

DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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"HAVING BEEN CONVINCED OF THE
TRUTH OF POLIGAMME I THEREFORE
ENTER'D INTO THE ORDER":
PRIMARY DOCUMENTS SINCE
IN SACRED LONELINESS

Todd M. Compton

It has been a little over twenty-five years since *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* was published, in late 1997.¹ After publishing my book, I hoped that additional primary documents would surface that would deepen our understanding of Nauvoo polygamy and the women involved in it. A number of significant and interesting sources have indeed emerged. While none of these documents has caused me to change my basic interpretations of the subject, several have added important detail, clarification, corroboration, or complexity to the historical record. In this essay, I highlight and briefly discuss those “new” primary documents that seem most important to me, with particular attention to what they contribute to our understanding beyond what was available in the mid-1990s.

1. Todd M. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Signature Books, 1997) (hereafter *ISL*). For a memoir of how the book was written, see Compton, “Plural Accidents: Writing *In Sacred Loneliness*,” in *Writing Mormon History: Historians and their Books*, edited by Joseph Geisner (Signature Books, 2020), 65–102. See also my *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents* (Signature Books, 2022) (hereafter *ISL: The Documents*).

One often discovers new primary documents on a certain subject when new secondary works on the subject are published. I have learned about new primary documents from the research of authors such as Brian Hales, Don Bradley,² David Golding,³ and Cheryl Bruno.⁴ We are indebted in particular to Hales and Bradley for the extensive research underlying their three-volume *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*. They discovered and commented on new documents, while also examining older documents carefully. Many of the documents they examined have since been made available through Brian Hales's website, Mormon Polygamy Documents.⁵

In addition, libraries and archives have changed significantly since 1997. Some "new" documents have become available in the normal course of archival acquisition and processing. Sometimes they become available because access policies have changed. Perhaps most importantly, large-scale digitization projects have made many key sources far more accessible than they were when *In Sacred Loneliness* was written.

The LDS Church History Library (CHL) is a good example. The Joseph Smith Papers Project,⁶ along with the digitization of materials such as the Emmeline B. Wells diaries and the George Q. Cannon diaries, has made many key documents widely available. In addition, policy changes at the Church History Library have given access to important documents relating to polygamy that were not fully open to researchers in the 1970s. For example, the Joseph F. Smith polygamy

2. Brian Hales, with Don Bradley, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Greg Kofford Books, 2013).

3. David Golding, "Rediscovering Fanny Alger Custer," *Juvenile Instructor* (blog), July 31, 2018, <https://juvenileinstructor.org/rediscovering-fanny-alger-custer/>.

4. Cheryl L. Bruno and Michelle B. Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits," *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 1, no. 1 (2025): 1–34.

5. Mormon Polygamy Documents, <http://mormonpolygamydocuments.org/>, accessed Aug. 9, 2025.

6. The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://josephsmithpapers.org/>.

affidavits, which required special permission to examine in about 1995, are now digitized.⁷ Other important sources, such as the William Clayton diaries, are still restricted but are slated for publication.

The Joseph Smith Papers published its first and last volumes between 2008 and 2023; it continues to expand digitally. This is a magnificent accomplishment, freely available on the internet as well as in printed format. It includes all known contemporary documents belonging to or authored by Joseph Smith.⁸ In its biography section, it recognizes the wives of Joseph Smith—often with language such as “identified in some sources as a plural wife of JS”—and provides valuable information on them. The marriage of Joseph Smith and Sarah Ann Whitney (Smith Kimball), is now quite fully documented in the Joseph Smith Papers.

This paper is an overview of selected primary sources that have emerged or become accessible since 1997. It is not an in-depth analysis of them, nor does it attempt to revisit in detail the methodological and interpretive frameworks developed in *In Sacred Loneliness* and *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*. Rather, it is written in conversation with those works, with the goal of identifying significant new sources and briefly indicating what they add to our knowledge of Joseph Smith’s plural marriages and the lives of the women involved.

A few points on historical methodology are in order. First, no piece of evidence stands alone. All evidence must be understood in connection with other evidence. Historical meaning emerges from an interwoven web of sources.

Second, no one piece of evidence is absolutely true in itself. No matter how valuable a letter or diary is, it nevertheless reflects only one person’s perspective at a particular time. Supportive or contrasting evidence should therefore always be welcomed. At times, historical sources

7. “Affidavits about celestial marriage, 1869–1915,” MS 3423, Church History Library (hereafter CHL). See *ISL*, 1, 632; Bruno and Stone, “Crafting a Sacred Story”; Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:7–8, 2:343–47.

8. “About the Project,” The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 9, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/about-the-project>.

contradict each other. In family memories of shared events, two people will sometimes remember an event in strikingly different ways. This is part of the human condition—we are all limited in perspective.

Third, one person can tell the *same* story differently at different times—not necessarily in a contradictory way, but emphasizing different aspects of the event.

Fourth, retrospective evidence is an important part of the historical record. Some scholars of Nauvoo polygamy have rejected any evidence that is not strictly contemporary. It is true that all historical evidence, both contemporary and retrospective, should be regarded critically. In retrospective evidence, dates are often remembered incorrectly, and memories are idealized or simplified. However, retrospective sources often preserve important details and emotional weight that would otherwise be lost.

Contemporary evidence and retrospective evidence work best when considered together. Each can illuminate the other, helping us better understand both the events themselves and how those events were later remembered and interpreted.

Notable New Materials and Collections

The Thomas Bullock–Heber C. Kimball Document, 1854–1866

One exciting development is the emergence of a fairly early list of Joseph Smith's wives that was not previously known.⁹ In a recent article, Cheryl Bruno and Michelle Stone announced this list, which Bruno found at the Church History Library.¹⁰ As this list predates by decades Andrew Jenson's influential 1887 list (discussed below), it has great historical importance. I will not give an extended analysis here, as Bruno has

9. "Names of Female Relief Society, circa 1854," MS 3157, CHL.

10. Bruno and Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story," 5. See also Cheryl L. Bruno, "Hidden in Plain Sight: A Rediscovered List of Joseph Smith's Wives," *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 2, no. 1 (2026): 53–112.

The Forgotten Wives?!



Eliza R. Snow



Mary Elizabeth
Rollins Lightner



Melissa Leff



Sylvia Sessions



Patsy Sessions



Prescilla Huntington Bell



Eliza Maria Petridge Lyman



Lucinda Morgan Harris



Fanny Alger



Louisa Beaman



Zina Huntington Jacobs
Young Smith



Emily Petridge



Nancy Wadsworth



Ruth Vase Sagers



Emma Hale Smith



Alva R. Snow



Elizabeth Davis Doolittle



Eliza Coules Holmes



Flora Ann Woodworth



Sarah Kagsley Cleveland



Delana Johnson Sherman



Fanny Young



Martha McBride Knight



Sarah Ann Whitney



Dardanene Woodworth Fillmer



Almira Johnson



Sarah Lawrence



Helen Marx Kimball



Lucy Wallace



Marianda Nancy
Johnson Hyatt



Agnes Conlith



Olive Gray Ford



Hannah Ellis



Maria Lawrence

OF JOSEPH SMITH

ILLUSTRATED BY LESLIE OLPIN PETERSON

Leslie Olpin Peterson, *The Forgotten Wives of Joseph Smith*,
2015, watercolor, 11 x 17 in.

Figure 1. MS 3157.

The first part is mostly written in pen:

Female Relief Society 1844 [*in left margin*]

Loisa Beeman	Mrs. Emma Smith
Eliza R. Snow	Sarah M. Cleveland
Hannah Ells	Patty Sessions
Eliza Partridge	Durphy
Emily Partridge	Sylvia Lyons
Sara Whitney	Priscinda Buel Zina Huntington
Elvira Cole [Cowles]	Ruth Sayers
Sara Lawrence	Mary Lightner [<i>writer 2?</i>]
Maria Lawrence	
Lucy Walker	[<i>in pencil:</i>]
Olive Frost	Mrs. John Snyder
[H]Ellen Kimball [<i>H: from more</i>	Mrs. Wm Law
<i>elaborate-writer 2?</i>]	Almera Johnson
Melissa Lott	Marinda N. Johnson
Flora Woodworth	
Eveline Knight	Lucien R. Woodworth's wife
Melisa ^Cordelia^ Morley [<i>Melisa crossed</i>	[<i>Phebe Watrous</i>] [<i>in pen again,</i>
<i>out in pencil and "Cordelia" added in pencil</i>]	<i>writer 2</i>]
[<i>below, in pencil</i>]	
Widow Sherman [<i>Delcena Johnson Sherman Smith Babbitt</i>]	
Widow Vinson Knight (maiden name) Martha McBride	
Desdamona Fullmer	
Emeline Hibbard (Mrs. White) 33	
The names in pencil added by Pres. Kimball Sep 14, 1866 in presence of Geo A	
& Joseph F. Smith & R. L. Campbell. The other names in Thomas Bullocks hand	
writing were got up in the Historians office in early times (1854 till 1860)	
[<i>end of MS 3157</i>]	

written an article on the subject, but a short summary and discussion of its significance are appropriate.

The document is titled "Names of Female Relief Society 1844," although it consists almost entirely of women who were wives of Joseph Smith, with one or two possible exceptions. Some of these women were never Relief Society members.¹¹ I will follow Bruno and Stone in calling it the Bullock–Kimball document, 1854–1866, as Thomas Bullock and Heber C. Kimball were the two main authors.

11. Bruno and Stone argue that the document was given this name to preserve the secrecy of the real subject matter.

Thomas Bullock was a scribe of Joseph Smith in 1843, so his portion of the list has great authority, especially since it is dated to “circa 1854,” only ten years after the death of Smith.¹² This is almost half a century before the Andrew Jenson list. Unlike Jenson, Bullock was himself a Nauvoo insider. Bullock’s list includes twenty-two well-known wives of Joseph Smith and three women who were either lesser-known wives of Joseph or were not wives at all. The list is separated into two groups: sixteen women who were single when Joseph Smith married them (with Elvira Cowles as an exception) and nine women who were married to other men when Smith married them (polyandrous wives).

Heber C. Kimball, of course, was deeply involved in Nauvoo polygamy, as he helped arrange his daughter’s marriage to Joseph Smith, took plural wives under Smith’s directions, officiated in some of Joseph Smith’s marriages, and married some of Joseph Smith’s widows. He added to the document five well-known wives and three who were either lesser-known wives or were not wives. Some of the lesser-known wives appear in my “Possible Wives” category in *In Sacred Loneliness*, and some do not. Some are documented from other sources, while others remain unidentified elsewhere.

Notably, neither of Smith’s earliest plural wives, Fanny Alger Custer and Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris, are included in this document, though they are included (and emphasized) in the later Andrew Jenson list. Perhaps this is because Jenson used some of Joseph Smith’s and Brigham Young’s living plural wives as his sources.

The Bullock–Kimball document is valuable because it gives further support for some of the better-known wives and demonstrates that a fairly standard list of Smith’s wives was known in about 1854. Bruno and Stone suggest that Joseph F. Smith used this list to create his polygamy affidavits in the late 1860s. If so, the Bullock–Kimball document helps illuminate the documentary foundations underlying later, more formal efforts to record Nauvoo plural marriage.

12. For an introduction to his life, see Jerald F. Simon, “Thomas Bullock as an Early Mormon Historian,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1990): 71–88.

Andrew Jenson Research Notes

Another important development since 1997 has been the emergence of the Andrew Jenson research notes,¹³ the preparatory materials Jenson compiled while preparing his 1887 article on Joseph Smith's polygamy.¹⁴ In that published article, Jenson listed twenty-seven plural wives of Joseph Smith, provided brief biographical sketches of some of them, and included selected affidavits.

While preparing his article, Jenson conferred with living plural wives of Joseph Smith, such as Eliza R. Snow, Zina Huntington Young, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Helen Mar Kimball Whitney,¹⁵ and Melissa Lott, as well as other Nauvoo veterans who were involved with Nauvoo polygamy (such as Harriet Cook Young, William Clayton, and Emmeline B. Wells). Therefore, this list is quite authoritative. I don't believe that Jenson included all of Joseph Smith's wives on his list (I included five more on my list), but I believe all that he included can be convincingly documented as women who married Joseph Smith during his lifetime.

The Andrew Jenson Research Notes collection was brought to the attention of historian Don Bradley by an archivist at the Church History Library who found the collection in a register used for internal work by archivists. It surfaced during preliminary work on the Joseph Smith Papers. This is just one reminder that archivists and librarians are doing important work as they sort through unprocessed collections to make them findable and usable for researchers.

13. Andrew Jenson Collection, MS 17956, box 49, folder 16, CHL (digitized; citations refer to PDF page numbers).

14. Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *The Historical Record* 6 (May 1887): 219–40.

15. For example, on June 27, 1887, Helen Mar wrote in her diary, "Bro. Gensen called to see me—wants me to write up incidents of my life as soon as I can. I gave him a few incidents of Flora Gove's life who was a wife of Joseph Smith." Charles M. Hatch and Todd M. Compton, eds., *A Widow's Tale: The 1884–1896 Diary of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney* (Utah State University Press, 2003), 246.

The research notes were first discussed publicly in Brian Hales's *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*. Jenson's notes include two lists of Joseph Smith's wives, with interesting but enigmatic inclusions and cross-outs. The second list seems to be a rough draft for the published list.

Across the two lists, three women—Elizabeth Davis Durfee, Patty Bartlett Sessions, and Martha McBride Knight—appear but were not included in the final published list. In the first list, four names are crossed out: Elvira Cowles Holmes, Elizabeth Davis Durfee, Sarah Kingsley Cleveland, and Patty Bartlett Sessions. (Elvira Cowles is added again toward the end of the list.) Two made it onto the final list and two didn't (Durfee and Sessions), but it is striking that they are all polyandrous wives.

There seem to have been at least two possible reasons for cross-outs or not being included in the published list—one is that Jenson might have finally concluded that the women named were not actually wives of Joseph Smith. Another possibility is that Jenson was reluctant to publicize polyandrous marriages. Finally, some women may have requested that they not be publicly included.¹⁶

The research notes also include biographical sketches of several wives, including a very short biography of one of the polyandrous wives, Ruth Vose Sayers, whom Jenson decided not to include in his published article.

According to Bradley and Hales, the first thirteen names in the first list were supplied by Melissa Lott, and the next thirteen names were supplied by Eliza R. Snow (in her own handwriting, reportedly).¹⁷ Jenson's notes include a letter by Lott, so we know he was in contact

16. Patty Sessions is an example of a woman who didn't want her marriage to Joseph Smith publicized. See Patty Sessions to Brigham Young, undated, originally from the Brigham Young collection, included in affidavits collected by Joseph F. Smith, "Affidavits about Celestial Marriage, 1869–1915," MS 3423, folders 1–6, folder 4 #1, CHL. In the bottom part of the letter, she gives the date of her marriage to Joseph Smith, March 9, 1842, but in a P.S. writes, "Please let no one see this bottom part of myself." Apparently, this means, "Let no one see this bottom part regarding myself."

17. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:263.

with her. If Snow and Lott are the sources for these lists, this is further evidence that Jenson's list has remarkable authority. If he had included a woman on the published list who wasn't accepted by his Nauvoo polygamy informants, they could have corrected him.

D. Michael Quinn Collection at Beinecke Library, Yale

The D. Michael Quinn Collection, now available at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, contains many of Quinn's research notes from documents that sometimes are not currently available. Quinn, one of the most influential modern LDS historians, was part of a select group that had unusually broad access to documents in the archives of the Church History Library. Most of his notes are derived from that access.¹⁸

Among Quinn's research materials is a set of note cards labeled "Polygamy, Joseph Smith's" that include notes from important primary sources.¹⁹ For example, Quinn saw and took notes from an autobiography of Desdemona Fullmer that has subsequently been lost. Don Bradley took notes on Quinn's relevant research notes at the Beinecke, and many of Quinn's notes can be found at Brian Hales's Mormon Polygamy Documents website.

The Quinn Collection thus represents an important secondary conduit through which otherwise inaccessible primary evidence has been preserved, even when the original documents themselves are no longer available.

Increased Validity as Wives of Joseph Smith

When I started research on Eliza R. Snow Smith's overland diaries at the Huntington Library in 1992, I realized that it was necessary to identify

18. For Quinn's time doing research at the CHL, see his "On Writing Mormon History, 1972–1995: From the Diaries and Memoirs of D. Michael Quinn," edited by Joe Geisner, in Geisner, *Writing Mormon History*, 237–72.

19. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, WA MSS S-2692, box 64. For the Quinn papers, see <https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/1312>.

the women to whom she referred in her entries. Therefore, I felt that I needed to have reliable, well-documented lists of the wives of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith, since they were sister wives of Snow.

At the time, the only footnoted list of Joseph Smith's wives was that of Fawn Brodie, but I felt that this list had serious problems, particularly because of its reliance on late, secondhand, antagonistic evidence.²⁰ In addition, it was out of date, as Brodie did not have access to documents now available in the "modern" LDS archives.

As a result, I began to make my own list, largely based on Andrew Jensen's 1887 list, the Joseph F. Smith polygamy affidavits, and records of early proxy marriages to Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Temple. While unsympathetic sources shouldn't be discounted, I tried to base my list on sympathetic or insider sources. One reliable source is enough to accept a woman as the wife of Joseph Smith, but I wanted multiple sources for each plural wife if possible. This was not simply a pedantic, technical task. Identifying these women accurately is essential for understanding their lives, their family relationships, and the networks of intimacy that shaped Nauvoo and early Utah Mormonism. They called themselves sister wives, so it is important to know whom they included in that circle.

As an example, Eliza R. Snow Smith Young and Zina Huntington Jacobs Smith Young (both wives of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young) shared a close friendship throughout their lives. They ended up as leaders of the general Relief Society in Utah.²¹ Their Nauvoo past was part of their close bond. As they traveled through Utah speaking to women,

20. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed. (Knopf, 1985), 457–88.

21. Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-Day Saint Women's History* (Church Historian's Press, 2016). Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward, *4 Zinas: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier* (Signature Books, 2000). Karen Lynn Davidson and Jill Mulvay Derr, *Eliza: The Life and Faith of Eliza R. Snow* (Deseret Book, 2014).

men, and children, they would often mention that they were plural wives of Joseph Smith.²²

More broadly, polygamous relationships are crucial for understanding elite nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, female and male. They need to be documented and understood. A friend of mine told me how offended her mother was when an official biography of Heber J. Grant did not even mention his plural wives, which effectively erased their sacrifices and contributions. My friend and her mother were descendants of one of these plural wives.

*Elizabeth Durfee, Delcena Johnson Sherman,
and Lucinda Morgan Harris*

Some of the women on my list in *In Sacred Loneliness* have been disputed, so it is very helpful to find corroborating evidence for them. The Bullock–Kimball list provides such corroboration in several cases. Elizabeth Davis Goldsmith Brackenbury Durfee Smith Lott was included in my list, but some historians have expressed doubt that she was a wife of Joseph Smith. She does not appear on the published Jenson list, but she does appear on the first list in the Jenson research notes—however, her name is crossed out. As discussed above, this might mean that Jenson did not consider her an authentic wife of Joseph, but it could also mean that Jenson was trying to avoid a problematic issue, polyandry, when he crossed out the names of four polyandrous wives in his first list.

Because Elizabeth moved to California with her Brackenbury sons and became RLDS, she does not have an affidavit in the Joseph F. Smith collection. In *In Sacred Loneliness*, I collected other evidence supporting her status as an older plural wife of Joseph Smith.²³ Her appearance on the 1854 Bullock list is therefore important. It represents an early, sympathetic source dated decades before the published Jenson list.

I included Delcena Johnson Sherman Smith Babbitt in my book mostly on the basis of two statements by her brother Benjamin Johnson,

22. *ISL*, 337.

23. *ISL*, 260.

whom I regard as a Nauvoo polygamy insider. In the Kimball part of the Bullock–Kimball list, we find a “Widow Sherman,” which provides important corroboration for her inclusion as Smith’s plural wife.

Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris has likewise been disputed as a Smith plural wife, as has my suggested marriage date of approximately 1838. Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott Faulring, in their long FARMS review of my book, rejected Jenson’s identification of Lucinda as a wife.²⁴ Richard Bushman in *Rough Stone Rolling* followed this judgment.²⁵ Brian Hales includes her in his count of Joseph Smith wives but expresses reservations about her status.²⁶

Nevertheless, when I published *In Sacred Loneliness*, I could cite Lucinda’s inclusion on Andrew Jenson’s list of Smith’s plural wives; she is listed third, after Louisa Beaman and Fanny Alger. Jenson describes her as “one of the first women sealed to the Prophet Joseph.” After Joseph Smith’s death, Lucinda had an early proxy marriage to him in Nauvoo, which is important corroborative evidence. In addition, Sarah Pratt, the disaffected ex-wife of apostle Orson Pratt, describes Lucinda as saying that her relationship with Joseph Smith started in 1838. Based on all of this and other evidence, I tentatively dated Lucinda’s marriage to Joseph to 1838.

In the Andrew Jenson research notes, we find confirmation both for Lucinda as a wife of Joseph Smith, and for the circa 1838 wedding date. Jenson wrote, “Harriet Cook Young is positive that sh[e] [Lucinda] was married to Joseph in Missouri.”²⁷ Harriet Cook Young was married to Brigham Young in 1843, so she was fully in the Nauvoo plural marriage

24. Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, “The Prophet Joseph Smith and His Plural Wives,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1989–2011 10, no. 2 (1998): 75.

25. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 644n1.

26. *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:286.

27. Jenson Research Notes, PDF p. 3.

network. Harriet even witnessed the marriage of Fanny Young Murray to Joseph Smith on November 2, 1843.²⁸

Jenson started a biography of Lucinda in his notes, the first part of which is crossed out, commenting, “better leave her out perhaps.”²⁹ Hales suggests that Jenson wanted to leave Lucinda out because he didn’t think the evidence was sufficient. However, once again, Lucinda was a polyandrous wife, and it is possible that Jenson didn’t want to emphasize this aspect of Joseph’s polygamy. Notably, despite hesitations, Jenson finally included her in his published list.

As was mentioned above, several of the living plural widows of Joseph Smith helped Jenson in his research. If he had included Lucinda by mistake, these women could have quickly corrected him. Jenson’s description of Lucinda as “one of the first women sealed to the Prophet Joseph” aligns well with a pre-Nauvoo marriage date. And Harriet Young’s testimony that the marriage occurred in Missouri further supports an early date.

Later Lives

As I was starting to create my list of Joseph Smith’s wives, I found that to reproduce the woman’s full name—including multiple married names—I needed to understand the full lives of these women. Many of these women married more than once, and errors could easily result without careful attention to chronology. Fawn Brodie, in fact, listed Elizabeth Durfee as two different women, using two different married names. To avoid such mistakes, I felt I needed to not only learn about these marriages but also document them carefully.

What began as a list of names soon expanded into a series of long paragraphs, then multi-page chronologies and biographies. This led me

28. See two affidavits by Harriet Cook Young in “Affidavits about Celestial Marriage, 1869–1915,” book 2 (folder 5, volume 2), pp. 12, 14.

29. Jenson Research Notes, PDF p. 3.

to reading memoirs and diaries, when available. As a result, I became interested in these women's lives before and after Nauvoo, which were filled with challenges, tragedies, and adventures, set within a larger context of Mormon migration and settlement of the American West. I became emotionally attached to these women when I started reading their wonderful letters, diaries, and memoirs.

Their later lives also shed light on their polygamous experiences in Nauvoo. Sometimes their first-person writings recounted their Nauvoo experiences or referred back to them.³⁰ As a result, a major part of *In Sacred Loneliness* was biography. While some readers were interested mostly in the Nauvoo period, I found these women's later lives—crossing the plains and building lives in Utah or California or other locations, living openly as polygamists—to be deeply revealing. New documents that illuminate aspects of their later lives are valuable, both for understanding their trajectories and for interpreting their earlier experiences that were shrouded in secrecy.

Fanny Alger Smith Custer

When *In Sacred Loneliness* was published, we did not have a death date for Fanny Alger. Richard Van Wagoner had generously shared his Fanny Alger material with me, and he mentioned that he had been unable to find a death date for Fanny. Within a year of my book's publication, a descendant of Fanny contacted me and provided both a death date and her obituary.

The obituary was found in the Adolphus Barnes Family Bible (also known as the Stephen Barnes Family Bible). It states that Fanny W. Custer died on November 29, 1889, in Indianapolis at the age of seventy-two. It offers a detailed account of her life in Dublin, Indiana,

30. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney repeatedly acknowledged her Nauvoo sealing to Joseph Smith in her later diaries. See entries from 1886 to 1894 in Hatch and Compton, *A Widow's Tale*, esp. 157, 169, 205, 236, 246, 383, 605; see also Emmeline B. Wells's diary for November 27, 1889.

where she was an early settler and a well-known community figure. The obituary emphasizes her generosity, stating, “She was generally beloved by all who knew her, and was noted for her benevolence of spirit and generous-heartedness; being known as one who would share her last crust with whosoever should need it.”

Several aspects of the obituary are particularly noteworthy. It reports that in 1874 Fanny joined the Universalist Church—a church with ties to spiritualism in the nineteenth century—and remained committed to that faith until her death. It also notes that she bore nine children, only two of whom survived her, a stark reminder of the high rates of infant and child mortality in the nineteenth century.

Historian and archivist David Golding later located an additional obituary notice that adds further complexity to Fanny’s religious life.³¹ This notice describes her as a “strong and prominent spirit medium.”³² Golding also cites an earlier newspaper notice which reads, “Solomon Custer and wife [Fanny Alger] are diving into matters concerning the spirit land. They claim to be receiving daily intelligence under spiritual control.”³³ Golding writes that these notices show that Fanny was “a historical figure who apparently lived a fascinating religious hybrid between earliest Mormonism, frontier Universalism, and early feminist spiritualism.” This evidence undercuts claims made by some early Latter-day Saints that Fanny remained a committed, faithful Mormon to the end of her life.³⁴

31. Golding, “Rediscovering Fanny Alger Custer.”

32. *Cambridge City Tribune* (Cambridge City, Indiana) 25, no. 34, Dec. 5, 1889, Thursday, p. 2. Available online at newspapers.com.

33. “Local Matters,” *Hagerstown Exponent* 7, no. 9, Aug. 2, 1882, p. 3, as cited in Golding, “Rediscovering Fanny Alger Custer.”

34. Benjamin Johnson, the brother of two of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, wrote that Fanny, “did ^not^ turn from the Church nor from her friendship for the Prophet while She lived.” Letter to George Gibbs, 1903, in Dean R. Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets* (Horizon Publishers, 1976), 39.

Some researchers have found additional information on aspects of Fanny's economic life. The LDS Church's gospel topic essay on Fanny recounts: "The Custers maintained a grocery store in Dublin and invested in a sawmill in nearby Lewisville. The family moved to Lewisville during a time of financial difficulty, and Solomon attempted to sell the sawmill, but ultimately declared bankruptcy. Fanny and Solomon then moved back to Dublin, where they remained until Solomon's death in 1885."³⁵ After her husband's death, Fanny lived with her son in Indianapolis. These details help situate her life within the economic uncertainties faced by many nineteenth-century families.

Finally, we now have additional sources that simply affirm that she was a wife of Joseph Smith. For example, RLDS member John Hawley wrote in 1885, "What I heard [from] John Olger [Alger] one of the first (or among the first) members of the Church he toald me his Sister was Seald to Joseph in Curtlin [Kirtland], this he Said to me in 1868."³⁶

Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris Smith

Lucinda's life after Nauvoo is obscure. When I was researching *In Sacred Loneliness*, I found a fairly early Masonic source (Rob Morris in 1883) that stated that Lucinda moved to Tennessee and served as a member of the Catholic Sisters of Charity during the Civil War.³⁷ More recently, Brian Hales has found new evidence that challenges Morris's account and sheds additional light on Lucinda's life after Nauvoo.

In his *Bibliography of Anti-Masonry* (1934), William Cummings directly disagreed with Morris on the possibility of Lucinda being a

35. "Fanny Alger," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 10, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/fanny-alger?lang=eng>.

36. John Hawley, Autobiography, Jan. 1885, p. 97, Community of Christ Archives. For Hawley, see Melvin C. Johnson, *Life and Times of John Pierce Hawley: A Mormon Ulysses of the American West* (Greg Kofford Books, 2019).

37. Rob Morris, *William Morgan; or Political Anti-Masonry* (Robert Macoy, 1883), 279.

Catholic sister during the Civil War. Then he wrote, “Recently discovered evidence proves that she [Lucinda] died at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Lucinda Wesley Smith, in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1856.”³⁸ This, of course, is several years before the Civil War. While Cummings is a later source, other documentation supports his conclusion.

In a newspaper article, Cummings discusses that “recently discovered evidence,” a letter from Lucinda’s son-in-law, David B. Smith (no relation to Joseph Smith).³⁹ Referring to his wife and brother-in-law, he wrote in that 1882 letter that “their mother, Lucinda Morgan Harris, died at Memphis, Tenn., in 1856.”⁴⁰

Although a later newspaper notice from 1860 states that Lucinda had died “recently,” the weight of the evidence now favors the 1856 date.⁴¹ Near to the David Smith letter published in *Christian Cynosure* was an excerpt from an actual letter by Lucinda herself on January 8, 1836, to a friend, Sarah Stevens. She writes:

How is dear Mrs. Betts and family? Tell her to live near the Lord and obey His commandments, and she will receive a crown of righteousness, which the Righteous Judge will give her at that day when he cometh to reward every one according to the deeds done in the body. * * * How are you all? And where is Colonel Miller and family? (The one who was associated with her husband in the publication of the Morgan Expose.—Ed.) Do write particulars respecting them.

38. William Leon Cummings, *Bibliography of Anti-Masonry* (pub. by author, 1934), 28. See also Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:310. The entire passage is quoted at “Cummings’ notes on Morgan,” Freemasons of British Columbia and Yukon, accessed Aug. 9, 2025, <http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/anti-masonry/cummings.html>.

39. “What Became of Lucinda Morgan: Famous William Morgan’s Wife,” *Batavia Times* 116, no. 37, Sept. 13, 1934, transcript available at <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/ny/miscNYS4.htm>.

40. Captain David Smith to Charles Betts, Esq., Dec. 10, 1882, as printed in “William Morgan’s Daughter,” *Christian Cynosure* 32 (Sept. 1899): 132.

41. *Prairie Du Chien Courier* (Wisconsin), Apr. 12, 1860, vol. VIII, no. 20, at <http://www.sidneyrigdon.com/dbroadhu/IA/miscwis2.htm>.

Please give our love to all inquiring friends, Sarah, I enclose five dollars for your mother. May the blessing of our Heavenly Father attend you and yours. Your affectionate friend,

Lucinda Morgan Harris⁴²

This letter is very valuable because it brings Lucinda to life. It indicates that she was devoutly religious, generous, and affectionate with an old friend.

In summary, these documents revise our understanding of Lucinda's later life, providing believable evidence that she died in 1856. Additionally, Harriet Cook's witness in the Andrew Jenson papers gives added support for Lucinda as a plural wife of Joseph Smith and for her pre-Nauvoo marriage to him around 1838.

Agnes Coolbrith Smith Smith Smith Pickett

On June 10, 1860, Agnes Moulton Coolbrith Smith Smith Smith Pickett and her daughter Josephine Smith Carsley, known later as Ina Coolbrith, wrote letters from Los Angeles, California, to "Edwin and Mary-Ann," whom Bryan Buchanan and Amanda Hendrix-Komoto have tentatively identified as Edwin Rushton and Mary Ann Fowell Rushton.⁴³ These letters, now at Brigham Young University, are remarkable because both Agnes and Ina express strong interest in the Reorganized LDS Church, and in the leadership of Agnes's nephew, Joseph Smith III, who had accepted the presidency of the RLDS Church on April 6, 1860. Agnes and Ina also express a decided antagonism to Utah Mormonism, including polygamy. Agnes wrote:

Edwin I do not believe in oppression in tyranny in bloodshed and murder and neither in the plurality I must say that I have tried hard to believe that it was right to have more wives than one but I never could get a witness but always to the contrary

42. *Christian Cynosure* 32 (Sept. 1899): 132–33.

43. Smith family correspondence; Vault MSS 803; John Smith papers, series 3, box 2, folder 11, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

I have been looking for many years for a change in the church that God in his own due time would cause the true one to step forth and lead his people which is now the case Joseph [Smith III] has come forth to set the people free and deliver them from bondage and tyranny how I long to see them as I have once seen them it would almost be a heaven on earth whether it will be my lot to join them once more I know not but I pray that God in his great wisdom will order it so that all of mine may be gathered back to our old home to rest and there lay our weary bones

These statements are especially striking given Agnes's own well-documented plural marriages to Joseph Smith and George Albert Smith. Her letter suggests a desire to leave that part of her life behind her and to align herself with a religion that explicitly rejected plural marriage.

Agnes's daughter, Ina Coolbrith, eventually the poet laureate of California, also expressed opposition to polygamy, a position which we can also see in her earlier letters to Joseph F. Smith.⁴⁴ She wrote:

I am a mormon—in all but Salt Lake Mormonism—and woe be unto you if you do not leave it. Polygamy—Murder—are abroad in your lands—and in your households. The Bible—the book of Mormon—and the covenants—are all against it. What is there that justifies it? Noth-ing—in heaven, nor on earth. If Joseph Smith brought forth this system of polygamy—he sinned—and he paid the penalty.

Despite Agnes and Ina's opposition to Utah Mormonism, and despite the fact that Ina did not publicize her LDS background in California, Ina wrote, "I am a Mormon" with an underline, thus indicating a sharp distinction between her identity as a Mormon and the tradition's practice of plural marriage. Despite these feelings, Agnes and Ina loved to visit their LDS friends in San Bernardino. There is no known documentation that Agnes or Ina ever affiliated with the RLDS Church

44. See *ISL: The Documents*, 121–29.

in California, though they sometimes socialized with RLDS visitors.⁴⁵ According to Lucy Walker Kimball, quoting Ina Coolbrith, Agnes once told two of her RLDS nephews, David and Alexander Smith, that Joseph Smith indeed practiced polygamy.⁴⁶

*Elizabeth Davis Goldsmith Brackenbury Durfee
Smith Lott [Brackenbury]*

As was mentioned above, Elizabeth Davis Brackenbury was one of Joseph Smith's older wives in Nauvoo. She was a fascinating, challenging woman to research because of her many marriages and name changes. She eventually was baptized into the RLDS Church. The following newspaper article contains an interview with Elizabeth's grandson Arthur Brackenbury.⁴⁷ It provides added background on Elizabeth's expulsion from Independence, Missouri, in 1833, and, much later, her return to the Missouri area. Arthur wrote:

"She lived on a 10-acre tract on the Blue, where Centropolis now is," Mr. Brackenbury said. "It was in November when she was driven from her home, and she and a son spent their first night with only a corn-shock as shelter."

With several other families, they went out the old river road north of Independence and crossed the river at the Wayne City landing. On the Clay County side, shelters were prepared by propping willows against a sycamore log, and the exiles remained there the rest of the winter.

45. For the early RLDS Church in California, see Ron Romig, "The RLDS Church on the Pacific Slope," *Journal of Mormon History* 35, no. 2 (2009): 43–125. For Ina and Agnes, pp. 64, 102.

46. Lucy Walker Kimball to Joseph F. Smith, Feb. 24, 1884, in *ISL: The Documents*, 538.

47. Excerpts from "STONE CHURCH BIG DAY: INDEPENDENCE EDIFICE IS 50 YEARS OLD," *Kansas City Sunday Star*, Nov. 20, 1938, p. 10 A, col. 1, as cited and reprinted in "Buried Early Missouri Mormon History," *Missouri Mormon Frontier Foundation Newsletter* 14 (Summer 1997): 5–6.

Elizabeth came to California with her son John Brackenbury, where he became RLDS. She apparently accompanied him back to the Kansas/Missouri area, and the family settled at first in White Cloud, Kansas, where Elizabeth also became an RLDS member. This gives further insight as to why Elizabeth died (in a train accident) in Kansas, not in Missouri, on November 10, 1876.⁴⁸ The details of the train accident are now available. The train became detached into two parts at a turn, and the engineer was not aware of it. When the first part stopped, the second part crashed violently into the first part, and Elizabeth was severely injured. She died in her son's home in White Cloud.⁴⁹

This material adds useful context to Elizabeth's later life and movements. While the grandson's recollections are necessarily secondhand and must be used cautiously, they provide a plausible narrative that helps situate Elizabeth within the broader patterns of displacement, migration, and return to the Midwest experienced by some early Latter-day Saint families.

Sarah Kingsley Howe Cleveland Smith

While I was researching *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*, an archivist at BYU generously told me about a collection of letters by Sarah Cleveland, who had been a prominent woman in Nauvoo, serving as a counselor in the first Relief Society presidency. These letters were dated from June 1852 to November 12, 1855, a half year before her death on April 21, 1856.⁵⁰ They give a moving record of Sarah's separation from her daughter, Augusta Bowen Cleveland Smith, the wife of John Lyman Smith. Augusta, John, and their children had left Nauvoo for Utah in

48. *ISL*, 268.

49. "Fatal Result of an Accident," *St. Joseph Gazette* (Missouri), Dec. 22, 1876, p. 3.

50. *ISL: The Documents*, 277–87; Augusta Bowen Cleveland Smith Collection, box 1, folder 1, MSS 1833, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

1846. This separation shows a tragic side of western migration: separation of families.

Sarah sent her last letter to Augusta on November 12, 1855. She concluded her letter saying, “I do hope there will be a way prepared for you & your ^Dear^ little ones to come safely over the plains, and visit us before we die—Your Father sends his best love to your dear children kiss them for us / he wishes to be remembered to Cousin Smith / God bless you and your family prays the heart of your affectionate Mother Sarah M Cleveland.”

These newly available letters add an important dimension to Sarah Kingsley Cleveland Smith’s life. They give us insight into the emotional world of an important historical figure and illuminate the personal consequences of family dispersion.

Secrecy in Nauvoo Polygamy

One of the defining features of Nauvoo polygamy was that it was secret, partially for religious reasons and partially because it was illegal in Illinois.⁵¹ If the subject was brought up publicly, Joseph Smith had to deny that he taught or practiced it. Those who deny that Joseph Smith was a polygamist often have not taken into consideration how Nauvoo plurality was profoundly secret. Zina Diantha Huntington Jacobs Smith Young, one of Joseph Smith’s polyandrous wives, said in 1898, “It [her marriage to Smith] was something too sacred to be talked about; it was more to me than life or death. I never breathed it for years.”⁵² Elizabeth Ann Whitney, one of the great charismatic woman leaders in Nauvoo and the mother of a plural wife of Joseph Smith, wrote:

[Joseph Smith] had been strictly charged by the angel who committed these precious things into his keeping that he should only reveal them

51. John S. Dinger, “Nauvoo Polygamy and the Law: Statutory and Common Law Prohibitions,” in Bruno, *Secret Covenants*, 269–94.

52. John W. Wight, “Evidence from Zina D. Huntington-Young,” October 1, 1898, *The Saints Herald* 52:2 (Jan. 11, 1905), 28–30. *ISL The Documents*, 60.

to such persons as were pure, full of integrity to the truth and worthy to be entrusted with divine messages; that to spread them abroad would only be like casting pearls before swine, and that the most profound secrecy must be maintained, until the Lord saw fit to make it known publicly through His servants.⁵³

Secrecy, even carried out for idealized religious motives, nevertheless inevitably led to ethical issues.⁵⁴ Two “new” documents touch on this aspect of Nauvoo plurality.

Desdemona Fullmer Smith Benson

One of these documents is a previously unknown autobiographical account by Desdemona Fullmer, parts of which were transcribed by D. Michael Quinn. This manuscript has since been lost. A crucial part reads:

having been convinced of the truth of poligamie I therefore enter'd into the Order butt I dared not make it known not even to my parents for I was forbidden by the Prophet for it would endanger the life of Joseph and also many of the Saints. . . . [she has a night vision in which an angel tells her that the polygamy doctrine is true].⁵⁵

This autobiography thus attests to the profound secrecy of Joseph Smith's polygamy in Nauvoo, as he does not allow Desdemona to mention her marriage to him even to her parents.

53. “A Leaf from an Autobiography,” *Woman's Exponent* 7 (Dec. 15, 1878), 105.

54. B. Carmon Hardy, *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 363–88.

55. Desdemona Fullmer, Second Autobiography, transcription by D. Michael Quinn, in Quinn papers. Cards in the “Polygamy, Joseph Smith's” and “Hyrum Smith, RE: Polygamy” groups, pp. 8–9, 72–73 of 166 in my pdf. Partially available at Hales, *Mormon Polygamy Documents*, JS0535. I included some quotes from the document (via Quinn's transcription) in the introduction to the Desdemona Fullmer section of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*. This source also discusses Hyrum Smith's conversion to polygamy and states that Desdemona married Joseph in 1842.

In this document, Desdemona once again accuses Emma of trying to poison her. Whether or not this is true, such a belief indicates the distrust, uncertainty, and fear that characterized the lives of some of Smith's secret plural wives.

Eliza R. Snow Smith

The Quinn papers also contain a document stating that Eliza R. Snow "said she did not know much about it when she was married to Joseph Smith said she did not know if ever she would be owned as a wife."⁵⁶ I think this statement is significant as it shows that Joseph Smith's marriages to plural wives were secret and sometimes rushed, so the plural wife at times did not understand fully what the marriage entailed. In addition, Smith's statements led Snow to believe that her marriage might always be secret.

Taken together, these two documents demonstrate how secrecy about polygamy functioned as an isolating burden, a test of religious obedience, and an anxiety-inducing practice.

Polyandry

When I began to construct marriage histories of the women whom I had identified as plural wives of Joseph Smith, I found that Joseph Smith married some women who were already married to other men. In these cases, the women continued to live with their first husbands, resulting in two marriages existing simultaneously. This by definition is polyandry, a woman being married to two men simultaneously. Of course, the marriages were different: the first was legally a civil marriage for time, while the marriage to Smith was a religious marriage for time

56. Glenwood Ward, Relief Society Minutes, September 28, 1880, in Quinn Papers, in my pdf, p. 94 of 166. Also in Hales, *Mormon Polygamy Documents*, JS 0596.

and eternity.⁵⁷ Like all of Smith's plural marriages, they were secret and were not legal civil marriages.

The Bullock portion of the Bullock–Kimball document reflects this reality. There are in effect two lists: on the left side are sixteen names of women who were unmarried at the time of their marriage to Joseph Smith (with the exception of Elvira Cowles); on the right are nine names of polyandrous wives (as well as Emma Smith). This shows that Smith's polyandry was fully recognized by LDS leaders and historians as early as 1854. By the time *In Sacred Loneliness* was published, other historians, such as Richard Van Wagoner, Daniel Bachman, and Lawrence Foster, had already dealt with this issue to a certain extent.⁵⁸ Obviously, I could not simply ignore this phenomenon—of Joseph Smith's first twelve wives, nine were polyandrous. I worked to understand it.

One of the few documents giving a forthright explanation of it was an autobiography of Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner. In June 1834, Joseph Smith stayed at the home of Sydney Gilbert, where Mary was living. She was sixteen at the time. She married Adam Lightner, a non-Mormon, a year later, on August 11, 1835 in Missouri. (They had ten children between 1836 and 1847.) They moved to Nauvoo, and there Joseph Smith proposed to her. According to Mary Elizabeth's memoir,

When Joseph made known to me that God had Commanded him in July 1834 to take me for a Wife, but he had not dared to make it known to me, for when he received the Revelation; I was in Missouri and when he did see me, I was Married. But he was again commanded, to fulfil

57. I have found no evidence that I find convincing that such marriages were ceremonial, for "eternity only." See Todd Compton, "Were There 'Eternity-Only' Plural Marriages in Nauvoo?" in *Secret Covenants: New Insights on Early Mormon Polygamy*, edited by Cheryl L. Bruno (Signature Books, 2024), 295–334.

58. Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Mormon Polyandry in Nauvoo," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1985): 67–83.

the first revelation; or Suffer condemnation—for I was created for him before the foundation of the Earth was laid.

She married Joseph Smith in February 1842, while continuing to live with her first husband.⁵⁹ Smith's arguments that God would condemn him if he didn't marry her and that her spirit had been linked with his in the premortal existence were convincing to her. These religious imperatives required a marriage for time and eternity, and a previous civil marriage to another man would not stand in the way.

Marinda Johnson Hyde Smith

We can see similar patterns in a newly accessible document by Marinda Johnson Hyde Smith. Joseph Smith had lived in the same house as Marinda, the home of John Johnson and Alice Jacobs Johnson, in Hiram, Ohio, from September 12, 1831 to April 2, 1832.⁶⁰ Marinda was sixteen at this time. She married Orson Hyde on September 4, 1834 (and together they had ten children, born between 1835 and 1858). Orson Hyde was called as an apostle in 1835. Joseph Smith proposed to Marinda in fall 1841, and she married Smith in April 1842, or in 1843.⁶¹

A statement by Marinda, now available at the LDS Church History Library, discusses her polyandrous marriage to Smith. It is titled there

59. See *ISL*, 205–27; the full memoir can be read in *ISL: the Documents*, 141–83.

60. JS History, vol. A-1, Joseph Smith Papers, Sept. 12, 1831; April 2, 1832.

61. See *ISL*, 228–53, for Marinda's life. A list of Nauvoo sealings written by Thomas Bullock in the JS Journal, December 1842–June 1844, Joseph Smith Papers, after July 14, 1843, book 2, p. 310, includes the Joseph Smith-Marinda Hyde marriage, with the date April 1842. An affidavit signed by Marinda on May 1, 1869 gives the date of her marriage to Smith in May 1843. Joseph F. Smith polygamy affidavits (see above), book 1, p. 15. I follow the date in the Joseph Smith journal, as it was written much earlier, but regard the 1843 date as possible.

“Marinda N. Johnson Hyde statement, circa 1880.”⁶² In this short document she states:

The peculiarity of my condition in life seems to call for an explanation at my hand

The Lord gave me to Joseph Smith before I married Orson Hyde. This I did not know until ten years after, when Joseph taught me the doctrine of celestial marriage. This was in the fall of 1841 and the following Dec, the following revelation was brought to me by Apostle Wilford Woodruff, —

Nauvoo Dec 1, 1841

“Verily thus saith the Lord unto you my servant Joseph, that inasmuch as you have called upon me to know my will concerning my handmaid Nancy Marinda Hyde; behold it is my will that she should have a better place prepared for her, than that in which she now lives, in order that her life may be spared unto her; . . . Let my handmaid Nancy Marinda Hyde hearken to the council of my servant Joseph in all things whatsoever he shall teach unto her, and it shall be a blessing upon her and upon her children after her, unto her justification saith the Lord. . . .”⁶³

A few years before Mr. Hyde departed this life he told me that Joseph Smith before our marriage, requested him not to marry me, but gave no reason for the request

This pattern seems to mirror that of Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, in that Joseph Smith said he had a spiritual witness years earlier that Marinda belonged to him in some sense and then explained this connection to Marinda when he proposed to her and later married her polyandrously in Nauvoo. It is also interesting that he had asked Orson Hyde not to marry Marinda (presumably because of this earlier spiritual witness) but that Hyde married her anyway.

62. MS 23157, CHL. In 2010, documents from the First Presidency’s papers were transferred to the Church History Library and Joseph Smith Papers. See Joseph Smith Papers, “Discourse, 27 June 1839, as Reported by Wilford Woodruff–A,” Source Note, n. 6.

63. *ISL*, 236.

Marinda's case is unlike Mary Elizabeth's in that Mary Elizabeth was married to a nonmember, while Marinda was married to a Church member not just in good standing but in the leading quorums of the LDS Church.

Ruth Vose Sayers Smith

In the Andrew Jenson research notes is a short, unpublished biography of Ruth Vose Sayers, which adds a different twist to polyandrous marriage:

[*Ruth and her non-Mormon husband Edward moved to Nauvoo.*] While there the strongest affection sprang up between the Prophet Joseph and Mr. Sayers. The latter not attaching much importance to ^the^ theory of a future life insisted that his wife ^Ruth^ should be sealed to the Prophet for eternity, as he himself should only claim her in this life. She the[n] [was] sealed to the Prophet in Emma Smith's presence and thus were ^became^ numbered among the Prophets plural wives. She however ^though she^ remained with her husband ^continued to live with Mr. Sayers^ until his death.⁶⁴

This is a remarkable story. It seems odd, even hard to believe, that a nonmember husband accepted that his wife should marry another man, even if it was a marriage apparently for eternity. But in this story, Edward Sayer does not just accept this; he "insisted" that Ruth should marry Joseph Smith. This seems to be putting all the motivation for the marriage on the first husband. If this story has some truth and Edward agreed to the polyandrous marriage, the idea of it probably wouldn't have originated with him. Joseph or Ruth would have suggested it.

Brian Hales uses this story to argue that the Smith-Vose marriage was for eternity only and did not have a time element. (He also argues that all of Joseph Smith's polyandrous marriages were for eternity

64. Jenson papers, pp. 9 and 11 of PDF downloaded from CHL website. MS 17956, box 49, folder 16.

only.⁶⁵) I agree that the story seems to include that concept. However, as this is secondhand evidence written by a non-Nauvoo insider long after Nauvoo, we would like to find some solid corroboration on this point. We do not know who Jenson's source was, and we do not know why he decided not to publish the little biography.

Sacred Loneliness

The women I wrote about in *In Sacred Loneliness* entered plural marriages in Nauvoo under conditions of secrecy that limited many of the normal experiences of marriage. But in their later lives, they lived openly in plural marriages in Utah. As I documented their experiences in post-Nauvoo plural marriages, I was struck by how distanced—emotionally, economically, and even physically—they were from their husbands, who were often high Church leaders. Plural wives had less time with their husband, and less financial support. Sometimes a plural husband had a favorite wife or wives, which left the other wives to struggle. This situation was exacerbated when the husband had many plural wives instead of just one or two. And yet, Church leaders taught that plural marriage was necessary for complete exaltation and that the more wives a man had, the greater would be his exaltation. This led leaders such as Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball to marry fifty-five and forty-three wives, respectively.⁶⁶

The title of *In Sacred Loneliness* points to this enigmatic contradiction in polygamy. The promise of exaltation through this marriage

65. I disagree. See Compton, "Were There 'Eternity-Only' Plural Marriages in Nauvoo?" 295–334.

66. I count a marriage if there was a marriage ceremony. For the Young wives, I follow the numbering of Jeffery Ogden Johnson, "Determining and Defining 'Wife': The Brigham Young Households," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1987): 57–70. For Kimball wives, I follow Andrew Kimball, *The Blood in Their Veins: The Kimballs, Polygamy, and the Shaping of Mormonism* (Signature Books, 2025).

practice sharply contrasts with the loneliness and struggle that these women endured.

Eliza Maria Partridge Smith Lyman

Eliza Partridge Lyman is well documented by her wonderful diary, but after my book's publication, I found some of her letters in the Church History Library and published transcriptions of two of them in *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*.⁶⁷

One of these letters offers a vivid account of Eliza's circumstances in Salt Lake City in the wake of her husband's departure with two of his other wives to serve a mission in San Bernardino, California. In an August 29, 1853 letter to her husband Amasa Lyman, Eliza described how difficult her life was with him so far away. She pointedly reproved Lyman for not writing often enough. Then she shared many details of her life and the lives of her sister wives in Salt Lake City, which included deaths and sicknesses survived. The Utes were threatening, and the Saints were directed to "fort up." Eliza, who had two continuously ill young children, detailed the financial troubles she was enduring:

I do not feel at all discouraged, but I certainly see no way to get bread or vegetables to live on this winter, but I make no doubt but we shall live a good while yet if we do not die till we are starved to death, for I think I have proved that, that was ^is^ not easy to do. I have lived without bread when some of the family had bread to throw to the pigs, and can do it again if necessary.

This letter illustrates how plural marriage shaped Eliza's experience. In a monogamous marriage, Eliza would have accompanied Amasa Lyman to San Bernardino. Instead, she lived separately from him for long periods, managing scarcity and danger largely on her own.

67. *ISL: The Documents*, 496–502. Letter to Amasa Lyman, Aug. 29, 1853, Amasa Lyman Papers, Letters from Wives and Children, 1853–1876, box 6, folder 9, MS 829, CHL; Letter to Paulina Eliza Phelps Lyman, July 26, 1881, Paulina Lyman Papers, 1839–1884, box 1, folder 11, MS 22808, CHL.

Some Date Changes—Certain or Proposed

Sometimes getting a date more precisely correct can seem like just tidy housekeeping. However, in some cases determining the correct date can change a story in significant ways, as is the case with the marriage of Flora Woodworth and Carlos Gove.

Flora Woodworth Smith Gove

When *In Sacred Loneliness* was published, some sources indicated that Flora married Joseph Smith in spring 1843 and then married Gove after Joseph Smith's June 1844 death.⁶⁸ More recently, however, a civil marriage record for Flora Woodworth and Carlos Gove was discovered in Illinois state records, giving us the date of the legal marriage to Gove as August 23, 1843; the marriage took place at Warsaw, about fifteen miles south of Nauvoo.⁶⁹ So now we know that Flora married Carlos Gove while Joseph Smith was alive. Notably, this marriage took place the day after Joseph Smith's blowup with Emma regarding Flora, as recorded in William Clayton's diary. However, after August 23, Joseph Smith continued to visit Flora, on August 26, 28, and 29.⁷⁰ All this raises new questions about the nature of her marriages to Joseph and Carlos, as well as the role of Emma Smith in these events.

In addition, Melissa Lott wrote, in a letter included in Andrew Jenson's research notes, that Flora "Married Carlos Gove at Navoo with the

68. Jenson, "Plural Marriage," 225. *ISL*, 389–90. Flora starts to appear in William Clayton's journal on May 2, 1843. George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Signature Books/Smith Research Associates, 1995), 100; Helen Mar Whitney, "Travels Beyond the Mississippi," *Woman's Exponent*, Nov. 1, 1884, 87; Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (BYU Religious Studies Center, 1997), 407.

69. August 23, 1843, License 750, Hancock County. Illinois Statewide Marriage Index Illinois State Archives, at <https://www.ilsos.gov/isavital/marriageSearch.do>; Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:105–7.

70. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 118–19.

Consent of the Prophet.”⁷¹ While Lott may be right about the consent of Joseph, she was wrong about the place of marriage. Jenson’s research notes indicate that Flora quickly regretted her marriage to Gove, given that he was an unbeliever, “and intended to cling to the Prophet.”⁷² It is not known if Flora was formally divorced from Gove or if they were separated temporarily.

This is all very odd, if Lott is correct about Joseph Smith’s consent. Why would Joseph encourage Flora (one of his favorites wives, judging from Clayton’s journal) to marry a nonmember, Carlos Gove? Why was the marriage immediately after the fight with Emma on August 22? Did Joseph encourage the civil marriage to appease Emma? Did Joseph encourage Flora to enter a legal marriage and then continue his plural marriage with her? That would make this a polyandrous marriage, which is D. Michael Quinn’s interpretation. Hales thinks it is more likely that Emma might have encouraged the marriage to Gove because of her jealousy.

Quinn puts the Gove marriage in the pattern of a “front husband” marriage, such as the “pretend” marriage of Sarah Ann Whitney to Joseph Kingsbury after her marriage to Joseph Smith.⁷³ However, this pattern is very different from the Whitney-Kingsbury marriage, in that the proposed “front husband” was a non-Mormon.

71. Melissa Lott to Andrew Jenson, June 27, 1887, in Jenson Research Notes, PDF p. 31.

72. Jenson Research Notes, PDF p. 29. Helen Mar Whitney might have been the source for this sentence.

73. D. Michael Quinn, “Evidence for the Sexual Side of Joseph Smith’s Polygamy,” response to Brian Hales in Mormon History Association meeting, June 29, 2012, expanded and privately circulated on Dec. 31, 2012. This is available at Brian Hales’s website, *Mormon Polygamy Documents*, <https://mormonpolygamydocuments.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Quinns-FINAL-RESPONSE.pdf>. Brian Hales’s side of the argument can also be found here. See <https://mormonpolygamydocuments.org/master-index/>, under 82.060.

In summary, the correct date of the Carlos Gove-Flora Woodworth (Smith) civil marriage in 1843 makes Flora's story even more enigmatic.

Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, and Presendia Huntington

Gary Bergera and D. Michael Quinn have presented and discussed alternate dates for the marriages of Louisa Beaman, Zina Huntington, and Presendia Huntington, based on a source called "Historian's Private Journal. 1858," by Wilford Woodruff.⁷⁴ Following a journal entry for July 1, 1866, Woodruff wrote four Joseph Smith plural marriage dates:

Nauvoo Illinois

Joseph Smith & Louisa Beeman were
sealed May [blank] 1840 by Joseph B Noble

Joseph Smith and Zina Huntington was sealed
Oct 27, 1840 By Dimick B Huntington in Nauvoo

Joseph Smith & Presinda Huntington were sealed
Dec 11, 1840 By Dimick B. Huntington in Nauvoo

Joseph Smith & Rhoda Richards were Sealed
June 12 1843, By Willard Richards in Joseph Store Nauvoo.

These dates (except that of Richards) conflict with many other attestations, notably the Joseph F. Smith affidavits in 1869, which have the first three dates in 1841, not 1840.

If Joseph Smith's marriage to Zina took place on October 27, 1840, then we would have to tell her story very differently. Her marriage to Henry Jacobs on March 7, 1841 would then follow the pattern of marriage to Joseph, followed by civil marriage to another husband. Some

74. Gary James Bergera, "Memory as Evidence: Dating Joseph Smith's Plural Marriages to Louisa Beaman, Zina Jacobs, and Presendia Buell," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 4 (Oct. 2015): 95–131. Quinn, "Evidence," 14. Brian Hales has defended the traditional dates, "Dating Joseph Smith's First Nauvoo Sealings," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 1–16.

evidence would support this (including Zina's 1898 interview in which she said that "Brigham Young repeated the ceremony after his return from England"⁷⁵). However, family traditions of Jacobs's marriage to Zina don't seem to portray him as a "pretend" husband. Zina also had well-documented children with Henry Jacobs.

An 1840 marriage date for Presendia Huntington would not change her story much, as she had married her first husband, Norman Buell, in 1827.

I believe that the preponderance of evidence supports the 1841 dates. However, I regard the 1840 dates as possible, and there is evidence that can be marshalled to support them—for example, while Joseph Bates Noble usually gave the year 1841 for the Louisa Beaman marriage, on two occasions, including in an affidavit, he gave the year 1840.⁷⁶

Bergera does bring up a point we should always keep in mind. All human beings have human fallibilities. All have biases, and their writings reflect limited personal perspectives. Time certainly causes our memories to lose sharpness. Dates, in particular, are sometimes not remembered correctly unless written down. This is why contemporary legal and religious records are so valuable, and why secret polygamy in Nauvoo has left many plural marriage dates uncertain.⁷⁷

75. Bergera, 121.

76. "Affidavits about Celestial Marriage," MS 3423, book 1:38 (also 4:38). Curiously, Noble gave another affidavit on the same day, June 26, 1869, with the 1841 date, 1:3 (=4:1).

77. Wilford Woodruff in his diary in 1862 mentioned a secret book of sealings, but we don't know if it dealt with Nauvoo sealings. Wilford Woodruff diary, Feb. 26, 1862. Scott Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898* (Signature Books, 1983–85), 6:21–22.

Sylvia Sessions Lyon

Hales and Bradley have given us an alternate date for the polyandrous Sylvia Sessions marriage to Joseph Smith, based on a careful reading of the Joseph F. Smith polygamy affidavits.⁷⁸ Book 1 states that Sessions married Smith on February 8, 1842 (and this has been the date I and other people have used), while Book 4 (which gives basically the same affidavits as Book 1) has February 8, 1843, a year later. This is an alternate date, and it is entirely possible to consider it and see how it leads us to retell the complex story of Sylvia Sessions and her first husband, Windsor Lyon, and her marriage to Joseph Smith.

It seems reasonable to expect that Book 1 was the original, preferred book, and Book 4 was a copy. Therefore, the 1842/1843 variation might be a simple scribal error, and the 1842 date is correct. But Brian Hales argues that Book 4 is the more primary, reliable, and complete document, given that it contains two incomplete entries that are not in Book 1. This position—and the later 1843 marriage date—allows him to maintain his argument that all polyandrous marriages were marriages for eternity only and did not include sexual relations. Sylvia Sessions Lyon, however, presents a problem for Hales, as she told her daughter Josephine that she, Josephine, was a daughter of Joseph Smith.⁷⁹ To address this issue, Hales works out a chronology in which Sylvia Sessions and Windsor Lyon were divorced after he was excommunicated, and Sylvia Sessions Lyon and Joseph Smith cohabited after the divorce. This fits with an 1843 marriage date, not with an 1842 date.

78. "Affidavits about Celestial Marriage," CHL, MS 3423, folders 1–6. Folders 1–4 are loose affidavits. Folder 5 contains two affidavit volumes, which have come to be known as Books 1 and 2 (and are labeled as such). Folder 6 contains another two Smith affidavit volumes, which have come to be known as Books 3 and 4.

79. Affidavit of Mrs. Josephine Rosetta Fisher, Feb. 24, 1915, "Affidavits about Celestial Marriage," folder 1, last item. For DNA evidence relating to Josephine's parentage, see Compton, "Were There 'Eternity-Only' Plural Marriages in Nauvoo?," 311–15.

However, later developments point to Book 1 being the primary, authoritative book, as seems logical, and thus that Book 4 is the copy, which suggests that the 1843 date is a copyist's mistake.⁸⁰

"Possible Wives"

In my introduction to *In Sacred Loneliness*, I included a category of "Possible Wives," wives who may have had only one attestation or whose evidence was not strong, so I did not include them in my list of thirty-three plural wives. In effect, they were marked for further research. As we have seen, some of these women were included in the Bullock–Kimball list. In two cases, we have further "new" documents that support "possible" wives.

Esther Dutcher Smith [Smith?]

On October 10, 1851, Esther Dutcher Smith,⁸¹ married to Albert Smith (no relation to Joseph Smith) since 1826, was sealed to Joseph Smith in a proxy marriage. Albert stood as proxy for Joseph in the sealing. An early proxy marriage to Joseph Smith is evidence that a woman might have married Smith in Nauvoo, but it is not certain evidence. Recently, documentation that Esther was married to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo has emerged. Daniel H. Wells, who had been a counselor in the First Presidency under Brigham Young, wrote to Apostle Joseph F. Smith, in a letter dated June 25, 1888,

He [*Albert Smith*] is also much afflicted with the loss of his first wife. [*Esther Dutcher*] It seems that she was sealed to Joseph the Prophet in the days of Nauvoo, though she still remained his [*Albert's*] wife, and afterwards nearly broke his heart by telling him of it, and expressing her intention of adhering to that relationship. He however got to feeling

80. See Johnny Stephenson's website, *Mormonite Musings*, at <https://mormonitemusings.wordpress.com/2015/09/17/brian-hales-polygamy-sylvia-lyon-the-1869-utah-affidavits/#refn19/>.

81. For Esther (1811–1856), see *Find a Grave*, 10963712.

better over it, and acting for Joseph, had her sealed to him [*Joseph Smith*], and to himself for time, [*a large section of the page redacted*] . . .⁸²

This letter provides the clearest evidence yet that Esther Dutcher was a plural wife of Joseph Smith. As D. Michael Quinn notes, Esther bore a son named “Joseph” on September 21, 1844,⁸³ so this might be another candidate for a child of Joseph Smith.

Mary Heron Snider [Smith?]

Mary Heron Snider represents another instance where newly accessible material has shifted the evidentiary balance. Testimony from Joseph Johnson, preserved in Quinn’s notes and later cited by Brian Hales, indicates that his mother-in-law, Mary Heron, had sexual relations with Joseph Smith in Nauvoo.⁸⁴ Mary Heron is included in my list of possible wives in *In Sacred Loneliness*, and I knew about this document in 1996, but it is now more fully transcribed and widely accessible. Joseph Johnson (brother of two of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, as well as Benjamin Johnson) testified in a Church council as follows:

I never heard any conversation to say it was right to go to bed to a woman if not found out—I was aware the thing was wrong.—had been with—he sd. He was familiar with the first frigging —that was done in his house with his mother in law—by Joseph.⁸⁵

As Quinn notes, if Johnson can be believed, Joseph Smith was certainly having sexual relations with Heron as a polyandrous wife. In the Bullock–Kimball list of Joseph Smith’s plural wives, Heber C. Kimball lists Mary Heron, “Mrs. John Snyder,” which gives added support for accepting her as a wife of Joseph Smith.

82. Daniel H. Wells to Joseph F. Smith, June 25, 1888, in Joseph F. Smith Incoming Correspondence, 1855–1918, MS 1325, box 16, folder 9, CHL.

83. Quinn, “Evidence,” 3.

84. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:463–69; Quinn, “Evidence,” 21.

85. Council meeting and trial of Joseph E. Johnson, Sept. 2, 1850, Miscellaneous Minutes, Brigham Young Papers, CHL; Quinn, “Evidence,” 21–22.

Also on the Kimball list (in pencil) are two names that often appear in antagonistic sources: Emeline Hibbard (White) and Jane Silverthorn (Law), wife of William Law. I won't discuss them at length, but it is surprising to find their names on a "sympathetic" list. William Law flatly stated that Joseph Smith proposed to Jane and she turned him down.⁸⁶ White, a non-Mormon, is portrayed in one source as a prostitute.⁸⁷ Despite the contradictory evidence, their appearance on the Bullock–Kimball list requires the historian to consider them seriously as possible wives of Joseph Smith.

Phebe Watrous (Woodworth), the mother of Flora Ann Woodworth and the wife of Lucien Woodworth, is also on the Bullock–Kimball list. She had an early proxy marriage to Joseph Smith, which is evidence for a possible marriage to Smith during his life.⁸⁸ On this basis, Gary Bergera and George A. Smith had already accepted her as a full wife of Joseph Smith.⁸⁹ Her inclusion on the Bullock–Kimball list makes it even more likely that she was a wife of Joseph Smith. I would now move her to my "possible wives" category.

Life Writings

From the beginning of my work on *In Sacred Loneliness*, I was always interested in telling the women's full life stories, so "life writings" of

86. For an introduction to the contradictory evidence on Jane Law, see Lyndon W. Cook, *William Law: Biographical Essays, Nauvoo Diary, Correspondence, Interview* (Grandin Book, 1994), 53.

87. Wilhelm Wyl, *Mormon Portraits: or the Truth About the Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886* (Tribune Printing and Publishing Co., 1886), 55, 60.

88. However, this is not certain evidence, as we have one case, Cordelia Morley, in which she did not marry Joseph during his life but still had an early proxy marriage to him.

89. Gary James Bergera, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841–44," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 30; George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... But We Called It Celestial Marriage"* (Signature Books, 2008), 623.

these women published after my book are welcome additions to the *In Sacred Loneliness* focus.

The following have appeared since 1997:

Among the most significant is the 2003 publication of Eliza Maria Partridge Smith Lyman's journal, which features excellent notes by editor Scott Partridge.⁹⁰

Helen Mar Whitney's 1884 to 1896 diaries, edited by Charles Hatch and myself (2003), are a magnificent window into her later life; they extend from the death of her second husband, Horace Whitney, until the weeks before her death. These diaries are part of the Life Writings of Frontier Women series from Utah State University Press.⁹¹ They show what life was like for a widow, fairly elite, but not well-to-do, in urban Salt Lake City toward the end of the nineteenth century. They include harrowing moments of tragedy and loss, as well as plodding documentation of daily struggles and experiences. It's a fascinating record of the Kimball and Whitney families, as well as a sociological artifact of a dramatic period of transition in Utah history.⁹²

The First Fifty Years of Relief Society (2016), edited by Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, is a wonderful collection of primary documents offering a wealth of information on women in my book, such as Eliza R. Snow Smith Young, Zina Huntington Jacobs Smith Young, Marinda Hyde, and Sarah Kingsley Cleveland Smith.⁹³ It's also very helpful to have the complete minutes of the Nauvoo Relief Society to refer to. The annotation and commentary in this book are superb.

90. Scott Partridge, ed., *Eliza Maria Partridge: Journal* (Grandin Book Company, 2003).

91. Hatch and Compton, *A Widow's Tale*.

92. For further on Helen, see Kimball, *The Blood in Their Veins*, 133–72.

93. Derr, Madsen, Holbrook, and Grow, *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society*. The online version includes many valuable short biographies of women. <https://www.churchhistorianspress.org/the-first-fifty-years-of-relief-society/>.

The Diaries of Emmeline B. Wells (2017), edited by Cherry Bushman Silver and Sheree Maxwell Bench, is a digital publication of Wells's extensive and endlessly interesting and important diaries.⁹⁴ She was a close friend of many plural wives of Joseph Smith, so the publication of her diaries has great relevance to the women of *In Sacred Loneliness*. Following are two examples relating to Presendia Huntington Buell Smith Kimball, sister of Zina Huntington Jacobs Smith Young.

As a witness to Presendia's healing charisma, Emmeline wrote, on January 16, 1881, "I went down to Presendia [Huntington] Kimball's and brought her to administer to Lucile for her face to be healed. Lucile has implicit faith in the ordinance she [Presendia] came washed and anointed it in the name of Jesus it will be healed I am sure."⁹⁵

On May 15, 1890, Emmeline wrote about four important Mormon women: "I felt lonely and thought I would begin to write, when a messenger came from Big-Cotton-wood to say Aunt Presendia and Aunt Bathsheba [Smith] had been thrown out of the carriage and injured, and I must send Dr. [Romania] Pratt and Aunt Zina out immediately. They started off about 6 p.m. I felt very sorrowful over the affair and could not sleep."

My own *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents* (2022) mostly publishes writings available when I wrote the first *In Sacred Loneliness*, but in this book I often was able to include complete documents (letters, autobiographies, interviews), whereas in the earlier book I only quoted excerpts from these documents. There is a great value in reading the whole document. I also added notes and background, which I hope are helpful. As was mentioned above, I included some letters that I did not

94. Church Historian's Press, *The Diaries of Emmeline B. Wells* (Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), <https://churchhistorianspress.org/emmeline-b-wells/>.

95. For background on women healers in the LDS tradition, see Jonathan Stapley and Kristine Wright, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1–85.

know about when I wrote the first *In Sacred Loneliness*: letters by Sarah Kingsley Cleveland Smith, counselor in the first Relief Society Presidency, after she and her family left Nauvoo and resettled in Plymouth, Illinois; and two letters by Eliza Partridge Smith Lyman.

Conclusion

Since *In Sacred Loneliness* was published in late 1997, newly discovered and newly accessible documents have refined, strengthened, and complicated our understanding of the lives of Joseph Smith's plural wives. None have caused any major shifts in interpretation for me. Instead, some new documents simply give a bit more solidity to important events in these women's lives. Reliable death dates for Fanny Alger and Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris, for instance, allow their lives to be situated more accurately within historical timelines.

Other documents strengthened positions that I had taken earlier. For example, evidence from the Andrew Jenson research notes supported Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Smith Harris's place on my list, as well as the 1838 dating of her marriage to Joseph Smith. (At the same time, admittedly, these new documents weakened the position that Lucinda had been a nurse in the Civil War.)

In other instances, new evidence has complicated existing narratives. A solid date for Flora Woodworth's marriage to Carlos Gove—now occurring before, not after, Joseph Smith's death—made the story of her marriages to Smith and Gove more enigmatic.

Similarly, Andrew Jenson's unpublished short biography of Ruth Vose Sayers is also puzzling, as it traces an odd triangle with non-Mormon Edward Sayers giving his wife to Joseph Smith to marry. We wonder who Jenson's source was and why he didn't publish the biography.

Other new evidence—or at least, evidence that was new to me—such as the letters from Lucinda Pendleton Harris, Sarah Cleveland, and Eliza Partridge Lyman, bring these women more fully to life. I find

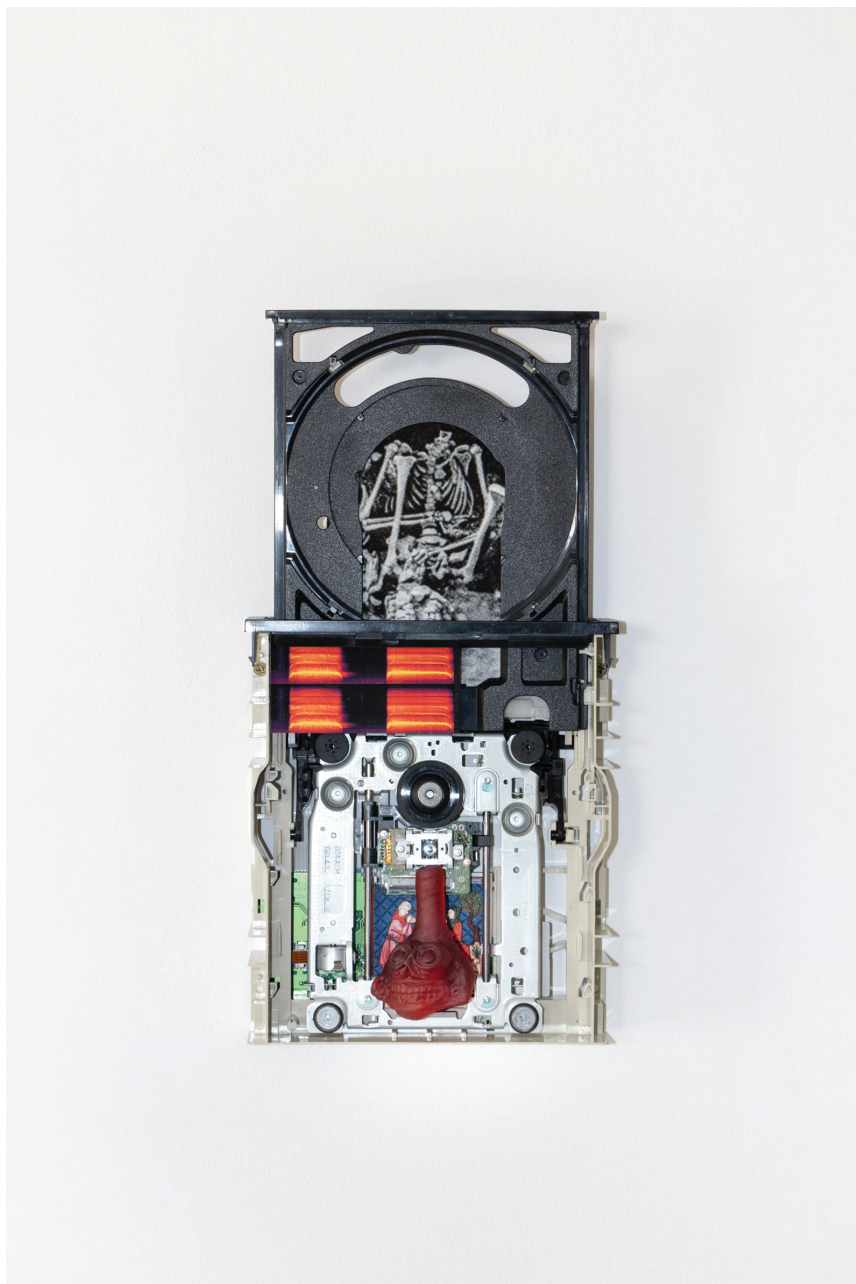
Sarah Cleveland's letters expressing her longing for her daughter and grandchildren in Utah especially moving, as they convey the emotional cost of migration and separation. Eliza Partridge's letters are similarly poignant and highlight the ongoing hardships of plural marriage.

In my "Possible Wives" category, new documents have fortified the cases of some women as wives. Esther Dutcher, we now know, was almost certainly married to Joseph Smith, and Mary Heron Snider's case as a plural wife of Smith is strengthened, though I would still keep her in my "possible" category. Other lesser-known wives appear in the Bullock–Kimball list, which might cause us to list them as "possible" wives now.

Finally, Marinda Johnson Hyde's short "Statement" gives more insight into the dynamics of her marriages to Orson Hyde and Joseph Smith. It presents a striking parallel to Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner Smith Young's account of being convinced to engage in a polyandrous marriage. The Lightner and Hyde accounts support each other but leave us with many questions.

Taken together, these materials demonstrate both the progress that has been made and the work that remains. They confirm that the history of Nauvoo plural marriage is neither static nor closed. As archivists continue to process collections and as historians revisit neglected sources, our understanding of the thirty-three women at the center of *In Sacred Loneliness*—and of others on the margins—will continue to deepen.

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Susana Isabel Silva, *Códigos de vacío*, 2025,
CNC and hand-cut paper, 28 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

THE ATONEMENT AND THE PROCESS OF HEALING

Scott C. Richards

The atonement of Jesus Christ is accepted in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) as the central tenet of the gospel and the most important event in human history. However, the Church has not endorsed or adopted any specific atonement model as official doctrine. Instead, perhaps recognizing the value of diverse imagery, Church leaders accept and use concepts from many different models and generally discuss Christ's atonement more in terms of metaphor than theory.¹ One of the most important functions of any atonement model would be to explain its efficacy in ways that people can understand in the context of their prevailing culture. Considering the increasing visibility of trauma and its aftermath in our society, it is not surprising that some of the more recent atonement theories move away from forgiveness of sin and toward healing from woundedness.² In healing models, the Atonement involves both mankind and deity in healing the emotional, spiritual, and relational wounds caused by sin and trauma. By engaging both the Savior's redemptive power and human agency, the Atonement could potentially utilize innate neurological mechanisms to access and repair maladaptive memories and schemas without the loss of the unique memories and trials that constitute a person's earthly

1. Lorin K. Hansen, "The 'Moral' Atonement as a Mormon Interpretation," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 219.

2. Fiona Givens, "Atonement and Retributive Justice," *Latter-day Saint Perspectives on Atonement*, eds. Deidre Nicole Green and Eric D. Huntsman (University of Illinois Press, 2024), 311–14.

experience. This would enable individuals to repent and forgive, and to fully participate in the divine restoration of themselves and their relationships. This essay explores LDS teachings on the Atonement that emphasize healing from sin and trauma, considers recent advances in neuroscience as providing potential mechanisms of action, examines possible applications and implications of these advances in our understanding of the Atonement, and reflects on how our collaboration with Christ facilitates both personal and relational restoration.

Atonement, Trauma, and Sin

Many LDS General Authorities have taught about the healing power of the Atonement for physical, emotional, and spiritual problems.³ There are also intimations in scripture that Christ's atonement is, at least in part, a process of healing. One of the most dramatic is the event recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in which Jesus healed a man with palsy.⁴ The Savior initially forgave the man's sins, but upon perceiving the thoughts of the scribes and Pharisees accusing blasphemy, he associated physical healing with the forgiveness of sins and then proceeded to heal the man's disease. The words of Jesus in this situation suggest that healing and forgiveness are carried out by the same power, and that the two may be synonymous.

3. See the following general conference talks (among many others): Neil L. Andersen, "Wounded," Oct. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/wounded?lang=eng>; Carole M. Stephens, "The Master Healer," Oct. 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2016/10/the-master-healer?lang=eng>; Richard G. Scott, "To Heal the Shattering Consequences of Abuse," Apr. 2008, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2008/04/to-heal-the-shattering-consequences-of-abuse?lang=eng>; Patrick Kearon, "He Is Risen with Healing in His Wings," Apr. 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2022/04/24kearon?lang=eng>; Russell M. Nelson, "Jesus Christ—The Master Healer," Oct. 2005, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2005/10/jesus-christ-the-master-healer?lang=eng/>.

4. Matthew 9:2–7; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:18–25.

Mormon scholars Fiona and Terryl Givens have suggested an understanding of the Atonement that is focused primarily on healing from woundedness, including an extensive rationale for this approach based on scriptural, theological, literary, and linguistic evidence.⁵ In this view, Heavenly Parents offered their spirit children the opportunity to be born as humans in order to obtain a body and learn by their own experience the consequences of various choices. They knew that those consequences would include not only joy, growth, and knowledge, but also physical, emotional, and spiritual trauma. As eternal beings, those children had agency and were therefore able to agree to the plan with full informed consent, knowing the risks and benefits. The Heavenly Parents knew that the wounds caused by poor choices could be devastating, and that there would need to be a process to heal those wounds. Christ experienced and suffered all the consequences of mistakes, all the injuries sustained at the hands of others, and all the other difficulties of a mortal existence so that he would know how to succor and heal the wounded. Through the Savior's example, humans would also have the opportunity to learn how to forgive and succor and heal themselves and each other. Christ's atonement is therefore a collaborative work of humans and God that can heal the traumatic effects of sin and mortality while protecting both our agency and the authenticity of our earthly education.

Our understanding of trauma and its consequences has expanded recently due to increased research in this area.⁶ What constitutes

5. Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *All Things New: Rethinking Sin, Salvation, and Everything in Between* (Faith Matters Publishing, 2020); Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *The Christ Who Heals* (Deseret Book Company, 2017).

6. Miranda Olf, Irma Hein, Ananda B. Amstadter, et al., "The Impact of Trauma and How to Intervene: A Narrative Review of Psychotraumatology Over the Past Fifteen Years," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 16, no. 1 (2025): 3; Samara Grossman, Zara Cooper, Heather Buxton, et al., "Trauma-informed Care: Recognizing and Resisting Re-traumatization in Health Care," *Trauma Surgery and Acute Care Open* (2021): 1.

a “traumatic event” can vary widely across contexts and cultures, as well as from person to person. Trauma can include emotional, mental, physical, interpersonal, and spiritual injuries that have interdependent impacts on the individual. Trauma of any type can have profound effects on the future health and functioning of the individual, including obesity, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular disease, stroke, autoimmune disorders, sleep disorders, substance abuse, and suicide, among others.⁷ There is no specific universal experience of trauma, and treatment of its multiple comorbid manifestations requires a transdiagnostic view that recognizes its diverse influences and effects.

In a similar manner, individual experiences of sin are variable and multifactorial. Why a person sins, what they consider to be sin and their perceived severity of that sin can depend upon their motivations, circumstances, culture, relationships, and prior experiences. The effects of a particular sin on the individual can include such intertwined emotional, physical, spiritual, and relational injuries that there may be no specific universal experience of sin. This suggests that personal experiences of healing through the Atonement might also be individualized and transdiagnostic, focused in large part on what people have endured and how it has changed them.

All sin participates in trauma, either as cause, consequence, or reenactment. Any sin in which one person hurts another also hurts the sinner because it changes who they are and who they are becoming. It also damages the relationship between those people and their relationships with God. David L. Wheeler writes, “In as much as both humanity and God are truly and essentially constituted by their relationships, sin is therefore essentially broken, or disordered relationship,

7. Olf, Hein, Amstadter, et al., “The Impact of Trauma,” 3; Vincent J. Felitti, Robert F. Anda, Dale Nordenberg, et al., “Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 14, no. 4 (1998): 248–49.

and the consequence of sin for the sinner is a deformed self.”⁸ The LDS conception of heaven is distinctive because of its vision of eternal family relationships that include the entire human race. Those relationships will need to be perfected along with each individual if people are to enjoy the sociality coupled with eternal glory that Joseph Smith described as his view of heaven.⁹ This suggests that each person’s myriad damaged and injured relationships will also need healing through the Atonement. As Benjamin Keogh writes, “If sin is relational, then atonement for sin must entail the at-one-ment of all broken relationships.”¹⁰

How might this healing from trauma and the consequences of sin be accomplished? The Resurrection may heal physical ailments, but what of the intertwined emotional, spiritual, and relational injuries that impact the physical domain? The combined struggles of sin and repentance, trauma and healing, offense and forgiveness may make us stronger and better than we were before, but would that be enough for even the deepest of wounds? Will we need to live eternally with painful memories of the failings of ourselves and others? If our memory of such traumas were completely erased, it would eliminate the pain, but losing those memories would seem to also eliminate any eternal value in having endured those experiences and developed those relationships.

In a Christ-as-Healer model, the Atonement functions primarily as a healing process. Recent advances in neuroscience, especially the neurobiology of memory, provide a theoretical mechanism for how Christ can heal the deep wounds of sin and trauma while still preserving our memories and growth. This essay represents an initial attempt to understand that potential mechanism.

8. David L. Wheeler, *A Relational View of the Atonement: Prolegomenon to a Reconstruction of the Doctrine* (Peter Lang Publishing, 1989), 193.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

10. Benjamin Keogh, “Relational Atonement: Groundwork,” in *Latter-day Saint Perspectives on Atonement*, 348.

Neuroscientific Insights

It is common for people to refer to their memories as a fixed and relatively accurate record of past experiences. They may recognize that their understanding of those memories can change with introspection and perspective over time, but they generally still assume that their core recollection of specific event details is accurate and immutable. Long-term memory has long been thought of in scientific circles as a permanent record with only passive recall, subject to decay over time but not significant alteration. However, research over the last few decades has dramatically revised the prevailing theories of how the brain forms and maintains memories and has revealed that memories are frequently subject to change and modification.

Lived experiences are rapidly captured as memories in the hippocampal region of the brain through the development of synaptic connections.¹¹ These are generally short-term “episodic” memories of specific events and may decay quickly. To become long-term memories, they need to be moved to the neocortex and stored there in a process known as consolidation, which involves not only synaptic activation but also molecular processes and protein synthesis that produce more permanent synaptic connections. However, consolidation is more than just the creation of a copy or a shift in location; it is also a conversion of the memory into a more abstract form that can include representational models of the world based on statistical evaluations of multiple episodic memories. These representational models are referred to as semantic memories and are commonly thought of as factual knowledge that helps individuals predict the outcomes of future similar situations. Recall of an episodic memory is not merely the retrieval of a copy but is

11. Santiago Abel Merlo, Mariano Andrés Belluscio, Maria Eugenia Pedreira, and Emiliano Merlo, “Memory Persistence: From Fundamental Mechanisms to Translational Opportunities,” *Translational Psychiatry* 14, no. 98 (Feb. 14, 2024): 1.

an actual reconstruction of the experience by the hippocampus based on facts and mental models stored in the neocortex. This combination of hippocampal and neocortical systems allows for long-term memory storage and rapid memory access while reserving limited hippocampal storage capacity primarily for new information. In this sense, the hippocampus functions as a teacher and the neural network of the neocortex as a student, similar to the process of an autoassociative network training a generative artificial intelligence network.¹²

However, this generative neural network introduces distortions in the recollection of events. Each time a memory is recalled, the neural connections involved are strengthened by additional molecular and cellular processes that assist in long-term maintenance. Memories that are emotionally charged are remembered better than those without strong associated feelings, probably because they are relived more often, thereby strengthening the neural connections that make up those memories. Due to these interrelated neural mechanisms, specific episodic memories gradually distill into more general semantic memories of the past as a whole. For example, if I remember several instances of a parent being angry with me for making a mistake, I may create more generalized memories that could include such things as that parent always being an angry person, mistakes being a valid reason for anger, or me being a person who frequently makes mistakes, depending on how I think and feel about those events. Since recall of a memory is a reconstruction based on mental models, not only do specific memories influence general memories, but general memories and beliefs influence the recollection of specific events. This can explain how two people may have such remarkable differences in their recollection of shared experiences. It can also explain many aspects of emotional trauma, including mental illness. As a result of intense emotional experiences, individuals

12. Eleanor Spens and Neil Burgess, "A Generative Model of Memory Construction and Consolidation," *Nature Human Behaviour* 8, no. 3 (Mar. 2024): 527.

can develop a mental model or schema that then controls behavior and thoughts from outside of their awareness.¹³ This schema can become maladaptive, causing distress and impairing daily functioning.¹⁴ A mental model that creates mental illness may seem illogical or counterproductive to an outside observer, but it makes perfect sense to the individual on a subconscious level, given their unique combination of episodic and semantic memories.

Fortunately, human brains have an experience-driven process of neurological change. Memory reconsolidation is an innate mechanism by which new experiences can update or revise existing memories.¹⁵ Whenever one has an experience that causes them to remember a prior event, that memory is activated and becomes labile, subject to modification for the next four to six hours. If no new information is apparent (i.e., the new event has the same result one has come to expect from prior events), the memory is potentiated and reinforced. If the new event has a significantly different result than prior events, the memory is reconsolidated in the neural network in a revised form that considers that new information. This reconsolidation of memories can achieve “unlearning” that permanently nullifies previous learned responses in humans as well as in experimental animals. Evidence supporting memory reconsolidation has been documented across multiple species and at multiple levels, including molecular, cellular, and behavioral.¹⁶ It is becoming apparent that the long-term persistence and re-triggering of intense emotional experiences are the proper functioning rather than

13. Bruce Ecker and Sara K. Bridges, “How the Science of Memory Reconsolidation Advances the Effectiveness and Unification of Psychotherapy,” *Clinical Social Work Journal* 48, no. 3 (2020): 288.

14. Merlo et al., “Memory Persistence,” 1.

15. Ecker and Bridges, “How the Science of Memory Reconsolidation,” 287–300; Karim Nader, “Reconsolidation and the Dynamic Nature of Memory,” *Cold Spring Harbor Perspectives in Biology* 7, no. 10 (2015): 4.

16. Nader, “Reconsolidation,” 4.

a malfunction of the brain's memory system, allowing individuals to learn and survive. Memory reconsolidation allows the brain to learn new responses and to change or unlearn mental models that are no longer accurate.

These principles aid in our understanding of how psychotherapy may actually work in helping individuals change.¹⁷ The emotional distress and behaviors from maladaptive mental models are usually elicited as a response to environmental cues, and the goal of therapy in this view is to unlearn or erase that response so that it can no longer be elicited by those cues. The erasure of the schema can thoroughly resolve a core theme of emotional distress and permanently eliminate the symptoms, behaviors, and thoughts associated with that distress. It is important to note that it is the semantic schema that is erased, while the episodic memory is preserved but interpreted differently. This distinction helps resolve any ethical dilemma on the part of the therapist, since they are not erasing the past but helping individuals consider their past in healthier ways.

For lasting change, three specific steps seem to be required.¹⁸ First is the use of cues or contexts to induce recollection and activation of painful memories and their associated feelings. This recollection must be fully experienced affectively and somatically rather than just cognitively to make those memories subject to activation. Second is a memory mismatch, a concurrent experience or understanding that contradicts what the individual knows and expects from this cue. This destabilizes the schema for several hours, transforming it from a consolidated state to a labile state susceptible to update and reconsolidation. Third is an

17. Ecker and Bridges, "How the Science of Memory Reconsolidation," 287–300; Richard D. Lane, Lee Ryan, Lynn Nadel, and Leslie Greenberg, "Memory Reconsolidation, Emotional Arousal, and the Process of Change in Psychotherapy: New Insights from Brain Science," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 38 (2015): 6.

18. Ecker and Bridges, "How the Science of Memory Reconsolidation," 287–300.

experience of counter-learning, a repetitive juxtaposition in which the individual experiences reality according to their schema and the reality of specific contradictory knowledge and experience, being consciously aware of both simultaneously. If this counter-learning occurs while the memory is labile, the maladaptive schema is erased or replaced. It no longer exists in memory and can no longer elicit the distress and behaviors of the past. New semantic models can then be reinforced by practicing new behaviors and new patterns of thought. The individual not only feels and functions better but remembers his or her past in different, healthier ways. The past is not forgotten but is viewed and interpreted in a new light.

Applications to Healing and Repentance

Memory reconsolidation is a possible mechanism that could be applied to an understanding of how Jesus Christ might heal trauma. Because of his atonement, the Savior knows every individual's painful memories in detail through his own experience and could therefore help activate and reconsolidate those memories more accurately and charitably. The Savior's intimate knowledge of each person's strengths as well as their weaknesses enables him to sustain them through the emotional challenges of traumatic memory activation and reconsolidation. His divine wisdom allows him to provide new experiences and understanding that can alter semantic memories in positive ways. He can guide each person to new behaviors that reinforce their reconsolidated memories and lead them in the path of emotional and spiritual healing. The earthly experiences and life lessons learned at such a staggering cost would not be wasted or forgotten but simply remembered and understood in different and more productive ways. I believe this may be how the Lord was able to promise Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail that "thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment."¹⁹ Through the Atonement

19. Doctrine and Covenants 121:7.

and ministering of the great Healer, we can remember the details of our traumas while no longer being traumatized by them.

Don S. Browning, in his comparison of Rogerian psychotherapy with several atonement theories, suggests that emotional injuries can be the result of inaccurate conditions of worth imposed by individuals or society and that Christ can heal those injuries by accepting the person's worth unconditionally and despite their confusion of worthiness with worth.²⁰ In this example, the confusion of worthiness with worth and the acceptance of society's definition of worth would be maladaptive schemas that limit progression. With his knowledge of an individual's life experiences, Christ would know the appropriate cues to activate the memories associated with those schemas and would be able to lovingly support that person as they relive their traumas. His unconditional love and belief in their worth could provide the memory mismatch needed to make those memories labile, and his assurances that worthiness does not equal worth and that society's conditions of worth are inaccurate could provide the needed counter-learning to reconsolidate the memories and erase or update the schemas.

Adversity is commonly considered to be a source of eventual growth and strength, and this assumption may hold true for traumatic events as well. Approximately two-thirds of individuals who experience traumatic events respond with resilience and eventual healing, although that healing may come at a significant cost to overall long-term health.²¹ Some studies even suggest the potential for a response to trauma that includes positive growth and transformative change (post-traumatic growth), although the evidence for this is still somewhat

20. Don S. Browning, *Atonement and Psychotherapy* (Westminster Press, 1966), 216.

21. Olff, Hein, Amstadter, et al., "The Impact of Trauma," 3.

controversial.²² The idea of post-traumatic growth resonates with cultural narratives of learning from adversity, as well as with the Restoration doctrine of eternal progression and the desire to find some purpose in mortal suffering. If this earthly life is truly designed as an educative experience, then post-traumatic growth or some similar process would seem necessary for individuals to build additional resilience and develop divine responses to affliction.

The concepts presented above pertaining to memory reconsolidation and post-traumatic growth provide an intriguing way to consider a mechanism for the Atonement, but it is important to recognize that these are relatively new scientific advances and are not yet fully proven or understood. They may serve as placeholders for functions that we assume must be occurring in the brain, but the underlying physiology and processes are extremely complex and in need of further elucidation. Much of our current neuroscience is likely to be modified or disproven with additional research, which would require significant future revision or abandonment of any proposed mechanism of action for the Atonement.

A healing view of the Atonement should account not only for recovery from major traumatic experiences but also for the divine healing recognized in the day-to-day repentance process. The words used to describe the elements of repentance as taught by many LDS leaders (e.g., *remorse, confession, restitution, forsaking sin*) reflect the terminology of a substitutionary model of the Atonement. However, the process

22. Eranda Jayawickreme, Frank J. Infurna, Kinan Alajak, et al., “Post-Traumatic Growth as Positive Personality Change: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations,” *Journal of Personality* 89, no. 1 (Feb. 2021): 146–47; Richard G. Tedeschi, “The Post-traumatic Growth Approach to Psychological Trauma,” *World Psychiatry* 22, no. 2 (June 2023): 328; Liliana Dell’Osso, Primo Lorenzi, Benedetta Nardi, Claudia Carmassi, and Barbara Carpita, “Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) in the Frame of Traumatic Experiences,” *Clinical Neuropsychiatry* 19, no. 6 (2022): 390–93.

of repentance can also be consistent with memory reconsolidation in a Christ-as-Healer model.

Repentance in the sense of healing echoes President Russell M. Nelson's discussion of the Greek word *metanoeo*, in that it is a process of changing minds rather than submitting to punishment.²³ Repentance is not just about changing behavior; it is about changing the individual's very nature. Sins are mistakes made due to fear, anger, lust, rebellion, selfishness, or other maladaptive schemas. Habitual sins and psychological addictions may be thought of as patterns of behavior due to faulty subconscious mental models that persist despite the conscious recognition that those patterns are destructive or harmful. Memory reconsolidation could potentially change those behavior patterns by erasing the underlying schemas.

For example, when an individual recognizes that they have done wrong, they naturally feel remorse for their mistake and for causing pain to others. Through remorse, they reexperience the event multiple times, thereby strengthening both the episodic memory and the semantic understanding of the consequences of the sin. True remorse allows an individual to relive the event emotionally and somatically, making the memory labile and susceptible to reconsolidation. Since the Savior knows them and their sins intimately, he can help them understand why they made that mistake. Through the Spirit, he can present to them different choices that they could have made, alternate interpretations of their deepest memories, and a new view of their sins as mistakes to avoid rather than evidence of an evil nature. This creates a memory mismatch, a counter-learning experience that can erase the faulty models and reconsolidate the memory considering the new understanding. The sinner's heart and mind are therefore changed such that they naturally forsake their sin and feel the joy of being forgiven

23. Russell M. Nelson, "We Can Do Better and Be Better," Apr. 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/04/36nelson?lang=eng/>.

by the Lord and by themselves. Confession and restitution to those they have offended are new responses to memories that used to elicit guilt and shame but now elicit a desire to change. They are also outward signs that can help those who have been hurt know that the individual is repenting, thereby hopefully assisting them in their forgiving and healing process.

Remorse in the context of repentance should be differentiated from feelings of guilt. Guilt, in the sense of excessive self-blame or shame rather than an appropriate sense of accountability, is unresolved remorse, a maladaptive schema in which individuals portray themselves as an evil or weak person unworthy of forgiveness rather than as someone who made a mistake. This type of guilt is a form of self-induced emotional trauma, a way in which an individual might seek to punish themselves for their mistake, and it is a barrier to repentance.²⁴

In this healing view of the Atonement, repentance is not a transactional process required to obtain God's forgiveness. God's disposition toward the sinner may be understood as radically merciful even prior to repentance, perhaps even at the moment of sin. Rather, repentance is how sinners can forgive themselves, and how their nature can be changed so they no longer want to sin. It is how they and their victims can heal from the consequences of their mistakes.

Implications

Critics might argue that a healing model of the Atonement minimizes the accountability of an individual for their sins, turns the Atonement into therapy rather than a reconciliation with God, and seems to negate the necessity of a divine Savior. While God's punishment of the sinner may seem like a natural consequence of sin, it is more likely a cultural

24. Browning, *Atonement and Psychotherapy*, 216; Eugene England, "That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Fall 1966): 150.

construct that makes sense to those in a legalistic society who view sin as an offense against God or justice. In actuality, the natural consequence of sin is suffering, most importantly the suffering experienced by the victim of the sin. That suffering needs healing, and although the victim may feel a desire for revenge or justice, the victim's greater need is for the healing that can only come through the Atonement. That healing does not require punishment of the sinner, and the victim's unconditional forgiveness of the sinner may be an important part of the healing process. However, the fact that the Savior can heal a victim without the sinner's repentance or assistance does not absolve the sinner of accountability. Rather, it increases accountability: the sinner has created suffering and therefore has the responsibility to do everything in their power to relieve and heal that suffering, including confession, apology, and restitution. When the sinner is eventually brought by the Savior to a full understanding of the unfolding cascade of suffering he has caused to the victim and the victim's loved ones, he will be overcome with grief and remorse. The sinner will punish himself, recognizing his overwhelming obligation both to his victims and to the Savior who has healed them, and will be unable to rest until all his victims have been healed. Those feelings of accountability to potentially unforgiving victims may be an even greater burden for the sinner than would be any punishment, and the sinner will likely also need healing from the trauma he has inflicted upon himself. This view of accountability is reminiscent of the experience of Alma in the Book of Mormon, who suffered for his sins for two days before feeling forgiven, and then spent the remainder of his life in an unrelenting effort to repair the damage that he had done.²⁵ Viewing sin as a response to maladaptive schema may sound like absolving the sinner, but it merely extends the culpability to include those who have contributed to that schema by their prior harmful actions to the sinner.

25. Mosiah 27, particularly verses 19, 23–29, and 32–33.

A Christ-as-Healer model of the Atonement does indeed focus on healing rather than on forgiveness of sins, changing both the process and the focus of reconciliation without altering its necessity. Reconciliation is the repair of a broken or damaged relationship and is one of the goals of both therapy and the Atonement. Reconciliation with God requires reconciliation with each other, and God seems to place great importance on the healing of relationships between mortals as a prerequisite for relationship with deity.²⁶ If sin is indeed trauma that damages relationships, it seems likely that a loving Father in Heaven would value healing more than blame or punishment.

If memory reconsolidation techniques can heal emotional trauma, is there still the need for a divine Savior? Elucidating a possible mechanism of action for healing through the Atonement does not mean that humans can accomplish that healing on their own. The absolute necessity of Jesus Christ remains. Only he has intimately and personally experienced each person's sins and sorrows and would be able to access the deepest memories and schema that are holding them back from their eternal potential. Only he has the unconditional love needed to comfort and support and heal each individual, far beyond what any human therapist might accomplish. Only he can fully disentangle and heal the threads of emotional, physical, spiritual, and relational trauma. Only he would be able to serve as a divine Mediator and Intercessor between the sinner and the victim, enabling the complete healing of that relationship. And only he can fully understand and witness overwhelmingly traumatic experiences, divinely accomplishing what theologian Shelly Rambo describes as knowing the unknowable, saying the unsayable, and witnessing the un-witnessable.²⁷

Although memory reconsolidation as a potential method of divine healing seems most applicable to a Christ-as-Healer model

26. Matthew 5:23–24.

27. Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 21–23.

of the Atonement as presented here, it could find some relevance in other atonement models. Relational atonement theories suggest that sin results in broken or disordered relationships between people and between humans and God, and that the Atonement is a continual phenomenon of reconciling those relationships. Relational theories could utilize memory reconsolidation as a potential mechanism since it can explain relational healing as well as healing from trauma. The moral influence theory maintains that Christ's life and death are salvific because they provide the perfect example of love, obedience, and humility that can turn the sinner's heart and mind back towards God, and memory reconsolidation is plausible as an explanation of that turning process. The Christus Victor atonement model views the death and resurrection of Christ as a rescue or liberation of mankind from the slavery and sickness of sin, death, and the powers of darkness, and memory reconsolidation could explain how that liberation might occur on an individual neurobiological level. Satisfaction and substitution atonement models portray sin as an offense against God's honor or God's justice that requires punishment, and that debt of punishment is paid on behalf of the sinner by the suffering and death of Christ. Those models are not consistent with healing as the primary purpose of the Atonement, but they could still find some applicability of memory reconsolidation if they also value a mechanism for the healing of individuals and relationships from the personal consequences of sin.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that a Christ-as-Healer model of the Atonement—emphasizing the restoration of emotional, relational, and spiritual wounds—can be understood in light of contemporary insights into memory reconsolidation and post-traumatic growth. While neuroscience cannot replace the divine agency of the Savior, it provides a plausible mechanism by which the Atonement might operate in human experience, enabling individuals to heal, forgive, and participate in the

restoration of themselves and their relationships. As the field of neuroscience develops and our knowledge of memory reconsolidation and post-traumatic growth expands, future revision of these ideas will be warranted. However, these early attempts at making these connections may serve as a useful starting point for future discussion as more knowledge becomes available.

The LDS plan of salvation seems to be collaborative in almost every aspect. Premortal humans participated in the Council in Heaven and the creation of the earth. Mortals cooperate with Deity in ordinances and covenants, in family and church councils, in missionary work and temple work and ministering work, and in their day-to-day attempts to emulate the Savior. They also collaborate with Christ in his atonement, at the very least in the sense that their participation is necessary for it to be efficacious in their own lives. It may well be that they also participate in the healing effects of the Atonement as they seek to heal each other through listening and counseling, confession and restitution, forgiving and repenting. Although Christ will undoubtedly play a great part in the healing of broken interpersonal relationships, the process cannot be complete without the involvement and permission of the individuals themselves. The primary participants in those relationships will likely do much of that relational work themselves as they seek the forgiveness of and unity with all those whom they have offended or hurt in this life. An important part of the mortal educational experience may be the time spent during and after this life helping others heal from the consequences of our mistakes.

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A CLOSE-UP VIEW OF FAITH CRISIS

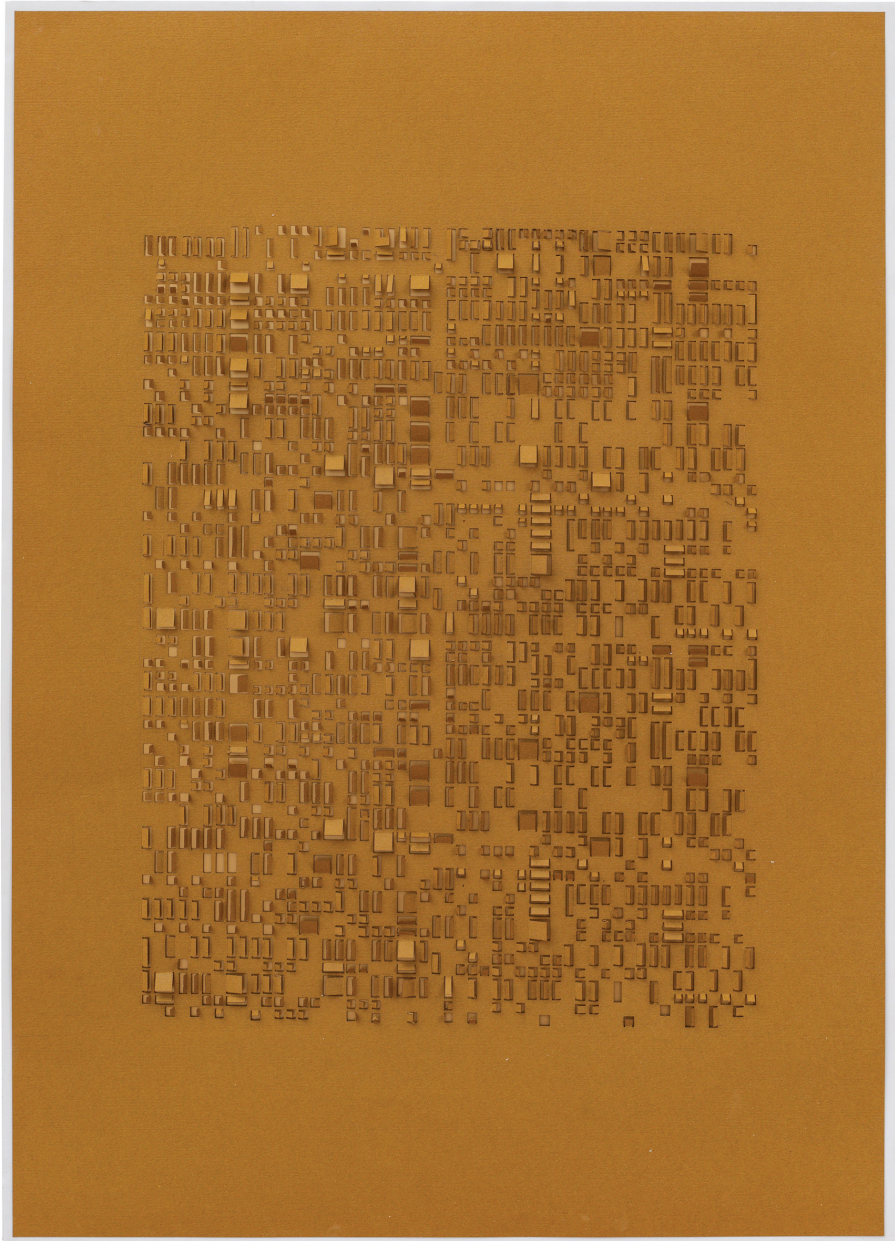
Gregory A. Prince

Faith crisis is pervasive within religious traditions of all flavors. Unresolved, it can lead to departure from one's own tradition or failure to engage in the first place. I have found it useful to frame faith crisis in the context of three "cards" that organized religion can "play": truth claims, moral authority, and community. If any card that was working ceases to work, a crisis can occur that can result in permanent disaffiliation. This essay focuses on the truth claims card.

Preamble to Faith Crisis

From its earliest days to the present time, Church leaders and members have written countless minute books, journals, diaries, letters, and other documents. While a blessing to the historian, such a record can be a challenge to Church members. When the carefully curated official narrative, laden with historical truth claims, is called into question by the Church's own documents, a faith crisis can follow.

Nineteenth-century publications on Mormonism, whether sympathetic or antagonistic, were mostly polemical, with many attempting to disprove the religion's truth claims. By the mid-twentieth century, some books on Mormon history began to lay claim to greater objectivity founded on careful documentation. Three that stood out were Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (1945), Juanita Brooks's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950), and Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958). But even as these books signaled a quiet revolution in Mormon historiography, an institutional counterrevolution was gaining momentum. Led initially by apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, it sought to preserve a glossy narrative of the Church's history, with



Gonzalo Silva, *Wandering Breath*, 2025, CD drive,
giclée print, resin 3D print, 11¾ x 5¾ x 1¾ in.

particular attention to a burnished Joseph Smith and no mention of his embrace of polygamy.

The New Mormon History

1965 was a banner year for Mormon intellectuals. Leonard Arrington, a professor of economic history at Utah State University, led the organization of the Mormon History Association and became its first president; and a group of graduate students at Stanford University started a new scholarly publication, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, the first independent journal devoted to Mormon studies. Apostles Ezra Taft Benson, Mark E. Petersen, and Boyd K. Packer were particularly threatened by *Dialogue*, even though nearly all its editorial staff were devout Latter-day Saints. In a meeting in the late 1960s of the Church Educational System board of trustees, whose membership included church president David O. McKay, Benson said, "That book, *Dialogue*, has no value in the world. In fact, if I had my way, I would *burn* the book." McKay replied, "Brethren, in this Church we do not burn books. But if we did, we ought to burn some that have been written around this table!"¹

In 1972, Leonard Arrington was called to be Church Historian, the only time in the Church's history that its official historian had professional credentials in the field. Such a calling required a unanimous vote among the Quorum of the Twelve, and Benson, Petersen, and Packer were all in the Twelve at that time. Although the minutes of the meeting in which the vote was taken are not accessible, it is likely it was an "omnibus" proposal covering an overall restructuring of the Church bureaucracy. All three subsequently turned against Arrington and his History Division, eventually succeeding in dismantling the division and releasing Arrington from his position in 1982.

1. Paul H. Dunn, interviewed February 18, 1995.

Early Signs of Trouble

Largely because of tutoring from Lester Bush and Tony Hutchinson, and earlier role modeling from Juanita Brooks, I found the New Mormon History to be a breath of fresh air, not a threat. But to others who had no preconditioning, it often was devastating.

My first exposure to the devastation came shortly after I was called to be a counselor to the bishop of a newly formed LDS singles ward in 1981. In January 1982, the other counselor to the bishop, an undergraduate student at Georgetown University, asked if he could speak with me about some issues of concern to him.² I did my best to talk him through his questions, and for a while he seemed satisfied. Ultimately, however, he walked away from the Church, as did many other members of that congregation.

The following year, I wrote in a diary entry, “More and more of our peers (and even some older friends) are undergoing similar crises. I believe, furthermore, that we are seeing merely the tip of an emerging iceberg. I foresee that many will abandon the church, and that the Church, itself, will be shaken as the confrontation between fundamentalism and intellectuality widens.”³ I spent hundreds of hours over several years talking people—including members of my own family—off the ledge, but many left despite my efforts. Once they concluded their church had lied to them, either overtly or by withholding information, there was little anyone could do to keep them in.

A Declaration of Theological War

Emboldened by their success in dismantling Leonard Arrington’s franchise, the three apostles took aim at other intellectuals. In 1983 and

2. Gregory A. Prince diary, January 10, 1982. Hereafter listed as GAP diary.

3. GAP diary, Aug. 26, 1983.

1993, in both instances taking advantage of a power vacuum caused by ailing Church presidents who were incapable of intervening, they took high-profile action against a few key intellectuals (excommunicating five in 1993) and thereby sent a shock wave throughout the entire Mormon intellectual community, whose harmful ripples continue to be felt to this day. As top leaders in a highly centralized church, they held all the cards that then existed. But they did not hold one that had not yet been invented, and it changed the game. Permanently.

The Internet

The internet began as an initiative by the Department of Defense in the 1960s. I remember in the 1970s and 1980s the workings of the “Mormon underground,” an informal network of scholars and history buffs that served to disseminate photocopies of previously unavailable documents. The enabling technology was the photocopying machine, and the conduits were the US Postal Service and discreet personal couriers. All of that changed with the internet. Suddenly, digitized images could be shared around the world in seconds. Documents became available from countless sources, even the Church archives. As the documents were read and digested, online discussion groups and blogs proliferated. The internet democratized data, and social media disseminated them. A Church hierarchy that had controlled the message largely by controlling the data now lost control of both.

We Don't Have a Solution

At the Mormon History Association meeting in 2008, while I was serving on the board of directors of *Dialogue*, several fellow board members and I spoke with Marlin Jensen, who was a General Authority Seventy and Church Historian. He acknowledged that the Church was having the same problem as other religious traditions in trying to keep the youth engaged and said that for Mormonism much of the problem

resided in the dissemination of historical information on the internet that went contrary to what they had been taught.⁴

Unlike most of his colleagues, Jensen both acknowledged the problem and struggled to find a solution. “I don’t think a week passes—I’ve got a note in my pocket now that somebody addressed to me, about talking to one of their sons who has lost his faith after his mission, after his marriage. There are new websites where there are questions that there aren’t answers for.” He didn’t suggest a response to those questions, but it later became clear he was thinking about it.

While I did not spend much time monitoring internet chatter, it was clear many Church members were becoming aware of questions that had been there for many years, but to which they had been oblivious because nowhere in their church experience had there been a venue for discussing them. I did my best to walk them through the virtual minefield to a safe spot on the other side, but often the problem was much deeper: “My church does not trust me with the truth.” When they reached that point, they were unlikely to remain engaged.

At the 2010 meeting of the Mormon History Association, I spent an hour with Marlin Jensen, continuing the discussion we had begun two years earlier.⁵ The problem of inconvenient history had continued to grow, and he was now willing to drill down with me. He said apostle Neal Maxwell, who had died in 2004, had told his colleagues they needed to prepare a response to Joseph Smith’s involvement in polygamy “because we’re going to have to confront it someday.” Marlin added, “But we didn’t do it, and he was right.” Finally, recognizing the increasing number of Church members bothered by historical issues, they were poised to do it.

Jensen said he had received approval to begin preparing papers on the Book of Abraham, DNA and the Book of Mormon, polygamy, same-sex marriage, race and priesthood, and women and priesthood.

4. GAP diary, May 23–24, 2008.

5. GAP diary, May 29, 2010.

He articulated what I had already come to understand: “If we don’t inoculate them, then when they find out about these things eventually, they are gone.”

The Swedish Rescue Mission

Six months after the MHA meeting, Jensen and Rick Turley, an assistant church historian, were deployed to Stockholm, Sweden to address a growing crisis among Church members who were struggling with the same historical issues that we had been discussing. What caught the attention of Church officers was both the number of strugglers—nearly 10 percent of the members belonged to a Mormon Stories Facebook group that openly discussed the historical problems—and the fact that they included several local Church leaders, the most prominent being Hans Mattsson, a third-generation Swedish Mormon who had served as the Area Authority. The meeting did not go well.

Travis Stratford

I met Travis Stratford in March 2011, when I spoke at a Mormon Stories conference he hosted in his Manhattan office. One of the speakers was an employee of Bonneville International, the media conglomerate owned by the Church. He said he had been working with the Church to try to determine the causes of inactivity among all members—he put the worldwide inactivity rate at 82 percent—and lack of retention of converts. None of the causes they had identified surprised me because they were what Marlin Jensen and I had discussed the prior year. Neither was I surprised to hear him say that any proposed substantive change would encounter two obstacles: Thomas Monson, the Church president, was nostalgic and disliked any kind of change; and Boyd Packer, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, still clung to the belief that hiding the truth was the best way to run the Church.⁶

6. GAP diary, March 26, 2011.

Several weeks after the conference, Stratford, who had served a proselytizing mission to Sweden, sent me an email that introduced me to Hans Mattsson:

I asked him what the Brethren had to say about his crisis of faith. He was very candid—and discouraged. He talked about how—last November—he was able to get Elder [Marlin] Jensen, Brother [Rick] Turley, and the local Area Authority to come to Stockholm to meet about 50 “members with questions” who were personally invited to the event by Hans. It was a three-hour meeting where these members could ask any question they wanted. The usual questions came up, and apparently the answers were not satisfying. . . .

One of the authorities (not sure who) said, “It is time for you now to tip the scale either to the church and to the Spirit of Christ or in a different direction and to the spirit of the devil. Make up your minds.” Ouch!

Hans says that after the meeting, all of the “questioning” attendees were called in by their bishops and stake presidents. He says the majority ultimately left the church on their own or were brought in front of a disciplinary council for apostasy.”⁷

As Stratford continued the online correspondence, Mattsson opened up about his own story. Born into one of the foundational, multi-generational Mormon families in Sweden, he checked all the boxes as he grew up, including serving a proselytizing mission in England. He gradually rose through the local ranks to become the Area Authority.

His years in that position (2000–2005) coincided with the blossoming of the internet, and as he traveled throughout northern Europe on Church assignments, he encountered for the first time the historical questions that were tipping over members. “At one of these, I was presented with issues that some members asked their stake president about. The topics ranged from Church history to the priesthood. These were questions that they [the European stake presidents] could not answer.”⁸

7. GAP diary, May 5, 2011.

8. GAP diary, May 24, 2011.

Neither could an apostle to whom Mattsson took the questions. To make his situation worse, he was instructed not to talk to Church members or even his own children about his own doubts and questions. Church members, some in his extended family, branded him an apostate and a threat to the Church.

Now that he had a sympathetic ear in Stratford, Mattsson was open to further discussions.

The LDS Faith Crisis Survey

In August 2011, I heard again from Stratford. He had asked Marlin Jensen and Mattsson if they would come to Manhattan to try to answer Mattsson's questions. Both agreed to meet in late October. Stratford asked that I complete the foursome that would include himself.⁹

Stratford then worked with John Dehlin, pioneer of the Mormon podcast genre, to craft a survey that would put numbers on the problem. Dehlin took the lead in deploying a social media-based survey of people who either had left the Church over historical or doctrinal issues or were marginalized and in danger of leaving. Within twenty-four hours they received more than 2,000 completed surveys. Upon reaching 3,000, they ended the survey and began to digest the data.

Just before I boarded a cross-country flight (I was in Utah) to attend the meeting in Manhattan, Stratford emailed me a three-hundred-page distillation of the survey that put a face on the numbers. I could not read the accounts without feeling pain, sorrow, and frustration because of a problem that could have been addressed decades earlier but instead was swept under the rug. Here are some:

A family member drowned on a river in northern Mexico. This person's father, a member of the Quorum of the 70, gave this person a priesthood blessing, and in the name of Jesus Christ, commanded him to raise and come back to life. Nothing happened. It was then that I knew that the priesthood authority was false and the church wasn't true. I went online

9. GAP diary, Aug. 2, 2011.

for answers and discovered all of the secrets, Book of Abraham, temple changes, etc., and my testimony was dashed in 30 minutes.

I just did due diligence on the First Vision versions and all info regarding this and Joseph's history . . . it broke my heart . . . after 40 years [of] solid belief.

I was fine with the church teaching that they believed that homosexual activity is a sin, but when they DECLARED WAR on my gay son by bankrolling Prop 8 and then telling outright lies during and after the campaign, the Lord assured me that this church was no longer for me. I simply cannot support a church that does not have love as its central tenet.

The church's priorities in my lifetime just become very warped. At a time when hundreds of thousands die of malaria every year, God is primarily concerned with the number of piercings a woman has? Or whether gay people are getting married? Or whether Nordstrom's has a nice enough home in SLC?

I arrived in New York on a Saturday.¹⁰ Mattsson and I stayed at Stratford's home, and the three of us talked through his questions until midnight. We continued our discussion Sunday morning for another five hours, by which time he was off the ledge. That meant our Monday meeting with Jensen could focus exclusively on the faith crisis survey.

The survey revealed plenty of surprises:

- 39 percent of the respondents were in their 30s; 81 percent were in their 20s through 40s.
- Half the male respondents had served in an elders quorum presidency; one-third of the female respondents had served in a Relief Society presidency.
- 70 percent were married.
- 69 percent had college degrees: 38 percent bachelor's, 21 percent master's, 10 percent doctorate.
- 60 percent had annual incomes over \$60,000.

In other words, this sample of some three thousand people was not of wild-eyed fringe elements. Neither was it representative of the

10. GAP diary, Oct. 22, 2011.

average Mormon. Instead, it reflected the higher end of the scale, both in education and income. Precisely the demographics the Church could least afford to lose.

While the demographics were surprising to me, the topics that were tipping people over were not:

- The Book of Mormon
- Polygamy, particularly Joseph Smith's practice of polyandry
- The Book of Abraham
- Black members and the priesthood
- Masonic influences in the temple ceremony
- Conflicting versions of the First Vision
- Past Church positions on science, including age of the earth and evolution
- Women and priesthood
- Authenticity of priesthood restoration
- Changes in the temple ceremony¹¹

The Meeting in Manhattan

We met for three hours in Manhattan. Jensen knew the historical topics that were troubling people, but not the demographics. He seemed particularly focused on the fact that so many who had left were not just leadership material but *had been leaders*. He made two interesting comments that supported our data. The first was that a man converted to Mormonism in Latin America had a one in twenty chance of remaining active long enough to be ordained an elder. The second was that attrition of returned missionaries was so alarming that mission presidents were being asked to create Facebook pages to include all the missionaries in their missions, and then to keep track of them indefinitely.¹²

Jensen asked Stratford if he would be willing to withhold publication of the data until he could arrange a meeting in Salt Lake City with his colleagues, where Stratford could make the same presentation. He agreed.

11. GAP diary, Oct. 23, 2011.

12. GAP diary, Oct. 24, 2011.

Two weeks later, I met with several officials in the Church's Public Affairs Department. As was the case with Jensen, the surprise to them was the demographics of the group. I told them I had spent three hours the prior evening meeting with thirty bright upperclassmen from Brigham Young University, answering questions that didn't deviate one bit from the faith crisis survey list. While the questions were not new to me, they were to the students—future leaders—and many of them were having serious problems holding on to their faith.¹³

Talking to the Brethren

More than a month passed with no word from Jensen about Stratford meeting with his colleagues. He wrote to Stratford, "I have been here for a long time. . . . You can't expect external pressure to facilitate the change, because they will just dig in their heels, and it won't happen. So, for the good of everything and of everyone, we need to do this strategically and at its own pace."¹⁴

In early February 2012, more than three months following the meeting in Manhattan, Stratford got the green light for the Salt Lake City meeting.¹⁵ Two days before the appointed date, I phoned Jensen and asked if he thought the faith crisis was real. He was certain of it. "There may be fifteen people in one ward, or three people in one stake, but I see it everywhere."¹⁶

Stratford was thrilled with the meeting, which included the ecclesiastical directors of several crucial departments.¹⁷ The meeting was all-male. Predictable was a bit of naysaying. "Oh, this is such a small percentage of the population. It's probably just North America." Rick Turley, assistant church historian, responded: "No, I was in Mongolia,

13. GAP diary, Nov. 11, 2011.

14. GAP diary, Nov. 30, 2011.

15. GAP diary, Feb. 7, 2012.

16. GAP diary, Feb. 21, 2012.

17. GAP diary, Feb. 24, 2012.

and I was getting questions about the Kinderhook plates and polyandry. This is a global issue that we are facing.”

Then the group took in the data and asked probing questions. At the end of the meeting, Stratford received congratulations from several people in the room: “This is amazing.” “It’s groundbreaking.” “This is huge!” Jensen said, “This has been amazing. I have lots of follow-up items. I’ll call you, Travis.”

And then, silence. Despite the enthusiasm in the room, no one from the all-important First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve was present. They are the “deciders.” The silence persisted for more than a year, and then we elected to do an end-run.

Meanwhile, More Crisis

In the meantime, signs of the toll of faith crisis periodically popped up. Using data published by the Church each year at its general conference, one analyst did simple arithmetic and showed an alarming trend that should have provoked a strong response but did not. Rather than track the raw number of total membership year-over-year, which does not account for dropouts, he charted the annual percentage increase in LDS congregations worldwide, a reliable metric of actual growth. Between 2004 and 2011, it dropped fourfold, to only 0.43 percent.¹⁸ By contrast, the average annual increase of congregations from 1971 to 1981 was 11.6 percent, nearly *thirtyfold* higher. Over half the recent growth could be accounted for simply by births among current LDS families.

Two months after Stratford’s meeting, I met with Jensen and Steven Snow, his successor as Church Historian.¹⁹ Snow suggested one would have to go back to World War II to find a faith crisis like the present one. He noted LDS troops had been deployed all over the world, often leaving their hometowns for the first time, and were not prepared for other thinking, values, and habits. When they came home, it was

18. GAP diary, Apr. 1, 2012.

19. GAP diary, Apr. 18, 2012.

difficult for many of them to reengage with the Church. “We basically lost a generation.”

Ultimately, the Church commissioned thirteen essays to address the troubling issues. Some were written by Church employees while others were commissioned with outside authors.

The Mormon Moment

None of this was happening in a vacuum. Two things were occurring simultaneously that impacted what we, Jensen, and his colleagues were trying to do. The first was the opening on Broadway in 2011 of *The Book of Mormon*, an irreverent and wildly successful musical now (2026) in its sixteenth year. Initially irritated by the production, ecclesiastical leaders soon shifted gears and leveraged its popularity. Three months after the musical opened, they launched an “I’m a Mormon” campaign in New York City that included a stories-high billboard in Times Square.²⁰

The second was the candidacy of Mitt Romney for the presidency of the United States. His candidacy caused Church president Thomas Monson to announce privately to his colleagues that the Church would avoid all national political activities until after the November 2012 election.²¹ That level of sensitivity undoubtedly played a role in delaying the faith crisis essays. Three months after the election, Darius Gray told me Paul Reeve had been informed by the Church that “the brakes had been applied” to his paper on race and priesthood, and his essay “likely wouldn’t see the light of day for at least a year.”²² Since we had heard nothing of any of the other twelve essays, I assumed the brakes had been applied to all of them.

20. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Mormon.org ‘I’m a Mormon’ Effort Launches in New York City,” Newsroom, June 16, 2011, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/mormon-ads-new-york-city/>.

21. GAP diary, June 21, 2011.

22. GAP diary, Feb. 19, 2013.

The Group

In June 2012, I received an email from Robert Rees, whom I had known for more than forty years, beginning with his tenure as editor of *Dialogue*. He proposed creating a small group to address faith crisis issues.²³ It never had more than about eight members, met infrequently, had no name, and kept a low profile.²⁴ Three key members were Travis Stratford and Chase and Grethe Peterson. The Petersons were well-connected in Salt Lake circles, largely because Chase had been president of the University of Utah.

Our first meeting, which spanned two days, began on November 30, 2012, at the Petersons' condominium.²⁵ Our purpose was to do something substantive to help those struggling with faith crisis.

On the second day, Stratford gave a presentation of his faith crisis survey, something few in the group had seen. When he finished, we had a consensus that the survey represented our best chance to effect change. Since it had languished for nearly a year, presumably bottled up in the Quorum of the Twelve, we saw only one other option: plow around the Twelve and go to the First Presidency, specifically to Dieter Uchtdorf. Because he spent most of his life in Germany and traveled the world constantly as a Lufthansa pilot, Uchtdorf had a progressive worldview distinctly different from that of his colleagues in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, one most receptive to the message of the faith crisis survey.

The question was how to deliver a copy of the survey to Uchtdorf in a way that he would read it. Chase was an obvious messenger, but he was cautious. After the meeting ended, he said to me, "Tell me you are confident that Travis's and your data about faith crisis are solid." "They are." "Okay. Then I will proceed to contact Dieter Uchtdorf."²⁶

23. GAP diary, June 27, 2012.

24. GAP diary, Aug. 2, 2012.

25. GAP diary, Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, 2012.

26. GAP diary, Dec. 1, 2012.

The Petersons approached him through an intermediary, and Uchtdorf signaled he was willing to speak with them.²⁷ However, getting onto his calendar proved problematic because the Church president, Thomas Monson, was sinking deeply into dementia, and Uchtdorf had to pick up much of the slack.²⁸ Nearly three months after our meeting, Grethe called Marlin Jensen for advice. He volunteered to hand-carry a copy to Uchtdorf.

Jensen advised us that timing was crucial and asked that we trust him to pick the right time so the printed material would be read rather than filed. The right time turned out to be late June, just prior to the monthlong July vacation General Officers take.

In late August, Chase and Grethe met Uchtdorf for lunch. He said he had read the faith crisis report completely, thought very highly of it, and had no pushback on its conclusions, unlike many of his colleagues. We subsequently learned it had a far greater impact than we might have supposed, but more on that later. The group had done its most important work.²⁹

The New York Times

Stratford had a longstanding friendship with Laurie Goodstein, a religion writer for the *New York Times*, and she had expressed interest in the story of Hans Mattsson. Stratford had tried to persuade him to meet with Goodstein when he came to New York for our Manhattan meeting in 2011, but he had demurred. Much had happened to him in intervening months, most of it not pleasant, and when Stratford revisited the possibility of an interview, Mattsson consented.

27. GAP diary, Jan. 2, 2013.

28. President Monson's dementia was being shielded from the public at the time, but several sources told me about it on condition of anonymity.

29. GAP diary, March 30, 2015.

In June 2013, Stratford, Hans, and his wife Birgitte came to my home in Maryland for two days of preparation prior to his interview in New York City.³⁰ On June 13, the three met with Goodstein for five hours, and again the following day for a videotaped interview.³¹ Later, Stratford called me and said, “It felt a little bit historic as it was happening.”³² He was right.

On July 20, a Saturday, Stratford sent me an email saying the article would probably be published that weekend. It was posted online that evening and printed on the front page of the Sunday edition of the *Times*, “Some Mormons Search the Web and Find Doubt.” The shot heard ’round the Mormon world. Excerpts include:

When fellow believers in Sweden first began coming to [Mattsson] with information from the Internet that contradicted the church’s history and teachings, he dismissed it as “anti-Mormon propaganda,” the whisperings of Lucifer. He asked his superiors for help in responding to the members’ doubts, and when they seemed to only sidestep the questions, Mr. Mattsson began his own investigation.

But when he discovered credible evidence that the church’s founder, Joseph Smith, was a polygamist and that the Book of Mormon and other scriptures were rife with historical anomalies, Mr. Mattsson said he felt that the foundation on which he had built his life began to crumble.

Around the world and in the United States, where the faith was founded, the Mormon Church is grappling with a wave of doubt and disillusionment among members who encountered information on the Internet that sabotaged what they were taught about their faith . . .

“I felt like I had an earthquake under my feet,” said Mr. Mattsson, now an emeritus area authority. “Everything I’d been taught, everything I’d been proud to preach about and witness about just crumbled under my feet. It was such a terrible psychological and nearly physical disturbance.”

30. GAP diary, June 9, 2013.

31. GAP diary, June 14, 2013.

32. GAP diary, June 17, 2013.

Greg Prince, a Mormon historian and businessman in Washington who has held local leadership positions in the church, shares Mr. Mattsson's doubts. "Consider a Catholic cardinal suddenly going to the media and saying about his own church, 'I don't buy a lot of this stuff,'" Mr. Prince said. "That's the level we're talking about here." . . .

The first doubts filtered up to [Mattsson] from members who had turned to the Internet to research a Sunday school talk. . . .

Mr. Mattsson said he sought the help of the church's highest authorities. He said a senior apostle came to Sweden at his request and told a meeting of Mormons that he had a manuscript in his briefcase that, once it was published, would prove all the doubters wrong. But Mr. Mattsson said the promised text never appeared, and when he asked the apostle about it, he was told it was impertinent to ask. . . .

That encounter is what really set off Mr. Mattsson's doubts. He began reading everything he could. . . .

In the last 10 or 15 years, [Richard Bushman] said, "the church has come to realize that transparency and candor and historical accuracy are really the only way to go." The church has released seven volumes of the papers of Joseph Smith and published an essay on one of the most shameful events in church history, the Mountain Meadows massacre, in which church leaders plotted the slaughter of people in a wagon train in 1857.

But the church has not actively disseminated most of these documents, so when members come across them on Web sites or in books, Mr. Bushman said, "it's just excruciating."

"Sometimes people are furious because they feel they haven't been told the truth growing up," he said. "They feel like they were tricked or betrayed."³³

Any article on Mormonism in the *New York Times* gets attention, but an article on the front page of the *Sunday Times* gets a *lot* of attention. The day after it was published, Stratford told me it was the number one most-viewed and number two most-emailed article in the *Times*

33. Laurie Goodstein, "Some Mormons Search the Web and Find Doubt," *New York Times*, July 21, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/us/some-mormons-search-the-web-and-find-doubt.html>.

over the prior two days. Comments flooded the “bloggernacle,” a nickname for blogs relating to Mormonism.

The following Saturday, the *Times* published a brief letter from Rabbi Harold Kushner, best-selling author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*:

It will be interesting to see how the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints deal with the apparent coming to light of facts to cast doubt on the validity of its founding narrative.

Might I suggest that they use the tactic used by many modern Jews dealing with biblical narratives that defy credulity, from a six-day story of creation to Jonah living inside a large fish. We distinguish between left-brain narratives (meant to convey factual truth) and right-brain narratives (meant to make a point through a story; the message will be true even if the story isn't factually defensible).³⁴

Breaking the Logjam

Two weeks after the *Times* article was published, I met Steven Snow for breakfast. He acknowledged the difficulty they had had in getting the essays through the approval process, particularly the intransigent president of the Quorum of the Twelve, Boyd Packer. The *Times* article had given urgency to the issue. Some of the Twelve were now saying, “We’ve got to get this going.”³⁵

Getting the essays out was a major challenge, but *how* to get them out was equally daunting. Although no one had accurate data on how many Church members were troubled by historical issues, there was a consensus that it was nowhere near a majority. The same essay that addressed the doubts of the few doubters could blow up the faith of the many faithful.

34. Harold Kushner, “Religion and Doubt,” Opinion, *New York Times*, July 27, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/religion-and-doubt.html>.

35. GAP diary, Aug. 1, 2013.

“Houston, We Have a Problem”

Faith crisis had long been the elephant in the room. A month after the *Times* article, the Church finally acknowledged its presence after years of denial at the highest levels, in an article in the Church-owned *Deseret News*, “How LDS Church members can help themselves and loved ones deal with doubt.”³⁶ It began, “David Marsh [a manager in the Church’s priesthood department] opened his BYU Campus Education Week class with a question. ‘How many of you know someone struggling with doubt?’ he asked the audience. Nearly everyone reached a hand toward the ceiling.” While not mentioning any specific issue leading to faith crisis, the article moved the needle by acknowledging the problem and urging non-doubting members to be understanding of those who doubted—a marked contrast from the earlier derision heaped on Hans Mattsson.

Three weeks after the *Deseret News* article was published, I delivered the annual Leonard J. Arrington Lecture in Logan, Utah. At a small banquet preceding the lecture, I sat next to Steven Snow. He said some of the essays were on the agenda of the Quorum of the Twelve the following week, and he anticipated approval.

The German Comes Through

On October 5, 2013, Dieter Uchtdorf gave the closing address in the first session of general conference. Shortly afterwards, Bill Evans, a high-ranking official in the Church’s Public Affairs office with whom I had shared the faith crisis survey, sent me an email: “Did you ghostwrite this talk?”³⁷

36. Katie Harmer, “How LDS Church Members Can Help Themselves and Loved Ones Deal with Doubt,” *Deseret News*, Aug. 27, 2013, <https://www.deseret.com/2013/8/27/20524591/how-lds-church-members-can-help-themselves-and-loved-ones-deal-with-doubt/>.

37. GAP diary, Oct. 5, 2013.

That evening, Laurie Goodstein posted an article on the *New York Times* website commenting on Uchtdorf's historic speech:

One of the top leaders in the Mormon Church acknowledged in an address to the church's global membership on Saturday that past leaders had "made mistakes" that had caused some Mormons to have doubts, an admission that amounts to a significant change in tone in the leadership's approach to Mormons who question, dissent or defect from the church.

"We respect those who honestly search for truth," President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, second counselor in the church's top governing body, the first presidency, said in the speech.

The church has in the past excommunicated prominent scholars and even low-profile members who publicly voiced doubts about its history or theology, and many Mormons who have lost their faith have been shunned by their friends and family. But recently, with some Mormons taking to the Internet to share their doubts, leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which now claims 15 million members, have been confronted with a bigger problem they could no longer ignore.

"We openly acknowledge that in nearly 200 years of church history—along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honorable and divine events—there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question," Mr. Uchtdorf said, speaking to 20,000 Mormons gathered for the 183rd semiannual general conference in Salt Lake City, and millions more watching telecasts and over the Internet. . . .

He said it was wrong for other Mormons to assume that those with doubts "have been offended or lazy or sinful." He said that the church "honors personal agency."³⁸

Subsequent sermons in the same conference took a hardline stance against marriage equality and ordination of women, indirect shots at

38. Laurie Goodstein, "A Top Mormon Leader Acknowledges the Church 'Made Mistakes,'" *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/us/a-top-mormon-leader-acknowledges-the-church-made-mistakes.html>.

Uchtdorf's remarks,³⁹ but Uchtdorf had laid a new marker that gave hope to those struggling with faith crisis.

Michael Otterson, the Church's director of public affairs, took exception to Laurie Goodstein's use of the word "mistakes," and he reached out to Dieter Uchtdorf, saying he was getting inquiries as to what he meant by using the word. Uchtdorf responded that he crafted his words precisely for the address, and he had no further comments for Otterson.⁴⁰

Few people in the entire Church even knew of the existence of the faith crisis survey or the summary we had hand-delivered to Dieter Uchtdorf in June. Those of us who knew kept it to ourselves. His words stood on their own. For us to spike the ball in the endzone would have been tasteless and counterproductive.

A month after Uchtdorf's speech, the Church, without announcement, posted the first of the essays, "Are Mormons Christians?"⁴¹

"Race and the Priesthood"

I knew almost nothing of the makings of twelve of the thirteen essays. For "Race and the Priesthood," however, I saw the sausage in the making, primarily because of my long and trusting friendship with Darius Gray, arguably the most prominent Black Church member ever. He did not write the essay or its antecedent research paper (which Paul Reeve wrote), but he was brought in at the eleventh hour to avert what could have been a catastrophic mistake.

39. Laurie Goodstein, "A Leader's Admission of 'Mistakes' Heartens Some Doubting Mormons," *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/09/us/a-leaders-admission-of-mistakes-heartens-some-doubting-mormons.html>.

40. GAP diary, Nov. 19, 2013.

41. "Are 'Mormons' Christian?," *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/christians?lang=eng/>.

Gray, who joined the Church in 1964, had been a leader in the African American LDS community since the early 1970s, when Church leaders organized the Genesis Group Branch and called him to be part of its three-man presidency. He served in that council, sometimes as its president, for several decades, often being consulted on matters relating to race.

On Monday, December 2, 2013, Gray received a phone call from a secretary at the Church History Department, asking if he could attend a meeting the following day. She did not give him any information regarding the content of the meeting.⁴²

The following evening, he called and debriefed me. Paul Reeve's commissioned research paper notwithstanding, Church bureaucrats (and probably one or more apostles) had essentially written their own essay. Seeing problems with it, the historians sought advice from Gray. Their instructions to him: "We really would appreciate you being candid."⁴³

The paper was problematic on several levels, primarily because it dodged the crucial issue of when and by whom the restriction on ordination of Black men occurred: by Brigham Young, after the death of Joseph Smith. And definitely not by God. There was one other challenge: they needed the paper to be revised *now*, although in the meeting they did not say why. Gray candidly told them what needed to be changed.

He called me again on Thursday evening, saying he had received another call from Church headquarters, asking that he be there at 9 a.m. on Friday.

We had dinner guests on Friday. Just before they arrived, I received an email from Gray:

"The material that I was involved with this past week turns out to be part of the NEW Church website on Race. I haven't had a chance to review the entire site, but it seems a far cry from that which had been proposed."

42. GAP diary, Dec. 2, 2013.

43. GAP diary, Dec. 3, 2013.

It was quite different from the essay-by-committee, and groundbreaking:

- It placed the priesthood ban in the context of “an era of great racial division in the United States,” with slavery influencing “all aspects of people’s lives, including their religion.”
- During Joseph Smith’s lifetime, several Black men were ordained.
- Brigham Young started the ban. God did not.
- None of the explanations for the ban—including the “curse of Cain”—was an official doctrine of the Church.

After our guests left, I spoke with Gray. On Thursday, the Quorum of the Twelve had approved the changes. The purpose of Friday’s meeting was to have him take a final look at the document. He was the final outside reviewer before the essay was posted online. The day after the posting, Stratford sent me an email: “Steve Snow sent a nice note saying our FC [Faith Crisis] work helped get this out.”⁴⁴

Several days later, the *Salt Lake Tribune* quoted Richard Bushman: “‘It is written as a historian might tell the story,’ Bushman says from his home in New York, ‘not as a theological piece, trying to justify the practice.’ By depicting the exclusion as fitting with the common practices of the day, says Bushman, who wrote *Rough Stone Rolling*, a critically acclaimed biography of Smith, ‘it drains the ban of revelatory significance, makes it something that just grew up and, in time, had to be eliminated.’”⁴⁵

Two months after the essay was posted, I had breakfast with Steven Snow. He said it was, by a factor of about five, the most read of all the essays.⁴⁶ The following month, I had breakfast with Paul Reeve. He said the event that had catalyzed the commissioning of his research paper

44. GAP diary, Dec. 7, 2013.

45. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Mormon Church Traces Black Priesthood Ban to Brigham Young,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Dec. 16, 2013, available at <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=57241071&itype=CMSID>.

46. GAP diary, Feb. 4, 2014.

was an article in the *Washington Post* in February 2012 that highlighted racist comments by a BYU professor, Randy Bott.⁴⁷ Bott's inflammatory comments, which resulted in his "retirement" from BYU, caused an immediate, public, and unprecedented reaction by Church Public Affairs. Within a week, Reeve was commissioned to write his paper. Two members of the Quorum of the Twelve liked his paper, but one—probably Boyd Packer—sent it to the Correlation Department, and that was where it devolved into the hot mess that Gray later had to clean up to avoid a catastrophe.⁴⁸

The Other Essays

The remaining essays trickled out over several months. Some took notable strides toward historical accuracy. For instance, the Church acknowledged publicly, for the first time, that the "translation" of the Book of Mormon involved Joseph Smith looking at a stone in his hat, with his face pressed tightly against the hat to block extraneous light. And it acknowledged that Joseph Smith took his first plural wife, Fanny Alger, in 1835, seven years before the revelation that authorized the practice.

Overall, the essays represented a balancing act, attempting to answer nagging historical questions without tipping over orthodox members. The glass was half full for everyone, but because of the position the Church had taken decades earlier of hiding parts of its history, half full was the best it could do. Nearly a year after the essay on race and priesthood was posted, Stratford sent me an email: "When Laurie [Goodstein of the *New York Times*] was interviewing Steve Snow a couple of weeks ago (when Steve was talking about the Church's new

47. Jason Horowitz, "The Genesis of a Church's Stand on Race," *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZZyfr_story.html.

48. GAP diary, March 7, 2014.

focus on transparency), Laurie couldn't stop thinking that the primary reason they are doing this is because of the Faith Crisis work we did."⁴⁹

The Beat Goes On

As significant as the essays were, they had little overall effect in addressing faith crisis churchwide. A year and a half after the first essays were posted online, Darius Gray told me Church officials had told him only 20 percent of Church members even knew of their existence, and only 4 percent had read *any* of them.⁵⁰

Even if more members of the Church had read the essays, it is doubtful that would have addressed the larger issues underlying faith crisis. The essays focused on one of the three “cards” the Church can play—truth claims—and for the younger generations, truth claims tend to be irrelevant.⁵¹

A Story That Doesn't Work

In July 2016, Richard Bushman spoke to a group in Salt Lake City. In the Q&A following his remarks, he made a profound statement about the Church's status quo and the need for it to change:

I think that for the church to remain strong it has to reconstruct its narrative. The dominant narrative is not true; it can't be sustained. So, the church has to absorb all this new information, or it will be on very shaky grounds and that's what it is trying to do, and it will be a strain for a lot of people, older people especially. But I think it has to change.

You know Elder [Boyd] Packer had a sense of protecting the little people. He felt that scholars were the “enemy” to the “state.” And it was the Grandmothers that were living in Sanpete County. . . . The price of

49. GAP diary, Nov. 11, 2014.

50. GAP diary, March 1, 2015.

51. See Jana Riess's work on this, including in *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

protecting the grandmothers was the loss of the grandsons. They got a story that did not work.⁵²

The Faith Crisis Survey Lives On

In January 2017, I received an email from Stratford confirming that our faith crisis survey of 2011 continued to have an effect:

I just got a random call from one of the head guys at the Church's Research & Information Division (RID) who deals in "sensitive" research like "difficult topics" and faith crisis.

He called to explain that our Faith Crisis Report and Faith Crisis Chronicles⁵³ documents have been circulating amongst the top Brethren the past couple of years and that they'd like to officially enter the documents into their research library so other leaders (who have top-level clearance) can access the documents.

Of note during the call, he said that Elder Ballard had consumed the research and had become an ardent advocate for the church dealing with it. . . .

Feels good that our work made at least a small difference.⁵⁴

The Story Continues

No one knows the precise number of Church members who have disengaged because of faith crisis. While the Church keeps track of those who formally resign their membership (a closely held number), it is unknown how many people who become disaffected simply withdraw from activity.

52. GAP diary, July 12, 2016.

53. The "Faith Crisis Chronicles" was a compilation of personal essays that we solicited following the initial social media questionnaire. We did the compilation at the suggestion of Clayton Christensen, who felt raw numbers told only part of the story. He was right. The stories were wrenching but accurately conveyed the profound personal toll that faith crisis was taking.

54. Travis Stratford to GAP, Jan. 6, 2017, in GAP diary of the same date.

Many people who have left the Church did so because they encountered opacity instead of transparency. The Church is making progress. Its newest multivolume history, *Saints*, is far more candid than previous histories published by the Church. Curricula for children and youth are being infused with more reliable data than in the past. But still, it is a long way from here to total transparency.

During the “Mormon Moment” in 2012, the year Mitt Romney was the Republican candidate for president, I was contacted by Michelle Boorstein, a religion reporter for the *Washington Post*. She had been assigned to do reporting on Romney’s religious affiliation, and she asked if she could meet with me to get up to speed on Mormonism.

We met several times, and during one of our meetings she commented on her own religious tradition, Judaism. “Discussion and argumentation are the lifeblood of Judaism. What is the mechanism within Mormonism that allows for this?” My response took her breath away: “There is none, Michelle, and if one attempts to create one, Church leaders are likely to shut it down.”

That is a problem. Where does a Latter-day Saint go to discuss difficult, controversial issues central to their faith? If the Church does not provide a safe space or encourage Church members to create their own, it will be the loser, for the members likely will find another space that is not sympathetic.

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ON GOING GRAY

Alison Ash Linnell

Standing in front of the sink rubbing the soap on my palms and through my fingers, I focus more on my gray hairs in the two inches of undyed regrowth reflected in the mirror than the actual washing of my hands. And as I tilt my head toward the mirror and study the mousy brown hair with gray streaks on the crown of my head, I compare that color to the caramel brown with honey highlights, and I contemplate if I will or can or should follow through on letting the gray grow in, and whether I'm ready for this transition—or the judgments.

When I attempted to go gray a year ago, my husband warned: “You know that will likely age you ten years or more.” Even if it doesn't sound like it, he was being helpful, pointing out that I like people thinking I'm younger than I am and letting the gray grow in will ruin that. My daughter spouted: “*Why* are you doing that?” She also knows the struggle I have with accepting my age and how I will be tested by the gray, and perhaps she, along with my husband, doesn't want to watch me come to terms with looking my age, and how ugly that might get, especially with my sixtieth birthday approaching.

When one friend noticed the gray, she told me how she remembers one of her college professors, some twenty years ago, growing out her gray hair and how awkward she looked all semester long, and I wondered if my gray hair—and not the important things about writing and rhetoric—might be the only thing my students would remember from their semester with me.

Last year, I had two and a half inches of regrowth before changing my mind. I hoped to get a job interview and worried about how the half-gray, half-caramel brown hair might look to a potential employer who was looking for someone energetic and active, which I interpreted

as young-looking. So, thinking the comparison of gray to brown would age me more than ten years, I colored the gray again. But I didn't get the job. And I'm tired of the damage and the regrowth and the coloring, and so, again, I'm going to see if I can be open to the gray.



While gray hair does indicate growing older, gray can also denote wisdom and maturity and sophistication. Yet, the color gray can also symbolize dullness or neutrality or indecisiveness.

For many years, I believed God was against gray—not my gray hair, but the kind of gray that indicates indecisiveness; the gray that makes one uncertain and unresolved or lacking determination and dedication. I believed God worked in black and white. I thought gray to Him was similar to the lukewarm of Revelation 3:16, and if one was lukewarm, God would spew them from his mouth. Therefore, I saw most things in black and white, in right and wrong, and avoided the gray.

When my children were little, we attended church—the full three-hour block—and never missed for naps or family gatherings; we participated in firesides and church activities and temple open houses and temple dedications and family home evening and family scripture study. On Sundays, we didn't watch television, except movies like *Prince of Egypt* or *Veggie Tales*, and we didn't play with friends but played Uno and Sorry and Battleship together instead, hoping to strengthen religious ties and family bonds.

On all our vacations, whether to San Francisco or Disneyland or Zion National Park, we not only found a church to attend on Sunday, but we bought sandwiches and snacks the day before the Sabbath to minimize what might be seen as not honoring the day.

I wanted my children to understand the importance of being clearly on the Lord's side, especially with things that were harmful to them. Growing up I'd seen firsthand the damage drugs and alcohol could cause a family, so to not normalize anything contrary to the things in

the Word of Wisdom, I used the term “breakfast cake” instead of “coffee cake.” That may sound fanatical, but I was determined to show God that there was no gray in my dedication to Him.

And yet, now I wonder how damaging it was for my family that I shunned any traces of gray. What would it have hurt to let my children’s friends be included in our board games on Sunday? What would it have hurt to let my daughter go to prom a week before her sixteenth birthday? What would it have hurt to let my children jump and splash and float in the hotel swimming pool on a Sunday morning during our vacation instead of rushing to an unfamiliar ward and listening to some stranger speak about their faith crisis?



I’m not sure when the first gray hair came in. I started dyeing my hair before any gray was evident. I didn’t like that my hair went from sandy blond to medium brown in my late thirties and so the highlighting and coloring to look younger began then.

I’m also not sure when the black and white I believed I needed to be with God started turning gray. It could have been when my kind brother-in-law came out to us as gay and was concerned that we would no longer let our young children be around him, and I wondered which of my actions had given him that impression.

It could have been when my husband was sustained as stake president after five years as bishop, and I was asked by the General Authority who extended the call to share my testimony during stake conference. I spoke about how difficult a calling like this can be for a wife and family, hoping it might invite some grace when my children or I didn’t meet the expectations others might have for us. After the meeting, the General Authority’s wife warned me to be careful about how honest I was about serving in the Church because it could possibly damage another’s testimony if I looked vulnerable. I wondered why it was the honesty and grace—and not the unrealistic expectations—that should be shunned.

It could have been when my adult son, who had stepped away from the Church, asked for an espresso coffee maker when I asked him what he would like for Christmas one year, and I knew this request was a test to see if I could love him even when he wanted things contrary to what I believed, and I knew that I wanted him to know that I could.



At church, I often study the women who are close to my age sitting in the pews around me. Some have gray hair. Others have blond hair or solid black hair or brown hair with blond highlights, and I wonder who is coloring their hair and who isn't. Still others seem to have their natural hair color, and I notice the few strands of gray growing in with their brown or blond or black or red hair. And I contemplate who might be doing it right, as if there is only one right way of letting gray grow in (or not grow in), and I'll find the right thing for me.

I also wonder, as I'm sitting on that pew, why there is a need—for me, for others, especially in a church—to look a certain way. I contemplate if it is the comments and the judgments and the expectations that often propel this look that makes it hard to allow any gray.

Even before I had children, or was married, I understood the judgments people make if your family doesn't look the part. I grew up in an inactive family, and although I was welcomed at church, and even encouraged to come, there was still a level of acceptance I felt I would never achieve. I knew certain families didn't want me to be best friends with their daughters or to date their sons; they worried my gray gospel family might influence their children.

When I had children, I worried that my gray gospel history could be blamed if my children didn't stay strong in the Church. I don't know if this idea was born or solidified from an experience when my children were just babies, but either way I believed I couldn't allow any gray. I recall talking to a neighbor of our bishop at the time. The bishop's

teenage son had left the Church, and not only did he leave, but at eighteen, he also joined a gang and got a tattoo confirming his departure from his family's values and his commitment to that gang. This neighbor said his mom just wasn't strong enough in the gospel to keep her children strong. At the time, I believed a parent's gospel standing could predict their child's outcome.

But now, I wish I had defended that bishop's wife. I wish I had said that we didn't know her commitment or the amount of gray in her life and why it was there or how that gray might benefit her child or other people she interacted with. I wish that instead of adding to those judgments, I had listened to this bishop's wife's experiences and her advice on how to show love to your child and accept your parenting flaws.

Those judgments took on new life when my teenage daughter began drifting from the Church and doing things contrary to the things she'd been taught. While I wondered what others might say about what gray they might have noticed in my parenting, I mostly hoped for a friend who would help me work through the guilt, sorrow, and confusion I was experiencing over my daughter's choices. In my young ward and neighborhood, it was hard to find someone who had experienced similar things who was willing to talk. I reached out to a neighbor whose daughter several years earlier had made similar choices my daughter was making; I hoped she would offer help and comfort and advice. Instead, this neighbor colored over these events her family had experienced and acted as if they had never happened. While I appreciated this neighbor's desire to protect her daughter's reputation, it felt more like she was protecting her own parenting and her family's perfect church standing from any judgments. I realized there is a cost to hiding the gray—lost friendships, lost opportunities to offer grace to ourselves and others, lost lessons of compassion and understanding and growth.

I recall one friend who, in her late thirties, said she'd never dye her hair because she was proud of her first few gray strands; she said they were hard-earned, and she was going to keep them. Yet, one day, after many gray hairs, she colored them. I never asked why, so I don't know if she wanted to look younger, or if she decided they were too hard to accept, or maybe she didn't like the judgments about her age and her choices. I believe many of my gray strands are hard-earned too. Although I wouldn't say I am proud of them, I have embraced many grays, and I don't feel a need to hide them anymore; those grays align with who I am.

I embraced the idea that my neighbors may have made some judgments about our family when my son's espresso machine showed up on our porch earlier than expected on a Sunday, while we were at church. It came in its original packaging, and it was clear for our entire neighborhood to see that we'd bought a coffee maker.

I embraced the idea of skipping church on a Sunday while on vacation with my grandchildren, and I laughed and played with my family as we built sandcastles on the beach and surfed the ocean waves.

I embraced the idea that maybe my friend had it right when she let her fifteen-year-old son go to his high school prom with a date. I didn't make any judgments because my friend believed it was the perfect thing for her child at that time.

I embraced the idea that I don't know how my brother-in-law or other LGBT+ individuals fit into the gospel plan. And when I was asked to give a lesson on President Oaks's talk about the plan of salvation, I showed a picture of my brother-in-law and his partner and his partner's two children, and I testified of God's love for them. I told my Relief Society sisters that I knew these men were good people and that my focus in my life should be about how my thoughts and my actions fit into God's plan of kindness and love and compassion and not about keeping others out of that plan.

I embraced the idea of talking with a ward member about some of my children's choices when she asked how I handle the heartache that

often comes with parenting, and I mourned with her as she shared her anguish and uncertainty over her parenting grays.



As I study other people's gray hair at church, at Walmart, or along the campus where I teach, I consider how similar my hair might look to theirs when the grays are all grown in, and I wonder if I can follow through this time. Yet, there is a gray trend I don't understand. As I'm searching the various strands of gray on my school's campus, I often see a student in her late teens or early twenties who has dyed her hair gray. I think their gray hair looks as unnatural and artificial as the auburn hair on my eighty-three-year-old neighbor.

I can't decide if the analogy for this artificial gray is that gray can't be forced. Or maybe it is that gray shouldn't be embraced in everything and that we shouldn't seek it out. Or perhaps the analogy is that if gray is there, we might ask why they have embraced it, what they have learned, and how they have become comfortable with it.

Still, when I look in the mirror, I'm not sure if I will ever be comfortable with my gray, or even how long I will let it grow this time. I don't know if I'm ready to admit my age or embrace all the uncertainty that comes in life. If I do let the grays grow in, it might be because I have a substantial strand of hair on the front right side of my head that is growing in white instead of gray, and that strand is stunning. And if I let that strand grow in, the rest of the grays come with it.

ALISON ASH LINNELL loves teaching (but not grading), writing (but not submitting), and mothering (but not disciplining). When she is not teaching, writing, or mothering, she can be found running, reading, or rearranging words or numbers or pieces for whatever puzzle she is fixated on at that moment. One of her current goals is to solve the easy *New York Times* Pips puzzle in under ten seconds; her fastest time so far is twelve seconds.

GOING TO CHURCH

Robert A. Rees

On a trip to England many years ago, walking and wandering the streets of London on a late Saturday night, I thought of Dr. Samuel Johnson's words, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." In truth, I have never been tired of either! When I served as director of continuing education in the arts and humanities at the University of California, Los Angeles in the seventies and eighties, I established and was director of studies for summer study programs at Cambridge University and at the Royal Colleges of Art and Music in London. One of my favorite experiences during my time in Cambridge and London was going to church, my own and those of other believers. Occasionally I had opportunities to attend both Anglican and Latter-day Saint worship services on the same day. The following recounts my experience on one particular Sunday.

The night before, my sleep had been troubled from having seen a film at Piccadilly Circus titled, ironically, *Internal Affairs*, which turned out to be more violent and sexually explicit than I had expected. Awakened, I felt the need to cleanse myself, especially from the dark shadows that haunted my dreams. With the sense that my own internal affairs needed ordering, I decided to go to mass at Westminster Abbey and then to sacrament meeting at the Hyde Park Ward.

There are times in our lives when we are blessed by gracious or fortuitous convergences. This was such a Sunday for me, for when I arrived at Westminster Abbey, I discovered that that day, July 22, was Saint Mary Magdalene's Day. It seemed appropriate to me that here I was, an ordinary sinner seeking grace on a day honoring a sinner who had experienced the forgiving grace of Christ in such a complete and profound way ("then neither do I condemn thee. Go thy way and sin no more") and whose devotion to her forgiver had given her the honor of being the first witness of the Resurrection.

Those of us attending the service at the Abbey waited patiently for the tourists to leave and the procession of ministers to enter and then, following them, took our seats in the choir and nave. Looking up into that gloriously vaulted ceiling, I felt the burdens of my heart and mind begin to lift, and then felt them completely vanish as the choir and congregation sang the opening anthem, “Light’s Glittering Morn Bedecks the Sky” (set to the familiar hymn “All Creatures of Our God and King”) with its repeated “alleluia”s. Westminster Abbey is a church for singing “alleluia” with full heart and voice:

Light’s glittering morn bedecks the sky;

Heaven thunders forth its victor-cry:

Alleluia!

An angel robed in light hath said,

“The Lord is risen from the dead”:

Alleluia!

The setting for the mass was Mozart’s *Missa Brevis* in F (K 192), one of the most lyrically melodious of the small masses, and my personal favorite.

Even though the invocation was a set prayer (there was no reference to our having gotten there safely!), I listened carefully to the words and felt their import in my heart: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

As the priest intoned the Kyrie, I thought of how often in my life I had asked for mercy, had pleaded repeatedly for forgiveness for my contribution to the *peccata mundi*—the sins of the world. What a heavy phrase that is, “the sins of the world”—the agony of the world, the exquisite suffering of the world, the dark and violent acts of the world—an enormous and yet unimaginable weight borne somehow by one person.

After the Gloria there was a scripture reading from 2 Corinthians about the transformation that comes from the love of Christ. The choir sang a gradual motet (set also by Mozart) and then there was a reading

from the Gospel of John about Mary's seeing the risen Christ. The reading was preceded by the priest saying, "Glory be to thee, O Lord" and followed by the reader saying, "This is the gospel of Christ," and the priest singing, "Praise be to thee, O Christ."

The sermon was centered on Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Christ. The minister spoke of Mary's sinful life and of her wandering in a wilderness before she met Christ. He then said, "We all know the wilderness. Everyone one in this church today has wandered in the wilderness and we will all wander in the wilderness again." I thought of my own wildernesses, past and present, and how through them I had come to know God and myself better.

The minister then postulated that Christ could be so forgiving of Mary because he was himself acquainted with the wilderness. He said, "I could not believe in a God who had not been in the wilderness." It was, I thought, precisely because Christ had gone into the wilderness and come out of it triumphant over the temptations of both the flesh and the spirit that we have hope that he can reclaim us from our wilderness wanderings.

Following the sermon, the choir sang a thirteenth-century hymn about Mary weeping for her dead Lord at the tomb and then recovering from her grief and lamentation when she sees him standing before her. Bowing before him, she washes his feet with her tears. The last stanza of the hymn is as follows:

Glory be to God and honor,
 who, preferring sacrifice,
Far above the rich man's bounty
 sweetness found in Mary's sighs,
Who for all, his love foretasting,
 spreads the banquet of the skies.

As the priests prepared the bread and wine, the choir sang the Sanctus:

Holy, Holy, Holy,
Lord God of Hosts,
Heaven and earth

Are full of thy glory.
Glory be to thee,
O Lord most high.

Meditating upon these words, I considered whether I would rise with the others and go to the altar to partake of the sacramental emblems. I was still undecided as it came time for the row I was sitting in to rise, but at that moment, the choir began singing the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") and it seemed as if joining that procession of saints seeking renewal at the Lord's Table was not only a logical step in what I was feeling but a necessary step in the spiritual renewal I was seeking that day. As I rose and walked to the altar, Mozart's music made me feel at one with the Lord, enveloping and lifting me on the wings of his love.

Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world,
Have mercy on us.

As I knelt at the altar, one priest placed a wafer in my mouth and a few moments later another offered the chalice of wine. I meditated for a few moments upon these emblems of the Lord's sacrifice for me and then returned to my seat. As I did so, the choir sang the *Benedictus*:

Blessed is he that cometh
in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.

The priest prayed that the Lord would accept our "sacrifice of praise" and sanctify the sacramental emblems to us. He then concluded, "Grant that we may so eat and drink of these holy things in the presence of thy divine majesty, that we may be filled with thy grace and heavenly blessing." After a moment's silence we all said the Lord's prayer, and it had fresh and wonderful meaning for me.

Following communion, the priest said a prayer of thanksgiving and pronounced a blessing on the congregation. The service ended with the choir and congregation singing:

Come down, O love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,

and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

Finally, the priest pronounced a benediction on the congregation:

Go in peace and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

I walked out of the service with a new awareness of belonging to the larger community of Christians throughout the world, with a renewed hope in my ability to be a faithful disciple, and with a renewed devotion to the Lord and his gospel. Once I was outside the Abbey, I immediately took a taxi to South Kensington so that I could be on time for sacrament meeting at the Hyde Park chapel.

The Hyde Park building is a wonderful place to worship, not only because it has an excellent pipe organ that sustains the singing, but because it is home to one of the most international wards in the Church, its congregation filled with Saints from many nations, including a number of people of color. I met, for example, a brother from Trinidad who had joined the Church as a young man because as a child he had been taught the gospel by his Methodist minister father from “Josephus, St. Aquinas, John Wesley and,” he added with his eyes widening, “*Talmage*.” Somehow his father had gotten a hold of a copy of *Jesus the Christ*, from which he taught both his congregation and his family.

The service at Hyde Park was as plain and ordinary as the one at Westminster Abbey had been elaborate and elevated. The choice of hymns was undistinguished and the speakers—an older missionary couple—banal and uninspiring. The brother, who was the concluding speaker, emphasized the importance of missionary work and then told a story about being in a high priests group in a ward somewhere in Utah that met in an historical chapel set on a hill. The stake president wanted to tear the building down, sell the land, and build another chapel elsewhere. In the vote to sustain this action, this brother was the lone dissenter. He thought it was wrong to lose such an important

historical building and so wrote to the General Authorities about his concerns. As a result of his letter, he reported, a General Authority persuaded the stake president to reverse his decision.

It was refreshing, I thought, to hear such an example of individual will and strong conviction that would risk countering local authorities, but just as I was thinking this, the brother concluded, “But since then I have decided to follow my leaders no matter what they say and to sustain their decisions, even if I don’t agree with them.” I was flabbergasted. Did he feel so guilty about this one act of independence that he had to rectify it with a vow never to do something like that again?

As opposed to the service at Westminster Abbey, which was vertical, with the emphasis on praise and glorification of God and Christ, a looking up, a lifting up, the entire service at Hyde Park was horizontal and mundane, in terms of both its general spiritual tone and its singular direction. There was a good deal of talking to one another but very little sense of singing or expressing praises to God, an emphasis on the works of the Church but no mention of the grace of Christ.

After church I walked along the Thames trying to sort out my feelings about the two services. The one at Westminster Abbey certainly appealed to my imagination with its beauty and structure that helped me order my feelings in a deep, significant way. Robert Frost says that poetry is “a thought-felt thing,” and it was that combination of thinking and feeling that the service earlier that day inspired in me, making it at once profoundly poetic and spiritual.

I have often regretted that the Restoration could not have taken place in a “high church” or liturgical context rather than a “low church” or more evangelical one. That is, if Joseph Smith’s religious roots had been Anglican rather than Methodist and Presbyterian, it might have made a dramatic difference in our present form of worship.

I recognize that this would probably have been impossible. Given the fact that it was Anglicanism that the Puritans separated from when they came to the New World, it is probable that there was not even an Anglican church in all of Western New York during Joseph’s time. It is also unlikely that the seeds of the Restoration could have taken

root in soil other than that nurtured by the evangelical fires that swept through what historians refer to as “the burned-over district” where Joseph Smith lived. Just as a prairie is regenerated by the nutrients resulting from grass fires, so the conflagration of spiritual fervor that swept through Western New York in the early 1800s made it possible for Joseph Smith and his family to be receptive to God’s penultimate intervention in history. Nevertheless, it is tempting to contemplate what our services would be like if our original traditions had been more liturgical.

But I also realize that it is its very openness to the *possibilities* of invention, improvisation, and inspiration as well as imagination that makes our form of worship so inviting. That we seldom rise to the occasion presented by these possibilities might say more about our spirituality than the form and structure of our worship services. That is, when our sacrament meetings really work the way the Lord intended them to, they may have the power not only to lift us to heaven but also to unite us on earth in a way that may be more difficult in a highly liturgical service. It is that combination of vertical and horizontal—uniting the glorification of God with deep fellowship—that makes a Latter-day Saint service so promising.

There wasn’t as much of a sense of intimate community at Westminster Abbey as there was at Hyde Park—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there was a different sense of community *for me*. At Hyde Park I felt a close kinship with the Saints assembled there. Though I didn’t know any of them personally, I felt we were part of the same family. What bonded us together was that special witness of the Restoration that we Latter-day Saints call “testimony.” At Westminster, I felt connected to the broader Christian community—the body of Christ, his church, in the larger sense. Those of us who came to worship at this most famous of abbey churches were for the most part strangers and foreigners, although for that hour there was a definite connectedness among us as we became “fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God.” At Hyde Park I was aware of my Mormonness in a deep, personal way. At Westminster I was in touch with my Christianity in a no less profound way.

In truth, I value both traditions, both experiences. I am a Latter-day Saint to the center of my bones. Mormonism is my Church, my people, my faith tradition. Members of my family were converts to the Church in four separate generations, each independent of the previous one, beginning with my great-great-grandparents who joined the Church in Fishguard, Wales, in the middle of the nineteenth century. My great-grandfather left the Church and joined the Reorganized Church. His son, my grandfather, though named Zoram, never joined the Church, but his wife, my grandmother Rees, was converted to the gospel by missionaries traveling through southwestern Colorado in the early part of the twentieth century. My two aunts were baptized at the same time, but my father was not. Later, after I was born and my parents were divorced, my father was converted to the Church through a miraculous priesthood healing. After the Second World War, he taught me the gospel, and I was baptized. I feel enormously blessed to be one of only three descendants of my great-grandparents who are active in the Church today.

Before they joined the LDS Church, my ancestors were Anglican. The sarcophagus of at least one of my ancestors rests at St. Davids Cathedral near Fishguard, Wales. Members of my family in Wales and England still belong to the Church of England. At least one, Hyrum Rees (named after the prophet's brother) was an Anglican minister. They were and are good Christian people. I also identify with their faith tradition and have been grateful for the opportunity to worship with members of that tradition in small parish churches, cathedrals, and abbeys in Great Britain and in the United States. When I go to Good Friday services or Midnight Mass, I go to an Anglican church. It is a part of my heritage that I honor.

I love the restored gospel of Christ. It is so much a part of me that I can't imagine myself not part of it. I love the Church as well. It is my spiritual home. But the village in which my home rests is the Christian church. I also belong to it and it to me. Beyond that village is the wider world of faithful people—Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, as well as many other religious traditions—who love God and try to serve him

and others. These are also my people, and I am one with them. As Coleman Barks's translation of the thirteenth-century mystic poet Rumi puts it:

We can't help being thirsty.
 Moving toward the voice of water
 Milk drinkers draw close to the mother.
 Muslims, Christians, Jews,
 Buddhists, Hindus, Shamans—
 everyone hears the intelligent sound
 and moves with thirst to meet it.
 Clean your ears.
 Don't listen for something you have heard before.
 Invisible camel bells, slight footfalls in sand,
 Almost in sight, the first word they call out
 Will be the last word of our last poem.

This poem is based on one of Rumi's sayings, "If you think there is an important difference between a Muslim and a Jew and a Christian and a Buddhist and a Hindu and a Shamanist then you are making a division between your heart and your ability to act in the world." I believe there are important differences between what I believe and what others believe, but I do not want there to be a division between what my heart knows and how I act in the world. So I believe that despite important differences, what is at the heart of every religion is not different—that the highest form of worship is to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls and to love others as we would want to be loved. Wherever we find these practices, we find fellowship.

Until his retirement in 2012, ROBERT A. REES was a visiting professor and the director of Latter-day Saint Studies at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. He has also taught at UCLA, UC Santa Cruz, and UC Berkeley. Bob's most recent publications are: *Imagining and Reimagining the Restoration* (2025) and *Making Space for Mormon Thought and Culture: The Enduring Influence of Eugene England* (2025). Currently he is co-editing a collection of essays titled *Pillars of My Faith* and a collection of poetry on Joseph Smith.

SANTA IN THE SWAMPS: A CHRISTMAS MISSION

Barrie Brewer

Was it foolish or inspired—this idea of smuggling the spirit of Christmas into the canal-side neighborhoods of Thailand? Could a red suit and a cotton beard convey a message where rote memorized discussions had sometimes fallen short?

It all started with a flash of red.

December 23, 1973. Elder Montgomery and I stood frozen in the doorway of a cluttered Bangkok souvenir shop, staring at what could only be described as a miracle in polyester: a full Santa Claus costume, white-trimmed and sagging on a rusted hanger like a red flag daring us to make a move.

“Thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” he whispered, eyes wide.

“Yep,” I said, already reaching for my wallet. “We bring Christmas to the swamps.” What we missionaries clumsily called “swamps” were actually canal communities built on stilts over polluted water. They were typically where the poorest people lived, neighborhoods stitched together by boardwalks.

By sundown, we had the costume, a sack of gift-wrapped trinkets, and a handful of goodies, with just enough change left for bus fare. Our plan was simple: disappear into the maze of stilted homes along the canals outside Thon Buri and quietly deliver joy where joy rarely visits.

At the bus stop, we drew stares like magnets in red velvet. Murmurs rippled through the waiting locals—half amusement, half confusion.

“*Farang khii nok chati xwn*,” a little boy grimaced, pointing. *Stupid, fat foreigner.*



Barrie Brewer dressed as Santa Claus on a bus in Thailand, 1973.
Courtesy of Barrie Brewer.

Montgomery chuckled, snapping photos with his camera. “We’re gonna scare the Christmas spirit into ‘em.”

When we climbed aboard the battered city bus, silence fell like a dropped curtain. Passengers blinked. The driver froze. Even the conductor hesitated when collecting our fare, gripping his metal collection cylinder like a shield.

Montgomery adjusted his camera strap and grinned. “Ready, Santa?”

“Ho ho ho!” I boomed.

The bus lurched forward. Passengers scattered like startled birds, leaving us an island of empty seats.

“*Khon nee pěn krai kah?*” a woman whispered. *Who is this person?*

Speaking in Thai, Santa asked, “Which stop is closest to the canal, Khlong Bang Luang?”

The driver jolted upright. “*Kheā phūd phās̄ā thiy?*” *He speaks Thai?* Laughter erupted. Directions were offered. And just like that, the curtain lifted.

Beyond the bus stop, stilted homes rose from the murky depths like half-forgotten dreams clinging to the edge of consciousness. Somewhere deeper in the reeds, a frog croaked—low and guttural, as if warning strangers not to linger. Quiet but inhabited, holding its breath after dark.

“Careful,” Montgomery breathed as we stepped onto the floating walkway. One wrong move and we’d vanish into the black water below.

Under the cloak of darkness, we trudged along a slatted boardwalk that creaked like old bones over fetid, black water. The air was thick with rot and woodsmoke. Shanties clung to stilts like survivors of a shipwreck, patched with tarps and scrap tin, glowing faintly from kerosene lanterns within. Torn mosquito nets flapped in the breeze. The scent of mildew lingered. A woman in a brightly patterned sarong stirred a wok, the air lifting with the fragrance of coconut and lemongrass. Each home was a testament to stubborn hope floating above despair.

“This is it,” I whispered. “You ready?”

Montgomery nodded, snapping a few photos. “Let’s deliver some miracles.”

We crept to the first home, where shadows danced behind a canvas curtain. Children’s voices drifted from inside. On our knees, we crawled up wooden steps, gifts cradled like peace offerings. With steady hands, we placed our offerings just inside the threshold.

“*Mee khrai yoo ban mai?*” “Anyone home?” I called before bolting.

Squeals erupted behind us—laughter, delight, the universal music of wonder. We repeated the ritual, house after house, disappearing each time before questions could be asked.

We melted back into the darkness, hearts pounding like jungle drums.

As we made our way back along the moonlit planks, pairs of eyes glinted from between the wobbly slats. Then a rustle. A thud. A flash of fur and fangs.

“What the—beavers?” Montgomery hissed, backing up.

“Too big. Those are—”

“—swamp rats. Giant ones.”

One lunged, baring oversized yellow teeth. Montgomery swatted it with the empty gift bag. I slipped—my foot sank through a rotted plank and the boardwalk groaned.

We tore toward the bus stop, hearts racing, the empty sack flailing behind us. A night like no other, capped with rodent warfare and adrenaline.

By the time we collapsed into our tiny apartment, we were soaked in sweat, laughter, and something else: a feeling neither of us could name just yet.

That Christmas Eve, we gathered with other missionaries, passing around traditional jelly-like Thai snacks and retelling the tale of the Santa who outran the rats. But later, lying on my bed in red pajamas, staring at the floor fan spinning lazily in the doorway, I kept circling back to the question that had lingered since we first stepped off that bus: Did we really make a difference? Or was it just self-prescribed foolishness in costume?

Montgomery developed our photos. In one frame, tiny hands clutched gifts while eyes sparkled with wonder, a universal language that transcended every divide.

Weeks later, I overheard a local woman tell another, “My children got a gift from a red spirit. They say he spoke like a monk and left without asking for anything.”

Saint Nicholas gave in secret. Jesus multiplied loaves for hungry crowds. Buddha taught compassion without condition.

I realized we hadn’t explained anything. We hadn’t taught, corrected, or asked. We had only given—and somehow that was enough.

And in that moment, the question was answered.

No, it wasn't foolish. It was faith: worn like a costume, delivered through laughter, stitched with compassion. That night in the waterways outside Thon Buri, the red suit became our answer: Sometimes the smallest acts of love don't just cross canals; they build bridges made of wonder and generosity, strong enough to stretch between faiths, firm enough to carry the weight of our shared humanity.

There in the canals, three traditions flowed together like tributaries joining a mighty river. Buddhist families received Christian kindness, delivered through Western folklore—and somehow, mysteriously, beautifully, it all made perfect sense.

Under the flicker of lanterns and the hush of muddy water, something holy passed between us. No scripture spoken. Just the gospel of giving.

BARRIE BREWER conducts postdoctoral research in organizational development and global technology learning initiatives, working at the intersection of behavioral science and agile-lean management. His experience spans Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where he has helped nonprofits and multinational organizations strengthen culture, leadership, and team performance.

Song of Solomon's Mother

Christopher Bissett

Beloved, you live unofficially
in decommissioned scripture
condescended to metaphor
a footnote to pages
of thousands of years of thoughtless sons
that squeezed through your valleys
climbed over your mountains
in every new generation.

Our fathers looked down from their rooftops
and frontlined your husband to heaven.
They crowned themselves wise
made a claim on your baby
divided your kingdom in two.
Your children are captive at Babylon
scattered like pieces of bread, ransacked
in hands of your priestly sons.

But you are indeed the true Mother
that insists upon wholing the loaf.
Every broken soul you will gather together
in your endlessly weaving fingers.
Every crumb that falls under pews at church
is perceived by your all-seeing eye.
Your bisected Son is rejoined together.
We'll make you our Mother again.

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Relentless

Nathan Kitchen

Wind.

Wyoming howls relentlessly under July sun and we drive on
Past antelope sentinels and endless sage
Trailing dust into unsettling emptiness—
Sacredness minus snowbanks and a rocky ridge ahead.
I know the stories. They shape me still.

The gravel road ends where monument waits
To offer complicated commemoration
Of my family
Who walked this trail of blood

Starving.
Freezing.
Dying.

I lean into eternal winds,
And touch the bronze that ties me
To them, my ancestors,
In this place that echoes footsteps on old, harsh land
Now classified sensitive trail,
Destroyer of modern cars.

And so, I walk
And walk
Up wheel ruts carved in stone a hundred seventy years ago—
Pulling me up,
Calling me up
To an ending I know, but they did not.

Their faith in this place confronts me
As I turn towards the valley
Where my distant Lexus sits

As silent as the monument,
Shouting my privilege
In the face of my widowed
Great
Great
Great
Grandmother

And her seven young children

Caught in October winds
Where life was in the steady pull
Up horizontal sheets of rock,
Where time was slowed by ice and cold,
Each step a defiant scream into a wind that would not end—
A wind that connects us now
In this age of shorts and sunscreen and a luxury car parked under
 long shadow of handcarts I somehow see through tears.

I call out,
Cries swallowed by gales,
Grandmother, forgive me.
I am not as brave,
A new kind of pioneer in a church we both loved.

I pause.
I listen.
I breathe in the wind as it courses from her lungs to mine.

Relentless.

NATHAN KITCHEN {nrkitchen@live.com} is president emeritus of Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families & Friends. He currently chairs the board of Flourish Therapy, a nonprofit providing care to LGBTQIA+ individuals and their families, and he sits on the advisory board of the Eugene England Summer Institute. He is an author with BCC Press and a dentist in private practice, and he has five children and five grandchildren. He lives with his husband, Matthew, in Arizona.

Nativity Ode

Doug Barrett

Christmas Eve

snow flurries creeping down the mountains
almost caressing cozy houses, bright-lit stores.
Something like sanctity sits upon the many-breasted hills.

White trail across the canyon
worms into the hollows, disappears.

Metamorphic witchery of winter wild—

frost enveloping car windows
fingers cold, but not too cold to write.
Cottontail scampers through the snow.

Getting dark, magpies long gone
jackrabbit limps along a ditch.

Where does that feeling come from—

the lamb-like winter world? Winter is savage here.
Snow and wind can kill you. Snow, like earth,
is part of nature, nature part of God
unless a whore, veiled in bridal white—
purity lie hiding another lie.

Hidden in earth the dragonbody lies.

Prodded by mile-long needles it writhes
and Christmas lights flicker worldwide. It is energy,
diamond mind, fossilized lust, riches of the deep,
sacred river, pressurized power
ejaculating in a mighty fountain

black fiery plumes. Its plastic skin blankets ocean beds.

From Babylonian sands extrude
its innumerable talking heads

expounding the latest prophecies of war
destined to reveal millennial jewel
and ratify the right to rule.

Jesus, do you acknowledge your bastard children?

The temples that you cleansed are full of them:
little gray men naturally warring on nature,
on light, and on each other. Let them play. It's always been this way.
We reverence you, baby Jesus,
not for your omnipotence but for your impotence.

Why do the nations rage? "Let us break his bonds asunder."

The world gathers together to fight against the Tao
against Allah, against Dharma, against Jah
against Nature, against Law, against the Lamb
against the Perennial Philosophy, against all that is Wakan
against the Everlasting Gospel.

Somewhere seabirds ride the lifeless ocean
or lie inert on land, dioxin-blooded.

Survivors call their fellows
across the waters, across continents
"Come together to the supper of the great God!
Maggot-pies, gulls, vultures, crows, feast on human flesh."

Yes, nature can kill you. Yet even at this moment
perhaps it's not impossible to discern
surrounding centrally-heated pleasure domes
the music and the silences
percussion of fir cones
crescendo of wind in pine needles

or maybe even elephants on unfathomably low frequency
whale call thousand-mile sound channel
mythical spheres in harmony

cosmic chant aum-amen

Messiaen's birdsong, mélange of desert languages
insect voices only Bartók heard.

Tomorrow sparrows will forage in these hills

flickers and jays in pinyons imitate

hawks, imitate each other

snowmelt chatter of juncos and finches

each oracle disclosing

the song of the supreme source:

"Come up! This is the marriage supper of the Lamb!

Blessed are those called to it!" Emptiness echoes
out of salt and sage flats, across exhausted ridges

twittering with the unborn light that saves

yet kills you if you never give it birth

or if you do. Haven't you heard it yet:

unlooked-for sound, unheard-of multicolored lights

emanations of the crucified dragonbody

hidden within the cradle of your mind

and sage and snow and pine?

Let it kill you, then go in vain to save the world

with archaic song unending

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Flux of Conversation

Doug Barrett

Yet again through this house like a mountain stream
 chatter has run down the pine-framed vistas
 each landing's distinctive prospect of Tahoe
pressed flat by early August heat
 to the conversation pool
 at last almost drained of guests.

All afternoon like a young girl in a creek
 enchanted by its babbling
 and, in order for the current to flow freely
 with a word here, a word there
to this person or that, arranging stones
 adjusting little logs to make eddies
 so you've played with us.

You like these metaphors, don't you, that sink us into nature.

 "We're sun worshipers," you used to say.

 But also: "If only the gospel excited me like the Beatles excite me
I might really do something." This to us as if
 as if poverty qualified confessors
 as if guilt fashioned the perfect wife
perfect hostess comparing notes on old friends, kids, and yes,
 grandkids
 running smooth or wild.

And so today: "But for me now it's just a matter of getting
 the inside to correspond with the outside."

 Confess—confess that you're still stuck here
in this beautiful house, never locked,
 shaped not for envious show but rather quite unknowingly
 to shape you, nature contra nature, mind eroding mind

as if matter could teach morals.

Life of flowing water, reconciling energies
dissolving obstacles, architecture murmuring to itself
in banks
dams
cascades
shaping
and shaped
releasing, restraining, to avoid needless destruction
but the morality, the intelligence, of a stream, not of a
canal
or a
cattle
chute

much less the cultured discipline of fields
and rigid tree plantations, forcing life
into a fearful frozen symmetry
and regularity of rhythms, framed
in lineaments of compromised desire
that desperately strains against the cage:

“As for living, our children will do that for us.”

Or are those rhythms really
trance-inducing drumbeats
thrusts of love?

So the flood falls, rolling toward Tahoe, big water calling
boiling vapors breathing toward the sun
thundertalk rising over Rubicon Peak.
Don't tell me you can't hear it—the ill-mannered jeremiads:
How many innocents saved from inquisition?
How many false friends lost?

How many times excommunicated for conscience' sake?

How many times crucified for another's sins?

Yes, the cycle is beginning again, deathly sublimation
cumulonimbus billowing as if

from a thousand burning houses.

and you have to say something.

And these houseless naked locals, what shall they do?

Dig deep, ground squirrels, slant upslope marmots

your wretched tunnels, downpour coming—

time to go before cloudburst hail and washed-out roads cut us off too.

We'll talk again, compare our answers maybe

after the walls fall down, the air clears, and all spills happily on
sinking toward desolation, watering alkali flats

the rejected places—and the boulder-rolling pelt-penetrating

ungovernable torrent destined never to reach the sea

has washed away the good as well as evil

In the Brigham Young Memorial Park in a Drought Summer After a Drought Summer

Millie Tullis

Salt Lake City, Utah

a woman tills
the earth
forever her
shoulders never
lift their gentle
bend to soil
the boy
at her feet
prods irrigation water
with his bronze stick

years of some
rain years of
heavy snow
years brushed
these bronze bodies
into green
green bronze
and green still
flexed and bent
the woman
tills earth
forever

& nothing
ever grows

MILLIE TULLIS {millie.tullis@gmail.com} is a poet, teacher, and folklorist. Her poetry has been published in *Sugar House Review*, *Stone Circle Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *SWWIM*, and elsewhere. Her full-length collection, *These Saints are Stones*, was published by Signature Books in 2026. Millie is the editor in chief at *Exponent II*. Find more at millietullis.com.



Page Turner, *Bobbles & Bones*, 2011, fibers, cotton, flax, wool, mouse bones, brass beads, zinc mason jar lid, paint brush, glass dome, 9 x 5 x 5 in.

BRING ME THE HEAD OF EZRA TAFT BENSON

Ryan Habermeyer

Tickets to the auction are in short supply. The auctioneers selected the Beehive House on South Temple for the occasion because of its spacious accommodations. The banquet room has been prepared with rows of cushioned chairs and a lectern near the curtain that leads to the storage room. Nobody knows what exactly will be auctioned. The Mormon Church has made few official pronouncements. But the ushers offer cryptic assurances: *Everything must go*.

The bidders trickle in slowly. Some look excited. Others skittish as stray cats. The room is warm with murmurs. At times it sounds like a voice rising and softening, the way static crackles on an old radio. Collectors from around the world sit near the front, while a cohort of historians in tweed jackets and wire-rim glasses occupy the back. The Osmonds are said to have sent proxy bidders. The Romneys have declined an invitation. An elementary school class that had the good fortune of winning tickets through the lottery system is on the balcony. They look bored.

Outside, the crowd on South Temple murmurs behind the police barricade. A mix of fundamentalists, apologists, skeptics. They hold signs. They chant. Some are cosplaying Mormon history: there are several Brigham Young impersonators, bearded, each with a harem of Victorian-clad women in tow. A man carries a satchel of prosthetic limbs and calls himself Ammon. Older men in blackface profess to be Lamanites. Applause. Jeers. The cameras are rolling. Utah has not been this relevant since—well, Utah has never been relevant.

The old man sitting next to me leans over and whispers, “Are you here for a look at the golden bible?”

After scanning the balcony and not seeing my wife among the unemployed Tabernacle Choir singers, I whisper, “I’m an agnostic observer, nothing more.”

The old man adjusts his glasses and mumbles, no doubt upset that I’ve broken the first rule of Mormonism, which is you can be a liar but never say anything false. The difference is crucial.



The first item for auction is a silver-plated sacrament tray used at the 1897 Bicentennial. It’s followed by a 1920s-era milk bottle produced by the Deseret Welfare Society. Then Michael Ballam’s hymnal, Kirtland Safety Society bank notes, and a VHS copy of *The God Makers*. Stamps. Inkwells. John Taylor’s broken pocket watch. After each sale there is a light applause.

As part of the court-mandated settlement, the Church is not required to admit to fraudulent activity, but after months of speculation it is clear that Mormonism, every scrap of it, is officially for sale. As of 10:59 a.m. tomorrow, the Church will have liquidated nearly two centuries of artifacts hidden in its vaults and raised sufficient funds to pay creditors and plaintiffs of the class-action lawsuit. As of 10:59 a.m. tomorrow, the Church will cease and desist all spiritual operations. As of 10:59 a.m. tomorrow, all priesthood blessings will be null and void, all temple garments will fail to offer protections against ballistic projectiles, and all handshakes—whether in this world or the next—will only be handshakes. This is all in the official proclamation signed by the soon-to-be former prophet.

Still, others are certain that at precisely 11:00 a.m. Mountain Standard Time tomorrow the graves will open and the morning of the first resurrection will commence. Others insist that without the Church we

will no longer enjoy the protection of the Almighty and the Russians will invade. As goes Mormonism so goes America, they say.

There are all kinds of theories as to what happened and why the Church would dismantle operations, but nobody really knows. One General Authority, who wished to remain anonymous, told the local newspaper, "We had a good run, but even Eden had to fall."



None of this would have been possible without Orel T. Talbot. Brother Talbot told his friends. About a year ago, he knocked on my door and said, "Mormons stole the dog." This was before the whistleblowers, and the raids, and the mass excommunications. Before Official Declaration 3. This was before anybody knew the auction was coming. Brother Talbot was going door-to-door telling people something funny was happening at church. Why else was the Bennions' parakeet not in its cage? And the day before that the Knudsens came home to an empty fishbowl. And now the dog. "Facts are stubborn things," Brother Talbot said, "and there are no coincidences." Do parakeets just fly away? Do goldfish commit suicide? "Is it not written," Brother Talbot said, "that when the seals are opened and Babylon rises in the desert that the crust of the earth will heave and the animals shall vanish as a sign of things to come?"

"It doesn't say any of that," neighbors sneered.

"Just wait," Brother Talbot said, stuffing hands in his pockets as he left porch after porch. "The Church is hiding something."



The auctioneer calls for the next artifact. It is Brigham Young's pizzle, preserved in a tincture of brandy. A few people gasp, but most remain in quiet awe. The pizzle, unremarkable in size and girth, floats gently

in the spirits. It auctions for a reasonable price to the Icelandic Phal-lological Museum.



People called Brother Talbot kooky. His parents were as fascinating as drywall. A mother who sang in the choir and canned peaches. A father who ate beef and potatoes at every meal and volunteered in the Boy Scout troop. Somehow, he turned out weird. “He talks like a grandpa,” the kids in Sunday School said. Some of those who spread rumors about Brother Talbot and his perpetual bachelorhood were annoyed he always won the chili cook-off at the annual Halloween potluck, but most were jealous of his left hand. From far away it looked like any other hand attached to the wrist of a sixth-generation Mormon of good pioneer stock. Wrinkled like wet newspaper that dried funny on the porch. But it wasn’t just any hand. That was the hand that shook hands with Ezra Taft Benson.

It happened sometime in 1988 or thereabouts. His mother had sent him to the store for a dozen eggs, and the boy found himself face-to-face with the prophet who was sitting cross-legged in the aisle in dirty overalls, opening the cartons and first shaking and then holding up to his ear each egg. The salmonella outbreak had been all over the news. Brother Talbot watched until the prophet had curated a dozen eggs to his liking.

“The Lord did not invent salmonella,” the prophet said, struggling to his knees, “and neither did the devil. Do you know what that means?” The boy stood there petrified with fear. “It’s a communist plot,” the prophet whispered. Then he stretched out his hand, which Brother Talbot took and helped him to his feet.

He tried to leave but the prophet pulled him closer. His face had a weird sheen to it, like a stone in a riverbed, and his breath smelled of old cheese. He placed one hand on young Brother Talbot’s head and with his other arm raised to the square pronounced a blessing: *The Lord knows*

the tears upon thy pillow, but remember, my son, that the devil rides upon the waters so if thou remainest clean thy skin will turn white and delightful and the avenging Angel shall pass over thee. For inasmuch as thou hast entertained angels unawares, thou shalt be clay in the potter's hand to bring to pass a strange and secret work, yea, for thy lips shall be a murmur but thy hand shall part the clouds of unbelief, and power will be given unto it to sift the wheat from the tares, and lo, by thy hand shall the fowls of the earth and the fishes of the sea be gathered unto Zion and then thou shalt find rest in the shadowed valley until there come one mighty and strong to breathe life into thy bones unto the confounding of thine enemies.

At which point the prophet ceased the impromptu blessing, chuckled a little, dusted his overalls, and shook the boy's hand vigorously. It would be more than fifty years after that fluke encounter in a grocery aisle before Brother Talbot washed it.



Robes from the tabernacle choir auction for pennies. Bruce R. McConkie's Ouija board commands a slightly more respectable price. The elderly gentleman behind me has the winning bid on a handwritten letter from Spencer W. Kimball to George Lucas permitting the prophet's likeness serve as a model for Yoda. I mumble congratulations.

For the next several hours bidding remains tepid. It's mostly Level 2 vault artifacts. Nobody seems interested. Beneath this hesitancy I notice that belief itself is on sale. The bidders are cautious, afraid to purchase their intimate desires, afraid to own a piece of history, afraid this might expose their longings. As Brother Talbot often told me, among the Mormons there is a Goldilocks problem: it's easy believing too much and sad believing too little, but believing just enough, belief amplified with reason—that's unbelievable.

I try calling my wife, but she doesn't answer the phone.

I fidget in my seat. I can't shake the feeling that this outrageous auction is merely a brilliant marketing campaign. For months now, the

fundamentalists have been certain the grand confession in Declaration 3 is all a ruse to separate the wheat from the tares. They are convinced this will be their Captain Moroni moment, content to sit back and wait in their smug self-righteousness. But it is not a ploy. There will be no rapture or grand reveal of a man behind the curtain. The evidence is indisputable. The Mormon faith has burnt up as fast as you can set fire to a scarecrow. All these years on the yellow brick road only to discover there is no emerald city named Kolob. Or to put it in terms the apologists can understand: It was as if we had completed the Tower of Babel only to peer through the clouds and find there was only sky. There were no heavens to reach into, no angels singing, no Gods to pull down and kill to appease our existential dread.



The Sunday after the grocery store hand-shaking incident, everybody knew. People kept turning around in their pews to catch a glimpse of Brother Talbot. In Sunday School, they wanted to touch his fingers, feel the grooves in his palm. They wanted to know if it had turned colors, what it smelled like, if it tingled, if he could reach beyond this world into the next, and whether he'd tried to do any miracles.

"Miracles?" he wondered with boyish naiveté.

"Like walking on water, dummy."

"I know how to swim," Brother Talbot said.

"My hamster died."

"Yeah, why don't you resurrect McKay's hamster?" someone said.

"Do hamsters get resurrected?" Brother Talbot asked.

"Don't be a pussy."

"Yeah, do it," someone said, "say the words."

"Prophets just have to stretch out their hands and it happens."

"No, you have to wait for it to feel weird."

"Feels the same as always," Brother Talbot said, balling his fingers into a fist.

“Don’t be like that, dummy. You basically shook hands with God.”
Brother Talbot shrugged.

It went on like this for months. He refused to let anybody touch it. Not the doctor, not the bishop, not even his parents. He wore a glove for a while but wanted to avoid the appearance of evil and being mistaken for a Michael Jackson fan. He stopped playing the piano. He stopped tying his shoes and let the laces flop around in the dirt. The baseball coach tried to recruit him to pitch, saying he probably could throw a 90-mph fastball now and it would be a sin to waste that gift. He never opened doors. He never clapped. He got a paper cut and just watched the finger bleed, relieved but slightly disappointed that he was still mortal.

Eventually, he warmed up to his newfound fame. He toured the state delivering Sunday firesides. When he raised his hand at the pulpit a hush fell over the room. His photograph was in *The Friend*. He had that church smile, almost plastic the way it bent across his face, with a hearty sitcom laugh track that checked all the boxes of being friendly, safe, normal, holy, and just a touch mysterious. My wife said her parents took her to see him speak when she was a teenager. They beam with pride whenever they tell the story of how she accidentally brushed up against Brother Talbot’s left hand when they both reached to grab bread off the sacrament tray. “And that’s why I’ve been the organist for over thirty years,” she always says with that Mormon half-smile.

Everyone said Brother Talbot was destined for spiritual greatness. He wanted to prove them right. He dipped a finger in the sacrament water, but it was less wine than a mildly chemical porta-potty water. He lay hands on an asthmatic high priest and commanded his lungs inflate, but he died three days later of a stroke. During the wildfires, the only houses that burnt down in the neighborhood belonged to less-actives who refused his prayers. One of the popular girls, Brynleigh-something-or-other, whose parents let her watch *Jem and the Holograms*, told him he could finger her.

Brother Talbot didn’t understand. “Like when the dentist rubs the fluoride on your gums?”

"No, silly," she laughed, "like rubbing the pit out of a peach, if you know what I mean."

"I don't eat fruit," Brother Talbot said.



People are growing impatient when the Level 4 vault artifacts appear. The room is once more full of murmurs. There are the Kinderhook plates and the lost 116 pages. A taxidermized white salamander is brought out in a cage, donated from the personal collection of Dallin H. Oaks. There are few bids for these well-known relics. The Church accountant tracking sales is noticeably disappointed.

"What about the golden bible?" the old man beside me inquires.

The accountant consults with the auctioneer. The two men shuffle through papers. Another well-dressed man enters from behind the curtain where all the auction items are stored. The auctioneer approaches the lectern.

"We can confirm there has never been a golden bible," he says solemnly.

The rumor spreads quickly into the street. One of the fundamentalists lights a Molotov cocktail but it is snuffed out by some ex-Mos. A group of unemployed Tabernacle Choir singers bursts into an impromptu hymn.

"Can you believe it?" the old man says incredulously, a little embarrassed or perhaps trying to convince himself it can't be true. "The spirit of God is like a fire burning."

It's like he doesn't understand that burnt children love matches.



By the time I met him, Brother Talbot's celebrity was a mixed bag. For every testimony meeting professing, *Brother Talbot cured my hemorrhoids!* there was a neighbor saying they heard from the bishop that one of the sister missionaries visiting a less-active member whose

stepdaughter broke up with her unbaptized boyfriend claimed Brother Talbot was caught kneeling beside some kid's bed giving him a blessing in the middle of the night.

He laughed when I asked him about it during my usual Wednesday adjustment at his chiropractor clinic. "Don't believe everything you hear," he said, showing me his pale, gnarled hand while rubbing my feet in clove oil.

I wanted him to touch me with that weird, decrepit hand of his, always fascinated by the possibility there really might be something divine about it, but I was too ashamed to ask.

Sometimes, after a night of too much Dr. Pepper and NyQuil, he would come over and rant. How many years had he spent aligning spines and twisting cricks from necks? How many pinched nerves had he liberated? His essential oil blend cured measles, HIV, and arthritis. And yet the Brethren ignored his requests for brunch, the bishop refused a 2 percent tithing reduction, and he was still home teaching the same jackasses with his father.

"The Jews got a reprieve from the desert after forty years," Brother Talbot said, "but here I am."

I started checking up on him with phone calls. Or a word or two through the slits in our shared backyard fence. On Saturday mornings, I accompanied him to the grocery store, where he liked to taste the free samples. His step was not as brisk, his eyes a bit more glazed than usual. He wasn't sleeping on account of the missing pets. I fixated on the gimpy hand that grabbed toothpicks full of cubed cheese, pineapple meatballs, and bread-and-butter pickles. I had never seen him touch anything with it before. After roaming up and down the aisles one Saturday, we were sitting outside the bakery with a tray of samples when a young father with three kids in tow asked if he could join us. There was no room in the food court. Brother Talbot reluctantly agreed, but almost immediately the young father motioned to his calzone wedge.

"I saw you touch that," he said, "would you mind if I taste it? I'll give you my smoked wieners."

Brother Talbot stared at the doe-eyed, unblinking children. He sighed and gave the young father a look that said, *No calzone will ever be our calzone.*

“What about a handshake?” the father asked. Brother Talbot stretched out his hand. “No,” the father said, “the other one.”

“It’s just a hand,” Brother Talbot said. He walked away.

Both the father and I stared at the half-bitten calzone oozing marinara.



The auctioneer smiles as he presents the sword of Laban along with an arrowhead once belonging to the Lamanite formerly known as Zelph. He narrates an exotic but inaccurate history of steel production in the early Americas, then describes how the arrowhead might have been used in circumcision rituals. One of the historians marches from the rear of the banquet room and hands the auctioneer a statement indicating the sword originated during the Habsburg dynasty. And the arrowhead, an independent chemical analysis reveals, is petrified cow shit.



I remember walking down the street with Brother Talbot as he put up signs on all the lampposts for the missing pets. Behind us, some of the neighbors were discreetly taking them down, but either Brother Talbot pretended he didn’t see them or was too busy deciphering the mysteries in his head.

“They’ll probably turn up sooner or later,” I told him, not knowing what else to say. I could see his face scrunching behind his glasses like a constipated caterpillar. Feeling as though I had upset him, I added, “Or maybe the animals know something we don’t. I’ve heard that right before earthquakes all the worms burrow deeper.”

“Worms have been around for millions of years,” he said, “they feel invisible things before they’re real.”

"Because they're blind and have brains as thin as a thread," I joked.

Brother Talbot sighed. "They got no faces, but I bet they're smiling down there," he said, "not knowing what a CTR ring is."

We kept walking. Sometimes he crouched on a lawn and traced fingers over animal footprints in the mud as if they were some kind of clue.

"I'm tired," he said.

"It is getting late," I said.

"No," he said, "I'm tired."

We kept circling the neighborhood.

"What could they possibly want with all these animals?" he said, putting up another flyer.

"I guess only mystery allows us to live," I shrugged, repeating something I'd read by a dead poet.

"I'll tell you a mystery," Brother Talbot said when we finally circled back to the porch. The sun was down. Our shadows stretched into other shadows. "My grandfather rode to Cottonwood Gulch with the posse that killed those Indians way back when. He'd bounce me on his knee and tell me how he ran out of bullets pinned inside a barn when the Paiutes came in and shot up the stall where he was hiding. There was blood all over his clothes and hands but not a scratch on him. They hanged six or seven of the Indians. He even pulled on their legs to make it go quicker. He used to let me smell his hands. Never washed them. Pale things that smelled like burnt pennies, like that old Indian blood."

I didn't say anything. My mouth was dry. The moon was a thin white smile in the sky. I could see my wife shuffling nervously at the window, worried I was getting strange ideas from *that strange man*. No doubt she was ruining the day she invited me to church to hear her play the organ, hoping her fingers would make me a believer.

Brother Talbot shrugged as he folded up the flyers. "The thing about mystery, kind of like water, is it's always slipping between your fingers before you get it to your lips."

He shook my off-hand in his and pulled me closer. He winked. Or maybe his eye twitched.



The auction continues. It's late. The clock is ticking. All items must be sold before the 11:00 a.m. deadline.

I'm a little confused when two high-ranking General Authorities—prophets, seers, and revelators of the former Latter-day Saint leadership—are wheeled beside the podium. Their hands are folded at the waist. They have penitent faces.

They are auctioning themselves.

The auctioneer reads a biographical description. They are men gifted in discernment with a talent for gestures of serious contemplation. They are learned in a folksy jokes. The auctioneer tries to drive up the price by proclaiming that General Authorities might be of particular value as political consultants, or perhaps as commodity speculators, or as a perfect Christmas gift for the sentimental believer.

In the end, both men are purchased by the Utah Society for the Equitable Treatment of Housewives—an offshoot group of Ordain Women—once it is confirmed that after the disassembly of the Church the men will still turn water into wine. The General Authorities are wheeled away.



"I'm just an ordinary guy," Brother Talbot told me. "I eat vegetables. I read the funny pages. I hit a hitchhiker on the highway once and just kept driving. I say my prayers." This was the night before Official Declaration 3. The next morning the bishop would read the pronouncement from the pulpit, but that night Brother Talbot confessed to me he had washed his left hand for the first time in almost fifty years.

"My sin is I got no faith but all I got is faith," he said. "It's hard to shake the feeling of a beautiful lie."

My wife took the news hard. I'd been trying to tell her all these years it was all a sham, but the heart is a mystery machine and it wants what it wants. I watched her talk to Brother Talbot in the chapel. After she left, he sat alone in the pew. He still had the same church smile as always, but his eyes were a pair of empty shot glasses. He stared at the fingers on his left hand, gnarled and stiff from years of unuse. He tried to open and close the fingers. Eventually, he quit trying.



The Beehive House is emptying out when the auctioneer announces: "Bring me the head of Ezra Taft Benson!" People trickle back inside.

A skull is brought in on a silver platter. It looks remarkably average.

Other bones of deceased apostles, supposedly, are also displayed. The few remaining bidders are allowed to inspect the bones up close but are forbidden from touching. We bend over and stare into the empty eye sockets. Someone whispers they look less like saintly relics than the bones of household pets.



The problem is reverence, I used to tell Brother Talbot. That's what kept me away. Reverence, I told him when he came over around the time the Church started bugging his house, is the drug the Mormons feed you. Get up in testimony meeting and say my wife has inappropriate dreams involving one of the Three Nephites and everyone feels the Spirit burning in their bosom. But the minute you voice something real, something too close to the heart—our leaders sure do talk like used car salesmen—well, that's when Mormons get on their high horse about reverence. Anyone who wants you to revere the absurd and call it holy has a few tricks up their sleeve.



In the final hour, the auctioneer announces that the Church has agreed to create a memories market. He smiles, as if this is the grand finale. For a price, he declares, anyone can forget Mormonism. It is the final act of restitution, the auctioneer explains—forgetting the sin occurred and stepping out the door with a clean slate. It will be an open bid. Pay what you believe your memories of Mormonism are worth. Once payment is received, a Church delegate confirms, a priesthood blessing seals the memories as lost to you forever.

A loud chorus of boos and laughter fills the Beehive House. People throw wadded-up paper and even shoes. The auctioneer hammers the gavel, but the murmuring continues. He pulls aside the curtain, hissing at the archivists. He looks back at the shouting crowd inching closer to the podium. The gavel echoes through the banquet room.

“You won’t try?” I whisper to the old man next to me. “It might work.”

He shakes his head with the look of a holy fool, a little like Cinderella right before the clock strikes midnight hoping she can keep dancing in glass slippers.

There’s no forgetting, he says. It’s too intoxicating, all this belief. This is the one thing the Church can never auction. Yes, he says, the temples will be razed. The bishop’s storehouses will close and scripture will be used as toilet paper, but the memories will live on. The hymns, the prophecies, the rumors, the dread, the prayers, the shame, the testimonies, the spite, the blessings, the love-bombing—it will all live on and on like ivy tangling around an abandoned house.



It’s a few months later when I find the bones in a thrift shop downtown. I’ve been looking diligently. The newspapers didn’t even print his obituary. They ran a thousand articles on his hand but couldn’t speak kindly of the Lord’s anointed just this once. Nothing about how sudden or suspicious or just plain sad his disappearance was. Once the auction

was over, they tossed his bones in the dumpster and changed the channel to other fires burning brighter across the world.

But not me. I know the signs of the times.

The phalanges are nicely bleached and it's obvious all the gnarled fragments are genuine and this isn't some Frankenstein thing piecemealed together from a Salt Lake cemetery or a Hollywood prop. I'm ashamed to say I did doubt, briefly, whether these were the bones of dogs and cats and parakeets or holy men. But I knew they had to be something. Not just a jumble of atoms calcified by luck and time, but something real and inexplicable.

Hurrying home, I lock the door behind me and put the hand with the other artifacts in the basement: the glasses, the toothbrush, the cuff links, even a half-eaten piece of toast with Brother Talbot's bite marks along the edge, all of the knickknacks arranged into a little shrine. I set aside the typewriter with the latest draft of Brother Talbot's biography and light another candle. I check the voicemail, but there's nothing from my wife. The sheets on her side of the bed are unwrinkled and tucked neatly under the mattress. With my eyes closed, I can almost smell her perfume.

I hold the hand close to my lips—his off-hand in mine—and, breathing gently, it's almost like I can feel it pulling me toward the other side. There's a murmur over there. It's almost imperceptible, like a ghost tap dancing in red-hot shoes on my heart. Far away but close. I try to sync my breaths to the murmur that tightens around me like a bird singing about its cage as I bow my head reverently here—here am I.

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CELESTIAL REALTY: A PARABLE, OF SORTS

Roger Terry

The preliminary resurrection was a rush. Bob Markham and his wife, Mandy, stood next to their graves in the Alpine, Utah, cemetery, as instructed, and waited. Quite gradually, atoms and molecules started rising out of the ground and attaching themselves randomly to their spirit bodies. As the elements fused together, Bob and Mandy experienced an almost overwhelming sensation of, well, sensation. Their fingertips tingled, their noses discerned pungent scents on the light breeze, and their hearts throbbed with biological passions they had almost forgotten during their sojourn in the spirit world. But this was only the beginning. The preliminary resurrection gave them only a basic glorified, indestructible body, one that would serve them until the Final Judgment, after which they would be assigned to a kingdom of glory and be transformed further into either telestial, terrestrial, or celestial beings.

Bob was rather certain that they were destined for the celestial glory. He had been a stake president, after all, not to mention CEO of DermRenu, a multilevel marketing enterprise that sold skin-care products based on a highly secret molecule that Bob's brother, Jim, a chemist, had created and that the two brothers had patented. Jim was content to tinker in the lab with new applications for his chemical concoction and enjoy the fruits of his half stake in the business. But Bob was the business genius who had turned a molecule into a multilevel mountain of cash. Consequently, the Markhams had done very well for themselves—a mansion in the hills above Alpine proper; private schools for their six children, all of whom had married well and in the

temple and had prospered in the family business; topped off with an early and well-funded retirement, during which they had served four temple missions to exotic locations. What a life.

After their preliminary resurrection was complete, Bob and Mandy spent the thousand years of the Millennium doing odd jobs in the spirit world, awaiting the Final Judgment and their assignment to the celestial kingdom. And odd jobs they were. Mandy had always had a knack for genealogy, so she became an expert in figuring out what to do with some of the tough cases that came up, like divorced parents whose children had joined the Church and then sealed them to each other in the temple, even though spending eternity together was almost as appealing to them as an eternal root canal. Bob, of course, was a master at management, so he quickly found himself in high demand as an organizer of the house of Israel, which was still in quite a state of disarray. After almost four thousand years of intermarriage and gene pool dilution, it wasn't easy to determine who exactly *was* of the blood of Israel. Did 10 percent Israelite DNA qualify? Five percent? One percent? Initially, Bob believed that identifying the "elect" would be easy, but some of the elect were anything but exceptional. Still, he felt he was doing a bang-up job.

At last, however, the great day drew near. Lucifer was let loose, Michael led his troops in battle and subdued the old devil, and then the earth was burned to a crisp and quickly refurbished into a spectacular orb filled with magnificent splendors and celestial wonders. And one fine day, the Markhams were called in to an appointment with Simon Peter, chief of all Jesus's apostles.

"Bob, Mandy," said Peter, reaching out a hand to each of them. "Come with me. I need to show you your new eternal home." Bob had met Peter a couple of times in his "odd job" and found him to be, well, rather unremarkable. He seemed just a little out of touch. One of Mandy's friends had told them Peter had never even learned to use a computer. "Still stuck in old Palestine, I suppose," she said with a giggle.

Once a fisherman, always a fisherman, Bob had thought when Mandy told him what her friend had said. But now Peter was apparently Jesus's main representative in parceling out celestial real estate.

Peter ushered Bob and Mandy onto a disk of gold that immediately sped off toward the rising sun. After a few minutes, the disk slowed. They passed gleaming neighborhoods of cozy little bungalows. When they finally stopped, however, they found themselves staring up at a massive, radiant castle, somewhat similar to Mad King Ludwig's Neuschwanstein, only much larger, much brighter, and much more elegant, with its roofs and turrets of gold, its crystal windows, and its sprawling gardens.

"So," said Simon Peter, gesturing toward the mammoth palace, "what do you think?"

"I'm speechless," answered Bob, somewhat disingenuously, because he certainly wasn't speechless. After an inner fist pump, he said, "It's perfect. Couldn't ask for more." What he didn't say was that he probably could have afforded to build such a mansion in mortality, but a nineteenth-century Bavarian fairy-tale castle would have clashed with the more modern mansions in their neighborhood. His neighbors probably would have thought it gaudy.

Bob had grown up in a modest suburban Utah neighborhood in West Jordan, so he knew what it was like to be, well, not poor but certainly not well off. He had never forgotten his roots, but he was certainly glad he had outgrown them. Mandy, on the other hand, was the daughter of a respected oral surgeon who had owned a large house, a couple of Mercedes, a boat, an RV, and a spacious cabin in the Uintas, so she had certain expectations when she met Bob. At first, he had seemed too ordinary, and she wondered if she loved him enough to spend the rest of her life in a neighborhood like the one where Bob's parents had raised him and his four siblings. But as she got to know him better, she saw something in him—call it potential. So she took a chance. Call it faith. And her faith had paid off handsomely. She was proud of the man Bob had become. And now she was especially proud of her astute

choice as a somewhat naïve young woman. *What a reward*, she thought. *Lots better than even I had hoped for.*

As Peter turned his eyes from the castle to Bob and Mandy, they looked around and noticed that their new home was surrounded not by castles of similar architecture but by small, pleasant-looking bungalows like the ones they had passed on their way to this location.

“So,” Mandy asked, “who will our neighbors be?”

Peter pointed to his right. “That house over there belongs to St. Francis of Assisi and his wife, Mother Teresa. The one next to it is where Spencer and Camilla Kimball will live. Next to them will be Mohandas and Kasturba Gandhi.” Pointing to the left, he said, “That house is Albert and Elsa Einstein’s. Next door is Abraham and Mary Lincoln’s place. Across the street will be J. R. R. Tolkien and his wife, Edith. Next to their house will be their good friends Clive Lewis and his wife, Joy Davidman. Down the street a bit is Florence Nightingale’s place. She had several marriage proposals in the spirit world but turned them all down.”

“Wow,” Bob exclaimed, “what a neighborhood.” But to himself he thought, *I guess none of these great people knew how to make a buck. Looks like my business acumen is paying off big time.*

“When do we move in?” Mandy asked. “I’m sure I’ll want to do some redecorating.”

“All in good time,” said Peter. “First there’s that little matter of the Final Judgment.”

A few weeks after the home show with their apostolic realtor, Bob and Mandy were summoned to the judgment bar. It was ten feet high, made of solid, sparkling diamond, and behind the bar sat Jesus, smiling broadly. Bob and Mandy stood in silent anticipation. Jesus looked down at them for a long while.

“Brother and Sister Markham,” he said finally, “I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.”

Bob’s brow furrowed. Mandy emitted a high-pitched gasp. “What sort of bad news?” Bob asked.

"Well, somehow you seem to have flunked the final exam."

"Final exam?"

"The castle tour," Jesus explained.

"But we were told that would be our mansion for eternity."

"Oh, you were? I'll have to have a word with Peter about his 'sales pitch.' Anyway, how did you respond?"

"With gratitude?" Bob guessed, hoping he'd given the right answer.

"I really like you, Bob," Jesus replied. "You're quick on your feet, and you have a good heart . . . when it's not distracted."

"We've always treated others generously," Mandy insisted. For years after they made it big, they had donated money to several charities, including the local children's hospital, which even boasted a Markham wing for children suffering from polio, a disease that had made a comeback in Utah after so many parents stopped vaccinating their children.

"I'm afraid you didn't read your Doctrine and Covenants very thoroughly," Jesus answered. "Or that little sermon I gave on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. There's also that, um, matter of the camel."

Bob and Mandy both looked confused. "The camel?" Bob queried.

"You remember," Jesus prompted, "about the eye of the needle and such."

"Oh," said Bob. "I thought that was just hyperbole."

"Well, maybe a little bit," Jesus hedged, "but I *was* making a point. At any rate, for now you'll be assigned to the terrestrial world. There you will learn all about camels and needles and a lot of other important lessons. Maybe in time you'll be ready to live in this nice little neighborhood."

"But . . ." Bob and Mandy stammered.

Jesus smiled and said, "Next."

One of Peter's assistants led Bob and Mandy away to the terrestrial resurrection chamber, and Peter brought Steve and Marla Newquist before the bar. Steve had been a custodian at a junior high school. Marla had taught kindergarten. Steve had never been made a high priest in the

LDS Church. The most prestigious calling he had received was elders quorum secretary, where he had served faithfully for four years. Marla had been a Beehive adviser before the Church deep-sixed some of its more unique monikers, served as an adequate Primary pianist, and taught in all of the auxiliaries. They had raised three children, all of whom had struggled, partly because their parents had been too busy trying to make ends meet to give them certain advantages. Eventually, though, the kids had recovered from their drug addictions, their impulsive marriage choices, and their wandering ways and had returned to activity in the Church, or at least partial activity.

When Steve and Marla came before the judgment bar, both fell instinctively to their knees, not daring to look up. Jesus climbed down from the bar, reached out a hand to each of them, and raised them to their feet. He then hugged them tightly.

"You passed the test," Jesus said with a laugh. "You'll be assigned to the celestial kingdom, and you will live in the house you requested."

Steve and Marla looked up at Jesus in disbelief. The Savior loosed them from his embrace and waved his hand in the air. Suddenly a vision of their castle tour with Simon Peter appeared before their eyes.

"So, what do you think?" said Peter, pointing to the gleaming castle.

"Why, we could never live in a place like that," said Marla. "For one thing, it would be a beast to keep clean. And, well, it's just not us."

"Especially when it's surrounded by all these ordinary little homes," added Steve.

"Don't you want to know who will be living in those homes?" asked Peter.

"It doesn't really matter," said Steve. "We don't want to live in a big castle while our neighbors live in modest homes. We'd feel more comfortable if we lived in one of the smaller homes."

"Well, if that's the way you feel," Peter replied, feigning disappointment. He turned away from the Newquists and winked at the "camera."

The vision closed, and Jesus looked at them again. "You gave the right answer," he said.

“We weren’t trying to give a right answer,” Marla answered. “It’s just who we are.”

“I know.”

“But I do have one question,” Steve said, looking perplexed.

“Ask away.”

“Who *will* be living in the big castle?”

Jesus laughed. “Why, nobody. If you think you deserve to live there, you don’t. And if you wouldn’t feel comfortable living there, we can’t force you to. So, in the end, nobody can live in it. We’ll just leave it there as a reminder about what qualifies a person to live in the celestial kingdom.

“But . . .” Steve stammered, “where do you live?”

“Oh,” Jesus laughed, “I travel a lot, but when I’m in town, I’ll stay in a nice little place next door to Florence Nightingale. She’s a hoot.”

ROGER TERRY retired in 2024 after eighteen years as editorial director at *BYU Studies*. Before that, he spent seven and a half years as a senior editor at the *Ensign* and *Liahona* magazines. Prior to that, he taught at the Marriott School of Management and edited the school’s alumni magazine. Along the way, he has published five books (three novels, a mission memoir, and a theological exploration), scholarly articles, essays, book reviews, short fiction, poetry, newspaper editorials, and the blog *Mormonomics & Mormonethics*.

RAUCH AMONG THE MORMONS

Russell Arben Fox

Jonathan Rauch. *Cross Purposes: Christianity's Broken Bargain with Democracy*. Yale University Press, 2025. 153 pp. Paperback: \$20.00. ISBN: 9-780300-273540.

Jonathan Rauch's *Cross Purposes*, the latest book by the longtime policy journalist and public thinker, presents two broad arguments: first, that throughout American history, Christian churches have played an essential role in enabling our liberal democracy to properly function; and second, that America's Christian churches (mostly, though not exclusively, Protestant ones) have of late abandoned this role, and by so doing have contributed to the breakdown of liberal and democratic rules and norms in American life. In addition to those two broad claims, Rauch makes a third argument: that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has continued to model exactly the sort of role that, historically, American Christian churches once played. Therefore, he asserts, the more the rest of American Christianity can learn from and perhaps even emulate the Mormons and the ways their discourse has created space for a pluralistic civic theology, the healthier America's democratic culture and institutions will be.

Given the praise contained in that third point—and given the philosophically liberal, politically moderate presumptions that underlie it and are generally embraced by the university-educated—it's not surprising that Rauch and his book have received a positive, bordering on enthusiastic, reception among intellectually-inclined mainstream

American Mormons.¹ In contrast, a small, philosophically (as opposed to merely politically) conservative minority have viewed Rauch's arguments far more suspiciously.² Who is right? Assessing that requires considering Rauch's claims in greater detail.

Rauch is well-known as an advocate of classical liberalism and political moderation; indeed, a large part of his reputation as a writer has been built on the fact that he is both an unapologetic atheist and a gay activist, yet neither reasons nor votes the way most Americans would stereotypically assume a gay atheist would (he has mostly been associated with wonky, politically moderate causes throughout his career). Over the decades, he has written thoughtfully about how government programs, however well-intentioned, tend to lessen both the government's legitimacy and efficiency,³ how the attempt to make language and procedures more inclusive only introduces an inquisitorial mindset that is harmful to all,⁴ how the legalization of same-sex marriage would strengthen the cultural importance of marriage rather

1. See Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Why an Atheist Gay Jewish Writer Believes Mormonism Could Save Democracy," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 25, 2025; Tad Walch, "The Remarkable Message a Brookings Senior Fellow Gave to BYU Students about the Civic Theology America Needs," *Deseret News*, Jan. 25, 2025; "Can Mormonism Save American Democracy? A Conversation with Jonathan Rauch and Terryl Givens," *Wayfare*, Feb. 14, 2025, <https://www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/can-mormonism-save-american-democracy>; Jonathan Rauch, "Latter-day Saints Can Save America," *Wayfare*, June 30, 2025, <https://www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/latter-day-saints-can-save-america>.

2. Ralph Hancock, "Moral Agency and Sustainable Liberalism: Rauch's Proposed Liberal-Christian Alliance" and "A New Political Theology of 'Agency,'" June 4 and 5, 2025, *Public Discourse: The Journal of the Witherspoon Institute*, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2025/06/98066/> and <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2025/06/98068/>.

3. Jonathan Rauch, *Demosclerosis: The Silent Killer of American Government* (Crown, 1994).

4. Jonathan Rauch, *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

than encourage sexual liberation,⁵ and how—in his most recent and very philosophically ambitious book—a free society depends upon embracing the achievability of objective knowledge, even when that involves delegitimizing certain revolutionary alternatives and choices.⁶ Throughout it all, Rauch has presented himself as a consummate pragmatist, always asking careful questions and eschewing any kind of controlling ideology.

Of course, as with pragmatism generally, this kind of evidence-based, practical-minded worldview tends to support a particular ideological position—namely, a classically liberal, utilitarian, and secular one, in the spirit of John Locke, Adam Smith, James Madison, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. Early in *Cross Purposes*, Rauch succinctly describes his ideological preferences (though without calling them that): “the modern tradition of freedom, toleration, minority rights, and the rule of law.” In support of such aims, he sees “three linked social systems” as essential: “liberal democracy to make political choices; market capitalism to make economic choices; and science and other forms of open critical exchange to make epistemic choices” (12). He is and long has been a consistent defender of responsible, thoughtful, but nonetheless total individual choice, in matters of politics and economics and religion, unfettered by custom or community.

But for all that, because he also accepts as both prudentially necessary and philosophically correct that choices must be made responsibly and thoughtfully, he’s not a libertarian. He knows that there are things that he does not and perhaps cannot know, and thus he needs to rein in his individual liberty and trust at least to a certain degree in the slow, patient work of ideas and options through society and culture. It is that conservatism in his nature that has led him, a nonbeliever, to take

5. Jonathan Rauch, *Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America* (Holt, 2005).

6. Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

seriously the historical role that Christianity has played in the development of the American democratic system that he prizes. In the book, he repents of his one-time intellectual overreliance upon the separation of church and state when addressing social and political problems; he now views his youthful celebration of “apatheism”—the ideal of simply “not caring very much one way or another about religion”—as “superficial” (5). Instead, he now believes “not just that secular liberalism and religious faith are *instrumentally* interdependent but that each is *intrinsically* reliant on the other to build a morally and epistemically complete and coherent account of the world” (21). Secularism and freedom of choice cannot fulfill the human need for belonging and meaning, and the Christian religion cannot escape its inability to account for the physical laws and the moral horrors of the universe. Hence, what is necessary—and what he believes that “the United States has been generally good” at for most of its existence—is for both American Christianity and liberal democracy to do their part in holding up the walls of our civic home. Creating an environment wherein this balance can be maintained requires “that the Constitution be interpreted in a way which is consistent with the well-being of law-abiding faith communities, and that God’s work be interpreted in a way which is consistent with the well-being of democratic pluralism” (33). The rule of liberalism in matters of politics and law must always accommodate religious exceptions, he affirms; but at the same time, the rule of Christian faith in society and culture must always give way to liberal protections and rights. This is a complicated balance, but it is one Rauch has confidence in, and one that he seeks to persuade his secular readers to be confident in as well.

From this point, Rauch moves forward with an argument that aligns with a good deal of other contemporary sociological research and political observation. First, that over the twentieth century, main-line Protestant churches became less culturally distinct, losing their ability to mold their parishioners and implicitly direct them toward the

virtuous role they had historically played in America's civic order. And second, that Protestant churches that rejected the mainline's compromise with secular liberalism gradually moved in an ever more partisan direction, adopting a paranoid and conspiratorial version of Christian teachings, which Rauch refers to as the "Church of Fear." This transformation led them to acquiesce to—and eventually to triumphantly embrace—the vulgarity, immorality, and cruelty of Donald Trump's paranoia and grasping defensiveness as their perfect political avatar.

While I will not deny that my personal political judgments are a factor here, I would still insist that the passages where Rauch brings the receipts, showing how thoroughly *un-Christian* it is to support Trump and the party he has built in his image, are really the best in the whole book. (One hopes that, by the time this essay is printed, Trump's transformation of American democracy in an authoritarian direction will not be so complete as to prevent the previous sentence from being published.) Rauch shows how evangelical Christians dismissed their previous insistence upon personal character in judging candidates and ignored Trump's criminality; how their gleeful identification with Trump as a culture fighter underscores how little faith they actually have in God's providence; and how their embrace of what Rauch calls "sharp Christianity" prevents them from articulating even a semblance of adherence to the Christian imperative to forgive and love rather than fight and punish. It is, frankly, a damning indictment, and since he believes that those imperatives have been central to the development of the civic culture within which American democracy flourished, it is an indictment of Trump's Christian supporters as *un-American* as well. As he concludes:

[S]ecular liberalism and Christianity have separate purposes. They do not need to *ally* (and should not); but they do need to *align*, at least well enough so that democracy's wheels don't come off. . . . In that respect, we seculars are entitled to hold the church accountable to the democracy of which it is part. We are entitled to hold it accountable

for the choices it makes. While the church's relationship with God is its own business, secular Americans are justified in reminding our Christian friends that the Church of Fear is toxic for them and for us. We are not out of our lane to suggest that what Russell Moore calls "confident Christianity"—one which "constantly reminds us that this life is less important than the next [and] demonstrates something of what it means to forgive and serve one another"—needs repair for all our sakes. In short, we have standing to hope, perhaps even insist, that Christians get their act together. (89)

Rauch believes American Mormonism provides a model of action that Christians could use as a blueprint to repair themselves. But should thoughtful LDS members accept as accurate his overarching historical account of American civic pluralism? Should we accept as correct what he sees within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as contributing to it? And if American Mormons do not accept one or both of these, does that mean the conservative critique of Rauch is correct?

Let's begin with what I assume to be the most obvious problem (at least for the likely readers of this essay; were *Dialogue* a Roman Catholic publication, Rauch's Protestant-centric account of America's civic culture would likely rankle even more). Any Mormon who can qualify the insistent celebration of Americanism that came to characterize the rhetoric and culture of the post-polygamy LDS Church of the twentieth century—an insistence that arguably is still far from truly fading—ought to be prompted to ask Rauch why his initial description of the American bargain between Christianity and democracy didn't provide some explanation for the profoundly anti-pluralist attacks on Mormonism that defined its development for decades. After all, perhaps the single greatest piece of evidence from American religious history that the country's liberal democracy was *not*, in fact, built within the liberal civic walls Rauch describes was the official exclusion and persecution that violently drove the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints out of the United States entirely. And this is *not* a parochial point; placing nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism alongside slavery and

Know-Nothingism as clear signs that America's Protestant Christian civic culture was heavily dependent upon racial, ethnic, religious, and gender exclusion is broadly accepted as a key component of any historically honest consideration of America's civic identity.⁷

Yet the only discussion of this defining example of religious oppression in American history that is present in *Cross Purposes* isn't to be found in Rauch's description of the intellectual components of America's liberal democratic culture, as it should be; rather, it appears as one of the motivating reasons why Mormons, in Rauch's reading, are so *supportive* of that democratic culture: "the modern church's . . . memory of persecution has bred sensitivity to the importance of religious freedom and pluralism" (108). Contrary examples from Mormon history, like Brigham Young's politically illiberal State of Deseret or the economically illiberal United Order of Enoch, receive no mention in the book. Joseph Smith's Council of Fifty *does* get a mention, but even that rhetorical embrace of religious authoritarianism—however quickly abandoned—is instead presented entirely in terms of a defense of freedom and religious choice, emphasizing how "Smith went so far as to . . . propose constitutional revisions requiring 'the armies of the government' to enforce 'principles of liberty' for all people, not just the Protestant majority" (110). That Rauch passes over the complications of Smith's not-always-coherent embrace of both religious authoritarianism

7. See, among many other sources: J. Spencer Fluhman, *"A Peculiar People": Anti-Mormonism and the Making of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Megan Sanborn Jones, *Performing American Identity in Anti-Mormon Melodrama* (Routledge, 2013); Patrick Mason, *The Mormon Menace: Violence and Anti-Mormonism in the Postbellum South* (Oxford University Press, 2011); and Donald Scott, "Mormonism and the American Mainstream," National Humanities Center, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/nmormon.htm>.

and republican freedom,⁸ to say nothing of other explorations of very real authoritarian alternatives present throughout American history is, perhaps, predictable but still unfortunate.

My point here is not to claim that LDS Church members or Americans generally must necessarily have some secret, ambiguous authoritarianism historically buried in our belief system. (Not that the rise of Trump hasn't led some historians of American religion to suggest exactly that.⁹) Rather, it is to claim that Rauch's understanding of America's liberal democracy and its relationship to expressions of religious faith, both as a matter of history and a matter of theory, is simplistic, and it requires papering over many ideas and actions that cannot be neatly arranged into a straightforward argument against the terrible choices Trump-supporting Christian churches have made, however worthwhile such an argument may be. There are thoughtful, historically grounded accounts of the development of LDS doctrine and practice that provide support for Rauch's thesis, seeing in LDS revelations various prophetic statements in support of freedom of conscience and secular moderation.¹⁰ But there is plenty of similar scholarship that

8. See Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (W.W. Norton, 2020), and Russell Arben Fox, "Religious Liberty and Joseph Smith in Park's *Kingdom of Nauvoo*," *By Common Consent* (blog), Feb. 9, 2020, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2020/02/09/religious-liberty-and-joseph-smith-in-parks-kingdom-of-nauvoo/>.

9. Michael J. Christensen, "'No Kings': The Rise of Religious Authoritarianism In America," *Religion Unplugged*, June 14, 2025, <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2025/6/14/no-kings-the-rise-of-religious-authoritarianism-in-america/>.

10. See R. Collin Mangrum, "Mormonism, Philosophical Liberalism, and the Constitution," *BYU Studies* 27, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 119–37; Rodney K. Smith, "James Madison, John Witherspoon, and Oliver Cowdery: The First Amendment and the 134th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants," *Brigham Young University Law Review* (2003): 891–940; and Frederick Mark Gedicks, *"No Man's Land": The Place of Latter-day Saints in the Culture War* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

makes the opposite case—that Mormonism, both theoretically and practically, is half-hearted at best in its accommodation of liberal freedoms, rational procedures, and cultural pluralism.¹¹ Rauch's recruitment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints into his invocation of a more liberal, less Trumpish Christianity is bound to attract much support from faithful Mormons frustrated with our religious culture's recent political turn, but it needs more work than he provides.

To give Rauch credit, he does make thoughtful use of the LDS doctrine of agency, employing that doctrine (which, under Rauch's reading, stipulates that, as all of God's children have the ability to make choices, the process of choice—if not necessarily the end result—must itself be respected, tolerated, and negotiated with) to persuasively elaborate upon several passages in sermons and speeches given by President Dallin H. Oaks. He summarizes: "Oaks argues for an alignment between God's moral constitution and Madison's political one. Speaking for the church, he sees patience, negotiation, and compromise . . . as social and spiritual ends unto themselves" (96). There is a quality to Rauch's writings here that can only be described as heartfelt; there is no doubting his sincerity, and his deep appreciation of some of Oaks's comments on the matter, when he writes about how he found the surprise passage of the "Utah Compromise" in 2015—which provided protection against housing and employment discrimination to Utah's LGBTQ population—as "inspirational" (100). But still, it is difficult to square his praise, for example, for Utah governor Spencer Cox when he apologized to LGBTQ Utahns for his past offenses in 2016, with his silence regarding Cox's vocal support for Donald Trump and opposition to the interests

11. See Steven D. Smith, "The Promise and Perils of Conscience," *Brigham Young University Law Review* (2003): 1057–66; D. Michael Quinn, "Exporting Utah's Theocracy Since 1975: Mormon Organizational Behavior and America's Cultural Wars," in *God and Country: Politics in Utah*, edited by Jeffery E. Sellis (Signature Books, 2005), 129–68; Gordon and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Early Mormonism and the Modern LDS Church*, 2nd ed. (University of Utah Press, 2016).

of trans individuals in 2024. Or for his quotation of polls from 2016 and 2020, showing comparatively low levels of support for Trump among LDS Republicans, and using that as support for his assertions about the supposed liberality of Mormon Christianity, while failing to note more recent polls that show that support for Trump increased among all Mormon demographics in 2024. True, all these snapshots are part of a complicated story. But a complicated story about LDS history and culture—one where our appreciation of personal agency and public-spiritedness is deeply entwined with our own particular, often partisan, prophet-idolizing Church of Fear—is not what Rauch wanted to tell.

In some ways, the critique of Rauch made by conservative (or “post-liberal”) Mormons is thus correct. For those wanting to accept Rauch’s conflation of being a good Mormon and being a good (that is, non-Trumpist) modern American, Ralph Hancock’s pointed challenge is a hard one to deal with. Hancock asks, “How can religion ‘align’ itself with liberalism . . . without at some level in or some way ‘supporting’ Rauch’s liberal (that is, atheistic and ‘scientific’) understanding of truth and of humanity?” Hancock’s fierce dismissal of Rauch’s key theological claim about Mormonism (“[Rauch’s] understanding of ‘agency’ is neither a remotely adequate phenomenology of human choice nor a serious rendering of LDS belief”) is also very much on point.¹²

But overall, Hancock’s conservative rebuke of Rauch’s longed for (and simplistic) rapprochement between liberal principles and Christian churches in America is also, in its own way, superficial. Rauch’s summation of the message of Christianity as “Don’t be afraid. Imitate Jesus. Forgive each other” is obviously incomplete and designed to point out an easy alignment between Jesus and Rauch’s hero, James Madison. But it is a substantive message, nonetheless, one grounded in a deep conviction of and commitment to Jesus’s loving, sacrificial gift of grace. To claim, as Hancock does, that the characteristics of Christianity that Rauch correctly condemns many Christian churches for having

12. Hancock, “Moral Agency and Sustainable Liberalism.”

abandoned in their partisan, paranoid embrace of Donald Trump—namely, humility, forgiveness, and tolerance—are actually insufficient to allow for “substantial participation as Christians in public life” is nonsense. Or at least, it is nonsensical if one accepts such profoundly pluralistic giants of liberal Christianity from Dorothy Day to William Sloane Coffin to Fred Rogers to Gene England as Christians, which I assume Hancock would, though perhaps only grudgingly.

To be fair to Hancock, none of those Christian leaders had to explicitly confront what he considers to be the primary challenge to substantive Christian belief today: namely, gay marriage and other assorted issues pertaining to the rights of LGBTQ individuals. Rauch himself frequently underscores how difficult these concerns—including his own marriage to his gay partner—are for certain Christian believers. This takes him back to the LDS Church and how he believes its chastening failure in the fight against same-sex marriage made it rededicate itself to its supposed inner liberalism: “After its Proposition 8 debacle in 2008, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has foregrounded those elements of its faith which harmonize with America’s constitutional order” (120). Rauch believes, in short, that even Mormonism’s illiberal elements (which he does not theologically explore at all) point in the direction of a Christianity at peace with pluralism and negotiation. After all, he argues, the LDS Church changed regarding plural marriage and the priesthood and temple ban on people of Black African descent, and yet it remains a substantive religious community. So why shouldn’t the rest of Christianity follow its example and make its way through a culture supportive of gay rights respectfully, too?

And it is this prospect which most horrifies conservative critics of Rauch’s vision of Mormonism. Hancock is dismayed at the possibility that “LDS church members have been insufficiently appreciative of the positive cultural and evangelical effects of the church’s alliance with Roman Catholics and others” in opposing gay marriage; that the institutional church, in its drive to “participate in the fashioning of legislative compromises” over LGBTQ issues, will not fully attend to

the “trade-offs of these compromises and their long-term effects”; and that Mormons will take a little too seriously the idea of “peacemaking,” which comes “perilously close to endorsing not only the fundamental dignity of all God’s children, but even the ideological self-understanding of those with whom we find that we must compromise.”¹³ These are the sorts of terrors that will keep those who insist that the substance of the Christian faith is entirely bound up in a few passages from Paul’s letter to the Romans (or Spencer W. Kimball’s *The Miracle of Forgiveness*) awake at night. The “Church of Fear,” indeed.

As a cynic in most things related to the ecclesiology of the LDS Church, I surprisingly find myself thinking that President Oaks’s words perhaps provide a better guide than Rauch or his critics to the complexities of maintaining a binding Christian faith in the midst of a world of individual choice, as well as a better guide to the doctrinal imperatives behind such supposedly banal principles as showing respect to and non-violent acceptance of those with whom one disagrees. Rauch celebrates Oaks’s comments at his University of Virginia lecture in 2021, “Going Forward with Religious Freedom and Non-Discrimination.”¹⁴ However, that speech leaves aside explicit consideration of LGBTQ issues, mentioning them only in passing, preferring to avoid any direct reference to doctrine (whether religious or constitutional) and endorsing instead the view of a colleague of his that informal, practical trade-offs work well in addressing questions about compromise where “abstract principles sometimes cannot.” Oaks has obviously addressed balancing abstract religious imperatives with secular necessities many times before, and sometimes harshly, but there is reason to see his rhetoric as having moved away from strict constitutional interpretation over the decades, as have

13. Hancock, “A New Political Theology of ‘Agency.’”

14. Dallin H. Oaks, “Going Forward with Religious Freedom and Non-discrimination,” 2021 Joseph Smith Lecture at the University of Virginia, Nov. 12, 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-dallin-h-oaks-speech-university-of-virginia/>.

the positions of the Church leadership as a whole.¹⁵ In an interview with Rauch, Oaks acknowledges that, in adjusting some (though obviously not all) of its language about and approach to LGBTQ individuals and interests since 2008, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has “left some evangelicals behind” and can no longer count on the same level of “Catholic support” to say nothing of no longer “track[ing] well with conservative Republicans” (102). Given the strong support Utah continued to give Trump in 2024—and the fact that Utah’s entire congressional delegation is Republican—one can doubt Oaks’s comments to Rauch were entirely accurate. Yet they remain far from providing the sort of perspectives post-liberals might wish for.

For his part, Hancock describes Oaks’s sermon “Balancing Truth and Tolerance” as a “classic address,” highlighting its martial language: “We are cast as combatants in the war between truth and error. There is no middle ground.” But he seems to fail to fully appreciate the sermon’s very next sentence: “We must stand up for truth, even while we practice tolerance and respect for beliefs and ideas different from our own *and for the people who hold them.*”¹⁶ This sentiment is not at all aligned with Hancock’s own post-liberal rejection of Rauch’s version of Mormonism, a rejection founded upon a supposed distinction between respect and tolerance, between people and the beliefs they hold. Hancock states that it simply isn’t possible for religious believers to function honestly in an environment of democratic compromise while holding to the understanding that their opponents are “profoundly and disastrously wrong”—yet that difficult thing is pretty much exactly what Oaks is calling the Mormon faithful to do.

15. See Mauro Properzi, “LDS Understanding of Religious Freedom: Responding to the Shifting Cultural Pendulum,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 128–47.

16. Dallin H. Oaks, “Balancing Truth and Tolerance,” Church Educational System, Sept. 11, 2011, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2013/02/balancing-truth-and-tolerance?lang=eng>. Italics added.

Rauch is too much of a secular liberal, too committed to open inquiry and the philosophical premises that require open inquiry, to automatically assume that any one view is “profoundly and disastrously wrong.” In contrast to the paranoia of the post-liberals, Rauch’s view of Christianity—even that Christianity which he believes has been horribly twisted in advocacy for authoritarianism—is neither dismissive nor domineering; on the contrary, he feels it highlights what he calls the “exilic mindset,” the position of being a minority, as profoundly honorable (135). Rauch understands the virtue of those who see the world in accordance with a different truth than he, an understanding that Oaks at least sometimes seems to share. (In his address, Oaks insisted that, even when believing Mormons enjoy a majority position in a community, “they should always be sensitive to the views of the minority,” something that those members of the LDS Church who have become convinced that they alone are defending Western civilization against the woke and homosexual hordes should probably be reminded of.) So, while Rauch’s articulation of that virtue is far from philosophically satisfactory, he has nevertheless perceived something about kindness and respect, compromise and forgiveness, that too many Christians in America have forgotten. If this gay atheist has found a way to use Mormonism—or at least one small, rather insufficiently developed part of it—to call those Christians (including some members of our own tribe) to remember those classic virtues, we owe him our thanks and ought to listen to him as well.

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Reflecting on the Mormon Moment

Rosemary Avance. *Mediated Mormons: Shifting Religious Identities in the Digital Age*. University of Utah Press, 2025. 216 pp. Paperback: \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1647692063.

Reviewed by Brenda R. Weber

Mediated Mormons: Shifting Religious Identities in the Digital Age is a thoughtful consideration of both the practices and belief systems of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—colloquially referred to as Mormons—and the religious meaning that is often communicated and solidified through contemporary media. Drawing on a narrow band of time that has been termed the “Mormon moment” (roughly 2010–2012), Rosemary Avance, an assistant professor of media and strategic communications at Oklahoma State University, uses case studies and broader theories about religion and communication to better understand a basic question: What does it mean to be a Mormon in the twenty-first century? Critical to Avance’s discussion is both who and what Mormons are and who and what have the right to make that determination.

In many ways, as an American-born religion that was founded in 1830 and came of age in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Mormonism finds ready parallels in both the principles of Americanness (individualism, democracy, free agency, meritocratic upward mobility) and in a mediascape that, much like the religion itself, has expanded with lightning speed in the last two hundred years. The answer to knowing the meaning of “modern Mormon identity,” as Avance phrases it, is to recognize that Mormonism exists in a discursive and often contradictory arena, positioning the faith system and those who adhere to it as both insider (in this case, as the model American citizen) and outsider (as persecuted, wronged, and misunderstood). Media plays

a central role in this representation, largely because Mormonism has been and continues to be a topic of fascination for non-Mormon creative producers, from *The Book of Mormon* musical to TV shows like *Big Love* and *The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives*. But as Avance and many other scholars have noted, Mormonism has also long been committed to using self-representation and public narrative both to sustain self-understanding and as a tool for recruitment to the Church.

For those familiar with Mormon studies, these are not original insights—but Avance’s book is helpful for the careful eye she brings to her case studies. Interested scholars will be richly rewarded by the extensive and persuasive archive of primary-source news items and Church pronouncements the author considers in her conversation. The tension between orthodoxy (right thinking) and orthopraxy (right action) is one that fascinates Avance and, indeed, two millennia of religious practitioners and scholars. In this case, however, Avance’s focus on Mormonism means she tries to sort out how much of Mormon identity is determined by a broader culture of socially scripted expectations (around tithing, baptismal rites, keeping the Word of Wisdom, wearing garments, etc.) and doctrinal belief. The fact that Mormonism is predicated on a “living doctrine,” which is to say that the prophet might receive divine inspiration and thus change the doctrinal code of the Church in the present moment, allows for a flux in the belief system of the LDS Church, a fact noted by many LGBTQ Saints, as one example, who live ever-hopeful for divine inspiration that will change the Church’s stance on queer folks, as the 1978 revelation did on Black men’s eligibility for priesthood status.

Again, this is well-trod territory for the Mormon studies scholar, and I say this as someone who sees herself as largely outside of this conversation. Avance’s greater contribution is in her communication studies background that allows her to look specifically at four case studies, organized as the chapters of her book. These are: (1) debates about the relative allowability of caffeine in the LDS dietary code, the Word of Wisdom; (2) discussion of Mitt Romney in 2012 when he was the first

nominee for US president selected by a major political party who was also a Mormon (side note: Joseph Smith also ran for president but was nominated by the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, the governing body of his own church); (3) debate of issues around secrecy and surveillance of apostates (those choosing to leave the Church), largely through a discussion of the podcast series *Mormon Stories*; and (4) dissection of attitudes and restrictions on Mormon women, including a small but thriving Mormon feminist movement and the “Wear Pants to Church Day” campaign. It is through Avance’s evenhanded and trustworthy analysis of these case studies that she is able to flesh out a fascinating tapestry where media both makes and unmakes a larger sense of identity. The payoff of her book, it seems to me, is less in definitively knowing the meaning of Mormonism as in recognizing its endless vacillation and adaptability.

While Avance deliberately limits the scope of her analysis to Latter-day Saints (mainstream Mormons) from 2010 to 2012, further exploration of media in relation to Mormon identity beyond this time period and outside the media production of the LDS Church would be helpful. The Mormon mediascape, indeed, the Mormon moment, is bigger than the three years Avance identifies. While Walter Kirn famously captured the spirit of increased interest around Mormons and Mormonism in his 2011 *Newsweek* article called, aptly, “The Mormon Moment,” the American fascination with Mormon peoples and practices has been sharp since its inception. As just one example, consider Ann Eliza Young, one of Brigham Young’s fifty-six wives, who in 1873 “divorced” the Church’s second president and left the Church, making a career on the nineteenth-century lecture circuit and publishing a best-selling book *Wife No. 19*. Brigham Young’s multi-windowed house in Salt Lake City has been an international tourist destination ever since.

Kirn himself suggests that increased visibility of Mormonism was less the point of the “Mormon moment” than what the “quirky” and “wacky” American-born religion allowed a broader culture to understand through it. Specifically, Mormonism carries within itself a “legacy

of marginalization” but also of “pluck” and hard work. Mormons are just like everyone else, declares the Church’s “I’m a Mormon” campaign, except in Kirn’s words, “they’re not. And it is their distinctiveness that is influencing the broader culture.”¹ Also, despite the efforts of the LDS Church to make the meanings of Mormonism unified, Mormons in the media are a far more varied and heterogenous group than Avance accounts for. For example, the protagonists of both HBO’s *Big Love* (2006–2011) and TLC’s *Sister Wives* (2010–present), two shows Avance understands to be instigators of the “Mormon moment,” hail from fundamentalist branches of the Mormonism, though they call themselves and are referred to in the media as Mormons. To think of Mormonism is always to operate in parallel intellectual chronologies, the time of now and the long history of the Church’s becoming, something the creators of these television programs fully understand (particularly given how characters, both in scripted and reality formats, struggle with the prophecy of polygamy in the context of the messiness of domesticity). Given this and many other factors that I do not have room to enumerate, the sign of Mormonism is much bigger than what the mainstream Church in Salt Lake City authorizes. I believe with her astute observations about media culture, Avance could and should have done more with understanding the heterogenous signs of Mormonism in the contemporary mediascape, even while her case studies are solid in their careful investigations.

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1. Walter Kirn, “The Mormon Moment,” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2011, <https://www.newsweek.com/mormon-moment-67951/>.

Desiring Stories, Storied Desires

Rebecca L. Davis. *Fierce Desires: A New History of Sex and Sexuality in America*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2024. 496 pp. Paperback: \$19.79. ISBN: 978-1324116752.

Reviewed by Christine Talbot

Rebecca L. Davis's book *Fierce Desires: A New History of Sex and Sexuality in America* asks as its animating question, how have Americans valued, expressed, and contained their desires over the course of American history? The first comprehensive history of sexuality published in over thirty years, Davis's book applies new paradigms and conceptions of the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality to show that neither sexuality nor sexual identities are unchanging facts—they have a history we can and must learn from if we are to solve some of today's most vexing sexual concerns. The book's central conceit, and perhaps its genius, is its use of narrative and story to link individual and communal lived experiences of desire and sexuality to their larger context and to examine the role of historical context in shaping individual lives. This approach balances the individual and community with the national, agency with social structure, and the personal with the political.

Davis gives readers a long arc of American desires and intimacies in white, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and working-class communities. It traces three broad periods beginning with the early years of settlement through the early nineteenth century, when Americans "organized their societies as hierarchies in which class, gender, status, and, increasingly, race, were supposed to determine a person's sexual liberties" (5). Over time these liberties expanded for white men but contracted for others (5). Many of those others nonetheless asserted the value of their desires, as did Juana Hurtado, a woman of mixed

Native and Spanish heritage captured by the Diné (Navajo) who later became a significant landowner in what is now New Mexico. Refusing to conform to the Catholic sexual demands of Spanish settlers, Hurtado had children with a man from the Zia Pueblo within a relationship that relied for its status on Pueblo kinship ties more than legal wedlock. In an early but splendid example of how Davis culls broad historical trends, shifts, and conflicts from sometimes ordinary narratives, Davis builds from Hurtado's life a chapter investigating the sexual customs, beliefs, laws, and practices characterizing Indigenous sexualities as they conflicted with the processes of Spanish colonization in what is now the American West. In another chapter, the story of January Colbert, an enslaved young man forced by violence to cease courting a woman enslaved at a nearby labor camp, anchors a chapter about how enslaved people resisted white control to establish their intimacies in the context of sexual violence, family separation, sexual stereotyping, and the exploitation of enslaved women's reproductivity. The love letters same-sex beloveds wrote to each other provide context for an exploration of queer intimacies in the early Republic. All of these stories illustrate the power of individual agency to create meaningful lives in the context of colonial, racial, state, and community violence and censure.

Part two of the book examines how, from the mid-1800s to the early twentieth century, many Americans explored sexual desire for its own sake and critiqued many of the forces keeping sex, sexuality, and sexual violence under wraps. This section begins with the story of Mormons who practiced polygamy, alongside other sexual radicals of the time, such as free lovers and the Oneida community that practiced complex marriage. Davis situates Mormonism as the most radical and long-lasting of these experiments. At the same time, increased contact between settlers and Indigenous communities illustrated other alternatives to monogamous, lifetime heterosexuality. In a series of late nineteenth-century legislations, the federal government asserted

unprecedented control over Americans' intimate lives, making "marital monogamy . . . the price of citizenship" (128). This section also covers concerns over obscenity that permeated late nineteenth-century America, when new sciences of sex defined "normal" and "deviant" sexualities, often identifying the desires of queer people and people of color as the latter. Likewise, stories of gender-bending and same-sex love, Anthony Comstock's campaign against "obscenity," the sexual risks and rewards of new commercial entertainments, and the development of early queer urban subcultures help readers explore early twentieth-century shifts toward more public expressions of hetero and queer desire. Davis also explores the development of "vice squads" meant to suppress various forms of sexual "deviance."

Part three covers 1938 to 2024, looking primarily at post-World War II sexual modernity, when reformers and revolutionaries argued that sexuality is an expression of the self and a fundamental human freedom. This section begins with sex researcher Alfred Kinsey's life and work as the narrative rooting an examination of sexuality in the 1950s. During a time often characterized by demands for sexual conformity and "traditional" family life, Kinsey's research showed there was no such thing as a "normal" sexuality, challenging decades-long ideas about the supposed threat of deviance. His work "fundamentally changed the way Americans talked about sex" (217). Armed with challenges like Kinsey's to the concept of sexual normalcy, queer activist Steven Kiyoshi Kuromiya makes appearances across several chapters as a queer youth persecuted for his sexuality in the 1940s and 1950s, then becoming a queer activist in the 1970s and 1980s. His story joins with those of other sexual reformers and revolutionaries in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s to ground chapters on the sexual revolution and gay liberation movements. The life of Betty Dodson, dubbed "Public Masturbator Number One" for her fierce advocacy of sexual empowerment through self-pleasuring, informs Davis's discussions of the feminist contests over the meaning of sexuality to women's liberation. These

more revolutionary forces battled with more conservative perspectives, often couched in terms of “family values,” that valued desire as a force primarily to be contained and controlled, if necessary by the state. The final chapter illustrates a continuity between the backlashes of the 1980s and contemporary concerns about drag queen story hours, sex education, and trans visibility. No doubt with these and other contemporary debates in mind, the last sentence of Davis’s book takes a final (and deserved) dig at those who would censor sexuality and its history: “History is at the heart of Americans’ arguments about sex; resolutions to many of these issues depend on whether we deny or affirm that history’s existence” (343).

Davis’s work illustrates the relevance of the history of sexuality to the personal and political concerns of twenty-first-century America. Its focus on narrative encourages readers to connect with elements of some stories, to see new perspectives in others, and to place their own stories and sexualities in historical context. While readers of *Dialogue* will notice that Mormonism appears in only one chapter of the book, they will nonetheless find elsewhere much to enrich their study of history, especially as Mormon studies increasingly incorporates sexuality and the insights gained from its study into the field’s mainstream. The book is a tremendous achievement, offering readers of all kinds opportunities to explore how Americans have valued, shaped, and contained sex, sexuality, and desire across American history and, ultimately, the forces that have shaped and contained how we value our own desires and sexualities in the current historical moment.

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No Man Knows My Prosody

Zachary McLeod Hutchins. *Joseph: An Epic*. University of Illinois Press, 2025. 192 pp. Paperback: \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0252089022.

Reviewed by Michael Hicks

I got the book and felt both the chill of skepticism and a flash of jubilation—mostly at the derring-do of my old friend University of Illinois Press. I was eager to pat the acquisition editors on the back. Could I do the same for the author?

Consider this a warm but hesitant, heavily annotated answer to that question.

The basics: the book is an iambic pentameter ode to Joseph Smith Jr., from birth through his first days in Kirtland, Ohio. There are six “books,” apportioned 3+3 into two “volumes” named “Awakenings” (through his first, failed attempt to get the promised golden plates) and “New Covenants” (ending with a meditation on his family’s domestic life in Ohio). Each volume has a middle book drenched in some dazzling speculation: the first (Book II) about a council of devils plotting to thwart Joseph’s destiny, the second (Book V) a twenty-page poetic paraphrase of the 116 pages that Martin Harris “lost”—the Book of Lehi. Beyond the larger gauntlet this epic throws down by its very existence, these two speculative books will both daunt and entice readers.

Two more basics that carry their own heft: the illustrations and the preface. The thirteen full-page drawings by “Godwin” bewitch the reader with their re-envisioning of the art of Victorian storybooks, pitched somewhere between Dürer and Doré. These illustrations, to me, are worth at least ten thousand iambs apiece. Some of them playfully illustrate scenes such as Joseph courting Emma, while others go deeper—especially “Satan’s Congress in the Grove,” with its edgy echo of Da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, and “The Opening of Joseph’s Vision,” which

delightfully torques one's own vision of that fabled experience with a cross between William Blake and Buddhist temple art. Don't overlook the gloss that Godwin's work brings to the book.

Meanwhile, in twelve nicely crafted pages (including bibliography) the preface elegantly lays down footings for the epic proper. Its four footnotes tip you off to the range of this Mormon author's mind—in order, Harold Bloom, Orson F. Whitney, Samuel Johnson, Michael Chabon. In the “sources consulted” list, I sensed a balanced, careful hand at work. The bibliography traces a rich, solid vein of Smithian lore. While I missed this or that source—why not Dan Vogel's *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet*, for example?—any such carping falls flat. Hutchins's well of sources runs deep.

But one premise in the preface with which I take issue—and this quarrel infests my whole response to the book—is whether or not, as Hutchins argues, a sort of “more is more” quasi-Miltonic verbal elaboration of Joseph's legacy is either apt or necessary. Too formal for this rambunctious seer? A bit too much holy water sprinkled on this God-appointed rascal? Doesn't formalism tie up his intrinsic rowdiness? Obviously, my own vision of Joseph shines through—or shadows—those questions.

While Hutchins is an ace mythographer of early Mormonism—an appellation I hope he'll accept as praise—concision and understatement might better fill the bill. (To quote the opening line of my own poem “First Vision”: “In the purest intellection / the word ceases.”) Again, does the formal constraint of rhythm and yardsticking of lines do violence to the real, full-blooded, wrestling, stick-pulling, rebus-making, joke-telling semi-prankster Joseph? On that question, the author and I differ. Which is why an epic along the lines of Whitman (or even Berryman) is what Hutchins's epic makes me imagine. And maybe yearn for.

I could attempt a blow-by-blow of the epic: its opening a deep-dive origin story of a super(natural)hero; the evil grand council on how to undermine his quest; the story of Joseph's first vision, including an avalanche of oratory (three pages' worth) from Jesus's mouth; etc. But

that would quickly lapse into Cleanth Brooks's "heresy of paraphrase." And this book is really about language and how it's used. Hutchins offers here a bewildering, eclectic, enthralling, tightly scaffolded structure that ranges from sublimity to soap opera, all of which makes it a bit like the Book of Mormon itself in its pre-postmodern hortatory mix of pretense and revelation.

So, let me talk about this work's language, both wide-angle and microscopic.

In any flyover, one has to ponder the landscape, mountainous formations set against well-plowed farmland. One experiences something like that in this epic. I've mentioned the monolithic intrusions of the satanic congress and the faux-Book of Lehi. But relative proportions all throughout this epic are blissfully beguiling. Sudden inflations of moments into pages, followed by condensations of years into paragraphs shape the work. Truncations followed by ornamentations abound. A hyper-literate Emma Smith gives some of the book's best head-patting orations to Joseph. Near the book's end, Mary Whitmer's encounter with Moroni unexpectedly swamps the narrative.

I'm a devout eclecticist. I like jangling juxtapositions. And they permeate this work, mostly via switches between the hieratic and the demotic—exalted oratory vs. boilerplate conversation. The latter dominates dialogue-based scenes of domesticity. Those clank more than resonate for me. But the hieratic is what one drinks up in this book. I smile at many clever moments, of course, such as, "By November, Joseph's bag was catless." But it's formations like this—about the angel Moroni's first appearance to Smith—that one can return to as to an archeological dig:

... *light—*
at first a solitary pinprick, like
a firefly come auditioning for work
as Joseph's personal pole star; and then,
the prick expanded, took on human shape
and came like lightning to his bedside. (6)

Or, later:

... *In retrospect,
the prophet recognized that this was a
mistake, that revelation is like salt:
a curative whose savor can become
a scourge if trodden into fertile ground
and not massaged into a votive flank.* (99)

That last passage brings up the work's constant seed-bedding of allusions and quotations, most from the Bible, but also from Latter-day scripture, along with countless other sources, from Shakespeare to Milton to Dickinson to Melville to Wordsworth, et al. (Were I better read, I'd catch more of them.) The profusion of allusion can garnish the meal a little too incessantly for me at times. But it's never mere clutter.

To enumerate the attractive phrases scattered like shells throughout the work, though, misses the mark. This epic succeeds not so much by delectable, extractable lines as by the river of wonder the whole thing attempts. It's contrapuntal, not monophonic; Handelian, not Gregorian.

That said, who should read it, how, and why?

Begin with Harold Bloom's credo that we engage with literature as part of "the search for a difficult pleasure."¹ That's the onramp for this book. Although Borges said that there is no "essential difference"² between writing poetry and prose, *this sort of poetry*, in which the feet of the lines slow down the eyes' pace, allows, if not requires, words to seep in gradually. That slowing down works less well in the demotic passages, which actually read better, for me, as "prose," with the page's margins being the only fences; the iambs enforce a rhythm that a surrender to "mere" prose would liberate. But difficult pleasure demands viscosity, whether in *Paradise Lost*, *Ulysses*, or *On the Road*. So, in the pursuit of difficult pleasure it's fruitful to wrap oneself wholeheartedly

1. Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 34.

2. Patricia Marx and John Simon, "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," *Commonweal Magazine*, Oct. 25, 1968, available at <https://www.commonweal-magazine.org/interview-jorge-luis-borges/>.

in the sort of rigor this book provides—a formal voice that one must swallow without choking on it. In doing so, one will inevitably revel, I believe, in the play of shifting proportions and the spading up for display of obscure—and imaginary—incidents, many suppositional, yes, but convincing.

Another reason to read the book: it enters, with a confident stride, the evolving canon of Joseph Smith literature. If you care about Mormonism, from whatever perch, Hutchins's book is obligatory to confront, a sieve one should push oneself through as a form of *religious studies* discipleship. Paradoxically, perhaps, it drives one back into the sources the author consulted—not to mention other (unconsulted?) literary treatments of Smith, from Fisher's *Children of God* to Carmer's *The Farm Boy and the Angel* to Taylor's *Nightfall at Nauvoo* to Card's *Saints*, etc. I think of this new entry into the field as a kind of "seer stone," with the essential wordplay the term suggests: it's heavy, but it illuminates. Indeed, it's a relatively chisel-resistant boulder that glows.

One final reason to read the book: it is Mormon devotional literature. Here again, my hat tip to University of Illinois Press for brokering it. Despite Hutchins's statement that "this poem begins and lingers in the interrogative mood" (xv), his standpoint is staunchly that of believer. Could a more skeptical, faith-grappling rehearsal of Smithian lore have yielded "better" results for readers like me? Maybe. But this volume certainly has the scent of faith promotion that the most dyed-in-the-wool Latter-day Saint will treasure.

In the end, all writing and reading is a kind of telepathy. As such, you can't really argue with it, only receive it with thanks. Which I emphatically do in the case of *Joseph: An Epic*.

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Swift River Philosophizing

Ryan W. Davis. *Dispatches from Mormon Zion*. Eerdmans, 2025. 205 pp. Hardcover: \$22.99. ISBN: 978-0802884695.

Reviewed by Fara Sneddon

Ryan Davis's new book, *Dispatches from Mormon Zion*, is a collection of ten essays, all connected by two central tenets: that Mormonism is magnified and made richer by considering it outside of the narrow confines of strict behavior rules and expectations. Mormon people, Davis shows us again and again, grow closer to a Zion-like life when love, not stricture, is primary. This is the "cultural experience" he wants to explore, and he does so through storytelling, personal experiences, philosophical exploration, and Taylor Swift.

Davis, an associate professor of political science at Brigham Young University, fills his essays with a variety of characters and personal interactions. He speaks of his divorce, of being friended by a small girl on a scooter who wants to learn how to fish, of colleagues he takes out to Strawberry Reservoir to teach how to fly fish. He tells about the men fishing on the Provo River who are aghast (almost offended) at Davis's refusal to take his catch—instead, he releases his fish back into the river. In all ways, Davis comes across as deeply thoughtful, kind, and genuinely engaged in the wide-reaching act of making his community a home: "[H]ome is less in the geography of one's origin than in the habits of one's action." Action is, of course, agency, and it is through what he calls "integrated agency" that he works to build a Zion of his own, maintaining "empathetic relationships with people who are otherwise strangers" (28).

Davis is concerned with both the moments when we rise above self-interest with kindness and love for the other, particularly the other for whom we have no responsibility or whom we may even actively dislike. He writes, "The ambition to build a Zion community could sometimes lead to moral disaster" (xiii). Certainly, this is evident in wards as the

differences in our worldviews diverge. Davis explains that “The work of making Zion is the work of taking time and effort to see others the way they see themselves—or, maybe, to see the persons they want to become” (xx). This practice of setting aside our biases, judgements, and ego, of opening our world to larger love, kindness, and “relationships of empathy are what Zion is made of” (35).

Love is central to Davis’s book, particularly love without putting expectations on one another. In chapter 4, Davis turns to the lyrics of Taylor Swift’s songs. While this may put off some readers or risk dating the book in years to come, the chapter itself is an excellent bit of literary analysis. In the middle of his book, Davis shifts from the lofty ideas of Zion, love for the one unlike ourselves, love for community and learning and the fish in the water, and instead dissects love in a way that allows the reader to understand, for perhaps the first time, the pitfalls we all navigate (often quite poorly and solipsistically) when we grapple with the hope or the hate that comes with romance. As a reader who is not a Swiftie, I admit to rolling my eyes when I first saw the subject matter of this chapter. I have repented. Davis’s parsing and explanations regarding love in theory and love in reality are fantastic and truly helpful in understanding both oneself and one another. This is a chapter to share widely, to read with your teenager or spouse.

Part of what makes love and loving so fraught is the inability to know what the other is thinking: if they’re being honest, if they’re hiding things. This shifts Davis to the topic of guile: the misinformation we give about who we are, about what we want, and how we present ourselves in a way that gets us what we want. We as humans judge others based on how they look, how they speak, what comments they make in Relief Society. Almost all of us act with guile at times, and all of us harshly judge others at times. Davis holds up a mirror to our guile as he, with love and kindness, reminds us how Christ interacted with both those who loved him and those who did not.

The essays in Davis’s book are tight, thoughtful, and edifying. They encourage a reconsideration on the part of the reader, a nudge to learn

and want to make changes that lead all of us toward something closer to Zion. This is the point from the very start of Davis's essays: We are all included in world-building/disassembling/meaning and finding creative ways of being in a religious system whose goal is to elevate all humankind.

One last note from Davis: "[If] somehow or other, the universe deals you a chance to respond to someone in a way that affirms, understands, or even shares in the way they value themselves, then you are in a position to give them a very special gift" (175). Amen.

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Whispers from the Poker Table

John Bennion. *The Dead Fathers: Grief and Poker in the West Desert*. By Common Consent Press, 2025. 512 pp. Paperback: \$19.95. ISBN: 978-1961471238.

Reviewed by John Engler

The triumph of *The Dead Fathers* is an ending that I don't dare spoil; it lands as an epic culmination of a subtly expanding panorama I hadn't seen coming. John Bennion spends nearly five hundred pages in Utah's West Desert—spare, wind-scoured, abandoned and rediscovered—and then, in the final movements, he opens the aperture until a hermit's private grief feels communal, even cosmic. If that sounds grand, it is. Bennion delivers the unexpected.

Readers first meet Christopher Twist living alone in a derelict camper trailer whose door is nothing but a blanket. This isn't poverty chic. Bennion inventories the scene of graphic indigence—filthy bedding, foul body odor, perpetually barren fridge, collapsing walls—to be honest about the cost of isolation. Twist, an aging, cantankerous, relentlessly philosophical, disaffected Latter-day Saint, has little to live for. Separated from his wife, estranged from much of his family and friends, his days crawl past in a kind of hollow, dusty silence. At first blush, there seems little reason to keep reading beyond curiosity about how low a man can sink; the early slow pace of the prose matches the long days of a lonely existence. And yet I found myself drawn in. Perhaps it is the hermit in me, or some ancestral echo that occasionally imagines such a stripped-down existence. Bennion, however, is clear: this is not Thoreau solitude fantasy but suffering of body and mind.

Then the dead fathers appear. Literally. Night after night, Twist's ancestors materialize around a shambly table to play poker and dispense advice. This posse of Dead Fathers (abbreviated DF in the novel) range from his own father to great-great-grandfather, eventually joined by dead mothers and aunts, too. Their conversations meander but always circle back to what they think Twist should or should not do. The catch: their motives remain elusive. Sometimes their tactics are comically petty (stealing his pants so he can't leave the trailer). Other times they are cryptic, contradictory, or maddeningly incomplete.

This device is gutsy. Part campfire metaphysics, part family court, the poker table becomes the stage where faith, memory, and grievance are shuffled and reshuffled. On one level, Bennion uses a tried-and-true tactic—depriving characters of complete information—to generate mystery and conflict. The DFs hint at a spiritual crisis, some calamity in the unseen world that Twist can help avert, but then refuse or are unable to provide him with details. Bennion challenges the assumption that voices from beyond must be omniscient. Here, the dead are partial, partisan, sometimes laughably wrong. The refusal to make them oracles gives the book both tension and authenticity. Readers, like Twist,

are asked to proceed without certainty, to navigate conflicting signals. Should the DFs be trusted or treated with suspicion? Is their counsel wisdom, mischief, or something else entirely? The literary tactic can feel heavy-handed at times, but it also mirrors the experience of grief and faith: half-clues, partial revelations, fragmented authority.

Readers beware: the number of characters in the book is utterly overwhelming. The sprawl is as something found in Dickens, Tolstoy, or Rushdie. Helpfully, Bennion does supply a partial family tree at the front, which I flipped back to constantly, but still I felt unmoored by the sheer number of names. In addition to more than a dozen dead relatives, there are fellow desert dwellers, estranged family members, moonshiners, mining executives, polygamists, government officials, off-roaders, and more. Admittedly my own weariness with the masses may be a result of sheer classroom fatigue—learning scores of new names for decades of semesters. But truly, the desert cast could swamp a reader.

Pacing is another sticking point. The early chapters move slowly, partly because a lonely man in a destitute trailer lives lonely, slow days, and partly because with the story told in first-person, readers are subject to Twist's extended, rambling, philosophical musings precipitated by a lifetime of indulgence in literature, LDS doctrine, and overthinking. For readers used to plot-driven page-turners, Bennion's disinterest in the conventions of a tight storyline may test patience. Scenes sometimes surface with a randomness that made me wonder if Bennion was throwing darts. Yet, in retrospect, that meandering feels intentional: a life without obvious arc, slowly shaped by interruptions, until a larger pattern emerges.

The book occasionally opens into moments of action: clandestine trips to photograph illegal moonshine operations, legal threats, strained collaborations with the ex-wife, explorations of abandoned mines. These episodes inject suspense and funnel into an evolving theme of discovery—of the land, of relationships, of self. These threads are woven slowly, almost stubbornly, into a single line that always runs back through Twist and his spectral visitors. True to life, Twist's ties to family and community are messy, full of argument and backtracking.

The result is frustrating at times, but it adds authenticity and prevents the relationships from collapsing into cliché.

With patience, the sprawl at long last reveals its purpose. A story that begins with a lone man and a blanket-door gradually admits more and more people—until Twist's life is crowded again. The book enacts the very thing it is about: isolation yielding, fitfully, to life-changing connection. Those prone to ascribe the early symbolic scenes of water and fire to a transformative baptismal moment might be left as confused as Twist when there is little of transformation then. Yes, those moments do embody the shrugging off of an old life, but the real invitation to be born again, to authentically reconnect with the divine, is yet to come. For a character who has given up on human contact, it's the burden of names and faces that is offered as the gift, an invitation to salvation.

By the final stretch, the book's slow burn pays off. Without spoiling the particulars, I can say this: the closing sequence reframes everything—the poker table, the vast circle of characters, the meandering scenes—as a rite of communal accounting. What looked like randomness begins to read as hospitality. Bennion invites more of the living and the dead into the circle until meaning can be made in company. The result is audacious, even visionary.

The Dead Fathers is not a book for everyone. Readers who crave taut plots and streamlined casts may chafe. But for those willing to trust Bennion's long game, the rewards are substantial: a tenacious, sometimes exasperating, but ultimately moving meditation on grief, family, and reconnection. It is a novel about poker, yes, but also about what it means to sit at the table—messy, crowded, alive—with the living and the dead.

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Narrating Mormonism: Perspectives on the American Chronicle

Benjamin E. Park. *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2024. 421 pp. Hardcover: \$35.00. ISBN: 978–1631498657.

Reviewed by Cheryl L. Bruno

From its early beginnings in the nineteenth century to its influence on contemporary landscapes, Mormonism has played a significant role in shaping American history. By examining the historical trajectory of Mormonism alongside key events in American history, *American Zion: A New History of Mormonism* offers valuable insights into the intersections of religion, politics, and society. This perspective helps readers contextualize current debates and challenges facing both Mormon communities and American society as a whole.

In a scholarly but accessible style, author Benjamin E. Park embarks on an exploration of the Mormon experience in America, each chapter focusing on pivotal periods in both Mormon and American history. US Americans will particularly appreciate this fast-paced romp through this homegrown religion, as their history gallops through a mere four hundred years at a breakneck pace.

At his many promotional book tour appearances, Park has expressed discomfort with how tersely he was forced to synopsise the history of Mormonism. The book is a synthesis of the whole of Mormon history, and it's true that many threads had to be trimmed. Each reader will likely feel some dismay that some of their favorite events are missing. To make up for this lack, Park employs a narrative-driven approach that brings the history of Mormonism to life with vivid storytelling and engaging anecdotes.

With his introductory chapter, "Faith and History," the author sets the stage by asking "who should or can narrate the church's past." Park

places himself in the midst of the tension between authoritative, devotional, and scholarly historians of the past. With a bit of hubris, he legitimizes his book as the first “since the so-called Mormon moment [in 2012] to tell the history of Mormonism,” drawing from “a generation of new scholarship that has excavated lost voices and reconstructed forgotten alternative trajectories” (5).

Let’s see how well he accomplishes the task. Park’s chapters delve into specific epochs, such as “A Visionary Nation, 1775–1830,” which illuminates the emergence of Mormonism against the backdrop of a nation grappling with its own identity and destiny. Here, he spotlights “frustrated religious seeker” Lucy Mack Smith, a woman “emblematic of that culture” and the religious awakening that “begat the nation’s preeminent prophet,” her son (13). Twenty-seven of Park’s ninety-four footnotes for this chapter include her roughly 175-year-old history, *Lucy’s Book*.¹ A scholarly edition of this memoir has been widely available since 2001. Though not “new scholarship,” Park is justified for centering this source, since it comprises one of the few sympathetic insider views of this time period and forefronts a female standpoint. As he did in his previous book, *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, Park is careful to highlight women’s voices throughout the book, a tricky task in such a patriarchal religion.

Chapters entitled “The Voice of the People, 1831–46” and “Of Empires and Wars, 1846–69” provide narratives of Mormon migration, persecution, and eventual settlement in the American West, highlighting the tensions between religious autonomy and federal authority. “Mormons both fled from and worked within America’s colonizing impulse” of Manifest Destiny, Park explains. He describes the exodus from Illinois through the eyes of seven-year-old Joseph F. Smith, who “forever remembered cannon fire being the last thing he heard in the

1. Lucy’s dictated memoir, in several versions, was restored in Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy’s Book: Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Signature Books, 2001). This edition was used in Dr. Park’s work.

city of his childhood, a sound he permanently associated with the lie of America's religious liberty" (86, 88).

As the narrative progresses, Park deftly navigates through periods of social change and upheaval in chapters like "The Boundaries of Citizenship, 1870–90" and "The Perils of Reform, 1920–45," offering keen insights into the complexities of Mormon engagement with broader American society. The nation was especially perplexed by Utah's juxtaposition of patriarchal theocracy and polygamy, on the one hand, and the granting of female suffrage on the other. "Utah is a land of marvels," Park quotes one newspaper as saying. "Was there ever a greater anomaly known in the history of society?" (131). Suffragists at the national level "simultaneously praised and pitied" Mormon women, the first in the U.S. to vote at a municipal election (132).

One of the book's strengths lies in its balanced portrayal of Mormonism, encompassing both its triumphs and challenges. From the optimism of "A Period of Progress, 1890–1920" to the introspection of "Fault Lines, 1970–95," the author skillfully captures the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity within the Mormon community. Reading his treatment of the evolution debate among the leadership of the Church was especially moving.

Likewise, *American Zion* does not shy away from addressing controversial topics such as gender roles, race relations, and the LGBTQ+ rights movement, as evidenced in chapters like "One Family Under God, 1945–70" and "Showtime, 1995–2012." Born in 1959, I lived many of these events within the Mormon church and was astonished by how well Park captured the mood and complexities of being a committed member at the time. In these two chapters, Park shows his chops as a specialist in political and intellectual history and theology.

Throughout the book, and true to his promise, Park employs an array of primary sources and works by noted historians, including many women. He additionally draws upon records of prominent leaders whose papers have recently become accessible, such as Joseph

Smith, George Q. Cannon, Eliza R. Snow, Emmeline B. Wells, Amy Brown Lyman, David O. McKay, Spencer W. Kimball, and Leonard J. Arrington. In the final chapters, “Latter-day Legacies, 2012–Present” and “Longing for Zion,” Park brings the narrative full circle, reflecting on the enduring legacy of Mormonism in the contemporary milieu and exploring both the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. In its rich exploration of Mormonism’s relationship with American history, *American Zion* leaves readers with a profound understanding of the fascinating interplay between this uniquely American faith tradition and the nation’s social, political, and cultural fabric.

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Chase Westfall, *Rainbow*, 2012,
oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in.

UNITY IN CHRIST

Kyle Bradford Jones

*Delivered on November 11, 2024, in Highland Springs Ward
Salt Lake Winder Stake*

I take my invitation to speak to you today very seriously. I give this message motivated by love and concern and hope for all of us, and I ask you to accept these words in the same way.

At the beginning of World War II, the famous British poet W. H. Auden wrote one of his most well-known poems entitled “September 1, 1939,” a poem about fear and uncertainty in the world. The poem closes with the famous line “We must love one another or die.” Years later, Auden disowned the poem, saying that it was too sentimental, too naive, and too simplistic to describe what he intended. He especially hated that final line, “We must love one another or die,” because it didn’t make sense in a worldly context.

We are encouraged to view our existence in an eternal perspective, to think celestial. In this context, the line that Auden came to hate so much actually fits perfectly, meaningfully paraphrasing the message and life of our Savior Jesus Christ.

I was asked to speak about unity with one another during challenging times. The ultimate unity we hope for is unity with our Heavenly Parents and the Savior Jesus Christ.

I am of the opinion that we should not avoid discussing important topics simply because they are hard. I am not going to avoid some of the proverbial elephants in our chapels that are often uncomfortable to address. The world in general and our society in particular are full of contention. This week was a contentious election that elicited (and will continue to elicit) strong emotions. I have spoken with many people in

various circumstances of life this week who are afraid for their safety because of recent developments as many in society have felt empowered to promote fear and violence. The vile, hate-filled, and incendiary political rhetoric espoused in our world is not congruent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. No earthly organization is a stand-in or surrogate for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The scriptures and prophetic counsel are clear: we must have faith in Christ, not institutions, idols, or false prophets.

Elder Dale G. Renlund said, “If we are unable to place our discipleship to Jesus Christ above personal interests and viewpoints, we should reexamine our priorities and change.”¹

In addition to these areas of contention, the “whole Earth groans under the weight of its iniquity” (D&C 123:7). Wars rage across the world, and natural disasters are becoming more frequent and more deadly. Spiritual corruption and unrighteous dominion over others are rampant. Eternal principles are sold for filthy lucre in the name of economic growth. As prophesied, in the last days, men’s hearts are failing them (D&C 88:91) and the very elect are being deceived (JS Matthew 1:22). It is important to recognize that this includes many of us.

We have many issues in our society and in our church that are contentious. Things such as women’s equality, abortion rights, and LGBTQIA+ issues. I have strong feelings and opinions about many of these things, as do many of you; these are important issues that should bring strong opinions. There is disagreement on these issues by many of us. I consider many of you here today to be good friends who just happen to think differently about these issues, just as I know you do me. I submit to you right now that we can be united as a people no matter what each of us thinks about societal issues, as long as we love one another unconditionally. Unity in the gospel surrounds our faith

1. Dale G. Renlund, “The Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity,” Oct. 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/10/43renlund?lang=eng/>.

in Jesus Christ and how we treat each other. But if we let our opinions get in the way of Christlike love for others, then we need to repent.

We are all siblings in Christ. We can still be unified if we want to be, despite our differing backgrounds and opinions. We cannot let differences of opinion promote contention. The Savior taught us to “be one; and if ye are not one, ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27).

In the period shortly after the Savior’s appearance in the Americas, there were no “-ites,” or separate groupings of people. We are told “that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (4 Nephi 1:15). I can guarantee that there were some differing opinions on important topics among the people, but they did not boil over into contention. They were unified in Christ. And as such, “there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God” (4 Nephi 1:16).

It’s also important to remember that these people were not perfect. They lived in great unity and harmony despite each having their own weaknesses and sins. I am willing to bet that some were annoying to others in the society. But a people unified in Christ are ones who are committed to continual repentance and loving everyone unconditionally.

Scriptures discuss unity most often in relation to love, having no contention, and having no poor among them. In the first eighteen verses of 4 Nephi, the phrase “no contention” is used four times. Mormon is really trying to drive home what unified the people—they didn’t contend with one another.

President Reyna I. Aburto, formerly a counselor in the General Relief Society Presidency, shared in the April 2018 general conference: “The Lord’s followers were one in purpose, in love, and in works. They knew who they were, they knew what they had to do, and they did it with love for God and for each other.”²

2. Reyna I. Aburto, “With One Accord,” Apr. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/04/with-one-accord?lang=eng/>.

President Russell M. Nelson counseled us in 2023 that we have the “agency to choose contention or reconciliation.” He continued: “Anger never persuades. Hostility builds no one. Contention never leads to inspired solutions . . . Contention is evil. [It] drives away the Spirit—every time.”³

It didn’t matter if those in the Americas both then and now felt others were deserving of their love and kindness, whether they “deserved” temporal or spiritual assistance, to be fed or clothed. They simply did it because they wholeheartedly embraced the two penultimate commandments—to love God and others (Matthew 22:36–40). There aren’t only some who deserve our love. Everyone deserves our love.

But we cannot have an agenda for why we love them. We don’t love others so that they will come back to church, or get baptized, or think and act the way we want them to. We love them without condition. We love them because they are God’s creation and therefore, they deserve it. The scriptures never qualify the love that the Savior has or that we are to offer. In order to be fully united, we need to see others the way Christ sees them, and then we will come to love them the way He loves them, no matter their situation in life or choices. Unity in Christ is loving everyone because that’s what Jesus does.

Our ongoing search for truth and spiritual progression through our faith in Jesus Christ is another thing that unites us. We don’t know everything. Truth is myriad, but being certain that we already have the answers to life or God shuts off understanding, faith, and revelation. We often spend too much time on religious dogma and too little on emulating the Savior and loving others. We need to avoid looking “beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14) or focusing on the wrong things, as Jacob described the people of Jerusalem at the time of Lehi’s exodus. One of the biggest instigators of contention is certainty in our opinions and knowledge. A

3. Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” Apr. 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2023/04/47nelson?lang=eng/>.

fictionalized Catholic cardinal character in a recent film put it plainly and elegantly: “Certainty is the great enemy of unity . . . the deadly enemy to tolerance . . . If there was only certainty, there would be no need for faith.”⁴ We do not have all of the answers, and we deny Christ when we think that we do. There is so much more that we don’t know than what we do. We as a church do not have a monopoly on truth or righteousness. When we see eternal truths, no matter where we find them, we should embrace them and be edified.

This also means that we destroy unity when we try to force others to live in ways that we think they should. If we go through life focusing on all of the things that we think others should repent of, or their weaknesses and imperfections, then we will end up sad and hard-hearted, which will make it nearly impossible for us to feel the joy of the gospel. What we do unto the proverbial “least of [us],” we do unto our Savior (Matthew 25:40).

Elder Renlund said, “We might be inclined to say, ‘Of course we can have unity—if only you would agree with me!’ A better approach is to ask, ‘What can I do to foster unity? How can I respond to help this person draw closer to Christ? What can I do to lessen contention and to build a compassionate and caring Church community?’”⁵

Unity takes humility from us all. It takes a desire to love and continually repent. It means seeking and listening to the Spirit in our lives. It means following what my mother always taught me growing up: “It’s better to be nice than to be right.” It’s better to be like Christ than like anything or anyone else.

President Aburto, whom I quoted before, also said “Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of unity with His Father. They are one in purpose, in love, and in works, with ‘the will of the Son being swallowed up in the

4. *Conclave*, directed by Edward Berger with screenplay by Peter Straughan (FilmNation Entertainment, Indian Paintbrush, and House Productions, 2024).

5. Renlund, “Peace of Christ Abolishes Enmity.”

will of the Father.”⁶ We are commanded to be one with God and Jesus Christ. This is something we all want, by the very fact that we are here today. We do this through exercising our faith, repenting continually, making and keeping sacred covenants, and most importantly of all, loving each other.

I love you all. This is my home and I consider this ward my family. I am so blessed to be here with each of you, and I thank you for your examples to me and your love for me.

Like W. H. Auden, the poet quoted moments ago, I have fear and uncertainty for our future. But I also know in whom I have trusted (2 Nephi 4:19). “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear” (1 John 4:18). Jesus is with us if we fight for righteousness. We must love one another or die.

6. Aburto, “With One Accord.”

KYLE BRADFORD JONES is a family physician in Salt Lake City, Utah. He served in the Ukraine Kiev Mission from 2000 to 2002. He is the author of the award-winning book *Fallible: A Memoir of a Young Physician's Struggle with Mental Illness* and the bestseller *When All Hope Seems Lost: A Gospel Perspective on Mental Illness in Youth*. He lives in Millcreek, Utah, with his wonderful wife and four great kids.

A CITY UNHEARD

Amanda K. Beardsley

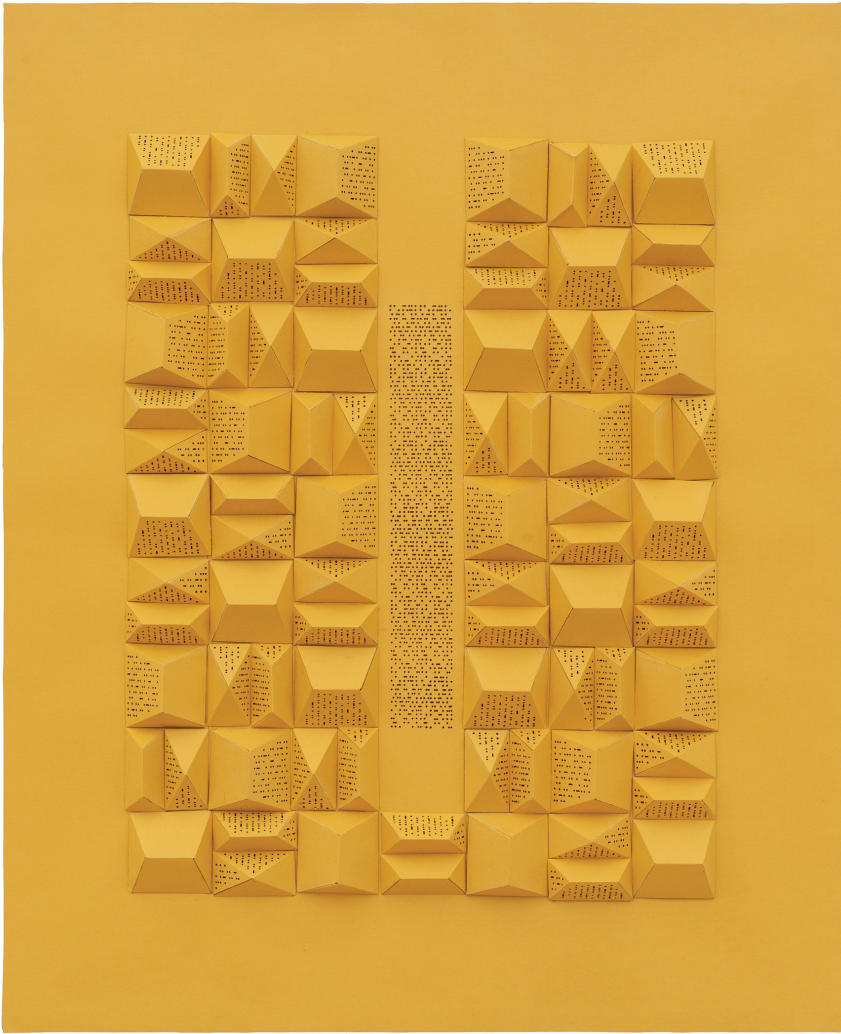
Golden yellow paper cubes extending beyond the two-dimensional surface of Susana Isabel Silva's *Partitura modular* (2025) create an architecture of shapes resembling a bird's-eye view of a village or urban center, lingering as a score for a city unheard. Punched holes in the angular surfaces amplify physical contrasts between surface and depth with the illusion of shading. A longer sequence of dots and dashes vertically cuts the composition in half, overwriting the smooth flatness of surface, offering a cryptic linear schism. The work names its terminology provocatively: *partitura*—a score where notation is as much about absence as presence in a modular topology of silence rendered through paper, cut edges, and the residue of algorithmic notation.¹

Silva's use of punched notation evokes the early computational technologies of IBM punch cards, Jacquard looms, and other proto-digital systems that translated human intention into machinic instruction.² In these technologies, meaning is never directly expressed; it is encoded and dependent upon interpretation by a system. In *Partitura modular*, this logic is made tactile. The work appears resolutely formal, even restrained. Its palette is limited, its geometry controlled, its surface immaculate. To read a system that refuses to resolve into sound is to inhabit an architecture of silence suspended between presence and omission.

This ambivalence between encoded instruction and sonic omission frames *Instrumentos de silencio*, a collaborative exhibition by

1. Many thanks to Elzbeth and Carmen Islas for assisting with translations.

2. Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (MIT Press, 2006).



Susana Isabel Silva, *Partitura modular*, 2025,
folded hand-cut paper

Argentinian artists and siblings Susana Isabel Silva and Gonzalo Silva, in which *Partitura modular* was first presented. Supported in part by the Ariel Bybee Endowment (Center for Latter-day Saint Arts), the exhibition opened in August 2025 at Sargent's Daughters Gallery in New York and has since traveled to the Graduate Theological Union Library in Berkeley, California, and the Utah Museum of Contemporary Art. Its movement from a commercial gallery to a theological library to a contemporary art museum mirrors the exhibition's concern with mediation and context.

Much of the Silvas' work is now being featured in this issue, as our contributors address a moment in American history and the Latter-day Saint faith that eerily grapples with various points of crisis (Prince), strategies of healing (Richards), unity (Jones), and alienation (Compton) that parallel the politicized Argentinian landscape evoked in *Instrumentos*. These themes reflect a broader anxiety within both nation and religion, including how to reconcile the digital witnessing of violence, inequality, and unjust death with traditions that claim moral coherence and communal care.³ In this context, *Instrumentos de silencio* foregrounds technological, theological, and aesthetic infrastructures through which silence itself is produced and maintained. Gonzalo's photographic series *Liturgia eléctrica*, for instance, documents the ruins of a "pipe organ in a 19th century Anglican church in Buenos Aires," cropping it closely as a devotional object tinged by marks of time and human intervention.⁴ Beyond sounding, the decaying organ

3. Recent deaths of Alex Pretti and Renée Good in Minneapolis by federal agents sparked ongoing anti-ICE protests and mass civil unrest (including general strikes and economic blackouts) as a concerned nation looked on via social media outlets. "Thousands rally against immigration enforcement in subzero Minnesota temperatures," *Associated Press*, Jan. 23, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/minnesota-ice-immigration-protest-unions-faith-leaders-edc6c4884f8cc26be9ad34a28d82a7a5/>.

4. "*Instrumentos de silencio*," Center for Latter-day Saint Arts, accessed Jan. 30, 2026, <https://www.centerforlatterdaysaintarts.org/instrumentos-de-silencio/>.

is a technology of erasure and memory: a visual score that withholds performative sound whereby its existence insists upon inscription and archive.

The Silvas' practice inherits a lineage of twentieth-century experiments that reconceived silence not as emptiness but as a structured auditory and political field. John Cage's *4'33"* (1952) reframed silence by foregrounding ambient sound and the attentive listener rather than the composed note. Cage demonstrated that absence can be framed, not as negation but as a socially awkward awakening to human conditions that performativity often obscures—that what we call “silence” is in fact saturated with the ambient sound of human existence: coughing, shuffling, and the listener's own presence.⁵ Often misread as a celebration of emptiness, the work transfers agency from performer to listener, insisting that listening itself is an active, socially conditioned practice. This insight was extended by Pauline Oliveros, whose notion of “deep listening” emphasized sound as relational, embodied, and political.⁶

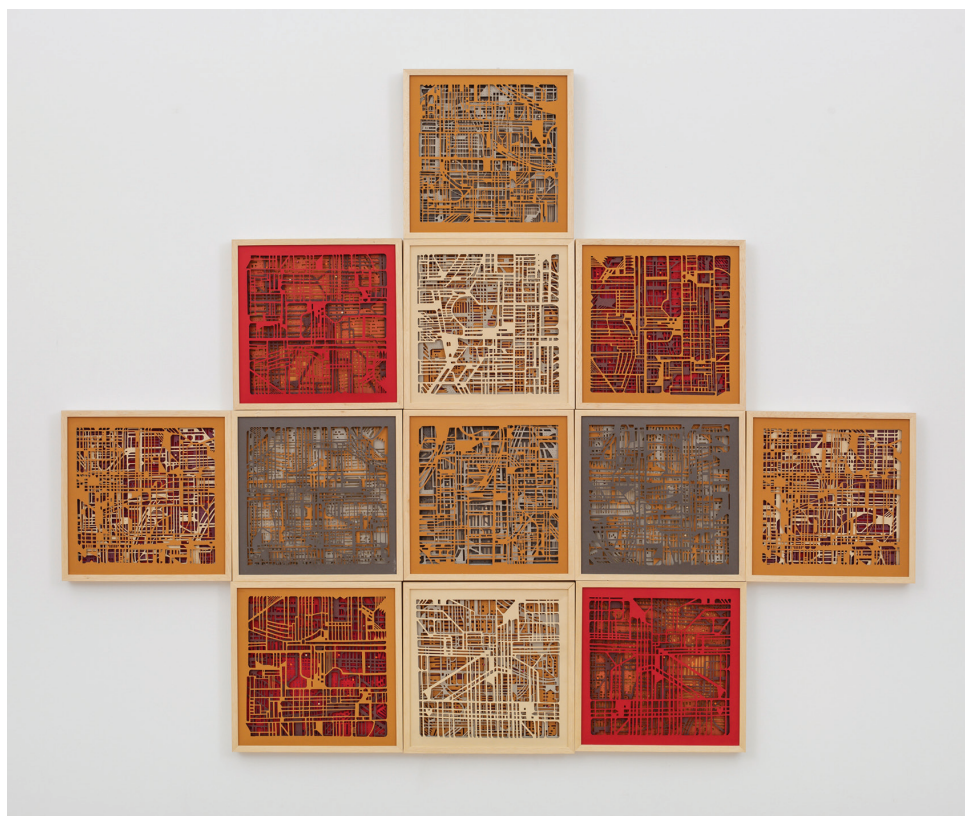
Instrumentos de silencio both inherits and complicates this tradition. Where Cage sought to recalibrate perception, the Silvas platform the systems that precondition silence. Their scores cannot be played because the technologies they reference—punched notation, modular archives, and digital traces—are already implicated in histories of control and engineered silence.

Read against Argentine political history, this emphasis gains further weight. During the military dictatorship of 1976–1983, systematic disappearances erased bodies and records, producing what Diana Taylor describes as an archive of absence.⁷ Documentation became dangerous, memory fragile, and silence often the only viable response. The Silvas'

5. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

6. Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (New York: iUniverse, 2005).

7. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Duke University Press, 2003).



Susana Isabel Silva, *Tocapu*, 2025,
CNC and hand-cut paper, 61 x 61 in.

invocation of the archival media of bureaucratic enumeration resonates with these histories even as it refuses legibility. These Argentine resonances gain additional urgency when placed alongside contemporary American concerns about digital surveillance, algorithmic governance, and data erasure. In the United States, the proliferation of digital technologies has produced new forms of witnessing in the form of viral videos, livestreams, data archives, while simultaneously generating new mechanisms of suppression. Content is removed, accounts are banned, histories are rewritten.⁸ Silence, once again, is produced technologically.

As Latter-day Saints, the Silvas engage traditions in which genealogy and ritual documentation are central to religious life. Mormonism has long emphasized preservation of records as acts of care and continuity, yet these systems also rely on categorization, exclusion, and authority.⁹ Difficult questions emerge: What happens when systems designed to preserve memory also enforce silence? When do archives become tools of discipline? The exhibition does not indict faith outright, nor does it romanticize technological neutrality. Instead, it stages a tension between belief and mediation, suggesting that silence can be both sacred and coercive.

8. See reporting on content suppression during politically sensitive incidents on TikTok, such as users alleging that Minneapolis shooting videos were throttled by the platform, *Washington Post*, Jan. 26, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2026/01/26/tiktok-censorship-ice-shooting/>; and accounts of Meta removing or restricting dozens of advocacy-related accounts, *The Guardian*, Dec. 11, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/dec/11/meta-shuts-down-global-accounts-linked-to-abortion-advice-and-queer-content>; see also Congressional Research Service, *Social Media: Content Dissemination and Moderation Practices* (2026), discussing how platforms algorithmically filter and remove content.

9. Amanda K. Beardsley, *Celestial Mechanics: Technologies of Salvation in American Mormonism* (PhD diss., Binghamton University, 2019). John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (University of Chicago Press, 1999); and *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Returning to *Partitura modular*, we encounter a work that functions as map and score, architecture and notation. Its refusal to sound is not a failure of execution but a deliberate demand to listen differently and to attend to what has been structurally rendered inaudible. The vertical fault line that bisects the composition marked by dots and dashes that both rupture and bind the surface stages silence as designed condition rather than absence. Gonzalo Silva's works take up this logic and extend it into the domains of sound, circuitry, and digital residue, translating Susana's visual grammar of interruption into sonic and technological form. Together, they construct an exhibition in which silence operates as an active force, shaped by systems of belief, mediation, and political history. Their instruments do not perform in the conventional sense; they bear witness to the infrastructures that organized what can be remembered and erased.

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ARTISTS

LESLIE OLPIN PETERSON is an artist based in Salt Lake City. Her series *Forgotten Wives*, featuring watercolor portraits of the thirty-four women married to Joseph Smith, was on exhibit at the University of Utah's Olpin Center during the Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium in 2015.

GONZALO SILVA (Buenos Aires, 1991) is an artist, educator, curator, and exhibition designer. He holds a degree in visual arts (Universidad Nacional de las Artes, UNA) and is currently pursuing a PhD in epistemology and history of science (Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, UNTREF). In 2025 he attended a research residency at TBA21–Academy within OcéanoFuturismos program. His work explores the relationship between art, science, and technology through contemporary philosophy and weird fiction. His practice involves mixed-media and audiovisual installations.

SUSANA ISABEL SILVA (1976) is a visual artist who specializes in paper cutout. Her work explores sacred narratives through a contemporary language, translating scriptures and symbols into poetic and structured compositions. Trained at the School of Fine Arts of Quilmes and the Universidad Nacional de las Artes (UNA), she has received multiple awards from the Church History Museum (Utah) and exhibited in the United States and Argentina. She lives and works in Buenos Aires.

PAGE TURNER is an Appalachian assemblage artist shaping a distinctly Mormon feminist visual language. Working with castoff garments, bone, glass, and domestic relics, she constructs bodies that bear the cost of belief. Rooted in the mountains of Virginia, her work honors feminine experience and ancestral heritage while questioning the intersections of faith and women's agency. Featured in the volume *Fifty Contemporary Women Artists: Groundbreaking Contemporary Art from 1960 to Now*, Turner's pieces have appeared widely in national exhibitions and journals.

CHASE WESTFALL is an artist, educator, and curator. He currently serves as curator and head of gallery at VCUarts Qatar in Doha, Qatar. He received a BFA from the University of Florida and MFA from the University of Georgia.