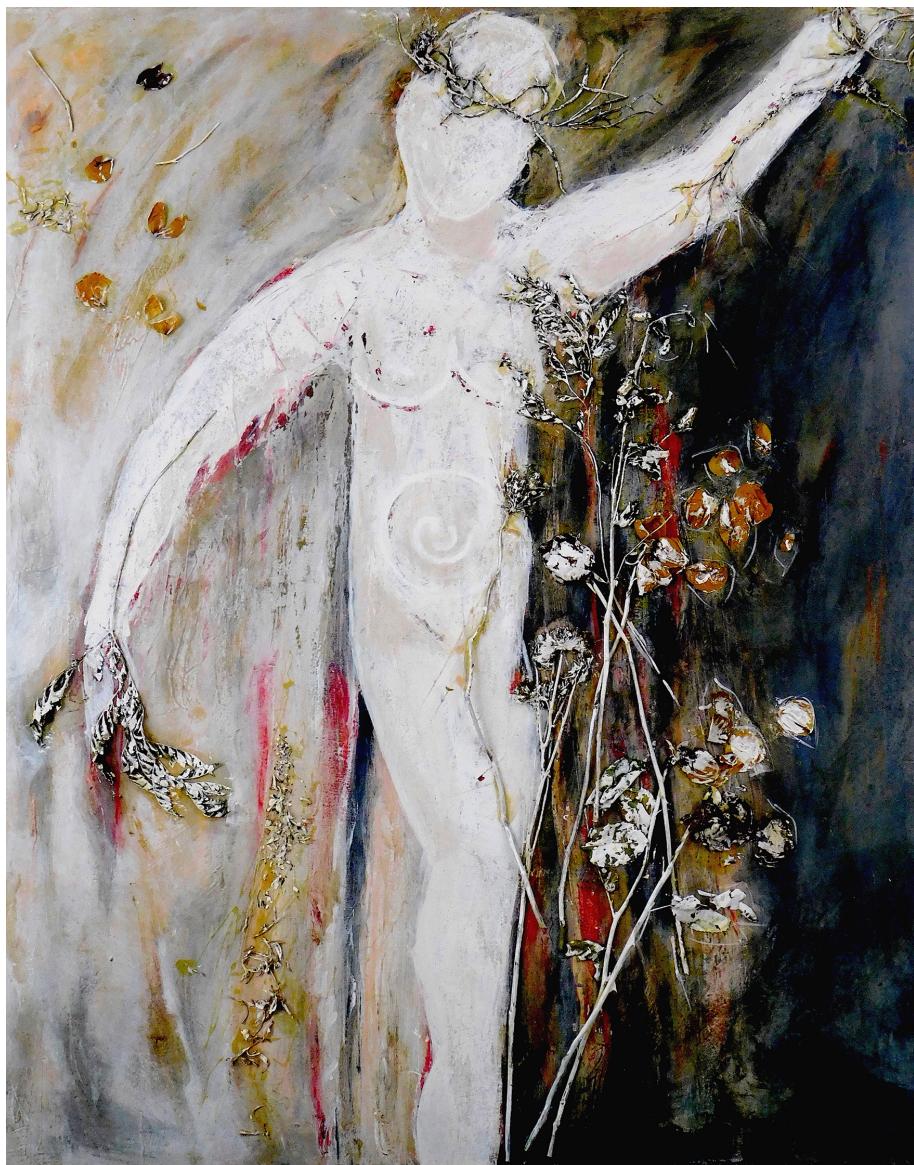
I learned to accept and love my wife for who and what she really was—not what I thought or wanted her to be. That lesson saved me

from the instant bitterness that many might feel—and from a quick and bitter separation. I see the way we as members of the Church have treated members of the queer community and I think we need to learn the same lessons to save our two communities from permanent separation. The queer LDS community's continued participation in the gospel shows they have learned this very love already.

Attempts at mixed-orientation marriages do not traditionally have fairytale endings. I thought mine could be different. Ours concluded in divorce. Godly love turned out not to be enough for our marriage relationship, in the end. Despite our efforts, our paths ended up diverging just too much. Marriage was simply not the right institution for our unique relationship. Yet ours was not a parting of bitterness and resentment. We continue to love each other as family, and our lives will be intertwined forever. Godly love may not be enough to sustain a marriage, but it will sustain a family, albeit not one where man and woman are defined by our sexual roles.

As I set out to remarry and rebuild, God's ultimate vision for my family eludes me. But we remain bound by sealing ties. We did build something, and we will not let that unique creation be torn asunder. Even if it may not end up exactly as we envisioned, it can still end up as God envisioned. He is the master builder, not us, and we are not finished until He says we are.

My family may yet require much sawing, cutting, and hammering to mold us into the shape we're meant to be. There will be additions, renovations. The path to celestial life may not even look like celestial living in any given moment—that's why I refuse to judge anybody else. Maybe my own choices will be challenged by someone with different values or priorities. I can't point to mine and say look at this beautiful fairytale ending, not yet. It's still one day of manna at a time. But that's its own blessing, isn't it? There's still time. Until we're out of this life, God is not done renovating. Not our souls, not our families, and not the living church itself.



Paola Bidinelli, *Mother's Seasons*, 2020,
mixed media on canvas,
47" x 39.5"

THE FIRST LETTER SHE FOUND

Charity Shumway

Oh Ellie, how to start? I keep thinking about the temple. I guess I'll start there.

I put my temple clothes and my garments in a bag and buried the bag in the back of my closet when I was young, just out of college. I've carried it to every new apartment and house since, never sure what to do with it. It's in the back of Dad's and my closet right now. I wonder if you've ever seen it. You used to crawl into our closet all the time when you and your brothers played hide-and-seek.

Sometimes, rarely, maybe four times in twenty years, I've taken the bag out and touched the white fabric—the cotton, the silk, the lace. I can remember then, so clearly, how the garments felt when I used to wear them. Every time I've done this, I've cried.

For a long time, your dad didn't know I had the bag, but he found me crying over it once. We had a terrible fight that day.

He's never understood that part of me. He doubts that I can be settled in the choices I have made, how I can have married him, had you kids and raised you like I have, but still feel conflict, regret, sorrow about religion—religion being the dirtiest word he can think of. He has always been afraid of faith. Afraid of me, really. That I would snap back to some puritanical position toward life, that I'd wake up and say I want to be a practicing Latter-day Saint again.

Faith is something he's never felt, and so he mistrusts it in all its forms, even the barely living form I still carry around. The time he found me with the bag was a long time ago, before you were born. That was the last fight we ever had about the issue. I think we both sensed the danger—it was a truly ugly fight, I am sorry to say—and we have

silently, since then, acknowledged it as untouchable territory, something we cannot talk about. It's one of the reasons I never talk about it with you.

In fact, Ellie, it's funny how I would never say any of this to you but here I am writing it. Not that funny because I've always been more comfortable writing things down than saying them, especially hard things. It used to perplex your dad when we were dating, the way I wouldn't have it out with him in the moment but would turn up a day or two later with a letter about whatever it is we were disagreeing about. I'm still that way. I wonder if I will actually give you this letter. I'll have to decide later. Maybe I'll read it over in a year or two and laugh to think I ever felt the need.

I'm not surprised that I'm writing this letter to you and not your brothers. There are things about me I want you to know, things about life that I want to tell you. Things I want to warn you about or spare you from. I have never worried for your three brothers the way I worry for you—because you are a girl in the world, because you're my girl. You are on the edge of so much, the end of high school, all that comes next. I look at your sweet teenage face, and I see the future, and I have such feelings. Fear and hope, all mixed together.

There's so much to explain—I'm in the sunroom, my usual spot in the corner chair. You're still at school, and I have hours until you'll be home, and I'm just staring out the window, watching the ropes of the willow tree moving in the wind.

The other day you were out here with your friend Amanda after school. The two of you sitting on the rug, doing a school project. And I was in this very chair, writing something, but really just listening to you being your sweet, silly selves. Then something happened. It was the smallest thing really. You said, "We should cut out some pictures of plants and paste them around!" You looked so excited. You leaned toward the piled-up gardening magazines in the rack beside my chair.

Amanda pursed her lips. “That’d be too busy,” she said. And you instantly wiped the eagerness from your face and nodded.

It was nothing, really. Just a poster! But your face changed so suddenly, the excitement hid itself away so completely. And it was this tiny suppression of yourself, something I hadn’t seen in quite this way in you before and have never seen in your brothers. You did it so readily. It left me cold.

The older you get the more I worry you’ll become practiced in that art, womanly art that it is. The more I fear you won’t even show eagerness until you’ve looked for acceptance. I am so afraid of this for you. I want to warn you against these surrenders of the self. Surrenders the women in my family, me prime among them, have too easily made. They seem like such nothings at the time. But they grow and grow.

If only it were as simple as some “be true to yourself” slogan. What is much harder is even knowing where your eagerness lies, and if it lies in several places, where to stand, how to protect the territory of yourself. How to know what really matters.

I can’t think that I really know how to help you, but Ellie, I wish I did! I wish I could! It’s this that’s making me think so strongly of my young self, facing my faith and trying to figure out my heart. The decisions I made surrounding that seem to me to be my most fundamental self-surrenders. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it, about you, since that afternoon.

To tell you about them, I have to tell you about the temple. Of course, you know that’s not where regular church services are, since you’ve been to a few of those. Never on ordinary Sundays, since that would have just killed your dad, but I’m sure you remember the services when some of your baby cousins were blessed.

The temple is something else entirely. I think you mostly know about it from weddings. That’s the reason we’ve never gone to any of your older cousins’ wedding ceremonies—they’ve all been in the

temple, and you have to be an adult member of the Church who has been endowed to go.

It's funny to think that there are words that have never needed explanation in my life, words like "temple" and "endowment" that are like the word "fork" or "bed" to me. But you're not LDS in any real sense. (Though I can't help but think it's in you in some ghostly form. The way you're so hard on yourself, or even the way you play piano, all those moving thirds and fifths you improvise. Do you even know those are hymn chords, that you learned those note progressions from me?)

So let me explain. The real heart of the temple is the endowment ceremony, which is basically the ceremony in which you commit to the faith as an adult and in which, in response to your covenanting, you are endowed with knowledge. It's this rite of passage, this big thing that is supposed to deepen your understanding and offer new realms of peace and guidance, and it's also something with this very physical change associated with it—the garments. You put them on when you go to the temple for your first time.

Garments were everywhere when I was growing up. All the adults I knew wore them. They're underclothing, tops and bottoms. For men, it's basically like wearing a white undershirt and extra-long white boxers. For women, it's a little stranger. The tops are like camisoles with cap sleeves. There are various necklines: scoop, princess, square. And the bottoms are like drapey white biker shorts. You wear them under everything, the closest thing to your skin. Your bra goes on top of the garments. (How ridiculous this all seems to explain, but you have to know to understand.) You can take the garments off to swim or work out, and, of course, to shower and all that. But otherwise, you're supposed to wear them all the time.

All your aunts and uncles on my side wear them. You probably haven't noticed, but that's just because you don't know what to look for. For me, I can always tell if someone is wearing them because of the lines they create under your clothing, a scoop near the neck, lines

under pants just above the knee. After I stopped wearing mine, I tried to wear thick clothing around my family whenever I visited, hoping they wouldn't notice. Of course they did, though. There were enough occasions when my skirt was a hair too short and they should have seen garments when I sat but didn't, when I bent over and my skin showed instead of my garments.

You know lots of stories about me from college. And lots about me and Dad in college together. The story of me and the temple is in and around all those other stories, and what amazes me most after all these years is how easy it's been not to tell it. I've pulled that vital cord from the stories and made them whole and lovely without it. I've been so thorough that I often don't even think of it myself.

The first time the temple came up was just before I left for college. The bishop of my ward back home asked me if I'd thought about going through the temple. I was surprised. Men go through the temple when they're just out of high school, right before their missions, but women don't usually go through the temple that young. They usually wait until they're twenty-one and going on a mission (actually that's changed now to nineteen, but that was the age when I was young) or until they're getting married, which sometimes happens at nineteen, I must admit, but which is usually a little later. Or if neither of those happens for them, no mission, no marriage, they'll go through when they feel ready, usually sometime in their late twenties. (When I was young, I always felt sad for the women who didn't have a momentous event compelling them, who just did it one day, no big hoopla. No one ever said it was sad, but I felt it—the smell of thwarted dreams coming up through the perfume of the day. I laugh at this now, as if twenty-eight were old! But back then it seemed tragically past hope).

Anyhow, what matters for what I'm explaining is that for the bishop to suggest that eighteen-year-old me consider going to the temple felt like a grand compliment. I left his office flattered. Looking back, I wonder if he feared that exactly what happened to me in college would

happen and hoped to bind me to the Church early, to protect me. But I didn't really think that at the time. The idea that I would leave would have been completely preposterous to me.

I might, in fact, have gone to the temple then, at age eighteen, if it hadn't been for the garments. I didn't want to wear them. I had never in my life worn anything sleeveless, and even though I was ashamed to put off unlocking the mysteries of the kingdom for the sake of tank tops, that's in large part what it came down to. I didn't want to have to explain my funny underwear to my new college roommate. It wasn't like I wanted to turn into a rebel in revealing clothes, so I didn't articulate my hesitancy by saying I didn't want to wear garments, but I did say I didn't feel a strong calling to go to the temple at the time, so why rush.

And then college happened. I went to Boston specifically to get away from Utah, to experience something bigger and broader, and I did. I made lots of new friends, saw all these different ways of thinking about things. During that time, I did a good deal of blustering about my various degrees of doubt, though never out loud to anyone other than my close LDS friends. And then only from the safe position of being a good Mormon girl—I paid my tithing, went to church, didn't drink or smoke, didn't fool around. (“Fool around” is actually your dad's phrase—one that I appreciate for its vagueness and also the sense of fun it implies. The words the Church uses—“petting,” in particular—are much more embarrassing.)

I say I blustered, but in truth, I was troubled by it all. There were things I doubted, doctrines that grated, rifts between my feelings and my thoughts on certain subjects that seemed impossible to mend: doctrines about gender, doctrines about revelation and obedience, the list went on and on. I wrote in my journal about it night after night, and I felt the beginnings of estrangement. But there I was, a sixth-generation Latter-day Saint. Did I really think I was going to up and become a Congregationalist, a Quaker? What was the point? Leaving religion

altogether was so fantastical a thought that it didn't even occur to me then.

There was something else too, something that would be easy to leave out, that I would seem nobler without. But to be honest I have to say there was embarrassment. It wasn't just that I was intellectually troubled by, say, the old doctrine of polygamy or the Church's stance toward homosexuality. Most of my friends in college were dismissive of faith in general and would have been dismissive of me if I had ever talked about it with them. I could get all worked up just thinking about it—those prejudiced jerks! But it was too internalized for that most of the time. I never wanted to talk about my faith with them anyway. There was too much to explain. And what was at the heart of it always seemed much too unspeakable.

I never felt comfortable with the language of the Church, the standard professions of belief. They sounded tinny. Corporate, even. "I'd like to bear my testimony. I know the Church is true. I know Joseph Smith is a true prophet"—you'll hear that a dozen times a meeting. The LDS Church is a church of bureaucrats and laymen. We have no paid clergy. Just regular folks who get up in church week after week and sometimes speak beautifully but much more often speak awkwardly and along standard lines. And sure, there's something great about that—the unpretentiousness of it. But instead of joining that shared voice, I've always retreated into silence or very carefully worded phrases. I still find it nearly impossible to talk about faith of any sort without evacuating myself and putting on some pose, some distanced voice: "Latter-day Saints believe. . . ." "The doctrine is. . . ."

So there I was, embarrassed, questioning, and stirring myself up into a real furor about the whole thing when something happened. That something was your dad. We met toward the end of my freshman year, and he swept into my life like . . . a novel. New York, Nantucket—you know all of it because it's your life. It's mine now too. But to me back then it was like stepping into something I'd only ever read about. And,

of course, you know your dad is loving and kind and good and smart and funny and wonderful. Ellie, in this letter I hope you will above all know that I love your dad and all of you kids! I don't unwish my life! You are my happiness. This is a beautiful life!

But there we were, college kids, and as time went on, he was interested, unshockingly, in doing a little more than kissing. And bit by bit, I went along with it. The trauma this caused me might seem funny to you, but it was a huge break for me. My questioning of my faith had always been safe because I was faithful in deed, if not always in thought, and that was proof of my devotion. I could say whatever I wanted as long as everyone knew where I really stood. It was part of my identity. The same thing that made me want to get good grades made me want to be a good girl—one more opportunity to excel! And for one measly guy, a fantasy really, I was losing myself.

There's a real ranking system in LDS doctrine. Murder is worst. Breaking the law of chastity is next in line. I realize as I write that phrase—the law of chastity—that it might not have a definite meaning to you. Let me be clear. It means sex, and who is allowed to have it. Married couples only. And even though we hadn't broken "the law of chastity" yet, we were pushing things. My non-Mormon friends would have thought all that anguish over a little petting (egads! that word!) was perplexing, and I certainly couldn't say anything about it to my LDS friends. They would have understood why it was so awful, but they never would have looked at me the same. So there I was, floundering, feeling alone and miserable. And then your dad and I slept together. (I'm sure these details about our physical intimacy are absolutely mortifying to you. I'm sorry! But it matters. So here we are. You can grimace if you have to.)

I broke up with him a week later, the both of us sobbing and blubbering and arguing for hours, days really, until we were exhausted and I slunk away, horrified about hurting him and ruining everything. Of course, you know we got back together my senior year, and I will come

to that, but nineteen-year-old-me was afraid and grieving. I felt like I had seen emptiness, had seen what it might be like to be without the Church, had felt that cavernous longing and loneliness. If I wasn't the golden child, who was I? I wanted back in.

I felt like it was time for me to accept myself, to finally say once and for all, stop wrangling! Who do you think you're fooling? This is who you are! Your ancestors walked barefoot across the plains to get to Zion, then scraped out lives in the desert, and you think snotty little you is in any position to tell them they sacrificed for no good reason? You think you're ready to throw it all away? Baloney.

I wanted to prove that I was spiritually mature, that I could embody that grand compliment the bishop had given me before I'd gone and ruined everything. But I will say that was only the trimming of my urge to go through the temple, not the heart of it. At the heart of it was a tender spot of faith I've never really been able to articulate. Because your dad and I slept together, I had to wait a year. That's a rule. And that entire year I felt that spot of faith grow brighter and brighter. I could sit back and feel it like the warmth of the sun.

And then the day came, a week before I went back to school for my senior year.

Your dad has always scorned the architecture of LDS temples. I see what he's saying. Their exteriors are often a little fantasy-ish—an inclination toward blazing white spires everywhere. But I've never been able to condemn them so roundly. I grew up on that aesthetic too much to fully reject it. And the Bountiful temple that first day could not have been more beautiful to me.

I remember driving with my mother up toward the temple, warm August sunshine giving all the dry brush on the whole hillside a soft golden glow. Inside the bride's room, where nonbridal little me was still led to put on my white temple dress and prepare myself for the endowment ceremony, that same light poured through the stained-glass

windows. Most stained-glass windows are bright primary colors, but these were pale purple and ivory. The ceilings in the room were perhaps thirty feet? I can't exactly recall. But that light. It was beautiful. The dress I'd picked out had mother-of-pearl buttons, pin tucks, and a high satin neck. I looked at myself there in the filigree-framed mirror, the light glowing off me in my temple dress, and I thought I had never looked more beautiful. Of course, you know that I am vain and that feeling beautiful matters to me more than it should. But it truly does matter to me, and it's only a feeling I have when I have a sense of well-being.

The endowment ceremony was ritualistic—hand signs, particular words and names to memorize, standing up and sitting down at particular times to show my consent and my covenanting. “Covenanting”—another word I understand instinctively but that won't mean much to you. It means promising, but two ways. I make promises to God, and He makes promises to me in return. But it's more than that, actually. You also make promises to your fellow saints, and they make promises to you. It's a communion of promises. A sturdy structure. Mutuality. I'm still moved by it.

I wasn't surprised by the ritual, strange as it might have seemed to an outsider, and I felt such peace, such complete un-embarrassment, as if I could at last embrace every bit of LDS peculiarity, could know that not a soul in the room looked down on me for my faith, irrational, clunky, or inarticulate as it may have been.

I left the temple that day wearing garments, an adult Latter-day Saint woman. I left feeling quiet, as if I had gathered the pieces of myself up and simply wanted to hold them close for as long as I could, as if I might scatter them again with words of any sort.

In the days after, I stayed quiet, but it became a morose quiet, a silent anxiety. It was the garments. I was too aware of my body. Parts of me that I was used to ignoring were suddenly signaling my brain at all times. My thighs, covered with fabric. My waist, bunched with fabric

where the garment tops tucked into the bottoms. My back. My arms. It was the heat of our little house in August, the way the sweat gathered where my bra covered my garment top. It was the agony of going through my wardrobe. I'd known the shorter skirts and the sleeveless dresses would be out, but I hadn't expected that so many of my shirts would have necks that were too wide or that so many shirts would be a little too short, the garment showing when I leaned forward or lifted my arms. I hadn't expected that so many of my knee-length skirts would, in fact, not quite cover the bottom of the garments. I moped around and cried. And then I went back to college.

I figured I would get used to garments soon enough. That it was a little something like the strangeness you had when you got your braces off, the way your teeth felt huge and slick for a week, and then you adjusted and could hardly remember that feeling. But I remained acutely aware of them. I looked at every girl I passed and assessed her outfit, garment friendly or not? The slightly sheer sweaters, low-rise jeans, tank tops—I was ashamed of my envy of them. And in the moments when it was possible that someone saw my garments—when I crossed my legs and my thigh showed a little too much or when, worst of the worst, I changed at the gym, I was embarrassed and ashamed of my embarrassment.

But all in all, even with the swirl of distress about the garments, I felt a power I hadn't felt before. A slight settling. I had hoped for a final settling, but slight was enough.

They'd just finished a new temple in Boston, a short drive from school, and all that year I went to the temple every Wednesday night. Sitting in the temple, wearing my dress, feeling like I belonged with "my people" was, until I had you children, the happiest I have ever felt.

That year was also when more of the stories you already know begin. Your dad had graduated and moved to New York for his first job after my freshman year, but when I was a senior he was back in Boston for business school. We started to see each other again, at first

just dinner. But then more. I hadn't seen him in a year and a half, and I felt an irresistible pull, like cords tightening. I remember the first time he finally touched me again. It was just his hand on my arm, but I felt it like a shock through my body, a jolt of pleasure and love. All I wanted was more.

We've told you all those stories, our crazy middle of the night calls and walks, our sudden road trips, how hard we fell for each other, so much more than before. How wonderful it was to rediscover him. And every bit of that is true and bears repeating. I'm afraid reading this letter you'll get the wrong idea. That's one reason I might not give it to you. I want you to know I chose your dad every bit of the way, that I fell in love with him, that I have loved him every day since and still do.

But I suppose the whole point of this letter, or one of the points, is for me to tell you that it would be easy if feelings were always clear, if one good feeling didn't conflict with another.

All within a week or so of us seeing each other again I told him about garments and about deciding to go through the temple, how it was a challenge but wonderful too. I remember the exact bench we sat on during that conversation, just a few blocks from my dorm. It was a warm night, and very late, and even though it was a busy street during the day it was almost silent at night, just the occasional cab going by. He listened so intently, leaning toward me, his eyes warm and wide, and partway through he put his hand on top of mine, the same pure pleasure flowing through me at his touch. I actually remember going home and writing in my journal, "John is so so good. He seems to understand all the sides of me." I remember that all these years later because I went back to that entry a lot of times and reread it. I wondered later how I could have thought that. Your dad is so so good, that part is true. But he does not understand all the sides of me.

Before, I had felt pressure, as if I were proving I was the sort of person he'd want, some game of sophistication, but now I just wanted to spend every moment with him, and I almost didn't think about what

I was doing as I pressed the boundaries of the law of chastity. Again, what a terrible phrase that is, but I use it because that's the specific phrase they use during the temple ceremony. The covenanting is fairly broad—promising to obey the law of the gospel, to consecrate your time and talents to building the kingdom. More words that might mean nothing to you, but just know they mean a general sort of faithfulness and participation. But then there is a very specific covenanting to obey the law of chastity. It's the only specific commandment that gets broken out. And there I was, once again troubled by it but now with much higher stakes. We were still in fairly safe territory, and I was still wearing my garments, going to church, being my newly revitalized LDS self and figuring, hey, who knows what I'm doing with this guy, but I love him too much to do anything else. I actually fantasized that he might convert.

And then after months of togetherness, one day I just knew something was up. Your dad had been droopy-eyed and sadly affectionate all day, handling me the way you would an old photograph, an edge of nostalgia in his touch. Finally, late that night, I nudged him and asked what was wrong. After a long pause, he said he couldn't ever marry a Mormon girl. And that was that. I slipped out of his arms and caught a cab back to my dorm. I fell asleep berating myself—what had I thought would happen? I cried all the next day and then the day after that. But I was also relieved, in a way. It was time to gather myself back up again and march forward with my Latter-day Saint life.

But then your dad showed up on my doorstep, desperate. He didn't know what he wanted. He wanted me. He didn't know. It was quite a scene. And, of course, you know we got back together—I was still crazy about him. But everything had changed. He couldn't put his hand on top of mine and listen to me talk about the temple anymore. He was trying to put me into his life, and he said he couldn't have that kind of religion in it. He couldn't stand that I felt guilty about what we were doing. Couldn't raise his children in the Church, in any church.

He didn't want a Mormon wife, even though he wanted me. And for me part of the problem was that he was so sure while I was trying to cope with uncertainty. I was so vulnerable to attack. Again, it may seem funny that we were these kids thinking and talking about our lives in these terms—our children, marriage, all of that. But Dad and I were always serious like that.

I wanted to cling to my faith. He couldn't stand it, couldn't stand me, but wanted me, wanted me. Your dad pushed me—did I really believe x, y, and z? And I saw more and more of my own inconsistencies, my own shakiness. We started sleeping together again (sorry again for the details!) It was so gradual that by the time it happened niggling over the details felt crazy. But I cannot overstate how ravaged by guilt I was. I'd made promises. And now I'd broken them. Still, I kept going to church, kept wearing my garments. For a short time, I even kept going to the temple even though I was in direct violation of my covenants. I told myself my life was complicated, and that some conflicts were unresolvable and that being a hypocrite was just being a reasonable person in the world—consistency was too much to ask, too painful to consider.

I was also increasingly unsure that I could hack it as a Latter-day Saint, even if we broke up. What if, instead of your dad, I married some nice Mormon man. Was I going to wake up at forty with three kids and tell him I wanted out? I couldn't shake that fear. But I also couldn't bear the thought of leaving, of never going to the temple again, of giving up the sweet, unembarrassed peace I felt there.

I am sure you will wonder if it really had to be so black and white, in or out. And I can only answer by telling you that you don't understand the Church. It is, in fact, black and white, in or out. I suppose I could have lingered in it, but it would have been a crippling half-life. There is very, very little place in the Church for the undevoted. I did my best to cling to that small both-in-and-out territory, until I just couldn't.

And so I took off my garments and put away my temple clothes, which really meant putting away the Church and that part of myself.

Your dad said he wanted nothing to do with it; it had to be my choice. But not too long after I did, we got engaged, got married, had you kids.

In the years since then I still feel clinging edges of embarrassment whenever anyone learns I grew up in Utah and asks, as they so often do, if I am Mormon. I never know what to answer, even still. The question always freezes my heart. There is such judgment in that question. I have seen clear relief pass over too many people's faces when I've answered that question no.

I stopped going to the temple before I stopped going to church—part of that attempted half-life. But on my last visit to the temple, just as I was finally deciding I was breaking myself apart with my dishonesty and couldn't go on, I carried my temple bag in, changed into my temple dress, and went in feeling heavy, verging on tears.

At the end of the temple ceremony, you pass through a veil—just a curtain, really, but meant to represent the thin division between earth and heaven, mortality and beyond, a division Latter-day Saints always call “the veil.” After passing through, you enter the celestial room, which is always the grandest room in the temple—white, light, perfectly peaceful. You can sit there and think and pray for as long as you want. That night, the last night I would ever be in a temple, I went through the veil and entered the celestial room and fell apart. I sat in a corner of the celestial room sobbing for almost an hour. I know the word “sobbing” is melodramatic, but it was the sort of crying you can't control, the kind that catches in your throat and shakes your body.

I am still not sure if I cried so long and so hard because I knew I was giving up something that I shouldn't have been giving up or because I was simply mourning a loss that was inevitable and for the best, though sad.

But I do know, Ellie, that I want you to be very careful. I don't take back what happened. I love you all so much. I love Dad! But I wish I had been more careful. I wish I had been gentler with myself. I wish I had tolerated my uncertainty to a greater degree. I wish Dad had tolerated

my uncertainty more too. I wish I had kept parts of myself for myself only.

But perhaps this letter shows how untrue that is, how desperate we are to share all of ourselves. Ellie, I have always wanted to share my spiritual self with someone and never have. I could never handle the blazing devotion of my fellow Latter-day Saints, and I could never find myself at home in the clear atheism of your dad's world. I wish I could share myself with you. I see now that this might be a foolish letter. Too much to give to a teenager. Even in a year or two.

You'll be home from school any minute. What am I going to do with this letter? I'll tuck it away for now, I guess? Maybe in the bag? Maybe you're enough like your dad that you'll never need to find stability in uncertainty the way I needed to. Perhaps all I will do is watch you more closely. Perhaps all I will do is pray for you in that silent, strange, muddled way I pray.

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Discretion

Joseph Morgan

Watching the boy rage into being
I recall the parting restraints
Arranged through infancy ascending
Through tantrum to disenchantment
With earthly fathers to loftier faults
Setting oneself abreast and ahead
With raiments cast in the sides of the north
O by this light do not wrong him he is
Too scrupulous that way it is his vice
No I am no prophet I just know this
Travail behind maturity is so well traced
It passes through far countries clambering
Up yon distant mountain
To prospect for oneself and Christ

JOSEPH MORGAN {ijamesmorgan8340@gmail.com} was born in Eastern Idaho and following his mission chose to make Idaho Falls his home. Between the time committed to his family, his faith, and his work as an agricultural advisor, he cultivated his own private love of literature and taught himself to write as well as he could. His writing tries to offer an answer to what poetry, a poetry of Idaho, and a Mormon poetry might be.

(atonement poem)

Theric Jepson

The black hole
of god's salvation
is here
 in his palm
where else
 really
 could It be

THERIC JEPSON is the editor of *Irreantum*, the author of *Byuck* and *Just Julie's Fine*, and the last person you want to see when your timing belt busts. This is his seventh poem to appear in *Dialogue*. He lives in El Cerrito, California, with his wife and three of their children, all of whom look forward to the upcoming hundredth anniversary of the Berkeley Ward (<https://berkeleyward.org/100>). Visit him at thmazing.com or subscribe to thmazing.substack.com.

Birding at the Lake

D. A. Cooper

A pod of pelicans patrols the shore
like angels guarding the gates of heaven.

Two robins stare into the rising sun,
seeking communion with the mystery of light.

A sole hawk soundlessly hovers,
hoping to find flocks to prey on.

A gang of gulls glides like leaves
freshly fallen from the tree of life.

Three egrets skim the water's surface;
Creation ripples, wrinkling in their wake.

Gulps of cormorants calmly glide
to the distant shore in the shining dawn.

An echo of mockingbirds, eager to mimic
something lovely, listens and waits.

Pen and paper perched on my lap,
I search the numen for the notes of my song.

Hunger

Daniel 6

D. A. Cooper

I feel your breath upon my neck—the heat
and dampness of each sigh, the way each pant,
each lungful pulls at me. Your eagerness
echoes throughout the lonely dark. A fear
expands into my chest and penetrates
my soul. I feel your touch upon my back—
your body's overflowing warmth consumes
me, fills my heart with an uneasy stillness.
I lie here next to you, afraid of you,
afraid of what you are, of what you'll take
from me when hunger overwhelms your sleep.

D. A. COOPER {dacooper4@gmail.com} is a poet and writer from Texas. His work has also recently appeared in the *ARCH-HIVE*, *Irreantum*, *New Verse Review*, *THINK*, and *Wayfare*, among others. He enjoys translating dialect poetry from Italy, watching *The Office*, and looking at trees.

sackcloth

Kyle Hunter

i am a good person
i tell myself
i am a good person
i feel remorse
as i lead the kid
to my knife
as i tenderly pull
away his pelt
it clings to his muscles
like a reluctant soul
cleaned and cut
with a strict sober eye

i am stitching the path
i took to get here
i am stitching a way out
can you admire the way
i construct my guilt
how i hide it in a coat
i took as my own
how i feel every coarse memory
i am finding myself crying
for what i have done
i am finding myself crying

KYLE HUNTER {kylemartinhunter@gmail.com} writes and wrangles his five kids in Indiana. His kids force him to practice law so they can have extravagances like food and instrument lessons, when he would much rather use his degree in oil painting. His poems have appeared in various journals, including *Main Street Rag*, *Abbey*, *DASH*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *So It Goes*, and others. In his free time, he also helps edit the *50*, a poetry anthology (<https://x.com/the50anthology>).



Paola Bidinelli, *Mute*, 2020,
mixed media on wood panel, 48" x 24"

Christian Laboratory: Mormon and Protestant Missions in Ideological and Geographical Peripheries

David Golding and Christopher Cannon Jones, eds. *Missionary Interests: Protestant and Mormon Missions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024. 230 pp. Paperback: \$26.30. ISBN: 978-1501774430.

Reviewed by Fernando Pinheiro

The book *Missionary Interests: Protestant and Mormon Missions in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, edited by David Golding and Christopher Cannon Jones, provides a significant contribution to the historiography of Christian missions by comparatively examining Protestant and Mormon missionary efforts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The work stands out for exploring connections, tensions, and parallels between these religious traditions, bringing together research presented at a symposium held in 2019 in Salt Lake City.

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp's preface sets the tone for the collection, describing Christian missions as a kind of experimental laboratory that reveals the complexities of missionary work and the dynamics of power and culture involved (vii–viii). Maffly-Kipp argues that Christian missions, in all their variants, are historical and social experiments that reconfigure values, identities, and cosmologies. She writes that comparing Protestants and Mormons reveals fundamental questions about religious authority, conversion strategies, and what constitutes missionary success (viii–ix). The book's goal, as outlined in the editors' introduction, is to expand the understanding of Christian missions by examining the parallels and interactions between Protestants and Mormons in global contexts. This comparative approach is innovative,

given that these two traditions have often been treated separately in previous studies.

The editors emphasize that, while Protestantism and Mormonism share traits such as evangelistic zeal and the use of communication technologies, their missions often clashed due to doctrinal differences and competition for converts. The book seeks to address the lack of dialogue between these traditions in historiography by bringing together experts to explore their intertwined histories.

The collection is organized into eleven chapters, structured chronologically, spanning the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Each chapter tackles a specific issue, often linking missionary efforts to broader historical and cultural contexts. For example, the chapters explore topics such as the impact of missions on Indigenous communities, the role of technology and photography in missionary work, and the relationship between missions and colonial projects.

One of the book's most notable contributions is its interdisciplinary and comparative approach. The chapters use diverse historical sources, from missionary diaries to photographs and institutional reports, to offer a broad and detailed view of missionary praxis. By adopting a comparative perspective, the book transcends the limitations of previous studies that often focused on just one tradition.

This approach elucidates common and divergent themes, such as the authority to preach and the participation of women in missionary work. The work also examines how missions influenced and were influenced by political and social contexts, such as colonialism and shifts in global power dynamics. Challenges faced by missions are discussed as well, including natural disasters, cultural resistance, and issues of race and gender.

Particularly intriguing are the chapters that explore how missions often perpetuated ideas of cultural and racial superiority, even as they sought to convert and "civilize" others. This tension is particularly evident in interactions between missionaries and Indigenous

or non-Christian communities, wherein concepts of “progress” and “modernity” shaped conversion strategies.

Another highlight of the book is its analysis of the theological and cultural issues that shaped Protestant and Mormon missions. The introduction notes the lack of missiology among Mormons compared to Protestants, who developed a rich tradition of missionary theory (6). This difference reflects distinct approaches to missionary practice and theology but also reveals how both traditions faced similar challenges when engaging with non-Western cultures.

The work holds great relevance for scholars of religious history, cultural studies, and missiology. By highlighting the interconnections between Protestant and Mormon missions, the book challenges traditional narratives and offers new perspectives on the impact of missions on the formation of national, racial, and religious identities. The comparative analysis also encourages a reevaluation of how missions shaped global Christianity and the dynamics between religion and power.

Missionary Interests is an essential contribution to understanding Christian missions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By bringing together innovative and comparative perspectives, the work illuminates the complexities of Protestant and Mormon missions, challenging assumptions and opening new avenues for research. With its focus on global connections and local issues, the book offers a vital starting point for future studies on the impact of Christian missions in global history.

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Reviving the Book of Mormon's Message for Modern Discipleship

Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming. *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*. Vols. 1–3. Draper, UT: By Common Consent Press, 2020, 2022, 2023. 176–400 pp. Paperbacks: \$9.70–\$15.95. ISBNs: 978-1948218238, 978-1948218580, 978-1948218993

Reviewed by James C. Jones

Too frequently, I have the experience of anxiously awaiting Sunday School to start so I can ask about a text from the week's reading that's relevant to what's happening in the world, only to be disappointed in some way—usually by no one else seeing what I saw or no one else thinking that what I saw is important enough to discuss. That recurring experience is frustrating and makes me feel unseen, but more importantly, it makes our faith feel shallow. Additionally, to go to church again and again to study a sacred text unique to us, a text that gives us more of Christ's word—a Christ whose most fundamental ethic is loving our neighbor as ourselves—and to also watch that sacred text be ignored for the rich justice text that it is, or worse, to also be utilized as a tool of oppression like the Bible, is a profoundly frustrating and exhausting experience. It's further frustrating to see the Book of Mormon speaking to the most pressing issues of our day, whether it's warning us of the dangers of capitalistic greed or teaching us how to care for the poor and otherwise marginalized, but we gloss over it in Sunday School, assuming we talk about it at all.

While the *Come, Follow Me* seminary and institute manuals are decent tools, they have demonstrated themselves multiple times to be incomplete. Enter the three-volume series *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These* by Rev. Dr. Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming.

Many of my personal projects in LDS spaces have been geared toward mining content and conversation from our sacred texts that validates and supports the marginalized. In my opinion, there is no Book of Mormon study guide or commentary that does this better than *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*. I'll take it a step further and say that it's arguably the best study resource for the Book of Mormon and does a better job of making the text relevant to discipleship in today's world than any other resource. It has revitalized my love for and study of the Book of Mormon, in addition to helping me articulate the ways in which the Book of Mormon points to our wickedness, warns us of consequences, exhorts us to better, and shows us how, while also showing us the beauty and joy found in discipleship.

In the introduction to the second volume, the authors identify the Book of Mormon story as a tragic and prescient warning of what happens when people choose "their own interests over [what Martin Luther King Jr. calls] beloved community" (xv). As such, Salleh and Hemming make a concerted effort to highlight the moments in the Book of Mormon where harm is being done, especially to the marginalized, and also where it teaches us what beloved community is and how to create it. They show us how Nephi's trauma affected his telling of his family's story, how it affected his descendants, and how it still affects the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; they show us how to read the silence (or silencing) of women in the text; and they show us how true understanding of our reliance on God will result in our keeping of the second great commandment to treat the needs of others as holy. They cover a variety of other topics and issues, including allyship, identity, memory work as justice work, economic justice, how the vulnerable are used as tools of war, sex ethics, the ways that antichrists operate, and much more. What I mark as simultaneously a strength and a weakness of *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These* is that it does an incredible job of starting many important conversations that are simply not happening in Sunday School, but as a commentary, a "start"

is about all the authors can afford. What will a greater exploration of the first half of 4 Nephi look like knowing that a concern for social justice is what enabled such long-lasting peace? What are the implications for the Church's law of chastity considering that its primary source text for it (Alma 39) may not say what we think it says? *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These* contains profoundly thoughtful commentary on a variety of issues like these, but it is not designed to treat most of them in the detail that a student of the text might desire.

Still, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These* is quite refreshing to me as a Mormon theologian, and it is quite accessible to the general public despite clearly being written by a pair of scholars. I most strongly recommend it to members of the Church who want to get more out of their Book of Mormon study, especially ones with a concern for social justice, which is too often omitted from the *Come, Follow Me* manual and our Sunday School classrooms. Having experienced a Sunday School classroom where the instructor cited these volumes, I also will specifically recommend this for Sunday School teachers.

To conclude, in our church culture that often glosses over the rich and life-giving justice messages in our texts, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These* serves as a vital and refreshing corrective. By centering the voices of the least, the last, the lost, and the left out, Salleh and Olsen Hemming invite deeper and more thoughtful engagement that not only reinvigorates our study of the Book of Mormon but also reminds us of its urgent relevance to modern discipleship. If you're like me and desperately yearning to find Christ's call to beloved community in the Book of Mormon, this work offers both spark and substance to begin transforming how we read, understand, teach, and live the gospel of the same Christ who declared our treatment of the least of these was our treatment of him.

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Groundwork for Future Study

Amanda Beardsley and Mason Allred, eds. *Latter-day Saint Art: A Critical Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 664 pp. Hardcover, \$49.99. ISBN: 9780197632505.

Reviewed by Rachel Meibos Helps

According to Oxford University Press, *Latter-day Saint Art: A Critical Reader* is “the first comprehensive critical examination of Mormon art.” This grand claim stakes out the territory that the book purports to cover: It presents itself as the first of its kind, a sweeping and generous exploration of art and Mormonism, incorporating the perspectives of the major scholars in the field and published by the top academic press in the world. The publisher’s claim also gives us three important criteria for potential reviewers to use in evaluating the work. All one must do is ask, and attempt to answer, the three questions implied by the marketing blurb: Is it the first? Is it comprehensive? And is it critical?

The first question is perhaps the easiest to answer. This is not the first book to discuss the visual arts and Mormonism. There are multiple books that have examined Mormon visual art, but the existing academic books have been from a historical or curatorial standpoint. One example of this approach is *The Mormon Graphic Image* (1983) by Gary L. Bunker and Davis Bitton, which uses political cartoons from historical periodicals to show how American popular perception of

Mormons changed over time. Nathan Rees, a contributor to *Latter-day Saint Art*, also wrote *Mormon Visual Culture and the American West* (2021), a book focused on early Mormon art. Rees uses Mormon art as cultural studies material to show how historical Mormon attitudes were demonstrated in their art. Many of the articles in *Latter-day Saint Art* follow the pattern of using visual art as evidence or to illustrate ideas about Mormon history and culture. So, while *Latter-day Saint Art* is certainly one of the first books to cover the Mormon art tradition, it is by no means the first.

What about comprehensive? Despite the publisher's claim, the editors of the volume are conscious of the scope of Mormon art and make no claims to comprehensiveness. They limit this collection to discussing visual art with Mormon themes. And while no collection can be comprehensive, most collections of this nature at least attempt to give readers a historical overview. This book lacks an overview chapter on Mormon art, making it difficult to get a big picture of how it has progressed over time. And while the articles provide important analysis, research, and context surrounding key works in LDS art history, they often lack connections to other artworks and movements within and without the LDS tradition. For example, Menachem Wecker's chapter on the Art and Belief movement describes the exhibit establishing the movement at the Salt Lake City Public Library in 1966. *Dialogue* itself was founded this same year. The Mormon History Association was also established around this time. Members themselves were establishing independent institutions to examine more niche aspects of their faith. Situating the Art and Belief movement alongside these other contemporaneous developments could have improved readers' understanding of it.

That said, the twenty-two chapters represent an impressive array of topics and approaches to Mormon art, with a thoroughness of research appropriate for academic publication. They are divided into six themes. The first section, focused on art as theology, attempts to answer the

question, “Just what does Mormon theology do with art?” Terryl Givens starts off with the argument that two distinctive parts of Restoration thought inform visual arts: “a conflation of the sacred and the banal” and “a perpetual tension between exile and Eden, or between gathering and integration” (19). This chapter would be more helpful if Givens explained how these two concerns constitute an “aesthetic” rather than a set of common themes. Colleen McDannell’s chapter sees the Edenic imagery as more stable in institutional art and explores how the LDS Church’s recent focus on original art for temples shows that they value art as something that transports patrons to an “ideal, perfected world” (73) that focuses on realist art depicting nature, scripture narratives, and contemporary worshippers. Randy Astle’s chapter on Mormon identity in documentaries shows how Mormons assert “a subjective self-portrait” (80) that is a kind of personal agency. No overarching style dominates Mormon documentaries, but their styles are a mosaic of diversity, much like members.

The second section, on image-making, focuses on how art has been used to shape the image of the Mormon people. Ashlee Whitaker Evans shows several examples of image-making in early Mormon art, including Brigham Young’s commission of a portrait of himself for the celestial room in the Nauvoo temple. The earliest examples show Mormons portraying themselves as respectable members of the learned upper class. Images from the mid-nineteenth century show a more nuanced identity, which includes agricultural labor, immigration, and poverty. Artwork like C. C. A. Christensen’s panorama, on the other hand, depicts the martyrdom and other key events in early church history, and shows a desire to solidify a communal history. Nathan Rees’s chapter on the appearances of Mormons in print contrasts anti-Mormon images with images made by Mormons for themselves. The anti-Mormon image *Greeting the Favorite* (1876) by Stanley Fox is unusual among anti-Mormon art, showing a respectable Victorian home. The subtle detail of the husband kissing his favorite wife without removing his topcoat

reveals, for Rees, a sinister licentiousness. Jennifer Reeder summarizes existing research on women's folk art, especially quilts and hair art, and deftly analyzes how it shows the relationships between women as mediated by their religion. In the last chapter in this section, Heather Belnap traces the short history of women artists who pursued international art study—many of whom did not have Mormonism as a major theme of their work. These women viewed their artistic ambitions as congruent with and expanding their faith.

The third section, on the politics of space, focuses on photography and architecture. The large spaces captured by architecture and photography demonstrate the artist's assumptions about the world, like who is worthy of documenting and who belongs in the space. Josh Edward Probert's excellent chapter on Latter-day Saint temple architecture examines the tension between luxury and utilitarianism. Temples, he claims, are designed to be "nice but not too nice" (238). He also warns Latter-day Saints about putting too much emphasis on architectural trends. "In using the visual discourses of material refinement and stylish design as a metaphor for godhood," he suggests, "Latter-day Saints have tethered the metaphorical effectiveness of the temple to changing notions of taste" (247). The two chapters on historical photographs by Mary Campbell and Rebecca Janzen focus on the cultural information present in a photo of Brigham Young's "Big Ten" daughters and in twentieth-century Mexican congregations, respectively. The final chapter, by James Swenson, examines trends in landscape photography in Mormon spaces. Swenson notes the absence of Native Americans, and the way LDS settlers made the landscape visibly distinct. In one example, he contrasts two photos of the Manti temple in a masterful analysis that shows a stark difference between two conceptions of temple space. In J. George Midgley's photo, a cowboy herds sheep in the foreground, with the temple silhouetted and enrobed in mist in the midground. Ansel Adams's photo shows the Manti temple centered, in full sun, with crisp and stately details.

The fourth section of the book focuses on institutions that influenced Mormon art. This section starts with a chapter by Linda Jones Gibbs on the Paris Art Mission—five Mormon artists sent to Paris’s Academie Julian to study art. It summarizes her previous work on this subject and, disappointingly, does not cite some of the more recent scholarship on the Paris Art Mission, but does draw plentifully from original correspondence. Glen Nelson wrote two chapters for this section. The first details the LDS artists who took part in the Art Students League of New York and the history of the league. Students formed the league after the National Academy of Design students lost their library access and life drawing sessions. The league emphasized figure drawing and had models available every weekday. Their instructors were very diverse. Famous LDS artists like Mahonri Young and Minerva Teichert joined the league and learned from their instructors. Nelson also wrote on University of Utah art professor George Dibble, whose modernist paintings were not always accepted by Utah’s conservative populace (even though modernism was out of style in the larger art world by the midcentury). Nelson advances an argument that LDS culture never really got over the cultural argument about modernism: “LDS reliance on Realism in its publications and workshop spaces,” he claims, “came gradually to be an evolving manifesto of its own” (399). Menachem Wecker’s chapter in this section traces the history of the Mormon Art and Belief movement in the 1960s and ’70s. Wecker expresses some dismay that the movement was unknown outside of the Mormon art scene and brings a legitimizing outsider perspective to the collection, along with an impressive amount of journalistic research.

Both of the chapters on historical photographs from the section on the politics of space and the bulk of the information in the section on institutions focus on historical information, with the art from these serving as a nice demonstration that the involved artists were influential and significant. This is unsurprising. Since Mormon history has dominated Mormon studies for a long time, it makes sense that much

of its scholarship would be Mormon history via Mormon art rather than a critical examination of artistry. As Jennifer Champoux noted in a 2021 presentation, scholarly treatments of LDS art often “focus on the subject matter . . . , rather than talking about the paintings themselves.”¹ She encouraged an approach that focuses more on the art itself, which is also exemplified in this volume, especially in the section on identity.

The fifth section focuses on art and identity, with chapters covering race, body politics, and feminism. W. Paul Reeve uses Mormon art to illustrate how early artists showed Latter-day Saints and Book of Mormon Nephites as white and respectable. He contrasts this art with contemporary art to show a kind of racial reclamation. Reeve contrasts Friberg’s painting of Alma baptizing people with Jorge Cocco’s of the same story. Friberg’s people are white and occupy a jungle paradise, while Cocco’s are Indigenous people in a desert landscape. Carlyle Constantino’s chapter, “Native Americans, Mormonism, and Art,” gives an overview of LDS art both depicting and by Native Americans, ending with selections from an interview with Santa Clara Pueblo Tewa artist Kwani Povi Winder. Mason Allred’s chapter focuses on the tension between carnal pleasure and body positivity in LDS theology. He examines three independent international films: *Love Is War* (1970), directed by Ragnar Lasse-Henriksen, *The Dead, The Devil, and the Flesh* (1974) directed by Jose Maria Oliveira, and *Weighed but Found Wanting* (1974), directed by Lino Brocka. Allred examines other LDS films to show the ambivalent relationship Latter-day Saints have to media in general and finds that dance is a middle ground where Mormons can appreciate their bodies without over-sexualizing them. Amanda K. Beardsley’s chapter, “Latter-day Saint Feminism and Art,” encapsulates diverse approaches of Mormon feminists by analyzing several examples

1. Jennifer Champoux, “Envisioning Wilderness: Symbolic Forests in CCA Christensen’s Paintings,” paper presented at the annual Mormon History Association conference, June 11, 2021.

of their work. She connects Valerie Atkisson's mobile *Hanging Family History* to Giovanna Zapperi's theories of feminist time and its critique of the gender-based perception of genealogy inherent in genealogical trees. In making this connection, Beardsley aims to show "discursive roots in feminism *and* the LDS faith" (515) in the artworks. Beardsley does not just find feminism in LDS works, but she also finds LDS ideas in non-LDS feminist works, as with Amy Jorgensen's *Body Archive*, where she describes her artwork as a "visual testimony" (526) to her bodily identity.

The final section is on exhibition and display. Laura Paulsen Howe, the current art curator at the Church History Museum, wrote on the history of the Church History Museum's International Art Competition. Howe shows successful examples of non-Western LDS art that were part of the competition and gives examples of three figurative artists who found a market in LDS art after participating in the competition. She argues that the competition is not promoting colonialism, because it features all kinds of art from international artists. Analisa Sato writes on the BYU Department of Art in the twenty-first century, which has moved toward contemporary trends of performance and abstract art. Using two examples of student senior exhibits, Sato demonstrates how the deeper message of the art is uniquely situated to speak to an LDS audience. Sato writes extremely positively of the department: "The specificity of [BYU] entails responsibility to examine challenging subjects, but it also allows students to broach religious content that could be harder to read or even unwelcome elsewhere" (590). The final chapter is "Toward a Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art" by Chase Westfall. Westfall is also optimistic about contemporary LDS art, stating that it is becoming more diverse. He uses examples that show how artists are engaging with their religion in ways other than the representational art that has so long dominated the LDS art world. In explaining the lack of unifying aesthetic for LDS art, Westfall

writes, “A revelatory art must constantly be seeking the language of its times” (620).

So, what about the final question from the volume’s marketing materials: Is it critical? Well, it depends on your definition of “critical.” The book succeeds at showing the diversity of LDS art and approaches to it, and it covers artwork most would consider part of the canon of Mormon art (if there is one). It also critically discusses topics that are of interest to scholars today: how depictions of race have changed in LDS art over time, how temple art has shifted to represent an increasingly global population, the influence of art instruction on LDS fine art, the preferences of LDS patrons for representational art, and how an artist’s sense of their audience shifts the emphasis of their art. This work is foundational for future studies of LDS art. Previously, most academic research on visual art in the LDS tradition has been published in journals like the *Journal of Mormon History* or *BYU Studies*. A collection of essays published by Oxford University Press demonstrates that LDS art has importance outside of the sometimes-insular world of Mormon studies.

One sense of “critical” the volume does not succeed in is that it presents LDS art almost exclusively in faith-building contexts, with criticisms largely confined to historical problems that the Church is interested in addressing. Beardsley’s chapter, for example, included discussion of artwork that protests racism in the Church. She summarized the works she discussed as placing the Church in a “critical yet constructive light” (515). Constantino’s chapter on Native American art seems overly optimistic about the power of representation in art to heal. She acknowledged that the Indian Student Placement program sponsored by the LDS Church was criticized for trying to assimilate Native American children into white culture and the LDS Church. Then she presented the LDS Church’s International Art Competition as “one way Native American artists can be seen and heard in the Latter-day Saint community” (478), where representation is the first step toward

empowerment and healing from the “traumatic history” (476) between the two communities. But if institutional healing is indeed part of the LDS Church’s goals, acknowledging its own role in wrongdoing ought to be part of that, as should the art that criticizes, prods, and sometimes infuriates the institution and its most dedicated defenders. This, too, is one of the important ways that art functions in a community.

In the introduction to “Toward a Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art,” Chase Westfall analyzed the works included in the Center for Latter-day Saint Art’s 2017 exhibition *Immediate Present*. He acknowledged the difficulties for LDS art in lacking legacy and patronage. He wrote, “There was a tendency toward formality and politeness in the demeanor of the works, which assumed a generally passive and deferential disposition toward their audiences and subject matter” (595). I would argue that this collection suffers from the same problem. It is a little too polite. However, there is a lot of angry and impolite Mormon art out there. Could the Center for Latter-day Saint Art have a vested interest in presenting only art criticism that is “critical yet constructive”? Then again, if it isn’t constructive, is it really “Latter-day Saint” art?

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Mormons in the French Mirror: Nineteenth-Century Reflections and Refractions

Heather Belnap, Corry Cropper, and Daryl Lee. *Marianne Meets the Mormons: Representations of Mormonism in Nineteenth-Century France*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022. 304 pp. Paperback: \$30.00. ISBN: 978-0-252-08676-2.

Reviewed by Haleigh Heaps Burgon

In the nineteenth century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints captured the French imagination, making Mormons and Mormonism prevalent themes in journalism, art, literature, politics, and popular culture. In *Marianne Meets the Mormons: Representations of Mormonism in Nineteenth-Century France*, Heather Belnap, Corry Cropper, and Daryl Lee illuminate French portrayals of Mormonism from the 1830s to 1914, showing how these depictions often served as critiques and parodies of French society. Mormonism became a lens through which the French reexamined such issues as gender, colonialism, marriage and family, and church-state relations, offering artists and writers a vehicle for exploring the complexities of their own evolving national identity.

Belnap, Cropper, and Lee all teach at Brigham Young University in the fields of literature and visual culture. The result of this collaboration is a meticulously researched, cohesive, and both visually and intellectually engaging narrative of how the French used Mormonism to work out their own cultural preoccupations. The text is both a critical academic resource and a fascinating narrative that will appeal to both LDS Church members and nonmembers alike. Furthermore, the authors address the topic with sensitivity, unlike previous works that tend to exoticize and treat Mormons and Mormonism as an Other in

much the same way that the French imagination did in the nineteenth century.

As the book opens, a chronology of key publications and events proves very helpful to understand how Mormonism is situated within French history during the Second Empire. The book contains eight chapters, and its approach is impressively interdisciplinary. The authors skillfully weave together historical analysis, cultural studies and religious studies to address French anxieties concerning marriage, gender, colonialism, and more. The chapters succeed at dialoguing with each other in a seamless manner.

In the engaging first chapter, the authors make a fascinating connection between a provocative political cartoon (in which Victor Hugo is offered Mormon polygamist wives on a silver platter) and the book's premise—that throughout the nineteenth century, Mormonism was used in France to expose, mirror, and parody contemporary French issues. In this instance, the satire provoked questions of marriage, gender, and sexuality. Belnap, Cropper, and Lee show how the French fascination with and interpretation of Mormonism reveals volumes when considered within its social context.

Throughout the book, Belnap, Cropper, and Lee support their claims with newspapers from across a diverse political spectrum. Yet, while the French referenced early Mormon prophets like Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, the authors are clear from the beginning that the French were preoccupied with the *idea* of Mormonism rather than the actual religion. They used the concept of Mormonism as a means to understand their own changing social norms, often by exaggerating what little they did know about Mormonism. Chapter 2 explores in depth instances where Mormons were equated with other French socialist groups in order to vilify any ideas that may have a potentially damaging effect on society.

In chapter 3, the authors delve into what they describe as “the Woman Question” in France in relationship to the French fixations

on gender roles in the Mormon household. The many representations of Mormon women—including “naïve martyr, harem *femme fatale*, overworked housewife, *Amazonne*, and emancipated *nouvelle femme*” revealed French anxieties as women of this era began to question and stray from traditional gender norms (57). A portrait of activist Olympe Audouard presents a compelling argument for the book’s thesis: An “alleged inciter of this Mormon mania in the capital of France,” she radically asserted that “in comparison to the French practice of taking multiple mistresses, the Mormon mode was more transparent and honorable” as wives and children were offered legitimacy and protection (55). Her self-critical writings stirred discomfort within French readership, and they continued to deflect the criticism back toward the curious Mormons.

The third chapter is one of the strongest, as the authors’ argument is brought to life through numerous illustrations from the press by Albert Robida and Honoré Daumier, along with several relevant paintings and popular images circulating at the time. These visual elements are not merely illustrative but are thoughtfully integrated into and analyzed in the text, providing additional context and enhancing the reader’s understanding of nineteenth-century masculine anxieties. The careful translations of the captions enable non-francophone readers to understand the satirical tones conveyed through the images. In addition to its scholarly contributions, carefully chosen images throughout the entire book render it engaging and accessible. Finally, the treatment of gender in chapter 3 lays the groundwork for further exploration of marriage and divorce in chapter 6.

Another powerful moment in the book occurs in chapter 7, which situates Mormons within the French colonial project. Belnap, Cropper, and Lee detail the exoticized representations of both Mormon men and women, which mirrored the well-established orientalist models from the Second Empire and Third Republic. Robida and others’ images of orientalized Mormon men leading their harems of polygamist wives

were rampant. The authors provide close analysis of popular vaudeville plays on the topic, most notably *Les Douze femmes de Japhet* (1890)—a Montesquieu-esque parody of the French colonial system. Despite this, the authors note that while the French mock unconventional religious and social practices, we do not witness the same “otherness” present in the stereotypically violent or hypersexualized portraits of North Africa and the Middle East that were in vogue at the time. Unlike those “others,” the French saw a part of themselves in the Mormon agenda, as they carried out their *mission civilisatrice* and intended to bring enlightenment to the whole morally decaying earth.

In conclusion, *Marianne Meets the Mormons* is a groundbreaking work that makes significant contributions to our understanding of the French’s imagined representations of Mormonism. Belnap, Cropper, and Lee term this book a work of “decolonization” as it contrasts with the Americentric scholarship often associated with LDS historical writing and responds to the need for a more “translocative history of Mormonism” (241). The authors have produced a diligently researched and compelling narrative that is both academically rigorous and accessible to a wide audience. Furthermore, while this book is highly erudite and provides continual in-depth analyses, it succeeds at also integrating a sense of humor with regard to the curiosities that it presents. This book will be an essential resource for scholars of nineteenth-century France and Mormon history and a fascinating read for anyone interested in the intersections of culture, religion, and history. *Marianne Meets the Mormons* is a testament to the power of collaborative scholarship and a valuable addition to the field.

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Paola Bidinelli, *Searching for a Lost Time*, 2020,
mixed media on wood box, 15" x 12" x 3"

WHERE ARE WE STANDING?

Margaret Olsen Hemming

This talk was delivered in the Chapel Hill First Ward in the Durham Stake in North Carolina and was given November 8, 2024.

In the most recent general conference, President Russell M. Nelson announced seventeen new temples that will be built in upcoming years. As we know, the process of building a temple takes a very long time, even after a building has been announced. A site must be decided on, the land purchased, and building plans made before a construction crew can even break ground. I'd like you to do a little thought experiment: Imagine that President Nelson announced a new temple for Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and soon after, the Church announced the plot of land that had been set aside for that temple. How would you think about that land before the temple had been built? Would you go over and dump your trash there? Or would you see it as already sacred? If you walked in that space or drove past it, what would you think about it? How would you treat it?

Okay. Hold that thought in your brain for a minute. I'm going to come back to it, but I want it to be sitting in the back of your head as I go forward.

In our scripture, we have two significant examples of people entering a promised land. The first is in the Old Testament, with Israel going into Canaan. In Genesis 17:8, God covenants with Abraham, saying, "And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Here, the promise seems straightforward: The land is theirs as a possession, for them and their descendants forever. But a little later it is more complicated. In Deuteronomy 4:25–27 and 8:1–2, God threatens Israel with removal from the land if they are

disobedient. Joshua tells the people explicitly, “Therefore it shall come to pass, that as all good things are come upon you, which the Lord your God promised you; so shall the Lord bring upon you all evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you. When ye have transgressed the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you” (Joshua 23:15–16). In other words, the land does not belong to Israel, even if it is the land God has given them. God led Israel to the land of Canaan and blesses them there *on condition* they act obediently.

The conditions that God lays out for Israel make up a large portion of the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They include everything from not worshiping idols to how the Sabbath is to be set apart to what kinds of food are forbidden to eat. Most significantly for my talk today, they also set out laws for how to care for the land: Israel must let the land rest from the work of growing crops every seven years (Exodus 23:10–11); land cannot be permanently sold (Leviticus 25:23–28); landowners must leave a portion of their fields unharvested, so that the poor and the stranger can pick that food and have something to eat (Lev. 19:9–10); and Israel is commanded to not destroy fruit trees during war, because life-giving trees have a special status (Deut. 20:19–20).

You may be feeling like I’m wandering a bit here but stay with me. The laws that God gives Israel tell us that the people *do not own the land*. God, forever and always, owns the land, because God created the world. Even though Israel is God’s covenant people, they are not entitled to the land, and they cannot treat it however they want. They are stewards of the land, and they must treat the land with care or else they will lose it.

The second significant example we have in scripture is from the Book of Mormon, when Lehi and his family enter the land promised to them. In 2 Nephi 1, Lehi speaks extensively about what God has given them: They have the land for their family and their posterity, but again, *with conditions*. Repeatedly, Lehi says that if they are not obedient to God’s commandments, then they will lose the land. They do not have

unlimited rights to do whatever they want. Verse 10 particularly sticks out to me in this section:

But behold, when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief, after they have received so great blessings from the hand of the Lord—having a knowledge of the creation of the earth, and all men, knowing the great and marvelous works of the Lord from the creation of the world . . . and having been brought by his infinite goodness into this precious land of promise—behold, I say, if the day shall come that they will reject . . . their Redeemer and their God, behold, the judgments of him that is just shall rest upon them.

What is interesting to me in that verse is what it says about creation. If the people, “having a knowledge of the creation of the earth” reject God, they will face divine judgment. Why knowledge of the creation and the earth in particular? Why is that important in a promise about the land? I believe it is meant to point readers to God’s work in creation. *The land belongs to God* and pondering the greatness of God’s creation will remind us of that and help us to be obedient and treat the land correctly. In other words, at the time of their entrance into the land, God reminds Lehi’s family that he created the world, the earth is his, and they should keep that idea firmly fixed in their minds as they settle it.

Hopefully at this point it is somewhat clear where I am going with this. For me, scripture makes it very clear that we, also, do not own the land. Regardless of what human law says, divine law is clear: Only God owns land. We only have the privilege of caring for it as stewards. What does that mean for us in real terms?

It means that the environmental crises in our world today are a problem for the faithful. In particular, the climate crisis warrants our deep concern. Scientists continue to warn us that climate change is accelerating, leading to more frequent and severe weather events such as hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and droughts. They stress that rising greenhouse gas emissions, primarily from human activities like burning fossil fuels and deforestation, are driving global temperature increases. Studies show that if global warming exceeds 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, there will be significant, possibly irreversible

impacts on ecosystems, biodiversity, and human communities. We are very close to that point and will pass it very soon—within a handful of years—unless we change our behaviors significantly. We have recently watched the impact of these worsening storms in western North Carolina. While this past summer was the hottest summer humans have recorded, the science tells us that it will be one of the coolest summers of our children's lifetimes. If we are stewards of the earth, then all of this is not just a scientific or a political concern, but also a spiritual one. What we are doing to God's land and God's people through unlimited consumption is a significant problem.

There have been times over the years, during conversations with my fellow Church members, that I have heard the idea that how we treat the land is irrelevant, because when Christ returns to the earth, "the earth will be renewed and receive its paradisiacal glory" (Articles of Faith 11). This is an important point. We must always acknowledge that it is not human efforts that will heal a wounded world—only divine grace can do that. As members of God's church, we must always look with faith and hope to the Creator for the renewal of all things.

But there's another thing to consider here. As Latter-day Saints, we believe that the Celestial Kingdom will eventually be established on earth. We do not believe, as some do, that Heaven is a far-off distant place and that we will leave our bodies and all earthly things behind to go there. So here is where I want to return to the image of a piece of land that has been set aside for the eventual construction of a temple. Picturing that plot of land in your heads, I want to ask again, How would you treat that piece of consecrated land? Would you dump your trash there? Would you say, it's fine to dump waste there because someone will clean it up before the temple is built?

My beloved brothers and sisters, I say all of this not for the purpose of scolding or shaming. My message is simply this: We stand on holy ground, all the time. God created this extraordinary world for us, but it does not belong to us. The earth is a creation made by God, just like all of us. How we treat God's gifts is crucially important. President Nelson

has taught us, “As beneficiaries of the divine Creation, what shall we do? We should care for the earth, be wise stewards over it, and preserve it for future generations.”¹ In the face of the climate crisis, maybe that means turning down the heat of our homes a little bit in the winter and instead putting on a sweater. Maybe it means wearing clothes until they wear out instead of tossing ours away and buying more. Maybe that means biking and walking instead of driving. Maybe it means consuming less meat. Maybe it means advocating for green energy projects. Every person’s situation in this room is different, so I don’t know what is right for you. But as people of faith, we know that freedom without limits is not God’s way. We are called to a higher, better way of being.

I invite each of us to consider our sacred responsibility as stewards of God’s creation. If we truly believe that the earth is destined to become the Celestial Kingdom, then every step we take on this land is a step on consecrated ground. The choices we make each day—what we consume, how we care for the resources we’re blessed with, and the impact we leave behind—are, in a very real sense, expressions of our devotion to God. Let’s remember that while we hope for the ultimate renewal of the earth through divine grace, our role is not passive. We are called to act with reverence and respect now, as part of our commitment to God and to future generations. May we live in a way that reflects our love and gratitude for all that God has given us, honoring the earth as a place of sacred potential and promise. As we leave today, I pray that we can carry this sense of stewardship with us, finding significant ways to care for the earth. In doing so, we not only follow the example set for us in scripture, but we prepare ourselves and our world for the day when this earth, transformed and perfected, will indeed become our eternal home. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Creation,” *Ensign*, May 2000, 86.

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Paola Bidinelli, *Seeds of Joy*, 2021,
media on canvas, 26" x 18"

LATTER-DAY SAINT ART: A CRITICAL
READER WITH EDITORS
MASON KAMANA ALLRED AND
AMANDA K. BEARDSLEY

Glen Nelson

September 18, 2024

Latter-day Saint Art: A Critical Reader is the first comprehensive critical examination of Latter-day Saint art. In this interview, transcribed and edited for length from a podcast conducted upon publication, Glen Nelson interviews coeditors Mason Kamana Allred and Amanda Beardsley about the volume.

GLEN NELSON: With a book that's so big, twenty-two chapters, there's so much content that we could talk about. I think we need some kind of organizing structure in our chat today. So here's my strategy. I'd love you to give an overview of what the book is, who's involved, and how it came to be. Then I have something fun. I've asked the two dozen authors involved to send me a question to ask you for this interview. A few weren't able to send a question, but most did, and some asked multiple questions. As people ask you about the book, or you're talking about it, how are you describing this to people?

MASON KAMANA ALLRED: I'm often letting them know up front that it does have a scope to it. We did have to sit down and decide, what can we cover? It's huge, but what do we have to cut out? It is focused on visual art from Latter-day Saints, but it has a pretty long history; it's that whole long history since the Restoration of the Church in 1830.

It covers quite a bit, but you're not going to find much on poetry or dance in here. It really is visual art, but it is, to my mind, really the first moment where we've gathered so many experts, scholars from different disciplines, different backgrounds, to look into this with such depth, from tons of different angles, and across that longish history I'm talking about. You just haven't quite seen it like this before. It is monumental. I think it is a groundbreaking book in that sense: who it brought together, what they were able to accomplish in that. That's how I'm describing it to others.

AMANDA BEARDSLEY: Yeah, I'm doing similar. I think for me, I describe it more as an anthology, a more traditionally academic anthology, but it is also something that anyone could read because there are so many different approaches, as Mason said, that tell a very diverse array of stories. These stories are kind of like case studies in Mormon history that are tied to some works of art that I don't think have ever previously been in print before. What's really exciting is that it's going to show two-hundred-plus images. We had a lot of them digitized for this book. And it explores some new topics through the lens of art history that I haven't seen very much in Mormon scholarship. I know there are a few chapters on race as it relates to image, as well as feminism and film. We take on a lot of different topics, and that was intentional because we want to put at the forefront that it's impossible to get one comprehensive history, especially when it comes to art history when we're interpreting images.

NELSON: We're doing this interview over Zoom, and both of you are book lovers, I can tell, because behind you are bookcases ceiling to floor. So I have to tell you a funny story. About an hour ago, I'm in Salt Lake doing some work here, and I was at the Church History Museum's library. It's mostly a conference table with bookshelves all around it, and it contains probably the largest collection of books about art by Latter-day Saint people that I've ever encountered or heard about. That said,

you could put all of those books on a few bookshelves. There just isn't stuff out there. Does that sound right to the two of you?

BEARDSLEY: It does. I would say there are a handful of books. Those are more monographs, usually, that we find in Mormon art history and in the arts, generally a book about a single artist who is already well known, like Minerva Teichert or something like that. But in terms of an art historical approach to a history of art, we really only have a few books that have been written, and a lot of those are devotional books written by curators in the Church. [Lorin] Wheelwright, for instance, is one of them. In terms of bias, it's very front and center that these are devotional books and less scholarship, though there is some rigorous scholarship in there. So they gave us a little bit of an entry point, but I would say there's maybe two or three of those books. One of them that came from a conference in the '70s, and then—

ALLRED: We cover a few of these in the introduction if you're interested in that kind of background, historiography, what's been done. But you're right. I would say Mormon studies is actually booming right now. But as far as art history analysis appreciation within Mormon studies, that's just not happening. This book is like, "Hey over here, let's turn your attention to this." This is really important. If you want to understand the full picture of the Latter-day Saint or Mormon experience, you've got to include this artwork, and these chapters speak to that. These chapters show just how integral the creativity, the creative process, and that final product has been to the development of Latter-day Saint culture and religion.

NELSON: Now let's turn our time to the questions of authors. We talked a little bit about what the book is like just generally, but it's so interesting because their interests are really varied. I have questions here from most of the authors from the book. First up, Richard Lyman Bushman. Richard cowrote the foreword of the book. It won't surprise you to know

that he's a big picture thinker, and his question is a big picture question. He says—it's kind of a compound question—what comes next? What do you think is the next step in scholarship about LDS art? Your volume has gone a long way. What would you like others to do now?

BEARDSLEY: I have so many answers to this because, as an art historian and one of the few art historians working in Mormon art history, I just get really excited. The next thing is to take every single one of our chapters and make them book-length projects, because every chapter is. It was so frustrating to the authors. They're like, I only get so many words to talk about Mormon cinema. Randy Astle wrote a huge book on that too. So having to condense this huge topic into a single chapter was very frustrating for a lot of us, and also a really great challenge because scholars should be more succinct and less long-winded. I think every single one of those topics in there would be great. I would love to see, for example, Jenny Reeder's chapter as a book on hair art and on quilt making. Hair art could be its own book. Quilt making could be its own book. Relief Society buildings could be its own book. I think even within the chapters, there are topics that can be pulled that are really exciting for book-length or dissertation-length projects. I would love to see a more global orientation than even what we had, as much as we tried. I think that Laura Howe's chapter on global art as it related to some of the art competitions within Mormonism was a case study, a brilliant case study, in that. Also, even just topics. Cultural migration, which we saw happening in different chapters. Rebecca Janzen's chapter was about a cultural migration, but so was Laura's, so I think that we have a lot there. Mason mentioned this a little bit earlier. This is mainly a visually oriented book. I think in terms of materiality, we could expand. As a sound studies person, that excites me to think of a sound art history of Mormonism. I think we have people who've touched on that. I think Jeremy Grimshaw, for instance, is someone who has, in the past, touched on sound and Mormonism, but I would

love to see something more oriented toward the arts. Then the last for me, just as a selfish thing, would be, how do art and technology work together within Mormonism? Because I think there's something really cool and really specific there that I'd love to see untangled by other scholars as well. That's my wish list.

ALLRED: I totally agree with Amanda. There are just so many ways that this hopefully will spread out. I think that you can almost take it now as this really solid at least skeleton to Mormon art where you can start fitting in some more muscle tissue where you're like, oh, there's something between those two chapters that hasn't been done. I'm just saying, let alone the book-length versions of these, between the chapters there's new little things that can happen. I think it will inspire ideas that way. And then, as Amanda was starting to say with the sound studies, I want to see the comparable book on dance and on poetry and on music and so forth. I would love to see that happening where it has inspired those as well, because people will love it. But hey, we're missing this part too. That's my hope. We've talked about this before and in the intro we mentioned this, that a lot of Mormon studies has been very heavy straight-up history. What we saw here, too, is more historians taking the artwork seriously. I'd love to see that happen too, where people stop and realize, I want to take account of what's happening here with the artwork in this situation or moment in time I'm looking at. I would love to see that happening too.

NELSON: I was aware, with both of you as editors, that you are prodding the authors to do more interpreting of the works they were writing about, and I think that's something generally that's lacking that the community could really use.

BEARDSLEY: I agree, and I think that's one of the biggest things that art history brings to this is not just interpretive but taking the images seriously and taking the time to actually describe what we are looking

at here. That doesn't happen historically. Image analysis is such an important skill, but such an understated skill in a lot of work. That was something that as editors we wanted to really put front and center as a methodology. Really tell us what this looks like as art historians or people who are not art historians who have to write an art history chapter. This is really important.

ALLRED: Yeah. And by doing that, we wanted to model as well that if you want a more robust artistic culture to analyze, we're also modeling that appreciation. We didn't want any authors to write their chapter in a way where you could write about these movies or these paintings having never seen them. That would be ridiculous for this book. So you're right that we did push and encourage our authors to do more close analysis and interpretation of these artworks. For me that was a real thrill because I've read some of these authors who haven't done much of that, then here they did it. It just blew my mind. It was so exciting to see both of those happening.

NELSON: I'm also thinking about it from the artists' standpoint. You get somebody in your head and you create stuff with them in mind, if artists were aware that somebody was going to take them really seriously and put them into a different context and maybe even hold them to a standard, I think their work might shift, don't you?

ALLRED: That's what I'm saying. It's by doing what Amanda said, take the artwork seriously, we're signaling to these artists, we love you, and we appreciate your work, and we take it seriously, and we think it's worth time and blood and sweat and tears writing about it. So please keep creating and create better and better and better. Let's do more. I think the book does that. It encourages that.

NELSON: Randy Astle has a question for you: While this book is incredibly comprehensive, what areas of study did you notice that are still missing or at least merit further study?

ALLRED: I'm at BYU–Hawaii. My first thought is, how do we not have a chapter in any kind of Polynesian art? Something from the Pacific. The marae with the Maori culture or tattoo or tapa cloth or something.

BEARDSLEY: For me, we mentioned this actually in the introduction, but I would have loved for someone to have taken on the art of Jon McNaughton because it's just the moment that we're in right now. Jon McNaughton does these political images, and this highly propagandistic imagery. I think I would have loved to have someone talk about that in the moment right now with the upcoming election. The other thing I would have loved to have seen, and maybe this wasn't something we could have included as early on, but I was just starting, in 2020, to see AI come into play and AI in relationship to Mormonism and specifically creating Mormon imagery. There are some artists I know who have been playing around with it. I would have loved to see someone write on that.

NELSON: Those are topics for the future. It's not a knock on what you accomplished. It's like a road map for what could happen next.

ALLRED: I would mention one more before you move on. I'm going to keep these really quick. But just to mention. It makes me think that one of the most popular Mormon artists, of course, was Arnold Friberg because he worked on *The Ten Commandments* and he did that Valley Forge prayer thing. But because he did the previsualization, the paintings for *The Ten Commandments*, it makes me think that today you have these Latter-day Saint VFX artists, these animators working with Marvel or Pixar or DreamWorks. Some of them are amazing, and they're doing the previs work today for these CGI movies. I would love to see a chapter on their work too. So animation as well.

NELSON: Heather Belnap asked, what new avenues of inquiry in the history of LDS art and visual art and material culture do you anticipate? Maybe I'll shift it a little bit. What would feminist scholars want to do

now regarding art and visual art and material culture? What do you think the next steps of scholarship might be?

BEARDSLEY: This is an exciting question because I've been in conversation recently with Joanna Brooks who [edited] the book called *Mormon Feminism*, alongside Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Hannah Wheelwright. We've been talking about this a little bit. I think we've seen a few really exciting strides especially since 2010—and I talk about this in my chapter a little bit—of shows that have showcased women artists or Utah artists and things like that. But really I think—this is something Joanna is thinking through right now is, how do we relate our own stories and our own identities as people who grew up in Mormonism, maybe left the Church or who are still in the Church, how do we reconcile that with our past? And especially with, as Nathan talks about, as well as Mary talks about, in their chapters, some of the exoticization of Mormon women historically. I think there's a lot to be reconciled there and grappled with. But I think the next step is to rethink—and I mention this in my chapter a little bit—beyond the biological essentialism or being relegated to the realm of our biology as women, period. Thinking of other genders that have emerged and how scientifically that isn't something that can easily actually be argued. For me, I'd love to see more in the realm of queer art in Mormonism. I know there are artists who have touched on this historically. I would love to see more that really shirks off that second-wave feminism. We are women, and that's what makes us different. It's our experiences that make us different, but it's not our biology, per se, as much if we think of it scientifically. I think, for me, that would be the next step. Not just recuperating and recovering this history of women artists, but to think through what it means to be a woman in our contemporary landscape.

NELSON: Rebecca Janzen has two questions which I think are really great. I want to know what the most challenging part of the process was and how you successfully sorted things out. And then she asks, I also

want to know what you thought the volume would be like and how that compares with how it turned out.

ALLRED: What was the most difficult part of the process? It's a great question. I think maybe, for me, it was probably—because Glen took the lion's share of dealing with a lot of the images and stuff like that. He really helped out on that front. And Amanda was so organized in getting all the images together on spreadsheets and so forth. I feel like personally, for me to respond, I would say probably somewhere in the editing. It was very enjoyable and very satisfying, but it was also just very time-consuming. We cared so much about helping but not overstepping and trying to encourage artists and never push them too much in certain directions. It was hard to balance that and to give them as much as we could. That's where most of my energy went. So that was the most difficult in that sense. Editing other people's chapters.

BEARDSLEY: I would agree. We were working with a lot of entities. We had twenty-two authors, and then we had an editorial board with the Center for Latter-day [Saint] Arts, and then we were working with Oxford as well. Remediating all of those different expectations and needs and ensuring that all those who have a stake in the project leave feeling happy can be really difficult. I found that very challenging because I wanted to also maintain academic integrity as I worked through this book. So what, to me, was the definition of that shifted in those different environments. Figuring out how to work together was hard. I think, as Mason talked about with the authors—and it wasn't that it was hard—it's a challenge that comes with any collaboration, this way of working with people and figuring out their different styles. Working with the authors and ensuring that we were true to what they were saying, and interpreting that, and figuring out ways to either improve content in whatever way that we could in a tone that was kind I think was complicated. I think the second thing that was hard for me was working with making an art history book that wasn't written by

all art historians. That wasn't a bad challenge, because working with an incredible array of scholars who were not art historians allowed us to center visual analysis and their methods while also learning from their disciplinary approaches to writing about Mormonism. As an art historian, I am moving forward with a very different perspective having learned from them as well.

NELSON: The foundation of James Swenson's question is something that I get quite a lot working for the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts about just the definition of this thing entirely. So he says, after editing this volume featuring a wide variety of scholars with a wide variety of ideas, did you come to a more concrete view of what "Latter-day Saint" art is and isn't? Is there truly such a thing as Latter-day Saint art?

BEARDSLEY: I'll start. No and yes. The back of our book, the blurb that you read, Glen, talks about how we define Latter-day Saint art. It's really anything that's adjacent to Mormonism. It doesn't matter about the identity of the artists themselves too much unless the artist integrates that into the work. I think this question made me and Mason horribly self-conscious because when we first sat down with the authors, all of the authors tried to answer this question. It's a little daunting and maybe even not really as interesting of a question to me anymore, but it's a question that needs to be answered. Because if we're making a book about Mormon art, what is it, right? But what seems more important than this question of what Latter-day Saint art is, and what's far more interesting than defining Mormon art is taking seriously what creators put in the world, whether that art is known or not, and asking what their work means. Again, starting with that image and then working outward from there to see if there are some defining characteristics that loosely connect them together. This is really why I like the multiplicity of voices and authors choosing the works for each chapter. This is how all the works were chosen for this book. [To] all of the authors, we were like, you have free rein. Choose what you need as long as it's within ten

to twelve images. So it highlights the—I don't know if subjectivity is the right word—but the power, I guess is a better word, inherent to defining a canon of something, while also demonstrating that anything within or adjacent to the religion is worthwhile so long as someone chooses and places it on that pedestal. For me that's what the definition is: what we say it is.

NELSON: Menachem Wecker gave us a few questions to ask you, so let me ask two questions. Here's his first one. With so much going on in the world, why a book on LDS art now? What does it have to say that speaks uniquely to what's going on now?

BEARDSLEY: My answer to that is short and sweet. If not now, when? This has been a long time coming, as you talked about—I think it was you, Mason—Richard Bushman was saying it's been a long time coming. That's one way I could answer it. The other way I would answer is to say that this is a book that has a lot of engagement with a lot of the sociopolitical conversations that are going on in the world right now. With Paul Reeve and Carlyle Constantino, we have chapters that really delve into some of the larger conversations going on around colonization and land distribution and representation. In Mason's chapter, in my chapter, as well as in a lot of other chapters we are thinking about feminist topics, we're talking about larger conversations surrounding what it means to represent controversial things. Like embodiment, even, in cinema, I think is a new topic, or not specifically new but a really cool topic to think about with regard to cinema. If you're sitting in a theater and are in this disembodied-seeming state, where your body's not moving. I think we have conversations that are really important to a lot of what is being talked about, both in scholarship as well as what's being talked about in the media right now. It's a really interesting historical document, I think, in that way, because our authors are very concerned with doing that kind of labor too.

NELSON: In the beginning of this conversation, we were talking about [how] this fills a gap in scholarship. This book could very well have been written a year, five years, ten years, twenty years ago, and should have been written, but it would be a very different book. I think this book ten years from now will be a very different book when there are one, five, ten, fifty more books that take it and run with the ideas of it. Let's see, Mason, let me ask this question to you that Menachem posed. What are some of the things that surprised you most in this project, whether penning your essays or editing others?

ALLRED: I wanted to point to a couple of artworks that surprised me, because I was unfamiliar with them, that also showcase a lot of the often more recent, but not always, artwork done by Latter-day Saints outside of what we might have expected. Some readers might expect a more Utah-centric idea of Latter-day Saint art history. So I'm going to pull from Laura Howe's chapter because she looks at the international art competition. In fact, one strategy to read this book, honestly, you've got to read that intro, but maybe start with Laura Howe's chapter that has all the international, more recent stuff, and then go back and read others to see the history that got us there. Two artworks I'll mention from there that speak to Menachem's question. One is by Aoba Taichi, a Japanese artist who creates these earthenware dishes for traditional Japanese tea ceremonies. He learned this from his father, who's one of the best in Japan. He learns this process, in fact, the same year that he converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and learns about what's called the Word of Wisdom, which would prohibit the consumption of tea, which is so deeply important culturally for him in Japan and the artistic practice he's now joined in as an apprentice. What he ends up doing is creating these new types of earthenware dishes that have engravings from the Book of Mormon on them and stuff like that. I mean, you've got to check these out and think about how he's wrestling with that in his mind and then working it out with

his hands, literally, as he creates these earthenware dishes. The last one I'll mention is Joseph Banda's, an artist from Malawi, who has this one image I want to speak of, this painting on wood I believe, of Lehi and Lehi's dream or vision of the tree of life. He has Lehi on a baobab tree where he's up in the top of it and getting this, I think it fills up with moisture over the course of the year, and he's getting the fruit. But unlike a lot of the visualizations I've seen of this where it's this problematic thing of once you get to the tree, maybe hang out and offer fruit to people, Banda has it where Lehi's working. He's climbing in the tree and grabbing the fruit and actively giving it out to people, which seems to really resolve some of that issue of, am I done? Are there yet things to do? This enduring to the end is playing out in his artwork, looks totally different than other visualizations of that dream coming from this artist in Malawi that I just think is really fantastic and will surprise some readers who aren't familiar with these artworks coming from around the world.

NELSON: Carlyle Constantino asks, how do you envision this book being used as a conduit to initiate conversations about spirituality and Mormonism, particularly regarding sensitive or tough topics within Latter-day Saint histories? How does art play a role in that dialogue?

ALLRED: I think we can see throughout the book that—I just think we probably need to get better collectively, those interested in Latter-day Saint culture and history, at recognizing how powerful art can be and has been in providing a space for people somehow orbiting this faith tradition or directly within it to wrestle with ideas and to express their experience in ways that are very individualistic, subjective, but also have these shared moments that feel like they resonate with other people. If you think about what makes it sort of unique or interesting, I do feel like in other traditions, whether it's Jewish art or Catholic art, you may see more things of stories and saints, and I think with

Latter-day Saints you have a lot more direct grappling or wrestling with modern revelation or prophetic utterance or cultural norms in ways that I think show up in the art. The art is providing the space, it's connective tissue, but also space to push and pull. That's really important and needs more support and appreciation in its role in doing that.

NELSON: Haven't the two of you found, generally speaking, that art is a really great way to start a conversation about difficult things? And if that is the case, maybe an example or some thought about that.

BEARDSLEY: Yes. When I teach, for instance, we always start with an image to open up the conversation. I think part of that is allowing students to make observations on their own about maybe a theme, if I designate the theme as such, or just say what themes could be drawn from this based on what you see. Again, that close looking and observation can start with what we know about the world in ourselves, what we see, and then take it to this really, for me, a magical space, which is talking about it or transforming the image or the piece or the work, the sculpture, what have you, in front of our eyes because we may have thought of it in one way for all of our own history. I think that's what is beautiful about art as this space for conversation is that it's a communicative medium, but we have to interpret that communication together as art historians. In that interpretation, I think it gives us a degree of separation to some extent. With Mormon art in particular, I think where Terryl Givens's chapter really comes in, in his paradox of personal revelation and institutional telling you what to do institutionally, and that seeming to be at odds with each other, but within Mormonism, it acts as a paradox. I think that's where you're talking about, Mason, in a really interesting way is artists' subjectivity in Mormonism might have that valence or that inflection of personal revelation that allows them to state, "This is my experience within this Church," and opens up some of those conversations of individual expression. Though I don't

want to always say that it's only about individual expression because it's an artifact still of a collective experience in a lot of ways when we interpret it. That's what is exciting, I think, about it. That's what allows us, a lot of the time, to really talk about these difficult topics such as this fraught history of race within Mormonism that a lot of people have had a really hard time talking about for a very long time, as well as polygamy and queerness within the religion too. Specifically in my chapter, I bring in the artist Marlena Wilding's images about her experience of being Black within a Mormon culture. Being able to talk about her experiences through that medium in our conversations was really both liberating for her as well as communicative in a way that I think she hoped would reach Mormon audiences to understand how those more banal forms of racism enter into those community experiences.

NELSON: I think a lot of the artists that I know are interested in eliciting a response. That's part of the communication that you were referring to. I wouldn't say the same is true for the illustrators I know. I think they're trying to tell a story. It's just a different kind of thing that they're working toward. So I love the idea that you have an artwork and people are gathering around it and just talking about it. Then one thing leads to another and you're getting insight into why that means something to them. Maybe their interpretation or their response to it is completely different from yours because of their individual experience, and then that connects you to them and gives you insights and all of that stuff.

Chase Westfall posed a question about the future: Having assembled and accounted for this history, what does it suggest to you about what might, could, should come next? How do you see the next two hundred years of LDS art and material culture?

ALLRED: I have no idea how to answer the two-hundred-year question. We've talked quite a bit about the scholarly hope of inspiring new

iterations of this type of a project or ways of expanding it, but since we're talking about the artwork as a community, too, I would love to see more of a sense of that appreciation, support, criticism, just care and love for Latter-day Saint art. Where you're at, Glen, with the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts, this is what you're all about. If you had that same sense of your Center all over the world, at least ingrained in people's minds to take very seriously and to get more familiar with stuff that's already out there in the Latter-day Saint tradition and to help push and create for more, that artists coming up would feel like, "I connect to a very deep, rich history of creators, and I want to do this now, something new and push it new directions." I feel like there's been too much of a disconnection with creating a public that loves and supports and critiques this to help artists want to create more and be a little more radical and push it in new directions. My hope would be that in two hundred years it would almost be some of these familiar contours we've seen, but maybe almost unrecognizable in some senses as far as the new directions it's gone and new creations we would see. But I have no idea. I'm not a prophet.

BEARDSLEY: I think this also gets at Nathan's question about why aren't there any contemporary artists featured in *Deseret Book*? Maybe in two hundred years, *Deseret Book* will be more open to exhibiting these artists and to having those kinds of conversations that really do allow for a little bit more critique of the Church itself, because I think that a lot of the contemporary artists do give some really interesting critiques based on their individual experiences. I think in two hundred years, my prediction is that *Deseret Book* will have more art books of contemporary artists.

NELSON: Laura Allred Hurtado has a question for the two of you. I think we've covered the first part of the question, which is about what you might have learned and new stories and new ideas through the process. But this second part of it that deals a little bit more with identity

might be novel enough to tackle to end our discussion today. How do you see this publication influencing culture, conversation, and identity in coming years?

ALLRED: The question that would keep coming up and has come up in this conversation is sort of, what is Mormon art? This is going to be important for cultural production because we tried to set this up in the intro as almost an agreement. We promise we'll keep asking that question, but we're more interested in provoking new questions. We think it's actually going to be more helpful to ask new questions. I'm hoping that will be the cultural ripple effect, that it's not so much to be obsessive about what is or isn't Mormon art and what those delineations are exactly. It's more like, what's the new questions we can ask about these? I think these chapters help showcase that in new ways. So I'm hoping the more, like you said, the curiosity, new questions about the scholarly endeavor of appreciating this artwork, but then on the other side, new questions about creation and artwork and new things that can be done that still connect with Mormonism somehow but push it in new directions is what I'm hoping to see.

BEARDSLEY: My hope is that, I mean, of course—It's funny because you hope that your book is going to change the world, right? This is a book about Mormon art history, and I find it to be one of the most important projects I've ever worked on in my life, and I'm very, very proud of it. But for those who read it and are open to it, I do hope that it continues, like Mason said, to provoke and incite curiosity. Whether the ideas rub you the wrong way, I would hope that that creates a conversation in and of itself. My hope culturally is that it creates more discourse, that it continues to make us sit down and have conversations about what these things mean and what are the stakes of how we represent ourselves and how we represent people outside of ourselves. If we can learn from those instances historically, like we learn from Paul and Carlyle's chapters, then how can we make ourselves better as a people? What are

the case studies that allow us to not repeat history? Culturally, I would hope that—as a historian and as someone who loves art as much as I do—I would hope that people can use that as a case study.

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ARTIST

PAOLA BIDINELLI was born in Italy, in the ancient town of Teate degli Abruzzi, a wild and archaic territory known as “Land of Shepherds.” Over the years, Bidinelli has used the unique nature and dynamics of a multitude of raw materials, transforming them into a new imagery and identity. “Materials speak aloud to me,” she says. “Despite their imperfections, they unleash forces beyond our control, in an endless, fascinating fluctuation between ephemerality and resilience.”

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The *Journal of Mormon History* examines the Mormon past through a variety of perspectives, including but not limited to Mormon studies/religious studies, cultural history, social history, intellectual history, reception history, sociology, economics, geography, political science, women's studies, material culture, race studies, and folklore.

Importantly, Mormonism is interpreted to encompass all traditions that trace their origins to Joseph Smith Jr.

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