DIALOGUE
a journal of mormon thought

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

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FROM THE PULPIT

Dear Editor,

My compliments to you and *Dialogue* for the Fall 2024 Roundtable section, "Fifty Years Since Lester Bush, 'Mormonism's Negro Doctrine.'" My family and I appreciated relearning that history and evolution.

We especially discussed an interesting contrast between Robert Rees's and Newell Bringhurst's new articles there. Rees emphasized that the old racial doctrine was "counter to the very clear language of the Book of Mormon." But Bringhurst had determined that even Bush's big essay of 1973 had not probed systemic origins of the ban and had completely ignored the Book of Mormon's role in the "formation of innate LDS racist attitudes."

It seems to us that in its ambivalence, everything racial in the Book of Mormon has its origination heavily derived from the Old Testament. I searched your online archive for articles or essays that highlight this Judaic ethnocentricity independent of our resultant issue with Black people. After seeing a mild and indirect article (for correcting "chosen") by Eugene England and another mentioning "chosen lineage" (relating to gender) by Cory Crawford, I did come across a more pointed essay naming one of the other Abraham bloodlines in the Fall 1989 *Dialogue* issue. It was impressively written with the credibility of a Palestinian-Israeli-Arab convert, Ehab Abunuwara's "Nothing Holy: A Different Perspective of Israel."

I guess I'm writing this as a letter to the editor, asking that you republish Abunuwara's sobering essay after thirty-five years. As a sampling for you, here are a couple quotes that are more bluntly honest than Deseret Book's admirable 2018 *Peace for a Palestinian* by convert Sahar Qumsiyeh and seem especially prescient nowadays for "Israel first" policies by both the Biden and Trump administrations and for President Nelson's urgence to be more prepared for the Second Coming. From Abunuwara:

> I am afraid that Latter-day Saints have surrendered to the Jews more than material things by their irrational fascination with Israel and their distorted understanding of the meaning of "Chosen People."
>
> The possibility of peace would be a devastating blow to Christian eschatologists who prefer to see this conflict as God-inspired, leading eventually to Armageddon and the return of the Savior. Such kingdom watchers, whose motto might be, "Blessed be the warmongers, for they will hasten the kingdom of God," could hinder American attempts [Carter and Bush I] to bring a just and enduring solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I fear that many Latter-day Saints might be found among such a group.

Nine years after his 1989 essay, I see that another halting article was published in *Dialogue* by his wife, Kimberly Jensen-Abunuwara, still mournful of the pervasive LDS and US-American bloodline prejudice in favor of Jews over Arab Israelis. Perhaps hers should be republished as well. Two quotes from her essay:

> During the summer of 1995 I had cajoled my husband into attending our graduation ceremony and being hooded together as Ph.D.s. We learned, too late, that the center piece of the commencement would be the presentation of an honorary doctorate to Teddy Kollek, former mayor of Jerusalem. Mormons tend to be captivated by Israel and, because of narrow interpretations of certain prophecies, are fixated on the Jewish people. A stadium of unknowing, unthinking Mormons was aflutter at having this figure in their midst. My husband, on the other hand, was confronted with a man who had taken land from Palestinians and supported the unfair construction of Jewish settlements in Jerusalem.
>
> And though I'd like to, I can't belong with other young Arab mothers hoisting children onto a bus in the heat. How can I share their indignation or even fear of uzi-armed Jewish–Israeli soldiers seated across the aisle when my tax dollars paid for their guns?

In the same vein, I have recently encountered poetry by Naomi Shihab Nye, an Arab American poet, that offers still-needed stimulus for reconsidering our Old Testament bias. She is a favorite of one of my sisters, two of whom have poems published in your most recent issue (Anita Tanner and Dixie Partridge). Here's a stanza from a Nye poem entitled "Blood":

> Today the headlines clot in my
> blood.
> A little Palestinian dangles a toy
> truck on the front page.
> Homeless fig, this tragedy with a
> terrible root
> is too big for us. What flag can we
> wave?
> I wave the flag of stone and seed,
> table mat stitched in blue.

An alternative or companion suggestion to call for papers need not be limited to the religiously escalated Israeli–Palestinian conflict nor to our progress with Black people. Rather, it could more broadly explore the West's divine favoritism for the narrowed Abraham-Isaac-Jacob lineage by the Old Testament, beyond the useful treatment in the Bradley Cook article twenty-two years ago ("The Palestinian–Israeli Conflict Reconsidered," Spring 2003 *Dialogue*) and mention by Robert A. Rees in the same Spring 2003 issue

("America's War on Terrorism: One Latter-day Saint's Perspective"). By now, our belief in the New Testament and Book of Mormon should have superseded the Old Testament's tribal system with "God is no respecter of persons" and "all are alike unto God"; but it hasn't.

Perhaps such an examination would expose this further overreach in the "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21). As Brigham Young University professor Andrew C. Reed has written,

> In its theology—if not fully within its practice and rhetoric—early Mormonism rejected traditional Christian supersessionism (the notion that the gospel of Christ completely outmoded and supplanted the Old Testament, the law of Moses, and the religion of the Israelites), opting instead for a view that emphasized the centrality of covenant and universality of its application. In so doing, they joined a powerful wave of American Christian thought that emphasized the continued covenant with Israel, mediated through a profound sense of American exceptionalism. . . . Joseph Smith obtained much of his theological understanding through Protestant theologians and drew upon themes and ideas common to his era. . . . For Joseph Smith, as well as many of the earliest Saints, the belief that their message contained in sacred scripture needed to reach all people led to strong rhetoric that reeked of philosemitic overtones. For early Latter-day Saints, it made perfect sense that Jews were God's chosen people. . . . They, like many European Christians, esteemed Jews as necessary partners." ("Framing the Restoration and Gathering: Orson Hyde and Early Mormon Understandings of Israel, Jew, and the Second Coming," in *Foundations of the Restoration: Fulfillment of the Covenant Purposes,* edited by Craig James Ostler, Michael Hubbard MacKay, and Barbara Morgan Gardner [Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2016], 228.)

Thank you for all *Dialogue*'s timely work to advance needed topics and poetics. I look forward to your thoughts and insight.

Appreciatively,
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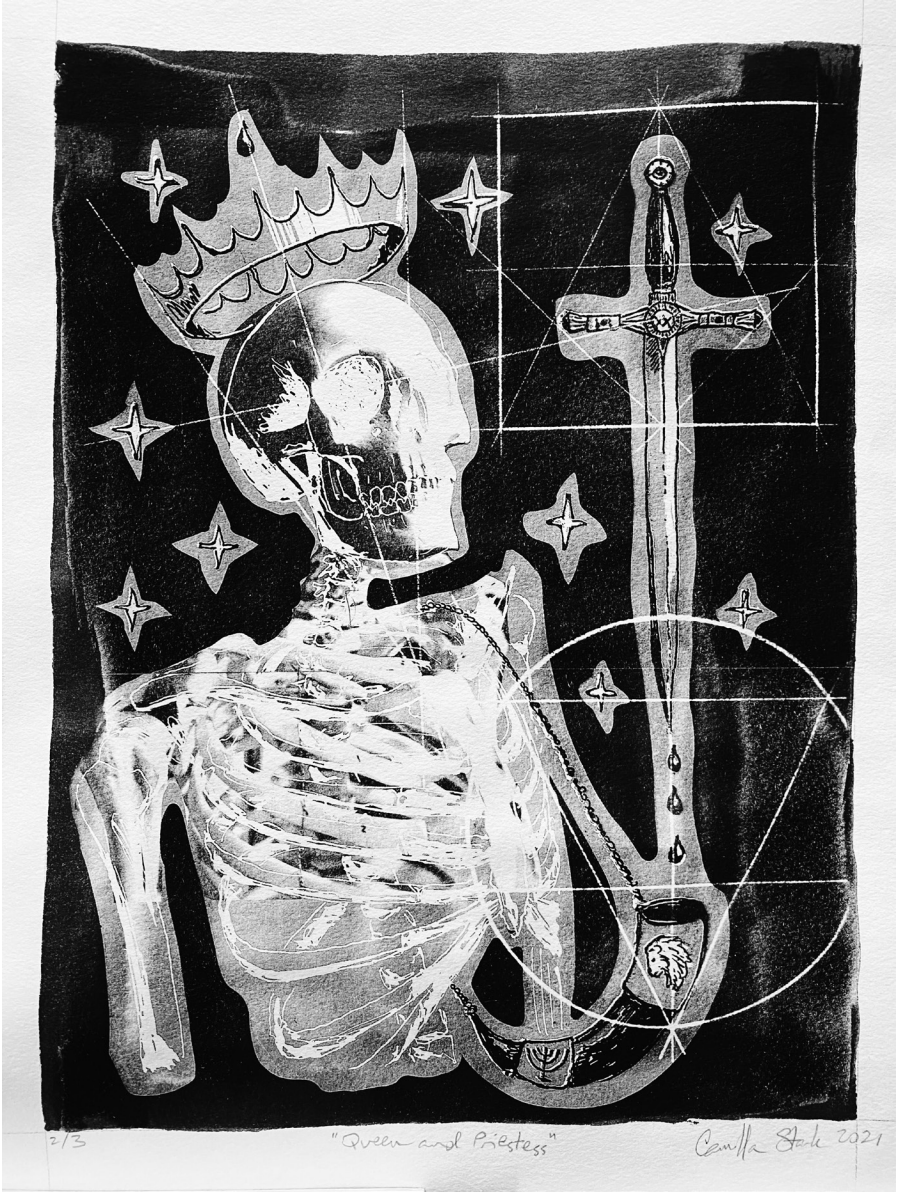

Camilla Stark, *Queen & Priestess*, 2021,
cyanotype, 22 x 15 in.

Artist's Statement: A woman, crowned and ordained with authority—with the power to act, to bless, to destroy—with the power of water, oil, and blood—with the power of knowledge, even secret knowledge—a woman who does not wait for her birthright to be recognized but has claimed it already.

HERETIC AND THE INVERSION OF THE MORMON ENDOWMENT

Ryan M. Springer

The opening credits of *Heretic* immediately immerse the viewer in mystery, as the title appears above a series of cryptic glyphs: 𐐐𐐯𐑉𐐯𐐻𐐮𐐿. To those steeped in Mormon lore, these symbols spell "Heretic" in the Deseret alphabet, a nineteenth-century script devised by early Church leaders.[1] These characters, however, serve not only as a nod to Mormonism's quirky past but also an initiation into a world of symbols, sigils, and hidden meanings.

Written and directed by Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, *Heretic* is a psychological thriller that follows Sister Paxton (Chloe East) and Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher), two young missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At its surface, *Heretic* is a scary movie: the missionaries are sent to a remote area where they become entangled in the strange and unsettling world of Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant), a charismatic yet sinister figure. Reed's sprawling, labyrinthine home becomes the site of increasingly bizarre and disturbing encounters that not only challenge the missionaries' faith but threaten their lives. As they navigate the ominous halls and hidden chambers, they are forced to confront their deepest fears, ultimately unraveling the terrifying truth behind Reed's intentions.

Beneath its chilling narrative, however, *Heretic* operates as a veiled metaphor for spiritual descent. While the film overtly engages with the

1. "Deseret Alphabet," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), available online at https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/EoM/id/5669/; see also Richard G. Moore, "The Deseret Alphabet Experiment," *Religious Educator* 7, no. 3 (2006): 63–76.

monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, its symbolic language is steeped in occult and esoteric traditions. Additionally, by opening with arcane Mormon script, *Heretic* situates both the religion and its narrative within a broader mystical and symbolic context, challenging the archetypal pattern of spiritual ascent found in early Gnostic Christianity, various Western esoteric traditions, and modern LDS temple rituals.

This essay will begin by reviewing the narrative of *Heretic*, then introduce some of the key symbols and motifs found in Western esotericism—such as astrology, alchemy, Kabbalah, and sacred geometry—that inform the film's exploration of ascent and descent. By examining these symbols, we can view the characters' journeys as a modern parable and an inversion of traditional spiritual ascent. Finally, a comparison with the LDS endowment ritual will reveal how *Heretic* inverts the LDS temple's dimensional and symbolic instruction on the soul's journey through the afterlife, illuminating the esoteric divine feminine and shedding light on the deeper mysteries at play.

Heretic as Textual Narrative

Heretic unfolds a haunting narrative that blends unsettling imagery and reflective thematic exploration, immersing viewers in a tale of faith, manipulation, and transformation. Centered on two sister missionaries and their encounter with the mysterious Mr. Reed, the story reveals a layered progression of struggle and revelation, where religious rituals and cryptic symbols guide the characters through a maze of spiritual and existential challenges. This section will provide a summary of *Heretic*'s expository narrative, offering a clear account of its key events and character arcs, before delving deeper into the symbolic analysis that unpacks the film's deeper meanings.

Act 1: Initiation

The story begins when Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes are caught in a storm and take refuge at the home of Mr. Reed. Reed welcomes them

inside with an odd hospitality, claiming his wife is in the next room baking a blueberry pie. After he nonchalantly mentions that the house is encased in metal, he and the missionaries converse, and Reed's questions and statements become increasingly uncomfortable, challenging the sisters' religious convictions. The two women quickly realize that they are trapped—when they attempt to leave, they discover that the front door is locked, and their phones have no signal. This sense of entrapment marks the beginning of their psychological ordeal, setting the stage for their descent into Reed's disturbing world.

Act 2: The Adept Gains Wisdom

Reed leads the missionaries deeper into his home, eventually bringing them to his chapel. Here, he presents a bizarre lecture on the nature of religion, suggesting that all religious systems are simply variations of one another. He introduces them to a series of unsettling choices, offering them two doors: one marked "Belief" and one marked "Disbelief." After their initial hesitation, the missionaries are horrified to discover that both doors lead to the same terrifying destination—a dungeon-like space where they encounter a woman who consumes a poisoned pie and dies. Reed claims the woman is a prophet of God and that they will witness her resurrection. When the woman does "return to life," she describes an afterlife that seems eerily similar to common near-death experiences. Sister Barnes challenges her account, expressing skepticism over the familiar narrative. In response, Reed kills Barnes, assuring her that she, too, will resurrect.

Act 3: Climax and Transformation

As Barnes lies bleeding out, Reed removes a metal object from her arm, claiming it is a microchip that proves the world is a simulation. Paxton, in a moment of clarity, recognizes it as a contraceptive implant, realizing that Reed has orchestrated the entire scenario to manipulate and control them. In a terrifying revelation, Paxton uncovers a hidden chamber containing emaciated women in cages—victims of Reed's

twisted house. This discovery leads her to the horrifying conclusion that Reed views religion and spirituality as tools for domination.

In a final confrontation, Paxton stabs Reed with a letter opener and he later pierces her abdomen with a box cutter. As both bleed in the basement, Paxton prays for solace, admitting that she knows prayer is ineffective but finds it beautiful to pray on other people's behalf. Just as Reed prepares to finish her off, Barnes, still alive despite her earlier death, kills him with a plank of wood before succumbing to her wounds. Paxton, now alone, escapes into the snowy landscape. As she looks at her hand, she discovers a butterfly resting on it. But just as quickly as it appears, the butterfly vanishes, leaving Paxton alone in the desolate winter world.

Revealing the Mysteries: Key Clues and Cues from the Western Esoteric Tradition

Heretic includes many of the symbols and themes found throughout various currents of Western esotericism. The phrase "Western esoteric tradition" is a broad term used to encompass an array of mystical, philosophical, and occult practices that have developed over centuries, often in contrast to mainstream religious or scientific thought.[2] Comprised of diverse practices, from mystical traditions like Kabbalah and Hermeticism to philosophical systems such as Neoplatonism, Western

2. This essay relies on the frameworks proposed by Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Antoine Faivre, which provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the broad and varied landscape of Western esotericism. Hanegraaff defines Western esotericism as a form of knowledge that transcends conventional frameworks, offering a counterpoint to traditional religious or scientific discourses. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Faivre, in turn, emphasizes the intellectual principles underlying esoteric thought, such as the use of symbolism, correspondences, and the belief in hidden knowledge revealing spiritual truths. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

esotericism is not a single unified system, though many of its currents share a common focus on uncovering concealed truths about the divine, the cosmos, and the nature of reality. This section will provide background on some of the traditions that make up modern esotericism, highlighting some of the key symbols and beliefs that are useful in understanding *Heretic* as a modern parable.

A. Temple and Cosmos: Themes from Gnostic Texts

Gnosticism[3] explores a spiritual framework characterized by four key elements: (1) the distinction between the ultimate, unknowable God and the imperfect or malevolent creator-god; (2) the depiction of a divine realm (Pleroma) from which humanity's spiritual essence originates, including the myth of Sophia ("Wisdom"), whose fall precipitates the material world's creation; (3) humanity's entrapment in an earthly condition of ignorance and death, remedied by the revelation of gnosis delivered by a heavenly savior; and (4) the enactment of salvation through communal rituals that affirm the liberation of the divine spark within.

In Gnostic cosmology, the unknowable God (often called Bythos, Father, or Monad) embodies the primal unity from which all creation emanates. The lesser beings, or Aeons, are not fully autonomous entities but symbolic manifestations of the divine fullness, comprising the Pleroma alongside God. The myth centers on Sophia, the lowest Aeon,

3. For this essay, "Gnosticism" is used primarily as a heuristic device rather than in reference to a particularly defined set of communities or beliefs. To this extent, the essay relies on and adopts Roelof van den Broek's characterization of Gnosticism as a religious worldview centered on "gnosis," an esoteric knowledge concerning the divine and human existence that offers salvation to its possessors. Rather than categorizing Gnosticism according to specific sects or historical movements, van den Broek focuses instead on the underlying emphasis on esoteric knowledge as the defining criterion. Roelof van den Broek. *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

who creates the Demiurge (also known as Yaldabaoth), a flawed and ignorant being, through a misguided attempt to act independently of the Father. The Demiurge, mistaking himself for the sole creator, fashions the material world and enforces his dominion with the aid of Archons, entities that perpetuate humanity's ignorance. Despite this, Sophia imbues humanity with a "divine spark" (pneuma), an aspect of divinity that can be awakened. The savior figure—often the "Living Jesus"—descends to reveal Sophia's fall, expose the illusory nature of the Demiurge's world, and guide humanity toward gnosis, the salvific knowledge that reunites the divine spark with its transcendent source.

The *First and Second Books of Jeu* are Gnostic texts preserved in the Bruce Codex, discovered in 1769 and likely dating to the fourth or fifth century CE, though their content is much older.[4] These texts serve as mystical manuals for spiritual ascent, detailing the soul's journey through cosmic realms to attain eternal unity with the divine. The *Books of Jeu* are often associated with the later *Pistis Sophia*, which incorporates concepts from the Jeu texts.[5] In the first book, the "living" Jesus addresses his apostles, urging them to transcend the material world through secret knowledge that enables them to navigate the "Treasury of the Light"—celestial chambers guarded by spiritual beings called Watchers. Through a series of illustrations and topographical maps, the text outlines a cosmic structure emanating from the true God and

4. Erin Evans, *The Books of Jeu and the Pistis Sophia as Handbooks to Eternity: Exploring the Gnostic Mysteries of the Ineffable*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, vol. 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2015); see also Hugh Nibley, "Prophets and Gnostics" and "Prophets and Mystics," in *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Vol. 3: The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987 [first published 1954]), 63–70, 98–107; Hugh Nibley, "One Eternal Round: The Hermetic Version," in *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, edited by Hugh Nibley and Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 379–433.

5. Evans, *The Books of Jeu and the Pistis Sophia as Handbooks to Eternity*.

provides diagrams, seals, and mystical instructions for passing through these treasuries, ultimately leading to an eternal, celestial realm.[6]

As the soul ascends along this journey, it must navigate hostile lower Aeons inhabited by malevolent Archons. To bypass these entities, the soul employs seals, divine names, and secret ciphers.[7] The *Second Book of Jeu* (2 Jeu) introduces a series of rituals—baptisms of water, fire, spirit, and the removal of archonic evil—necessary for progressing through the chambers. It maps the soul's journey through twelve Aeons, culminating in the realm of the primal trinity. This is an adaptation of the highest trinity described in texts such as the *Apocryphon of John*: the Great Invisible Spirit, Barbelo, and the Unbegotten One, representing Father, Mother, and Son. The Apocryphon of John explains that Autogenes, the Self-Begotten One, is brought into being through the union of the Invisible Spirit and Barbelo, who "became the womb of everything, for it is she who is prior to them all."[8]

This framework underscores the Gnostic emphasis on cosmological structures and the soul's progression toward reunification with the divine. The Father, Mother, and Son trinity symbolizes the interplay of creation, emanation, and spiritual completion, guiding the soul's journey through the Aeons toward ultimate enlightenment.

B. Mingling Myths and Magic

Gnosticism and its texts, including the *Books of Jeu* and *Pistis Sophia*, emerged from the cultural and spiritual syncretism of late antiquity. This era witnessed the blending of Greek philosophy, Egyptian

6. Dr. Justin Sledge, curator of the "Esoterica" YouTube channel, has produced an informative video that was not only helpful in this essay but is an excellent introduction to the Books of Jeu. "The Only Illustrated Ancient Gnostic Manual of Mystical Ascent After Death – The Two Books of Jeu," posted Mar. 24, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhGXgegKeSI.

7. Evans, *The Books of Jeu and the Pistis Sophia as Handbooks to Eternity*.

8. Apocryphon of John, 5.5–8.

cosmology, Hebrew mystical traditions, and nascent Christian thought, creating fertile ground for the development of both Gnostic texts and the corpus comprising the Greek Magical Papyri (abbreviated "PGM" from the Latin "Papyri Graecae Magicae").[9] The PGM, a collection of texts from Greco-Roman Egypt dating from the second century BCE to the fifth century CE, were primarily discovered in Thebes and acquired by European institutions in the nineteenth century.[10] Written in Greek, Demotic, and Old Coptic, they reflect a deeply syncretic cultural environment where Greek, Egyptian, and other traditions intertwined.[11] Their content integrates deities, rituals, and magical practices from multiple traditions, like Jewish Merkabah mysticism, which describes ascents through celestial palaces.[12]

Both the Gnostic texts and the PGM share similarities with Egyptian funerary texts, such as the *Book of the Dead*, which guides souls

9. Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); see also Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

10. The historical discovery of the PGM in the early nineteenth century coincided with Antonio Lebolo's excavation of mummies and papyri from the same region. See Michael H. Marquardt. "Joseph Smith's Egyptian Papers: A History," in *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition*, edited by Robert K. Ritner (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 11; H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 78–83. The Joseph Smith Papyri, which include "an ancient funeral illustration"—a resurrection spell—"for a deceased Egyptian man named Horus" (Marquardt, 61), became the basis for the Book of Abraham, and Smith's acquisition of these artifacts represents a curious coincidence, if not a modern link, to these ancient traditions.

11. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*.

12. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 40–79.

through guarded regions of the afterlife.[13] Ancient Egyptian *hry-tp* (lector priests) also possessed a rich understanding of spiritual ascent, performing rituals at temples like those at Karnak and Abydos, enacting the soul's passage through the Duat, the Egyptian underworld, where it undergoes trials and purification before reaching the realm of the gods.[14]

Central to these traditions and practices is the preoccupation with spiritual ascent and the manipulation of cosmic forces. The *Books of Jeu*, the PGM, and Egyptian funerary texts make extensive use of similar sacred names and magical words (*voces magicae*), and from them, new traditions emerged, derived from a synthesis of Greek, Coptic, and Hebrew traditions.[15] These texts emphasize divine names, esoteric rituals, and invocations to gain power over spiritual realms and to facilitate interaction with divine forces. While the *Books of Jeu* focus on detailed cosmological hierarchies and the soul's ascent through celestial spheres, the PGM incorporate a wider range of magical applications, including love potions, wealth spells, and other rituals, alongside practices aimed at divine communion and spiritual empowerment.

Themes of sacred names, syncretic spirituality, and direct engagement with divine forces in the Gnostic scriptural texts, and the practical magic of the PGM, profoundly influenced later esoteric systems. The blended elements of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman religious traditions offered rituals and invocations meant to harness supernatural forces

13. E. A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008); see also Mark Smith, ed., *Following Osiris: Perspectives on the Osirian Afterlife from Four Millennia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

14. "Performed by priests as the technique of religion, Egyptian 'magic' cannot be opposed to religion, and the Western dichotomy of 'religion vs. magic' is thus inappropriate for describing Egyptian practice." Robert K. Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1993), 2.

15. Arthur Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esoteric Traditions* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

and attain personal transformation. This period laid the foundation for later developments in Western occultism, including the belief in an underlying, secret wisdom accessible to initiates.

C. Magic and Early Modernity

From these philosophical and religious currents, esotericism in the West evolved significantly during late antiquity, as Christian mysticism began to merge with Hermeticism. Emerging in the second and third centuries CE, Hermeticism is a philosophical and spiritual tradition rooted in the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a legendary figure who blends elements of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth.[16] Both Hermes and Thoth are deities associated with wisdom, communication, and the occult, and in Hermeticism, they symbolize the union of Greek and Egyptian thought, particularly regarding knowledge, magic, and the divine.[17] Central to Hermeticism was the belief in the divine ordering of the cosmos and the potential for human ascent through knowledge, a concept that influenced later esoteric traditions.[18]

However, as the Christian Church rose to power, it sought to centralize religious authority and suppress competing beliefs. Non-Christian, unorthodox, and esoteric traditions, such as Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and paganism, were often deemed heretical.[19] These traditions, which

16. Clement Salaman, et al., trans., *The Way of Hermes: New Translations of the Corpus Hermeticum and the Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus to Asclepius* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2000).

17. Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times*, translated by David Lorton (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2007).

18. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, eds., *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

19. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

emphasized personal revelation and hidden knowledge, came into direct conflict with the Church's insistence on orthodoxy and the public transmission of doctrine. Consequently, many esoteric practices, texts, and ideas were driven underground. Those who continued to pursue such knowledge risked persecution, and as a result, esoteric knowledge became concealed, or "occult"—from the Latin *occultus*, meaning "hidden."

This hidden tradition did not vanish entirely, however. As the ancient world gave way to the Middle Ages, esoteric thought became intertwined with Christian mysticism, Kabbalistic teachings, and alchemical traditions, motivating "not simply a matter of establishing intellectual harmonies, but rather the implication that these traditions sprang from a single, authentic, and divine source of inspiration, thus representing the branches of an ancient theology (*prisca theologia*)."[20] The Kabbalistic revival in the twelfth century, influenced by earlier Jewish mysticism and Christian theological reinterpretation, brought about an understanding of divine names and sacred geometry, which persisted into the Renaissance.[21] Alchemy, initially practiced as an art of transforming metals into gold, soon expanded into a spiritual discipline with the goal of personal transformation and the pursuit of the philosopher's stone.[22] During this time, figures such as Paracelsus (1493–1541) integrated Hermetic principles with medical theory, seeing alchemy as a means of spiritual and physical healing.[23]

In the early seventeenth century, the Rosicrucian movement emerged as a fusion of Hermeticism, alchemy, and Christian

20. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

21. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

22. Stanton J. Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

23. Charles Webster, *Paracelsus: Medicine, Magic and Mission at the End of Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008).

mysticism.[24] The Rosicrucian manifestos (1614–1617), attributed to figures like Johann Valentin Andreae, propagated a vision of a secret brotherhood dedicated to spiritual enlightenment and scientific discovery, blending mystical and scientific thought.[25] This movement had a profound influence on the intellectual milieu of Europe, sparking a revival of interest in esoteric knowledge.[26]

The Renaissance was also the era of prolific magicians and occult philosophers, such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who reintroduced Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas, emphasizing the relationship between human beings, the cosmos, and divine realms. John Dee, the famed mathematician and astrologer to Queen Elizabeth I, blended alchemy, astrology, and mysticism in his quest for divine knowledge, using angelic communication to bridge the gap between the material and the spiritual.[27]

By the eighteenth century, much of the intellectual energy of Western esotericism had shifted toward freemasonry and Rosicrucian-inspired secret societies.[28] These movements, while sometimes oriented toward more social or political agendas, maintained a deep engagement with esoteric symbols, rituals, and the search for spiritual enlightenment. The Enlightenment brought some skepticism toward these traditions, but certain intellectual circles, led by figures such as Éliphas Lévi and the occult revivalists of the nineteenth century, carried the torch.[29]

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24. Lyke de Vries, *Reformation, Revolution, Renovation: The Roots and Reception of the Rosicrucian Call for General Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

25. Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).

26. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*.

27. Jason Louv, *John Dee and the Empire of Angels: Enochian Magick and the Occult Roots of the Modern World* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2018).

28. Owen Davies, *America Bewitched: The Story of Witchcraft After Salem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 252.

29. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 184–85.

The early nineteenth century saw the rise of spiritualism, which drew heavily on earlier esoteric traditions. This movement, which flourished in both Europe and the United States, emphasized communication with spirits through mediums and seances. Spiritualism was partly an outgrowth of the fascination with alchemy, magic, and theosophy and was characterized by a belief in the afterlife and the ability of the living to interact with the dead. Figures like Franz Anton Mesmer, who developed the theory of animal magnetism (later known as mesmerism), used psychic energy to heal and influence others, introducing a new form of magic grounded in the human mind and body.

Similarly, prominent leaders and practices of spiritualist movements, from the Fox sisters in New York to the seances of mediums like Andrew Jackson Davis, emphasized communication with the dead and the exploration of unseen spiritual realms. These currents contributed to the development of the so-called "psychic highway," a region of esoteric belief and magical practice running through New England in the early nineteenth century.[30]

D. Mormonism and the Magic Worldview

Into this milieu, on the winter solstice of 1805, the prophet Joseph Smith was born.[31] In a way, his life can be seen as reflecting a progression through stages or degrees, beginning in Palmyra, New York, as his engagement with folk magic, treasure-seeking, and biblical prophecy

30. Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: White House Séances, Ouija Circles, Masons, and the Secret Mystic History of Our Nation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009).

31. D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, revised and enlarged (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998); John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Dan Vogel, "The Locations of Joseph Smith's Early Treasure Quests," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 197–231.

marked his search for divine mysteries.[32] In Kirtland, Ohio, Smith constructed his first temple, formalized sacred rituals like the washing and anointing, and established the School of the Prophets to explore theology and mysticism, paralleling esoteric traditions of spiritual mastery.[33] Finally, in Nauvoo, Illinois, Joseph introduced the temple endowment and eternal sealing ordinances, which symbolized spiritual ascent and unity, bridging the material and divine.[34] The Nauvoo Temple, with its sacred symbolism and transformative rituals, epitomized Joseph's culmination as a spiritual leader and his ability to guide others toward higher realms of understanding. Indeed, "Joseph Smith lived a richly symbolic life—a ritual life, if you will."[35]

Smith's work with the Book of Mormon and his translation of the sacred text via seer stones and divine visions parallel the practices of earlier occultists who sought hidden knowledge through mystical and spiritual means. Occult historian Peter Levenda observes that Mormonism arose from "the same root texts . . ., the sorcerer's workbooks

32. See Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*; see also Richrd Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Lance S. Owens, "Joseph Smith and Kabbalah: The Occult Connection," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 117–94.

33. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

34. Matthew B. Brown and Paul Thomas Smith, *Symbols in Stone: Symbolism on the Early Temples of the Restoration* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1997); David R. Crockett, "The Nauvoo Temple: 'A Monument of the Saints,'" *Nauvoo Journal* 6, no. 1 (1994): 5–28; Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Importance of the Temple in Understanding the Latter-Day Saint Nauvoo Experience: Then and Now," Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series, no. 6, Oct. 25, 2000, available online at https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_lecture/5/.

35. George L. Mitton, "The Book of Mormon as a Resurrected Book and a Type of Christ," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 392.

of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance."[36] Through his visionary work, Smith situates himself within the broader Western esoteric tradition, blending Gnostic principles with a uniquely American religious framework.

Codes and Keys: Language, Symbols, and Semiotics

Although Smith didn't create the Deseret alphabet used in *Heretic*'s opening title, it was originally conceived as part of his church's utopian effort to restore linguistic and spiritual purity. The alphabet was rooted in the Mormon belief that language had degenerated from its original Adamic form, the sacred tongue spoken by God to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.[37] For Joseph Smith, the Adamic language represented more than an intellectual curiosity; it was a pathway to

36. Peter Levenda, *The Angel and the Sorcerer: The Remarkable Story of the Occult Origins of Mormonism and the Rise of Mormons in American History* (Lake Worth, Fla.: Ibis Press, 2012), 78; see also John R. King IV, *The Faculty of Abrac: The Tradition, Training, and Techniques of Commanding Spirits* (Lulu, 2021). King explores the lesser-known esoteric influences on Joseph Smith, highlighting his familiarity with apocryphal writings, noting that Smith not only possessed esoteric talismans but also engaged in treasure-seeking aided by spirits. According to King, Smith's method of dictating the Book of Mormon, which involved mystical revelations received through scrying stones, parallels the practices of occult figures, claiming "his entire religion was dictated in a method reminiscent of John Dee and position[s] Smith within a broader tradition of esoteric mysticism" (King, 84). See also Massimo Introvigne, "The Beast and the Prophet: Aleister Crowley's Fascination with Joseph Smith," in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 255–84.

37. Samuel Morris Brown, *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 21–22. Brown notes that the language is called "Adamic" by convention alone; he proposes "Edenic as more accurate, since the language was spoken by all in Eden, not just the first man" (21).

recovering divine truths and unlocking latent spiritual power.[38] This pursuit echoes a recurring theme in Western esotericism: the quest for a sacred language capable of unlocking divine mysteries.

The early Mormons' pursuit of linguistic purity parallels other esoteric traditions, notably the work of the Elizabethan magus John Dee and his scryer Edward Kelley.[39] Dee, in his efforts to communicate with angels and access higher realms of knowledge, used scrying stones to receive what he believed to be an ancient alphabet, later dubbed Enochian—a celestial language said to have been revealed through angelic visions.[40] Like the Adamic language, Enochian was considered a divine

38. See Moses 6:5–6. The Book of Moses, produced by Joseph Smith in 1830, says that says Adam kept a book of remembrance "in the language of Adam" and that his children "were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled." The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Book of Moses," in *The Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

39. If Dee and Kelley's Enochian is the Monopoly of magical languages, Hildegard of Bingen's Lingua Ignota could be its Landlord's Game. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a German Benedictine abbess, mystic, and polymath, created the Lingua Ignota ("Unknown Language") as part of her visionary works. This constructed language, comprising unique vocabulary and a corresponding alphabet, was intended for divine praise and spiritual expression. Hildegard described the Lingua Ignota as a holy tongue revealed to her in visions, reflecting her innovative theological insights and her belief in the unity of divine creation, while standing as one of the earliest known examples of a constructed language in Western history. Though the language and its purpose remain a mystery, some theorize it "may have been an attempt to reproduce the pure, virginal tongue spoken by Adam and Eve in paradise." Barbara Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 16; Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

40. Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

tool, a means of restoring humanity's connection to the ineffable truths of creation.[41]

This focus on language and its meaning connects directly to semiotics, the study of signs, symbols, and their meanings within cultural and social contexts.[42] In a semiotic framework, the interpretation of meaning assigned to different letters varies significantly depending on context, or in some cases, one's level of initiation. Exoteric understanding—the outer, surface-level interpretation—offers a general meaning accessible to all. In contrast, esoteric interpretation delves into hidden, inner meanings reserved for initiates who have undergone specific spiritual training or rites: things that appear straightforward to the uninitiated may harbor profound significance to those versed in the tradition's secrets.[43]

Heretic uses a vocabulary of symbols throughout its narrative, which culminates in an ambiguous ending that invites viewers to question what they have seen. Themes of faith, control, and the blurred boundaries between reality and illusion are left unresolved, leaving the audience to interpret the film's rich tapestry of symbols on their own terms. This lack of resolution highlights the inherently subjective nature of art and symbolism, where meaning is shaped by individual perspective.

Through layers of symbols, *Heretic* not only critiques institutional power but also illuminates the shared currents between esotericism and Mormonism. Just as the characters in the film confront a labyrinth of signs, so too must viewers seek their own understanding of what these symbols represent. What follows is one interpretation of *Heretic* and

41. Aaron Leitch, *The Angelical Language, Volume I: The Complete History and Mythos of the Tongue of Angels* (Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2010); Louv, *John Dee and the Empire of Angels*.

42. Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017).

43. Patrick Dunn, *Magic, Power, Language, Symbol: A Magician's Exploration of Linguistics* (Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2008).

its layered symbolism—a subjective exploration of the meanings that might lie hidden within.

Unlocking *Heretic*'s Mysteries

> *When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.*[44]
>
> *—Joseph Smith*

In Gnostic traditions, Sophia's journey represents the soul's pursuit of divine knowledge, or gnosis. Her initial descent from the Pleroma into the material world, driven by a desire to comprehend the unknowable, leads her to fall through a veil of darkness and ignorance. This fall results in her entrapment within the material realm, symbolizing the soul's entanglement in the physical world. Through repentance and the assistance of higher divine powers, Sophia embarks on a journey of redemption, gradually ascending back toward the Pleroma. Her ascent reflects the soul's journey through the veil of material existence, striving to reconnect with the divine source. Thus, Sophia's narrative illustrates the transformative passage from ignorance to enlightenment, culminating in the reunification with the divine fullness.

It is impossible to say with certainty whether the filmmakers intended for *Heretic* to align with the Gnostic Sophia myth, but as the following analysis demonstrates, these symbols are undeniably present throughout the film. By examining these symbols through the lens of various currents within the Western esoteric tradition, *Heretic* can be seen as a version—or iteration—of the Sophia myth, offering a modern

44. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1976), 348.

retelling of its central tale. Whether deliberate or not, the presence of these symbols enriches the narrative, guiding the viewer toward a deeper understanding of the film's exploration of faith, control, and the cycle of descent and ascent.

A. Act 1. Initiation

i) The Sacred and the Profane

The first act of *Heretic* introduces Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes, who are presented in a quiet, introspective moment on a bus bench. Sitting opposite an advertisement for condoms on the bench, they have an awkward yet sincere conversation about Paxton's experience with a "porno-ographic" movie, which establishes a thematic foundation for the film—one that explores dualities, the sacred and the profane—and foreshadows the spiritual journey ahead.

Soon after, the missionaries ascend and descend a cement staircase, their steps deliberate yet habitual. This movement mirrors recurring esoteric themes of ascent, descent, and transformation. The imagery evokes the journey described in *Pistis Sophia*, a Gnostic text in which the soul descends into chaos and ascends through realms of light and darkness, ultimately striving for reunion with the divine. The missionaries' practiced steps suggest a cyclical nature to their journey, hinting that this passage is not a new experience but part of a larger, ongoing spiritual process—and that, perhaps, they've done this before.

From this perspective, Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes embody archetypal roles that mirror the Gnostic myth of Sophia and the Redeemer. In Gnostic tradition, Sophia is the embodiment of wisdom who, in her quest for knowledge, descends into the material world, leading to the creation of the flawed physical realm. Similarly, Sister Paxton's journey reflects a descent into a world of deception and darkness, where she confronts her own beliefs and the nature of reality. Her experiences challenge her understanding, mirroring Sophia's fall and the subsequent quest for redemption.

Sister Barnes aligns with the Redeemer archetype. In Gnostic narratives, the Redeemer is a divine figure who descends into the material world to impart gnosis, guiding souls back to the divine realm. Sister Barnes embodies this role by offering insight and guidance to Sister Paxton, helping her navigate the challenges they face. Like the Gnostic Savior, Barnes is a figure of action and sacrifice, deliberately entering darkness to bring light and knowledge to those trapped in ignorance. She assumes the role of a protector and teacher for Paxton, and through her eventual sacrifice, empowers Paxton to overcome the illusions and forces that bind her. Through these characterizations, *Heretic* intertwines Gnostic themes, using the archetypes of Sophia and the Redeemer to explore profound questions of faith, knowledge, and the human condition.

ii) Revelation at the Crossroads

Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes walk their bikes toward an intersection—a literal and metaphorical crossroads—where they encounter three sorority sisters who impede their path.[45] Initially, the interaction seems lighthearted, with Sister Paxton spontaneously declaring, "Oh my gosh, I already love these girls." The giggling girls surround the missionaries, asking them to pose for a photo, but the playful encounter takes a sharp turn. As the missionaries pose, one of the girls asks, "Is it true?" before another pulls down Sister Paxton's skirt, revealing her temple undergarment. The three girls cackle as they ridicule her "magic underwear," a cruel derision that forces Paxton into a moment of not just intense vulnerability but revelation.

The intersection now takes on a liminal quality, serving as a crossroads where Paxton's journey, beliefs, and sense of self will be tested, challenged, and ultimately defined. In this way, the scene evokes the symbolism of Hecate, the witches from *Macbeth*, and the Moirai—Greek

45. The roles are credited as "Teenagers," but the screenplay identifies them as "sorority girls," i.e., sisters. See Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, *Heretic*, available online at https://a24awards.com/assets/Heretic-screenplay.pdf.

mythology's three sisters of Fate, weaving these mythological traditions into a moment of spiritual and existential significance. Hecate is the goddess of magic, witchcraft, and the underworld who stands as the guardian of the crossroads—an archetype of transition and choice.[46] In *Pistis Sophia*, Hecate is described as a "triple-formed deity,"[47] highlighting her role as a figure of boundaries, offering multiple paths and possibilities, and as the Roman poet Ovid observed, each of her three forms presents a choice of different paths.[48]

Echoing the Fates, the three sorority sisters can be seen to represent the three stages of life: one spins Paxton's thread by initiating the confrontation, another measures its length through the trial of ridicule, and the third, like Atropos, cuts through Paxton's illusions, exposing the latent power and magic within her.[49] Together, they weave the threads of fate and free will, pushing Paxton toward a transformative choice that will redefine her path. The scene also recalls the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who, like Hecate, act as agents of fate. The three "weird sisters" deliver cryptic prophecies that unravel the natural order, guiding Macbeth toward his inevitable end.[50] Likewise, the three soror-

46. Sarah Iles Johnston, *Hekate Soteira: A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature*, American Classical Studies 21 (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1990).

47. Hecate "appears a great archon[ ] of the Midst, tormenting the souls of sinners." She "is described as three-faced; this is in keeping with Greco-Egyptian magical tradition, which frequently depicts her as three-formed." Evans, *The Books of Jeu and the Pistis Sophia as Handbooks to Eternity*, 118.

48. Owen Davies, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

49. Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, translated by Robin Hard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 29.

50. "The weird sisters, hand in hand, / Posters of the sea and land, / Thus do go about, about: / Thrice to thine and thrice to mine / And thrice again, to make up nine." William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), 1.3.

ity sisters at the crosswalk serve as symbolic agents of destiny, posing the question "Is it true?" as a riddle that hints at the larger, unfolding narrative.

iii) The Candidates Present

Following their encounter at the crossroads, the missionaries arrive at the home of Mr. Reed, one of several prospective investigators (and the only one without a first, i.e., "Christian" name). As they head up the path toward Mr. Reed's house, it is shrouded by darkening skies that portend an impending storm. Sister Barnes locks the bike and places the key securely in her pocket before the sisters approach the arched entrance to the house. There, beneath the arch, they are greeted by Mr. Reed (think Christopher Hitchens, but more polite). The missionaries inform him that pursuant to mission rules, another woman must be present for them to enter the home. He initially responds with feigned confusion before inviting them in, assuring them that his wife is nearby, busy baking pie in the next room.

The missionaries' approach to the arched doorway of Mr. Reed's house echoes the symbolic arches of King Solomon's temple and thereby, inversely, the nine circles of Dante's *Inferno*. In Freemasonry, the Royal Arch tradition recounts nine vaulted chambers beneath Solomon's temple, with the ninth containing the sacred name of deity.[51] The arch, in this context, functions as both a literal threshold and a metaphor for initiation, suggesting that the sisters' crossing signifies entry into a place where they will receive instruction.

Mr. Reed's living room is comfortably appointed and well-kept. Decorative statues of birds perch on a shelf: one bird is ascending, the other descending, with an owl at the center, its unblinking eyes observing. A spool of yarn rests in a basket on a nearby chair, and a

51. Cheryl Bruno, Joe Steve Swick III, and Nicholas S. Literski, *Method Infinite: Freemasonry and the Mormon Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2022), 236.

cross-stitched "Bless this Mess" sign confirms the coziness. Mr. Reed leaves the young women alone while he checks on the pie, and they seat themselves on a sofa situated between two six-sided end tables. A third hexagon appears as a window behind them, where Sister Barnes notices a butterfly struggling against the glass. Mr. Reed returns with refreshments—two glasses of caffeinated cola, which the missionaries demurely decline. Though they toe a fine line, they choose to follow their religion's Word of Wisdom.[52]

In a pivotal scene, Mr. Reed confronts Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes with a scathing challenge to their faith and the narrative they are sent to share. As Sister Paxton begins her earnest retelling of Joseph Smith's vision and the restoration of the gospel, Reed interrupts, revealing that he already knows the story. Producing a well-marked Book of Mormon from his cabinet, he dismantles their confidence, citing controversial episodes from early LDS history, including Joseph Smith's alleged affair with Fanny Alger, often regarded as a shadowy precursor to the Church's practice of polygamy.[53] Reed's barrage of questions

52. Doctrine and Covenants 89:18–19. "And all saints who remember to keep and do these sayings, walking in obedience to the commandments, shall receive health in their navel and marrow to their bones; *And shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures*" (emphasis added).

53. Mr. Reed raises the issue of Fanny Alger, with whom, by some accounts, Joseph had an unorthodox marital arrangement. See Brian C. Hales, "Encouraging Joseph Smith to Practice Plural Marriage: The Accounts of the Angel with a Drawn Sword," *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 2 (2010): 55–72. Assuming Mr. Reed is right, and Joseph Smith had a nonmonogamous relationship with Fanny Alger at the behest of an angel with a flaming sword, it wouldn't have been the first time such a thing happened. Allegedly, John Dee and Edward Kelley were likewise so commanded, being instructed to swap wives by such an angelic being, which "proposed that the two men should have, as Dee puts it, 'had our two wives in such sort, as we might use them in common', though he declares himself unsure as whether the 'sense were of carnal use.'" Stephen Clucas, ed., *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 287.

and accusations cuts through Sister Paxton's rehearsed fervor, forcing the missionaries to confront the complexities and imperfections of their faith. The moment leaves the sisters visibly shaken, exposing the vulnerability beneath their conviction and setting the stage for deeper questions about belief, truth, and redemption.

With the tension in the room rising, Reed moves deeper into the house. After inventing a reason to stay back momentarily, Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes exchange panicked glances and move toward the door, only to discover it is locked. Paxton twists the knob desperately, her movements growing more frantic with each failed attempt. Their bikes are also secured outside, but the key to the locks is in Barnes's coat pocket—rendered useless now that Mr. Reed has taken their coats to another room. The realization sets in like a heavy weight: they are trapped. The locked door, an unyielding barrier, seems to mirror their entrapment in a situation far darker and more complex than either had anticipated.

Within esoteric traditions, as well as in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the key—like the one Sister Barnes slipped in her pocket—functions as more than a practical tool. The act of holding or transferring a "key" often reflects the passing of authority and the responsibility to both reveal and conceal hidden truths. This symbolism aligns with Solomonic magic, where King Solomon's legendary wisdom and control over spiritual forces are said to have granted him access to the universe's secrets. Collected in grimoires like the *Greater Key of Solomon* and *Lesser Key of Solomon*, these practices symbolize the key as a tool to unlock spiritual gateways and command the hidden forces of nature.[54]

54. Aaron Leitch, *Secrets of the Magickal Grimoires: The Classical Texts of Magick Deciphered*. (Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2005); Lon Milo DuQuette, *The Key to Solomon's Key: Secrets of Magic and Masonry* (San Francisco: CCC Publishing, 2006).

The three hexagons add another layer of esoteric meaning, representing equilibrium and transformation in sacred geometry. In *Obeliscus Pamphilius* (1650), Athanasius Kircher drew connections between the six-sided hexagram, metaphysical principles, and geometrical forms.[55] This symbol, long known as the Seal of Solomon, embodies balance, unity, and the intersection of the divine and the earthly. In esoteric symbolism, the hexagram holds profound significance, representing balance, harmony, and the interconnectedness of the universe, particularly in its association with King Solomon, known for his wisdom.

However, when multiplied or repeated, the hexagon can take on darker connotations, especially within occult traditions. Each hexagon is a six-sided shape, and the repetition of three hexagons—whether as physical objects or symbolic motifs—produces the number 666, commonly known as the "number of the beast" from Revelation 13:18.[56] Thus, in Mr. Reed's home, the triad of hexagons subtly reinforces the

55. Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Stuart Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

56. Aleister Crowley famously adopted the title "The Great Beast 666" as a deliberate act of rebellion against conventional religion and as a symbol of his role as a spiritual and occult pioneer. Drawing from the Book of Revelation, Crowley embraced the number 666 not as a mark of evil but as a representation of humanity's full potential and liberation from restrictive moral codes. He reinterpreted the number as a symbol of enlightenment and cosmic energy, aligning it with his philosophy of Thelema, which emphasized the pursuit of one's true will as the highest spiritual goal. This self-designation encapsulated his provocative persona and his mission to challenge societal norms. See Aleister Crowley, *The Magical Diaries of Aleister Crowley: Tunisia 1923*, edited by Stephen Skinner (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1996); Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, revised and expanded edition (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2010); and Gary Lachman, *Aleister Crowley: Magick, Rock and Roll, and the Wickedest Man in the World* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2014).

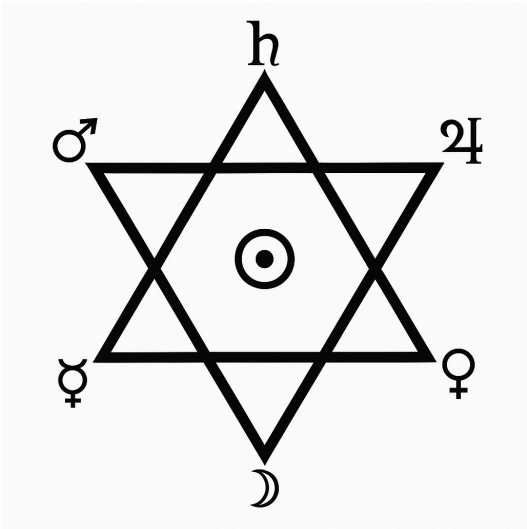

Figure 1. The Hexagram of Nature. J. Daniel Gunther. *Initiation into the Aeon of the Abyss* (Lake Worth, Fla.: Ibis Press, 2014), 38.

idea that the missionaries have entered a domain governed by illusion, limitation, and a veiled, malevolent force.

The room's elements—its locked door, ticking clocks, and geometric order—suggest the missionaries are caught within a constructed reality where time and space converge to demand transformation. Meanwhile, the butterfly trapped against the hexagonal window mirrors the sisters' predicament, symbolizing their struggle to break free. The window, with its liminal placement, becomes not merely a portal but a representation of the paradox of their initiation: they cannot leave the space; they must go through it.

B. Act 2: The Adept Gains Wisdom

i) The Chapel: Sacred Geometry and Transformative Space

The missionaries descend a dark hallway, passing through shadows, into Mr. Reed's chapel, where the space around them seems to shift and take on a new, otherworldly dimension. *Heretic* employs spatial dynamics as a symbolic tool, using distinctive shapes and geometry to evoke deeper metaphysical meanings. Through its intricate use of

sacred geometry, the film converts physical space into a symbol for spiritual transformation, crafting a narrative grounded in the esoteric principle that space itself can act as a conduit for divine understanding.

The esoteric concept of sacred geometry holds a key to the chapel's clues. This connection between space, geometry, and spiritual truth echoes a tradition that fascinated figures like King James of England, best known for commissioning the King James Bible.[57] His intellectual curiosity in the esoteric was shaped by scholars like Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie, whose 1578 *La Galliade, ou de la révolution des arts et sciences* proposed that Gothic cathedral builders employed "sacred geometry" inspired by Pythagorean and ancient Hebrew mathematical traditions. Sacred geometry, in this context, was not merely practical but a way to unlock divine order, revealing cosmic truths embedded in the structure of the universe.

More recently, the twentieth-century alchemist Fulcanelli further explored this concept of space as a transformative agent in *Le Mystère des Cathédrales (The Mystery of the Cathedrals)*.[58] Fulcanelli argued that cathedrals were far more than religious monuments; they were, in essence, books written on "pages of sculptured stone,"[59] encoded with the secrets of alchemy and the "great work." The architectural designs of Gothic cathedrals were seen not just as impressive feats of engineering but as physical manifestations of hidden spiritual truths. Sacred geometry, and its accompanying power to transform physical space into a metaphysical conduit, was supposed to link the earthly realm with the divine.

According to these principles, physical environment becomes a medium for accessing higher knowledge, offering pilgrims and seekers

57. Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision*.

58. Fulcanelli, *The Mystery of the Cathedrals*, translated by Mary Sworder (Brotherhood of Life, Inc., 2000).

59. See Fulcanelli, *The Mystery of the Cathedrals*, 36.

a pathway to enlightenment. In this context, spaces such as the LDS temple or Mr. Reed's house in *Heretic* can be understood as metaphysical pathways. Each space invites seekers to decode its mysteries, guiding them on a journey of awakening to the divine knowledge it holds. These sacred spaces become sites for the soul's journey, where hidden truths await those who are willing to embark on the path of spiritual transformation, and new mysteries discovered by those with the eyes to see.

Ultimately, like pilgrims to cathedrals or participants in temple ceremonies, the missionaries find themselves not just surrounded by symbols but standing in one. The house itself, with its deliberately distorted geometry, religious iconography, and interplay of light and shadow, becomes a transformative space. The transition from the living rooms hexagons to the chapel's three-dimensional cube suggests that this chamber, with its careful proportions and Saturnian symbolism, was not merely a chapel but a liminal space where the boundaries between the profane and the sacred are blurred, and the veil separating the mundane and the transcendent begins to dissolve.

This dimensional shift occurs as the rectangular door through which Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes enter assumes a different shape on the other side. The top of the door frame resembles the top half of a hexagon, though the bottom extends outward, expanding into a large room with pointed arches and ribbed vaults reminiscent of Gothic cathedrals. The room's hexagonal footprint (evident later in the film) has its dimensions distorted by transepts bearing altars and religious iconography and the presence of two doors—one green and one purple—positioned on either side of an altar that stands at the fore of the apse.

The missionaries enter the warped symmetry of the chapel through a narrow, dimly lit library, its towering bookshelves packed with ancient texts, sacred writings, and esoteric tomes from myriad traditions. At the head of the room, the altar stands illuminated by two candles, their flickering light casting restless shadows across the space. Behind the

altar, the chapel's architectural design reveals a startling feature: the illusion of a three-dimensional cube, with Mr. Reed positioned at its precise center.

The haunting strains of "Just Like a Butterfly That's Caught in the Rain" drift through the room:

> Here I am praying,
> Brokenly saying,
> "Give me the sun again!"
> Just like a butterfly that's caught in the rain.[60]

Despite the metallic walls of the chapel's exterior, an unexpected phenomenon occurs—water drips from above, a leak in the ceiling. The droplets collect in a *sōzu*, a traditional Japanese water fountain, which tips and resets in a steady, unchanging rhythm.

The dripping water serves as a symbolic bridge between the physical and metaphysical realms. In Christianity, the "living water" of Christ represents spiritual renewal and eternal life, flowing endlessly to cleanse and regenerate the soul.[61] In alchemy, water is the elemental force of dissolution, purifying and breaking down base materials to prepare them for transformation. The dripping water embodies both of these roles, suggesting the potential for transcendence while also marking the relentless passage of time—a passage that occurs within a space bound by the leaden constraints of material existence.

The *sōzu*—which cannot fully stop or contain the flow but merely slows it down—operates with a disciplined precision. Much like the ticking of the two clocks and the structured geometry of the metal-encased house, the *sōzu* serves as another clue to the presence of Saturn, whose symbolism permeates the narrative.

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60. Mort Dixon and Harry M. Woods, "Just Like a Butterfly That's Caught in the Rain," recorded by Annette Hanshaw, 1927. Audio recording.

61. See John 4:10; John 7:37–39 (KJV).

ii) Six Sides of Saturn

In the occult, the hexagon is intimately connected to Saturn, the planet of structure, discipline, and transformation.[62] This connection manifests in the natural hexagonal storm at Saturn's north pole, a phenomenon that has fascinated both scientists and mystics alike.[63] Saturn, in alchemical tradition, is associated with lead, representing the unrefined, base material state that marks the early stages of both material and spiritual purification.[64] This association connects Saturn with the *nigredo* stage of alchemy, known as the "blackening" phase, during which decomposition and putrefaction occur. The nigredo represents the death of the old self, clearing the way for renewal and rebirth—much like the soul's journey through darkness toward enlightenment. "Thus the Sol niger—Saturn—is the shadow of the sun, the sun without justice, which is death for the living," writes Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz.[65]

For millennia (or at least since the *Books of Jeu*), the heavens have been regarded by some believers as a divine map, with the planets embodying higher powers and their movements reflecting cyclical currents of energy that subtly or profoundly shape human experience. Astrology and astronomy have been intertwined within the Western esoteric tradition since the ancient Sumerians first identified the seven classical planets: the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and

62. See Marguerite Mertens-Stienon, *Studies in Symbolism: Theogonic and Astronomical* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1933). Notably, the cube and Saturn motif is evident on the exterior of the Salt Lake Temple's Saturn stones, which line the top of the structure.

63. NASA, "NASA's Cassini Spacecraft Obtains Best Views of Saturn Hexagon," Dec. 4, 2013. https://www.nasa.gov/press/2013/december/nasas-cassini-spacecraft-obtains-best-views-of-saturn-hexagon/.

64. Frater Albertus, *The Alchemist's Handbook* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1974).

65. Marie-Louise von Franz, *Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), 156.

Saturn.[66] These "wandering stars," often referred to as deathless powers, have served as symbols of cosmic forces that influence both the material and spiritual realms.[67] This interplay between celestial and terrestrial realms—captured in the Hermetic axiom "as above, so below"—has guided the mystical seeker's search for meaning, aligning the mysteries of the universe with the rhythms of earthly existence.[68]

Saturn is also connected to Kabbalistic traditions through the third sephirah, Binah, or "understanding."[69] In the Tree of Life, Binah is associated with Saturn and represents the dark waters of creation—the primordial, flowing essence from which all existence emerges. As the supernal mother and queen, Binah embodies the feminine potency of divinity, standing in co-equal relationship with Chokmah, the sphere of wisdom and masculine creative force. Binah is therefore part of the Elohim, the great feminine aspect of God, in whose image both man and woman are formed.[70] Her connection to Saturn emphasizes discipline, limitation, and structure as essential aspects of creation, framing them not as mere restrictions but as the womb through which divine order manifests.

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66. David Godwin, *Godwin's Cabalistic Encyclopedia: A Complete Guide to Cabalistic Magic*, 3rd ed. (St. Paul, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2002), 141.

67. Godwin, *Godwin's Cabalistic Encyclopedia*.

68. According to John French, the translator of Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, Hermes "is said by himself, to be the son of Saturn, and by others to be Scribe of Saturn." Stanton J. Linden, ed., *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 209.

69. Lon Milo DuQuette, et al., *Llewellyn's Complete Book of Ceremonial Magick: A Comprehensive Guide to the Western Mystery Tradition* (Woodbury, Minn.: Llewellyn Publications, 2020), 86.

70. Stephen Skinner and David Rankine, *The Keys to the Gateway of Magic: Summoning the Archangels and Demon Princes* (London: Golden Hoard Press, 2005), 76.

In this context, the black sun (sol niger) symbolizes the hidden light that emerges through this transformative process. Alchemical tradition holds that this stage of darkness, chaos, and confrontation with the shadow self is essential for attaining a deeper, more refined essence. Only by passing through the darkness—whether literal, emotional, or spiritual—can true enlightenment and transformation occur.

iii) The Veil Presents Itself

These symbolic elements reach their peak when, in a pivotal scene, the film cuts between characters, and the camera pans around the room. As the missionaries take in the surrounding details, they notice a striking alteration: the door through which they entered has vanished, replaced by a shroud of dark red—nearly black—curtains: *a dark veil*.

Here at the veil, Reed presents a lecture on the nature of religion, suggesting that all religious systems are simply variations of one another (think Christopher Hitchens, just more psychotic). Building his board game analogy, he likens religion's iterations to Monopoly and its predecessor, The Landlord's Game. He then presents Barnes and Paxton with the chilling choice between two doors: one for believers and one for non-believers. However, both doors lead to the same horrifying destination: a damp, hexagonal cellar, highlighting the futility of the choice and the inescapable cycle they are trapped within. This mirrors Gnostic teachings, where the illusion of choice is manipulated by the Demiurge, keeping souls bound to endless cycles of suffering and rebirth.

As the black curtain rises, revealing a female form reclining in luminous serenity, flanked by Shiva in his cosmic dance and twelve deities who echo the savior archetype, though confined within static frames—boundaries of tradition and doctrine. Amid twelve framed male deities, Sister Paxton must confront a new and demanding teaching. This is no longer a matter of rote belief or passive learning; it is an invitation to awaken to her own divinity. Sister Barnes dispels Sister Paxton's doubts, and the pair chooses belief and descends the staircase into another hexagonal space.

iv) The Cellar

After some tension-building interactions between Mr. Reed and a diligent, if insensible, ward mission leader, Elder Kennedy (Topher Grace), Barnes is able to pull a match—a source of light—into the darkness. Earlier, when they first stepped into the basement, she had climbed onto a table like a sacrificial altar and dislodged a wooden plank, embedded with three nails. Right after, she hides the plank behind a pillar and passes a letter opener she retrieved earlier to Paxton, then creates a code phrase, "magic underwear," to signal their plan. Paxton tucks the dagger into her pocket just as a shrouded figure carrying a lantern enters the room. The figure holds a pie, with the fire of the lantern flickering, illuminating the water, which is now trickling with more force than before.

Reed declares the woman is a prophet who will eat the pie—which he's poisoned—and die; but, as a miraculous confirmation his is the "one, true religion," she will be reborn. The missionaries perceive something that appears to Paxton to be the woman's resurrection, though Barnes challenges Reed on what they actually witnessed.

Confronting Reed about the supposed "miracle," Barnes starts to say the code phrase. However, as Paxton rushes toward Reed with the letter opener, Reed abruptly slices Barnes's throat with a razor, the act swift and brutal, leaving her bloodied and vulnerable, marking the end of her guiding presence and the beginning of Paxton's own inevitable transformation.

C. Act 3: Climax and Transformation

i) The Dungeon

As Barnes lies bleeding out, Reed coldly removes a metal object from her arm, declaring it a microchip that proves the world is a simulation. In a moment of clarity, Paxton recognizes the object as a contraceptive implant, exposing Reed's elaborate deception. It becomes clear that Reed has orchestrated the entire scenario to manipulate and dominate them, using fear and illusion as his tools. Paxton's growing awareness

culminates in a horrifying discovery: a hidden chamber filled with emaciated women confined in cages—victims of Reed's twisted power. This revelation cements Paxton's realization that Reed views religion and spirituality not as paths to truth but as instruments of control and subjugation.

Here, Mr. Reed emerges as a type of Demiurge, the flawed and malevolent creator in Gnostic cosmology. Like the Demiurge, Reed traps souls within his illusory domain, obscuring their path to higher spiritual knowledge. His house, with its oppressive architecture and labyrinthine chambers, mirrors the material world described in Gnostic teachings as a deceptive construct—a prison of illusion designed to ensnare and mislead. The interplay of architecture, ritual, and character within the film's first act also draws heavily on the esoteric symbols of Saturn, a planetary force associated with adversity, limitation, and ultimately transformation.

Earlier, in the living room, the film cryptically reveals that Paxton is the youngest of eight daughters, inviting an unsettling interpretation: the six caged women and the "prophet" who died after eating the pie may symbolize previous incarnations—or iterations—of Paxton herself, each born, trapped, and destroyed within Reed's constructed reality. This framing aligns with the Gnostic view of the soul's imprisonment in the Demiurge's domain, forever cycling through futile existence without the liberating knowledge of gnosis. Paxton finds herself trapped in an ouroboric cycle—a Möbius strip of existence symbolized by the serpent devouring its own tail—engineered by Reed, who sustains his power through her perpetual entrapment.

In Jewish mysticism, the doctrine of *gilgul* describes the soul's reincarnation as a process of rectification or spiritual growth, not too dissimilar from the Hindu and Buddhist cycle of *samsara*, where liberation (*moksha*) is the ultimate goal. Similarly, in Western esotericism, metempsychosis explores the soul's movement between forms as a means of redemption or learning. Yet as Sophia's fall from the Pleroma

into materiality symbolizes humanity's descent, her eventual redemption represents the possibility of spiritual restoration through wisdom. As a guide, she helps others return to the divine.

After Paxton has figured out Reed's religion of control, she stabs him with the letter opener and tries to escape but isn't successful because of the house's disorienting architecture. Catching up with her, Reed stabs Paxton in the stomach with his box cutter. Not long after, Sister Barnes rises as if from the dead and delivers a decisive blow to Reed's head with the wooden plank from earlier, giving Paxton an opportunity to escape. Sister Barnes's self-sacrifice catalyzes Sister Paxton's ultimate triumph. Her act mirrors the Gnostic savior who illuminates the path to liberation for others. Barnes's temporary resurrection reflects divine intervention, underscoring the film's exploration of reclaiming light from darkness. Together, these themes highlight the redemptive power of gnosis, sacrifice, and the pursuit of spiritual liberation

The arcs of Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes mirror Sophia's archetypal journey. Their suffering and ultimate empowerment reflect the tales of descent and redemption found throughout the Western esoteric tradition: in rejecting Mr. Reed's oppressive system, they reclaim their divine potential and serve as symbols of the feminine as a source of wisdom and spiritual liberation. Their defiance transforms them into redemptive figures, subverting the systems of control imposed by Reed and reclaiming the divine light.

In the climactic moments, Paxton whispers a prayer and finds an act of kindness within herself, enabling her to survive her ordeal through the indescribable power of prayer. She uses her own wits to solve Mr. Reed's final puzzle, escaping through a narrow portal, a liminal space that hints at both physical and spiritual release. *Heretic* ends on an ambiguous note, leaving the audience with unanswered questions. The film resists full decoding, much like the enigmatic forces it portrays, demanding the viewer to grapple with its layered symbols and unanswered mysteries.

The Modern LDS Endowment and its Journey of Ascent

In addition to using LDS missionaries as protagonists, *Heretic*'s inversion of archetypal ascent journeys draws other parallels to Mormonism, particularly in the LDS temple endowment's ritualized enactment of ascending from a fallen, earthly state to divine exaltation. The ceremony guides initiates through a symbolic ascent, paralleling the Gnostic tension between the ascent to spiritual realms and the descent into material bondage. Smith's temple rites similarly transform the structure of the temple into a sacred space, where esoteric truths are encoded within ritual, architecture, and dimensional transformation.

President Russell M. Nelson explained that for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the temple is "a house of learning," where individuals are taught "in the Master's way," which is "ancient and rich with symbolism."[71] President Boyd K. Packer likewise taught that "if you will go to the temple and remember that the teaching is symbolic," individuals will find themselves with "a vision extended" and their "knowledge increased as to things that are spiritual."[72] This perspective reflects the notion that sacred spaces, such as the LDS temple, use symbolic instruction to convey hidden, spiritual truths that are accessible only to those prepared to receive them.

In *Heretic*, Reed's home acts as an "anti-temple" and serves as a critique of the perversion of sacred spaces into tools of control and power. In contrast, the modern LDS endowment strives to preserve the integrity of sacred space as a site for spiritual enlightenment and personal communion with God. Paxton's journey begins with the mockery of her "magic underwear" by strangers for whom she had just expressed innocent love. When she is stabbed at the end, it is in her navel, part

71. Russell M. Nelson, "Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings," Apr. 2001, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2001/04/personal-preparation-for-temple-blessings?lang=eng.

72. Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 32.

of the body commonly associated with health and vitality. In the end, the "magic underwear" that earned the derision and scorn of the girls at the crosswalk may well save her. When she is stabbed, she survives (and awakens), reaffirming the transformative potential of true sacred experience.

Themes of power and redemption run through both the LDS endowment and *Heretic*, but with contrasting outcomes. The endowment's "endowment of power" symbolizes spiritual empowerment through divine knowledge and enlightenment, often associated with the Tree of Life. Reed's perverse "endowment of knowledge" seeks to subjugate participants through indoctrination. Yet, characters like Sister Paxton and Sister Barnes reclaim these symbols, embodying the true empowerment intended by sacred rituals. Their journey reflects a triumph over Reed's counterfeit power, aligning with the transformative ideals of the endowment.

A. The Temple Ceremony

Designed to instruct participants about God's plan for humanity, the LDS temple ceremony is a ritualized, transformative experience intended to deepen spiritual understanding and prepare participants for a closer connection to the divine. The endowment unfolds through several distinct stages, each associated with a specific room within the temple. These stages, through their symbolic language and ritualistic progression, chart a path of spiritual purification and ascension.

Participants embark on a spiritual journey through a series of symbolic rooms that reflect the Creation, humanity's divine purpose, and the plan of salvation. This progression culminates in the celestial room, representing communion with God and eternal life. Each space fosters enlightenment, offering sacred teachings and opportunities for covenant-making.

By contrast, *Heretic* reimagines this structure with Mr. Reed's "instruction room," a distorted counterpart that indoctrinates participants into a twisted "religion of control." Instead of leading toward

divine understanding, Reed's ritual emphasizes manipulation and despair, subverting the spiritual intent of such rites. This inversion underscores one of the film's central themes: the corruption of sacred rituals to sustain oppressive ideologies.

The structure of Mr. Reed's house inverts the symbolic principles and spatial progression of the LDS temple endowment ceremony, creating a distorted mirror of spiritual transformation. The film opens in Mr. Reed's living room, the best room in his house, a stark reversal of the temple's progression, where the room representing glory—the celestial room—comes at the end, symbolizing the culmination of spiritual ascent. Instead of moving toward greater light and understanding, participants in Reed's chapel journey deeper into confusion and darkness, reflecting a deliberate subversion of divine order.

The film's use of the black veil further emphasizes this inversion. In the temple, the veil signifies the boundary between mortal life and the divine presence, symbolizing spiritual ascent into God's glory.[73] Reed's black veil, however, represents the opposite: a descent into a shadowed, corrupted understanding. It denies participants access to transcendent truth, confining them within the material and mortal world. Each space within Reed's chapel reflects this unsettling reversal, where the intended path of purification and enlightenment becomes a descent into spiritual disarray, twisting the sacred principles into their dark antithesis. Through these inversions, *Heretic* critiques the misuse of sacred rituals and the fragility of spiritual progress when corrupted by human influence.

Spatial symbolism plays a critical role in highlighting this subversion. The LDS endowment ceremony is an upward journey, symbolically

73. James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1912); Daniel C. Peterson, "The Temple as a Place of Ascent to God," paper presented at 2009 FairMormon Conference, available online at https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2009/the-temple-as-a-place-of-ascent-to-god/.

ascending toward divine presence. Participants move from external purification ("washings and anointings") through rooms that represent Creation, the Fall, and humanity's spiritual progression, culminating in the celestial room. In *Heretic*, this ascent is reversed. Participants descend deeper into the earth, moving toward a literal and symbolic hell. The downward progression mirrors spiritual degradation, starkly contrasting the uplifting and aspirational nature of the temple journey. This deliberate reversal reinforces Mr. Reed's authoritarian worldview, where domination replaces divine communion.

Similarly, the LDS endowment ceremony symbolically represents an ascent toward God's presence, paralleling the Gnostic journey of spiritual ascent. Participants progress through symbolic stages—Creation, the Fall, and redemption—that culminate at the veil, a gateway to divine communion. This structured journey mirrors the Gnostic soul's ascent through cosmic barriers to reunite with the divine Pleroma, emphasizing spiritual growth and preparation for eternal life. This structured journey emphasizes spiritual growth and preparation for eternal life.

In contrast, as discussed below, the anti-endowment in *Heretic* subverts this concept. Upon leaving the outer world and entering Mr. Reed's prison world, Sister Barnes and Sister Paxton are seated in a room with a hexagonal window. The geometry of the hexagon holds rich symbolic significance within esoteric traditions, where it is often linked to the planet Saturn and its associated themes of structure, limitation, and adversity. The six-sided figure, appearing in nature through patterns like honeycombs and Saturn's polar hexagonal storm, represents the interplay between order and chaos.

From an esoteric perspective, *Heretic* engages with archetypal themes of ascent and descent, light versus darkness, and the tension between liberation and subjugation. Reed's descent into hell reflects an anti-endowment steeped in occult dualities: every act of creation or ascent has its shadow counterpart. This descent into chaos contrasts

with Sister Paxton's eventual empowerment, which embodies the esoteric ideal of self-realization and mastery over external forces.

B. Inverting the Sacred

The progression of rooms in the LDS temple ceremony mirrors an archetypal journey of spiritual ascent and enlightenment, structured to guide participants through layers of symbolic understanding. Beginning in the initiatory room, participants are symbolically cleansed and prepared for the sacred journey. They proceed to the creation room, where the formation of the world and humanity's entry into existence are reenacted, setting the stage for themes of divine order. The garden room follows, evoking a state of innocence and harmony with God before the Fall. Participants then enter the world room, representing the trials and challenges of a fallen, sinful world. Ascending further, they reach the terrestrial room, a space of greater light and understanding, where spiritual progression culminates in preparation for passing through the veil. Beyond the veil lies the celestial room, symbolizing divine glory and union with God, and in some temples, the Holy of Holies serves as the sacred core of communion with the divine. This journey reflects a deeply Gnostic and esoteric narrative of descent, testing, and ascent, designed to transform the individual by guiding them from the profane to the sacred.

In *Heretic*, the rooms of Mr. Reed's house stand as a dark inversion of this sacred journey, critiquing the misuse of spiritual authority and faith. The basement theatre, where Reed conducts his experiments, represents a perverse testing ground—a corrupted counterpart to the temple's world room—where the labyrinthine structure serves to manipulate and break rather than refine and elevate. Ascending through the house, the occult chamber, filled with trinkets and a skull, echoes esoteric traditions but reduces their transformative potential to tools of power and control. At the center of the house lies the chapel room, with its makeshift altar and religious icons, symbolizing

a disjointed, eclectic faith that binds rather than liberates. The design of the chapel, with Reed standing in a cube that echoes the hexagonal window from earlier, underscores the distortion of sacred geometry, transforming symbols of freedom and unity into those of confinement. Like the LDS temple, the structure of Reed's house reflects a narrative of transformation, but in *Heretic*, it is deliberately corrupted to critique spiritual manipulation. Together, the temple and the house present parallel but opposing journeys, one seeking enlightenment and unity with God, the other highlighting the destructive potential of misused faith.

Conclusion

The LDS endowment offers a framework for transcendence. Its symbolic teachings—delivered through signs, covenants, and sacred tools like the compass and square—emphasize mastery and co-creation within the divine order. These symbols affirm the potential for individuals to transcend deception and embrace universal truths. *Heretic* critiques the corruption of such sacred, symbolic frameworks while also reclaiming their transformative potential through its protagonists' resistance and triumph.

Ultimately, *Heretic* operates as a meditation on the tension between institutionalized religion and personal spiritual transformation. By subverting the structure and symbolism of the LDS endowment, the film critiques how rituals can be distorted to sustain power. However, it also celebrates the reclamation of spiritual agency, offering a counternarrative to oppression. Sister Paxton's eventual empowerment and escape shatter Reed's false veil, revealing its illusory nature and enabling her spiritual liberation.

Through its exploration of Gnosticism, sacred spaces, and Joseph Smith's religious legacy, *Heretic* illuminates the universal quest for enlightenment and serves as a modern iteration of the Sophia myth.

The collision of the sacred and the profane challenges viewers to consider how rituals, spaces, and individual journeys shape humanity's search for transcendence, reminding us of the enduring relevance of Gnostic ideas in contemporary storytelling, whether revealed through sacred rites or just a night at the movies.

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WHITE IS AN ITE: THE BOOK OF MORMON'S MISAPPROPRIATION OF THE IROQUOIS GREAT LAW OF PEACE

Thomas W Murphy

> *And now behold, it came to pass that the people of Nephi . . . became an exceeding fair and delightsome people. . . . [N]either were there Lamanites nor any manner of ites, but they were one, the children of Christ*
>
> *—4 Nephi 1:10, 17*[1]

The Book of Mormon's portrayal of a great peace that followed the climatic appearance of Jesus Christ in ancient America presents a conundrum. The people of Nephi reportedly became especially "white," a label that is described simultaneously as *not* an "ite." On the one hand, the narrator Mormon represented the "people of Nephi" as "fair and delightsome."[2] Yet, a few verses later he declared that there

1. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 643–44. A special thank you to Kerrie Sumner Murphy, Hemopereki Simon, Manuel Padro, Max Mueller, and Angelo Baca for responding constructively to draft forms of this essay, which synthesizes ideas presented more fully in Thomas W Murphy, *Unsettling Scripture: Iroquois and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2026).

2. The term "fair," as used here, appears to be a synonym for the label "white"—especially given its pairing with "and delightsome," as in "white and delightsome"—a phrase used earlier in the original text to describe anticipated changes following Lamanite "knowledge of Christ" (2 Ne. 30:5–6). Skousen, *Earliest Text*, 148. Likewise, the term "people of Nephi" appears to be a synonym for the ethnonym "Nephite" commonly used throughout the text.

were no longer "any manner of ites." The paradox in this portrayal is that Nephites, even if they absorbed whitened Lamanites and renamed themselves the people of Nephi, remained rather literally (wh)ites. Put more bluntly, the label "white"—just like "Lamanite" and "Nephite"—remains an ite.

In his 2017 book, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, historian Max Perry Mueller confronts the same troubling passage from Fourth Nephi, noting that "Lamanites and Nephites unified to become one raceless (white) Christian people." Mueller recognizes an unseemly paradox: "whiteness is the racial category that is, ironically, empty of race." White is presented as "the original and universal racial category" as well as a mutable one: "within the Book of Mormon hermeneutic of restoration whiteness becomes an aspirational identity, which even those cursed with blackness can achieve."[3] In his 2024 book, *The Testimony of Two Nations*, Michael Austin, provost of Snow College, applauds the mutability of curses and races in the Book of Mormon. Austin asserts that in contrast to curses in biblical texts, "The curse in the Book of Mormon is reversible and tied clearly to continuing behavior." He suggests that despite "the overt racism in some of its passages concerning race and skin color, it [the Book of Mormon] injected something genuinely new in to the divine-curse-as-racial-etiology genre of scripture."[4]

3. Max P. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 42–43.

4. Michael Austin, *The Testimony of Two Nations: How the Book of Mormon Reads, and Rereads the Bible* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024), 67. Narratives of racial mutability were neither novel nor unique in 1820s New York and New England. They can be found in the writings of Protestant missionaries, ceremonial magicians, novelists, proto-ethnographers, and Revolutionary War veterans. See Matthew W. Dougherty, *Lost Tribes Found: Israelite Indians and Religious Nationalisms in Early America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021), 176, n27; Thomas W Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites: Native Americans and the Book of Mormon" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2003), 18–24, 75–76, https://www.academia.edu/10367006/; D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View, Revised and Enlarged* (Salt Lake

I seek to unsettle this applause by highlighting Indigenous readings of the Book of Mormon that expose its broader colonial implications. Is the narrator Mormon's suggestion of racial mutability actually something novel to be praised or might it be, instead, a rather common but disguised instrument of settler colonial erasure?

Overview

I offer an approach to answering this question that draws from critical Indigenous studies methodology to center Indigenous perspectives. I begin with an overview of recent Indigenous scholarship on whiteness and Mormon settler colonialism, including a discussion of how the recognition of my own settler positionality informs this analysis. I then step back in time to the mid-twentieth century to illustrate with a concrete example the harmful deployment of the Book of Mormon's great peace narrative in the formulation of a federal Indian policy of termination by Latter-day Saint politicians. This effort to deploy the power of the federal government to turn American Indians white sparked a backlash from Indigenous activists who defended their sovereignty, in part, by alleging that Joseph Smith misappropriated an oral version of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Great Law of Peace[5] in his construction of the Book of Mormon. I then take this allegation seriously by reviewing circumstantial evidence from the early nineteenth century supporting a possible oral transmission of Haudenosaunee narratives followed by an examination of written sources that were also available

City: Signature Books, 1998), 153–55; Scott Michaelsen, *The Limits of Multiculturalism: Interrogating the Origins of American Anthropology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 59–76; Thomas W Murphy, *Unsettling Scripture: Iroquois and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2026).

5. Throughout this article, I refer to a "great peace" in the Book of Mormon, the Great Law of Peace (an oral narrative and wampum text), and the Great Peace (the political event heralded by the Great Law of Peace).

in the late 1820s prior to the dictation of the extant Book of Mormon. I then conclude with a juxtaposition of the narrator Mormon's portrayal of a great peace with that of the results of a similar Peacemaker in Iroquois accounts to reveal the settler colonial erasure of Indigenous sovereignty undergirding the racial politics of the Book of Mormon.

Throughout this essay, I feature Indigenous interpretations not simply for the historical claims that they make. More importantly, these narratives—regardless of whether or not they can be substantiated by the historical record—do very important cultural work. These narratives contest the silencing implicit in the assumed settler privilege of telling stories about Native origins by countering with stories of their own about how Mormons came to be. Intriguingly, Mormon narratives about how American Indians came to be and Indigenous etiologies of Book of Mormon origins share in the assumption that there is a kinship between their differing accounts of an ancient great peace. Indigenous stories embrace this kinship, not by erasing Mormon stories but by supplementing them with alternatives that feature living Indigenous neophytes rather than dead white Nephites.

Juxtaposing these related traditions by giving voice to unsettling Indigenous stories leads to the troubling realization that white, too, is an ite. The narrator Mormon's portrait of a seemingly raceless society looks a little too much like a settler colonial body politic that manufactures peace by erasing Indigenous cultures and identities. Hallmarks of settler colonialism embedded within Mormon's narrative include the production of alternative histories favoring settler perspectives alongside the elimination, displacement, and/or absorption of Indigenous peoples into a homogenous polity stripped of Indigenous sovereignty. The Book of Mormon functions in this respect as a settler colonial document that seeks to replace Indigenous stories of their own origins and histories with one that subordinates ancestors of Indigenous peoples within narratives of an origin outside of Turtle Island (North America). The false political narrative that one can be white (or pure) and raceless

has done considerable harm to Indigenous communities, particularly when Latter-day Saint politicians in the mid-twentieth century drew from these same teachings in the Book of Mormon to construct a settler colonial state policy of termination, directed toward eliminating Indigenous sovereignty in the United States.

Indigenous activists who led a counteroffensive opposing the termination policies advocated by Latter-day Saint politicians recognized and took strategic aim at the roots of termination in Book of Mormon theology. In defense of their imperiled sovereignty, Indigenous knowledge keepers identified this Book of Mormon story as an overly Christianized variant of a larger body of Haudenosaunee oral history of the arrival of a Peacemaker who helped found a confederacy uniting Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and (later) Tuscaroras under a Great Law of Peace prior to the arrival of colonists from Europe.[6] They attributed the presence of the Great Peace and other allusions to Iroquois narratives in the Book of Mormon to an oral transmission of these stories to Joseph Smith prior to his dictation of the Book of Mormon. This etiology ought to be taken more seriously by scholars. In fact, I identify several Haudenosaunee individuals from the historical record who would have potentially had the opportunity to share these stories with Joseph Smith as well as some written sources he may have encountered. More importantly, I consider how we might read Third and Fourth Nephi differently when viewed within the larger body of Six Nations literature on the Great Law of Peace.

None of the Haudenosaunee versions depict the Peacemaker as white, portray an ancient white civilization on Turtle Island, or imagine

6. In 1722, closely related Tuscaroras from the eastern seaboard would relocate and join these Five Nations to become the League of Six Nations. Today, traditional Haudenosaunee lands, dotted with several reservations, span like a longhouse across western New York and into parts of Pennsylvania, Ontario, and Quebec. In the nineteenth century, under political pressure from settlers, some Oneidas, Cayugas, and Senecas removed from their traditional lands to what are now Wisconsin, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

a white society as the ultimate goal of peacemaking endeavors. Some Indigenous variants identify the Peacemaker with Jesus, but they insist on his autochthonous origin on Turtle Island. Haudenosaunee narratives depict the league initiated by the Peacemaker as a shared matrilocal longhouse where each matrilineal nation maintains its own sovereignty and clan mothers manage the communal ownership of land. Only a couple of secondhand settler colonial versions of the Great Law of Peace from the twentieth century associate the Peacemaker or the Six Nations with whiteness.[7] These, much like the Book of Mormon, are settler accounts with questionable connections back to Indigenous communities.

Critical Indigenous Studies

I grew up in white settler Latter-day Saint communities of southern Idaho in the 1970s and '80s hearing stories of an Iroquois "princess" in our family tree. We were taught as children that our family had become "white and delightsome" through adoption of the Christian gospel as represented by the Book of Mormon. These stories propelled a scholarly interest in anthropology of the Book of Mormon and, eventually, critical Indigenous studies. As I learned to recognize my own implication within the structures of settler colonialism, I began to question the hidden presumptions in our genealogical narratives and Latter-day Saint scripture. I realized that as citizens of a settler state we were deploying stories of Indigenous ancestors in a manner that sought to legitimate our participation in the displacement of our Native neighbors. In living the Book of Mormon ideal of whiteness, we erased the stories of our Indigenous ancestors. Over the past decade, I have sought to recover those stories and found myself stunned and surprised by an unanticipated entanglement of Haudenosaunee narratives with those

7. See examples cited below. A broader and deeper analysis of these materials is available in Murphy, *Unsettling Scripture*.

in the Book of Mormon.[8] I have also found that our familial readings of the Book of Mormon privileging whiteness did not resonate in the same manner for many Indigenous readers of the sacred text. For these readers, whiteness was neither desirable nor beneficial. Even if imagined as raceless, absorption into a "white" settler colonial state included a loss of indigeneity and a forfeit of sovereignty.

The Pawnee Latter-day Saint Larry J. Echo Hawk, writing in 1975—decades before he served as a General Authority Seventy (2012–2018) in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—objected to the expectation that Christianized Indigenous bodies must change. The Book of Mormon "says we will be white and delightsome people someday. I like the color I am. In fact, I don't know any Indian who wants to change."[9] In the 2008 film *In Laman's Terms* directed by the Diné and Hopi anthropologist Angelo Baca, Forrest Cuch (Ute), then director of the Utah Division of Indian Affairs, bluntly stated "certainly, certainly we are not going to turn white someday. Because there are a few of us who don't care to do that. Frankly, I am perfectly happy being the color of the

8. Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites"; Thomas W Murphy, "Decolonization on the Salish Sea: A Tribal Journey back to Mormon Studies," in *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Post-Colonial Zion*, edited by Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018); Thomas W Murphy, "Grave Consequences: On Revelation and Repatriation," in *Blossom as the Cliffrose: Mormon Legacies and the Beckoning Wild*, edited by Karin Anderson and Danielle Beazer Dubrasky (Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2021); Thomas W Murphy, Kerrie Sumner Murphy, and Jessyca Brigette Murphy, "An Indian Princess and a Mormon Sacagawea? Decolonizing Memories of our Grandmothers," *Journal of the Mormon Social Science Association* 1, no. 1 (2022): 93–121; Thomas W Murphy, "From Patriarchy to Matriachy: A Marital and Spiritual Journey," in *Revising Eternity: 27 Latter-day Saint Men Reflect on Modern Relationships*, edited by Holly Welker (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022).

9. Larry Echo Hawk, "Someone's Concerned About Me," *Ensign*, Dec. 1975, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1975/12/meet-father-lehis-children/larry-echohawk-someones-concerned-about-me?lang=eng/.

earth." Diné actress and writer Monika Crowfoot's mother learned as a participant in the Indian Student Placement Program run by the LDS Church "that Mormon Jesus would turn her cursed brown skin white if she was a righteous Mormon." In a 2020 blog for *Exponent II*, Crowfoot described a childhood "hoping to turn white. But through the years the language changed and it became: 'Oops! We're sorry, did you think it meant literally? No, silly. It was *metaphorical*, duh.'"[10] Can whiteness, whether taken literally or metaphorically, actually function as a raceless category for Indigenous peoples in a settler colonial society?

Māori scholar Gina Colvin, writing in *Dialogue* in 2017, recognized that the concept of a universal "gospel culture" silences Indigenous identities by its mere "impossibility." Colvin illustrated the problem with this and several similar examples: "An existential violence is inflicted upon Māori, and therefore upon the body of Christ . . . when Māori women are asked to surrender their mana to white, male US church authorities, US curriculum, and systems that cause Māori people to culturally disappear." "The gospel culture," Colvin continues, "will not make Māori white, nor will it teach them to be proud of the color of their skin." This "injunction to live a gospel culture" is not deployed equally within the global church; rather, it "is more often than not directed at the Other."[11] Who, one might note, is expected to become something different, something white?

Māori scholar Hemopereki Simon has issued a formidable challenge to research paradigms in Mormon studies. In a series of articles appearing in academic journals such as *New Sociology*, *Journal for*

10. Monika Crowfoot, "My Apology for My Complicity," *Exponent II* (blog), July 5, 2020, https://www.the-exponent.com/guest-post-my-apology-for-my-complicity/. In 1981 the LDS Church did change the phrase "white and delightsome" in 2 Nephi 30:6 to "pure and delightsome." See Douglas Campbell, "'White' or 'Pure': Five Vignettes," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 119–35; Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites," 92–94.

11. Gina Colvin, "There's No Such Thing as a Gospel Culture," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 57–61.

Cultural and Religious Theory, *Anthropological Forum*, *Culture & Religion*, and *Genealogy*, Simon has "described the need for an intervention in Mormon Studies as an academic discipline."[12] Simon represents the role of Indigenous researchers to be that of "change agents for our communities. We are the key to explaining our point of view to the religious and scholars of religion." Simon invites intercultural dialogue with settler scholars. He encourages them to pay more attention to the "relationship of Mormonism and other restorative traditions to settler colonialism." He questions "the position of whiteness within Mormon culture," prescriptions of Lamanite identities onto Indigenous peoples, and the "destruction of Indigenous cultural heritage" in pursuit of validation for historical claims of the Book of Mormon.[13]

Simon's intervention contributes to a growing body of literature adopting decolonizing methodologies and seeking to bridge the cultural chasms between critical Indigenous and Mormon studies. *Dialogue* has played an important role in these efforts with the publication of special issues in 1985 and 2021 that included pathbreaking articles by the Ute author Lacee A. Harris, Taos Pueblo scholar P. Jane Hafen, Diné writer Monika Brown Crowfoot, and several more Indigenous people challenging derogatory portrayals of Lamanites, American Indians, and

12. Hemopereki Simon, "Hoea Te Waka ki Uta: Critical Kaupapa Māori Research and Mormon Studies Moving Forward," *New Sociology: Journal of Critical Praxis* 3, no. 1 (2022): 1; Hemopereki Simon, "Mormonism and the White Possessive: Moving Critical Indigenous Studies Theory into the Religious Realm," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 21, no. 3 (2022): 331–62; Hemopereki Simon, "A Kauapapa Māori Intervention on Apology for LDS Church's Racism, Zombie Concepts, and Moving Forward," *Anthropological Forum* 33, no. 2 (2023): 118–45; Hemopereki Simon, "Rolling Our Eyes Toward God: An Intervention Arising from Mormon Missionary YouTube Activity and the Cultural (Mis)Appropriation of Haka," *Culture & Religion* 23, no. 1 (2023): 46–80; Hemopereki Simon, "Genealogical Violence: Mormon (Mis) Appropriation of Māori Cultural Memory through Falsification of Whakapapa," *Genealogy* 8, no. 12 (2024).

13. Simon, "Hoea Te Waka ki Uta," 1–2, 6–7.

Native Americans in Latter-day Saint discourse. Two anthologies from the University of Utah Press, *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion* and *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*, bring together Indigenous and settler editors and authors in a series of essays that resist hegemony by centering Indigenous perspectives on Mormonism and the Book of Mormon.[14] Dakota historian Elise Boxer's *Mormon Settler Colonialism: Inventing the Lamanite* is the first book-length monograph to examine the Book of Mormon through the lens of settler colonialism and to interrogate cultural genocide in the separation of Indigenous children from their families in a Church-sponsored foster program.[15] This essay builds upon and responds to this growing body of postcolonial scholarship.

Viewed through a lens of critical Indigenous studies, the expression of Mormon's version of the Iroquois Great Peace as raceless whiteness exemplifies what Hemopereki Simon calls a "religious environment" that "reproduces the hidden racial ontology" that operates as a "discourse of silencing." These silencing strategies function by "mediating ignorance about the structuring force of colonization."[16] Kanaka ʻŌiwi scholar Hōkūlani K. Aikau describes the persistence of whiteness, whether metaphorical or literal, within Mormonism "as a privileged state of being and the sign of salvation" that is "part and parcel of a settler colonial project intent on territorial expropriation of native land."[17] Diné scholar Moroni Benally concurs, observing that the Book of Mormon often functions as "a tool of erasure for Indigenous

14. Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, eds., *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018); P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink, eds., *Essays on American Indian & Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019).

15. Elise Boxer, *Mormon Settler Colonialism: Inventing the Lamanite* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2025).

16. Simon, "Mormonism and the White Possessive," 350.

17. Hokulani K. Aikau, *A Chosen People, a Promised Land: Mormonism and Race in Hawai'i* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 41–43.

people's rightful claim to land, politics, economies, and power." "This erasure," Benally emphasizes, "is one facet of settler colonialism."[18] In her essay "The Book of Mormon as Mormon Settler Colonialism," Boxer also explains that gathering Indigenous peoples into a singular nation of either Lamanites or a settler nation without ites "denies and ignores tribal diversity and sovereignty."[19] Anthropologist Patrick Wolfe describes settler colonialism as a persistent invasive structure that "strives for the dissolution of native societies" through, among other strategies, "renaming" and "religious conversion." Proclaiming that there are no longer any ites but whites is, rather frankly, a settler colonial "elimination of the native."[20] Furthermore, framing whiteness as a utopian Christian racelessness obscures the settler colonial violence that gave rise to white possession of Turtle Island and made it possible for Joseph Smith to disturb what he perceived to be Indigenous graves in the pursuit of a golden treasure containing a new Christian gospel in an American setting.[21]

18. Moroni Benally, "Decolonizing the Blossoming: Indigenous People's Faith in a Colonizing Church," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 73.

19. Elise Boxer, "The Book of Mormon as Mormon Settler Colonialism," in *Essays on American Indian & Mormon History*, edited by P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019), 17.

20. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 388.

21. Thomas W Murphy, "Laban's Ghost: On Writing and Transgression," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 3 (1997): 105–26; Thomas W Murphy and Angelo Baca, "Rejecting Racism in Any Form: Latter-day Saint Rhetoric, Religion, and Repatriation," *Open Theology*, no. 2 (2016): 700–25; Thomas W Murphy, "Views from Turtle Island: Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Mormon Entanglements," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism*, edited by R. Gordon Shepherd, A. Gary Shepherd, and Ryan Cragun (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Thomas W Murphy, Simon G. Southerton, and Angelo Baca, "Science and Fiction: Kennewick Man/Ancient One in Latter-day Saint Discourse," *Journal of Northwest Anthropology* 56, no. 2 (2022): 137–61.

Termination

In the mid-twentieth century, American Indians in the United States faced an existential threat to their sovereignty when a group of powerful Latter-day Saint politicians and bureaucrats, led by Utah senator Arthur Watkins, began to turn Fourth Nephi's ideal of a settler nation with no more ites into a new federal Indian policy that would be called by the ominous name of "termination." Watkins framed his policies that would terminate the sovereignty of Indigenous nations, redistribute communal land and resources severally, and absorb Indigenous peoples into the settler body politic as an "Indian freedom program." The implicit "freedom" in this policy would benefit outsiders seeking to profit from Indigenous peoples, lands, and resources much more so than those who lost representative governments that could protect their interests.[22]

In a 1954 letter to LDS leadership, Watkins linked his proposed reformation of what he believed to be mistaken federal Indian policies to Book of Mormon prophecies. "It seems to me that the time has come for us to correct some of these mistakes and help American Indians stand on their own feet and become a white and delightsome people as the Book of Mormon prophecied [*sic*] they would become."[23] Fortified by his faith, "Watkins truly believed that he knew best for the Indian, whether they offered consent or not."[24] That same year, Watkins targeted Utes and Paiutes in Utah for termination and five years later the predominantly LDS Catawbas in South Carolina. Elder Spencer W. Kimball, then a member of the Quorum of Twelve and later president

22. R. Warren Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy: The Discarded Indians of Utah* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 235–39; Murphy, "Views from Turtle Island," 763–65; Charles F. Wilkinson, *Fire on the Plateau: Conflict and Endurance in the American Southwest* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999).

23. Quoted in Erika Marie Bsumek, *The Foundations of Glen Canyon Dam: Infrastructures of Dispossession on the Colorado Plateau* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023), 136.

24. Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy*, 239.

of the Church, offered his complementary vision of the future in 1962: "I firmly believe that tomorrow there will be no reservations," and "I believe that [American Indian] integration into our economy and community life is essential and I look forward to the day."[25]

These efforts to turn American Indians white by dissolving Indigenous sovereignty disguised baser motivations as Watkins and LDS attorneys Ernest L. Wilkinson (later president of Brigham Young University) and John S. Boyden "circumvented genuine consultations, manufactured the appearance of consent when it did not exist, coercively withheld funds, concealed conflicts of interest, amassed millions in profits, and drew the ire of Native activists whose protests would lead to the reversal of these policies under subsequent administrations." [26] While Latter-day Saint settlers profited from termination, Indigenous communities experienced devastating economic and cultural impacts. Congress would eventually recognize the failure of these policies and reverse the termination of Southern Paiutes in 1980 and Catawbas in 1993. Some Utes and their descendants, though, remain terminated to this day.[27]

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25. Quoted in Margaret D. Jacobs, "Entangled Histories: The Mormon Church and Indigenous Child Removal from 1850 to 2000," *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 2 (2016): 41. See also Murphy, "Views from Turtle Island," 764.

26. Murphy, "Views from Turtle Island," 764.

27. Metcalf, *Termination's Legacy*, 235–39; Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites," 127–29; Thomas G. Alexander, "Native Americans in Post War Utah," https://historytogo.utah.gov/native-americans-post-war-utah/; Stanley J. Thayne, "The Blood of Father Lehi: Indigenous Americans and the Book of Mormon" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016); Forrest S. Cuch, ed., *A History of Utah's American Indians* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Division of Indian Affairs and Utah State Division of History, 2000); Wilkinson, *Fire on the Plateau*; Robert Gottlieb and Peter Booth Wiley, *America's Saints: The Rise of Mormon Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986 [originally published 1984]); Parker M. Nielson, *The Dispossessed: Cultural Genocide of the Mixed-blood Utes: An Advocate's Chronicle* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998); David M. Brugge, *The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute: An American Tragedy* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

McKay Pikyavit was a member of the Kanosh band of Southern Paiutes who protested termination policies. Pikyavit remembered, "Me and my dad wrote a letter saying we didn't want termination, but they booted us anyway." Denied credit and burdened with new taxes after termination, the band lost the reservation and what had previously been a profitable nine-thousand-acre farm. Pikyavit recalled, "We were supposed to be equal to our white neighbors. That didn't work out." Senator Watkins had told him it would "be good for you, be just like a white man. I told him I ain't no white man, never will be." Exasperated with the loss, Pikyavit lamented, "There's something there that just ain't right. We ain't Lamanites. Another thing, the Book of Mormon is Indian religion. When Joseph Smith was back east he met with an Indian guy back there, asked about Indian religion, and he wrote it down. Then he made the Book of Mormon up. There was an Indian from back in Wisconsin told me."[28]

As Indigenous activists traveled and rallied around Turtle Island to protest termination, they recognized the roots of the United States federal policy of eliminating Indigenous sovereignty in the outsize influence of Latter-day Saint politicians and linked termination to the Book of Mormon's misappropriation of the Great Law of Peace. Longstanding oral traditions had told of encounters between Joseph Smith and Senecas, members of the largest Iroquois nation whose traditional lands included villages of Gä'nägweh and Ganondagan, near Palmyra and Manchester, New York. As early as August of 1830, Phineas Young (brother of future Church president Brigham Young) recognized similarities between the Book of Mormon and Haudenosaunee traditions.[29]

28. Quoted in William Logan Hebner, *Southern Paiute: A Portrait* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), 64–66. See also Murphy, "Views from Turtle Island," 765. For a Pulitzer Prize–winning fictionalized account of a Chippewa community wrestling with termination and Mormons, see Louise Erdrich, *The Night Watchman: A Novel* (New York: Harper, 2020).

29. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 353.

During an 1840 visit with Mohawks on an island in Ontario's Lake Simcoe, missionary Benjamin Johnson also found parallels and noted "their hopes of the future were almost identical to our own."[30] The earliest literary reference to the by then well-established oral history about Joseph Smith's appropriation of Iroquois narratives appeared in Texas in 1945.[31] Historian Lori Taylor credits the proliferation of stories of Seneca influence on Joseph Smith in the mid-twentieth century to the widely traveled Tuscarora activist Wallace "Mad Bear" Anderson, who helped lead the North American Indian Caravan across Turtle Island rallying grassroots opposition to termination policies. Nicholas Vrooman, who recorded a version of the story he had heard from Mad Bear in 1994 for the historian Taylor, noted that the Iroquois teachings in the Book of Mormon "got watered down and changed." The Book of Mormon's great peace, Vrooman noted, has "too much emphasis on the Christian thing, more than there used to be, more than the way that we passed it on, the Iroquois passed it on, the Seneca there to Joseph Smith."[32]

Moor's Men

While the idea that Joseph Smith may have misappropriated Iroquois oral histories may seem far-fetched to some readers, it is not outside the

30. Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review: Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin Johnson* (Provo: Grandin Book Company, 1997), 63–64.

31. C. Stanley Banks, "The Mormon Migration into Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1945): 238.

32. Lori Elaine Taylor, "Telling Stories about Mormons and Indians" (PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2000), 309–14; Lori Taylor, "Joseph Smith in Iroquois Country: The Handsome Lake Story," *Juvenile Instructor* (blog), June 30, 2010, http://juvenileinstructor.org/joseph-smith-in-iroquois-country-the-handsome-lake-story/; Lori E. Taylor, "Joseph Smith in Iroquois Country: A Mormon Creation Story," in *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*, edited by P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019), 42–45; Murphy, "Views from Turtle Island," 751–52.

range of plausibility. There are several candidates and multiple locations where these transmissions may have occurred.[33] Ample opportunities for intercultural exchange flourished between 1811 and 1816 at Moor's Indian Charity School in Hanover, New Hampshire, attended by Joseph Smith's older brother Hyrum Smith and his cousin Stephen Mack Jr. Their Iroquois classmates who would likely have been familiar with the Great Law of Peace included Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Louis Langford, Ahkwesáhsne Mohawk (or possibly Stockbridge) John Weal, and three Senecas: Jacob Jameson, James Stevenson, and John Whalebone. In the mid-1820s Stephen Mack Jr. joined "a government expedition around the [Great] lakes from Detroit to Green Bay" that had been "tasked with exploring the prospects for relocating the Iroquois" to what is now Wisconsin. Mack married a Winnebago (Ho-Chunk) woman named Hononegah during the winter of 1828–1829, and the Ho-Chunk responded by adopting Mack into the tribe.[34] Did Hyrum or Stephen introduce Joseph to any of their classmates or convey some of their stories to him secondhand?

All three of Hyrum's and Stephen's Seneca classmates would likely have returned to western New York after their schooling at Moor's. Jacob Jameson certainly did. He returned to Buffalo Creek in 1817,

33. For more examples and extended analyses see Murphy, *Unsettling Scripture*.

34. Richard K. Behrens, "Dreams, Visions, and Visitations: The Genesis of Mormonism," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 27 (2007): 177; Richard K. Behrens, "Dartmouth Arminianism and its Impact on Hyrum Smith and the Smith Family," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 26 (2006); Colin G. Calloway, *The Indian History of an American Institution: Native Americans and Dartmouth* (Lebanon, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 89, 195–96; Dean McMakin, "Hononegah: A New Biography," *Nuggets of History* 41, no. 4 (2003); Edson I. Carr, *The History of Rockton, Winnebago County, Illinois, 1820–1898* (Rockton, Ill.: Herald Office Print, 1898), 6; Don Bradley, "The 'Indian Problem': The Uncertain Place of Native Americans in Anglo-America," 2018; Dan Blumlo, "Pocahontas, Uleleh, and Hononegah: The Archetype of the American Indian Princess," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 110, no. 2 (2017): 137–39.

about the same time that the Smith family moved to Palmyra, New York. Jameson studied medicine in Buffalo and traveled throughout the area as an interpreter over the next two decades. Jameson and other Senecas often returned to hunt and fish at Ganargua (Mud) Creek, a favorite fishing spot for the young Joseph Smith Jr. The famous Seneca orator Red Jacket, accompanied by Blue Sky, William Sky, Peter Smoke, and Twenty Canoes, even delivered a speech to much acclaim at Palmyra Academy in July of 1822, a few months before Joseph began having visions of a spirit and buried treasure. Newspaper reports do not name Red Jacket's interpreter, but Jacob served in that capacity on many similar occasions.[35] Did Hyrum's relationship with his classmate Jacob continue over the next decade and could he, or those who accompanied him while traveling, have been the reported protagonists of Haudenosaunee oral histories?

35. William N. Fenton and Jacob Jameson, "Answers to Governor Cass's Questions by Jacob Jameson, a Seneca [ca. 1821–1825]," *Ethnohistory* 16, no. 2 (1969): 33; Timothy Alden, *An Account of the Sundry Missions Performed Among the Senecas and Munsees; in a Series of Letters* (New York: J. Seymour, 1827), 33; Thompson S. Harris, "Journals of Rev. Thompson S. Harris," *Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society* 6 (1903): 281–82, 342–43; Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 3:154; Horace Eaton, *A Thanksgiving Sermon, delivered at Palmyra, N.Y., Nov. 26, 1857* (Rochester, N.Y.: A. Strong & Co., 1858); Orasmus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, N.Y.: William Alling, 1851), 209, 383–84; James E. Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (Canandaigua, N.Y.: J.D. Bemis and Co., 1824), 79; Chad L. Anderson, *The Storied Landscape of Iroquoia: History, Conquest, and Memory in the Native Northeast* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 55; "Seneca Indians," *Palmyra Herald* (Palmyra, NY), July 31, 1822; Taylor, "Telling Stories," 343; Peter Manseau, *One Nation, Under Gods: A New American History* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2015), 297–98; Thomas W Murphy, "Other Scriptures: Restoring the Voices of the Gantowisas to an Open Canon," in *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*, ed. P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019), 39.

Joseph Smith attributed his knowledge not to the living but to the dead seen in visions. According to his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, he shared the "most amusing recitals" long before he ever dictated the text of the Book of Mormon. She found the details about "the ancient inhabitants of this continent" so remarkable and flowing with such ease from Joseph's lips that it seemed to her "as if he had spent his whole life among them."[36] While living Senecas may be absent from the stories early Mormons shared about how American Indians came to be, they were not absent, in fact. Living Iroquois figure prominently in the stories Indigenous peoples have remembered about how Mormons came to be. It seemed, even to Joseph's mother, *as if* his interlocutors were actually alive rather than dead.

Great Peace

The literary record of Haudenosaunee oral histories corroborates the claims of activist critics of termination (Pikyavit and Vrooman) who allege that the Book of Mormon contains elements of Indigenous religion, or more specifically an overly Christianized variant of the Great Law of Peace. Haudenosaunee narratives, which have varied somewhat over time and place, recount how a Peacemaker unified the Five Nations into the League of the Haudenosaunee, the people of the longhouse, and initiated a long era of peace and equality called the "Great Peace."[37] This Peacemaker, identified variously as Teharonhiawá:kon (Holder of the Heavens), Aionwá:tha, or Tekanawí:ta (both of whom are sometimes identified as human incarnations of Teharonhiawá:kon), traveled across the salt water and spoke of another people who had rejected his

36. Larry E. Morris, ed., *A Documentary History of the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107.

37. Arthur C. Parker, *The Constitution of the Five Nations* (Albany, N.Y.: University of the State of New York, 1916).

message of peace and murdered him. In some variants, a disillusioned Peacemaker even displayed his wounds for all to see. Some knowledge keepers explicitly teach that the Peacemaker, although originally from Turtle Island (thereby, not white), is the same person spoken of in the Bible as Jesus.[38] When and where does the Book of Mormon fit within the written records of this oral history?

The founding of the League of the Haudenosaunee that gave rise to the Great Peace occurred prior to the arrival of European colonists to Iroquoia, although it was likely more of a process than an event. Ahkwesáhsne Mohawk author Darren Bonaparte has approached the variability of the accounts as evidence of a thriving culture, evolving over time in dialogue with neighbors. In a 2006 survey of the literary record of the creation and confederation of the League, Bonaparte reflected: "When viewed as a manifestation of the living culture, which evolves with a people, we can see that the confederation epic was probably based on real events, but over time has accumulated a number of supernatural elements borrowed from the Iroquoian cultural world (especially our creation story) and the traditions of other nations." Scholars have devoted much attention to the timing of the League's formation. Most accept a date around 1450–1550 CE, with some advocates arguing for earlier dates including a rather precise date of August 31, 1142 tied to a solar eclipse, and a few knowledge keepers even suggesting that the founding of the League preceded Christ's appearance in

38. Darren Bonaparte, *Creation and Confederation: The Living History of the Iroquois* (Ahkwesáhsne Mohawk Territory: Wampum Chronicles, 2006); Murphy, "Other Scriptures"; Anthony Wonderley and Martha L. Sempowski, *Origins of the Iroquois League: Narratives Symbols, and Archaeology* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2019).

the New Testament. Many variants of the Great Law of Peace, notably, refer to multiple manifestations of peacemakers rather a singular appearance.[39]

While the Book of Mormon's account of a "great peace" lacks much of the cultural detail available in other versions, it most closely resembles the written variants proximate in time and place to Joseph Smith's reported acquisition of gold plates in 1827 in Manchester, New York. In fact, it fits neatly between the version published by the Tuscarora author and artist David Cusick in that same and following year as *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* at Lewiston, New York, and an 1845 version attributed to Onondaga Chiefs De-hat-ka-tons or Abraham La Fort and Captain Frost from Buffalo Creek, New York. The latter version first appeared in print in 1847 in Henry Schoolcraft's *Notes on the Iroquois* published in Albany, New York, and two years later as part of *Onondaga, or, Reminiscences of Earlier and Later Times*, published by historian Joshua Clark at Syracuse, New York. These accounts, along with an unpublished 1816 version from the adopted Mohawk John Norton on the Grand River Reserve in Ontario, Canada, differ from all earlier versions, which were much more secular in tone and contained much less of the marvelous.[40]

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39. Bonaparte, *Creation and Confederation*, 51–52; Murphy, "Other Scriptures," 36–37; Wonderley and Sempowski, *Origins of the Iroquois League*; Dean R. Snow, *The Iroquois* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996); Barbara A. Mann and Jerry L. Fields, "A Sign in the Sky: Dating the League of the Haudenosaunee," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 21, no. 2 (1997): 105–63; David Henige, "Can a Myth be Astronomically Dated?," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 23, no. 4 (1999): 127–57.

40. David Cusick, *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations*, 2nd ed. (Lewiston, N.Y.: Tuscarora Village, 1828; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2006); Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Notes on the Iroquois: or, Contributions to American History, Antiquities, and General Ethnology* (Albany, N.Y.: E. H. Pease & Co., 1847), 270–83; Joshua V. H. Clark, *Onondaga; or Reminiscences of Earlier and Later Times; Being a Series of Historical Sketches*

The Cusick account, the closest in time and place to Joseph Smith, is the first published version in the historical record to associate the founding of the League with a deity, Teharonhiawá:kon (Holder of the Heavens).[41] Historian Dale Morgan has even suggested that an 1827 announcement of Cusick's book in a Canandaigua newspaper may have been "the catalytic agent" inspiring Joseph Smith's Book of Mormon.[42] Cusick's *Sketches* contains the first written account of a Jesus-like old man who spoke of people across the great water murdering their maker. The close-knit timing and proximity suggest that Smith could have consulted Cusick's publication rather than or in addition to engaging in dialogue with Seneca or other Iroquois collaborators. Yet, the Book of Mormon's version does have a little more of the "rapturous ecstasy" characteristic of the later 1845 Onondaga version than does Cusick's version. Some of the many similarities, though, might also be explained by independent adoption of biblical allusions.[43]

Some Latter-day Saints might read Cusick ethnocentrically as a distant memory of an older account of the great peace more accurately

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Relative to Onondaga; with Notes on the Several Towns in the County, and Oswego (Syracuse, N.Y.: Stoddard and Babcock, 1849); Carl F. Klinck and James J. Talman, eds., *The Journal of Major John Norton 1809–1816* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1970).

41. Bonaparte, *Creation and Confederation*; Wonderley and Sempowski, *Origins of the Iroquois League*.

42. John Phillip Walker, ed., *Dale Morgan on Early Mormonism: Correspondence and a New History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 310; "Indian Literature," *Ontario Repository* (Canandaigua, N.Y.), July 11, 1827, 2.

43. Cusick, *Sketches of Ancient History*; Susan Kalter, "Finding a Place for David Cusick in Native American Literary History," *MELUS* 27, no. 3 (2002): 9–42; Daniel M. Radus, "Printing Native History in David Cusick's *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations*," *American Literature* 86, no. 2 (2014): 217–43; Clark, *Onondaga*, 21–30; Klinck and Talman, *The Journal of Major John Norton*, 98–106; Bonaparte, *Creation and Confederation*; Wonderley and Sempowski, *Origins of the Iroquois League*.

recorded in the Book of Mormon.[44] Yet, historical evidence suggests that the Book of Mormon's version looks like an early nineteenth-century variant of an Iroquois original stripped of much of its historical resistance to removal. The founders Aionwá:tha, Tekanawí:ta, and Thatotarho appear as ordinary human beings in all the earliest versions of the Great Law of Peace found in the historical record and none of them prior to Cusick allude to a Jesus-like character crossing the salt water. Founders of the Great Peace only begin to take on characteristics of deity with Christian allusions during the Second Great Awakening that gave rise to both the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake and the Mormon seer Joseph Smith.[45] Ahkwesáhsne Mohawk scholar Darren

44. Thomas W Murphy, "An Insufficient Canon: The Popol Wuj, Book of Mormon, and Other Scriptures," *Journal of Mormon History* 48, no. 3 (2022): 80.

45. John Heckewelder, *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States*, new and revised edition, edited by William C. Reichel (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1881 [1819]; repr., Echo Library Reprint, 2016), 43; Douglas W. Boyce, "A Glimpse of Iroquois Culture Through the Eyes of Joseph Brant and John Norton," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 117, no. 4 (1973): 288, 93; William Dunlap, *A History of New York, for Schools* (New York: Collins, Keese, and Co., 1837), 153–54; William M. Beauchamp, "Onondaga Notes," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 8 (1895): 215–16; Mathew Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace: Iroquois-European Encounters in Seventeenth-Century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 82; Wonderley and Sempowski, *Origins of the Iroquois League*, 40–54; William N. Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 5; Murphy, "Imagining Lamanites."; Thomas W Murphy, "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002); Thomas W Murphy and Angelo Baca, "DNA and the Book of Mormon: Science, Settlers, and Scripture," in *The LDS Gospel Topics Series: A Scholarly Engagement*, edited by Matthew L. Harris and Newell G. Bringhurst (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020); Murphy, Southerton, and Baca, "Science and Fiction."

Bonaparte noted, "We would not be wise to assume that when we hear the story of Tekanawí:ta, we are simply hearing an Iroquois version of the New Testament. Instead, we are witnessing a people paying homage to their most ancient beliefs by giving them new life, new meaning. We are witnessing the workings of a living culture and a living history."[46] In the 1820s, Iroquois nations faced an existential threat of removal. Novel biblical allusions helped advance the argument that the Six Nations needed neither civilization nor Christianity from the settlers. Literary scholar Susan Kalter summarized the implicit argument in Cusick's rendition of the Great Law of Peace: "if God can visit Israel in human form, teach love, prophesy, die, be buried and rise again, nothing prevents him from visiting North America." Missionaries who assumed "that Christ's teachings could reach the Iroquois and other Indians only through their own work" were mistaken.[47]

The dilution of the Haudenosaunee cultural context present in other accounts of the Great Peace is what makes it possible for Joseph Smith's narrator Mormon to imagine that the Peacemaker would envision a society with no manner of ites except whites. In most Iroquois versions of the Great Law of Peace, the Peacemaker, with assistance from Aionwá:tha and in some cases Tsakonsasé (Mother of Nations), brings the five nations together around a central fire at Onondaga. Mohawks, Oneidas, Cayugas, and Senecas do not forfeit their national identities to Onondagas but operate through a system of consensus that essentially grants the matrilineal clan mothers of each nation and the male representatives they select veto power over decisions of the confederacy. Citizenship in the League comes through the clan mothers, who not only represent their consanguineal kin but may adopt children and adults of any nationality. The maintenance of national sovereignty

46. Bonaparte, *Creation and Confederation*, 88.

47. Kalter, "Finding a Place," 32–34, 40.

amid confederated unity, resting ultimately in the hands of women who hold the lands of their matrilineages in common, makes the Iroquois Great Peace significantly different in structure from the settler colonial version represented by Mormon. The Book of Mormon's version erases national identities and mentions neither matrilineal kinship nor the sovereign political power maintained by the clan mothers. It also lends itself to abuse by settler politicians seeking to displace sovereignty, lands, and resources from Indigenous communities. Common ownership of lands in matrilineal clans and national sovereignty are integral elements of the Haudenosaunee recipe for peace that are absent from the culturally misappropriated variant in the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, whiteness, whether imagined ethnically or racially, plays no role in the attainment of peace in any of the authentic Haudenosaunee renditions of the Great Law of Peace.[48]

Joseph Smith may have been the first but certainly was not the last settler colonialist who deployed representations of the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace for their own purposes. William Canfield's 1902 *The Legends of the Iroquois, Told by "the Cornplanter"* and L. Taylor Hansen's "Pale Hea-wah-sah" from her 1963 book, *He Walked the Americas*, subsequently misappropriated and whitewashed Haudenosaunee narratives in ways that also privileged settler belonging over Indigenous sovereignty. Both accounts, much like the Book of Mormon itself, proposed much older origins for their narratives than the historical record

48. Lewis Henry Morgan, *League of the Iroquois: A Classic Study of an American Indian Tribe With the Original Illustrations* (New York: Citadel Press, 1962); Fenton, *Great Law*; Tom Porter, *And Grandma Said . . .: Iroquois Teachings, as Passed Down through the Oral Tradition* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris Corporation, 2008); Barbara Alice Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Brian Rice, *The Rotinonshonni: A Traditional Iroquoian History through the Eyes of Teharonhia:wako and Sawiskera* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2013); Kayanesenh Paul Williams, *Kayanerenkó:wa: The Great Law of Peace* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018); Murphy, "Other Scriptures."

supports and lacked verifiable manuscripts in support of their claims for Indigenous sources. Anachronisms, confusion of Algonquian and Iroquoian cultural traits, taking stories out of their cultural context, and a fetishized focus on racialized features of protagonists accompany the dubious circumstances surrounding the acquisition of these narratives by settler colonial authors.[49]

Conclusion

A Christian utopia in which there are no ites except whites is a classic example of a settler colonial illusion. Historian Lorenzo Veracini "argues that all settler projects are foundationally premised on fantasies of ultimately 'cleansing' the settler body politic of its (indigenous and exogenous) alterities."[50] The Book of Mormon portrayal is not "a proto-postmodern view of race as a historical construct." While the scripture does present a mutable concept of race, this malleable racial body is better described as a common nineteenth-century settler colonial construct rather than something akin to a novel postmodern perspective. The presumption that whiteness is nonracial is a dangerous interpretation that has done, is doing, and will continue to do significant harm to Indigenous communities in settler colonial societies. The extent to which the Book of Mormon might teach that "race was not real," that "race was not a permanent part of God's vision for humanity," or that

49. William W. Canfield, *The Legends of the Iroquois, Told by "the Cornplanter"* (New York: A. Wessels Co. , 1902); Wonderley and Sempowski, *Origins of the Iroquois League*, 83–85; Christopher Vecsey, *Imagine Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 1988), 96; Henige, "Can a Myth be Astronomically Dated?," 140–42; L. Taylor Hansen, *He Walked the Americas* (Amherst, Wis.: Amherst Press, 1963); Bonaparte, *Creation and Confederation*, 48–50, 90–94. For an extended discussion of these and other sources see Murphy, *Unsettling Scripture*.

50. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33.

readers "were charged with spreading Christ's gospel of (potential) racial reunification" masks a deeper, hidden logic of extermination. The presentation of whiteness as "raceless" fails to consider the settler colonial setting of the Book of Mormon's production. The scripture's "white universalism" is more accurately recognized as a settler colonial erasure of indigeneity.[51]

Coming to terms with the Book of Mormon as a flawed and incomplete scripture has surprisingly opened my eyes to new ways of reading this problematic text. Joseph Smith must have recognized at some level the injustice at the heart of the settler colonial United States of America and sought theological means for making what was so wrong appear right. He appears to have, as the activists against termination claimed, encountered Iroquois narratives of the Great Law of Peace in person or maybe in print. Lamentably, in the stories he told, he displaced these living Iroquois neophytes with dead white Nephites.

51. Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People*, 12, 19–20. See also Murphy, "Laban's Ghost," 113.

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ROOTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Charlotte Hansen Terry

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to take a seminar from a professor at my university in the Native American and Indigenous Studies Department, focused on religious and/or spiritual traditions, belief systems, and worldviews of Native American and Indigenous peoples in the Americas. As part of that course, one of our assignments was to reflect on the course materials and to express what the texts had meant to us, and what they had led us to think about and consider. In a book I read in this class and some others, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*, Lawrence Gross explains how he tells his students, when they consider a religious tradition, to think about what kind of human beings the given tradition is trying to create.[1] This was something I kept coming back to during that class and since then. What kind of human beings do different worldviews try to create?

In the many worldviews we discussed in class, knowledge and wisdom are continually based in space and place. This wisdom is passed on through storytelling, through repetition, so that the next generation can become rooted.[2]

The readings in this class encouraged me to self-reflect. Am I rooted? And if I am, what am I rooted in? What space and place? When I took that class, the place I was rooted in was the land that is the home of Patwin people in what is known as Northern California. This place

1. Lawrence W. Gross, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2014), 238.

2. Gross, *Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being*, 164; Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 127.

impacted what I learned in my PhD program and what my scholarship would look like. But I have other roots as well.

My sister is a printmaker. A few years ago, she made a print showing various root vegetables, including carrots, beets, and radishes, with the words "love your roots" carved above. Of course she was playing on words here. She is a gardener. But I can also consider a bigger meaning from this. Do I love my roots? My history? My family history? What do I love, and what do I not? Am I truly myself with others?

Along with rootedness, what am I reaching for? What type of world am I wanting to help perpetuate? What communities am I a part of, since it is in community that strength can come? Learning comes in the walking together; it comes in the connections we make.

So, what are my roots? I am the descendent of white Mormon settlers who came to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My ancestors were settlers who lived on Native lands throughout the North American West, particularly Shoshone, Paiute, Goshute, and Ute lands. I have women in my ancestry who joined the Church because of the hymn "O My Father." There are some women who participated in polygamy, and others who apparently threatened their husbands with axes if they took other wives. I have ancestors who participated in missionizing efforts in the United States and in the Pacific. That past informs who I am and how I approach my scholarship. I come from a family that is more liberal in its understandings of Mormonism but certainly still has its flaws and shortcomings, as any family does. I carry my family with me in my name. I am named after one of my grandmothers, which has certainly made me remember her, her works, and her words of caution as I pursued my graduate studies. This legacy has impacted what I study. I particularly want to reflect on my grandmother's life and experiences and how she has influenced me.

My grandmother, Charlotte Hawkins England, grew up in Iowa and in Salt Lake City. In 1954, when my grandmother was twenty and a newlywed, she went with my grandfather, Gene, on a mission to Sāmoa.

Figure 1. Charlotte and Eugene England arriving for their mission in Sāmoa, 1954. Courtesy Charlotte England.

This was certainly more uncommon as a practice by the 1950s. They were called in particular to teach school in the village of Vaiola for the first part of their mission, were then separated and put with different companions in various districts for a bit, and then worked together again teaching school. I recently read through their mission journal. It was an interesting practice, reading their mission journal with the critical eye I might use when I read other mission journals for my scholarship. They used the same book to journal in, with my grandmother using the pages on the left, my grandfather the pages on the right. It was particularly eye-opening to me to read their words from when they were only twenty and see their thought processes, their personalities, and their frustrations. And I particularly enjoyed the various drawings my grandmother made throughout the journal pages, from images of large waves crashing on the shore to a sketch of the full moon to diagrams showing the layout of certain events and gatherings.

They talked about how troubled they were with how Tagata Sāmoa (Native Samoans) were treated by other missionaries as less than and as servants. They tried to teach love and be good examples. Their mission helped them both realize that they loved teaching. Some missionaries kept trying to treat my grandmother as if she was just their cook and cleaning lady and did not always see her as a real missionary. She would try to call these missionaries out for their behavior and stand up for herself, being the only woman there, but she did not always succeed. She got pregnant one year into her mission and was transferred to Hawai'i so she could have access to better medical care at the end of that pregnancy, which meant she did not die in childbirth in 1956.

They also had their own biases that emerge in their writings, and I could see how they struggled with those. They made assumptions about the nature of the Pacific Islands and expressed fascination with a place and people so different from what they knew at home. At times they recognized this and tried to acknowledge it. Other times, they did not. I continued to think about the legacies of colonialism as well, including the fact that they were even in Sāmoa on a mission, showing the roots of US imperialism and Mormon participation in those efforts. In my dissertation I have considered the importance of schools started by white Mormons in the Pacific, from Hawai'i in the 1850s to Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the 1880s and Sāmoa in the 1890s, and the use of such schools by missionaries to help strengthen their connections with the US consulate and reinforce the image of themselves as Americans. And here in my grandparents' journal I can see the successors to that practice. They talked about making lesson plans and included details about teaching these Tagata Sāmoa children particular manners and dances, teaching European fairy tales, teaching them songs in English, teaching them sewing, and teaching them many other Anglo-American-centric practices.

Growing up, I knew the general details about my grandparents' lives after their mission: coming home, moving to various places in the

United States for school and jobs, starting *Dialogue* while they were in California, eventually ending up in Utah, my grandfather teaching at Brigham Young University and having to "retire" early from teaching there during the 1990s, and my grandfather finishing his career at what was then Utah Valley State College. Very often as a child, I learned more about my grandfather's work and writings, about his thoughts on particular topics. After his death in 2001, when I was fifteen, there became even more of an emphasis and encouragement for me to read what he wrote, to remember his life. Very often this focus on my grandfather meant that my grandmother and her thoughts and ideas have not always been the focus, even though my grandmother has always been a larger part of my life, the one I have felt closer to, the one I spent more time with, and the person I have always felt a special bond with.

As an adult, I have had the chance to have more in-depth conversations with my grandmother about her experiences. I think much of this has become possible because of the frequent trips I made to her home when I lived in Utah to help her organize her papers. When I have not lived in the state, she always asks when I will be coming to Utah so she can have me work with her for a day and go through papers more or help organize and edit her writings about her life. We have continued reorganizing her papers and files, and with each reorganization I have had the chance to ask her questions about different parts of her life. As I have helped edit some of her writings more recently, I have been able to learn more intimate details about her and what has mattered to her. And I think my own studies during my master's degree, as I took more women's history courses, researched and read women's diaries, and looked at the position of women in the Church, meant I approached these conversations with my grandmother from a different position.

I have had conversations with my grandmother about her experiences as a woman in the Church, the labor she has performed in church that often goes unrecognized, and the frustrations she has had about women's position within the faith. I see how she is treated by family at

Figure 2. Charlotte England organizing her files and recipes, 2023. Courtesy Charlotte Hansen Terry.

times as not important, and that her opinions don't matter as much as her spouse, who has been gone now for almost twenty-five years, and this has all led me to think more deeply about the gendered dynamic of scholarship within Mormonism.

My grandfather is known for his teaching and scholarship—scholarship that has certainly impacted me and how I think. My grandmother is known for being there at his side, being part of the conversations, welcoming people into her home, making lovely meals, especially her bread and ice cream. Of course, his scholarship and who he was was not possible without her. Without her work balancing the household, raising six children, bouncing off ideas with him and pushing him further in his conceptions he wouldn't be the man whom so many respected. And she was there having her faith challenged, too, as the behavior of

people in positions of power in the Church hurt her as well, and she saw contradictions between this behavior and the principles she believed in. People questioned her about why she remained in the Church with all that happened. She wrote about fifteen years ago about how "such an action would mean abandoning our core beliefs, which were too deeply embedded for us to forsake."[3]

She often even downplays herself and her life as she tries to emphasize my grandfather's writings and work. Each Christmas for a few years she would call me and ask for my opinion on which of my grandfather's essays she should print off and share with all my cousins. Most of that side of my family no longer attends church, and I would say almost all my cousins do not see themselves as members of the Church. Many of my cousins were young when my grandfather died, so he is a more distant memory. But we all feel very close to my grandmother. I have recently started to encourage her to also share some of her own writings about her life with her grandchildren, insisting that we all want to learn more about her, too, and hear more of her thoughts and experiences. We want her recipes, her artwork, and more of her in our lives. She luckily has started to do that, printing off drafts of papers she is writing, sending us little watercolors in the mail, some of them on the back of my grandfather's old business cards. Recently we worked to collect some of her recipes and shared those with everyone for Christmas, to the delight of many of my cousins. And hopefully I can eventually convince her to share her writings with all her grandchildren. For now, I feel lucky to be trusted with them, with her thoughts and feelings that she is hesitant for all to know.

During my master's program at the University of Utah, I was in a research seminar on US colonialism and needed to pick a paper topic. Since I had grown up hearing about my grandparents serving a mission

3. Charlotte England, "My Leaps of Faith," in Robert A. Rees, ed., *Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), 174.

Figure 3. Charlotte England drawings, 2021. Courtesy Charlotte Hansen Terry.

in Sāmoa, I became curious about when the United States got involved in Sāmoa and when Mormons showed up there, so I looked it up and saw that it was close to the same time, in the 1870s and 1880s. This led to me doing a research paper to consider this conjunction and what it meant. I do not think I would have even considered going in that direction for a paper without knowing about my grandparents. As I write this piece, I am completing my PhD in history, where I explore white and Pacific Islander Mormon attempts to define and expand racial, religious, familial, and national belonging, informed both by my history classes but also by my classes in Native American and Indigenous studies. As I have worked on this dissertation, I have needed to consider what questions and topics I can look at and which ones I should not because of my positionality and privilege as a white woman. While I have done my historical research on an earlier period in the nineteenth

century, I also continue to think back, especially recently, on my grandmother's experiences in Sāmoa in the 1950s, how it changed her, and how she also participated in US colonialism through her missionary work. During my dissertation work, I have read many missionary diaries, seen the artifacts they brought back from their missions and the photographs they took with people in the Pacific. I have thought of parallels with my own grandmother when she reopened her mission trunk after not doing so for about fifty years, and I saw her lay down items, including tapa cloth gifted to her on her mission, now with significant creases from being folded for decades. This period of her life from so long ago still had such an impact on her present moment, and she spoke about all these items, refamiliarizing herself with these artifacts of her youth after they had been shut away for so long.

When I told my grandmother I was considering getting a PhD, she was very serious with me on the phone. She told me to keep in mind how much doing that work can impact your family and how it will affect your husband and your relationship. It is not easy, she said. It takes both of you to get through that. And as she said that, I thought back to what it must have been like for her as a Mormon woman during the 1950s and '60s. I am in a different place as her granddaughter. But I still have to grapple with particular gendered dynamics within my faith that might question why I went off to pursue graduate work, with my husband putting his career on a slower trajectory as he followed me to a new location.

Being named for my grandmother, and looking a good deal like her, does not mean I will make the same decisions she made or think the same things she does. But I am rooted in her, and the rest of my family, and my past. Her deep desire to love and care for those around her, how she shares her love through food and enjoys sitting and chatting over a cup of tea, are definitely things I have picked up from her, too. And how she has loved her church and community while at the same time challenging it and disagreeing with positions has provided an important example for me.

Figure 4. Charlotte England at her cabin in Provo Canyon, Utah, 2019. Courtesy Charlotte Hansen Terry.

I am rooted in that Mormon history. And I would not be where I am, studying what I am, having the questions I do about Mormon history, without that rootedness in my grandmother. As I consider what directions I might go with my scholarship and work as well as my place within my faith community, I continue to reflect on my responsibility in my scholarship to grapple with this family history and Mormon past. I can focus on loving fiercely and holding my faith accountable. But I also continue to grapple with these complex gendered and colonial legacies in which I am rooted.

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HAUNTED HOUSES

Hadley Duncan Howard

Content warning: This essay discusses sexual assault.

On a late October afternoon, as I stood on my parents' driveway in the pleasantly chilled autumn air, a tree applauded me. I was twenty-one years old. Just days before, I'd returned home from my mission, too ill to be of any use in that regard. It had been a doomed endeavor from the beginning, but I didn't know that then. What I did know was that I was home, wearing jeans and no nametag, companionless, and relieved beyond measure for my honorable and very early release.

I'd gone outside to retrieve the groceries from my mother's Volvo. It was a glorious day, brisk and sunny and fragrant with crisp leaves, and I paused for a moment beside the car to drink in the loveliness. I stood as it were at attention, each hand holding a weighty bag, and allowed the peace of a perfect day to flow over me. The street was utterly deserted; there was no noise. No cars, no lawn mowers, no kids. Just silence and stillness, until I gradually became aware of what sounded like applause. It wasn't the clapping of a single pair of hands, but the very particular din of an enormous crowd engaged in acclamation, that unmistakable white noise of cheering, the very human expression of joy and respect, en masse.

I looked around. Maybe a neighbor had a window open and a television on much too loud? But every window in every house was closed. There wasn't so much as a frolicking squirrel in the vicinity. I was entirely alone in that cul-de-sac, hands full of groceries, taking in the echoing applause of a grateful crowd, when I realized the sound was alive. Applause was living within a large maple tree in a grassy lot across the road. Its copper-colored leaves were animated, undulating

in time, waving and moving to a rhythm and a wind only it could feel. I detected no breeze; all other greenery remained unstirred. It was just that one, beautiful maple with its nodding head and shaking arms extended as if in exuberant praise, its spirit communicating with mine. I stood motionless with wonder and gratitude and received its ardent compliments and divine approval, allowing the material presence of God to envelop me.

In a way that was too personal, too holy to fully articulate, and despite my deep confusion on the matter, I knew that heaven accepted my fragile missionary offering, over too soon. I knew I had, unwittingly but not insubstantially, moved forward, upward. Though I couldn't see how, I knew the nothing I'd achieved had in fact been fundamental and transformational. I knew it because the tree told me so, because God and Nature went well out of their way to shout hurray.

~

I'd never wanted to serve a mission. My parents converted to Mormonism in their young adult years; they indicated no mission regret for themselves and presented no mission pressure for their children. I was born in the early 1970s; missions for girls of my generation were by no means unheard of but generally ranked as quite a bit less than expected. By my junior year at Brigham Young University, most of my roommates and friends had gotten married, but I didn't know any girls who'd left for a mission. I had a desire to do something with my life, something worthwhile and challenging in the wider world, not just in the fuzzy future but right then. I'd gotten a very short-lived wild hare that I wanted to join the Peace Corps until my brother (accurately, and with much amusement) reminded me that my idea of roughing it was a hotel without room service. With limited options for adventure, I decided there was no harm in praying about a mission, especially since I was completely certain the answer for me was no.

Well, the God of Surprise Responses said yes. The very first time I (half-heartedly) asked, he sent me an unequivocal, resounding, emphatic yes. Along with a smile and a thanks for asking.

~

A few months later I received my mission call and, a few weeks after that, my temple endowment. I hadn't taken a temple prep course; I felt that was for new converts and those who hadn't paid attention in Sunday School. The temple was an invitation-only affair, but I felt I had the gist of the thing and figured I'd have my parents and the temple matron to explain the rest. How different or difficult could it be?

Tremendously, as it turned out.

In a locker room that smelled faintly of disinfectant, I was undressed by strangers before being draped in a sheet with open sides to allow other strangers, posted in partitions, to touch my naked body. I was clothed in a garment so voluminous as to be ghost-like, led into a dark room filled with people in costume and covered faces, the door closed. I had a frightening sense of vulnerability despite being surrounded by friendly faces. There were inscrutable behaviors and strange, mild-mannered threats; reaching with arms and gesturing with hands for some kind of elusive deliverance; moving images on the walls, depicting the vast darkness of galaxies. And there was a curtain, through which a man whose face I could not see handled and judged me.

Afterward, my parents and I calmly ate a cafeteria lunch of spaghetti and Jell-O.

It was a devastating experience, harrowing, inexplicably torturous to my spirit. This was what my roommates had found beautiful? This was what my Church leaders had praised as the pinnacle of our religion? This was what my parents valued most of all? I found it terrifying in the extreme, a horror film made real. Equally acute was the unfathomable sense of utter betrayal by those I'd trusted to keep me safe.

It was, in every possible sense, a living nightmare—a haunted house. And it included the only thing in the world capable of keeping me there: the shame I'd bring upon my parents were I to run away screaming when given the chance. It was, alone, that unwelcome constraint that prevented me from shouting "hell no" and sprinting straight out the door, never to return.

The costumes, the touching, the curtain, the man—it wasn't beautiful theology and the promise of heaven. It was trauma, ugly, violent, barely survivable. From that day on, I had a stomachache. From that day on, I didn't sleep. From that day on, I held my breath.

I held my breath.

I held my breath.

~

Almost exactly a year after the tree applauded me, I had an every-other-Sunday morning calling in the copy center of my BYU student ward. I'd gone back to school, but it had been a challenging year, both physically, while I visited dozens of physicians trying to find the cause of my constant illness, and emotionally as I tried to make sense of my mission debacle. What had it all been about? Why had God commanded me to serve a mission he knew I wouldn't serve? I still had no answers. On this Sunday I was where I should be, in a tiny cinder-block office on the top floor of the student center, waiting, as the not-actually-funny joke went, to be of reproductive service to someone. No one needed me, so to pass the time I pulled an abandoned copy off the Xerox machine and started to read. It was Isaiah 55:8–12:

> For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.
>
> For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.
>
> For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

> So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.
>
> For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

In these verses, given to me that Sunday morning, God put his hand upon my cheek, looked me in the eye, spoke my name, and smiled. My situation did not change, but I knew some things that morning that I hadn't known the night before: God was up to something. It was for a purpose and still in progress. He knew what he was doing and, difficult as it was, everything was just fine. Oh, and that tree? I didn't imagine that; the Spirit didn't lie. At the command of its God and mine, that stunner of a copper-colored maple tree full-on applauded me. The Lord would leave me hanging for a while longer, but to ease the wait, he'd moved heaven and earth to give me a hand.

~

At twenty-two and with my university degree in hand, I moved a thousand miles away and embarked on adulthood in earnest. I landed a job at an immensely stressful global PR firm, a place where jackets and pantyhose were required and eighty-hour workweeks were business as usual. I found a darling prewar apartment with original moldings and a sunroom. I opened a 401(k), bought a car, ordered a custom sofa, and hung real paintings on the walls. And I stopped attending church.

It was a combination of factors, really. The singles ward was filled with people I didn't want to know, and the bishop wouldn't transfer my records to the regular family ward whose boundaries I lived in. I worked until midnight seven days a week. But mostly, well, mostly the problem was me. Even with true effort, I couldn't reconcile my traumatic temple experience with the doctrine I'd been taught. If something that viscerally distressing was the pinnacle of Mormonism, I didn't see how I could be a Mormon. Jesus and I would always be the best of

friends, but I needed to be excused from his church. His silence on the matter was comfortable and comforting; I knew he understood.

I put my garments in the bottom dresser drawer and walked away.

~

In late October of my fifth-grade year, I attended a Friday night lock-in at our local YMCA. My family didn't have a membership and I'd never been to the Y before, but for a nominal fee I could dine on cheap junk food with about a hundred kids, wander through a haunted house in the rec room, and spend the night in my brother's sleeping bag on the hardwood gymnasium floor. This sounded like fun to my ten-year-old self.

The indoor pool was off-limits for the evening, but the air in the building was humid and pungent with the scent of chlorine. It seemed just a bit damp, the sort of place with toilet paper stuck to the bathroom floor and dank towels piled in cinder block corners. The rec room was just to the right of the main entrance, across from the reception desk. Its door remained closed during dinner and group activities: no entrance until invited. I was dressed as a ghost, wearing the homemade white-sheet-and-flowy-headdress ensemble my siblings and I had been rotating through for several years.

Finally, it was time for the haunted house, the main event. My friends and I arranged ourselves in a makeshift conga line, each jittery girl holding the shoulders of the jumpy girl in front of her. I was last, right on the end of the column. Into the room we went, the door shut behind us. In terror, I held my breath. In the darkness, moving images of the night sky shone on the ceiling. There were several small curtained-off areas to rotate through, each with a costumed adult stationed inside, each holding scary things, deemed age-appropriate, for us to touch and feel: spaghetti brains, grape eyeballs, Jell-O intestines.

Last in line, still breathless and holding tightly to the girl in front of me, I was suddenly grabbed from behind, lifted, and taken to a corner

behind the back curtain. A man I couldn't see held me down, covered my face, and and and. I fought him with every ounce of terror and strength within me, kicking and punching until I was free.

I ran screaming from the rec room, bursting out the door and startling kids waiting their turn. I sat alone on a bench in the quiet locker room, holding my breath, for hours, unresponsive to friends' entreaties to join the fun. Eventually, well after lights out, I found a spot on the edge of the gym and spent the night sitting up, on high alert, with my back against the wall.

In the morning, from the back seat of my mother's station wagon, I told her that a man had sat on my lap and hurt me. Perhaps my insufficient understanding didn't translate. Whatever the reason, my very good mother did nothing.

I began to have a recurring dream. It was always the same: it was the Kal Kan cat food commercial I'd seen while watching *Little House on the Prairie*. It went like this: with early eighties movie magic and a synthetic "zwoop" sound, a blue pill-shaped vitamin penetrated the top of a metal can of cat food. Every time, I woke up panting, unable to breathe.

I had that dream for years.

Until eventually, at some point, it stopped.

I didn't notice.

~

When I was twenty-six, an emergency meeting was called at the advertising agency where I'd just started managing several national accounts. We were told that the company's president was guilty of embezzlement and had bankrupted the business. We all lost our jobs.

It was the week before Christmas, and with Y2K global havoc anticipated in just a couple of weeks, the timing was not great to be unexpectedly unemployed. I had lots of contacts and a good professional reputation, so I wasn't overly worried; I knew I was a catch. But

I'd been working eighty-hour weeks for so long that I didn't even own a pair of jeans—I had no place to wear them, as I was always in the office. I was so far past burned-out that I received the news of my abrupt unemployment with equanimity: finally, finally, a break.

The world, as it happened, didn't come to an end that January 1. I packed up my car with clothes and CDs and drove four hours south to bunk up with Grandma Jo. She still lives in the town I grew up in. She's funny and irreverent, her house smells like coffee, and she's had the same "gentleman caller" since my beloved grandpa died in 1987. I've always adored her.

Jo arranged for me to work part-time in a darling upscale boutique owned by a friend. It was a quiet place, run as a hobby by a woman who didn't need to live off the profits. For fifteen hours a week, I languidly faffed around the store, rearranging merchandise and creating displays. I did some low-stakes modeling for a laugh. With Jo, I attended the Methodist church my grandpa helped form (continually reminding myself that the recitation was the Apostles' Creed, not Apollo Creed). I read a lot of books. I rode my bike, slept in late, rediscovered jigsaw puzzles, napped in the hammock, and refinished an antique table I found on the side of a road. I stayed for six months and gradually unfurled my tightly clenched soul.

While I was there, I also took a lot of drives. I enjoyed the music and the answering to no one, the solitude and the aimlessness. I drove out into the country or explored unfamiliar parts of the city or just tooled around my old hometown to see what had changed. I knocked on the door of the house I grew up in and chatted with the owner. I visited my elementary school and remembered the burning-hot metal death traps we used to call playground equipment. I stopped off at my former pediatrician's office and requested my (mimeographed!) file. I went to Johnnie's and Braum's and The Cookie Jar. And one day, I happened to feel a distinct tug to turn right at an unexplored, uninspiring intersection and ended up at the YMCA.

I pulled into the Y's parking lot to turn around, and as I did, I had a faintly itchy sensation that I'd been there before. I knew my family hadn't been members, so I couldn't imagine why I would have ever been inside, but the feathery idea was there, tickling the periphery of my memory, tickling, tickling, just enough that I could feel it, just enough to make me aware of it. I thought on it all the way back to Jo's house and for the rest of the day. I thought on it the next day, too. Then, as I stood in her kitchen, the recollection ever-so-gently distilled upon me. Oh, that's right, I softly said to myself. That's right, I went to a party there once. What was it? Halloween? Yes, I remember now. It smelled like chlorine and there was a spookhouse with spaghetti for brains and grapes for eyeballs and Jell-O for intestines and a line of little girls and people in costumes and me as a ghost and a closed door and a dark room and a faceless man touching me behind a curtain and a locker room and a gymnasium wall and and and.

Soon enough, I began dreaming about Kal Kan cat food again. The same blue vitamin pill zwooping into the same metal can. Awakening with the same breathlessness.

~

It was time to leave the restorative tranquility of Jo's house, move back into my apartment four hours north, and return to a real job in my regular life. I took a position at a very competitive communications firm, managing crisis communications for national accounts. I was back to pantsuits and dinner meetings and billable hours and poisonous colleagues, back to stomachaches and insomnia and an inability to catch my breath. A few months into my new role, I was assigned to direct communications for a historically demanding client.

It was the YMCA.

~

Healing, newly necessary for professional reasons as well as spiritual, came through an exceptional therapist. Libby was a diminutive woman, perfectly coiffed and groomed, with an office in the back of her country club home and a sweet nature that disguised her tough, tell-it-like-it-is style.

Her office was a temple to me, a house unhaunted, a place where God was so kindly, so powerfully present. He was gentle, but he was a force, there to do real work. He was in the air and in the light; he was on the sofa beside me. His love and peace were an all but tangible presence in that room. His comfort and truth and respect and friendship were not whispered to me—they were spoken clearly, with volume and intent, not to be missed or misunderstood: He ratified and rubber-stamped my goodness, my choices, my worthiness of everything he'd ever had to offer. He, better and more deeply and fully than I ever could, understood.

He taught me that experience is not linear, nor is the discernment of it, but a double helix of creation, twisting and swirling around itself in its convoluted becoming. He taught me that all things have purpose, that all circumstances and all people can eventually lead to him. He taught me that, through him, pain and confusion and suffering are beautiful and efficacious. He taught me that intent matters: mine and others' and his. He taught me that all offerings to him are accepted when offered in purity of heart. He taught me to seek his love and his friendship and his approval, no one else's, not even (and perhaps especially) his church's. He taught me that his love is formless, capable of passing through anything at all to reach his children—like light to see, like air to breathe.

He taught me to breathe.

I learned, with God, to breathe.

~

I returned to church. It was hugely uncomfortable. Many, many years later it remains so. But I'm still here, present in a pew every Sunday and in my heart each day in between. I am active and faithful in my religious life, but I do not serve an institution—I serve God. Religion is only a vehicle for a relationship of tremendous trust in God, for a friendship that includes humor and talking back, laughter, sarcasm, frustration, inside jokes and shared shorthand, necessary silence and joyful reunions.

And we are in relationship, God and I, a living, changing, motivating, moving relationship—a relationship that breathes. I don't often visit his house; when I do, it's a very specific offering, received with very specific recognition. The temple no longer haunts me, but it also doesn't beckon. It's invitation-only, and I'm pleased to be invited even if I accept only infrequently. Instead, I chat constantly and casually with God, and he with me, in all locations of time and space, where mutual worthiness and faith in each other easily connect us. I'll never again be last in line—God is always behind me, his hands upon my shoulders.

The love between us breathes freely.

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Camilla Stark, *Love & Fear (All Must Be Tried as Abraham)*, 2022, cyanotype, 20 x 16 in.

Artist's Statement: I used to think God would make me sacrifice everything I loved to prove I loved Him. As it turns out, everything I loved was under attack—by obsessive-compulsive disorder. You see, love and fear are a two-edged sword. OCD creates horrific fears about everything I love, but I choose to love even though it comes at a terrible cost. But God is sharper than a two-edged sword, and He helps me wield the hazardous dichotomy of love and fear.

AVIAN INTERMEDIARIES

Suzanne E. Greco

Content warning: This essay discusses sexual violence.

Birds, across cultures and time, hold a rich tapestry of symbolic meanings, entwining life and death, omens and auguries, angels and spiritual guides. They are often seen as carriers of the departed souls, and at times, they are believed to embody those spirits. Adam McLean, a Scottish writer on alchemical texts, notes, "The essential thing about birds is that they have as their domain the air element, mediating between the earthly realm and the heaven world."[1] This essay aims to elucidate the role of birds as intermediaries between divine entities and humans, highlighting how their distinctive abilities and capacities are employed according to their taxonomic classification and skill set. This will be explored through human encounters with birds, including my own and one by Dr. Lisa Miller, and by engaging with limited mythological and biblical texts.

Intermediaries

As a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I believe that birds can serve as celestial intermediaries. These winged emissaries, divinely appointed and summoned, function as conduits for conveying messages of hope, profoundly touching human souls in unparalleled ways. Birds, thus, act as mediators, vehicles, and gateways, revealing a shared world beyond our own. This concept aligns with ornithomancy, the practice of interpreting omens from the actions of birds, such as

1. Adam McLean, "Birds in Alchemy," *The Hermetic Journal* 5 (1979): 15–18.

their flight patterns and calls. Regarding birds as integral members of our community and perceiving them as living beings rather than mere objects allows us to engage with ornithomancy, interpreting signs, symbols, and synchronistic events in a spiritual context. Interpreting these interactions cultivates dialogue concerning the divine phenomenology inherent in such experiences.

Consider first such postulations found in both Greek philosophy and in the Hebrew Bible. Plutarch, the Greek philosopher and priest at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, wrote about birds within communal relationships.

> It is, in fact, no small or ignoble division of divination, but a great and very ancient one, which takes its name from birds; for their quickness or apprehension and their habit of responding to any manifestation, so easily are they diverted, serves as an instrument for the gods, who directs their movements, their calls or cries, and their formations which are sometimes contrary, sometimes favoring, as winds are; so that he uses some birds to cut short, others to speed enterprises and inceptions to the destined end. It is for this reason that Euripides calls birds in general "heralds of the gods."[2]

Here Plutarch examines ornithomancy, the ancient practice of divination through birds, as a significant method of discerning the gods' will. He views birds, with their swift reactions and environmental awareness, as divine means of communication. Their movements, calls, and formations are interpreted as signs of divine favor or opposition, shaping human actions and decisions. Plutarch references Euripides to support this perspective.

Additionally, I turn to the Hebrew Bible to view Elijah's experience with a raven acting as a divine emissary.

> Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew

2. Plutarch, *De sollertia animalium*, "Whether Land or Sea Animals are Cleverer," in The Loeb Classical Library, vol. XII (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957).

> nor rain these years, except by my word." And the word of the Lord came to him: "Depart from here and turn eastward and hide yourself by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. You shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." So he went and did according to the word of the Lord. He went and lived by the brook Cherith that is east of the Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.[3]

In this narrative, ravens serve as divine emissaries, delivering crucial provisions. Their behavior, known as "caching"—the act of scavenging and storing food in temporary caches—renders them uniquely suited for this role. It is clear why they, above all other birds, were selected for such a sacred task by God.

The Red-Tailed Hawk and Eagle

In my forties, I was caught in an inescapable vortex. I finally relayed my history of being sexually violated as a child to some people in my life. From a young and vulnerable age, I existed in a world that felt like a battlefield—one I didn't understand and couldn't escape. The trauma of those years shaped me, leaving scars that defined who I became. Stifled by alexithymia, a condition marked by an inability to identify or articulate emotions, I drifted through social interactions with peers like a ghost, my profound distrust of others anchoring me to isolation. This emotional detachment, paired with deep-seated fear, perpetually stranded me on the fringes of human connection. Thus, I came to rely heavily on the presence of divine beings and dreams, which cultivated an acute sense of spirituality in my life. In this process, I developed an innate affinity for connecting with birds and the divine Mother Earth, which has served to counterbalance my distrust of humanity and lack of social integration. Whenever certain birds appear in my life, I am

3. 1 Kings 17:2, in *The Hebrew-English Interlinear ESV Old Testament*, edited by Thom Blair (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014).

compelled to introspect on the significance of their presence, scrutinizing the timing, context, and emotional resonance or feeling-tone of the encounter.[4] I seek to decipher the message being conveyed through the interaction, inquiring about the purpose behind our convergence and the wisdom being imparted. I believe, as illustrated in the life of Carl Jung—a Swiss psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and the founder of analytical psychology who was also a victim of sexual abuse as a child—that such trauma is inherently linked with spirituality.[5]

In that context, at the time, I was deeply worried about my eldest daughter's future, which was precariously at risk by someone close to her, due to the trauma drama being played out in my family's life. My ecclesiastical minister, David F. Holland, was acting as an intermediary, helping to provide some measures of safety and protection. While driving my youngest daughter to gymnastics, I was highly agitated by the situation and unfolding events. As I turned onto the interstate, a large red-tailed hawk suddenly appeared, mere inches away from skimming across my windshield. At that exact moment, my phone lit up with a call

4. Martine Batchelor, "*Vedanā* or Feeling Tone: A Practical and Contemporary Meditative Exploration," *Contemporary Buddhism* 19, no. 1 (2018): 54–68.

5. See my forthcoming article "Spiritual and Metaphysical Components to Healing Child Sex Abuse," in *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*; Deirdre Bair, *Jung: A Biography*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2003), 72, 112–14; Barbara Hannah, *Jung, His Life and Work: A Biographical Memoir* (New York: Putnam, 1976), 22; William McGuire, ed.,. *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), 94–95.; C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections,* Edited and recorded by Aniela Jaffé (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 10–14; Edward Santana, *Jung and Sex: Re-Visioning the Treatment of Sexual Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 109: Dean Bonura, *Beyond Trauma: Hope and Healing for Warriors: A Guide for Pastoral Caregivers on PTSD* (Bloomington, Ind.: WestBow Press, 2016); Deirdre Bair, *Jung: A Biography*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co.: 2003), 72; William McGuire, ed., *The Freud/Jung Letters: The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), 94–95.

from President Holland. The synchronicity of this event—the hawk's near collision and the call—left me stunned and bewildered. In my shocked and confused state, I did not answer my phone.[6]

My symbolic associations with hawks were informed by the Native American spiritual beliefs, specifically those of the Cherokee people, who regard the red-tailed hawk as a protector spirit. Although I was aware of this cognitively, my heightened stress level prevented me from integrating this knowledge to soothe my soul. After dropping my youngest daughter at gymnastics, I proceeded to the temple, my sanctuary for therapeutic intervention. Upon completing an endowment session and spending time in the celestial room, I experienced an overwhelmingly powerful and peaceful sensation. The feeling while sitting in the celestial room was a palpable impression of being surrounded by divine angels. Upon leaving the temple, I turned on my phone to find a text from President Holland: "Suzie, I feel angels are surrounding you tonight." How could he have known? How could he perceive this intimate personal experience in the temple? We were miles apart, and I had not communicated anything about my encounter with the hawk or the angels in the temple with anyone.

The psychospiritual imprints of this event have compelled me to reflect deeply on the mysteries of the universe and the boundaries between humans, birds, angels, and our divine parents. In a profoundly impactful moment of vulnerability, when I found myself in dire need of support and hope, it became strikingly evident that a higher power was attempting to communicate with me through various manifestations: a bird, President Holland, and angels. President Holland subsequently conveyed that measures had been taken to ensure the safety and protection of my eldest daughter. The simultaneous appearance of a hawk and the illumination of my phone serve as a poignant reminder of this divine communication, reinforcing my belief that loving divine parents

6. Suzanne E. Greco, *The Stone Sphere* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Ekpyrosis Press, 2025), 134.

watch over us, imparting not only one but several messages of reassurance that all would ultimately be okay. This encounter is indelibly etched in my memory, not only for the physical proximity and sensations or embodiment of being in contact with a hawk and angels, but also due to the emotional and psychological state I was experiencing at the time, a state wherein I was seeking power and assistance beyond any earthly kind.

Birds, often regarded as symbols of hope, have historically been noted to appear in times of peril, during battles, or prior to embarking on challenging journeys. The reception of a favorable avian omen from the divine during significant life events constitutes a profound experience that uplifts the spirit and elicits feelings of relief. Homer's *Iliad* provides several illustrations of such occurrences.

> And they, when now they saw that sent of Zeus
> The bird had come, leapt on their Trojan foes
> More fierce, and turned their spirit to the fight.[7]

> Thus did he pray, and father Jove pitying his tears vouchsafed him that his people should live, not die; forthwith he sent them an eagle, most unfailingly portentous of all birds, with a young fawn in its talons; the eagle dropped the fawn by the altar on which the Achaeans sacrificed to Jove the lord of omens; When, therefore, the people saw that the bird had come from Jove, they sprang more fiercely upon the Trojans and fought more boldly.[8]

In Homer's works, the social interaction of birds and humans is exemplified as a potent catalyst for hope, thereby empowering warriors to engage in battle with renewed vigor. This phenomenon underscores the profound psychological impact that birds can have on human behavior.

Early in the morning, I ventured out to tend to the chickens, housed in a coop situated near a tranquil body of water in our backyard. The

7. W.C. Green, trans., *The Iliad of Homer with a Verse Translation* (London: Longmans & Co., 1884), 331.

8. Green, *The Iliad*, 329–31.

sun's first light began to pierce through the dense fog, casting an ethereal glow. My burdens were heavy at the time, having recently embarked on an overly ambitious endeavor to establish a nonprofit aimed at preserving and providing access to Catholic parish records across Italy. Having been a stay-at-home mom for more than twenty-five years, I now found myself in urgent need of employment. This path was ludicrous, fraught with risk and uncertainty, yet it felt right.

Simultaneously, I was recovering from severe PTSD symptoms, stemming from accusations I had made against my father regarding child sex abuse. As such, I was hypersensitive to every movement and sound. As I approached the coop, I detected an approaching presence from my right. Turning, I witnessed an eagle soaring past me, mere feet away. Most likely the bird had not seen me due to the thick fog. The physical proximity, the rush of air, and my direct view of the wingspan brought a heightened awareness as I heard the words come into my mind: "Keep looking up Suzie, keep looking up." I understood this to mean that I should persist, push through the pain, the darkness, and the uncertainty. I perceived this encounter with this eagle, at this moment in time, as a spiritual omen, symbolizing the necessity to attain a higher perspective, transcend my limitations, and look beyond my myopic viewpoint with courage.

Lisa Miller and the Mama Duck

To further illustrate the phenomenology of avian encounters, I share the experience of Dr. Lisa Miller, which she recounts in *The Awakened Brain*.[9] After years of attempting to conceive, Lisa and her husband turned to IVF treatments. Following several unsuccessful attempts, Lisa returned home from another treatment, burdened with doubt about its success. Upon opening her front door, she found a mysterious black

9. Lisa Miller and Esmé Schwall Weigand, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life* (New York: Random House, 2021), 89.

object on the doorstep. She picked up the wet mass only to discover it was a duck embryo, with a beak and tiny webbed feet askew. To Lisa, this symbolized another failed IVF attempt. However, a few hours later, she heard a tapping at her door and found a full-grown female duck, offering a poignant personalized message. "I opened the door and found that the mama duck had brought me a gift: a plump, juicy worm. She dropped it on the threshold and waddled back toward the river."[10] Lisa further explains: "[M]y inner life and outer life lined up in a way that felt significant, too improbable to have happened by chance. I felt guided by something, a larger order or life force. In that moment, I saw the mama duck as evidence of the deep connection possible between living beings, a feeling of oneness. Even hope."[11]

In Lisa's experience, a profound communal connection involving a human, a bird, and the element of care is observed. Ducks symbolically embody good luck, nurturing, bonding, transformation, intuition, and spiritual ascension. The juxtaposition of the lifeless duck embryo and the subsequent tapping at the door by the mother duck constituted significant physical encounters and symbolic signs. These were undeniably meaningful to the recipient. Despite another unsuccessful IVF attempt, Lisa and her husband eventually adopted a child and simultaneously conceived naturally, experiencing blessings beyond their imagination. This encounter with the bird bridged conscious and unconscious realms.

Phenomenology

When individuals encounter such phenomena, they often experience a profound sense of disorientation, frequently accompanied by an unwillingness to disclose these experiences due to concerns about being perceived as irrational or unstable. However, acknowledging these

10. Miller, *The Awakened Brain*, 89.

11. Miller, *The Awakened Brain*, 89.

encounters through a phenomenological lens—a qualitative research approach focused on analyzing lived experience and the structures of subjective consciousness—provides a more grounded framework. By examining how individuals perceive and interpret phenomena without dismissing them as unstable or illogical, phenomenology allows researchers to credibly explore these experiences as meaningful aspects of human understanding.

Avian encounters, as reflected in collective memory, provide significant insights, as the collective memory of social groups closely parallels the structure of myth.[12] Myths typically emerge from oral traditions, wherein narratives are transmitted through generations via oral communication. Over time, these narratives can evolve and adapt, ultimately becoming entrenched within shared cultural narratives that explain various phenomena or human experiences. Consequently, individual stories or lived experiences can coalesce into a broader cultural process. Therefore, phenomena such as encounters with birds should not be dismissed as implausible but rather recognized as meaningful aspects of human experience.

The phenomenology of avian encounters might be conceptualized through the following analogy. Jung made the decision to disclose his experiences of childhood sexual abuse. He had been Freud's up-and-coming protégé. His eventual split with Freud stemmed from a fundamental disagreement with Freud's theories regarding sexuality. Jung's work then gravitated toward themes of mythology, spirituality, archetypes, and the exploration of both conscious and unconscious realms.

The structural dismissal of subjective phenomenology across clinical and spiritual domains reveals recurring patterns of epistemic violence rooted in hierarchical systems of validation. Freud's systematic negation of female patients' abuse narratives, framed as pathological

12. Jeffrey C. Alexander, et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 67.

fantasy rather than embodied testimony, demonstrates how institutional authority can weaponize theoretical frameworks to delegitimize marginalized accounts.[13] This mirrors, though does not equate to, the exclusion of spiritual encounters from dominant epistemologies, where claims of divine or numinous experience are frequently relegated to the realm of delusion or false consciousness. Both contexts expose how hierarchies of credibility, whether privileging psychoanalytic interpretations over survivors' accounts or materialist empiricism over metaphysical phenomena, operate through systemic exclusion. The enduring cultural legacy of such epistemic gatekeeping lies in its capacity to naturalize specific ontologies while rendering alternative modes of perception illegible. It is imperative to recognize that the phenomenology of spiritual encounters—whether with birds, angels, or the divine—should not be dismissed as mere illusions or false consciousness. Instead, these experiences warrant consideration as manifestations rooted in a more tangible, communal framework, representing a divine network that collaborates for the betterment of humanity.

Drawing on Jung's concept of meaning matrices, they frame the integration of inner subjective experiences and outer objective realities as a psychic matrix. My application of this to birds is that birds function as a bridge between the universal realms of signs (objective) and symbols (subjective). Our comprehension of the external world is inherently constrained by subjective limitations. Jung posits that a matrix is formed when unconscious content, manifesting in various archetypal forms, reflects our objective reality and becomes consciously accessible to us. Thus, when one encounters a bird, the experience is not merely an apparition; rather, it is an engagement with a distinct

13. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 10–20; Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 65; Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret: Sexual Abuse of Children* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

entity, creating a mutual recognition and obligation. These encounters with birds are perceived through our individual objective lenses. Christopher M. Moreman asserts, "As such, the entirety of the bird can never be known, but instead one can only ever truly know what the bird means for the individual experiencing it, or, archetypically, what the bird might mean for humankind."[14] Moreman elucidates that birds transcend mere symbolic representation; while they are indeed powerful symbols, our understanding arises from the intricate interrelationship between the bird and the observer.

As a survivor of child sex abuse, my admiration for birds has been engendered by the profound role they have played in my life as a source of inspiration and guidance. These precious beings have communicated divine messages, bolstering my courage and fostering hope during challenging times. I make a conscious effort to acknowledge and express gratitude for their presence, whether they serve as a warning or convey messages of hope. The phenomenology of avian encounters warrants greater recognition and appreciation within our broader understanding of the communal relationship between divine beings, humans, and birds.

14. Christopher M. Moreman, "On the Relationship between Birds and Spirits of the Dead," *Society & Animals* 22, no. 5 (2014): 496.

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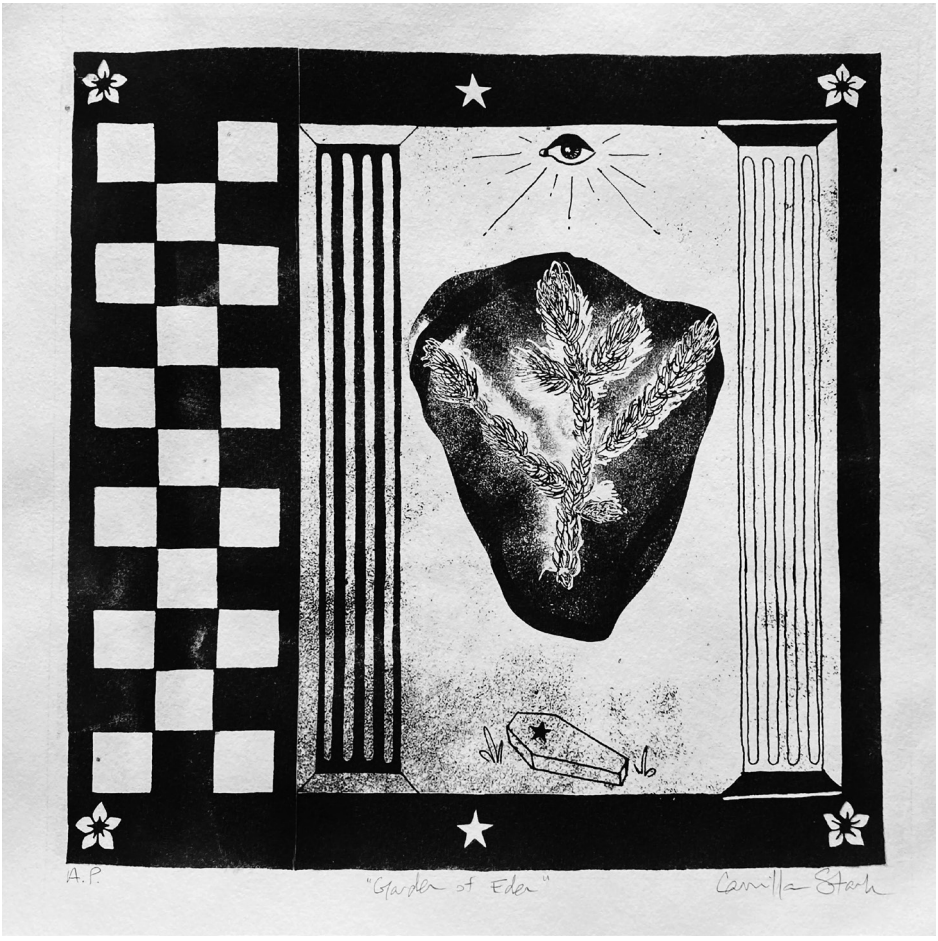

Camilla Stark, *Garden of Eden*, 2022,
cyanotype, 12 x 12 in.

Artist's Statement: Every moment is an infinitely branching point of possibility. But when we make a choice, some paths open and others close. This piece represents both the branching point and the singular path that led us to our present situation. The checkerboard references the floor of Solomon's temple, as depicted in Freemason imagery, whose black-and-white squares represent the intermingling of good and evil. As a whole, this piece speaks to duality, choice, and acceptance.

SNEAKING TO CHURCH IN SAUDI

Stephanie Kilpatrick

Orange dust blows into my eyes as I step out of the car onto the hot-enough-to-cook-an-egg sidewalk in the Diplomatic Quarter, or DQ as everyone calls it, of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. We are a few blocks away from the villa our "book club" uses as a church building. A house furnished with plastic chairs, a wood podium, and folding tables tucked away and pulled out only for occasional ward activities. Instead of housing a family, its function is a meeting place for the unofficial Riyadh Second Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The place where us non-Saudi LDS residents can meet, if we choose. And we do, so every Friday we make the half-hour drive through the insanity of chaotic Riyadh traffic and walk into the 105°F oven to get to church.

My husband and three sons are dressed in long pants, not slacks, and button-up shirts—a couple white, one plaid, another blue. I peek down into my tote bag to make sure I have all four of their ties, then straighten my robe-like abaya, making sure my dress is completely covered. We can't look like we are going to church. Instead, we have to give off an "everyday" appearance, as if we could be going to a restaurant or to visit a friend. A nearby minaret—a prayer tower attached to a mosque—begins broadcasting the call to prayer through a loudspeaker at the top. The Arabic chanting bounces down the sunny, dusty street we walk along, echoed in the distance by other prayer towers crying out in different tones. A communal worship singing throughout the country. It makes me wonder what it would be like to live in a place full of people with my same faith. Where almost everyone shares my spiritual foundation and understands my beliefs. Where it's normal to live the way I do at church, or inside my home, in public too. With everyone. Would it make me stronger? Braver? Or lazy?

Up ahead, another family from our ward is heading to the villa. We slow our pace to keep our distance and pretend we don't know them. Turning a corner to walk down a different street than the one they were taking, Shawn and I step over fallen dates that litter the sidewalk, while our sons use them as ammo. With a screech, one of the many stray cats that roam the streets of Riyadh darts out of the palms and across the street. I would be sweating, but it is so dry, any drop of liquid immediately evaporates. After about five minutes, the villa comes into view. Another family just went through the metal door in the stone wall that surrounds it, so we let it clang shut and pause a street away before moving toward it. We have to stagger our arrival so there isn't a group of people seen heading into the villa at the same time and gathering. Because what we're doing is, technically, illegal.

Religious freedom isn't a thing in Saudi. It's an Islamic state governed by a monarchy, where the laws of their country are based on the laws of Sunni Islam. Laws that influence their dress—men in their white thobes and women in black abayas and hijabs. Laws that dictate social norms and gender roles. Laws that say no pork is allowed in the country (a fact greatly bemoaned by my bacon-loving boys). Laws that ban non-Islamic public worship, proselyting, and even symbols. Saudi religious community encompasses everything about them, and everyone shares in it. So, it makes sense that in a place where it's a crime, potentially punishable by death, for a Muslim to convert to another religion, other religions wouldn't be allowed. However, the current law *does* say non-Muslim residents may worship *privately* and possess personal religious material. We *were* allowed to bring our personal scriptures, as long as we kept them to ourselves. So what if we keep church to ourselves? How private is *privately*? Maybe it is enough to keep our gatherings private from neighbors and other Muslims. And it seems to be. It is a fine line.

The secret meeting I'm going to could ruin a Saudi's life, in one sense, if they tried it. But we're Christian American expats, so we walk toward the villa door on that very fine line. A line that makes us refer

to the Riyadh Second Ward as our "book club," not only in public but also in phone calls, texts, and emails—since those are monitored by the Saudi government. The same line that motivates us to park blocks away and walk through the heat and be inconspicuous. A line that we, and the rest of our ward members, walk in order to meet on the Sabbath, which in Saudi is on Friday, and take the sacrament.

Once inside, I pass the ties out. Our fourteen-year-old gets his on by himself, while my husband helps the twelve-year-old, and I zip up the cheater-tie onto the ten-year-old. I hang my abaya with all the rest on the large coat stand next to the door, then we all take off our shoes and put them on the half-filled shoe racks lining the entryway before we head inside. Where there would have been a large dining room and living room, instead we have a chapel. A typical LDS wood podium resides at one end, facing rows of plastic chairs with a single aisle going down the center. We fill up five of the six chairs in a row on the left side of the aisle and as it gets closer to starting time, our oldest boys move up to the front right row to pass the sacrament—they, the only two young men in the ward of sacrament-passing age.

I look around the room; I know everyone here. There are only about thirty or forty of us. We are all expats displaced from our home countries on behalf of employment. An amalgamation of families from India, New Zealand, Philippines, and United States. No Saudis. Despite our varied backgrounds and cultures, we are bonded by our beliefs and subculture, though not the LDS subculture found in the United States in places like Utah. Here, we are a mix of so many countries and societal norms and rituals that our common culture is based on the gospel. Our Indian friends wear traditional saris, our Filipino friends brought delicious classic Filipino foods to a ward party and taught us stick dances, and our New Zealand members taught us a Māori haka. It's a ward where sometimes a musical number isn't sung in English, and the Spirit is stronger for the diversity. But still, our hearts are in common. When a child gets baptized, we all stay after church and participate

as they go into the pool in the small backyard of the villa. We eat and celebrate together as a ward for one child entering those waters. Our common faith roots us in a borderless community as children of God in his worldwide church.

But these circumstances aren't what we from the States would call, by any means, typical. For my family, only here for a couple years, it's an adventure. But for some of these youth who are here long-term, it must be difficult. I grew up in Florida, where there weren't many members. My close friends were the youth from church because they understood a deep part of me. When kids at school found out I was "Mormon," as they called me, I'd usually get the question, "So how many moms do you have?" followed by snickers. I'd say "One" with an annoyed attitude, then shut it down and change the subject. But I had my church friends—my fellow support among peers. Even my small group was bigger than what these kids in Saudi have.

Shawn is a leader over the young men, of which there are four, half of them belonging to us. I'm over the young women, of which there are also four. Despite the age and culture differences, they all laugh and chat and play together at our weekly youth activity—their only option for interaction with LDS peers before they go off to the American school or the Filipino school or their compounds or apartments. To the places where they aren't *allowed* to speak about their beliefs. Where most of the people surrounding them don't even believe in Christ. While in the States we encourage youth to share their beliefs and invite friends, in Saudi we are reminded from the pulpit not to share, not to post, to be careful and keep our beliefs quiet. It must feel awfully isolating at times for these young people. I admire their strength and commitment to their faith when they choose to hold onto it even though they have to secret it away like a hidden book club.

Now that I'm back in the States, I sometimes wonder if that isolating circumstance has the potential to make one stronger. It would have been easier, even safer, to worship truly privately. Alone. Skip the traffic,

heat, and risk. Just take a couple years off from the fight of getting kids dressed, fed, and in the car for church. It was a circumstance that tested us. Made us choose. And I think we became stronger because of it. Not only in a personal sense but as a group of believers in Christ. Our ward was tight, as they say. Because we had to be. We only had each other. Well, at least within our secret villa at our book club meetings. Aside from our faith, maybe it was our shared sense of being careful, of being "in it together," that drew us close as a group. Is that what early Saints felt as they were trying to build the Church and were constantly persecuted and run out of town? Maybe part of the glue that held them close was their collective trial of living their faith in a time or place where it was not accepted, even in a country that was founded on a belief in God and proposes to grant religious freedom to all.

The United States has come a long way since then, from a place in the past where, like the Saints in Saudi, the early pioneers had to be careful and, at times, hide to a modern soup of religions scattered and tolerated throughout the land. But while no one can get away with tarring or murdering a "Mormon" these days, the atmosphere of tolerance varies by location. There are definitely more Christian places, like the South or Utah, where going to church and believing in God is accepted as typical, even expected. And then there are other places where, if you mention that you're Christian you are labeled a fool or a bigot.

Before moving to Saudi, we lived in western Washington, about an hour north of Seattle. It was, in some ways, a personal version of Saudi. Be careful. Keep your beliefs to yourself, as it were. Almost as if the unspoken agreement was: While we have freedom of religion, we shouldn't encourage expression of any one religion on the chance we may offend another. Or, if you're Christian, you're weak-minded and deluded. Or, you're discriminatory. Or maybe even schizophrenic. Who knows. Those crazy religious people just need to shut up and keep it to themselves. That was the general temperature of the waters I observed from the shores of social media or school hallways or overheard grocery

store chatter. So, I hid my book club unless I knew, absolutely, it was safe. My good friends were from church, and I didn't talk much about my beliefs with people who weren't. When someone would give me a $5 coffee gift card as a thank-you for volunteering at school, I'd pass it on to someone else rather than tell them I didn't drink coffee and risk them feeling bad or judged, or judging me. I'd read my scriptures at home, but not in public. At home I'd pray over food, but not in public. Not like the Saudis who would close down stores and whip out their prayer rugs and pray for everyone to see. While legally and physically, I could, stigma and judgment and negative experiences kept me in a state of hesitant carefulness. Was it outside forces that made me huddle down inside myself, or inward ones?

In a place like Saudi, where many people share similar beliefs, it seems like it would be easier. Surely it helps some people keep spiritual focus and prevents religious contention or persecution. But then I wonder at the seemingly equal potential for that to lead to strength or weakness. If my country was built upon my religion, shared by most of the people, and enforced by my government, would my faith be bolstered or hindered? It seems more comfortable. Safer. But would we Latter-day Saints be more confident in our convictions as a people? Would we be a cohesive city of faith—a Zion community, thriving without the chains of worldly judgements and repercussions? Or would we become a "culture" of religion, scattered with hollow pockets of emptiness—a people more likely to fall into the pattern of putting on the appearance of religion?

Citizens in Saudi live a Muslim life in part by following the dress code and laws, including no delicious bacon, with no choice to do anything different. While I have no doubt that countless Muslims in Saudi Arabia are sincere believers and find great meaning in their religious tradition, I can't help but wonder how many Saudis were going through the motions—saying memorized prayers at certain times but perhaps lacking a deeper faith. Saudi Arabia has a culture and legal system that makes it easy for some to *seem* devout without *being* devout.

I wonder if having that kind of bubble around us, and our Latter-day Saint belief system, would help or harm the depth of true conversion. It might protect us from discrimination, but maybe it would also make it harder to grow strong roots. To be *sure* of our faith. To test it. Exposure to different ideas forces us to confront our own, to strengthen them or abandon them. Maybe the freedom to choose is what makes our decided beliefs rugged and well-built, able to last past the lifetime warranty. Like a wind-blown sapling that digs its roots wide and deep and grows into a towering oak, as opposed to a plant grown safely indoors, its shallow roots requiring that it stay indoors or risk being ripped out of the ground by a gale. A bubble, whether it is one we make for ourselves or one imposed upon us, may feel good, but it could lead to us lacking a deep, heartfelt, faith-filled conversion. And it is that depth of conversion that gives us the fortitude to practice our beliefs alone, persecuted, or when it isn't popular. When you have to sneak across a date-scattered, dusty, burning-hot sidewalk, acting like a spy to get to church.

Now I live three houses down from the church building in a Zion-like neighborhood in Idaho Falls. It is the closest I've ever been to a little LDS Saudi land. Our building is filled with people, so many that even after two years I don't know everyone here, but the ones I do know are family because we share a deep foundation—our faith. Shawn and I are back serving with the youth, only here, our sons have a large pool of peers that share their streets, their schools, and their values. We are more open with our beliefs. Less afraid of judgement. Is it the location? Maybe. Feeling like we're part of a larger culture here definitely helps. But maybe some of it is strength grown through experience. Whatever it is, I feel my roots taking up water.

As I walk to church, my not-that-high heels wobbling down the sidewalk, my neighbor goes whizzing past on her electric scooter, dress fluttering in the breeze. I wave to a Sunday-clad neighbor family zipping past on their golf cart. Boys dressed in suits ride past on their bikes. There's no hiding who we are or where we are going. I'm not

looking over my shoulder or checking for watchers. There's no self-consciousness or worry. It's freeing and connecting. But in a small way, there is a distance, one I only know because of comparison. The difference between a large, free congregation and the intimate, personal, and secret meeting of a small group in Saudi.

I think of my Saudi Church family, the ones who are still there, and wonder how their Friday Sabbath was. If the prayer towers sang to them as they snuck to church. If the dust was blowing through the date palms landscaped along the roads. If the small villa room was filled with close-knit hearts and borderless love. Even continents away, we are still connected. A worldwide community. Children of God.

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THE POWER OF WORDS

Scott Sanderson

Within the Latter-day Saint cultural milieu, there are phrases frequently utilized during church meetings—from testimonies to talks to firesides—that are so ubiquitous that we should rightfully wonder if such statements actually deserve repeating. Irrefutably, these expressions of belief are revered and their sincerity should never be disparaged. However, the popularity of such statements underscores the necessity to dissect and understand their meaning. Only then can we hope to effectively communicate these vitally important truths and realities to others.

There are many common phrases and iterations of these phrases. One such statement is "I know the Church is true." There are many others that are similar: "I know that [insert name of the current leader of the Church] is a prophet of God," or "I know that [insert name of local leader] is called of God." Again, such statements are most often expressed with profound sincerity and should never be ridiculed or mocked. But for the simplicity of this essay, I will focus on the first statement as it contains the basic elements for thorough discussion of the topic.

The phrase "I know the Church is true" is the bedrock statement of many testimonies. While I do not, myself, express these words exactly, I believe I understand the intended meaning. What is implied by this phrase is a general acknowledgement that every good choice, good feeling, and sense of purpose in one's life has emanated from membership in the Church. It means that since one has experienced such undeniable intrinsic benefits from said membership, that that, in and of itself, is an obvious affirmation that it is the true source of spiritual boon. It may

also be an expression from many of a divine personal revelation that the Church is where they are needed and where truths exist. It may also be a statement about the importance of community and losing oneself in a higher celestial purpose. Spoken along these lines, there is a powerful and emotional witness that life's meaning is contained within the organization, experiences, and teachings of the Church. As beautiful and profound as these insinuations may be, nevertheless, the actual words said do not exactly match this meaning.

The word "know" has several definitions in the English language. It can mean having an awareness of something real, having information or an absolute certainty about something, and other definitions like to be familiar with someone. While it is not hard to make a connection with some of these definitions of knowing and what might be meant by a statement like "I know the Church is true," this usage is still not the most clear or insightful. There are better, more enlightening ways to express this, in my opinion. The principal issue with applying a phrase such as "I know" to a gospel topic is that it supposes that the processes of revelation, exercising faith, and acting on hunches are perfect methods that necessarily lead one not just in a direction of belief but to an absolute and certain destination. There is no doubt in knowing. There is also no need for faith when something is known. Alma the Younger alludes to this when he states that faith is "not a perfect knowledge" (Alma 32:26). Therefore, knowledge is not belief. Belief is not knowledge. Knowledge is derived from assimilated *facts* about the observable universe. Belief is derived from assimilated *experiences* that point one to faith. Knowledge is found through *data*, through breaking down a phenomenon to its constituent parts to discover its inner workings. Belief is found through exercising faith, by melding *events* together to discover their underlying meaning. These are key and fundamental differences. The words—"knowledge" and "belief"—are, in fact, not interchangeable. Communicating about belief as if it equates knowledge can lead to severe misunderstanding. This is especially true of those who are new

to LDS culture or who are struggling to identify with LDS culture. A much more accurate way to describe such a testimonial statement, in my opinion, would be to say, "I have faith that the Church is true," or "I firmly believe that the Church is true." This shifts the focus onto the hope that the things felt and observed are from God, not on expressing that something has to be absolute and certain in order to be spoken in a testimony. I understand that this change would appear to trivialize those who have experienced profound heavenly answers where their understanding was illuminated in an undeniable manner. My intention is not to marginalize any such experience, but I think it is important to recognize that this is not the same exact concept as empirical knowing. Faith is a process, not a destination. Faith is a wrestling with doubt, not an exercise in certainty.

The next part of the phrase "I know the Church is true" that merits discussion is the inherent vagueness with the usage of the word "true." In the LDS cultural vernacular, "true" here has a reference to something being real, correct, or actual. In the English language, there are two similar definitions: a state of being in accordance with fact or reality or of being accurate or exact. As we observed with "knowing," we might be implying empirical certainty to processes that are subjective, sensed, or intuited. The usage of a word like "true" might inaccurately denote that all truth and reality can only exist in a binary state. That is, something is either completely true or correct, or it is completely false or erroneous. Such dichotomous claims can really only be defended when demonstrated by repeated experiments in controlled studies. This is generally limited to observable phenomena repetitively confirmed by the scientific method. The beauty here is that anyone can conduct the same experiments—if they have the means to do so—and achieve the same results. But even with scientific inquiry, there are errors, gaps in understanding that need to be corrected. Therefore, not everything with rational, objective reasoning can always be defended as undeniably true. How does this apply, then, to the usage of "true" in a spiritual

or faith-based inquiry? It would ostensibly appear that repeated, similar feelings about the same ontological concept might imply its truth. There certainly is power in repeated divine confirmation of ideas that we accept as correct or actual. Nevertheless, we are led to ponder what it might mean that something—particularly, spiritual or faith-based—is "true." For instance, if we declare that "the Church is true," does this mean it is so in the binary or all-or-nothing sense? Are there indeed only two possible outcomes from that question? Is it factual to say that "the Church," the organization apparently created by God for the benefit of man, has never during the entirety of its lifetime of being influenced by human hands and hearts experienced shortcomings, errors, or oversights, or even had occasional events that harmed members? To me, this last question is perhaps the most preposterous. I do not believe it is even remotely possible to defend a narrative to suggest that "the Church" has always been led perfectly and never had to correct errors in course and in doctrine. This is not to say that the same Church is not led and inspired by God, but rather that it is incorrect to assume it is "true" in the absolute sense of the word. There are two doctrinally and theologically supported reasons for this: the vitally important gift of agency and the veil that separates heavenly from earthly experience. If it were God's intention to send us to Earth to, with perfect certainty, navigate through the vicissitudes of life, there would be no risk and little growth. True enlightenment derives from "see[ing] through a glass, darkly," as stated in 1 Corinthians (13:12). This implies formative learning from experience, not because we know the answer exactly, but rather because we are willing to discover it over time and over repeated prayer to the being who knows all. None of us would grow if all knowledge was so overtly extended; therefore, it is important to note that our understanding is not absolute. Thus, when we speak of religious concepts existing in a "true" state, we must recognize that this comes with limitations.

The next problem with describing the Church as "true" is that there is inherent ambiguity about what this actually means. Are we generally

saying that we believe in the Restoration, that Jesus Christ is leading the Church, that the Book of Mormon contains the word of God, that the Church is a good place where the Spirit can be felt, etc.? I surmise that this is what most intend. However, it is critical, in my opinion, to be much more specific in our communications. For instance, it may be apropos to cite a personal experience where heavenly guidance was received on how to interpret and apply a particular scriptural verse to your life. This would mean that the scripture that has been read is true in the sense that you have been instructed in how it is relevant to your life. Another example would be recounting how a vexing situation was instrumental in building your testimony on the concepts of fasting and prayer. Such examples go on and on. The more general or vague we are about our spiritual experiences, the less significant the impact when we declare them to be "true." The more specific we are about how something is real in our lives, the more we can convey its genuineness. Perhaps a more accurate way to describe the "trueness" of a spiritual reality is to say that "I believe there is truth to that concept." Or "that specific topic is one that is real to me and for this reason . . ." I think we lose certain individuals, and often ourselves, when we utter blanket statements like "the Church is true," especially without being specific about its real-life application. A more fitting proposal might be to, rather than explaining *why* the Church is true, focus more on *what* about the Church is true. For instance, the Church's teachings about faith have been instrumental for me in developing a strong and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The Church's long-standing focus on families has undoubtedly fostered deeper love in my own family. Other such examples abound. It is also useful—though unpopular—to reflect on what about our conceptualization of the Church may not be so true. To embrace, rather than avoid, uncomfortable facts regardless of how much we worry about their impact to our faith. This will instill in us the most honest narrative, the one that has the most power to truly enlighten and save lost souls.

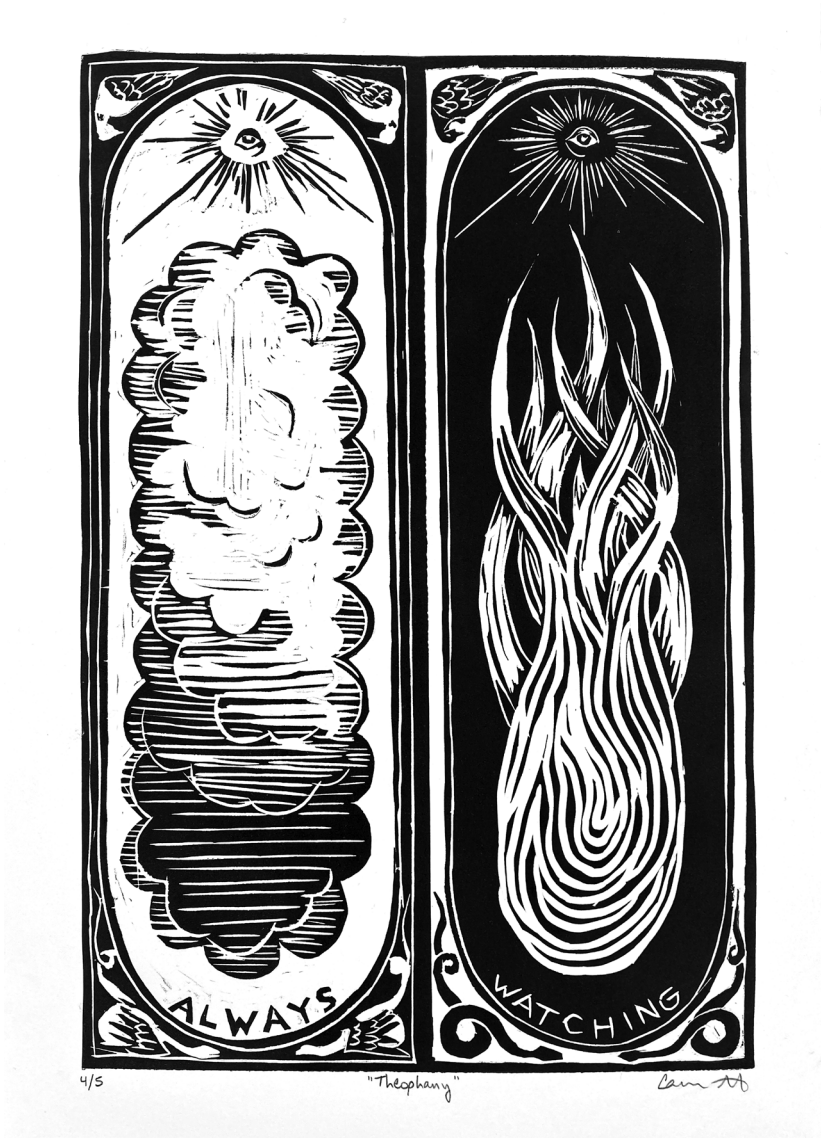
What, then, is the epistemological alternative within LDS culture to using words like "knowing" and "true"? The exact answer is likely to vary based on the unique experiences and perceptions of individuals; however, there are common threads. If we treat faith as belief and not absolute certainty, we allow our hearts and minds the openness to hear new words, to have new celestial insights, and to be taught by the Spirit. By contrast, if we know something is true, why would we ever pray about it or ask probing questions? If we state that we know something is true—and, in particular, if a sizeable portion of the most active and visible membership does this—we may inadvertently imply to others who are still growing in faith that their spirituality is defective or subpar. We may also stop all honest inquiry into key spiritual or doctrinal issues that we as a Church so desperately need to discuss. The better way, in my opinion, is to assert the reality of doctrinal truths through the sharing of relevant experiences, through the particular and specific ways Church membership has demonstrated itself to be a blessing, through applying principles in practice (not just in word), along with many, many other ways. This form of testimony has more power to motivate, inspire, and move others toward action as they see how—in reality—the things we regularly speak about resonate.

As a church, we should continue to express what we believe. We should also be honest about what it means to believe, to know, and what we declare as truth. While the whole point of this essay may appear to some trivial and semantic, missing the point of what creates an ardent, heartfelt testimony, and overly critical of enduring cultural tradition, there is yet power in the actual, specific words we choose to say and in how we choose to perceive them. If it is truly our aim to have the Church reach hearts and souls around the world, we then should be mindful of the words we use and how we communicate our own beliefs to others.

The most powerful testimony I have encountered has not emanated from speakers that insist what they "know is true" (or at least these

words are not the focal point), but rather from the expression of how their specific experiences have solidified their beliefs. Such words are substantial not because we blindly accept the words of declaration from someone, but rather because their experience relates to our own experience, which pierces the soul with testimony. In sacrament meeting talks, Sunday School discussions, youth lessons, or other such venues, the strongest impact will arise from the specific and intentional application of gospel principles to real-life circumstances. Extending undue emphasis on expressions of certainty, in reality, only obscures the true purpose behind our mortal existence.

SCOTT SANDERSON {astro.solitario@gmail.com} is an aspiring writer who has begun composing articles on themes that are underrepresented within routine LDS discourse. This piece is the first of hopefully many that will explore issues of relevance to the modern Latter-day Saint. Sanderson lives in Washington, Utah, where he works as an assistant professor at Utah Tech University and a medical laboratory scientist (MLS) at Intermountain Health.



Camilla Stark, *Theophany*, 2019, linoprint, 22 x 15 in.

Artist's Statement: My fiery spirituality makes me drawn to intense spiritual manifestations in scripture—visions of flames and angels, the presence of God in a cloud, contradictions and paradoxes. I have always felt God's presence very strongly in my life—always there, always watching—but to what end? In some moments I feel the eye of God weighing and measuring and finding me wanting. In others, I sense Him as a trusted companion keeping me safe under His eye.

HEAVEN WILL FIND YOU (EXCERPTS)

Sheldon Lawrence

Fiction Editors' Note: As fiction editors at Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, *we're excited to showcase two chapters from Sheldon Lawrence's novel Heaven Will Find You. The novel follows a man who learns that death is no escape from the consequences of a life of broken relationships, self-loathing, and lingering addiction. Though relentlessly pursued and tempted by dark forces in the afterlife, the man also discovers that God is tirelessly in pursuit, too, to remind him of his divine nature. Guided by angels, the man, as he struggles to see himself and others fully through divine eyes, discovers that true righteousness deepens our ability to love and be loved.*

Chapter 1

They have let me come and speak to you in your sleep. They said it would help us heal but that I should not go alone because seeing my son again in the flesh could pull me back down—my love could lapse into need or self-pity. So my friend, my guardian, has escorted me here and is watching me, taking care, ready to fill me with light if necessary. He is wise; even now, seeing you here, I long to be part of your life and wonder what might have been if I could have seen into your heart. But regret is heavy and can quickly drop into self-indulgent despair. I have come too far to risk that.

I want to tell you how I came to this point and where I have been since my death. I want to tell you about the hard path of repentance for someone with my stubborn heart and the difficulty of fixing things from where I am, close enough to touch you but separated by a universe. You carry so much of me within you—some good, some bad. I bear part of the burden you inherited from me, and I would labor for

eternity if necessary to lift it from you. My greatest pain is knowing the burdens I passed on to you like a virus, and knowing that you will in some degree pass them to your children. I have learned how deeply our paths and eternal destinies are intertwined.

I used to believe we were all lone wolves dealing with our own problems, making our own way, succeeding or failing based on our own merits. But I was wrong. I have come to know we are not separate. We are parts of the same whole, a living organism. One of us is not saved without the other, and so on through the generations. When one rises, the entire organism flourishes; when one falls, the entire human family suffers.

We can make things right. That is the great truth, the beautiful mystery. You are still in the game, and I am one of legions cheering for you, encouraging you, and praying for you. You carry within you the hopes and burdens of your ancestors. Growth and repentance are so much easier where you are, in the flesh, but even here we are all involved in the work of salvation.

If you retain any of this, it will seem like a strange and disjointed dream. But I hope something I say will ring true to you. That one day while reading or in conversation, when you hear a truth, you will feel a resonance, like you have heard it before, that somehow it makes sense. I did nothing to teach you faith while on Earth, but now I can at least whisper this story into your soul and hope that it somehow finds a place there. More than anything, I hope that, even if only in your dreams, your heart can begin to turn toward me, your father.

~

The first thing I remember after the accident is the powerful urge to flee the scene. There, in the darkness of a remote mountain highway, lay a steaming mess of two mangled vehicles. I told myself I was going for help, but there was no question that I was running from the mess I had just caused, running from the consequences of my choices. I had

been driving drunk and would be arrested when the police arrived. Moans of agony seeped from the other mangled car, but I did not go to help. To my relief, and some shame, I survived the wreck without even a scratch.

In the distance I thought I saw a house and told myself I would go there and get help, spinning my motives to look more innocent than they were. Yes, I would run and get help. But my real reason for running hung in the air. I ran for the same reasons I had always run away, to escape, to hide from responsibility. I wanted the forest to bury me so its blanket of darkness would cover my sins. In the pale moonlight, bodies, now quiet, lay motionless in the twisted wreck, even a limp human form lay in my own car—one I assumed had been thrown into my vehicle on impact. My chest now sick and hollow, I turned to run.

I heard a distinct voice say, "Don't run." I looked to see who said it, but I stood alone in the cool night air. The voice came a second time, more like a warning, and seemed to come from within my being.

Above the highway a piercing light appeared, illuminating the entire scene. The light revealed not only the smashed cars but the truth of the whole chain of events that hung in the air, an undeniable reality. The true cause of the crash, my intentions in running, the injured people in the other car—all displayed before me with perfect clarity.

I told myself the light was from another car, or perhaps a result of hitting my head. But every time I lied to myself in the presence of this light, the absurdity of my thoughts was naked and obvious. If only in this moment I had submitted to the wisdom of this light, allowed it to open me and work its truth upon me, I could have been spared a lot of pain. The light invited me into it, but I resisted.

Now more than ever, I wanted to run. I could not bear the presence of the light and wanted to be as far from its influence as possible. The voice from within again begged me not to go into the forest, but I pushed it away and plunged off the embankment into the thick, dark trees below.

I slid fast at first, almost falling. What I thought was a small embankment leading to the flat bottom of the canyon now plunged deep into the darkness. I did not drop into a canyon but an abyss, a dark pit that would hide me from the all-knowing light at my back. As I pushed downward through the darkness, the voice of warning grew fainter with each step and then finally, to my relief, fell silent.

I finally reached the bottom of the canyon as the ground gave way to a gentler but still downward slope. I could no longer see the steep wall I had stumbled down. Nothing about the landscape looked familiar. I was now impossibly far away from the wreck, worlds away, it seemed.

The moonlight was gone, replaced by a soft gray mist. A bone-chilling emptiness pervaded the atmosphere. I kept walking, not knowing what else to do, still lying to myself by saying I was looking for help. In the dim light I saw a grove of trees ahead, a tangled mass of branches and undergrowth. I hesitated.

A voice, somehow familiar, came from deep within the forest. "Look! It can still see you. The grove will protect you. Hide!"

I looked up in the direction of the wreck and could still see a pin-point of light like a single star in a black sky. The voice was right. The light still watched me. Though distant, my movements and thoughts were as obvious to it as when I was directly under its gaze. Seized with the fear of being captured (by what or whom I could not tell) I ran into the grove, pushing deep within until the spark of light above was no longer visible.

Beyond the trees—or was it deeper in the forest?—human voices laughed and whispered.

"Hey!" I shouted into the darkness. The power of my own voice—loud and forceful—startled me. Anger and frustration welled up and my voice felt violent. The buzz of alcohol no longer blunted my senses. I felt more alert and alive than ever.

I pushed on toward the direction of the voices, but the forest grew thicker and darker. I was no longer among living trees but only thick, finger-like shadows, sometimes snagging me and holding me back, not

like branches so much as hands. I ripped off the clinging branches. Laughter echoed in the trees, faint at first, but then louder.

"Shhh . . .not yet, not yet. Let him get deeper."

Was it a real voice or just inside my head? I couldn't tell.

"Who's there?" I yelled.

Again, the aggressiveness of my own voice frightened me. My anger did not have a particular cause, did not rise from a specific wrong against me. Rather, the resonance of the atmosphere seeped into my being. Rage clouded the air like smoke, and I breathed it in. A beast grew inside me, nourished by the waves of violence and hate that filled the grove. As my anger surged, so did my physical strength. I clenched my fists and teeth. I could fight, or kill, anything. I dared something to challenge me. The lie of looking for help no longer motivated me. I pushed through the trees because they were in my way, and I wanted something to fight against.

Every thought irritated me. The accident, though now like a distant memory, infuriated me. If it weren't for the stupidity of the other driver, I wouldn't be wandering through this forest looking for . . . whatever I was looking for. I didn't care if those in the other car survived. Their death would be their problem. Something softer inside me listened in horror as I said aloud, "I hope they're all dead."

The few voices in the forest—or in my mind—now became the indistinct murmur of a crowd. Sometimes laughter, sometimes a cry of pain, sometimes frustration, and sometimes all of these at once. I went mad with confusion. No way could so many people be here, in the middle of nowhere, at the bottom of a canyon. But they watched me, counted my every step, studied my every thought. The trees watched me, the shadows watched me, and then they followed me. Behind me, the path collapsed and closed in. Ahead, black veins sprouted from the ground to slow my steps.

The branches now grabbed at my face, my feet. Did I wonder how shadows and trees could have intention? No, I only took pleasure in hating them. I snapped them away with strength I had never before

experienced. I was an animal, busting my way through the undergrowth. When a tree wrapped a limb around my neck or my waist, I ripped it away with ease.

A joyless laughter came from deep in the shadows, a mocking, triumphant laughter. I stopped and listened in the darkness.

"Show your face," I yelled. "Bring it on!"

Only a faint, suppressed laughter, then nothing.

The sudden stillness reminded me that I had no clue where I was or where I was going. The car wreck felt like a thousand miles away. Should I turn and fight my way back up the hill? I couldn't detect a trace of the path behind me, but only a grayish light illuminating an ocean of tangled shadows. No more canyon walls, no more light in the distance.

One moment, fear coaxed me to turn back, the next moment, rage prodded me deeper into the forest. Voices crowded my mind, mostly my own, complaining about the person who crashed into me (their fault, no doubt), my job that made me take that trip, and this pointless trek into the woods.

I pushed on through the tangled mess of trees, but they no longer felt like trees. Rough bark was now smooth and cold, like—I didn't want to admit it—the skin of something dead. The shadowy branches now bent and coiled like snakes. One reached down and caressed my cheek and neck, pulling away when I reached for it. Another jabbed me hard in the ribs, and I grabbed it and pulled it apart, its flesh tearing in my hands. It shrieked in pain, but the cry was only a mocking one followed by laughter, like when a child proves it isn't really hurt.

This should have terrified me, but I converted terror to anger. The oppressive atmosphere overshadowed any sense of good judgment or even self-preservation. As if in a dream, I did not stop to wonder at the moment but simply took the world as it presented itself.

My most overwhelming desire, the most obvious thing to do, was to fight someone. My rage transformed me. Nothing was stronger than me. I now dared them to come for me, these voices, whatever they were.

"He's almost ripe," said one of them. Shadows melted into the shape of human forms. Like ravenous dogs waiting for their master to unchain them, they howled and lunged.

"When?" they cried. "When?"

There were now hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. I turned to run, but tendrils wrapped my body, binding my legs and arms, forcing me to the ground. Like a fly caught in a web, the more I struggled, the more I sent waves of excitement through the legion of beings creeping toward me. They planned a long time for this and now came to reap their harvest.

Finally, an authoritative voice from the darkness let them have their reward.

"Now."

~

Author's Introduction to Chapter 17: Attacked and tormented by malicious spirits, the man realizes that not only is he dead, but he has ended up in a realm of souls as selfish as he had been in life. Confusion, grievance, and deception bombard his mind for a seeming eternity until he is struck from above with the purest memory of his life, the birth of his son. This memory creates an energetic opening in the darkness through which a guardian spirit rescues him. Feeling unworthy of the rescue, he drifts into other, less dark but equally distracting, spheres of the spirit world where he continues to confront spiritual temptations and competing philosophies of God and the universe. When all paths lead to disappointment and frustration, he finally surrenders and chooses to confront, with the loving guidance of his guardian, the broken relationships and poor choices of his mortal life.

Chapter 17

Rest in this world was nothing like sleep on Earth. It was a deep and dreamless sleep, but also a conscious sleep. My whole body and soul melted into the stillness of night. When morning came, it felt like a

rebirth, as if the whole world was also reborn and awaiting new acts of creation. Nothing here was monotonous, no mass production, no daily grind.

I was ready for whatever awaited, but still apprehensive. My guardian met me and, sensing my nervousness, filled me with love. He told me I was not alone in this and that I would be supported by unseen friends and ancestors.

At the center of this community, like the others throughout the landscape, stood a large temple-like structure that formed the focal point of activity. Large crystal spires lined the exterior, while inside, tall columns supported the ceilings. The architecture was simple and elegant without being too showy or too ornate. This would be the place of my training as well as the point of entry for rescuing my father.

Inside, we entered a large, dark room where the only light was what emanated from my guardian. I felt safe in his presence and knew that as long as he was with me, I could make this journey.

"Your preparation begins with understanding who you are and what you are doing," he said. "I will teach by analogy. Until you are capable of direct perception, analogies—while they have their limits—will suffice.

"We are all part of a vast and beautiful work of art. Wholeness comes with working in harmony with God's creative processes. When you resist, the result is confusion and discord, a sense of enmity with creation. To exist in a state of competition and comparison, to assert one's glory over another, or to see yourself in a game of trying to win God's approval is to exist in a state of self-delusion. Freedom comes from directly perceiving your divine nature, not just learning about it intellectually. And there is only one divine nature. God is one.

"The universe is not a hierarchy of the righteous and the wicked or the intelligent and the ignorant. There is only one kind of being in the universe, and all creation comes from that Being and is fundamentally good. Beings who know they are part of God are sometimes labeled as righteous; beings who have forgotten are sometimes labeled as evil.

But the difference is one of accurate perception versus ignorance, not essential nature.

"Evil is not an inherent quality of any being's soul, but a temporary condition of ignorance. God's work is not to sort out the good from the bad or the righteous from the wicked, but to awaken souls to an understanding of their true selves. Once souls understand this fully, they will return to the God who gave them life.

"This is our work and God's work—not to sort and judge, but to awaken to eternal life, or more accurately, to *return* to eternal life."

My guardian pointed to an empty space before us, where a large, ornate vase appeared. He must have pulled it from my own mind, for it was similar to one I had seen in a museum during mortality and had paused to admire longer than the rest. But this version was much taller, at least twice my height.

Unlike the one from my memory, this vase was not a dead piece of ceramic but vibrated with life and intelligence. It was a conscious intelligence, but it did not comprehend itself. It did not understand itself as something beautiful because it had not experienced anything other than itself.

Suddenly a crack formed at the base and traveled up the side, and I felt a keen sense of loss as the fissure split the vase in two pieces, each piece falling to the floor. Now each half of the vase saw the other half, and the vase began to comprehend itself. The halves regarded one another with fascination and fear. Each half coveted the other's beauty but also hated the other's brokenness as it hated its own brokenness.

More cracks formed in the halves, which then split into more pieces. Now with more pieces, the competition grew fiercer and the fragmentation continued, fragments breaking into fragments that broke into more fragments. Soon I saw millions of pieces of painted ceramic in combat, cutting and getting cut, breaking and being broken, each one fighting for its own legitimacy, its own worth.

Then a fragment appeared that had a perfect memory of the vase's wholeness. It contained the master plan, the whole image of the lost vase.

It knew how to mend the brokenness. Though the work seemed impossible, this shard bound itself to one fragment, then another, and then another. The vase began to mend, but the work was slow, as thousands of fragments filled the room in a swirling cloud. Many shards only decided to come together after they had exhausted all other options for finding a sense of completeness. I watched in wonder and delight as hundreds of pieces forgot their self-importance and found their place in the whole.

The work was not random. Two pieces could not come together in just any order. For the art to be perfectly restored, each broken piece had to seek out the others to which it had been bound and mend itself with those pieces, no matter how long it took. Some pieces came together easily and naturally. Other pieces tried to come together but kept jabbing and crashing into one another awkwardly, binding themselves in all the wrong ways. These pieces yearned for wholeness but still insisted on their own brokenness. Only by giving up their identity as broken fragments could they find their fit, their harmony.

Sometimes several other pieces, which had already bound themselves to others, had to wait until two pieces found their fit before they could come into place. Like a complex jigsaw puzzle, when a key piece had found its place, it set off a chain reaction, enabling other pieces of the puzzle to fall into place.

So the binding and mending happened one fragment at a time. At first the work seemed absurdly slow and impossible, but there was momentum in it, for as the vase began to form, other fragments caught the vision and began to search for their place.

Eventually the work was completed, and the vase was different, even more beautiful than before, with tiny fracture lines, like scars, giving it an aged and weathered appearance. It now seemed even more alive than before. Having experienced fragmentation, the vase comprehended its wholeness. Having experienced its own death, it comprehended its life. Having experienced its own destruction, it now comprehended itself as creation and beauty.

"The old life," my guardian said, "is largely defined by a sense of fragmentation and separation—separation from God and separation from one another. We only experienced *ourselves* as real and found it impossible to truly see into the life of another soul. We experienced ourselves as fragments, and we tried to make ourselves whole by filling ourselves with more of our self, asserting our own greatness, which caused only more fragmentation.

"We thought of ourselves as individuals, and as an individual, the natural thing was to compare yourself with others, to see how you measured up, to see where you fit in the great game of losers and winners. Who was the smartest, the prettiest, the strongest, and the richest? It even infected spiritual life—who was the most righteous, the most enlightened, the wisest, the most loving? The journey to Hell is this striving to win in a supposedly hostile universe, competing against other souls who are also striving to make themselves great.

"Awakening means releasing your individual claim to greatness and glory and finding your place in the fabric of creation. This requires seeing other fragmented beings as essential, not as hostile, to our quest for wholeness.

"You have come a long way. But escaping Hell was not about leaving a certain space. In a sense, you are not returning to Hell to rescue your father. You are still there with him, still bound to him in all the wrong ways.

"Only mending and binding your hearts according to God's plan will make things right. Generations of ancestors await your reconciliation. It will cause a chain reaction that will work backward through your soul family as they are released from their contribution to your brokenness. Your change of heart will free you, and it will also free them to continue their journeys."

I still didn't understand what my extended family had to do with this. In mortal life, I had little connection with them, and I had no real interest in my ancestors.

"Why can't my soul family just go about their own business, growing at their own pace?" I said. "How could my father and I be holding them back?"

"Think of your soul family as a body. In the old life, if you were to smash your foot, the rest of the body could not indifferently go about its business. The whole body feels the pain, and the whole body must attend to healing. But we must extend this analogy to understand what is really happening in the human family. The broken foot and its consequent pain cannot be blamed on the foot alone. The entire body, all of its systems, played a part in that act, and therefore, all of the systems are responsible for it.

"You cannot imagine the hands or nose congratulating themselves for their own righteousness while the foot suffers. A body divided against itself in that way could not live. A healthy body experiences pain as a whole and joy as a whole. When one part of the body is released from pain, the entire body rejoices.

"Your soul family, extending back to your distant ancestors, is inextricably tied to your life on Earth. They provided the genetic material for your body as well as the cultural environment in which you lived and breathed. So many of the challenges and inclinations, good and bad, that you believed were uniquely yours were actually a shared burden—shared with them.

"Instead of viewing yourself as you truly were, a good soul heroically advancing the spiritual evolution of the human family, you saw yourself as a lone individual losing at a game in which the rules were stacked against you."

In the space where the vase had been, there appeared the image of a human body. I was unsettled to see that it was a model of my image, my body, on display before me. But I did not perceive it in the normal way. My eyes were opened so that I was able to see every part of it, every tissue, every cell, and every system.

Yet there were no parts. I did not just perceive the physicality of cells and tissues and nerves. I saw their origin, their life cycle, their function,

and the way they formed the whole. These were not parts working together like a machine. They were a single, indivisible unit. The body was perfect and healthy. But, like the vase, it did not perceive itself as such.

I perceived the body at a microscopic level and watched as a virus infected a cell, then another cell, and spread throughout the entire body. The infection was fierce, permeating every tissue. The body grew pale as its various systems shut down until it was on the brink of death. Then a cell infused with light started its own kind of infection, an infection of health and energy that spread from cell to cell. Each cell learned how to overcome the virus and flourish again. The body returned to full health, but now, because it had experienced the opposition of infection, it enjoyed itself as alive and healthy. It was no longer susceptible to the virus, as it was inoculated against its effects. Joy and appreciation only came through overcoming opposition.

As the body returned to life, my guardian said, "Witness the resurrection of Christ."

I was startled at this and worried that he had blasphemed, as this was clearly *my* body we were looking at.

He heard my thoughts and smiled at my concern. "This is Christ's consciousness coming alive in you, as it must come alive in all, giving new life to all humanity."

The body disappeared, and we stood alone in the darkness, as I tried to absorb my teaching. He said, "Analogies help, but their symbolic nature still creates distance between your mind and the thing itself. Awakening is the process of dissolving barriers between yourself and pure reality."

"I still don't understand what all this is about," I said, "all this talk of awakening and growing. I have been saved from Hell and am now in Heaven. If you need my help getting my dad here, I am fine to do that. But isn't that the important thing? Haven't I been, as they used to say on Earth, *saved*?"

I felt a kind of joyful mirth coming from my guardian, almost laughter, not patronizing or mocking, but a kind of delight in my question.

"In the end, the only thing to be saved from is ignorance and our incorrect perception of reality. Salvation is the process of removing the veil of ignorance from our mind. To see something purely and understand it purely is to love it purely. As our consciousness expands beyond the boundaries of the self, as we assimilate each new life into our being, or rather, as our life extends into creation, our joy expands until, eventually, we share in the mind of God.

"Righteousness and sin are not about obeying or disobeying a list of commandments. Righteousness is anything that deepens our powers of accurate perception or, in other words, love. Sin is anything that obscures or distorts our capacity to love. Whenever we resist or deny reality, we thicken the veil of darkness surrounding our minds, which keeps us from seeing and therefore loving. Heaven is not Heaven because of beautiful scenery. It is Heaven simply because it is the dwelling place of beings who are no longer fettered by veils of self-delusion.

"Hell is the exact opposite. In Hell, your mind was so darkened by confusion that we needed to create an opening, just one moment of clarity and love. It had to be a moment in your life—the birth of your son—when your awareness was least polluted by self-concern. You were touched by grace because grace is the gift of sight, of seeing things as they really are, not through the lens distorted by our pride, appetites, opinions, and judgements. True sight leads inevitably to true love.

"Which brings us to the next stage of your growth. It will be among the most painful and joyful experiences you have had yet. You must open the book of your life and review its wisdom and secrets."

I had feared this moment. I felt the familiar desire to run.

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This Quickening

Sleepless, Past Mid-life

Dixie Partridge

In this darkening, you watch the aura
of a northwest sky turn lavender blue.
Waverings of new leaves go quiet,
unused senses seem to be opening.

Austrian pines form a sheltering quorum
around you; pale dogwood blossoms
are small souls ascending, and there's a reaching . . .
as though for all you haven't known you need.
At midnight a tinge of light remains above the hills.

Beyond garden, pale Russian olive sends out pungency;
scent of mint rises from where it spreads along fences . . .
grown from a sprig brought by our son in first grade.

Night birds calling in other tongues hallow
the tabernacle sky . . . go suddenly still.
Changeling seasons have been quick
like that: warm days such as this,

to breath paling visibly; the true colors
of leaves, bolding before they let go;

milk fern frosting windows,
a lake's dream of ice, rising.

Fat sparrows of childhood still sputter
through your winter dreams, thin down
for spring to Indian summer;

halo moons ripen over holy forests
of the mind, where all seasons
are one with the transmitting stars,
quasar, pulsar . . . old sound.

Routes for Grieving

Dixie Partridge

Keep moving at the pace of the path, no matter how it unfolds.
—Mark Nepo

Nights of little sleep, now the morning of the switch
from daylight saving time. In the cold before dawn,
the road I follow bends where the river bends,
its curve of mist ghosting upward like a long exhale.

My spouse by degrees is leaving me
via Alzheimer's. I'm unable to identify when this began,
the tarnish on the future before we were aware.
If we sensed fully the moment
something begins to be lost, could we act
with instincts that might mean salvation?

As clouds darken sunrise, I turn off near the edge
of forest. Once more on an old path I walk in
and into a kind of stillness that can mean solace.
Surprised to find anxieties outnumbered
by overnight blooms—like grace notes emerged
without the aid of anyone—I try to identify
the white corollas, but they are nameless now.

I think of a faint trail worn into welcome shade
of cottonwood on the farm where I grew,
nights helping with irrigation during drought;
how darkness can teach about light,
how the word *pasture* became scriptural.
For months I've wished for the long,
lost sleep of childhood: that sinking,
sinking, until it felt like rising. . . .

Darkening clouds turn to rain and I don't mind
the drenching, but must go slowly driving back—
in the downpour the wipers can't keep up,
just as they can't beat back time,
nor can daylight be saved.

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Megachile

Justin Evans

stout dowager to this tiny grove inside
her little cell
morning echoes
the long season brings happiness through
industry balance
each earthly creature
has its purpose
its place

~

there is no need
to fear a swarm
there is only this
singular devotion

~

heo eac *waet of deaðe*
word fare from *mæden to mæden*
æfre haebbende þone weoruld *æt feorhðe*
to wyrcan *þæt is styðde*

she too leads *a solitary life*
anchoress *mæden of the terrace*
rooms built *from greenery*
far away from *the world of men*

Junco hyemalis

Justin Evans

foretelling arrival of winter
the bird begins to gather debris

for her nest cold months ahead
suggest a lifeless season always

life beneath the surface for
anyone who wants to

look long enough this is
how the world learns to begin anew

how the heart heals itself
standing up and walking

digging deep for warm lodging
a windbreak against Cailleach

harbinger of faith
a righteous messenger

brought forth to announce
a bright beginning

renewal each slight shift
of the pear tree's branch

Lauds

Psalm 90:14

Justin Evans

light reaches beyond
its capabilities from behind
three sisters

sky flush
rosy pink petals splash vibrant azure
fading into celestial deep

calling the faithful
by name
to their day

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Startled Awake

SJ Larson

He calls out to me in the darkness
He has learned to sleep on his own
But still finds himself restless and yearning
For my mother arms
And my mother warmth

I send in his father first
To comfort and calm him.
And it may work for a while,
But it never lasts.
He still calls for me
Aching to be close to my side.

I call out in my darkness too.
I have learned to find peace on my own
But still find myself restless and yearning
For my Mother's arms
And my Mother's warmth.

They send in the Father
to comfort and calm me
And it works for a while,
But it never lasts.
I still call for my Mother
Aching to be close to Her side.

I wonder if She aches too
hearing my cries and feeling
Unable to reach me
Yet, also
Unable to hold Herself back

I run to my baby and hold him close
Drying his tears
And speaking soft words
Until he finally relaxes in my arms

I feel my Mother God as She runs to me
A straightening of the spine,
A gentle warmth
And strength that
Only a mother can give.

They tell me I should not pray to Her,
But in quiet moments we have
Desperate conversations.
She speaks comfort to me
The way I speak to my son.

"Breathe baby, breathe
I never truly left you
I'm right here,
I will always be right here."

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"Celestial Diffraction through Gelatin"

On Daniel George's Jell-O Belt Exhibit

Jacqueline H. Harris

Liquid Crystal Display of neon Jell-O molds
Rotating underlit, perpetual planetary oscillation,
Celestial diffraction through gelatin.

A glutinous colloidal protein, an edible jelly.
"For now we see through a glass, darkly;
But then face to face."

Sliced banana in lemon—a planet aflame.
Fruited berry blue: sonogram, in embryo.
Shredded carrot in lime a koi pond of marrow.

Passions of funeral potatoes, nine by thirteen.
Green bean casserole wing of doctrine.
Cold Hawaiian haystacks part a red sea.

A triptych of cookbooks on wedding/funeral lace tablecloths:
Sugar 'n Spice, Tastefully Yours, A Spoonful of Bricks.
Twelve ladled disciples suspend in martyrdom eternal.

JACQUELINE H. HARRIS {harrisjac@byui.edu} is an English professor at Brigham Young University-Idaho. She earned her PhD from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, specializing in nineteenth-century British literature. She has published numerous works including the co-authored *Concepts of Managing: A Road Map for Avoiding Career Hazards* (2023), scholarly work in *North Wind*, *Brontë Studies*, *Rocky Mountain Review*, and *Victorian Studies*, and creative pieces in *Red Ogre Review*, *New Graffiti*, and *Scribendi*. She lives amid the farmland of rural Idaho.

By the Bonfire's Light

Gabriel González Núñez

Self-translated from the Spanish

There in the city they know all about
laughing by diamond light,
living in palaces,
and delighting in feasts.
Those are things I will never know,
Nothing of precious stones,
Marble houses,
Or overflowing tables.

I am only a traveler
With banishment for a bed,
Or rather, I am but a root
In search of a heaven.
In my lengthy desert
A woman gave me her love,
From the strength of her belly
She gave my seed life.

When I sometimes look up
at the blackness of the sky
and its thousands of stars
that no longer are,
I realize that soon
I too will be extinguished
and my little ones
will look for me in vain.

What will I leave to them?
In this nomad's life
All I can carry is

A worn-out sack
for my clothes
and a handful of books.
(I pick up my books
from some old merchants.)

That is why to my children
I can leave very little.
Any coins I manage to scrape
Go as they come.
The sands I wander through
belong to others.
The heavenly dome
I cannot hand to them.

So I do what I do.
When night falls
And the day's weariness
Makes my bones heavy,
I call them to my side
By the bonfire's light
Where I can
Tell them the stories.

I tell them what we were:
Dust in the universe
Forever blown forward
By the breath of God.
I tell them of the past,
Of their parents and grandparents,
And of the others too,
The ones who came before.

I tell them two thousand fables
Of knights errant,
Of hidden cities,

Of talking puppets,
Of silver donkeys,
Of hillside sprites,
Of lost sailors,
And of tiny water men.

When my children grow up
And I am long gone,
Theirs will be the knowledge
Of the old stories.
And they will carry with them
The echo of my voice . . .

~

ORIGINAL:

A la luz de la hoguera

Gabriel González Núñez

En la ciudad bien saben
reír entre diamantes,
habitar palacetes,
deleitarse en manjares.
De eso nada sabré,
ni de piedras preciosas,
ni casas marmoladas,
ni mesas de banquetes.

Soy solo un peregrino
con lecho en el destierro,
una raíz, digamos,
que procura algún cielo.
En mi largo desierto
una mujer me amó,
del vigor de su vientre
dio vida a mi simiente.

Al contemplar a veces
el negro firmamento
con sus miles de estrellas
que han dejado de ser
pienso en que falta poco
para extinguirme yo,
para que mis pequeños
me busquen sin hallarme.

¿Qué legado les dejo?
Esta mi vida de nómada
cargar no me permite
más que un gastado bolso
en que cabe mi ropa
debajo de unos libros.
(Los libros los consigo
de antiguos mercaderes.)

Y por ello a mis hijos
poco puedo legar.
El cobre que obtengo
se va tan pronto llega.
La arena en que me arrastro
no es de mi propiedad.
La bóveda celeste
bajársela no puedo.

Así que hago lo que hago.
Cuando cae la noche
y el cansancio del día
los huesos pisotea,
los invito a mi lado
a la luz de la hoguera,
para poder así
contarles las historias.

Les cuento lo que fuimos:
polvo en el universo
desde siempre impelido
por el soplo de Dios.
Les hablo del pasado,
de sus padres y abuelos
y también de los otros,
los que vivieron antes.

Les relato mil fábulas
de andantes caballeros,
de ciudades secretas,
de títeres parlantes,
de burros plateados,
de duendes en los cerros,
de marinos perdidos
y de hombrecitos de agua.

Cuando mis hijos crezcan,
cuando yo ya no esté,
les quedará el saber
de las viejas historias.
Y llevarán consigo
el eco de mi voz . . .

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Camilla Stark, *Hand of Glory*, 2019, aquatint, 10 x 8 in.

Artist's Statement: This piece is about power—power to see, power to be seen, power to create, power to destroy.

More than a Long Letter from a Dear Friend

Katie Ludlow Rich and Heather Sundahl. *Fifty Years of Exponent II*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024. 405 pp. Paper: $29.95. ISBN: 978-1-56085-477-7.

Reviewed by Rebecca de Schweinitz

Katie Ludlow Rich and Heather Sundahl's "first-ever comprehensive history" of *Exponent II* is a deeply researched and engagingly written volume that reads as much like "a long letter from a dear friend" as the original publication (xix, xvii). Crafted from dozens of oral histories, the pages of every issue of the periodical, thousands of blog posts, the *Exponent II* archival collection at Brigham Young University, and their own experience with *Exponent II*, Rich and Sundahl trace the origins and evolution of *Exponent II*—encompassing its roles as a quarterly newspaper/magazine, retreat, and blog—while highlighting the key figures who shaped its history and whose own lives were transformed in the process. They explore *Exponent II*'s evolving relationship with modern feminism, its interactions with centers of LDS power, its connections to other "unsponsored sector" initiatives and movements, and its responses to broader social, political, and technological changes.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part offers eleven short but multilayered chapters that chronicle *Exponent II*'s history from its beginnings among Boston-area women grappling with the emerging feminist movement in the context of their personal and religious lives to a geographically dispersed and more diverse cohort similarly seeking and sharing knowledge about themselves and their faith in the twenty-first century. With pithy yet descriptive titles such as "Wonderful Darling Upstarts," "Editing Out the Anger," and "Mormonism's Stealth Alternative," chapters build chronologically, each outlining key transitions and successive editorial teams' main challenges and accomplishments.

Throughout, Rich and Sundahl show that whether *Exponent II* women were dealing with pressure from LDS apostles, technological revolutions (or limitations), critiques from other liberals, or with internal blind spots and betrayals, the women who founded and shepherded *Exponent II* over the last fifty years made "agentive decisions" that affirmed their values, questions, and understanding of their "duel and dueling identities" as Mormons and feminists (xx, xix).

The second half of the book presents a diverse collection of writings from *Exponent II*, organized into six "units," each corresponding roughly to a decade of the publication's history, with an additional chapter dedicated to material originally posted on the blog. Each of these begins with a visual selection of *Exponent II* covers and a short introductory essay: the first three written by the volume's authors, and the rest by editors who served during the respective periods. These essays highlight key developments in *Exponent II*'s history, frame the selections, and offer points of analysis while providing further insight into the unique voices, goals, and challenges of individual editors and editorial teams.

In unit 4, for example, Aimee Evans Hickman discusses her team's efforts to engage a new generation of feminists in digital spaces while also moving to produce a full-color magazine. During her and Emily Clyde Curtis's tenure—marked not just by technological changes but by demographic shifts in Church membership, the rise of "the Mormon moment," and public campaigns advocating for the ordination of women to the LDS priesthood—*Exponent II* increasingly integrated the perspectives of visual artists and amplified the voices of those representing the global Church alongside the diverse, intersectional identities and experiences of Mormon women and gender minorities.

Rich and Sundahl suggest that their anthology represents a "sampling of *Exponent II*'s best writing, dominant themes, and most memorable and historically significant pieces" (xix). Notably, almost all the works included in the anthology section are by different authors. Rather than privileging particular voices or more prolific writers, their

selections reflect the editorial care taken by successive editors and align with one of the publication's core purposes: to provide a space where diverse Mormon women (and, more recently, gender minorities) could share their lived experiences and perspectives. The anthology features a range of genres and includes work by writers closely associated with *Exponent II* and Mormon feminism as well as contributions from authors whose experiences and impact on LDS feminist thought might otherwise be overlooked. As Hickman suggests, "the quiet voices," often outside the spotlight, "may be where the biggest cultural shifts are manifested in the end" (249).

It is also notable that the anthology features largely complete pieces, with only a few expertly excerpted for brevity. Taken together, these selections not only highlight recurring issues central to LDS women throughout *Exponent II*'s history but also showcase the diverse ways in which Mormon women have engaged with these issues in their personal lives. The anthology further underscores the dynamic nature of Mormon feminism, tracing its evolution across time, place, subject, and perspective.

Several selections from the anthology particularly stood out to me and offer a glimpse into its diverse and thought-provoking content: Victoria Grover's poignant essay examining the tensions within "the Mormon view of the dispersal of spiritual power" (220); Kylie Nielson Turley's moving poem about pregnancy loss (229); Linda Hoffman Kimball's interview with Black Latter-day Saint Cathy Stokes, a "woman of smarts and spirit," who forthrightly claims her place within the faith (233); Page Turner's compelling exploration and artistic rendering of "the sacred history of remnants" (263); Ellen McCammon's haunting midrash on Jael (299); and Hannah MacDonald's (pseudonym) powerful reflection on the conditioning she experienced in suppressing her queer identity as a young LDS woman. A different reading at another time would likely yield a different list, and readers from across the spectrum of Mormon experience could undoubtedly highlight other pieces that reflect the breadth and depth of the feminist work cataloged here.

Rich and Sundahl recognize that their book, which includes a helpful timeline of key events, an excellent index, and wonderful photographs, represents a first step in telling and analyzing the history of *Exponent II*. I join them in anticipating that this volume will encourage other scholars to fill in the gaps that 110 pages of historical narrative could hardly begin to cover. *Exponent II* and the many women involved with it over the years are certainly deserving of more attention in the annals of Mormon, religious, and feminist history.

Still, *Fifty Years of Exponent II* is a remarkable achievement that directly and indirectly shifts our understanding of LDS history, particularly in relation to the history of LDS women and Mormon feminism. As Rich and Sundahl explain, *Exponent II* faced criticism from both the LDS establishment and from members who feared even mild challenges to institutional authority and gender norms as well as from those who felt it wasn't feminist enough. Scholars have long called for greater recognition of diverse feminisms and for attention to the varied origins and paths of feminist thought and organizing. Rich and Sundahl's volume invites us to reflect on the ways Mormon women, over the last half century, have crafted their own brands of feminism—and their own ways of being Mormon.

The authors—and the work they feature from *Exponent II*—demonstrate Mormon women acting collectively to improve their condition. They show how these women identified and challenged the contradictions and tensions in their lives, offered alternative frameworks for understanding themselves and their faith, and did so in ways that privileged women's ways of knowing and resulted in genuine knowledge production. It is fitting that women from a religious tradition centered on a new book of scripture—an upstart tradition that once allowed space for women to express their own authority, theologize, cultivate spiritual gifts, and create programs that met both their individual and communal needs—would produce a written record that features their own faith journeys.

This history speaks to us not "from the dust" nor from the heart of what most would identify as "the Church." It speaks from the ordinary moments of women's lives and from the often heavily managed margins of the institutional church. If *Exponent II* has often felt "like a long letter from a dear friend," this volume makes its history and content even more accessible and helps us to see *Exponent II* for what it truly is: an uncorrelated Latter-day Saint history of lived religion, evidence of the agentive persistence of LDS women, and fifty years of feminist theorizing by a much-maligned group of women of faith. Mormonism's "stealth alternative," indeed (xviii).

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The Long Road to the "Long-Promised Day"

Matthew L. Harris. *Second-Class Saints: Black Mormons and the Struggle for Racial Equality.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. 460 pp. Cloth: $39.99. ISBN: 9780197695715.

Reviewed by Benjamin E. Park

Matthew Harris has provided the Mormon community with a gift: *Second-Class Saints* is a substantial work of scholarship based on enormous archival research and makes a compelling case concerning the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' racial policies since World War II. While the parameters of the story are well known, the

twentieth- and twenty-first-century Church's evolving relationship with Black members has never been so meticulously documented and bracingly told as in this volume. *Second-Class Saints* will be a standard work for quite some time.

While the first chapter provides a general overview of the background, origins, and implementation of the LDS Church's racial restriction—in which those of African descent were barred from priesthood ordination and temple participation—the book is primarily focused on the policy's development in the mid-twentieth century, its demise in the 1970s, and the legacies that have remained to the present. There are some moments that will surprise even the most seasoned reader, like Harris's documentation of an apostolic committee formed in the early 1950s to assess whether they could rescind the policy (57–61). Other sections add further context to common stories, like when Harris provides additional detail to the federal government's investigation into Brigham Young University student practices or the Church's tax-exempt status (197–202). And some portions provide a first attempt to contextualize the most recent developments in the twenty-first century, like when Harris analyzes the context for the Church's 2012 statements that proclaimed, "All Are Alike Unto God" (293–306). *Second-Class Saints*, indeed, provides something for every reader, no matter their level of expertise.

The strongest part of a very strong book is its sources. Harris was able to gain access to a treasure trove of personal papers located in archives, universities, and family ownership, which enabled him to unearth facts and ideas that have been overlooked by previous historians. These collections are so numerous that *Second-Class Saints* features a six-page abbreviations index for its 110 pages of endnotes. At the heart of many of these sources were internal disagreements among LDS authorities, an excavation that demonstrates how race was as contested among Church leaders as it was among the general American public. Indeed, because this book is primarily focused on telling the story

rather than analyzing its meaning or context, it provides numerous starting points for future scholars to investigate, introducing them to key moments or figures as told through previously overlooked sources and begging for more investigation.

Harris takes pains to document the ideology and theology at the heart of the racial policy and its aftermath. The book is at its best when unpacking the writings of, especially, Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie to demonstrate both the depth of their racial views as well as, in McConkie's case, how he evolved to eventually see a policy change as possible. While one might hope that Harris had spent more time placing their ideas within a wider context, this is arguably the most synthetic and comprehensive analysis of modern LDS leaders' thinking on race that the historical field has yet produced.

Every historian is forced to frame their work in such a way that it prioritizes some questions over others. *Second-Class Saints* is no different. Because Harris's archival source base primarily deals with the institutional Church and its elite critics, the story is primarily told through the lens of white voices. The Black experience is primarily implied rather than detailed, though more Black voices appear after the creation of the Genesis Group in the 1970s and the proliferation of Black activists in the twenty-first century. Excavating their lived realities and ideas would have required a different set of sources and methods beyond those framing this work. It will therefore be left to other historians to build on this institutional foundation and tell that story.

One other notable point of framing and prioritization concerns audience. *Second-Class Saints* is primarily devoted to addressing Mormon narratives and answering Mormon questions. This can be seen, for example, both in how Harris frequently refers to "the brethren"—a term with a particular meaning within LDS culture—as well as in how he tells a tale of competition between orthodox conservatives, primarily Smith and McConkie, and liberal critics, primarily

Sterling McMurrin. The stakes of these debates are often cast in a way that is only significant to the LDS community. At times the narrative even veers toward a good-guys-vs.-bad-guys framing more reflective of internal debates rather than engaging the external context. The benefits of such an approach are that the work will reach a much larger audience of Latter-day Saints who typically find academic works unapproachable; the downsides include limited use for the broader academy.

Perhaps the chapter that best embodies this framing and its consequences is chapter 8, which explores the immediate fallout after Spencer W. Kimball's 1978 declaration that ended the racial restriction. On the one hand, the chapter is Harris at his archival best: he meticulously traces the origins of several folkloric stories concerning the declaration as they spread across LDS culture between 1978 and 1985, largely embellished accounts created by McConkie himself that eventually garnered chastisement from his superiors. However, scholars outside Mormon studies might find such exhaustive detailing tedious, if not antiquarian. They might also be left desiring more analysis on how McConkie's storytelling fit into a broader culture simultaneously struggling with a crisis of authority in the wake of Watergate and America's racial protests, like how LDS leaders' anxiety over reaffirming their clout in the wake of a fundamental change reflects contemporary social discord.

But one book cannot do everything. *Second-Class Saints* should be praised, and praised extensively, for what it *did* accomplish. Harris's monumental achievement is in the vein of D. Michael Quinn: an archival-rich reckoning that will both prompt discussions within the Mormon community and serve as a foundation for future scholarship. It is an immediate classic.

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Japanese Latter-day Saints and Personal Acculturation

Shinji Takagi, Conan Grames, and Meagan Rainock.
Unique But Not Different: Latter-Day Saints in Japan.
Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2023. 190 pp.
Paperback: $20.95. ISBN: 978-1-58958-791-5.

Reviewed by Pierre Vendassi

Unique But Not Different: Latter-day Saints in Japan is the result of a sociological investigation into the identity of Latter-day Saints in Japan. Throughout its pages, its three authors seek to elucidate how Latter-day Saints practice their faith as members of a minority religion in contemporary Japan (xi).

Shinji Takagi, Conan Grames, and Meagan Rainock's work follows the current and much-needed movement growing in global Mormon studies to conduct sound, grassroots-level academic research to shed light on the various experiences of those who may be considered, in one way or another, on the periphery or margin of the Church.

On that account, Latter-day Saints in Japan are an ideal subject of study, since they occupy a numerically marginal position both in the Church and in Japanese society, with 130,192 registered members (as of 2021). This represents less than 0.1 percent of the Japanese population, among whom the authors estimate only 20 percent to be actively involved in the Church.

The data from which the authors drew for this book comes from the responses of 530 Latter-day Saints to a 56-question self-administered survey sent via email and advertised on virtual social network platforms in 2021. Due to its mode of administration, the survey focuses almost exclusively on active Church members who were willing and able to respond.

The book consists of a preface, an introduction, a theoretical and methodological chapter, and five chapters exploring in detail themes covered by the survey: social profiles, conversion, beliefs and practices, identity conflicts, and challenges and opportunities. For each theme, the authors analyze and interpret in detail the answers to the survey's related questions, taking great care to contextualize the subject historically and socially for the nonspecialist reader. A seventh chapter of a dozen pages offers summaries of the main takeaways tailored for various kind of readers: scholars and researchers, the general public, Latter-day Saint missionaries and leaders, and other Latter-day Saints. It precedes a conclusion and appendices, including the original Japanese-language questionnaire.

The authors place their work within a framework of "identity theory." Behind this term lies one simple and key idea: individuals, though strongly influenced by their national culture when making religious choices, are not consigned to act as their national culture dictates. Rather, they use the cultural materials at their disposal as a menu or toolbox to make choices and build complex, multiple identities that they are able to mobilize differently according to the contexts in which they find themselves.

This theoretical approach challenges the culturalist beliefs from which the book's central question emerges, namely the idea that being both a Latter-day Saint and Japanese is a paradox or mystery to be elucidated. This culturalist bias, which many of us share to some extent, gives rise to the truism in the preface: "The survey thus provides *prima facie* evidence that it is possible to be both a Latter-day Saint and Japanese" (xiii). The actual existence of Japanese wards, stakes, temples, and converts seems to be insufficient evidence for some skeptical ethnocentric minds.

More broadly, the fact that individuals born and raised in a given cultural context may call on culturally exogenous resources spontaneously appears to most of us as a mystery when it is, in fact, an ordinary

phenomenon of human societies, entirely constitutive of Mormonism since its origins. In fact, the book tends to show that despite *prima facie* oddities between Japanese culture and Mormon North American culture, Latter-day Saints in Japan are not so different from other Latter-day Saints regarding their religious beliefs and practices, and not so different from other Japanese people regarding most of their social practices. At least most of those who responded to the survey don't find it too problematic to identify both as Japanese and as Latter-day Saints and to manage these identities in daily life.

The real contribution of the survey and the book, therefore, lies in understanding how Japanese Latter-day Saints embrace and live out their faith and mobilize their Mormon identity in a Japanese society that gives little credence to such a marginal identity.

We learn through the pages of the book that most LDS converts in Japan join before the age of thirty. A not-insignificant number of them have prior knowledge of Christianity or join the movement not only on the basis of doctrine but also because of the social and moral model embodied by the missionaries. This makes them quite conventional converts from a sociological point of view, i.e., converts who join on the basis of strong cultural continuity and the creation of socio-affective bonds. Active Church members tend to be socially and economically integrated in Japan, even though they are religiously active and fully embrace their minority religious identity. They report few conflicts related to their religious identity, apart from social drinking and tea consumption—two important social practices in their cultural context that they manage to make acceptable. Their ideological tendency is not uniform and reflects that of the Japanese population, from the most conservative to the most progressive. Their tendency toward conservatism on social issues is strong but not absolute, and they are more liberal than the national average when it comes to immigration, which goes hand in hand with a strong internationalization of their career paths. Rather highly educated, they tend to have more children than the

average, but this number is declining. They also hold more professional positions than the average, which helps them avoid conflicts linked to Sunday religious practices. What's more, the LDS population is aging at the same rate as the Japanese population.

From a religious standpoint, it's worth noting that the population studied shows a high level of acceptance of the Church as it is, particularly regarding the preeminence of priesthood leadership over personal revelation and the role of women in the Church.

Throughout the book, the authors address the problem of acculturation, asserting that since the Church as an institution makes little effort to acculturate itself to the local culture, it's up to individuals to negotiate their own identities in society—what the authors call personal acculturation. As they repeatedly point out, the respondents to the questionnaire may actually constitute the active, well-acculturated core of the LDS Church in Japan, characterized by a high degree of religious conformity and a high degree of social integration within wider society, with rather high levels of social and cultural capital. Consequently, they seem to have a less disruptive presence in society than their unusual religious choice (from a Japanese standpoint) might suggest. They are the minority who manages to adapt and accommodate.

The valuable quantitative approach adopted here calls for further ethnographic explorations in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how these Latter-day Saints manage the social tensions they are subjected to in real time. Further ethnographic work could also explore how most of their fellow Japanese Church members struggle or fail to manage those social tensions, eventually dropping out, never converting to begin with, or creating other kind of in-between identities.

To conclude, this book is a perfect complement to the work already done on Mormonism in Asia, and particularly in Japan, notably *The Trek East* by the same Shinji Takagi. It should also be acknowledged that this book originates from work prepared for a volume of essays edited by Laurie Maffly-Kipp and the late Melissa Inouye on Mormonisms in Asia. It is no surprise that Inouye was involved in the development of

such an important project, and I have no doubt that this movement to study Latter-day Saints across the world will rightly continue to echo throughout the field of Mormon studies.

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Three Women, Three Worlds: A Review of New Poetry Collections

Maureen Clark. *This Insatiable August.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024. 84 pp. Paper: $14.95. ISBN: 978-1560854739.

Elizabeth C. Garcia. *Resurrected Body.* San Diego: Cider Press Review, 2024. 100 pp. Paper: $18.95. ISBN: 978-1930781658.

Darlene Young, *Count Me In.* Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024. 82 pp. Paper: $14.95. ISBN: 978-1560854746.

Reviewed by Melody Newey Johnson

It was a pleasure to read and review recent poetry collections by Darlene Young, Elizabeth Cranford Garcia, and Maureen Clark. Each poet in her own voice and with her own hand dissects, examines, and elucidates themes of relationship, selfhood, parenthood, God, and nature.

Collectively they create a kaleidoscope of experiences from women in different but overlapping stages of life. Reading them as a tryptic feels like visiting a collaborative art exhibit by the likes of Judy Chicago, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Joan Mitchell—beauty everywhere and something for everyone.

Reading Darlene Young's collection, *Count Me In*, feels like an invitation into your best friend's backyard where the whole neighborhood is playing night games and improvising backyard theatre: it is well-organized and full of energy. Young is an accomplished writer—both succinct where it matters and also willing to tell the story the poem demands. Her poems illuminate our favorite humans in a generous and sometimes stark light. She is honest and clear when writing about her own life and about other imagined lives.

In the opening poem, "The Baby That Became Me," Young describes the sublime beauties of the newborn who "had not yet met her lifelong bully—her older self" (2). From this compelling introduction she traverses childhood, adulthood, and all parts in between. In "Motherhood," the poet as a child sees her mother as the expansive sky and herself as "a small bird dark against her" (11). Later in the poem, Young has become a mother herself and embodies the burden of motherhood as she speaks to her child: "you fill my sky / sometimes I can't even see daylight at your edges / at night I stare into the dark / and gasp for air" (11).

Young lends equal gravity to poems about the life of a teenage boy coming of age and the imagined loneliness of the prophet Moroni. She also conjures the singular experience of Lazarus after he was raised from the dead in the haunting and magical "Lazarus 2.0." The subject navigates a strange, renewed existence where "The words got stuck in his mouth, as if in a second language, as if overrun by some distant music."

The reader may most acutely observe Young's skillful crafting of language and her love of words where she strings words and phrases together in several list poems. In these she leads you, the reader, down

a path to either a wonderful surprise or to the bottom of a dark well where you're not sure how to climb out—or if you even want to. (See "Hinge," 22; "What I Hope My Children Will Say on Mother's Day in 30 Years," 36; "Things I Have Pretended," 38; "Things I Have Lost," 56.)

Several poems in this collection, including my current favorite, "Morning," demonstrate Young's ability to find a thread of glory woven through ordinary life. She tugs the thread out until it glimmers just enough to give the reader a measure of hope they didn't know they needed, ". . . and feels herself part of the tree, the call / the yellow morning, even here / in this nondescript suburb, which is, she knows / actually, a pretty good place, as holy as any" (54).

Elizabeth Cranford Garcia's *Resurrected Body* is an aptly titled ode to incarnation. Animal, vegetable, and mineral are all enlivened through Garcia's unflinching storytelling. In the introductory poem, "What to Expect When You're Expecting," she invites us to dive into flesh and bone. "You will be spatchcocked / your sternum, your backbone scissored out" (xiii). Here Garcia meets herself and the reader in her extremities and continues to do so throughout the book. She offers equal grace to her childhood memories of the sounds of a '72 Datsun, her mother's crush on Tom Selleck, her father's cardiac arrhythmias, and what a deer might see in the forest or when captured in approaching headlights, "where the fractals of all your possible selves // branch out forever, and she stops to wonder / which one you will choose" (44).

Garcia's four "Self-Portrait as Sinkhole" poems are stunning. The poems are interspersed throughout the collection. For the reader they may act as unexpected anchors into a deep and mysterious connection with Mother and Earth. Among my favorite images within these poems were descriptions of the quiet workings beneath the earth's surface and then the inevitable human reunion with soil: "just how little acid water needs / to carve its runnels / into memory like lace" (21). And later in the poem, "you who were not the child self // were falling your mouth wide open / face down your mouth filling with dirt / and dead leaves—you / are the mouth. You / are the swallowing, becoming it" (22). And the

beautifully descriptive lines in another sinkhole poem: "And in its belly, metal chairs, broken bottles / the night offerings of teens baiting nature, uprooting // whole systems of belief—*what is the seismic cause / for all that gives way beneath us—mothers / in their beds, frail as bird bones, cousins / drowned, uncles, wood-stemmed, still whittling away*" (36).

The author paints intimate portraits of motherhood, sometimes darkened by postpartum depression and always warm and honest. Some poems may be personal, maternal memoirs, but she does what great poets do: She finds the right words to express the inexpressible for the reader too. In "Shit Mom," Garcia speaks as the desperate mother of young children where the subject may believe she "deserves the flock of sharp-winged women / their stormswift their *I-would-nevers* / clawing her to eternal torment" (16). And every woman who has ever nursed a baby will see herself in the poem "Full," with "milk-hard breasts, wheelbarrows / heavy with river rock. / This is the weight of mercy, / the body's need to empty itself, / to fill another" (59).

Maureen Clark's debut collection, *This Insatiable August*, feels like a celebration of Everything. Clark is a consummate writer who employs classic and freeform verse to transform everyday moments into high art. In so doing, she grants the reader permission to see life clearly—as it once was, as it is now, and as it may be—and to embrace it all, including the messy bits.

The introductory poem, "Sunday Song," is brief, sublime, and by the fourth line is thick with portent: "Wind is worrying something into shape. Is it a boat or an axe?" (1) From there Clark moves to a poem envisioning her ideal heaven—in "Most of All a Future," she asks, "What's the point of paradise without orange-sections and sunsets?" (4) And later, "What can recommend mortality except the bite of winter // and the sweet return of birdsong, a letter arriving from a future tense? / I want the splinter so it can be removed. And gloom, / I want all the green at once, memories of imagined lovers and loss" (4).

Clark includes several beautiful pieces about lovers and loss in this book. In "Circumstance," a poem about a long marriage, she asks, "How

could I unknot the intricate tatting of what we share // undo the web of finely woven rituals of our youth, / the tiny knots we made to hold, to last" (6). And in the end, "Yours is the only death / that would turn me entirely thorn." In another poem she paints a vivid picture of the place on the bed where a lost beloved has slept. "The feather pillow keeps // the impression of your head, as though gravity / still has hold of you, as if the shelter / of your body were just there . . ." (7)

The poems move with Clark through a maturing spirituality, one that ultimately leads to a loss of faith in God and in the religious home she had known since childhood. But the heartache and loss may be softened by the presence of the author's ancestors. Clark's poems about her mother, father, grandparents, and great-grandparents are wonderfully tactile—from a root cellar to a turkey slaughter to her mother's illness. These are real, complex, and comforting characters in the story. Additionally, the author's own four "Psalms" pepper the journey with something akin to hope.

My current favorite in this collection is "Knotted Wrack," an iconic declaration by a woman becoming herself, "just a woman who is naming herself one letter at a time a woman / who lives in a kind of poverty so rich I can be full / of questions. My feet are bare. I carry a jar of ointment. I am a traveler / looking for answers" (66). Among her readers Clark will no doubt find a congregation of women shouting "Amen!" to this poem.

Readers will return to these collections again and again for their varied and brilliant witness of the lives of women, for the wisdom they impart, and, perhaps, for unexpected kinship with the authors in their respective worlds.

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Diné dóó Gáamalii: Navajo Mormons

Farina King. *Diné dóó Gáamalii: Navajo Latter-day Saint Experiences in the Twentieth Century.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2023. 312 pp. Hardcover: $44.99. ISBN: 9780700635528.

Reviewed by Stan Thayne

Diné dóó Gáamalii. The title of the book is important for understanding both the primary subject of the book and the author. *Diné*, meaning "the People," King explains, is a name that the people commonly known today as *Navajo* often use to refer to themselves, though King uses both of these terms interchangeably, as many Diné/Navajo people do (219n1). *Gáamalii* is a Diné term for Mormons or Latter-day Saints. The subject of the book, then, is Diné people who are affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, either through conversion (like King's father) or by being born into a Mormon family (as King herself). This is a book, then, in which the author is herself deeply embedded. It is not your typical history. King describes the book as "a collective biography as interpreted through my own lens as a historian seeking to better understand my own people and family" (1). In the sense that King is writing about a group with whom she identifies—Diné dóó Gáamalii, Navajo Mormons—the work could also be considered autoethnographic, a term King uses only once in the text proper in the chapter "Red Power at BYU." That chapter layers on one more dimension of

embeddedness, as both King and her father are BYU alums. "Some people may consider such autoethnographic writing too subjective and biased, but I embrace my voice and closeness to the people, my friends and family, in this narrative to (re)claim and share our stories" (161).

King's book is important largely because of who she is. Positionality is very important in this work, as is intersectionality, a concept that King also identifies as influential to her thinking (260n28). Rejecting binary assumptions that might depict being both Navajo and Mormon simply as a "clash of two worlds defined by race," King understands Diné dóó Gáamalii as "representatives of multiple groups that affiliated along intersecting lines of indigeneity, race, gender, ethnicity, and religion" (158). These intersections prioritized some identities over others, as overlaps created bridges and generated community. That these identities are entangled with and within settler colonialism does not make them any less Navajo/Diné. (On "colonial entanglements," see the work of Osage anthropologist Jean Dennison, whose work on Osage politics demonstrates the many ways Osage people continue to be Osage while entangled with colonial forms; indeed, entanglement is an important part of what it means to be Indigenous.)

While Navajo Mormons may strike many readers as a cultural eccentricity, Diné dóó Gáamalii are not wholly dissimilar from other intersections and entanglements, including Navajos belonging to other Christian denominations—or secular formations, such as nations, constitutions, race, etc. Part of the importance of this work is not only that it brings these little-known "intimate entanglements" (260n29) to light for readers, but that it helps to round out our understanding of Diné people as a diverse community who intersect with each other and those around them in various and often unexpected ways.

The book is divided into chapters that address different aspects and historical phases of the experiences of Diné dóó Gáamalii, such as missionary work, education, church services, Brigham Young University, and the lives and perspectives of Diné dóó Gáamalii both within and beyond Diné Bikéyah, the homelands of Navajo people. In keeping

with the title of the book, King often provides Diné terms for Mormon institutions, such as *Gáamalii Bina'nitiní* for *missionaries* and *Sodizin Bá Hooghan* for *church*. A chapter on Ólta' Gáamalii, "Mormon School," provides a history of the Indian Student Placement Program (ISPP), a controversial program that removed Diné youth from their homes and placed them with (typically) white Mormon families, and which now faces lawsuits from former students who experienced abuse in the program. While acknowledging the violence the program perpetuated, King seeks to honor the voices of Diné dóó Gáamalii who experienced ISPP, many of whom had positive as well as painful experiences and built loving connections with their host families. In this respect, this chapter is not wholly dissimilar to K. Tsianina Lomawaima's work on federal boarding schools in *They Called It Prairie Light*, which, while recognizing the structural violence of the boarding school system, focuses on the voices, experiences, and limited agency of Native students, including their friendships, community building, and resilience as well as their pain. King states that "instead of indexing or categorizing their experiences as negative/positive or good/bad, I consider the spectrum and variety of Diné experience on their own terms" (87). This includes students who have since left the Church and those who remain within it, many of whom feel both positive and negative feelings at the same time as they reflect back on these experiences.

Like many of her chapters, these experiences are drawn largely from oral history collections housed within the Redd Center collections at BYU and the Church History Department archives, though, again, King's own personal reflections offer as much insight as the interviews she draws upon. For example, in demonstrating her frustration with blanket denunciations of ISPP, she relates an experience she had in a classroom when a fellow Indigenous student authoritatively denounced ISPP outright as a form of violent othering. King felt triggered by this, angered that such totalizing statements do little to honor the complex experiences of people like her cousins who actually experienced these things. King tries to honor those experiences, both the pain and the joy,

by listening to their voices and attempting to weave a fuller tapestry of their varied experiences.

The idea of a "two-world" experience is one that emerges in many different American Indian contexts and scenarios as a result of assimilationist policies and the general force of Euro-American hegemony. The general idea is that Native people have to learn to get along in the white man's world while also trying to hold onto and live their Native culture, which is always under threat of disappearance due to the compromising and dominant force of the other. Diné dóó Gáamalii are no different in this regard, other than that the assimilationist side of the binary is Mormonism (though never *just* Mormonism). Often this two-world balancing act is described in terms of Diné culture on the one hand and Mormon religion on the other, which are often depicted as incompatible or in competition.

While this is just the kind of binary that King strives to complicate and challenge, one thing that does come through over and over in the book is that many Diné dóó Gáamalii often experience the world through these terms and this sense of ongoing tension. But King does provide multiple examples of striking if limited hybridity. One that stood out to me, near the end of the book, relates the practice of a Diné and Latina woman who did not grow up with ancestral teachings and currently chooses not to attend Diné ceremonies but still continues some important traditions, such as safeguarding an infant's *nits'éé'*, umbilical cord. This Diné dóó Gáamalii woman did so by burying her grandson's *nits'éé'* on the Mormon temple grounds. As this example demonstrates, the Gáamalii/Mormon aspect of her identity—perhaps among other factors—may keep her away from certain aspects of Diné traditional life, but she may still continue to practice some Diné traditions. Though even those may be embedded, quite literally, within Mormon ground, if not within standard Mormon practice. Grounded, not just as Navajo or as Mormon, but as Diné dóó Gáamalii.

A point that King aptly demonstrates is that Diné dóó Gáamalii are a significant part of the Diné experience, historically and presently. In

this way, the experience and position of Diné dóó Gáamalii is similar to the experience of many Hawaiian people, as Hokulani Aikau demonstrates in her book *A Chosen People, A Promised Land*. Describing a Hawaiian-Mormon hybrid site of cultural celebration centered on a canoe journey bearing the Hawaiian name of a Mormon missionary, *Iosepha* (Joseph), Aikau states: "Within a Hawaiian worldview we cannot move forward if we do not know where we came from. Thus the path ahead in many ways is dictated by how well we know the paths already traveled. For . . . community members affiliated with the *Iosepha*, a critical aspect of the path already traveled includes the LDS church and its history in Hawai'i" (174). Similarly, the story of the Diné dóó Gáamalii is not simply their story, but it is a part of the history of the Diné. One cannot fully understand who the Diné are today without including the Diné dóó Gáamalii in that story.

Diné dóó Gáamalii is an important work, and it joins with other voices that have also written about Indigeneity and Mormonism, such Hokulani Aikau, Elise Boxer, Gina Colvin, and Angelo Baca, some of whom are mentioned in the book. Surely there are others as well that I have overlooked. Pore over King's notes and her bibliography and you will find them (the summer of 2021 issue of *Dialogue* is a special issue on "Mormonism and Indigeneity").

Not unlike the tapestry of voices King has woven together in her book, King's own contribution will perhaps be most illuminating when her voice is interwoven with the voices of other Indigenous people who have written and will yet write about their experiences with Mormonism, Christianity, and other colonial entanglements from their own positionalities and subjectivities.

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Alternate Narratives and Family Bonds

Mary Clyde. *Journeys from a Desert Road*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2024. 214 pp. Paper: $18.95.
ISBN: 978-1-56085-478-4.

Review by Tamara Pace Thomson

Mormon doctrine plays a scant role in Mary Clyde's new novel, *Journeys from a Desert Road*, but Mormon narratives are intrinsic to her characters, their family bonds, and to the journeys of the title. As Darrell Spencer once explained in an interview for this journal (paraphrasing John Bennion's insights), while Mormonism may play a role in some of his stories, it doesn't "capture the narrative."[1] The same is true of Clyde's story. But the threads of ancestry, of pioneer attributes, and of unabashed optimism that inform Clyde's characters remind the reader that one's faith biography is nearly impossible to disentangle from lived crisis.

The particular crises that Clyde details are those of the Wilson family. One narrative is that of the son, Jack Wilson, recovering from a car accident that leaves him with a serious brain injury. The other deals with the aftermath of a nuclear bomb and the family's journey from Phoenix toward Payson, Arizona. These two narratives, and journeys, complement one another, because the first is mostly seen through the perspective of Ellen Wilson, the mother of the family, while the latter is mostly told from Jack's perspective. Even though Jack is unconscious in the story of his brain injury, the alternate narrative allows us to see his inner thoughts and concerns, thus complicating and enhancing what we get from Ellen's point of view.

Ellen is a former Mormon, raised by a mother who still sings hymns, quotes scripture, and believes that tribulations endured well

1. Douglas Thayer, "An Interview with Darrell Spencer," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 129.

will bring an eternal reward. Ellen's love of the rational led her away from Mormonism as a college student, but she still values the tenacity of her Mormon ancestors who settled in the harsh Sonoran Desert. She is also a rather benign rebel who, even in her middle age, won't drink coffee in front of her mother for fear of offending her. And while it may not be a central theme in the story, Ellen begins to wonder if her own beliefs are enough to sustain her during Jack's coma.

This kind of religious musing runs along the periphery of the story, and we are frequently reminded of Ellen's "pioneer stock" and of her own fortitude when faced with calamity. She is optimistic about both her son's dire situation and, in the alternate narrative, about the perilous reality of postapocalyptic Arizona. And unlike many post-Mormons, she isn't triggered by LDS hymns. In fact, she actually enjoys her mother's Mormon Tabernacle Choir renditions of "Lead, Kindly Light" and "I Know That My Redeemer Lives" because "the confident harmonies [lift] her spirits" (152).

Ellen as a protagonist is a curious and keen thinker. In the early days after Jack's accident, and well before she knows if he will recover or not, she observes a jet contrail in the sky: "Contrails are ice crystals, she thought, made from engine exhaust that forms where the air is colder. Information of all sorts seemed significant and relevant. Somewhat superstitiously, she wondered whether fragments of knowledge might be pieced together to heal her son" (45). But her concern that she is superstitious is unfounded, as she reads countless books and articles about brain injuries to fully understand her son's plight. And while the minds of many parents would dissolve into a tangle of confusion when faced with a child's death or permanent disability, Ellen's mind becomes hyper observant and analytical.

Ellen acts as the anchor for the entire family as they wait for Jack to awake. She constantly reassures her husband, Peter, whom she admits she loves "partly because he needed her" (39). Peter is anxious, insecure, and nearly paralyzed with fear when facing Jack's injuries. He tries to stay away from the hospital as much as possible and leaves the

nurturing of their son to Ellen. This means that the burden of understanding Jack's situation, and the burden of optimism, rests on Ellen.

Clyde's prose is not always remarkable or elegant. In the first few chapters, her language is unsure of itself. There are moments that feel unnatural or intrusive. One such instance happens before Ellen has even seen Jack after learning of his accident. She finds Jack's shallow, self-absorbed fiancée with a broken arm in the hospital on her way to see Jack, and Ellen thinks, "Lily wouldn't have made it across the frozen Mississippi River on the first night of the westward trek" (1). The idea that Ellen would be thinking of the westward trek while unsure of how dire her son's condition is feels unlikely.

Other weaknesses of the novel include characters that are not fully drawn. Jack, despite the central role he plays within the nuclear bomb narrative, comes off as ineffective, both as a convincing character and as a participant in the drama. His desires and motivations are not always clear, and he tends to be acted upon rather than being an actor in his own fate.

However, Clyde employs plenty of enticing language as the novel progresses as well as characters that feel fully developed and alive. A minor character named Andy is vivid and authentic. He is a survivalist teenager who befriends and helps the Wilsons on their trek to Payson. He is gritty, energetic, shrewd, and endearing. His fearless escapades breathe life into the surreal situation the family finds themselves in.

And, about a quarter of the way into the book, Clyde's prose flows more naturally and pleasingly, as when Ellen returns home for the first time after four days of sitting with Jack at the hospital. Clyde writes, "Outside, she watered pots of withered geraniums. Oranges were ripening on the trees, and the fig tree was losing ugly, crumpled leaves. She felt she'd been gone a long time and remembered someone saying that experience is measured in intensity, not duration" (49).

In an essay for the Association for Mormon Letters blog, Clyde laments that her literature students often complain that assigned reading is "sad." She makes a strong case for reading complex, sad, and

even bleak literature, writing, "literature [is] not to entertain but to enlighten, to open minds, to introduce questions, to offer new vistas, and to foster empathy and understanding."[2] (This is the same case I have made countless times to my own students.) And she also defends *Journeys from a Desert Road* against her brother's judgment that her story is sad. She admits that not many literary families are saved by love but that her novel is indeed one of familial love and loyalty.

Which brings me to the great strength of this sad but hopeful narrative. Ellen Wilson is the center of the novel because Ellen Wilson is the center of her family, as innumerable mothers are. Like Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, Ellen keeps her family from splintering by loving them in all their flaws. Her fearlessness will not allow Jack's daunting recovery to undermine her patience, loyalty, or optimism. It isn't Ellen's faith in dogma that stabilizes her family, it is her love.

Shortly before reading Mary Clyde's book, my husband suffered a moderate brain injury from a fall on ice. For four or five days, I wasn't sure if he would recover. And while Jack's injuries in the novel are far more serious, I certainly feel empathy for Ellen. I also admire her. I happen to be a Mormon who didn't inherit the fortitude of my pioneer forbears, nor do I possess much optimism about our world or the future. But reading of Ellen's calm, rational, and patient handling of her son's terrible condition, I feel genuinely inspired. Wives and mothers are expected to be stalwart and cheerful and irrationally buoyant. But Ellen is smart, skeptical, and doubting while also being genuinely devoted to her family.

We may read postapocalyptic books, as one character says, to prepare ourselves to face our fears, but when we are already living our greatest fears, whether watching our democracy be dismantled or witnessing our loved ones suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous

2. Mary Clyde, "The Question of Sad," *Dawning of a Brighter Day* (blog), Oct. 8, 2024, https://www.associationmormonletters.org/2024/10/the-question-of-sad-by-mary-clyde/.

fortune, it is stories of family devotion that might help us through. Mary Clyde's novel is just that.

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Mormon Transhumanists: Their Origin and Destiny

Jon Bialecki. *Machines for Making Gods: Mormonism, Transhumanism, and Worlds without End*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2022. 368 pp. Paper: $35.00. ISBN: 9780823299362.

Reviewed by Megan Leverage

Circles of light crown the peaks of red rocks against black skies. Are they sacred halos gleaming or artificial lights beaming from a UFO? The beautiful cover image of the book *Machines for Making Gods* draws the reader into the "rhymes" of the Mormon Transhumanist Association (MTA). Despite the anti-scientific attitudes of conservative forms of Christianity, including and especially Mormonism, anthropologist of Christianity Jon Bialecki explores the complex relationship between religion and science, through the "foldings, inversions, and twists" of Mormonism and transhumanism (49). For those unfamiliar with the term, Bialecki defines transhumanism as "the positive anticipation of the possibility that increases in technology will allow *Homo sapien*

sapiens to overcome their historic species' limits to such as degree that they become something else altogether" (76).

This book is an ethnography of the MTA. Founded in 2006 and with a current membership of one thousand people, the MTA is the oldest and largest religious transhumanist movement. Demographically, MTA members tend to be highly educated, LDS, tech workers, and living in the American West. Through in-person and digital outlets, MTA members explore the potential connections between nineteenth-century Mormon theology and the future technoscience of transhumanism: how cryonics, nanotechnology, and computer simulation make possible the resurrection of the dead; how God could be a space alien or computer programmer; and how theosis (i.e., the belief that humans will become gods and create worlds of their own) could be a technological achievement. As Bialecki concedes, these ideas are the intellectual property of Mormon transhumanists. What Bialecki hopes to contribute uniquely, then, is a social analysis of the movement.

Across three parts and nine chapters, Bialecki explores the collectivities of Mormonism, transhumanism, and the MTA. Challenging the binaries of religion/science, openness/closure, and secular/mythic time, Bialecki examines their relationship to the dead, apocalypticism, worlds without end, and transformative ideas about kinship. At its heart, this book is about speculation. In the simplest terms, Bialecki argues, "Mormonism is a religion of belief" (146). And secular transhumanism is plausible science fiction. Taken together, the MTA creates new conceptual horizons. Bialecki adds that speculation is also social. Hence, the MTA is socially transformational.

Bialecki's greatest contribution is his discussion of revisionist social issues, particularly gender and sexuality. While secular transhumanists are predominantly elite white men, Bialecki argues that the MTA is more progressive, offering feminist and queer ways of being Mormon. Take for example Blaire Ostler, former CEO of the MTA. Ostler readily writes about Heavenly Mother, the ordination of women, and queer

polygamy or "a form of sacralized, non-heteronormative, feminist non-monogamy" (xx). Bialecki explores the connections between transhumanism and this future form of polygamy: "technological freedom from human limitation means nothing if one is constrained in whom a person can love, and in what form" (291).

Along these same lines, Bialecki's study could be extended to discuss more aspects of human diversity, such as race. Anecdotally, researching the MTA in 2013, I recall online discussions about the Book of Mormon's scriptures on righteousness and lightening skin tones— reinterpreted as electronic illuminations. Arguably not the most productive speculation, the MTA's technoscientific post-racism would make a fascinating case study of Mormon race-making.

My main complaint about the book is its limited accessibility. It takes an already complicated subject of Mormon transhumanists and further complicates things by adding deep-track theories of structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, French philosopher Henri Bergson, and the like. Instead of creating a clear and pointed lens for the reader, much of the introduction remains esoteric. To be sure, Bialecki offers an abridged version of the book, suggesting some readers skip the theoretical sections. This approach, however, excludes many readers from reaching the big idea of the book.

Machines for Making Gods contributes in several ways to the rich discussions on the topic of religion and science published in *Dialogue*. First, the MTA adds to the current understanding of the variety of Mormon attitudes toward science. Second, Bialecki shows that the MTA does not just counter the anti-scientific attitudes of the LDS Church but its conservatism more broadly. Indeed, in his fieldwork, Bialecki found that some MTA members were not drawn to the movement because of their interest in technoscience. Rather, they found a solution to the problematic history and policies of the LDS Church (e.g., anti-LGBTQ, racism, sexism) in the MTA. For these members, Mormon transhumanism is about morals, not knowledge. Third, Bialecki applies

anthropological methods to frame the MTA's speculations as myths of the future. Through the power of myth, Bialecki suggests that the MTA offers a model of and for the LDS Church in an increasingly technoscientific world. In this way, could the MTA transform the LDS Church by imagining its future?

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Gates Hinge Both Ways

Andrew Hall and Robert Raleigh, eds. *The Path and the Gate: Mormon Short Fiction*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2023. 295 pp. Paper: $21.95. ISBN: 978-1560854678.

Reviewed by Rosalyn Collings Eves

Given the LDS Church's recent emphasis on the "covenant path," it seems fitting that this collection of Mormon short fiction takes up a similar theme: the ordinances (baptism, endowment, temple marriage) that operate as gates along a "straight and narrow path" (2 Nephi 31:17–21) leading individuals back to the kingdom of God.

From this seemingly narrow starting point, the twenty-three contributors of *The Path and the Gate* spin a vast array of stories, ranging from futuristic accounts of missionary work in the metaverse (William Morris, "Always to be Found") to the comic journal of a newly minted and inept God (Ryan Shoemaker, "Barry Dudson: The God Journals") to the seemingly mundane in both contemporary and historical

settings. Gates, in these stories, might be literal and nightmarish gates (as is the case in Phyllis Barber's "After Midnight"), or they might be entirely metaphorical.

While each of the stories takes as its starting point Mormon faith and culture, the resulting explorations have a wider audience appeal than just Mormon readers: the characters who inhabit the stories span the spectrum of LDS belief and behavior, and even seemingly orthodox characters can be surprisingly complex. Other stories offer illuminating (and heartbreaking) perspectives from characters outside—and sometimes inside—the faith who do not fit comfortably. Eric Freeze's "Holy Ghost Power" follows an apostate father who lacks the officially sanctioned power to bless his daughter but who believes in and blesses her nonetheless, posing timely questions about the power we vest in institutions versus individuals. Other extraordinary believers include a coffee-drinking bishop in Joe Plicka's "Natural Causes"; an older sister in Tim Wirkus's "A Vision" who bears devout testimony to a capricious and merciless God; and a missionary in Mattathias Singh's "Missionary Weekly Report" who abandons his mission precisely *because* he believes in the immanent (and imminent) message of God's grace.

Some stories use humor to gently skewer orthodoxy, even as they find something to admire in sincere belief. Heidi Naylor's "Mrs. Seppe" must wrestle with her priorities (her family, including her estranged drug-addict daughter) when she unexpectedly wins a lottery; the members (including the prophet) of Danny Nelson's "Narrow is the Gate" are confounded by the arrival of aliens even more orthodox than they are; and the cybersecurity expert of Jack Harrell's "The Mathematics of God" finds himself led by the Spirit to aid and abet a mysterious Ukrainian couple. In Theric Jepson's "The Curse," a third-generation member of the Church finds his life comically shaped by a too-specific patriarchal blessing given him as a young man.

Other stories are more critical of the LDS Church and its culture. Two of the most haunting stories in the collection feature young women who are constrained by their beliefs into paths (marriages, lives) not

entirely of their own choosing: Charity Shumway's "A Courtship" and Larry Menlove's "Calf-Creek Falls." Ryan Habermeyer's "We're Going to Need a Second Baptism" begins with a wryly funny look at ordinances and ends as a disturbing cautionary tale about the dangers of putting too much faith in our own illusions. David G. Pace's "Lana Turner has Collapsed!" critiques the sometimes-shallow motives that can drive the performance of sacred ordinances, even ordinances ostensibly meant for others.

The stories also pick up quintessentially Mormon themes like agency and community. Alison Brimley's "It's a Good Life" fittingly riffs off a *Twilight Zone* episode to ask: If you could make other people do what you wanted, should you? Ryan Shoemaker explores agency from a different angle, imagining how a new god hilariously manages to undermine the very idea of salvation by trying to spare his children his own mortal humiliations.

Reflecting the inextricable link of faith and community in Mormonism, some of the stories poignantly explore how community can flourish even outside shared faith: in Michael Fillerup's "Ghosts," two widowers—one faithful, one doubting—find community and solace on a bitterly cold night. Other stories illuminate how heaven (both on earth and in literal heaven) can be built upon relationships: Jennifer Quist's plague story, "Unhanded"; Annette Haws's humorous look at the afterlife in "Planting Iris," and Holly Welker's depiction of complicated teenage grief in "The Funeral."

The stories and themes are beautifully bookended by Todd Robert Peterson's "The Investigator" and Steven L. Peck's "Sister Carvalho's Excellent Relief Society Lesson." Peterson opens the collection with a postapocalyptic rendering that both calls out tendencies to insularism and violence in Mormon culture and points toward hope. In a post-pandemic world where gun-toting survivors have mostly wiped out their neighbors, a nameless narrator survives by following a stake map to a modest Mormon home, where he lives off canned goods and reads

the Book of Mormon. What struck me most about this story was the Flannery O'Connor-esque ability to marry the grotesque with kernels of grace.

This same marriage of grace with the ridiculous shows up in Peck's closing story, where a pair of non-Mormons who have respectively survived wars in Rwanda and Israel wind up in Pleasant Grove, Utah, where a clerical error assigns them the Carvalho name and a history of church activity. When a dispute over essential oils threatens to tear the ward apart, the wife tears into the sisters with a reminder of what true violence looks like—and, paradoxically, what love looks like as well.

Not all the stories will be for everyone (as a sometimes literalist, I found a few to be opaque), but there's something here for nearly all readers. Ryan McIlvain's sweet and funny meditation on the New York Times crossword puzzle and longtime friendships captures the expansive spirit of the collection, both orthodox and unorthodox. "It's a useful exercise," he writes, "to force your brain to work as the puzzle wants it to" (166). But "occasionally the pieces just won't fit. . . And that's okay, too." This is as true of readers as it is the diverse characters who inhabit these stories.

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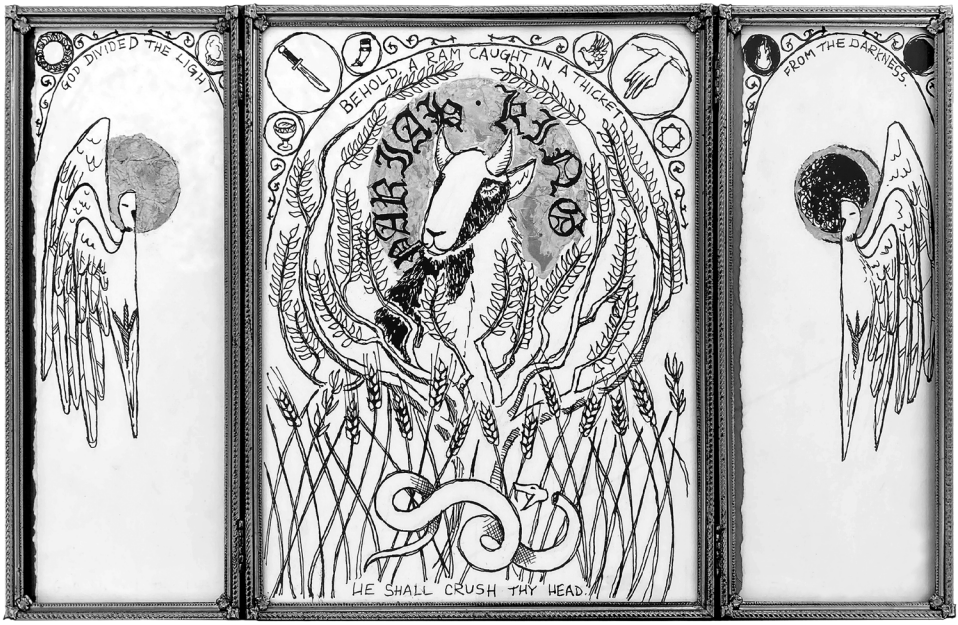

Camilla Stark, *Pariah King*, 2018, pen & ink, fold foil, found frame, 10 x 16.5 in

Artist's Statement: Praise our Pariah King, our Lord of the Outcasts, our Ram in the Thicket, our Sacrificial Lamb. Praise His triumph over that Serpent, His division of the Light from the Darkness, the Wheat from the Tares. Praise Him in the Day and in the Night, Holy Holy Holy cry the Seraphim, praise our Pariah King, praise His Unspeakable Name.

CHRISTMAS IS MUSIC

Justin Goodson

Delivered on December 20, 2020, in the Frontenac Ward of the Saint Louis Missouri Stake.

Christmas is Jesus. Christmas is music, too. Even during a pandemic, I've had live carolers at my door. When in-person performance isn't possible, we listen to recordings of choirs performing Handel and his classical *Messiah*. There's the comfort of the Vince Guaraldi Trio—piano, bass, and drums—in the background of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. There's even that one radio station that plays Christmas music 24/7 all month long. It's the station that reminds us that not all Christmas music was composed equally! Though the Gospel of Luke makes no mention of music, when we read of angels announcing Jesus' birth to shepherds, we often imagine the heavenly host singing rather than speaking: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). And thus, music is tied to the shepherds, the angels, and the birth of Jesus.

Christmas and music have something important to teach us about living with each other. Music is all sorts of harmonies. The simplest is unison, with every voice and instrument playing the same note. Musically, unison adds emphasis; it underscores key phrases and focuses attention on important lyrics. The effect in life is similar. We feel power in unity. We take comfort in being with others who think, look, and act similarly. Unison also highlights difference. When we're all on the same note, even just one person singing off-pitch can be grating. And if someone plays an altogether different note, it's all we can do not to stop and stare.

Life isn't lived in unison. Old and young, Black and white, single and married, Democrat and Republican, urban and rural, male and female, rich and poor, with the crowd and against it—these are realities that don't lend themselves to unison. But if we're patient enough to move past the initial cringe of dissonance, new and beautiful sounds await.

Try this on your own. Find a piano. Play any black key and the adjacent white key, above or below. Now pound it! At best this is what a pleasant train wreck sounds like! At first listen, it seems like a mistake, but it can produce much richer music than any one note by itself. Now add some more traditional harmonies, for example a major seventh chord. A major seventh chord will include those same two adjacent notes but add two or three more notes as well. The sound is different, by many standards beautiful, and at the very least much more interesting than unison. Replacing unison with dissonance is like upgrading your television from black-and-white to color, or, for the younger crowd, from HD to 4K. At first you just stare in amazement. Eventually, you realize you're hearing a sound that is vibrant and complex and stunning all at the same time. There's no going back: from now on, it's all 4K harmony.

In music, dissonance is particularly useful when it resolves into a more traditional sound. Tension followed by something familiar is very satisfying to the ear. In fact, this is what makes most music interesting: phrase after phrase of tension and resolve. The same can be true in life. For example, apply this to your social media experience during an election cycle. If your feed is like mine, it sounds a lot like this: unison, unison, train wreck, unison, train wreck, etc. There is very little in between, and the dissonance never resolves into something beautiful. But if you sit down with a person whose voice is different from yours, if you look past the polarization and hear their experiences and life story, then the initial dissonance is fleshed out by all sorts of complex harmonies. To be sure, some tension remains, but where you once heard

a one-note blunder, you now hear an entire phrase. You understand a little better how the dissonance fits into a larger motif. What once sounded hideous is more palatable.

We don't often have these conversations. We shy away from dissonance because it's uncomfortable. Sometimes we even mistake the clashing of sounds for a battle between good and evil. It's our side versus the other side, and of course we're the good guys. When this happens, we become trapped by sameness, mistaking conformity for unity, myopically believing the echo of one voice is better than the harmony of several. Rather than participate in a symphony of sounds reflecting our varied lives, we enter a contest to see who can agree more with those like us and disagree more with those not like us.

There are some voices in the world that are absolute evil, but these typically lie well below the longest bass strings of your piano. It's almost always okay to consider something different and to consider *someone* different. Just like music without tension can be boring, a single voice is often monotonous. How to avoid the monotony? Have that uncomfortable conversation, dwell on the dissonance long enough to fill in the missing notes, learn enough about someone else to flesh out the whole sound.

What does this have to do with Christmas? Jesus' birth wasn't announced just to shepherds but to the whole world: the star shone across nations. When I imagine the heavenly hosts singing to the shepherds, it's not in unison but in harmony. Implicit in this harmony is the miracle of Christmas. Jesus' birth, life, death, and atonement don't transform us from dissonant sinners to all-in-unison saints. Rather, they teach us how to love and serve each other despite—even because of—our differences.

Christmas is a celebration of how we can live when we look beyond ourselves and make room for other voices. Christmas is an acknowledgement of the tensions and resolutions that are the rhythm of life. Christmas asks us not to single out a certain note but to sort through

life's many sounds, creating a literal symphony of my life alongside your life alongside everyone else's, with all of us plucking different strings, collectively creating a melody more beautiful than any one of us could arrange by ourselves.

The shepherds were sore afraid when "the glory of the Lord shone round about them." Contemplating all the harmony—the tension and resolution—that Christmas entails, we might be afraid too. With enough courage, we can do what the shepherds did. Go to Bethlehem, find Jesus, and make the angels' message known abroad:

Christmas is Jesus.

Christmas is music.

Christmas is all of us.

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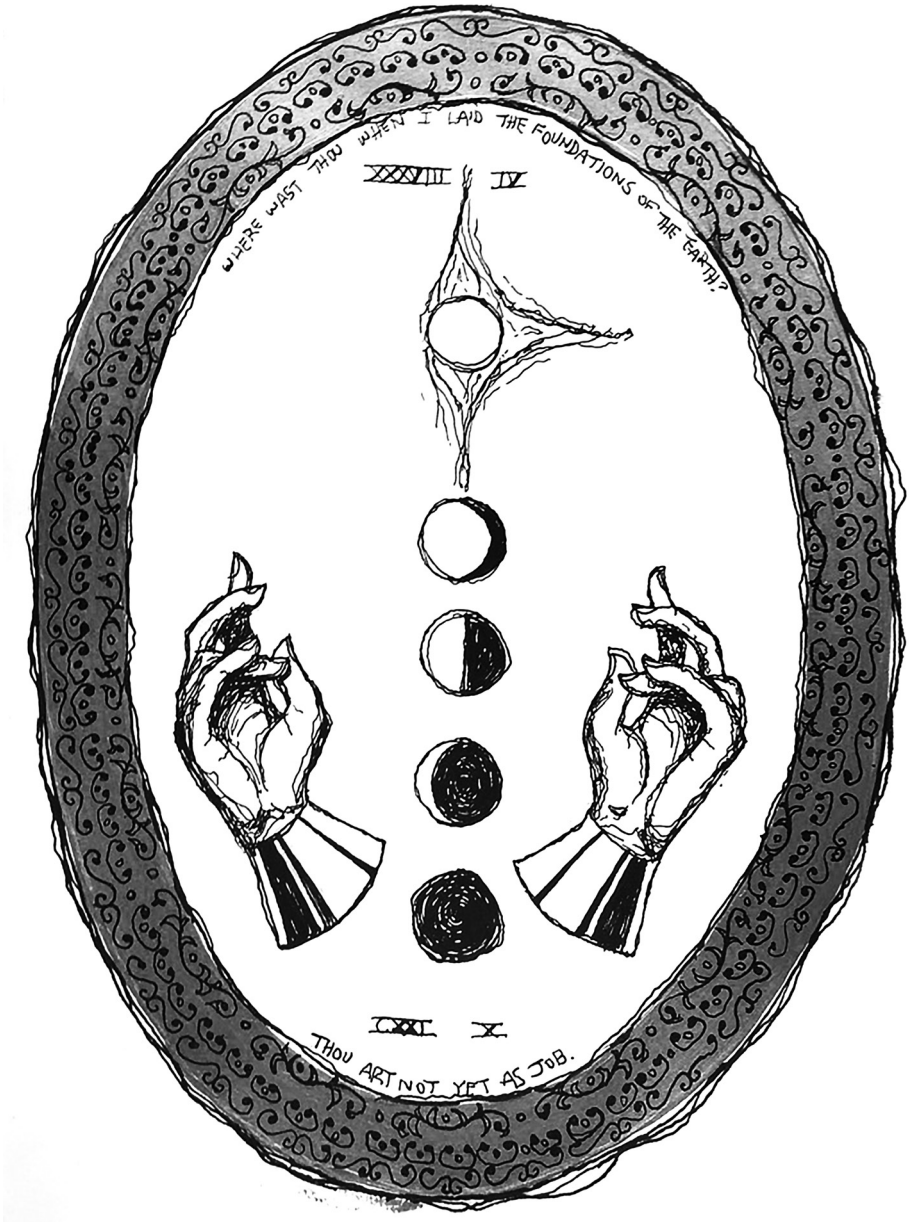
MARYNA LUKACH {lukach.artmix@gmail.com} is a diplomat in the first degree of the International Foundation of the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine and 2016 Master of the Year in textile arts by the International Association of Designers VATIKAM. Her textile paintings are in the Museum of History and Art in Salt Lake City. She has received gold, bronze, and silver medals from the international photo competition TRIERENBERG SUPER CIRCUIT. Her works are held in collections worldwide, including in Ukraine, the United States, England, Italy, Germany, Russia, UAE, Netherlands, Austria, and Cyprus.



Camilla Stark, *Times & Seasons*, 2017,
pen & ink, acrylic paint, 14 x 11 in.

Artist's Statement: *When the moon covered the sun and twilight fell at midday, I saw the foundations of the earth and the eye of God.* All of life is circles and cycles, and every year I see it more clearly.