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*Abraham on the Plains of Mamre*, by Grant Romney Clawson. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

# Why Abraham Was Not Wrong to Lie

Duane Boyce

The book of Genesis contains two well-known accounts of Abraham lying about his wife, Sarah (Gen. 12:10–20; 20:1–18).<sup>1</sup> In each of them, Abraham reports that Sarah is his sister,<sup>2</sup> Sarah is then taken from Abraham, trouble ensues for those who have taken her, and Sarah is then returned to Abraham. The account in Genesis 20 also explicitly tells us that the Lord protected Sarah from being “touched” in the circumstances (v. 6), and the account in Genesis 12, too, tells us that the Lord intervened, presumably for the same purpose (v. 17).

## Two Competing Views of Abraham

A very common conclusion drawn from such accounts is that Abraham’s lying was wrong and therefore that it serves as an example of the spiritual defects that exist even in prophets.<sup>3</sup>

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1. The episode in Genesis 12 occurs before the Lord changed Abram and Sarai’s names to “Abraham” and “Sarah,” whereas the account in Genesis 20 occurs afterward. For simplicity’s sake, I use their later names. I will do the same when referring to the related episode in Abraham 2.

2. In the Genesis 12 episode, Abraham is depicted as asking Sarah to lie, as well as telling the lie himself (see Gen. 12:13, 19). In Genesis 20, Abraham tells the lie to Abimelech personally (Gen. 20:2).

3. See, for example, Terryl L. Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 4 (2013): 134, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/letter-to-a-doubter/>. Givens makes the same claim elsewhere. See the transcription of a Q&A with Givens found in “Faithful LDS Scholars Address Faith Crisis,” available at <https://www.churchistrue.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Faithful-LDS-Scholars-Address-Faith-Crisis.pdf>; and Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible*

A counterclaim to this view, however, is that Abraham did not actually lie. To support this idea, some point out that Abraham could legitimately describe Sarah as his sister.<sup>4</sup> Others indicate that the Egyptian term used by Abraham to describe Sarah was ambiguous—it means both “sister” and “wife”—and that, for this reason, Abraham was not false in his statement.<sup>5</sup> Either way, Abraham did not lie.

Unfortunately, this second claim—that, for one linguistic reason or another, Abraham did not actually lie—is unpersuasive. The problem is this: Regardless of whether we say that Abraham could legitimately describe Sarah as his sister, or that his term in describing her was ambiguous, it is still clear that his *purpose* was to deceive. And others, in fact, were deceived. From a moral standpoint, therefore, the fact that Sarah could technically be called Abraham’s sister or that Abraham used a term that technically included the idea of “sister” seems, in the end, to be beside the point. Under either interpretation, the statement was still a deliberate half-truth—and, as a deliberate half-truth, a deliberate deception. Thus, despite the laudable effort to mitigate condemnation of Abraham’s conduct, appealing to such linguistic nuances actually fails to do so. Abraham must still, so it would seem, be seen as lying.

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*of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 64. Patrick Mason also employs Abraham’s lying as an example of prophetic weakness. See his *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 52. It is also worth noting that in both Genesis episodes Sarah lied as well. This can be inferred from Genesis 12:13 and is explicitly reported in Genesis 20:5. It is also clear that she lied in the episode found in Abraham 2:21–25. Writers typically do not focus on Sarah when discussing these incidents, however. The interest is primarily in Abraham.

4. See, for example, Ellis T. Rasmussen, *A Latter-day Saint Commentary on the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 38–39. See also Susan Easton Black, *400 Questions and Answers about the Old Testament* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2013), 45. One scriptural account, of course, depicts Abraham himself as making this point (Genesis 20:12).

5. See John Gee, *An Introduction to the Book of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), <https://rsc.byu.edu/introduction-book-abraham/book-abraham-ancient-world>. Also motivated by what she considers to be the difficult theological issue regarding Abraham, Gaye Strathearn explores this ancient wife/sister motif in detail. See her “The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh’s Introduction to Jehovah,” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 100–116, <https://rsc.byu.edu/sperry-symposium-classics-old-testament/wife-sister-experience>.

### The Shared Assumption in these Views

What is most interesting about these two competing views, however—one that Abraham lied and one that (for one linguistic reason or another) he did not lie—is that they both make the same underlying moral assumption: they both presuppose that lying itself is always wrong. The first view sees Abraham as practicing deception, and it considers his doing so to be proof that even prophets do wrong at times. The second view—that Abraham did not lie—seems motivated to claim that Abraham did *not* do wrong, and it supports this claim by arguing that he did not actually lie. But this approach harbors the assumption that Abraham *would* have done wrong if he *had* lied.

Thus, while the two views differ on the surface—on whether Abraham actually told an untruth—beneath the surface they both assume that he was wrong if he did. Either way, lying itself is assumed to be prohibited *tout court*.<sup>6</sup>

This recognition crystallizes the question of this paper: *Is lying prohibited tout court? Are there no exceptions?*

Note, at the outset, that this is a moral question, not an exegetical one. Rather than a concern with interpretation per se—for example, with identifying biblical writers' intentions in crafting the Abraham accounts—the concern here is simply with the ethical status of lying itself, wherever it occurs. Is lying categorically prohibited—or not?

Moreover, because our question is moral rather than exegetical in nature, we are also not concerned with an interpretive comparison of the various Abraham episodes. It is true, for example, that in Abraham 2 (vv. 21–25) the Lord is the one who instructs Abraham to lie. This is unlike the Genesis episodes, where Abraham lies of his own volition. But the concern here is not whether the episode in Abraham 2 is more

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6. Students of the scriptures can also find themselves wondering about Abraham's conduct in terms of the precarious circumstances it entailed for Sarah. It should be remembered, though—as mentioned earlier—that the Lord explicitly protected Sarah and that the circumstances were therefore not as perilous as they might seem at first glance. Moreover, Sarah's situation is not the issue normally raised about Abraham's conduct in academic circles. In the brief mention of Abraham's lie by Givens and Mason, for example, it is the lie itself—not the possible consequences for Sarah—that gets attention and is the evidence that Abraham did wrong. The same is true of those who argue that Abraham did not actually tell a lie. The concern in this argument, too, is not whether Abraham put Sarah in precarious circumstances but simply whether he was lying. The scholarly view I am interested in, then, is specifically the claim that Abraham's lie was wrong in itself.



accurate than those appearing in Genesis—or vice versa. The concern in considering Abraham's conduct is to explore the moral status of lying itself—and, for that issue, the question of primacy is irrelevant. From a moral standpoint, it is actually simpler to think of all these accounts as depicting separate incidents. What matters is that they all present the same general *circumstances*—and in each case, those circumstances present us with an ethical question about lying.

This ethical question, then—not exegesis—is the present concern, and on that issue, the two competing views about Abraham make a common assumption—namely, that lying itself is morally wrong and thus prohibited. That shared assumption is the subject of this brief study.

### The Problem with This Assumption

On its face, the idea that lying is completely prohibited makes perfect sense, of course. After all, it is straightforwardly condemned in every book of scripture, from the Old Testament to the Pearl of Great Price (see Lev. 19:11; Prov. 12:22; Rev. 21:8; 2 Ne. 9:34; D&C 76:104; and Moses 4:4).

The problem, though, is that both the scriptures and our own gospel-informed thinking present us with clear counterexamples to such a blanket prohibition. Remember, for example, the famous incident in which the Nephites, under sustained aggression from the Lamanites, used deceptive measures to gain military advantage and defeat a Lamanite army (Alma 52:19–40)—a strategy that was used by Helaman with his Ammonite sons, as well, for the same purpose (Alma 56:30–55).<sup>7</sup> Such Nephite decoys were deceptions, but no one would say they were wrong.<sup>8</sup> Remember, too, the account of the Hebrew midwives in ancient Egypt

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7. Nephite leaders also did something similar in Alma 55:2–24 and 58:1–29, and in these instances, they succeeded in avoiding any loss of blood.

8. Remember that the Nephites had been commanded to defend themselves from Lamanite aggression (see Alma 43:46–47; 48:14; 60:28, 34). Moreover, note that Captain Moroni went to battle against the traitorous Nephite governors specifically because the Lord commanded him to do so if those governors—who were aiding the invading Lamanites—would not repent (Alma 60:33). This attitude toward self-defense is corroborated in Doctrine and Covenants 134:11 as well as in 98:33–36, where the Lord speaks of appropriate defense as “the law” he has given over the earth’s history. Remember, too, that the Lord routinely helped the Nephites in their self-defense against Lamanite aggression. Such help is either reported or presupposed in numerous passages (see, for example, W of M 1:13–14; Mosiah 1:13–14; Alma 2:16–19, 28–31; 16:6–8; 43:23–24; 44:3–5; 57:25–26, 35–36; 58:10–12, 33, 37, 39; 59:3; 60:20–21; 61:13, 21; Hel. 4:24–25; 7:22; 12:2; 3 Ne. 3:15, 21, 25; 4:10, 31, 33; and Morm. 3:3, 15).



who routinely lied to Pharaoh in order to save the lives of newborn Hebrew males and who were expressly blessed by the Lord for doing so (Ex. 1:15–21). Remember also that when Syria was mounting aggression against Israel on one occasion, the Lord explicitly helped Elisha deceive the Syrians (2 Kgs. 6:8–23). And, as mentioned above, also remember a third episode involving Abraham and Sarah—the one in which *the Lord* instructed a lie about their relationship (Abr. 2:21–25). It is difficult to consider every instance of lying morally wrong when the Lord himself approves it, and even directs it, in such scriptural episodes.

We reach the same conclusion when we examine our own thinking about concrete nonscriptural instances. Consider, for example, a famous case in which we are asked to imagine that (1) a would-be murderer comes to our home, and we know he is seeking to kill someone; (2) he asks us if the person he is seeking is in our home; and (3) the person is, in fact, in our home. Assume also that there is no way to stop this would-be murderer if he knows the truth (we are not armed, there is no way to create a delay, the police cannot arrive in time to prevent the murder, and so forth). Now, it would obviously be a lie to tell this would-be murderer that the person he seeks is *not* in our home—but we would all agree that it still would not be wrong to do so.<sup>9</sup> Think, too, of the actual cases of families who hid Jews in their homes during the Holocaust. Such families were effectively lying to the Nazis all day, every day—but no one believes that such lying was wrong.

When faced with these concrete and extreme cases, it turns out that everyone recognizes times when lying would not be wrong. Intuitively, it makes sense that, other things equal, you can lie to those who will either kill you or other innocent people if you *don't* lie to them. It is not difficult to imagine cases in which we feel this way, not to mention finding examples of this in the scriptures themselves.<sup>10</sup>

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9. This case was posed long ago by the French philosopher Benjamin Constant (1767–1830). A recent source for Constant's example is Lenval A. Callender, "In Defence of Kant's 'Infamous' Reply to Constant: 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Benevolent Motives,'" 2014, <https://vdocuments.net/in-defence-of-kants-reply-to-constant.html?page=1>. For some background on this case, see appendix A.

10. Of course, all of this leaves aside the question of whether we actually have a positive duty to lie in such extreme cases. It is one thing to say that we are justified in lying in one circumstance or another, and another to say that we actually *should* lie in them—to say that we are not only permitted to tell an untruth but that we are morally obligated to do so. Although this is an important moral distinction, it is not necessary to address it here, since those who write about Abraham assume that lying is not even justified. This obviously

But intuition is not enough. To be completely satisfied and, for that matter, to actually be confident in our judgments, it is important to unpack this intuition. This is particularly the case with Abraham, whose deception is often considered to be wrong despite our general instinct about lying and killing. Moreover, our intuitions about these cases seem to contradict the clear commandment against lying, which, as mentioned earlier, appears in every book of scripture. This makes it hard to accept that this obligation can be superseded simply by our intuitions.

All of this indicates the value of trying to understand why we feel the way we do in the cases we have considered. It is a little bewildering to see how easily we can form our judgments in these instances, even though we are completely aware of the commandment against lying that seems so clearly to contradict them.

### **A Way of Thinking about Truth-Telling**

Part of our bewilderment, it would seem, is due to thinking of truth-telling strictly in terms of an abstract *rule*. Thinking this way is not unreasonable, of course, since the vast majority of the time we *are* obligated to tell the truth. As mentioned, this is a common feature of the scriptural record.

The problem, though, as we have seen, is that it is not difficult to think of occasions when telling an untruth is completely justified. This is evident even when we consider some aspects of ordinary living. Think, for instance, of homeowners who—in worrying about potential burglary—routinely make it look as if they are at home when they are not (for example, by leaving lights on, playing music, having neighbors take in mail and trash cans, and so forth). People do this kind of thing all the time, and it is all clearly a lie—but no one believes it is wrong. Such examples, in addition to the more extreme cases we have already seen, indicate that truth-telling cannot really be a rule *per se*. There must be more to it than that. Following, therefore, are some general considerations that might help us gain increased clarity about this issue.

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precludes the possibility that it could ever be a positive duty, and that is why it is not important to take up the distinction here. For purposes of addressing Abraham, it is sufficient to show that lying is at least justified in certain cases.

### *Lying as the Violation of a Relationship*

Perhaps a useful way to begin thinking about truth-telling is to see it at least partly as a function of our relationships with each other. Rather than simply being a rule that should be obeyed *as* a rule, perhaps, at a deeper level, it has more to do with how we treat each other.

To get a sense of what this means, think, to begin, of our status as persons with agency. Such fundamental freedom has been an inherent aspect of our nature from the very beginning (D&C 93:29–30). However, we cannot properly exercise our agency if we are doing so against a background of falsehoods—if we are responding to things that are not actually real. In order to be fully accountable for how we order our lives—for what we *become* as a result of what we choose, moment by moment, to do—we must be experiencing the world as it actually is.<sup>11</sup> As persons with agency, we therefore have a right to *know* the way the world is: we have a personal right to the truth.

It follows from this that we also have a corresponding duty—namely, to tell each other the truth. To assert that we all have a personal right to the truth is meaningless if it does not mean that we all *owe* each other the truth. The right entails the duty.

Once we see this, it is easy to appreciate that lying violates the relationship we have with one another. If I lie to you, I am violating what I owe you as a person who has a right to the truth. I am violating *you*. I am manipulating your mind—I am *using* you—and this is a mistreatment of you, personally. Indeed, it makes sense to see the abstract imperative about truth-telling as, at least partly, an instantiation of the deeper principle that we are not to mistreat each other: it is a violation of the second great commandment. Such mistreatment can happen in multiple ways, of course—for example, by illegitimately causing physical harm or even death to someone. But lying is also one of the ways we mistreat others, and it makes sense that that is at least one reason why there is a general prohibition against it: lying is wrong *because* it is a mistreatment of others. Again, it violates the fundamental commandment about how we are to feel about and treat each other.

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11. For a brief discussion on this point about accountability, see appendix B.

### *Forfeiting Rights*

Now, recognizing a deeper principle about mistreating each other has an important consequence. Since this deeper principle is what generates individuals' right to the truth in the first place, no one can assert this right to the truth if their *purpose* in possessing it is to mistreat someone—to physically harm or even kill them, for example. Both morally and logically that is self-defeating. Since everyone's personal right to the truth is grounded to begin with in the more fundamental right not to be mistreated, no one has that right to the truth if their *purpose* is to mistreat someone. That would be to corrupt—and thus to negate—what engendered the personal right in the first place: we cannot have a right to violate what *gives rise* to the right.

One thing this means is that although people have a right to the truth, they can also *forfeit* their right to the truth. When their purpose is, say, to murder someone, they are violating what generates their right to the truth in the first place, and they therefore lose that right.<sup>12</sup> They have no moral claim on others to tell them the truth.

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12. The notion of forfeiture typically arises in discussions regarding self-defense where (to put it simply) we might say that although everyone possesses a right against violence, aggressors—by their aggression—actually forfeit that right, whereas those who are merely defending themselves maintain it. There is thus a moral difference between acts of aggression and acts of self-defense, even though both involve violence. A bit more discussion of this general point has recently appeared in my article, “Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 132–33. The idea of forfeiture has been challenged from time to time in the philosophical literature, but it has also been successfully defended. Judith Thomson, for one, challenged it in an early paper, but later explicitly invoked it. See Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Self-Defense and Rights,” in her *Rights, Restitution, and Risk: Essays in Moral Theory*, ed. William Parent (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 33–50, and her classic “Self-Defense,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 283–310. Charles Fried (my first influence) and Frances Kamm both employ the idea, as does Fiona Leverick, even more fully. See Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); F. M. Kamm, *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Fiona Leverick, *Killing in Self-Defence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Grabczynska and Ferzan criticize Leverick's reliance on forfeiture, but unpersuasively, and Brian Orend explicitly defends the notion against critics. See Arlette Grabczynska and Kimberly Kessler Ferzan, “Justifying Killing in Self-Defence,” *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 99, no. 1 (2009): 235–53, and Brian Orend, “A Just-War Critique of Realism and Pacifism,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001): 435–77. Of course, in society generally, we routinely recognize that rights can be forfeited. People have a right to liberty, but if they perform sufficiently serious criminal acts, they forfeit that right and are restricted in their liberty through incarceration.

### *The Obligation to God*

What we owe other persons is not the only reason we have a duty to tell them the truth, however. Another reason we have this duty to others is because of what we owe *God*. Because truth is one of the Lord's essential characteristics,<sup>13</sup> we are obligated to honor him by emulating him: we have an obligation to be truth-tellers to our fellow human beings because of what we owe *him*. Thus, even though those with murderous intentions have forfeited their *personal* right to the truth, we nevertheless have an obligation to tell others the truth because of what we owe the Lord. Our obligation to others *and* to God both seem to be reasons why, as mentioned earlier, we are regularly commanded to not lie.

Despite our obligation to God to tell others the truth, however, even this obligation does not apply without exception. Not only are we certain that he would approve the deception practiced by those hiding Jews, as well as by us in lying to the would-be murderer at our door, but we have also seen scriptural examples in which the Lord actually approves, helps, and even directs acts of deception. Thus, although it is true that we have an obligation to God to tell others the truth, even this obligation does not apply in *every* circumstance.

### *Moral Asymmetry*

One element that seems to make a difference in the cases we are considering (the Hebrew midwives, Elisha, those hiding Jews, and so forth)—and that would help explain the Lord's approval—is the asymmetry of the moral choice they pose. Notice, for example, that if we all have the personal right not to be mistreated—and thus have a right to the truth—then we have an even more stringent right not to be killed. Violation of that personal right constitutes a much greater mistreatment than simply being lied to—and that is precisely what is at stake in the cases we are considering. They pit lying against killing, and, other things equal, it is obvious that killing is the more serious of the two acts.

But the asymmetry is actually more radical than this. After all, it is not just that we are faced with lying versus killing in the abstract—as if the particular nature of these acts did not matter. To the contrary, their particular natures are crucial, because they are crucially different: we are

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13. For example, the scriptures tell us that he is “a God of truth” (Deut. 32:4; Ether 3:12), that Jesus *is* “the truth” (John 14:6), and that the Holy Ghost is the “Spirit of truth” (John 15:26).

faced with lying to someone *who has no right to the truth in the first place* (and thus has no right *not* to be lied to) versus saving the life of someone who has *every* right not to be killed. So the point is not just that lying is a less serious mistreatment than killing. It is also that the persons being lied to have no right not to be lied to in the first place, whereas those whose lives are at stake have *every* right not to be killed. Morally, again, the situation is completely asymmetrical.

### *A Restricted Choice*

Another element that seems to make a difference in the cases we are considering—and that would also help explain the Lord's approval—is that the innocent parties in these instances have no option beyond this completely asymmetrical choice. The Hebrew midwives did not have some third alternative, for example—a way both to tell the truth *and* to save lives. Nothing they did could have prevented infants from being killed if they told Pharaoh the truth. The same was true of those hiding Jews during the Holocaust. They too had no third alternative that would have permitted them to tell the truth and yet save those they were hiding. Telling the truth would have *entailed* the loss of those lives.

The same is true in every one of our cases, from the would-be murderer at our door to Elisha. In none of them is there some higher authority that can be relied on to overrule such a restricted choice and permit the parties to tell the truth *without* entailing innocent deaths. The killing simply cannot be prevented if the truth is known.

These two features of our cases, then—the radical asymmetry of the options they present, and the restriction to these two options only—would seem to explain how the Lord could sanction lying in them. In each case, the persons being lied to have no right *not* to be lied to, whereas those whose lives are at stake have *every* right not to be killed. When this is the unavoidable choice, it seems evident enough that the Lord would approve the decision to lie, just as we would.

### *A Tentative General Principle*

At least tentatively, all of this suggests the following three-part principle about lying in the cases we are considering: The innocent parties in these situations have no obligation to tell the truth to their antagonists because (1) those antagonists have no right to kill anyone in the first place and thus have no right to the truth that would help them do so (that is, they have no right *not* to be lied to); (2) at stake are the lives of

innocent persons who, in contrast, have *every* right not to be killed; and (3) the killing cannot be prevented if the truth is known (lying versus this killing are the *only* options).

All of our cases present such extreme and morally asymmetrical circumstances, and this is at least one possible explanation for why we feel that lying in them is justified—and this is true even regarding our obligation to the Lord.

### Accounting for Our Intuitions

The quick discussion above is far from a full account of lying, of course. Moral philosophy is a discipline rich in subtlety, debate, and careful moral distinctions, and full moral arguments, therefore, are necessarily more complex and subtle than this.<sup>14</sup> The concern here is simply to consider some specific cases where everyone would agree that lying is justified (the cases of Elisha, the Hebrew midwives, and so forth) and to raise some general considerations for thinking about them. We have

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14. The very notion of a right is complex, for instance, and the literature on the topic is therefore large. A fairly recent detailed and comprehensive discussion is F. M. Kamm's *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). An earlier volume that also illustrates the complexity involved in thinking about rights is Ronald Dworkin's classic *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978). My purpose is dramatically narrower than providing a complete and detailed argument about either rights or lying, however. I will be content if my brief discussion simply resonates with the intuitions and considered judgments of most readers regarding the particular cases I have identified. A more complete treatment of my thinking (at least in intellectual terms) would draw importantly on Kant (particularly his second formulation of the categorical imperative), Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas (my understanding of whom is completely indebted to C. Terry Warner). Additional features are derived from important and, in my view, classic works by Charles Fried, who wrote on the relational foundation of right and wrong long ago, and Ronald Dworkin, whose conception of equality is central to my thinking about moral issues. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, rev. ed., ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (1785; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Charles Fried, *Right and Wrong* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). Obviously, countless authors have emphasized Kant's categorical imperative, and on multiple topics. To pick up on just one of the threads, specifically regarding self-defense, see Jonathan Quong, "Killing in Self-Defense," *Ethics* 119, no. 32 (April 2009): 507–37; and Kimberly Kessler Ferzan, "Self-Defense, Permissions, and the Means Principle: A Reply to Quong," *Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law* (2011): 503–13.



intuitions about these cases, and the intent here is no more than to identify at least a minimum plausible explanation that would account for these intuitions.

Here, for example, is how this approach looks in one of the nonscriptural instances we have considered:

Because the Nazis had no right to exterminate the Jews in the first place, and thus had no right to the truth that would help them do so (that is, they had no right *not* to be lied to); because the Jews had *every* right not to be killed; and because the killing could not be prevented if the truth were known (lying versus this killing were the only options), those hiding Jews had no obligation to tell the Nazis the truth. They were completely justified in lying all day, every day.

Once we understand the elements of this argument, we can put the idea in more abbreviated form, as follows:

Not only did those hiding Jews face the unavoidable choice of either lying to the Nazis or entailing Jewish deaths, but, in addition, the Nazis actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas the Jews had *every* right not to be killed. Those who hid Jews were thus completely justified in their deception.

The same logic applies to the would-be murderer at our door, as well as to our scriptural cases. For example, we can say of the Hebrew midwives:

Not only did they face the unavoidable choice of either lying to Pharaoh or entailing infant deaths, but, in addition, Pharaoh actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas those infants had *every* right not to be killed. The Hebrew midwives were thus completely justified in their deception—which explains why the Lord would bless them.

The identical logic applies to Elisha, who deceived the Syrian attackers before any war began (with the Lord's help, remember), and to the Nephites, who deceived their Lamanite attackers during their ongoing defensive war against them. Both were thoroughly justified in their deceptions, and for the same reasons as those above.<sup>15</sup> In all of these instances, both scriptural and nonscriptural, our intuitions tell us that these lies are

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15. Although identical in moral structure, the Nephite case is more general and indirect than the other cases we are considering. For a discussion of their particular example, see appendix C.

justified, and this approach to them provides at least one possible explanation for why we feel that way.

The case of Abraham is no different, even though people often assume he was wrong. To see this, consider first the account involving the Egyptians in Abraham 2:21–25, where the Lord explicitly tells Abraham that he will be killed if the Egyptians know the truth about Sarah. The logic is the same as in the other cases:

Not only did Abraham face the unavoidable choice of either lying to the Egyptians or being killed, but, in addition, the Egyptians actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas Abraham had *every* right not to be killed. Abraham was thus completely justified in his deception.

Seen this way, the idea that Abraham was justified now seems as intuitive as the other cases. And the same logic, of course, applies to both of the related Abrahamic episodes in Genesis, where Abraham also saw that his life was at stake (Gen. 12:12; 20:11). What is intuitive to us in the other instances, then—that is, that their lies were completely justified—applies equally to Abraham.<sup>16</sup>

All of this is particularly significant when we think of the Lord himself instructing Abraham to lie in Abraham 2. This is not because that passage somehow takes precedence over the biblical episodes but only because the Lord's clear involvement throws our ethical question into

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16. I do think it is intuitive for us to see the deception in these cases (including Abraham's) as justified. This is why, despite the various commands in scripture, it is still somewhat mystifying that Abraham's conduct has so often been seen as a problem. Not only do we (1) have an account in modern scripture in which the Lord tells Abraham to lie, (2) possess other scriptural episodes in which the Lord approves and even assists in deception, (3) have obvious cases in our history, like families hiding Jews from the Nazis—and so forth—in which we naturally believe that lying is justified, but (4) we also have our own intuitions that tell us someone in Abraham's situation would be justified in lying. It seems likely that part of what prevents us from thinking clearly in Abraham's case—that is, seeing his conduct as problematic even though we clearly recognize other exceptions—is his preeminent spiritual status. If the story were about an ordinary person facing a choice like Abraham's, then, given the totality of the story as it played out, the lie would likely be shrugged off as a perfectly reasonable thing to do—just like we do with the midwives, for example. It seems to be Abraham's elevated spiritual status that makes it hard to see it that way in his case: at least inchoately, the thinking might be that, given such status, the standard is naturally more stringent for him. But notice: even if this were the case, because of Abraham 2 it still would not be enough to show that his lie was wrong, since there *the Lord* instructs Abraham to lie. Thus, whatever increased stringency we might think applied to Abraham, that (obviously) was still not enough to make his lie wrong. All of this seems evident enough, which means it is still mystifying why Abraham's lie has ever been thought to be a problem.

such bold relief. Something has to explain how the Lord himself could instruct a lie, and this approach, at least in general terms, seems to offer a plausible framework for such an explanation.

### **The Commandment against Lying: A Key Presupposition**

The foregoing is one approach regarding justified deception in the cases we are considering. This account, then, along with our intuitions, naturally invites us to revisit our understanding of the commandment against lying. After all, when the Lord says, “Thou shalt not lie,” and “He that lieth and will not repent shall be cast out” (D&C 42:21), it appears that the command must apply without exception. It seems prohibitive of *all* lying.

We have seen, though, that a broader look at the scriptures, and at our own moral thinking in certain cases, indicates that this understanding cannot actually be correct. Indeed, even if only tacitly, we have always known there are exceptions. There are simply too many counterexamples, including the Lord’s own approval and direction at times, to support a blanket prohibition of all lying.

The common structure of the cases we have considered helps us see at least one plausible reason for why such exceptions exist. The fact that these cases have the same moral structure, and that both our intuition and our reasoned judgment tell us that lying is justified in them, suggests that the commandment against lying simply does not *contemplate* cases like these. Instead, it appears to presuppose circumstances that are actually very different. Either (1) everyone in the situation actually has a right to the truth (that is, they *do* have the right not to be lied to); or (2) no innocent lives are at stake; or (3) if they are, the killing can be prevented even if the truth is known (lying versus killing are *not* the only options).

These are more normal circumstances, and it makes sense that a commandment would assume those rather than the extreme situations we have been considering. Most of the time, for example, people lie because they merely want to save face or, perhaps, to avoid the consequences of their actions. Even more serious, but also common, are circumstances in which people want to gain an advantage over others, exact revenge, satisfy their greed—or meet some other purely selfish interest. Such circumstances are breeding grounds for lies and have nothing like the moral structure we see in the exceptional cases we are considering. The commandment, therefore, applies straightforwardly to such circumstances and condemns their deceptions.

In contrast, the cases of the Hebrew midwives, Elisha, Abraham, and so on, simply seem to fall outside what the commandment against lying contemplates—and that, plausibly, is why they constitute genuine exceptions to it. *Their* actions, in *their* circumstances, are not what the commandment was designed to prevent—it presupposes very different kinds of circumstances—and its prohibition, therefore, does not apply to them. They are authentic exceptions.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that such instances are completely anomalous, however. In the vast majority of cases, the circumstances map exactly what the commandment was designed to prevent, and to lie in these circumstances is clearly prohibited.

This means that the approach presented here is not at all permissive. It actually prohibits every lie proscribed by the various commandments against lying, while simultaneously offering an explanation for why we (along with the Lord) have *always* recognized exceptions. This account does not offer new exceptions but simply explains the type of exceptions we have always recognized when we have actually thought about it.

Again, although this account supplies a general structure for understanding the specific cases we are considering, it is far from a complete theory of lying. More than anything, it is simply an introduction to the topic.<sup>18</sup> However, this treatment does seem to help us with these par-

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17. The presupposition presented here is only partial, of course, since it is derived only from the particular cases we are considering. Additional cases of justified lying, including more subtle ones, would lead to a more robust conception of the presupposition that appears to be built into the commandment. The discussion here is just a sliver of what would be a much larger project in understanding all justified lies.

18. For example, surely there are some acts less serious than murder that would nevertheless justify lying, and a full theory would account for them—along with many other subtle variations. Think, for instance, of the homeowner example, mentioned earlier. Burglary is far less serious than murder, and yet we all feel comfortable with homeowners lying about being at home when they are not. Part of the reason, surely, is that potential burglars, by their evil intentions, have forfeited any personal right to the truth and thus have no moral claim on homeowners to tell them the truth. It is easy to imagine that the Lord, too, approves deception in such cases—and yet they are far from circumstances of murder. They also are far from certain in their outcomes: rather than the certainty that some innocent person(s) will be killed—as in the cases we are considering—in this example, there is only the *risk* that one's home will be burglarized. The situation is thus both less serious and less certain than the cases we are looking at. Moreover, we can also imagine situations in which, for reasons far short of murder, antagonists have forfeited any personal right to the truth but in which we still feel obligated to tell the truth out of our duty to God. A complete theory of lying would account for all such permutations. Moreover, as already mentioned, there are other types of lies altogether (for example, to

ticular cases. It seems to offer, at least in outline, a minimum plausible explanation for why we believe that lying is justified in these instances. Instinctively we can see this, and this approach is a possible way to help us understand why. The most important example, of course, is the case of Abraham, because his conduct gets the most attention. This approach allows us to see that his situation was exactly like the others, and that it makes perfect sense, therefore, to see his lie as not morally wrong at all but instead as completely justified—which, of course, also helps explain why, in one passage, the Lord himself would instruct Abraham to tell an untruth.

## Two Corollary Issues

### *The Irrelevance of Biblical Writers' Intentions*

Earlier mention was made of biblical writers' intentions in creating their accounts. This matters because it is sometimes thought that these intentions are relevant to the moral judgments modern readers make about Abraham. The idea is that in crafting their accounts of Abraham's deception in the first place, biblical writers were intentionally conveying the message that prophets can be inspired and still make mistakes. Since that was their very purpose, modern writers are therefore justified in reaching that conclusion based on these accounts: it is exactly what the original writers intended.

There are two problems with this argument, though.

The first is that if, by Abraham's lie, biblical writers intended to show that prophets can be inspired and still make mistakes, they were assuming that his lie *was* a mistake—that it was a moral wrong. But the only way to jump from "Abraham lied" to "Abraham was wrong to lie" is to assume in the first place that lying itself is always wrong—that it is prohibited *tout court*.<sup>19</sup> However, as we have already seen, this assumption is a mistake. Therefore, if, in fashioning their accounts of Abraham's lie, biblical writers were intending to show that prophets can be inspired

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satisfy greed or to gain revenge), and there are also lies intended simply to spare others' feelings—and a full theory would address all of these as well. An analysis this complete, however, would require consideration of far more variables and moral distinctions than brought forth here, and doing so is beyond the scope of any single paper.

19. The alternative is to say that even though lying is not always wrong, this *particular* lie was wrong. However, because the authors I have referenced do not argue in this way, one is left to conclude that their claim of Abraham's wrongdoing is based on the broader assumption—namely, that lying is always wrong.

and still make mistakes, *they* were making a mistake. They were making their own false assumption about lying. It is no defense of modern writers, then, to say that they are merely reaching the conclusion that the ancient writers intended. Because of their false moral assumption, those ancient writers were *mistaken* in what they intended—and thus they obviously provide no support to modern writers who follow them in that mistake.

The second problem is that biblical writers seemed to have the *opposite* intention in writing about the Hebrew midwives and Elisha. There we are shown the Lord both helping and blessing acts of deception, which would seem to deliver the message that people can deceive without their deception being wrong—which is the opposite of the conclusion reached about biblical writers' intentions in the Abraham case. In that case, it is assumed that people *cannot* deceive without their deception being wrong. When we see that biblical writers can have opposite intentions in this way, it seems even more obvious that it is a mistake to rely on them and what they think, and to form our own moral judgments instead.

### *Repentance?*

One way of looking at cases where it is obviously not wrong to lie is to think that lying in those instances is just serving the greater good. According to this view, although we *are* doing wrong in lying, that wrong is outweighed by the good we are producing: Abraham is saving his life; Elisha is saving the Israelites' lives; the Hebrew midwives are saving babies' lives; and so forth. In this view, although people are doing something wrong by lying, they are achieving the greater good by doing so, and that is what justifies it. The deception *is* still wrong, however, and thus seems to call for at least some kind of repentance.

In the view presented here, however, lying in these cases is *not* actually wrong—even a little—and thus there is simply nothing to repent of. Abraham was not mistreating the Egyptians in lying to them, for example, because, due to their murderous intentions, they had no claim to the truth in the first place. For the same reason, Elisha was not mistreating the Syrians, the midwives were not mistreating Pharaoh, those who hid Jews during the Holocaust were not mistreating the Nazis—and so on. In all of these cases, the truth was not given to people who, because of their murderous intentions, had no right to the truth in the first place. Preventing such persons from mistreating others was in no sense a mistreatment of *them*.

Neither, moreover, do the lies in these circumstances dishonor God. The radical asymmetry of these situations, and the strictness of the choice they force upon innocent parties, seems to explain why God would sanction lying in the cases we have seen. Such circumstances are completely different from those presupposed by the commandment against lying and therefore constitute genuine exceptions to it.

It is true, of course, that we will all feel regret that the world can present circumstances of this sort—situations in which lying is appropriate and justified. Nevertheless, it *is* appropriate and justified in the circumstances we have seen and therefore calls for nothing like repentance.

This becomes even more apparent when we recall, again, that in the book of Abraham it was the Lord who instructed Abraham to lie. It seems absurd to imagine God giving instructions to do something (1) that was morally wrong; (2) that would thus require repentance by Abraham for obediently performing it; and (3) that, based on such repentance, would also require suffering by his Son in order to atone for the wrong *that he himself had commanded*. A similar kind of problem applies to the Lord's helping Elisha lie, as well as his approving of the repeated lies told by the Hebrew midwives. Again, it is absurd to imagine that God would help and approve acts (1) that were morally wrong; (2) that would therefore require repentance from those who were performing them; and (3) that, based on such repentance, would also require suffering by his Son in order to atone for the very wrongs *he was helping and approving*.<sup>20</sup>

All such considerations indicate that in the cases we have considered, lying is not wrong even in a small degree and thus calls for nothing like repentance.

## Conclusion

We have considered a number of specific cases in which our intuitions tell us that lying is justified. We have also identified a general structure for understanding why we think this way in these particular instances, including why they do not violate the commandment against lying.

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20. In one sense, speaking of God performing acts that would require the suffering of his Son is not actually accurate. This is because the Savior was the one actually giving direction to Abraham, helping Elisha, and approving of the midwives' lies. Nevertheless, he was doing so *as* the Father, and, in light of that, this way of speaking *is* accurate. It is a genuine absurdity to imagine the Father (in whose place the Savior was acting) giving commands and approving acts that would not only require repentance but would also require the suffering of his beloved Son.



All of this applies to Abraham. In the end, there seems to be no good reason to think that he did wrong when he lied about Sarah. When we consider the evidence and all the relevant factors, including the five similar cases we have looked at, it is clear that he was *not* wrong to do so.

It is highly beneficial, of course, to have a rule against lying that governs conduct for the vast majority of circumstances in our lives. Following that commandment prevents a massive amount of mistreatment that would occur without it. Although far from complete, and although other explanations might serve as well, or better, the account here at least helps us see a minimum plausible explanation for why the commandment can operate as a rule in this way and yet simultaneously admit the exceptions we see in the specific cases we have looked at, including Abraham's.

A final point: The conclusion that Abraham was not wrong to lie does not suggest that prophets such as Abraham are flawless, of course. To believe that his lie was completely justified is not the same as saying that he was perfect. Everyone appreciates that even the greatest of prophets are human and have human weaknesses. But it does not follow from this that we should point to false examples to make the point—and that appears to be what happens in common thinking about Abraham. It seems clear that Abraham's lie was not an instance of wrongdoing, and it would be better, therefore, if it were not casually treated as if it were. Doing so not only perpetuates an insufficiently nuanced and thus inadequate view of lying itself, but also results in an inaccurate perception of Abraham.

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## Appendix A

As mentioned in the text (note 9), Benjamin Constant initially proposed the case of the would-be murderer at our door. His solution to it was to say, first, that rights give rise to duties, and then, second, to add that “to tell the truth then is a duty, but only towards him who has a right to the

truth. But no man has a right to a truth that injures others.”<sup>21</sup> Although people almost universally agree with Constant in his answer, Kant was not one of them. This is not surprising, since Constant was specifically challenging Kant’s view of lying in proposing this example in the first place. Kant published a reply to Constant, but some of Kant’s reasoning in his reply is widely considered ludicrous. The range of interest in this topic can perhaps be represented by the arguments of four authors as a sample. David Sussman, for instance, defends Kant’s overall reasoning by placing it in a specific context: not in the arena of personal morality (“virtue,” as Kant referred to this domain of philosophy), but specifically in the context of the relations among free and equal members of a political community with a just legal system (the ethics of “right,” as Kant referred to this domain of philosophy). Thus, contra Kant himself, Sussman finds a way (through the notion of “deputizing”) to justify the lie even on Kantian terms.<sup>22</sup> Lenval Callender defends Kant’s reasoning in both philosophical contexts and claims that Constant simply uses the term “right” in a way different from the way Kant uses it.<sup>23</sup> Christine Korsgaard argues that the lie is permissible from the standpoint of Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative but not from the standpoint of the second or third<sup>24</sup>—and this because the standard of conduct Kant establishes for us is designed for an ideal state of affairs: one in which everyone is living in accord with Kant’s maxims. We are to conduct ourselves *as if* we were living in such a world. She argues that this suggests the need for special principles for dealing with evil—principles that do not assume the ideal state of affairs that Kant generally asks us to assume.<sup>25</sup> James Mahon also defends Kant on lying, incorporating distinctions both regarding the context of lying and regarding three different *kinds* of lies addressed in Kant’s work.<sup>26</sup>

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21. See again Callender, “In Defence of Kant’s ‘Infamous’ Reply to Constant.”

22. See David Sussman, “On the Supposed Duty of Truthfulness: Kant on Lying in Self-Defense,” in *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. Clancy Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 225–43.

23. See Callender, “In Defence of Kant’s ‘Infamous’ Reply to Constant.”

24. If these are unfamiliar, see Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

25. See Christine Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15, no. 4 (1986): 325–49.

26. See James Edwin Mahon, “The Truth about Kant on Lies,” in *The Philosophy of Deception*, ed. Clancy Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 201–24, [http://wlu.academia.edu/JamesMahon/Papers/152941/The\\_Truth\\_About\\_Kant\\_On\\_Lies](http://wlu.academia.edu/JamesMahon/Papers/152941/The_Truth_About_Kant_On_Lies). For one translation of Kant’s published reply itself, see Immanuel Kant,

## Appendix B

Regarding the relationship of truth to accountability, note Jacob's reminder to the Nephites that the Lamanites' filthiness at that time "came because of their fathers" (Jacob 3:7, 9), and also his warning to the Nephites that "ye may, because of your filthiness, bring your children unto destruction, and their sins be heaped upon your heads at the last day" (Jacob 3:10). Also recall the Lord's pronouncement that, though the people at the time of the flood were the most wicked of all his creations, "their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers" (Moses 7:36–37), and his declaration in our day that if parents are not diligent in teaching their children, "the sin be upon the heads of the parents" (D&C 68:25). Remember, as well, that Samuel blamed the unbelief of the Lamanites in his day on the "traditions of their fathers" (Hel. 15:15) and that Captain Moroni did the same decades earlier. He remarked that the traitorous behavior of Nephite governors was worse than the conduct of the Lamanites who were attacking the Nephites, because the Lamanites' hatred was caused by "the tradition of their fathers" (Alma 60:32). And early in Book of Mormon history, Lehi blessed the children of Laman that "if ye are cursed, behold, I leave my blessing upon you, that the cursing may be taken from you and be answered upon the heads of your parents" (2 Ne. 4:6)—a blessing he extended to the children of Lemuel as well (2 Ne. 4:9). All of these passages indicate that accountability is attenuated when persons must exercise their agency in an atmosphere populated by false beliefs or false ways of living—or both. We see this even in the Ammonites. While scripture clearly declares that there is no forgiveness for murder "in this world, nor in the world to come" (D&C 42:18), the Ammonites committed acts of murder and yet obtained forgiveness.<sup>27</sup> In this case, as in all the others above, some degree of diminished accountability must be operative in order to explain such forgiveness. What all of these passages show is the importance of the truth in individuals' exercise of agency and in their degree of accountability for how they exercise it.

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"Concerning a Pretended Right to Lie from Motives of Humanity," trans. A. E. Kroeger, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (April 1873): 14–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25665827?seq=1>.

27. For a discussion of this matter, see Duane Boyce, "The Ammonites Were Not Pacifists," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 293–313.

## Appendix C

As mentioned earlier (note 15), the Nephite case is more general and indirect than the other cases we are considering. They used deceptive tactics, not because particular lives were at stake in the moment, but because *all* Nephite lives were at stake in the general ongoing war against the invading Lamanites. The Nephites did not start the war but were merely defending themselves against the aggressing Lamanites who were invading and killing them. As seen earlier (note 8), the Lord had commanded the Nephites to defend themselves, and he helped them do so. Moreover, the Lamanite threat was severe and ominous. They vastly outnumbered the Nephites they were attacking (see appendix D), and their intent was specifically to murder them—an attitude that led to killing even women and children (see, for example, Alma 35:14; 43:9–10, 45, 47; 48:24; 49:7; 60:17). We have record of instances in which Lamanite armies were already in occupation of Nephite cities and thus were refusing to fight; instead, they were advancing their aggression by steadfastly maintaining those occupations (for example, Alma 52:19–40; 56:13–55; 58:1–29).

In these circumstances, the only way these Nephite armies could actively defend their people was to defeat as many Lamanite armies as possible and to retake Nephite cities. And the only way to do this was to practice deception. They did not know whose particular lives they were saving by their actions, but they did know that by defeating Lamanite armies and retaking Nephite cities they were hastening the end of the war, thereby saving numerous innocent lives, however unknown they might be.

Thus, although more general and indirect, the moral structure of the Nephites' circumstances is actually the same as the other cases we are considering. Let's call the killings that could be prevented by retaking Nephite cities and defeating as many Lamanite armies as possible—thereby shortening the war and reducing loss of life—"preventable killings." Then the logic goes like this:

Not only did Nephite defenders face the unavoidable choice of either lying to the Lamanites or entailing preventable killings, but, in addition, the Lamanites actually had no right *not* to be lied to, whereas the Nephites had *every* right not to be killed and thus every right to prevent such killings. The Nephite defenders were thus completely justified in their deceptions. (With suitable modifications, the same thinking applies to Elisha's situation with the Syrians.)

## Appendix D

That the Lamanites vastly outnumbered the Nephites is a prominent feature of the record. Recall, for example, that the Nephite population was less than half the size of the Lamanite population in about 120 BC (Mosiah 25:2–3). Roughly thirty years later, the text begins reporting major dissensions from the Nephites to the Lamanites (Alma 2), and by the time of Captain Moroni (more than ten years after that), the text tells us that dissenters who had joined the Lamanites were nearly as numerous as the entire remaining Nephite population (Alma 43:13–14). By the time the war begins in Alma 43, therefore, the Nephite population—which, apparently, had long been less than half the size of the Lamanites—had been reduced by nearly half again. Not only, then, did the Nephites face regular attacks from the Lamanites, but, although there is no way to be certain, it is possible that the Lamanites outnumbered the Nephites by a ratio of nearly four to one. When under attack, the circumstances were genuinely dire for the Nephites.<sup>28</sup>

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28. I am indebted to Royal Skousen for pointing out to me in personal correspondence the textual correction—changing “descendants” to read “dissenters” in Alma 43:14—that brings this passage into conformity with the earliest texts. See also Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 428–29.

## Gethsemane

I want to tell the story. But—  
there is no approaching this,  
strange crux  
of everything.

Come at it sideways.  
Come at it from the edge.

Picture, then,  
a hardscrabble patch of land.  
Rocks. An olive tree. Sparse,  
straggling desert grass. The rocks

have been waiting. The wind  
has been waiting. The living souls nearby  
sleep through the whole thing.  
(This is important. I have slept  
through many things.)

And then—  
What

can be known? There has never been  
any moment more private  
nor more public.

So.  
What I know: the screaming windy cliff  
of unavoidable onus, the weight  
of what must be done.  
For me, it was the abyss  
of being about to give birth. The way  
the self shrinks  
to a pinpoint in a vacuum, the way  
one becomes lost, faceless,

the way  
the thought that there is another soul depending on you  
can pull you inside out and through  
to a new place.

But of course  
even in that, my most impossible moment,  
he was already there,  
having been there before me.

Oh, how is a human  
to comprehend godly heartbreak?  
Might as well teach a point on a line  
about temples and spires,  
about stars. It's a matter of dimension:  
impossible geometry.



What we know:  
he went to a place.  
He knew that ahead of him  
was a pain yet unknown in the world,  
extra-dimensional. That  
seeing it, he, who had maybe  
never known fear before this,  
asked to be excused,  
but not really.

We know:  
the contemplation of that pain  
was so terrible it required the ministrations  
of an angel before it could be approached.

We know:  
at point zero  
he was left alone  
in a way no human can comprehend.

We know:  
he came out on the other side  
gentle, generous,  
quieter.

Forever after,  
he would say very little about it.  
Only: *shrink*.  
Only: *nevertheless*.

—Darlene Young

# “Last at the Cross”

## Teachings about Christ’s Crucifixion in the *Woman’s Exponent*, the *Relief Society Magazine*, and the *Young Woman’s Journal*

John Hilton III, Jesse Vincent, and Rachel Harper

An article in the 1921 issue of the *Relief Society Magazine* states, “Sisters of the Relief Society, . . . answer to your hearts one question: Have I secured to myself the Pearl of Great Price, the great gift of God to man, which is eternal life, and which can be secured only through first obtaining a testimony of the mission and crucifixion of the Savior, with the added testimony that Joseph Smith was a prophet of the living God, and that he revealed anew the gospel of Jesus Christ in this the last dispensation to the children of men?”<sup>1</sup> Note that in this unsigned editorial, the author emphasized the importance of securing a testimony, specifically of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Previous studies have clearly indicated that the scriptures,<sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith,<sup>3</sup> and Church leaders whose words were spoken in general conference or printed in the *Journal of Discourses*<sup>4</sup> have heavily emphasized the atoning significance of Christ’s Crucifixion. While the Savior’s gift from Golgotha is unquestionably important, little has been written regarding

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1. “No Man Can Be Saved in Ignorance,” *Relief Society Magazine* 8, no. 9 (September 1921): 538.

2. See John Hilton III, “Teaching the Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ,” *Religious Educator* 20, no. 3 (2019): 132–53.

3. See John Hilton III, “Joseph Smith, Gethsemane, and the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ,” in *How and What We Worship: Christology and Praxis in the Revelations of Joseph Smith*, ed. Rachel Cope, Carter Charles, and Jordan Watkins (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), 303–29.

4. See John Hilton III, Emily Hyde, and McKenna Trussel, “The Teachings of Church Leaders Regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ: 1852–2018,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 49–80.

how early Latter-day Saint women treated this topic in their writings. This is a critical omission, given the perspectives offered by female authors and editors. Amy Easton-Flake's recent comparison of how male and female Latter-day Saint authors used Bible verses reconfirms "the necessity of bringing women's employment of scriptures into any study that seeks to understand how individuals read scriptures."<sup>5</sup>

In the present study, we apply this insight from Easton-Flake to explore how female members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints perceived the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We do this by examining what the authors and editors in the *Woman's Exponent*, the *Relief Society Magazine*, and the *Young Woman's Journal* wrote about and selected for publication on this topic. These editors (exclusively female) and authors (primarily female) provide powerful insight and needed perspective on a "fundamental"<sup>6</sup> principle of our religion.

## Method

The specific corpus we used was created for the purposes of the present study and includes the contents of three early Latter-day Saint periodicals.<sup>7</sup> The first is the *Woman's Exponent*, published from 1872 to 1914. This periodical "was one of the earliest periodicals for women in the United States."<sup>8</sup> It was expressly published for women and run by women. Although not an official publication of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it was "loyal to church leaders and policies."<sup>9</sup> The second journal in our corpus is the *Relief Society Magazine* (1914–1970); its beginning coincided with the discontinuation of the *Woman's Exponent*. Like the *Exponent*, the *Relief Society Magazine* was run by

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5. Amy Easton-Flake, "The Bible in the *Millennial Star* and the *Woman's Exponent*," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2021): 41.

6. Joseph Smith taught, "The fundamental principles of our religion is the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, 'that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven;' and all other things are only appendages to these, which pertain to our religion." "Elders' Journal, July 1838," 44, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 13, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/12>, emphasis added.

7. This corpus is available to other researchers via the WordCruncher bookstore. For more information about WordCruncher, or to download a copy, visit <https://wordcruncher.com>. Researchers interested in obtaining the corpus should contact Jesse Vincent ([jesse\\_vincent@byu.edu](mailto:jesse_vincent@byu.edu)).

8. Sherilyn Cox Bennion, "The *Woman's Exponent*: Forty-two Years of Speaking for Women," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1976): 222.

9. Bennion, "Woman's Exponent," 223.

women and was specifically for a female audience. Unlike the *Exponent*, the *Relief Society Magazine* was an official Church publication.<sup>10</sup> The third periodical included in our corpus is the *Young Woman's Journal*, published between 1889 and 1929. This magazine was sponsored by the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association, analogous to the current "Young Women" program.

Digital versions of these periodicals have been collected by sources such as the Brigham Young University (BYU) Digital Collections and the Internet Archive; however, these resources have used only basic optical character recognition (OCR) technology to make the transcriptions and do not allow search results to be easily extracted and analyzed. Jesse Vincent and Jeremy Browne from BYU's Digital Humanities Office used Python and Google's open-source OCR tool, Tesseract, to convert the images of the materials that were digitized by BYU Digital Collections into text. This technology to convert images to text is not perfect, but Browne used a method of changing the brightness of each page multiple times and counting how many dictionary words are on each brightness change. The iteration that had the most dictionary words on it was selected and added to the corpus.

This method converts text more slowly but tends to show better results in the output of digital text than traditional OCR technology. The corpus of this scanned text was housed within the program WordCruncher, which allowed for search terms and their surrounding texts to be exported to other programs, such as Excel, for streamlined analysis. Across all three periodicals, our corpus contained approximately fifty-four million words.

To identify what authors in this corpus taught concerning Christ's Crucifixion, we employed a variety of search terms. We searched for the words "Crucify" (in all variant forms), "Crucifix," "Crucifixion," "Cross," "Calvary," "Golgotha," and "Lay down . . . life." We also searched for the words "Die," "Death," "Sacrifice," "Slain," and "Lifted Up" that occurred within ten words of "Jesus Christ" (or one of the titles "Messiah," "Redeemer," "Lord," "Lamb," "Savior," or "Son of God," or the word "sins").<sup>11</sup> Our primary data comprised the fifty words spoken before and

10. For more details about the *Relief Society Magazine*, see Patricia Ann Mann, "A History of the Relief Society Magazine, 1914–1970" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1971).

11. Our methodology leads to undercounting, given that we did not search other titles (for example, "Jehovah"). Thus, a phrase such as "Jehovah died for the sins of the world" would not have appeared in our search results.

after each use of the search term.<sup>12</sup> We used WordCruncher to extract the key word hits (along with the preceding and following fifty words) and move them to an Excel document to analyze and code the data.

We note that because our methodology relied on computer searches, there are some limitations. Some teachings regarding the Crucifixion might not have used one of the key words we identified; in addition, the OCR output was not perfect. For example, if the OCR read the phrase “Our Captain, Christ the Crucifcd” (the OCR incorrectly included a “c” rather than an “e” as the second-to-last letter in “Crucified”), it would not have been recognized in our search. Such errors in the OCR are an admitted weakness of our study and have led to an undercounting of the results presented. However, we believe this weakness is mitigated by the fact that we were able to digitally search a large corpus that has hitherto been unsearchable in this manner.

Many of our search results did not relate to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. For example, several instances of the word “cross” were completely unrelated (for example, “Parents should not be cross with their children”). Statements that did not directly relate to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ were eliminated from our corpus, including statements about humans bearing crosses, when they were metaphorically used to describe trials. We also eliminated instances in which our key words were used multiple times in close proximity,<sup>13</sup> as well as times when they appeared in a header or the table of contents. After this refinement, we had 1,903 passages across all three publications to analyze.

Once our corpus was in place, we read each passage, looking for common themes. A process of emergent coding<sup>14</sup> led to nine themes that we used to code each reference. Table 1 summarizes our coding structure.

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12. In some instances, such as when parts of the OCR were illegible, we analyzed additional portions of the original article.

13. If a second reference appeared within fifty words of the first, it was considered a duplicate and was deleted from the corpus.

14. Emergent coding refers to the process of repeatedly reading qualitative data to identify themes contained in the dataset.

**Table 1. Thematic coding structure**

Code	Description	Sample Quote
Love	Christ and/or God manifested love through the death of Jesus Christ	"His, our Elder Brother's, life was an example of the divine love of the Father, who so loved the world that He gave His well-beloved Son to be a sacrifice for sin, that we might obtain eternal life." <sup>15</sup>
In-depth description	The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the main topic of the text: detailed descriptions of Christ's trial before Pilate, the walk to Calvary, or the Crucifixion itself.	"At last Golgotha was reached, Jesus was crucified, and the card was nailed above His head. The two sinners were crucified on either hand of the Savior. As He hung upon the cross, His enemies mocked Him, and asked Him now to save Himself or call upon God to do it. To these mockeries Jesus replied nothing." <sup>16</sup>
Women at the cross	The focus of the passage is that women were with Christ at the cross.	"Then came the day when with Mary of Bethany and Mary of Magdala, the women who understood the mission of Jesus, she stood by the cross on Calvary. 'These women who were the last at the cross and the earliest at the grave.'" <sup>17</sup>
Christ's final seven statements	One of Christ's seven statements from the cross is either explicitly stated or referenced.	"Keep the picture of Christ being crucified before you, remember these words 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,' or if you have been injured, you know that you are happier than they who have wronged you, for it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong." <sup>18</sup>

15. Ina, "The Power of Love," *Woman's Exponent* 34, no. 4 (September 1, 1905): 18.

16. "Junior Lessons: The Life of the Savior: Lesson XVII: The Crucifixion, Resurrection, Burial, and Ascension," *Young Woman's Journal* 25, no. 3 (March 1914): 196.

17. Maude Beeley Jacob, "Woman as an Interpreter of the Faith," *Relief Society Magazine* 26, no. 7 (July 1939): 437.

18. R. A. S., "Great in Small Things: How to Forgive," *Woman's Exponent* 29, no. 16–17 (January 15, 1901): 73.

Code	Description	Sample Quote
Poetry	The author refers to, quotes, or writes poetry.	"With the morning light came soldier[s], / On their cruel errand sent. / To the crown for Him they plaited / Its sweet charm the flower lent. / When upon the cross they crowned Him." <sup>19</sup>
The cross as a physical object	Description of floral arrangements or other representations of a cross, physical cross at a church.	"The first to make their appearance were the little children, girls about six years old, who led the march in two single files, about ten feet apart. Between the files, and distant a hundred feet from each other, were little girls, scarcely able to walk, carrying an anchor, a cross, or a picture of some patron saint." <sup>20</sup>
The atoning power of Christ's Crucifixion	We receive redemption/salvation through the death of Jesus Christ.	"Through his life and ministry upon the earth, and through his death upon the cross, He atoned for the sin in the Garden of Eden, and gained the victory over death, so that man, though he must die, shall yet have life everlasting." <sup>21</sup>
Narrative	Christ's Crucifixion is mentioned as part of a general narrative of his life, or only mentioned in passing. <sup>22</sup>	"I thought of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan by John, which after was followed by His crucifixion, and of the approach of His second coming in the near future; and I questioned who will be prepared for His coming?" <sup>23</sup>

19. Faith, "The Legend of the Passion Flower," *Woman's Exponent* 15, no. 1 (June 1, 1886): 1.

20. T., "St. John's Day in Constantinople," *Woman's Exponent* 15, no. 5 (August 1, 1886): 33.

21. "The Story of the Restoration: Second Year: Lesson XVI: The Resurrection of the Body," *Young Woman's Journal* 23, no. 2 (February 1912): 104.

22. Any quote that received any other code was excluded from the narrative code.

23. Dr. Elvira S. Barney, "Dr. Barney's Travels in Colorado," *Woman's Exponent* 26, nos. 11–12 (November 1 and 15, 1897): 210.



Code	Description	Sample Quote
Miscellaneous	All of the statements that did not fit into the above categories.	"To become a son of perdition, one must reject the fulness of the light of the everlasting Gospel; one must defy the power of God after having known it and partaken of it; one must deny the Holy Spirit after having received it; one must consent to the crucifixion of the only Begotten Son of the Father, and to the putting of Him to open shame." <sup>24</sup>

Each reference received at least one code; however, a quote could receive more than one code depending on its content. For example, the following lines from a poem by Lydia D. Alder received two codes, "Atoning Power" and "Poetry": "This is the Lord, who groaned upon the cross; / And yielded up his precious life, our souls to cleanse from dross."<sup>25</sup>

Two independent researchers read each reference and assigned codes based on the above descriptions. Their assignments were compared; in cases of disagreement, a third researcher reviewed their work and made a final determination of the codes assigned.<sup>26</sup>

## References to Christ's Crucifixion

Within our corpus, there were 1,903 references to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ or the cross. Chart 1 shows the frequency with which the Crucifixion of Christ has been discussed over time in the *Woman's Exponent*, the *Relief Society Magazine*, and the *Young Woman's Journal*. To account for the variance in the number of words in each periodical, chart 1 is normalized for the occurrences of our search terms relative to the total number of words appearing in the periodicals each year.<sup>27</sup>

There is no clear directional trend shown across the nearly one-hundred-year period contained in our corpus; rather, the variances between individual years exceed the variances between decades or longer periods of time. The higher frequency of mentions in individual

24. "The Story of the Restoration: Lesson XVIII: The Vision of Glories," *Young Woman's Journal* 38, no. 4 (April 1927): 276.

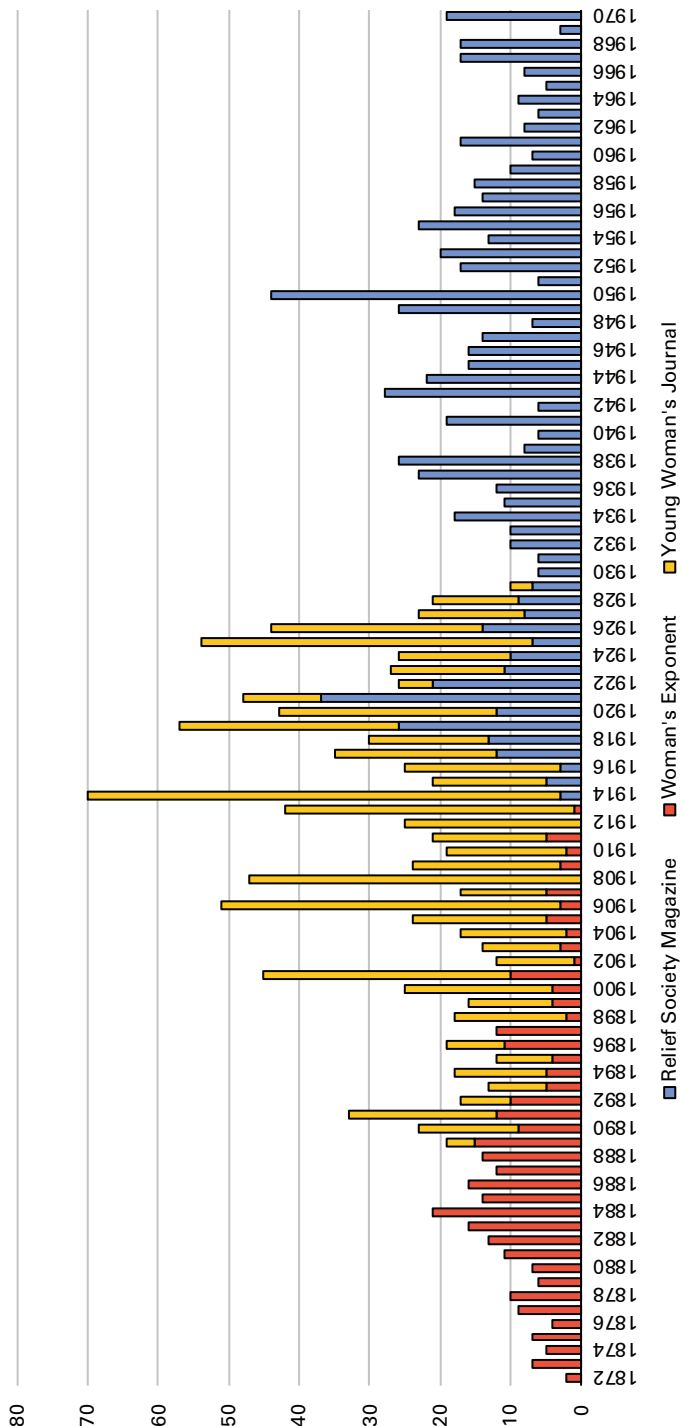
25. Lydia D. Alder, "A Vision," *Woman's Exponent* 27, nos. 3–4 (July 1, 1898): 11.

26. Jesse Vincent and Rachel Harper did the initial coding; John Hilton III reviewed the coding process and resolved discrepancies in the codes.

27. The raw data was similarly shaped; for precision and to avoid duplication, we include only the normalized chart.

Chart 1. Discussion of the Crucifixion by source and year

Relief Society Magazine, Woman's Exponent and Young Woman's Journal



years likely stems from more Crucifixion-themed articles, lessons, and poems in a particular year, but there does not appear to be any systematic trend, other than the fact that the *Young Woman's Journal* referenced Christ's Crucifixion substantially more than the other two periodicals.

Because each quote could receive multiple codes, the 1,903 statements we analyzed received a total of 2,093 codes. Table 2 shows how frequently each statement received each code.

**Table 2. Frequency of themes**

Code	Description	Percentage of statements that received this code
Love	Christ and/or God manifest love through the death of Jesus Christ.	3.7%
In-depth description	The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the main topic of the text: detailed descriptions of Christ's trial before Pilate, the walk to Calvary, or the Crucifixion itself.	4.6%
Women at the cross	The focus of the passage is that women were with Christ at the cross.	4.6%
Christ's final seven statements	One of Christ's seven statements from the cross is either explicitly stated or referenced.	7.7%
Poetry	The author refers to, quotes, or writes poetry.	8.9%
The cross as a physical object	Description of floral arrangements or other representations of a cross or a physical cross at a church.	11.9%
The atoning power of Christ's Crucifixion	We receive redemption/salvation through the death of Jesus Christ.	14.1%
Miscellaneous	All of the statements that did not fit into the above categories.	16.7%
Narrative	Christ's Crucifixion is mentioned as part of a general narrative of his life or only mentioned in passing. <sup>28</sup>	37.8%

Some the themes we uncovered yielded less-interesting insights than others. For example, the "Narrative" quotations, which made up just over one-third of total occurrences, mentioned Christ's Crucifixion only

28. Any quote that received any other code was excluded from the narrative code.

in passing, often as a time marker. For example, Christine H. Robinson wrote, “Yet, after the Savior’s crucifixion, his disciples apparently forgot the instructions he had given them and some of them returned to their former occupation as fishermen.”<sup>29</sup> Because these narrative statements do not provide insight into Christ’s Crucifixion, we do not examine them in the present study.

The statements we coded as “In-depth description” were typically a summation of what the scriptures teach about Christ’s Crucifixion, often as part of prescribed lessons. Such lessons were also often accompanied by a series of questions that reviewed the lesson material, such as “1. Where was Jesus crucified? 2. What inscription was written above his head? 3. Who were crucified at the same time? 4. What did his enemies say to Jesus as he hung upon the cross? 5. Who of Jesus’ friends were at the cross? 6. What promise did Jesus make to the believing sinner? 7. What were the words of Jesus while he hung upon the cross?”<sup>30</sup> When we exclude the statements that are lists of questions, most of the statements coded as “in-depth description” also received another code; therefore, we have not included a separate section for “in-depth description” in this article. In the present study, we focus on the following themes (organized in order of appearing from the least to most frequent): love, women at the cross, Christ’s final seven statements, poetry, the cross as a physical object, the atoning power of Christ’s Crucifixion, and miscellaneous.

## Love

We identified seventy-three instances in our corpus where there was a focus on the love that Jesus Christ or Heavenly Father demonstrated in connection with the Savior’s death. The most frequent connection (appearing about fifty times) was a specific mention of the love Jesus Christ manifested for humanity by laying down his life for them. On eighteen different occasions, all or part of John 15:13 was quoted: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” For example, Clara Farnsworth elaborated on this verse, stating that Jesus “died not only for the righteous, but for sinless and sinful

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29. Christine H. Robinson, “Visiting Teacher Message: Truths to Live By from the Doctrine and Covenants,” *Relief Society Magazine* 52, no. 7 (July 1965): 541.

30. “Junior Lessons: The Life of the Savior: Lesson XVII: The Crucifixion, Burial, Resurrection, and Ascension,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 25 no. 3 (March 1914): 198.

alike. 'Greater love than this hath no man, that he lay down his life for his friend.' But Christ was more than man; mortal man could not do what He did. He gave His life for enemy as well as friend. Here was the supreme merit of His sacrifice."<sup>31</sup>

Many of the statements describing Christ's love on the cross were both powerful and poignant.<sup>32</sup> Consider these statements about the love Christ expressed in his death—collectively they illustrate that many Latter-day Saints viewed the Savior's Crucifixion not as a topic to be avoided, but rather as a manifestation of his love:

- "His life was lived to fulfill his Father's will and was offered on the cross because of his great love for you and me."<sup>33</sup>
- "See the cross and bleeding feet, / Hear the cry of pain and anguish, / Hear the message, tender sweet, / Hear him calling, gently calling / All mankind to Him above, / For He gave His life a ransom, / From the depths of perfect love."<sup>34</sup>
- "Jesus . . . loved to the extent of laying down his life for each individual."<sup>35</sup>
- "Jesus in his mighty love, Came from the courts above; And died on Calvary's awful cross."<sup>36</sup>
- [At the cross] "of anguish Love was born"<sup>37</sup>

A second love-related theme that appeared was how the love of Heavenly Father was manifested in the death of Jesus Christ; this type of statement occurred seventeen times. In a short dialogue, written in the form of a script, M. Elizabeth Little paraphrased John 3:16 to say, "The Bible

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31. Clara Farnsworth, "Gifts and Giving," *Young Woman's Journal* 35, no. 12 (December 1924): 653.

32. In addition to the quotations cited in the body of the text, we highlight one statement which was unusual in that it highlighted how the Savior's love for *his Father* was a key part of Christ's death. Alice Colton Smith wrote, "Jesus as he hung on the cross sacrificing his life for the love of God and his purposes." Alice Colton Smith, "Visiting Teacher Message—Truths to Live By: Message 2—Love—a Way to Salvation," *Relief Society Magazine* 54, no. 8 (August 1967): 624.

33. Marguerite J. Griffin, "Echoes of Hope," *Relief Society Magazine* 33, no. 4 (April 1946): 226.

34. Grace C. Jacobsen, "Gently Calling," *Relief Society Magazine* 22, no. 8 (August 1935): 528.

35. "Theology and Testimony," *Relief Society Magazine* 11, no. 8 (August 1924): 427.

36. Sarah J. Austin, "Lines," *Woman's Exponent* 19, no. 14 (January 1, 1891): 111.

37. Faith, "The Legend of the Passion Flower," 1.

says that God so loved the world, that He gave His only Begotten Son to die for the sins of the world, that through the shedding of His blood we may be saved.”<sup>38</sup> One editorial states that “Christmas should hold a deeper meaning” for Latter-day Saint youth because they “think tenderly of Him whose birthday it represents and their hearts will be lifted in adoration to their Father for the divine love which sent a Savior into the world to live and die for men.”<sup>39</sup>

A beautiful poem published in the *Woman's Exponent* in 1878 combines these first two ideas by describing the love of both Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ: “Our Father loved his children, Oh! so well. / He gave the noblest, best beloved of all, / And through the One saved millions from the fall; / And when we doubt his love could we but turn / To Calvary's cross where love doth purest burn.”<sup>40</sup>

Although not nearly as frequent as the preceding themes, there were five occasions in which specific reference was made to the cross itself as an emblem of love. An unattributed editorial in the *Young Woman's Journal* acknowledged that the cross had negative connotations prior to the Savior's sacrifice but asserted that Christ's death changed this meaning. The editor wrote, “The cross that was then a sign of disgrace has become a symbol of love and salvation.”<sup>41</sup>

### Women at the Cross

Throughout our corpus, we found eighty-five statements emphasizing the presence of women at the cross and identified four commonly appearing themes. First, occurring in twenty-five instances, was Mary's feelings during the Crucifixion. These passages included the idea that women can sympathize with how Mary felt at the cross. An author identified only as Vina wrote, “There is none who can more deeply sympathize with that mother's broken heart who was borne away fainting from the cross where hung her darling son; than mothers themselves.”<sup>42</sup> Vina's observation enhances the concept of mothers' divine characteristic of sympathy for their children.

38. M. Elizabeth Little, “A Dialogue,” *Woman's Exponent* 12, no. 20 (March 15, 1884): 158.

39. “The Sacred Birthday,” *Young Woman's Journal* 30, no. 12 (December 1919): 677.

40. Hope, “A Reverie,” *Woman's Exponent* 6, no. 15 (January 1, 1878): 115.

41. “The Drawing Power of the Risen Redeemer,” *Young Woman's Journal* 26, no. 4 (April 1915): 260.

42. Vina, “Mother and Son,” *Woman's Exponent* 19, no. 14 (January 1, 1891): 109.

A second theme, appearing twenty-one times, was the idea that women were known to be the last and the first in ways that demonstrate their devotion to Jesus Christ—particularly that women were "last at his cross, and earliest at his grave."<sup>43</sup> Consider these other remarks that elegantly portray women's faith and devotion:

- "Women were last at the cross and first at the sepulchre, and it was to a woman that He first revealed Himself after His resurrection."<sup>44</sup>
- "First to greet lovingly man at his birth, Last to forsake him when dying,  
First to make sunshine around his hearth, Last to lose heart and cease trying.  
Last at the cross of her crucified Lord, First to behold him when risen,  
First to proclaim him to life restored; bursting from death's gloomy prison,  
First to seek knowledge, the God-like prize, Last to gain credit for knowing."<sup>45</sup>
- "'Do to others as ye would they should do to you,' that is ever helpful. It is that element which made her last at the cross and first at the sepulchre."<sup>46</sup>

From these statements, we can see that women were frequently portrayed as first to join Christ and last to leave his mortal body. Those who wrote these statements used this point to demonstrate the depth of faith possessed by women.

A third theme regarding the presence of women at the cross, occurring on twelve occasions, was a specific focus on the fact that Christ gave attention to women while he was being crucified. An editorial in the

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43. This phraseology seems to be based on a poem titled "Woman" by Eaton Standard Barrett. In this poem, Barrett writes, "Not she with trait'rous kiss her Master stung, / Not she denied Him with unfaithful tongue; / She, when apostles fled, could danger brave, / Last at His cross, and earliest at His grave." "Woman" (London: Cox and Baylis, 1819), 34. This poem was both quoted and paraphrased within the corpus and has at times been misattributed to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. See "Lesson III: Literature," *Relief Society Magazine* 9, no. 10 (October 1922): 548; and John Bissell Trowbridge, "The Hymns of Fanny Crosby," *The King's Business* 19, no. 3 (March 1928): 157.

44. Phebe C. Young, "Woman and Her Sphere," *Woman's Exponent* 17, no. 18 (February 15, 1889): 139.

45. Lu Dalton, "Woman," *Woman's Exponent* 21, no. 14 (January 15, 1893): 107.

46. "Thoughts," *Woman's Exponent* 27, no. 14 (December 15, 1898): 76.

*Woman's Exponent* asked, "Were not some of his latest expressions of thoughtful tenderness, addressed to the *women*?"<sup>47</sup> This idea was also emphasized in a list of topics given to teachers in the *Relief Society Magazine* emphasizing that "Christ manifested great love for his mother. Two of the few recorded utterances [Christ gave] when on the cross had reference to his mother."<sup>48</sup> As discussed later in this paper, twenty-eight different statements in our corpus directly referred to Christ's words to his mother from the cross.<sup>49</sup>

A fourth theme, appearing eleven times, praised women for uniquely demonstrating spiritual strength at Christ's death. Ella F. Smith wrote, "Woman followed him shedding tears of sympathy and pity. Woman alone pressed her way to the very foot of the cross, and there poured out her prayers and tears in behalf of the world's dying martyr."<sup>50</sup> Hannah T. King said, "There stood by his cross Mary, his mother, and Mary, the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene; true unto the death were these most remarkable and highly favored women; they wait and watch all through those tremendous sufferings."<sup>51</sup> Those who wrote these statements attributed remarkable spiritual strength to the women at the cross and likely hoped to inculcate this same faith within their readers.

### Christ's Final Seven Statements

Christ's final statements from the cross were collectively quoted or alluded to 147 times in our corpus. Table 3 shows the frequency of references to these statements. The statements appear in the approximate order in which Christ gave them.<sup>52</sup>

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47. A. B. C.s, "Woman's Influence," *Woman's Exponent* 18, no. 1 (June 1, 1889): 1, emphasis in original.

48. "Teachers' Topic for May," *Relief Society Magazine* 10, no. 3 (March 1923): 158.

49. Not all of the statements about Christ's words to his mother were coded as "Women at the cross." This code was reserved for statements that emphasized the presence of women at the cross, while statements Christ made to Mary from the cross often had a different focus than the presence of women at the cross.

50. Ella F. Smith, "Woman's Mind Equal to Man's," *Woman's Exponent* 18, no. 22 (April 15, 1890): 177.

51. Hannah T. King, "Scripture Women," *Woman's Exponent* 6, no. 24 (May 15, 1878): 185.

52. Matthew and Mark each provide one (the same) statement from the Savior on the cross. Luke and John each give three statements from Christ; these statements are unique to their respective Gospels. Because all seven statements are not present in one account, it is difficult to determine their precise order.



**Table 3. Frequency of references to Christ's final seven statements<sup>53</sup>**

Statement	Number of Appearances
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."	70
"Today shalt thou be with me in paradise."	18
"Woman, behold thy son." "Behold thy mother."	28
"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"	19
"I thirst."	1
"It is finished."	20
"Into thy hands I commend my spirit."	13

The statement referred to most frequently in our corpus, with seventy occurrences (nearly half of the total), was "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Often it was quoted in the context of emphasizing Jesus's love or forgiving nature. A talk by Rosannah C. Irvine contains a typical example: "He spoke no word of bitterness or complaint. Even when he hung in agony on the cross, his never to be forgotten words, which have resounded through the ages, are the most marvelous example of forgiveness and love that the world has ever known: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'"<sup>54</sup> Ruth May Fox, known for composing the hymn "Carry On,"<sup>55</sup> wrote a poem that connects Christ's forgiveness from the cross with the power of the Atonement, saying, "They brought not flowers / They plaited thorns, / Wherewith to crown His Kingly Head; / They pressed them low upon His brow / Regardless of the throbbing pain: / And crimson drops / That fell like rain. / They spat upon Him / Mocked, reviled, / Maligned and scourged the blameless One: / Yea crucified the living God / The while He prayed, 'Forgive them, Father, O forgive, I die, I die that these may live.'"<sup>56</sup>

The second most frequent statement, appearing twenty-eight times, was Jesus's entrusting of his mother into the care of the Apostle John (see John 19:27). This statement was often quoted or referenced to highlight

53. In addition to the references appearing in this chart, there were eight additional references that were coded under "Statements made from the cross" that, while discussing what Christ said from the cross generally, didn't explicitly refer to any of these statements.

54. Rosannah C. Irvine, "Relief Society General Conference," *Relief Society Magazine* 13, no. 6 (June 1926): 309.

55. "Carry On," in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 255.

56. Ruth May Fox, "He Is Risen," *Young Woman's Journal* 24, no. 4 (April 1913): 208.

Jesus's concern for women. Elna P. Haymond, writing while serving as a member of the Relief Society general board, pointed out, "Jesus, while on the cross in his hour of greatest trial, gave as one of his last considerations his concern for his mother."<sup>57</sup>

The statement "Why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34) was mentioned nineteen times. This statement was primarily used to highlight the human emotions of Jesus Christ. Emily Hill Woodmansee, the author of the hymn "As Sisters in Zion,"<sup>58</sup> poignantly described how we sometimes "re-echo" Christ's cry of abandonment:

And was He not mocked by humanity's dross?—  
 "Art thou the Christ? then come down from the cross."  
 How many in anguish re-echo his cry—  
 God, hast thou forsaken me, wherefore and why?  
 Sometimes His presence our Father doth hide—  
 To test us and prove us, as gold can be tried;  
 Then whispers the tempter,  
 "The Lord doth not care."<sup>59</sup>

A lesson titled "The Dual Nature of Jesus Christ" reflects on the character of Jesus, saying, "Was it not his human nature that called forth the question on the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"<sup>60</sup>

The conversation with the thief (Luke 23:39–43) was referred to eighteen times, sometimes to portray an expression of comfort<sup>61</sup> or forgiveness. A poem by Nina Burnham McKean reads: "In the sound of the bells the Savior's words live, / 'Yea, seven times seven, forgive, and forgive.' / But what is the hope the chiming can bring, / To the sinner so hardened he scarce hears the ring? / Yea, even may he, by the Master be shriven, / For thus on the cross the thief was forgiven."<sup>62</sup> Other authors believed that the thief was not promised immediate salvation. One writer wrote that Jesus "administered comfort" to the thief but did not guarantee him exaltation, arguing that neither Jesus nor the thief

57. Elna P. Haymond, "Mother," *Relief Society Magazine* 42, no. 5 (May 1955): 288.

58. "As Sisters in Zion," in *Hymns*, no. 309.

59. Emily Hill Woodmansee, "Wherefore and Why?," *Woman's Exponent* 8, no. 22 (April 15, 1880): 169.

60. "The Dual Nature of Jesus Christ," *Relief Society Magazine* 13, no. 8 (August 1926): 426.

61. "The Story of the Restoration: Lesson XIV: The Salvation of the Dead," *Young Woman's Journal* 24, no. 1 (January 1913): 68.

62. Nina Burnham McKean, "The Message of the Bells," *Relief Society Magazine* 9, no. 12 (December 1922): 652.

immediately ascended to the Father, as Jesus later explained to Mary Magdalene.<sup>63</sup>

The statements "It is finished" (John 19:30) and "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46) were often mentioned together, with a focus on Jesus's satisfaction with the completion of his mission at the very hour of his death. A lesson plan on Christ's death emphasizes the voluntary nature of his death, saying, "He exclaimed in triumph and supreme relief: 'It is finished.' Also: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.' Then He voluntarily submitted to death. . . . Thus the great consummation on the cross had been wrought, even as the prophets of old, and particularly as Jesus Himself, had predicted. No man had power to take His life from Him; but now His hour had come, and His death was a voluntary surrender."<sup>64</sup>

The statement "I thirst" (John 19:28) was mentioned only once, in a narration including several other statements. The only thing mentioned specifically about this phrase is that Jesus "gave one statement of his physical condition: 'I thirst.'"<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, this statement has also been quoted the fewest times in general conference addresses.<sup>66</sup>

## Poetry

Our corpus contained 169 references to poetry. While a few of these were brief mentions of a crucifixion-related poem that was recited at a meeting, most were published poems—some of which were quite intricate. We note that collectively the poetry within our corpus is moving and beautiful—it deserves much more in-depth treatment than can be afforded in the present study. Herein we present only a sampling of this poetry, noting that future studies could profitably focus entirely on this topic.<sup>67</sup>

63. "Nailed to the cross, enduring patiently indescribable agony himself, the Lord Jesus administered comfort to the commiserating malefactor who hung by his side. 'Today,' said Jesus, 'shalt thou be with me in Paradise.'" "The Story of the Restoration: Lesson XIV: The Salvation of the Dead," *Young Woman's Journal* 24, no. 1 (January 1913): 68.

64. "The Divinity of Jesus of Nazareth: Senior Course of Study: Lesson 18—His Death," *Young Woman's Journal* 36, no. 2 (February 1925): 128.

65. Elder Don B. Colton, "Theology—the Life and Ministry of the Savior: Lesson 27—'Death and Burial' and 'In the Realm of Disembodied Spirits,'" *Relief Society Magazine* 37, no. 9 (September 1950): 628.

66. See John Hilton III, Megan Cutler, and Emily Hyde, "Teachings of Church Leaders on Christ's Final Seven Statements," *Religious Educator* 22, no. 1 (2021): 79–99.

67. While several studies have focused on poetry written by Latter-day Saint women, we are not aware of in-depth study of Latter-day Saint poetry related to Christ's Crucifixion. For examples of broader, related studies, see Kylie Nielson Turley, "Rhetoric

One theme that frequently recurred in Crucifixion-related poetry related to the feelings of women at the cross—particularly Jesus’s mother, Mary. In 1904, a panel of judges, including James E. Talmage, awarded Kate Thomas first prize for her poem “For Christmas.”<sup>68</sup> This illustrates how poetry was used to describe Mary’s feelings at the death of her son:

O beautiful mother Mary, O mother of croonings low,  
Did you know more bliss in each fond kiss  
Than we common mothers know?

His baby step she taught him, she put him gaily down  
And laughed with pleased, low laughter when his fingers clutched her gown.  
She taught him his first ‘Our Father,’ and as he lisped the prayer,  
She bended her face till her lips found place  
In the soft sheen of his hair.

O beautiful mother Mary, O Woman of women wise,  
Did you see the End? Or did Father send  
A kindly veil for your eyes?

She watched him grow into boyhood, with innocent eyes like his own  
That wept when He came into manhood and the Load He must carry alone.  
For the way of the Hill was heavy, and the Cross on the Hill was high,  
And ’twas hard to look where whose sins He took.  
Were lusting to see Him die!<sup>69</sup>

Another theme frequently occurring in Crucifixion-related poetry within our corpus concerns the atoning power of Christ’s Crucifixion. A portion of a poem by Sue S. Beatie states,

The Father of our spirits, in the glorious gospel plan,  
Gave his precious Son, a ransom, on earth to die for man.  
  
To take away the power of death, and for all our sins atone,  
That we may claim his promise on the resurrection morn—  
  
To dwell with him forever, in his kingdom, free from strife  
Where we may be exalted in that grand eternal life.<sup>70</sup>

A less-frequent theme, but one that still occurred in more than a dozen of the poems in our corpus, related Christ’s Crucifixion to

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and Ritual: A Decade of *Woman’s Exponent* Death Poetry,” *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 3 (2006): 54–81; and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “Poetry and the Private Lives: Newspaper Verse on the Mormon Frontier,” *BYU Studies* 25, no. 3 (1985): 55–65.

68. “Prize Christmas Poems,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 15, no. 12 (December 1904): 570.

69. Kate Thomas, “For Christmas,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 15, no. 12 (December 1904): 532.

70. Sue S. Beatie, “Our Gift,” *Relief Society Magazine* 54, no. 2 (February 1967): 151.

Christmas. An excerpt from a poem called "Our Christmas Tree" is indicative of how many authors related Christ's Crucifixion to an element of the Christmas season:

Time[']s curtain backward rolls and we can see  
 How He too gave to us our Christmas Tree,  
 Himself the gift—love's offering to the world,  
 Redemption's banner His dear hand unfurled.  
 And from that tree the lamp of life burned high,  
 But oh to light that lamp the Christ must die!  
 Must drain for man the deepest cup of woe,  
 Must feel the keenest pain mortals can know. . . .  
 Bright shines the memory of that far off time,  
 And Christmas trees now live in every clime,  
 Bearing love's gifts to friends and kindred dear  
 While merry bells are ringing far and near.<sup>71</sup>

### The Cross as a Physical Object

We used the code "The cross as a physical object" to describe mentions of physical representations of crosses ostensibly associated with the Crucifixion but not mentions of the actual cross upon which Christ was crucified. Our corpus contained 227 such instances.

Most of these usages were neutral or slightly positive descriptions of various types of crosses. For example, on twenty-nine occasions, crosses were mentioned in connection with funerals or graves. Many describe floral arrangements or other decorations of coffins, such as the "immense passion cross of lilies" laid upon the coffin of a Catholic clergyman.<sup>72</sup> Others depict grave markers in the shape of a cross. For example, one description reads, "Out in dear Mount Auburn, where so many precious dead lie, there is an exquisite cross, ornamented with ferns, which bears the name 'Fanny Fern.'"<sup>73</sup> Twenty-six instances describe decorative crosses, and in some cases, instructions are given for making such crosses. For example, a woman named Rosabel, in an article titled "A Few Hints about Flowers" wrote, "A very pretty idea is to . . . get some handy young man to make for you, a wooden cross ten or twelve inches high, and stick it in the pot with some one of your vines, and they will twine

71. Hope, "Our Christmas Tree," *Young Woman's Journal* 5, no. 5 (February 1894): 234.

72. "Washington Jottings," *Woman's Exponent* 14, no. 24 (May 15, 1886): 178.

73. E. Addie Heath, "Fanny Fern," *Woman's Exponent* 8, no. 24 (May 15, 1880): 192.

about it so thickly you will hardly be able to see the wood at all, and will be tempted to think you have a cross of living green.”<sup>74</sup>

These descriptions of crosses included twelve reports of those hung in various cathedrals. In addition, there were twenty-three mentions of crosses as part of architecture, such as a church “built in the form of a cross.”<sup>75</sup> On thirty-one occasions, crosses were mentioned as awards or physical gifts intended to honor recipients. For example, one anecdote recounts how a Madame Dieulafoy “shocked Paris by appearing at the theatre in masculine dress, with the Cross of the Legion of Honor on her breast.”<sup>76</sup> Another describes “a gold cross . . . presented to Miss Anthony by the Citizen’s Suffrage Association, of Philadelphia, in a graceful speech by Mrs. May Wright Sewall, who characterized Miss Anthony as the ‘saint’ to whom the beautiful gift, with suitable inscriptions and date, was especially due.”<sup>77</sup>

Instances of crosses worn as jewelry or in some other way appeared twenty-two times. Included in this number is a description of a meeting with the Pope, who “was dressed entirely in white cloth, a beautiful, fine, soft fabric, and he wore hanging on his breast a magnificent emerald cross.”<sup>78</sup> One poem, titled *Mary, Queen of Scots*, depicts the titular character approaching her death: “Rich were the sable robes she wore, her white veil round her fell, / And from her neck there hung the cross, the cross she loved so well.”<sup>79</sup>

While many of the quotations connected with the cross as a symbol had a neutral or slightly positive tone, there were a few that spoke negatively about the cross. Eliza R. Snow, then serving as the second Relief Society general president, described being in Syria and observing people “kneeling and bowing before the cross.” She said, “I withdrew, feeling thankful to God for the gifts and ordinances of the Everlasting Gospel.”<sup>80</sup> On another occasion, Snow wrote of observing Catholics worshipping at church, “some crossing themselves, some reverently kneeling and others

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74. Rosabel, “A Few Hints about Flowers,” *Woman’s Exponent* 8, no. 9 (October 1, 1879): 67.

75. “An Eastern Trip,” *Woman’s Exponent* 18, no. 13 (December 1, 1889): 100.

76. “Notes and News,” *Woman’s Exponent* 16, no. 2 (June 15, 1887): 16. The “shocking” part of the dress was not the wearing of the cross, but rather that Jane Dieulafoy wore men’s clothing, something that was illegal in France at that time.

77. “The National Suffrage Association,” *Woman’s Exponent* 10, no. 2 (June 15, 1881): 15.

78. G. B. W., “An Audience with the Pope,” *Woman’s Exponent* 41, no. 7 (May 1, 1913): 51.

79. “Mary, Queen of Scots,” *Woman’s Exponent* 10, no. 12 (November 15, 1881): 89.

80. Eliza R. Snow, “Correspondence of Miss Snow,” *Woman’s Exponent* 1, no. 24 (May 15, 1873): 190.

bowing, first to a golden crucifix then to the Archbishop, my heart responded—How long, O Lord, shall these, thy children be bound in the dwarfing chains of traditional superstition and ignorance?"<sup>81</sup> Ruth May Fox wrote that the "Pilgrim Fathers" had viewed the cross of St. George as standing "for the worship of saints" and being "of papalistic origin."<sup>82</sup>

In contrast to the handful of negative statements about the cross as a symbol, several statements were very positive. An editorial stated that "Christ changed the cross into a symbol of Glory,"<sup>83</sup> and in "An Allegory," Susa Young Gates, the founder of the *Young Woman's Journal* and the first editor of the *Relief Society Magazine*, lamented, "How few there be that fly the pennon of peace, and fewer still that carry at their mast-head the Figure on the Cross."<sup>84</sup>

An article about San Francisco also presents a positive view of the cross as a symbol, saying, "It is reassuring of a morning to see the sun bring the golden cross to life. It peacefully gives confidence to see of an evening, the shadowed crucifix immovable against the flaming sky."<sup>85</sup> One essay claimed it was because "a sign of the cross" appears on "every bough" of the balsam fir that it "was selected as the favorite Christmas tree."<sup>86</sup> Sarah Granger Kimball, who served as a ward Relief Society president for forty-two years, also had positive connections with the cross. Writing while serving as Relief Society general secretary, she reminisced that her final memory of her grandfather was seeing him "in a log school house . . . worshipping at the cross of Christ, and trying to lead sinners to repentance."<sup>87</sup>

### The Atoning Power of Christ's Crucifixion

Our corpus contained 268 references relating the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ to his atoning power. All these statements in one way or another describe the truth that Christ died for the sins of the world. For example, Ethel R. Smith stated, "We can know that Jesus Christ . . . is the Redeemer

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81. Eliza R. Snow, "Correspondence of Miss Snow," *Woman's Exponent* 1, no. 19 (March 1, 1873): 150.

82. Ruth May Fox, "Flags of the Allies," *Young Woman's Journal* 28, no. 7 (July 1917): 373.

83. "The Light of the World," *Relief Society Magazine* 20, no. 4 (April 1933): 235.

84. Susa Young Gates, "An Allegory," *Woman's Exponent* 29, no. 15 (January 1, 1901): 67.

85. Fromade, "The City That Beckons the World," *Young Woman's Journal* 26, no. 7 (July 1915): 435.

86. "Mutual Messages," *Young Woman's Journal* 37, no. 11 (November 1926): 742.

87. S. M. Kimball, "Phelps Centennial," *Woman's Exponent* 18, no. 7 (September 1, 1889): 50.

of the world, and that he died on Calvary that you and I might live. We can know this, sisters, and to know these things is life eternal.” She continued later in the same article, speaking of being in the Sacred Grove and picturing in her mind a series of events connected to the life of Joseph Smith. She wrote, “I pictured another scene in which I saw that . . . sacrifice offered on Golgotha. I saw there my Savior in all his majesty and his dignity, after suffering ignominy, insults and death, cruelly crucified, dying that we might have eternal life, and I resolved in my heart that I would do all in my power to further this great cause for which these sacrifices were made.”<sup>88</sup>

An emphasis on Christ’s atoning sacrifice occurred in a variety of contexts. For example, it was often referenced in connection with the sacrament. An anonymously written column as part of the “Lesson Department” in the *Relief Society Magazine* states,

While, of course, all the ordinances of the Church of Jesus Christ are sacred and should always be regarded as such, still . . . the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is undoubtedly the most sacred. A little reflection will show that this is so. For one thing, the central fact in the religion of Jesus Christ is the death and resurrection of Christ. “He died that we might live” in a real sense, both in this life and in the next. . . . The death and resurrection of Christ being the central fact in revealed religion, everything in our faith revolves around it and takes its meaning from that fact. . . . We eat the bread in remembrance of the body which He gave up in death for us, and we drink the wine (water) in remembrance of the blood which He shed for our sins, that we might not have to suffer in like manner for them. Thus, in the most literal way, we are reminded, every time we partake of these emblems, of the great sacrifice which Christ made for us.<sup>89</sup>

Many other settings were used to discuss the importance of Christ’s Crucifixion. For example, an author identified only as Annie wrote the following as part of her column on celebrating Christmas: “Let us pause in the midst of our fun and rejoicings, and spend a few moments in sweet thanksgiving for this blessed day. We will think of Him who gave us light, who brought the pure knowledge of Christianity, and of the One who was crucified to redeem the world.”<sup>90</sup>

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88. Ethel R. Smith, “Relief Society General Conference,” *Relief Society Magazine* 13, no. 6 (June 1926): 318.

89. “Mission Lessons: Latter-day Saint Hymns,” *Relief Society Magazine* 28, no. 10 (October 1941): 723–24.

90. Annie, “Christmas,” *Woman’s Exponent* 10, no. 14 (December 15, 1881): 105.



In addition to the consistent emphasis on the atoning efficacy of Christ's death, two other themes relating to the Savior's Atonement emerged. First, a common description in our corpus was that Christ's Crucifixion led to the destruction of death. Grace Ingles Frost wrote, "He, betrayed by evil's subtle power, / Was nailed upon the contumelious cross. . . . / He proved not only over death and hell / Victorious, but of Himself as well, / The King."<sup>91</sup> An unidentified author further draws on the imagery of a battle by writing, "The Son planned the play in which He, the hero of the great drama, must give to each and all of humanity more than they could give to Him. They should with freedom become helpless captives of death; Christ should ransom and give new life to all; He should suffer and die and descend into the pit, open the prison doors, and provide a Gospel dispensation for the dead."<sup>92</sup>

A second recurring theme was that the Savior's Crucifixion would draw all people to him. Many authors included the Savior's statement from John 12:32: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." An unsigned editorial expounded on this proclamation by saying, "The civilized world hail him as King. The source of his drawing power is his divine love, and so his prophecy is constantly being fulfilled—he was lifted up and he is day by day drawing more and more men unto him."<sup>93</sup>

### Miscellaneous

Outside of the specific categories discussed thus far, there were 318 quotations that we classified as miscellaneous. Several of these quotations clustered together into themes; in this section we discuss those that appeared most frequently.

### Artwork

There were forty-one references to works of art. Most frequently these came from authors who provided descriptions of what they were seeing as they visited cathedrals in different parts of the world—often mentioning Crucifixion paintings in conjunction with other artwork they viewed. One of the most detailed descriptions of a Crucifixion painting came from Lutie H. Fryer, who wrote about *The Descent from the Cross*

91. Grace Ingles Frost, "The King," *Relief Society Magazine* 10, no. 12 (December 1923): 583.

92. "Vital Problems of Life," *Young Woman's Journal* 32, no. 4 (April 1921): 241.

93. "The Drawing Power of Christ," *Relief Society Magazine* 19, no. 4 (April 1932): 238.

by Peter Paul Rubens. Fryer writes, “In arrangement of line and shade this picture is unexcelled. Every figure in the composition has either beauty of grace or of character, and the most beautiful is the Savior’s, to which all the principle [*sic*] lines of the composition lead. Start where you will and follow along the direction of the figures, your eye finally centers upon the Savior’s head. It is the focus point.”<sup>94</sup>

### Hymns

There were also forty-one references to hymns. Often these were titles of hymns mentioned in passing as part of programs that were being reported on. Some of these hymns remain in our current hymnbook (for example, “While of These Emblems We Partake”<sup>95</sup>), whereas others, such as “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” do not. In several instances, lyrics from various hymns were directly quoted. While many of these were sacrament hymns, on four occasions lyrics from “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” were recorded: “As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, While God is marching on.”<sup>96</sup> Lyrics were also shared from the hymn “Rock of Ages,” including stanzas not appearing in the current Latter-day Saint hymnal: “Nothing in my hand I bring; Simply to thy cross I cling; Naked, come to thee for dress; Helpless, look to thee for grace; Vile, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.”<sup>97</sup>

One of the most interesting references to hymns within our corpus was one composed by Susa Young Gates, simply called “Sacrament Hymn.” This hymn states:

Our Lord and Master called the feast,  
He blessed the bread and brake—  
Remember my great offering  
When of this ye partake.

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94. Lutie H. Fryer, “Peter Paul Rubens,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 37, no. 9 (September 1926): 561–62.

95. “While of These Emblems We Partake,” in *Hymns*, nos. 173 and 174.

96. Julia Ward Howe, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” *Atlantic Monthly* 9, no. 52 (February 1862): 10. Also cited in Howard R. Driggs, “America as Reveled in Its Literature: Lesson 7—America through Testing Years,” *Relief Society Magazine* 34, no. 1 (January 1947): 61. Note that this hymn was written by Julia Ward Howe. Along with other modern versions of this hymn, the 1985 Latter-day Saint hymnbook changes Howe’s original lyrics from “let us die to make men free” to “let us live to make men free.” “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” in *Hymns*, no. 60.

97. Augustus Toplady, “A Living and Dying Prayer for the Holiest Believer in the World,” *Gospel Magazine* (March 1776): 132, cited in “Lesson III—Literature: ‘Rock of Ages,’” *Relief Society Magazine* 9, no. 9 (September 1922): 498.

He raised aloft the sacred cup  
And as He blessed the wine  
He said, drink this in memory,  
Of this sacrifice of mine.

I am that promised Paschal Lamb,  
Our fathers long have known  
I soon shall hang upon that Cross  
This feast has ever shown.  
Henceforth no priest shall slay a lamb;  
No rites shall offered be  
For in this dreadful night these signs  
Will be fulfilled in Me.

O wondrous Lamb of God who died  
That men might live again  
Who wrought salvation for the race  
Through suffering and pain.  
Accept our pure devotion now  
And grant we may be true  
For as we eat and drink the cup  
We covenant anew.<sup>98</sup>

Particularly noteworthy in this hymn are the idea that Christ's institution of the sacrament was directly connected to his Crucifixion and the assertion that the Passover had always pointed to the cross.

### *The Sign of the Cross*

There were thirty references to the sign of the cross, meaning the hand gesture. Such references are included in descriptions of ceremonies, sacraments, and ordinances of other branches of Christianity, such as masses, baptisms, and even exorcisms. M. J. Tanner recounts in her journal the experience of attending a Catholic mass, describing the experience as "very new and strange to [her]." She writes, "While standing in the vestibule we saw people pass the font or basin of holy water and make the sign of the cross before entering church."<sup>99</sup> M. B. Crandal describes chapelgoers in Dublin who "cross themselves and tell their

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98. Susa Young Gates, "Sacrament Hymn," *Young Woman's Journal* 33, no. 4 (April 1922): 193.

99. M. J. Tanner, "Leaves from My Journal," *Woman's Exponent* 17, no. 14 (December 15, 1888): 111.

beads for a short time and go out again, just as sincere as they can be, for they know no better way of serving God.”<sup>100</sup>

### *Soldiers of the Cross*

There were twenty-four references to “soldiers of the cross.” This phrase was often used to describe individuals who engaged in missionary work; for example, Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball are referred to this way.<sup>101</sup> An unusual use of the phrase came from an anonymous article titled “Selfishness,” in which the author decried “people who pity themselves.” The author counseled that “all have troubles of their own, and the recital of yours will not make theirs easier to bear. Don’t be a spiritual piker! Be a brave soldier of the Cross. Get busy doing or saying something for others. Forget self. Shut the door on your complaints, open the windows of your soul to let in health and peace.”<sup>102</sup>

### *Pain and Suffering*

Twenty-two of the references to Christ’s Crucifixion emphasized the pain and suffering he endured. Some contrasted the terrible nature of his suffering and death with his own glorious and sinless nature. An essay titled “Mission and Suffering of Christ” elaborates,

Three hours of agony! With the cruel nails driven through the stainless hands, that had never wrought evil deeds, piercing the quivering flesh of the holy feet that had never trodden forbidden paths, with lips of anguish that had never uttered words of guile, a heart unsullied with evil intents, throbbing beneath the cruel pain, a mind unspotted with wicked designs, and a life pure in the sight of all the myriad hosts of earth and heaven, and yet crucified, wounded and bleeding. He was put to death in open shame, a holy sacrifice for the sin of the benighted and fallen world, whose inhabitants could never hope to regain the presence of their Father and God without a Savior’s atoning blood.<sup>103</sup>

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100. M. B. Crandal, “Reminiscences of Dublin,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 7, no. 1 (October 1895): 51.

101. Susa Young Gates, “History of Modern Temple Building,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 20, no. 1 (January 1909): 26.

102. “Selfishness,” *Relief Society Magazine* 5, no. 11 (November 1918): 646.

103. “Mission and Suffering of Christ,” *Woman’s Exponent* 13, no. 1 (June 1, 1884): 1.

## Baptism

Baptism was mentioned in connection with Christ's death twenty-one times. Of those references, twelve included Romans 6:3–4, which compares the ordinance of baptism to Christ's death and Resurrection. A lesson plan on baptism advises, "The earnest Latter-day Saint girl . . . should recall the day of her baptism often and each time it should bring to her mind the great sacrifice made on Calvary. As Christ's body was covered or buried in the tomb, so her body was completely covered or buried in the watery grave, and as He arose to a glorious immortal life, so she came forth from baptism to a new life in His Church."<sup>104</sup>

## Conclusion

Our analysis of quotations in the *Woman's Exponent*, the *Relief Society Magazine*, and the *Young Woman's Journal* indicates that the women involved in writing and selecting articles found Christ's Crucifixion to be an essential part of their theology. The Crucifixion and its surrounding events were used to provide insights into the character of Christ, underscore the devotion of his female disciples, and teach about the nature of the Atonement, among other important principles.

This study represents only a beginning of analysis on what early female Latter-day Saints wrote about Christ's Crucifixion. The three periodicals we examined comprise only a portion of the writing and sermons of Latter-day Saint women. Additional research could be conducted on discourses or other writings by women across the decades of the Church. Moreover, our corpus did not include references to Gethsemane or to the Savior's Atonement more broadly. Further study is needed to form a more complete picture of Latter-day Saint women's perspective on Christ's Atonement as portrayed in the three periodicals we analyzed.

The women whose writings we have discussed in the present study interacted with the theology of the Crucifixion and the symbolism of the cross in a diversity of ways. Some wrote of seeing cross-related worship and viewing it as similar to idolatry, while others wrote of giving, receiving, displaying, or wearing the symbol of the cross. Some emphasized the importance of Jesus's death to the resurrection of the body, and many also focused on the direct connection between his Crucifixion and the

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104. "Baptism, Its Efficacy and Symbolism," *Young Woman's Journal* 34, no. 11 (November 1923): 623.

Atonement for our sins. Jesus's behavior and attitude during and before his Crucifixion was given as an example to us all—of forgiveness, humility, obedience, meekness, and love. Although the Crucifixion is a painful topic to consider, many of these faithful women also found it inspiring. As Ila Fisher wrote, “His death—dear Lord, the thought of Calvary / Makes our afflictions easier to bear.”<sup>105</sup>

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105. Ila Fisher, “My Christmas Prayer,” *Relief Society Magazine* 4, no. 12 (December 1917): 704.

# Rebaptism in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

*Jonathan A. Stapley and David W. Grua*

The first day of November 1847 brought Patty Sessions a snowstorm that blew her tent down and shredded it. But life in Winter Quarters was never easy, and Sessions maintained her regular schedule despite the disruption. She was a midwife and had a central position among the women of the city. Over the next week alone, she delivered four babies and attended four meetings. She also sewed for hire, and she anointed and blessed in faith. And on Friday the 26th, as she wrote in her diary, “I was baptized.”<sup>1</sup> In this short three-word entry, Sessions documented one of the most distinctive beliefs and practices of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: the repeat baptism of believers.

There are few clues to help us discern the reason Patty Sessions stepped out into the cold to be immersed in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. What is clear, however, is that Sessions was already a baptized member in good standing. Like all Latter-day Saints who lived at that time, she was rebaptized and certainly would be again, perhaps multiple times, before she passed away. And while dramatically different today, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints maintains rebaptism practices that distinguish it from nearly all other Christian groups.

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Links to the online sources are available in the version accessible on our website, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/rebaptism-in-the-church-of-jesus-christ-of-latter-day-saints/>.

1. Donna Toland Smart, *Mormon Midwife: The 1846–1888 Diaries of Patty Bartlett Sessions*, Life Writings of Frontier Women, vol. 2 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997), 102–3.

Whether it is an 1893 monthly fast meeting in which “the time was all taken up confirming persons who’d been baptized—many of them rebaptized,”<sup>2</sup> or a missionary in 1877 Ohio who rebaptized as many people as he baptized,<sup>3</sup> documentation for the practice throughout the nineteenth century is ubiquitous. Rebaptism of Church members was practiced in four core modalities: (1) for healing, (2) as a function of Church discipline, (3) voluntarily for the remission of sins, and (4) for the renewal of covenants.<sup>4</sup> Kristine Wright and Jonathan Stapley have written on baptism for healing in detail elsewhere, tracing its trajectory from its formal beginnings in Nauvoo in 1841 to its termination in the 1920s.<sup>5</sup> This article briefly explores how early Latter-day Saints approached the question of what constitutes valid baptism and then documents and analyzes the three other modes of rebaptism in the Church. Evident from this analysis is that rebaptism was prominent within the development of Latter-day Saint covenant theology and its resulting distinctions from other Christian traditions.

### Valid Baptism

The Book of Mormon includes many accounts of baptism of the penitent by immersion before the coming of Jesus Christ at the volume’s apex. When the narration brings the reader to that moment, Jesus bestows authority upon his New World disciples to baptize by immersion and gives them a prayer to use in doing so (3 Ne. 11:21–27). In 1829, Oliver Cowdery gathered ecclesiastical and liturgical instructions from the Book of Mormon and created a document to govern the small band of believers in New York—the “Articles of the Church of Christ.” God had directed Cowdery to write, and the words were, in his words, “unto me as a burning fire shut up in my bones.”<sup>6</sup> Upon formation of the Church

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2. Charles M. Hatch and Todd M. Compton, eds., *A Widow’s Tale: The 1884–1896 Diary of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney*, Life Writings of Frontier Women, vol. 6 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003), 537 (March 30, 1893). Whitney noted that there were also two baby blessings.

3. Orson F. Whitney, Diary (August 1, 1877, to September 6, 1877), COLL MSS 188, box 6, fd. 19, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

4. D. Michael Quinn first documented these forms of baptism in his “The Practice of Rebaptism at Nauvoo,” *BYU Studies* 18, no. 2 (April 1978): 226–32. In contrast to Quinn, we have not found any evidence for rebaptism for the renewal of covenants until after the Nauvoo period.

5. Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine L. Wright, “‘They Shall Be Made Whole’: A History of Baptism for Health,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 69–112.

6. “Appendix 3: ‘Articles of the Church of Christ,’ June 1829,” [3], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 7, 2022.



of Christ the following year, Joseph Smith produced “Articles and Covenants” for the Church. This document included material from Cowdery’s “Articles” and appended to it several statements of belief, thus earning it the title of the “Mormon Creed” from antagonistic observers. Smith’s Articles and Covenants declared that the humble believers who desire baptism, and who witness to the Church that they are penitent and “willing to take upon them the name of Christ, having a determination to serve him unto the end, and truly manifest by their works that they have received the gift of Christ unto the remission of their sins” should indeed be “received unto baptism into the church of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

Aside from affirming the inspiration of the Book of Mormon’s origins, the material in these Articles and Covenants was not particularly controversial within the Protestant culture of nineteenth-century America. One of the statements of belief even paralleled the Apostle’s Creed, and the ecclesiology of the Church was not particularly distinctive when compared with American contemporaries. However, not long after the document’s creation, and perhaps in response to the questions of believers, Joseph Smith approached God to clarify the rules of the Church in regard to baptism. And as he uttered the word of the Lord to his nascent Church, he ruptured not only the American religious landscape but also the topology of Western Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

For the better part of fourteen hundred years, Christians in the Western tradition had accepted “valid” baptisms, regardless of which church, if any, the baptizer belonged to.<sup>9</sup> Then valid baptism became a prominent and contested issue during the Reformation with the rise of Anabaptists, or “credobaptists.”<sup>10</sup> These people believed that only the baptism of a person who was accountable and capable of faith in Jesus Christ (believer’s baptism) was valid, and polemicists readily controverted those with opposing views of what constituted valid baptism. But whether churches held infant baptism or adult believer’s baptism by immersion as valid, they still accepted all valid baptisms (in their view) performed outside of their particular denominations. Thus, Methodists accepted the baptisms

7. “Articles and Covenants, circa April 1830 [D&C 20],” [4], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 7, 2022.

8. Ryan Tobler, “‘Saviors on Mount Zion’: Mormon Sacramentalism, Mortality, and the Baptism for the Dead,” *Journal of Mormon History* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 207–10.

9. For the history of this practice, see Lynn Mills and Nicholas J. Moore, “One Baptism Once: The Origins of the Unrepeatability of Christian Baptism,” *Early Christianity* 11, no. 2 (2020): 206–26.

10. Bryan D. Spinks, *Reformation and Modern Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From Luther to Contemporary Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 83–100.

of Catholic converts, and Campbellites accepted the baptisms of Separate Baptists.<sup>11</sup> The rise of credobaptists was so wildly controversial precisely because believer's baptism repudiated the validity of countless baptisms throughout Christian history. "Rebaptism" of anyone was thus offensive to pedobaptists (believers in infant baptism).<sup>12</sup> But credobaptists made the exact same argument, with shifted definitions for valid baptism, declaring that "re-baptizing believers is making void the law of Christ."<sup>13</sup> As the Westminster Confession summarized, "The Sacrament of Baptisme is but once to be administred unto any person."<sup>14</sup>

On April 16, 1830, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation declaring that all Christian baptisms—what many Protestants viewed as the sign of God's covenant with the elect—were like the law of Moses, representative of an "old covenant" and "dead works." It is unclear whether this revelation took Protestant covenant theology seriously or turned it on itself, but the

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11. Early on, John Wesley argued that valid baptism necessarily was performed by the episcopally ordained. He grew to accept lay baptism, and Methodists more broadly followed. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 84–85, 93–94. See also E. Brooks Holifield, *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570–1720* (1974; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 66–69.

12. For excellent context and analysis of this debate as it played out between Methodists, Baptists, and Latter-day Saints, see Christopher C. Jones, "Mormonism in the Methodist Marketplace: James Covell and the Historical Background of Doctrine and Covenants 39–40," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2012): 86–90. It should also be noted that lay believers did sometimes seek out rebaptism despite institutional rejections. Baptists sometimes had their babies baptized, hoping that they would be baptized again as adults, and sometimes people baptized as infants sought baptism as adults. Jones, "Mormonism in the Methodist Marketplace," 86–90; Janet Moore Lindman, *Bodies of Belief: Baptist Community in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 117; William Pitts, *The Gospel Witness* (Catskill, N.Y.: Junius S. Lewis, 1818), 83, microfiche, 080 Sh64a 45343, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as HBL).

13. Thomas Campbell, "The Mormon Challenge," *Painesville Telegraph* (February 15, 1831), [2]. There are, of course exceptions to this broad consensus. English Separatist John Smyth rejected the sacraments of the Anglican church and was rebaptized. Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 66. In 1848, the German Baptist Brethren in the U.S. reaffirmed, in response to questions about accepting credobaptist converts into the church, that "it would be better to admit no person into the church, without first being baptized by the brethren." *Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Brethren* (n.p.: n.p., 1886), 124; Carl F. Bowman, *Brethren Society: The Cultural Transformation of a "Peculiar People"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 212–17.

14. *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster, Concerning a Confession of Faith: With the Quotations and Texts of Scriptures Annexed* (London: Evan Tyler, 1647), 49.

text had to have stung anyone who viewed his or her baptism as a sign or seal of God's covenant.<sup>15</sup> The revelation placed all Christians in the same space they had put Jewish people, and the voice of God declared "a new and everlasting covenant" and that "this church" was "built up unto me." This last covenant described in the revelation was accessible only by the "straight gait" of a new baptism.<sup>16</sup> Joseph Smith announced that the only valid baptism on the planet was necessarily performed by priests or elders ordained under his hand.<sup>17</sup> This revelation situated the Church of Christ closer to Eastern Orthodoxy, which had long rejected "heretical baptism," than to its immediate neighbors. Soon Smith alienated even this proximity. Just as Christian believers had to be "rebaptized" to join Smith's Church of Christ, the Church soon found occasion to rebaptize its own members—something essentially distinct in Christianity. Over the ensuing decades, some Church members would be baptized upward of a dozen times.

### Rebaptism and Church Discipline

In August 1834, William McLellin traveled through Indiana, preaching, laying hands on the sick to heal them, and baptizing. The Church had been previously established in the area, and McLellin regularly met with members and interested observers alike. Eden Smith and his wife, Elizabeth, lived in the area. They had both once been Church members—Eden had served an evangelizing mission of his own—but they were no longer part of the Church. We don't know whether the Smiths left the Church or were removed by Church discipline. Another couple, Catrin and Elisha Hill—both excommunicants—also lived in the area. Over a period of three weeks, in response to McLellin's preaching, all four "manifested their willingness to take upon them the name of the

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15. For examples of such views, see Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 14, 26, 51, 76–77, 89, 96–98, 142–45, 151, 172–73. On Protestant covenant theology more broadly, see Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether, eds., *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2020).

16. "Revelation, 16 April 1830 [D&C 22]," [4], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022.

17. Eleven years later, Joseph Smith recognized "sectarian" objections to Latter-day Saints not accepting other Christians' baptisms, saying that it would be like putting old wine in new bottles. "Minutes of a Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Held in Nauvoo, Ill., Commencing Oct. 1, 1841," *Times and Seasons* (October 15, 1841), 578. On ordination, see "Revelation, 9 December 1830 [D&C 36]," 48–49, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022.

Lord” and “wished to return.” McLellin led them, along with others who wanted to join the Church for the first time, down to the river, where he baptized them by immersion. After the baptisms, McLellin wrote that “we then united in prayr and while brother Levi was praying I laid my hands on and confirmed those who had been baptized—We then par-took of the ‘supper.’”<sup>18</sup>

Many churches in Antebellum America enforced discipline on their members, some more strictly than others. Church leaders across denominations regularly doled out judgments upon their members for infractions spanning a wide array of moral and social offenses, with the ultimate threat of excommunication being a possibility in the most serious cases. Though it took a few years for Joseph Smith to reveal the ecclesiastical structures to formally adjudicate and enforce Church discipline, Latter-day Saints regularly used terms like “cut off,” “excluded from fellowship,” and “excommunicated” to describe the status of those removed from Church membership.<sup>19</sup> For the early Latter-day Saints, however, the prospect of excommunication was not merely a separation from the worship and association of other members. For the early Saints, salvation was a social affair. They were trying to build the city of Zion—a land of promise to possess “while the Earth shall stand” and “again in eternity no more to pass away.”<sup>20</sup> Those who “apostatized” were stricken from the records of the Church, and as Joseph Smith wrote, they “shall find none inheritance” in the land of Zion.<sup>21</sup> There was no salvation—spiritual or temporal—outside of the Church.<sup>22</sup>

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18. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies; Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 133, 135–36.

19. For an example document that includes all three terms, see “Letter to Wilford Woodruff, circa 18 June 1838,” [4], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022. Occasionally members were also “excludid from the church.” George Burket, journal, September 28, 1835, MS 10340, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as CHL). On Latter-day Saint discipline and context, see Nathan B. Oman, “Preaching to the Court House and Judging in the Temple,” *BYU Law Review* 2009, no. 1 (2009): 157–224.

20. Joseph Smith, in “Revelation, 2 January 1831 [D&C 38],” [51], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022. (Note as well the changes introduced in the 1833 printing.) See also “Revelation, 30 August 1831 [D&C 63],” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022.

21. “Letter to William W. Phelps, 27 November 1832,” 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022.

22. Jonathan A. Stapley, *Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 60–61. This exclusivity was tempered by developing Latter-day Saint universalism.

Excommunication in Christian churches has generally indicated that the recipient is, as the term indicates, outside of communion, but there is no way to cancel valid baptism in traditional Christianity. Excommunication is a tool of church discipline wielded to encourage repentance and a return to fellowship. Excommunicants are typically barred from the Lord's Supper and other aspects of church community and worship, but their baptisms are unaffected. There are no early Latter-day Saint records explaining a theology of excommunication, but just as converts from other churches had to be rebaptized in order to join the Saints or, as Hyrum Smith declared, come "into the visible kingdom of god" and "in to the visible Church of Christ,"<sup>23</sup> so too were the penitent "apostate" Latter-day Saint required do the same in order to return.<sup>24</sup>

The two couples that McLellin baptized in Indiana are potentially reflective of two different practices of Church discipline. McLellin noted that the Hills were clearly "cut off" from the Church. Alternately, of the Smiths he only wrote that Elizabeth "had once been a member."<sup>25</sup> The Smiths may very well have left the Church of their own volition.<sup>26</sup> While the Church required formal excommunicants to be rebaptized upon return to the Church, leaders also regularly required rebaptism for the disaffiliated or reprobate when no excommunication had taken place. Many people in the early Church, including prominent disaffected Church leaders, were rebaptized with no records of excommunication. For example, in 1843, Elisha Davis confessed his sins during a local conference in Freedom, Illinois, and asked to be rebaptized. Because he "acknowledge his sins without trial," and because "the hand of fellowship had not been withdrawn from him," his elder's license

23. Hyrum Smith, Diary, November 29, 1832, and January 20, 1833, MSS 774, series 1, box 1, fd. 4–6, Special Collections Miscellaneous, Digital Collections, HBL. On antecedent ideas of baptism and the visible church, see Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 42–43, 96–98.

24. See, for example, Vermillion Branch Conference Minutes, 1832 November to 1833 July, March 18, 1833, LR 552 21, CHL; "Letter to J. G. Fosdick, 3 February 1834," [23–24], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022; Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* (Frankfurt: n.p. 1842), 75. Jonathan Green published an English translation of the latter: "Ein Ruf aus der Wüste 4.8: Orson Hyde on Confession and Disfellowship," *Times and Seasons* (blog), March 28, 2021, <https://www.timesandseasons.org/index.php/2021/03/einf-ruf-aus-der-wueste-4-8-orsond-hyde-on-confession-and-disfellowship>.

25. Shipps and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 133, 136.

26. For example, on September 27, 1835, Edward Partridge rebaptized a penitent man "who had once belonged to the church, & had been an elder, but had withdrawn from the church." Edward Partridge, Diary, September 27, 1835, MS 892, CHL.

remained in force.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, with time, the frequent verdict of formal Church discipline was, if the subjects were penitent, a requirement of rebaptism without excommunication.<sup>28</sup> For example, one missionary in 1855 who profaned the name of God was disciplined, rebaptized, and continued his service.<sup>29</sup> In Southern Utah, when one particularly belligerent individual had made threats and assaulted some community members in 1866, the local bishop asked, “Shall we cut [him] off & throw him away?” After some discussion, the acting bishop’s counselor wrote the response: the man “should Make a Public acknowledgement & be rebaptized for the remission of sins & begin a New again; this was the feelings of all Presant.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in 1891, several boys in Cardston, Alberta, who belonged to the Church stole pocketknives in a neighboring town. Their bishop subjected them to Church discipline. After he directed them to make restitution, they were all rebaptized.<sup>31</sup>

At other times, formal disciplinary meetings were not even held. For example, when one missionary in 1889 was pained with guilt over previously hidden sin, he wrote and confessed to Church President Wilford Woodruff, expecting to be relieved of his ministry. However, the Church President erred on the side of mercy, writing back and instructing him “to get rebaptized and have all my priesthood and former blessings resealed upon me, but not to be in a hurry in doing so; meantime to apply myself diligently in magnifying my calling as a missionary.”<sup>32</sup>

While Church leaders debated the relationship of excommunication to the other liturgies of the Church over the years,<sup>33</sup> the requirement

27. Freedom [Illinois] Branch Conference Minutes, July 20, 1843, Historian’s Office Minutes and Reports (Local Units), 1840–1886, CR 100 589, CHL. These minutes also indicate that Davis was “restored to his former standing” during the reconfirmation.

28. See, for example, “Minutes, 30 January 1836,” [137], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022.

29. Salmon River Mission Journal, March 8 and 9, 1856, MS 4955, CHL.

30. Robert Glass Cleland and Juanita Brooks, eds., *A Mormon Chronicle: The Diaries of John D. Lee, 1848–1876*, 2 vols. (1955; Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), 2:22. See also the case of two men who were tried by the ward for unruly conduct, with the verdict that they “repent of their sins be rebaptized forthwith and make a satisfactory confession to the brethren and sisters of the ward or be cut off from the church.” Tenth Ward General Minutes, 1849–1977, vol. 6, 1849–1866, October 28, 1853, LR 9051 11, CHL.

31. Donald G. Godfrey and Brigham Y. Card, eds., *The Diaries of Charles Ora Card: The Canadian Years 1886–1903* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1993), 180–81 (March 14, 1891).

32. William B. Smart, *Mormonism’s Last Colonizer: The Life and Times of William H. Smart* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2008), 63, 67.

33. Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 54–55.

of rebaptism to rejoin the Church persisted from the earliest records to the present (though the terminology changed from excommunication to “withdrawal of membership” in 2020).<sup>34</sup> The practice of rebaptizing people who weren’t formally excommunicated, however, was deprecated by Church leaders in the early twentieth century, which is discussed later in this article.

### Rebaptism for “the Remission of Sins”

Late in his life, Brigham Young reminisced about his time as a missionary in England in 1840 and 1841: “In my traveling and preaching, many a time,” he said, he “stopped by beautiful streams of clear, pure water, and have said to myself, ‘How delightful it would be to me to go into this, to be baptized for the remission of my sins.’” In his retelling, when he arrived back in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith told him that “it was [his] privilege” to be rebaptized. He remembered that there was a “revelation, that the Saints could be baptized and re-baptized when they chose,” along with being baptized for their deceased friends and families.<sup>35</sup> Joseph Smith committed very few revelations to writing in the Nauvoo era. His revelation of baptism for the dead, for example, came by way of sermons and a few instructional letters. There are no extant revelation texts on rebaptism or baptism for the dead. However, when Brigham Young did return to Nauvoo after crossing the Atlantic, he saw what one antagonist of the Church described as seeing “the river foam” with rebaptisms.<sup>36</sup> Further, what contemporaneous records do describe is that by April 1841 many Church members, including Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon, were rebaptized “for the remission of their sins,” often before being baptized as proxy for their dead relatives and friends.<sup>37</sup>

34. *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020), 32.11.4; Larry D. Curtis, “After Changes to Handbook Terminology, LDS Church Members No Longer ‘Excommunicated,’” KUTV, February 19, 2020.

35. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 18:241 (June 23, 1874). No manuscript or shorthand version of this sermon is extant.

36. Oliver H. Olney, *The Absurdities of Mormonism Portrayed* (n.p., 1843), 8.

37. William Clayton, Diary, April 8 and May 9, 1841, MSS 47, Mormon Missionary Diaries, Digital Collections, HBLL; William Huntington, Journal, April 11 and 27, 1841 [p. 41], holograph, MSS 272, HBLL; Franklin D. Richards, Journals, typescript, April 11–May 2, 1841, holograph, MS 1215, CHL. Baptism for the dead records from this early period do note several cases of “first baptisms” and rebaptisms interspersed with the baptisms for the dead. See Nauvoo Baptisms for the Dead in the Mississippi River, 5, 11,



The question of what religious work baptism performed in the cosmology of Christian believers is important and complicated. For centuries, Christians had debated the precise relationship between the remission of sins (also termed regeneration or rebirth) and the ritual of baptism. Catholics had long held that the sacrament of baptism itself effected regeneration. Many Protestants hesitated to ascribe that sort of power to a human act and instead viewed the Holy Spirit as the agent of regeneration, which could occur at any time. The remission of sins was, in fact, a necessary requirement for the admission to many Protestant churches.<sup>38</sup> Although the Articles and Covenants of the Church appear to reflect a similar perspective, Joseph Smith regularly turned to the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and his own revelations, which necessitated a “baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” or the “remission of sins by way of baptism”—a position similar to that of the German Baptist Brethren and, more famously, Alexander Campbell.<sup>39</sup> Latter-day Saints proselytized carrying the message that all humankind could be saved by the ordinances of “1st, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; 2d, Repentance; 3d, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; 4th, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>40</sup> The injunction to rebaptize Christian converts,

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14, 38, 63, and 85, document 227681, FamilySearch Library, accessed September 9, 2022; Correspondence Baltimore Patriot, “Nauvoo,” *New-York Spectator* (August 23, 1843), 4.

38. Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 5; Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 90–93, 105–6; David W. Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010), 188–89; Thomas L. Humphries Jr., “St. Augustine of Hippo,” in *Christian Theologies of the Sacraments: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb and David A. Johnson (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 49–50.

39. Luke 3:3; Acts 2:38; Moroni 8:11; “Revelation, circa Summer 1829 [D&C 19],” 42, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022; “Revelation, 7 May 1831 [D&C 49],” 82, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022; “Revelation, 14 June 1831 [D&C 55],” 91, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 9, 2022. On Baptists, see *Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Brethren*, 56–57, 123, 207, 219, 226; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 290, 299, 303–4. Some contemporaneous observers suggested that Smith was borrowing this emphasis from the Campbellites. “Candor,” letter to the editors, *Christian Advocate and Journal*, March 6, 1840, 115. For antecedent debates, see Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 80. It appears that the Reformed Methodists may also have advocated for baptism for the remission of sins. Pitts, *Gospel Witness*, 74. The remission of sins was included in prayers during the early Methodist baptism liturgy, but they were later removed. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 87, 92, 106.

40. “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* (March 1, 1842), 709. Smith frequently preached on faith, repentance, baptism for the remission of sins, and the Holy Ghost in Nauvoo.



disciplined members, and “apostates” was a powerful antecedent of non-traditional approaches to baptism. While his precise logic isn’t clear in the documentary record, Joseph Smith concluded that all Church members could find a remission of sins through repeated baptisms.

On March 20, 1842, Joseph Smith delivered a Sunday sermon on baptism. As reported by Wilford Woodruff, Smith declared: “God hath decreed & ordained that man should repent of all his sins & Be Baptized for the remission of his sins.” At the end of his sermon, Smith “informed the congregation that he should attend to the ordinance of Baptism {in th}e . . . river near his house at 2 o’clock.” Woodruff witnessed the river-bank humming with people. Smith waded into the water and baptized “with his own hands about 80 persons for the remission of their sins.”<sup>41</sup> At least one of these individuals was baptized for the first time—Emma Smith’s nephew Lorenzo Wasson. As Woodruff’s own experience shows, however, many of those baptized that day were certainly members in good standing. The following Sunday, Joseph Smith spoke again, this time on baptism for the dead. And again the Saints gathered as he went into the river and “Baptized all that Came unto him.” This time, however, Woodruff was not content to be a mere observer. He wrote: “I considered it my privilege to be Baptized for the remission of my sins for I had not been since I first Joined the Church in 1833.”<sup>42</sup> Then, along with Apostle John Taylor, who was also rebaptized, Woodruff and the others walked to the temple and were reconfirmed.

While some like Woodruff and Taylor were rebaptized because of their personal desire for the experience, others appear to have had specific mandates for the ceremony. Just as some people were rebaptized before performing proxy baptisms, at least some people experienced rebaptism before participating in the newly revealed temple ceremonies. For example, before being sealed in marriage on August 27, 1842, Newell and Elizabeth Whitney were baptized “for remission of sins.”<sup>43</sup> And once the temple font was completed, the Saints used it for “Baptizing for the dead, for the remission of Sins & for healing.”<sup>44</sup> At the April 1842 conference, Joseph Smith clarified that “baptisms for the dead, and for the healing of the body must be in the font,” but “those coming into the

41. Wilford Woodruff, *The Wilford Woodruff Journals*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Benchmark Books, 2020), 1:499 (March 20, 1842), braces in original.

42. Woodruff, *Journals*, 1:500 (March 27, 1842).

43. “Revelation, 27 July 1842, in Unidentified Handwriting—A,” [2], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022.

44. Woodruff, *Journals*, 1:483 (November 21, 1841).

Church, and those rebaptized may be baptized in the river.”<sup>45</sup> Practically, however, the font remained a regular place for baptizing for the remission of sins, at least while it was open. The month after that conference, Wilford Woodruff noted that in one day at the font he had baptized “about 100 persons mostly for the dead.”<sup>46</sup>

The Saints continued the practice of rebaptism for the remission of sins beyond the Nauvoo period. For example, in Winter Quarters, Wilford Woodruff sought rebaptism “for the remission of my sins” from Apostle Willard Richards. After being baptized, Woodruff then baptized Richards and several members of his household.<sup>47</sup> Rebaptism of Church members continued along the trail west,<sup>48</sup> into the Great Basin, and then throughout the world wherever the missionaries traveled.<sup>49</sup> As discussed in the following section, eventually all immigrants who arrived in the Great Basin were rebaptized.<sup>50</sup> Rebaptism was sufficiently common that in 1853, seventeen percent of all Church members in Utah had been rebaptized within the preceding twelve months, with one ward rebaptizing all its members (see fig. 1).<sup>51</sup>

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45. “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842): 763.

46. Woodruff, *Journals*, 1:506 (May 15, 1842).

47. Woodruff, *Journals*, 2:133 (August 8, 1846).

48. For example, Bathsheba W. Bigler Smith, Diary, June 29 and September 2, 1849, MS 36, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City; John Oakley, Journal, June 19, 1856, microfilm of holograph, MS 1996, CHL.

49. At least some early missionaries were rebaptized before being blessed and set apart, while others were rebaptized when they arrived in their service areas. Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diary of Hosea Stout, 1844–1861*, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 454 (October 16, 1852); Las Vegas Mission Record Book, June 3, 1855, LR 5691 21, CHL; Salmon River Mission Journal, July 8, 1855, and May 18, 1856. For examples of rebaptism for the remission of sins in the Pacific Islands, see George Q. Cannon, Journal, April 19, 1851, and May 28, 1852, The Journal of George Q. Cannon, Church Historian’s Press, accessed September 7, 2022; S. George Ellsworth, ed., *The History of Louisa Barnes Pratt: Mormon Missionary Widow and Pioneer*, Life Writings of Frontier Women, vol. 3 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998), 144; Edward Leo Lyman, Susan Ward Payne and S. George Ellsworth, eds., *No Place to Call Home: The 1807–1857 Life Writings of Caroline Barnes Crosby, Chronicler of Outlying Mormon Communities*, Life Writings of Frontier Women, vol. 7 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005), 134. For examples in Britain after 1847, see Cheltenham Conference Historical Record, 1850–1855, 9, 12, 15, 19, 22, holograph, LR 1631 21, CHL; Glasgow Conference General Minutes, 1840–1856, 1840–1846, pp. 175–81, holograph, LR 3194 11, CHL.

50. Many of the rebaptisms in the first decades in the Great Basin are documented in “Historian’s Office Rebaptism Records, 1848–1876,” holograph, CR 100 591, CHL.

51. Data drawn from “Report of the Bishops,” *Deseret News*, October 15, 1853, 179. Note that this report does not distinguish between modes of rebaptism.

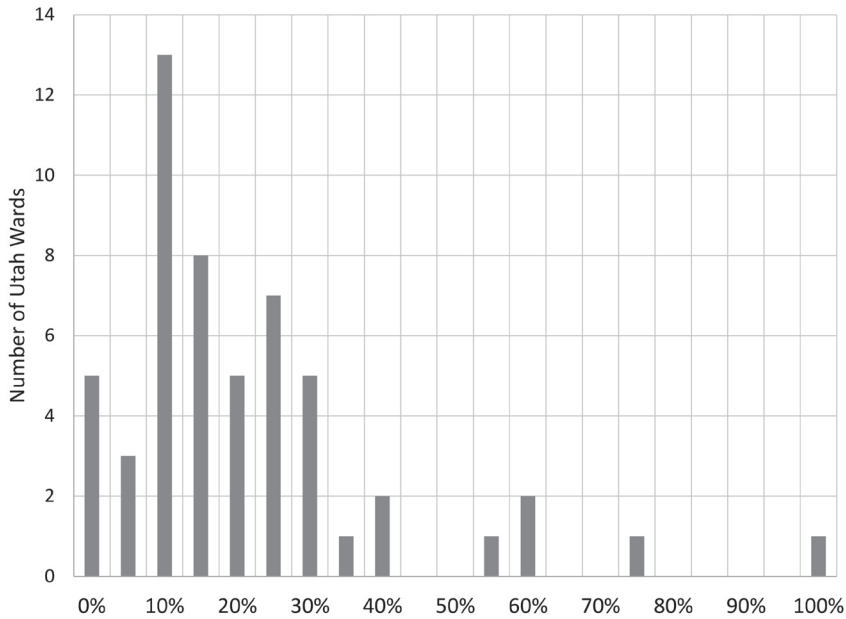


FIGURE 1. Percentage of ward members rebaptized in Utah wards in 1853.

### Baptism for the Renewal of Covenants

A central message of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the twenty-first century is that the Church exists to help people “make and keep sacred covenants” on the path to exaltation. Church leaders introduced this phrase in 1985 as part of the “Young Women Values,” and it has since grown to occupy a place of primacy, being repeated in general handbooks, lesson manuals, general conference sermons, and even employment descriptions.<sup>52</sup> When Latter-day Saints speak of covenants today, they largely mean the promises members make when participating in the liturgies of the Church.

In addition, Latter-day Saints have not only made the promissory covenants; they have also renewed them. In contemporary Church practice, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is the primary means by which

52. “Young Women Values,” *Young Women Special Issue [New Era]* (November 1985): 27. See also Janice Kapp Perry, “I Walk in Faith,” *Young Women Special Issue [New Era]* (November 1985): 14–15. For more information on the development of these values and the Young Women’s program introduced in 1985, see the forthcoming history of Young Women to be published by the Church Historian’s Press in 2024.

Church members “renew” their covenants. However, in the nineteenth century, covenant renewal among Latter-day Saints was largely mediated by rebaptism, Brigham Young having introduced the practice upon entry into the Salt Lake Valley. However, before approaching this mode of baptism, it is important to understand how Latter-day Saints developed an understanding of covenants and their renewal that is distinct from other Christian traditions.

### *Covenants*

Because covenants are featured prominently within the narratives of the Bible, scholars have long made them a focus of study. In the ancient Near East, covenants were the legal, religious, and ethical means to extend the “duties and privileges of kinship” to others, within various categories of relation and degrees of bilaterality. Individuals entered into covenants in liturgical ceremonies in which they made solemn oaths (or nonverbal oath-signs) and assented to the obligations of the specified relationship.<sup>53</sup> Readers will likely be familiar with God’s grant-type covenants with Abraham and Israel and the language of redemption within Christian soteriology drawn from them.<sup>54</sup> While Christians have also largely believed that Jesus Christ introduced a new covenant by which God saves humanity, precisely how they have related this covenant to those of the Hebrew Bible, and God’s salvific work more broadly, has varied. Early Latter-day Saints largely spoke, wrote, and published about covenants in ways that resonated with the Bible but contradicted many traditional Christian theologies. Joseph Smith revealed that Christ’s new covenant was everlasting and was the same covenant in force throughout human history.<sup>55</sup>

Joseph Smith also framed the covenant of Church membership as God’s renewed covenant with Israel. This is seen in the revelation on baptizing all Church members discussed at the opening of this article.

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53. See Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to a Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 1–33.

54. See T. Benjamin Spackman, “The Israelite Roots of Atonement Terminology,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2016): 39–64.

55. See Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14–44; Nathan B. Oman and Jonathan A. Stapley, “Covenant without Contract,” book chapter forthcoming. Note that Givens perhaps simplifies Reformed covenant theology, which views God’s covenant of grace in place throughout human history. See Waters, Reid, and Muether, *Covenant Theology*.

Joining Israel in God's covenant was adoptive—a transformation of the status of an individual to being part of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>56</sup> One did not make a new covenant with God; one joined the existing covenant.<sup>57</sup> There were, however, other types of covenants. Essentially all Protestants focused on God's salvific covenant, but Puritans, along with many Baptists and some Presbyterians, also created congregational articles of faith and church covenants that required church members, as one Scottish divine wrote, "to come under solemn, voluntary obligations unto the Lord" by promising to serve him and follow the rules outlined in the covenants.<sup>58</sup> The direct analogy for Joseph Smith's followers was their formal acceptance of the "Articles and Covenants"—a document that, like Protestant church covenants, laid out Church beliefs, structure, and membership obligations—after the organization of the Church of Christ in 1830.<sup>59</sup> To reiterate, formally, Protestants did not use the term "covenant" to describe these membership promises, preferring words like "obligations," "vows," and "promises." Instead, they reserved "covenant" to describe the relationship between God and his people and between the people of the Church.

Americans also regularly entered into legal covenants. Informed by ancient antecedents, within the western legal tradition, contracts had been relationship- or status-based agreements between parties, and covenants were a type of agreement formalized during land and property transactions (and in other contractual relationships as well).<sup>60</sup> In fact, attorneys frequently used the paired synonyms, or legal doublet, "covenant and agree" in transactional documents. During the nineteenth century, legal scholars grew to view contracts and covenants as the legally enforceable promises of independent agents.<sup>61</sup> Joseph Smith and other Latter-day Saints were clearly familiar with legal covenants. For

56. Samuel M. Brown, "Early Mormon Adoption Theology and the Mechanics of Salvation," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 3–52.

57. See, for example, *A Collection of Sacred Hymns, for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in Europe* (Manchester: W. R. Thomas, 1840), nos. 160, 162, 166.

58. Archibald Mason, *Observation of the Public Covenants, betwixt God and the Church: A Discourse* (Glasgow: E. Miller, 1799), 14. Note that some in these groups also militated against such covenants of duty. See also David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).

59. "Minutes, 9 June 1830," 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022.

60. P. Brady Leigh, *An Abridgement of the Law of Nisi Prius*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: P. H. Nicklin and T. Johnson, 1838), 602; Sir John Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 339.

61. Oman and Stapley, "Covenant without Contract."

example, Joseph Smith covenanted to fulfill certain obligations as part of a land transaction with his father-in-law in 1830.<sup>62</sup> While Protestants were generally more theologically fastidious in how they used the term, both Methodists and Latter-day Saints occasionally used the language of covenant, drawn from both their religious and legal dealings, to mean a solemn promise, typically to God.<sup>63</sup>

There are scattered examples of Latter-day Saints using covenant language in places where traditionally words such as “promises,” “vows,” or “oaths” would typically have been used. In 1830, several Church elders witnessed that they “most solemnly covenant before God” to fulfill a mission to “the Lamanites.”<sup>64</sup> In 1836, after a period of alienation between Joseph Smith and his brother William, they reconciled and “covenanted with each other in the Sight of God and the holy angels and the brethren, to strive from henceforward to build each other up in righteousness.”<sup>65</sup> In these examples, Joseph Smith and other Church members used the secular contractual language of covenant to make a solemn religious promise.

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62. “Agreement with Isaac Hale, 6 April 1829,” [1], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022. See also “Lease to Willard Richards, 4 January 1842,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 27, 2022; “Lease to John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff, between 8 and 10 December 1842,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 27, 2022.

63. Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher, Consort and Relict of the Rev. John Fletcher* (New York: J. Kershaw, 1824), 119; William O. Booth, “Memoir of William Fishwick, Esq., of Long-Holme,” *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* (July 1842): 548; M. M. Henkle, *The Life of Henry Bidleman Bascom, D.D., LL.D., Late Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Louisville: Morton and Griswold, 1854), 53. In 1827, Methodist Henry Tarrant created and signed “in the presence of God” a written covenant that delineated his relationship to God, including several promises and commitments. W. Frith, “Memoir of the Later Rev. Henry Tarrant,” *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (October 1845): 418–20. Two examples that are illustrative of how legal terminology was appropriated for religious promises among Latter-day Saints are the deeds of consecration used in the early Zion period of Missouri and Wilford Woodruff’s written consecration of property before he left on a mission on the last day of 1834. The early deeds were legal agreements and covenants between individuals and Edward Partridge to transfer property. Levi Jackman, *Deeds of Consecration and Stewardship*, MS 3103, CHL. Woodruff’s document is a religious declaration that he did “freely covenant with my God that I freely consecrate and dedicate myself together with all my properties and affects unto the Lord.” Woodruff, *Journals*, 1:28 (December 31, 1834).

64. “Covenant of Oliver Cowdery and Others, 17 October 1830,” [1], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022.

65. They then repeated the covenant a few weeks later with the Quorum of the Twelve. “Journal, 1835–1836,” 96, 124, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022. See also “Revelation, 26 April 1832 [D&C 82],” 129, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022; “Covenant, 29 November 1834,” 87–89, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022.

In some cases, Church members similarly made promissory covenants to obey God's commandments, sometimes quite specifically. In 1833, Hyrum Smith stood at the shore of Lake Erie and preached to fifty men and women while referencing both the older and newer conceptions of covenant. He preached about the "knew [sic] covenant" that required industry, cleanliness, sacrament, and the ordination of elders. He then called upon his listeners to covenant to "keep the commandments of god & Be faithful."<sup>66</sup> In the Kirtland Camp—the group of approximately five hundred Saints that traveled from Kirtland to Far West in 1838—all members covenanted to "strictly to observe the laws of the camp and the commandments of the Lord."<sup>67</sup> And in 1843, in Freedom, Illinois, a Church elder covenanted at a local conference that he "would never be overcome again with liquor."<sup>68</sup>

It was in Nauvoo that Joseph Smith redefined individual religious promises as covenants within the Church's formal liturgy. Where others made vows, promises, and oaths, Joseph Smith asked Church members to make covenants. For example, instead of marital "vows," Smith revealed a sealing ceremony that required participants to "covenant" to follow certain behaviors.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, when Smith revealed the endowment ceremony, he used the method of teaching that he found in Freemasonry. And where the masonic presentation required initiates to make solemn promises in order to progress through the ritual, Latter-day Saints used the language of covenants in the temple endowment. Thus, during Joseph Smith's lifetime, Church members used both the older and newer understandings of covenants. They looked to join Israel in God's covenant, and they also participated in liturgies where they individually made solemn promissory covenants to keep specific commandments.

66. Hyrum Smith, Diary, April 1, 1833.

67. Kirtland Camp Constitution and Journal, 1838 March–October, July 8, 1838, holograph, MS 4952, CHL.

68. Freedom Branch Conference Minutes, July 20, 1843. See also Freedom Branch Conference Minutes, September 3 and 4, 1843, holograph, CHL.

69. "Revelation, 27 July 1842," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed September 15, 2022. Marriage was inherently relationship-based, and "covenant" is seen in at least one other tradition at this time, albeit associated with and not in lieu of "promise." The Presbyterian marriage liturgy required that the bride and groom both "promise and covenant, in the presence of God and of these witnesses." *The Constitution and Standards of the Associate-Reformed Church in North America* (Salem, N.Y.: Dodd and Stevenson), 1827), 452. This formulation dates back the seventeenth century. See *The History of Non-conformity, as It Was Argued and Stated by Commissioners on Both Sides, in 1661* (London: B. Bragg, 1704), 110.



## Renewal

As discussed above, Protestants viewed baptism as the sign (or seal) of God's covenant, similar to how Israel saw circumcision as such.<sup>70</sup> Puritan and Congregational church members brought their babies to the church to be baptized having God's covenant sealed upon them. Later, as these children grew to be adults, they renewed (or reaffirmed) this covenant in ceremonies that allowed them access to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Covenant renewal grew to be a community-wide event, sometimes associated with fasting, and reaffirmed God's bond to the individual and to the church.<sup>71</sup> Puritans gathered together and made solemn promises in the "Presence of God, Angels and Men" to consecrate "our *Talent*; our *Time* our *Estates*, our *Influence*" to God, to avoid a litany of sins, and to follow specific expectations of righteousness.<sup>72</sup> Though not universally held, some Puritans and Anglicans taught that the Lord's Supper itself could be a means of covenant renewal.<sup>73</sup> John Wesley, having been exposed to Anglican and Puritan covenantal theology, among other sources, readily turned to and ritualized covenant renewal for Methodists. They gathered—often annually at the beginning of the year, but also at camp meetings—to renew their covenants in ceremonies that usually concluded with the Lord's Supper.<sup>74</sup> This was a recapitulation of Israel's covenant renewal in Exodus 19, Deuteronomy 29, and Nehemiah 9–10—a reaffirmation of and recommitment to God's covenant. And whereas these ceremonies might include making specific

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70. Holifield, *Covenant Sealed*, 5–15, 41–42, 149, 177; Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 88. Note that some theologians also dissented from this view.

71. See Anne S. Brown and David D. Hall, "Family Strategies and Religious Practice: Baptism and the Lord's Supper in Early New England," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 41–68. For a more detailed study, see Anne Speersneider Brown, "'Bound up in a Bundle of Life': The Social Meaning of Religious Practice in Northeastern Massachusetts, 1700–1765" (PhD diss., Boston University, 1995).

72. John Brown, *Solemn Covenanting with God, One of the Best Means to Prevent Fatal Declensions* (Boston: n.p., 1728), 19, 30, microfiche, 080 Sh64 3001, HBLL.

73. Thomas Bray, *A Short Discourse upon the Doctrine of our Baptismal Covenant, Being an Exposition upon the Preliminary Questions and Answers of Our Church-Catechism* (London: E. Holt, 1697), 11, 29; Brown, *Solemn Covenanting with God*, 7–8.

74. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 67–69, 77–80. The contemporary liturgy to renew the baptismal covenant is available in The General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church, *The Services of the Baptismal Covenant in the United Methodist Church: As Revisited to Align with the 2008 Book of Discipline and Book of Resolutions* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Publishing House, 2009). See also *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 431–90.



promises or vows, such promises were part of the renewal process, not the covenants themselves.

Many Protestants also sought to renew some of their religious promises and vows. Following closer to the Roman tradition, the Church of England and, by extension, the Methodists maintained the practice of requiring baptismal vows—a series of four questions that in the 1824 *Book of Common Prayer* began with “Dost thou renounce the devil and all his works?” and ended with “Wilt thou then obediently keep God’s holy will and commandments, and walk in the same all the days of your life?”<sup>75</sup> And while many Reformed traditions moved away from explicit vows toward catechesis, they nevertheless viewed baptismal vows as implicit to baptism.<sup>76</sup> Anglicans could renew these vows, or promises, in certain services and through participation in the Lord’s Supper.<sup>77</sup>

The desire for renewal is a relatable impulse. Life is a persistent series of failures, large and small. This was true for Puritans, Methodists, and Latter-day Saints alike. However, when Church members talked about covenant renewal during Joseph Smith’s life, it was largely as a synonym for the Restoration, not as a personal recommitment to specific promises. For example, in 1837, a Church periodical discussed valid baptism throughout history, stating that no one had been authorized to perform it “till the renewal of the covenant and the restoration of the priesthood.”<sup>78</sup>

75. *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacrament, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the Use of the United Church of England and Ireland* (Oxford: W. Baxter, 1824), 678–79. For the Methodist vows, see *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Kirk, 1804), 170.

76. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 201–26. Though many Reformed traditions moved away from the formal vows, Baptist Morgan J. Edwards wrote that baptism was for “those who vow obedience and holiness in a subjection to the gospel.” Morgan J. Edwards, *Customs of Primitive Churches* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1768), 80, microfiche, 080 Sh64 10891, HBLL.

77. *Book of Common Prayer*, 546, 556.

78. Editor, “For, for This Cause,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 6 (March 1837): 470. For similar examples, see also Zebedee Coltrin, Diary, December 14, 1832, holograph, MS 1443, CHL; W. A. Cowdery, editorial, *The Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 3, no. 8 (May 1837): 508; Hyrum Smith, “Communications,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 2 (December 1839): 20; R. B. Thompson, “Communications,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 10 (August 1840): 151; J. Blakesley, “Communications,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 12 (October 1840): 179; “Highly Interesting from Jerusalem,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 15 (June 1, 1842): 805; *Collection of Sacred Hymns*, no. 165; “Great Discussion on Mormonism between Dr. West and Elder Adams, at the Marlboro Chapel,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 19 (August 1, 1842): 864; “Mormonism, a Heresy,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 14 (June 1, 1843): 211; “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 15 (June 15, 1843): 238.

While Joseph Smith is not documented as teaching about personal covenant renewal, a few Church members did approach the idea. Writing from a small branch of believers in New Hampshire, Levi Wilder wrote to Kirtland in 1835, hoping to encourage proselytizing elders to visit his city and preach the gospel. He explained that “we have been in rather a cold state through the summer, but we have renewed our covenant, and find the Lord is ready and willing to bless us when we do our duty.”<sup>79</sup>

In the March 20, 1842, sermon that Joseph Smith delivered on baptism, discussed above, he appropriated Protestant language to describe baptism as “a sign ordained of God.”<sup>80</sup> But instead of being a sign of God’s covenant, it was a sign “for the believer in Christ to take upon himself in order to enter into the Kingdom of God.” Protestants had described baptism as a sign of God’s covenant, while Joseph Smith largely framed baptism as the means God decreed to receive a remission of sins prerequisite to the reception of the Holy Ghost and to enter the Church. After Joseph Smith’s death, the way Church leaders discussed and taught about baptism shifted in two important ways. First, Church leaders opened the possibility of regularly renewing promissory Church covenants through rebaptism. Second and later, Latter-day Saints moved toward the idea of baptism being the method for the individual to make promissory covenants with God to serve him and keep his commandments in the first place.<sup>81</sup>

### *Rebaptism for the Renewal of Covenants*

As mentioned above, Joseph Smith introduced the Nauvoo temple liturgy before his death. Before leaving Nauvoo, Church leaders spent day after day performing the endowment and sealing liturgies in the temple.

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79. Levi B. Wilder, letter, February 15, 1835, quoted in “A Summary,” *Latter-day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 5 (February 1835): 76. See also Scott H. Partridge, ed., *Thirteenth Apostle: The Diaries of Amasa M. Lyman, 1832–1877* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2016), 14–15 (February 3, 1834); Erastus Snow, Journal, November 1836, holograph, MS 1329, CHL.

80. Methodists in particular described baptism as a sign of grace but also as entrance into the visible church. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship*, 87–89.

81. Today, Church members often point to Mosiah 18, a Book of Mormon passage that describes an ancient prophet, Alma, teaching about the covenant that initiates witness when entering the waters of baptism. When Latter-day Saints talked about baptism during Joseph Smith’s lifetime, they did not frame their discussion in light of that passage, and the use of Mosiah 18 to understand the baptismal covenant occurred in several stages over decades during the Utah era. This shift is documented and analyzed in the forthcoming history of the Lord’s Supper by Jonathan Stapley, David Grua, and Justin Bray.

They began to increasingly speak of “covenants” in the plural—meaning the promises Church members make to God and each other through Church liturgy. They also created opportunities to renew these covenants. As the Vanguard Pioneer Company wended its way west, Brigham Young became frustrated with the company’s “levity, dancing, checkers, cards, Swearing, &c.” He organized them into rows by priesthood office, and they each in turned manifested with uplifted hands that they would “serve the Lord, humble themselves, repent of their sins, cleave unto the Lord & renew their former Covenants.”<sup>82</sup>

The Vanguard company continued on to the Salt Lake Valley where they immediately set to work plowing, surveying, and making adobes. Two weeks after the first company members arrived, Brigham Young decided to dam up the small creek near camp and rebaptize first the Quorum of the Twelve and then the balance of the company. As Wilford Woodruff wrote, “We consider[e]d this A duty & privilege as we come into a glorious valley to locate & build a temple & build up Zion we felt like renewing our Convenant before the Lord and each other.” They baptized for three days, culminating on Sunday, August 8, 1847. Two hundred and eighty-eight were baptized in total, and Woodruff repeated, “We felt it our privilege to be baptized & to Baptize the Camp of Israel for the remission of our sins & to renew our covenants before the Lord.”<sup>83</sup> From this point into the 1890s, Church policy was that every immigrant who arrived in Utah was to be similarly rebaptized.<sup>84</sup> Some immigrants did question the practice and refused to be rebaptized. In response,

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82. Will Bagley, ed., *The Pioneer Camp of the Saints: The 1846 and 1847 Mormon Trail Journals of Thomas Bullock* (Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark, 1997), 171 (May 29, 1847). See also Camp Assembly Minutes, Platte River, May 29, 1847, digital images of manuscripts, CR 100 318, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, 1839–1877, CHL; Albert P. Rockwood, Journals, 1847–1853, May 29, 1847, digital images of holograph, MS 1449, CHL. This renewal most certainly included the covenantal responsibilities outlined in D&C 136:1–4.

83. Woodruff, *Journals*, 2:237–40 (August 5–8, 1847), brackets in original. See also William Clayton, Diary, August 7, 1847, digital images of holograph, MS 1406, CHL; Ronald O. Barney, ed., *The Mormon Vanguard Brigade of 1847: Norton Jacob’s Record* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005), 238 (August 8, 1847); George A. Smith, Journal and Autobiography, 1845–1847, 1870, p. 252, August 6–8, 1847, digital images of manuscript, MS 30882, CHL.

84. George Reynolds to Arthur Eroppe, March 9, 1888, First Presidency Letterpress Copybook, CR 1 20, CHL. Groups outside of the Great Basin also recommitted themselves through rebaptism during this period. See, for example, Pennsylvania District General Minutes, 1885–1901, vol. 1, 1885–1897, June 12 and 19, 1881, digital images of manuscript, pp. 11–13, LR 17691 11, CHL.

Church leaders like Provo stake president James Snow reminded the Saints that rebaptism was revealed by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo and that those who were not rebaptized “are not consider [*sic*] in full fellowship.”<sup>85</sup> And while rebaptism “for the remission of sins” remained common,<sup>86</sup> the association between rebaptism and the renewal of covenants, what other Christians understood as renewing vows, grew inextricably from this point forward.

As with Brigham Young’s intercession in the Vanguard Company’s camp culture, the earliest and most prominent accounts of rebaptism for the renewal of covenants occurred during periods of revival and reformation. For example, in the summer of 1854, Apostle Erastus Snow traveled from Salt Lake City to St. Louis, where he presided over the Saints and started a newspaper. He found the Saints in many of the local branches to be “in rather a Lukewarm state” and consequently “endeavoured to stir them up” and to “commence a reformation.” As a result of Snow’s labors, he wrote that “nearly all the Saints in this city have renewed their covenants in Baptism and many who have been long on the back ground have come forward with renewed Zeal.”<sup>87</sup> From Church leaders’ perspective, it was not just the far-flung branches of the Church that needed reform, however. The most significant reformation in Church history was centered in Salt Lake City two years later.

The “Mormon Reformation” of 1856 and 1857 was a period of intense introspection and recommitment for the Church.<sup>88</sup> Church leaders withdrew the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper during the winter<sup>89</sup> and drew up a list of questions—a “catechism”—for all members to submit to, with inquiries ranging from personal morality to personal hygiene.

85. Provo Utah Central Stake General Minutes, 1849–1977, vol. 10, 1855–1860, August 12, 1855; September 30, 1855; and December 2, 1855, digital images of manuscript, LR 9629 11, CHL.

86. See, for example, Bagley, *Pioneer Camp of the Saints*, 264 (August 22, 1847); Woodruff, *Journals*, 2:433 (July 10, 1850).

87. Erastus Snow to Brigham Young, September 21, 1854, digital images of manuscript, Brigham Young Office Files, box 42, fd. 14, CHL.

88. Stephen C. Taysom, *Shakers, Mormons, and Religious Worlds: Conflicting Visions, Contested Boundaries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 101–52; Paul H. Peterson, “The Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989): 59–87.

89. Brigham Young to George A. Smith, January 26, 1857; Brigham Young to John Taylor, January 26, 1857; and Brigham Young to Orson Pratt, January 27, 1857; all in Letterbook 3, 1856 August 20–1858 January 6, pp. 332, 342–46, and 326–27, respectively, Brigham Young Office Files.

Even bishops struggled to live up to the standards.<sup>90</sup> Leaders like Jedediah Grant and Brigham Young preached with fervor and sometimes invoked violent imagery to persuade the Saints to reform. The start of the Reformation coincided with the dedication of the stone-lined font near the Endowment House at the beginning of October. The dedicatory prayer included supplications to “feel the power of God and have power to work a great Reformation [*sic*] among this people.” The font was dedicated “to Baptize the Living & the Living for the dead.” At the close of the dedicatory prayer, the First Presidency rebaptized each other and several members of the Quorum of the Twelve.<sup>91</sup> Brigham Young described how, after general conference, which over ten thousand Saints attended, “many are going forward” to the font and “renewing their covenants before the Lord.”<sup>92</sup> The Reformation expanded out from Utah<sup>93</sup> to Idaho,<sup>94</sup> San Bernadino,<sup>95</sup> St. Louis,<sup>96</sup> New York City,<sup>97</sup> Britain,<sup>98</sup> and even South Africa<sup>99</sup> where nearly every practicing Church member was rebaptized for the renewal of his or her covenants.

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90. Presiding Bishopric, Minutes of Bishops' Meetings, 1851–1862, September 30, 1856, digital images of manuscripts, CR 4 2, box 1, fd. 3, CHL.

91. Woodruff, *Journals*, 3:55–57 (October 2, 1856); Brigham Young to Silas Smith, October 4, 1856, Letterbook 3, p. 97.

92. Brigham Young to Thomas S. Smith, October 7, 1856, Letterbook 3, pp. 107–10.

93. The Salt Lake Eighth Ward record is exemplary of a ward preparing for months and then being rebaptized together. Eighth Ward General Minutes, 1856–1976, vol. 5, entries between October 1, 1856, and March 7, 1857, digital images of manuscript, LR 2525 11, CHL.

94. Salmon River Mission Journal, November 6, 9, and 16, 1856.

95. Amasa M. Lyman and Charles C. Rich to Brigham Young, January 7, 1857, Brigham Young Office Files; San Bernardino Branch Journal, 1856 July–1857 December, November 2 and 30 and December 14–20, 1856, digital images of manuscript, LR 1594 22, CHL.

96. Brigham Young to Erastus Snow, October 31, 1856, Letterbook 3, pp. 158–63; Erastus Snow to Brigham Young, April 25, 1857, Brigham Young Office Files. Snow presented the contents of this letter to a special meeting in St. Louis on January 7, 1857, at which meeting a baptismal font was dedicated. Snow was the first to be baptized, after which he baptized those in attendance. Saint Louis Stake Record of Members, 1856–1862, 3, digital images of manuscript, LR 12388 7, CHL. Subsequent pages record the rebaptisms of hundreds of members.

97. John Taylor to Brigham Young, February 24, 1857, Brigham Young Office Files.

98. Brigham Young to Orson Pratt, October 30, 1856, and January 27, 1857, Letterbook 3, pp. 139–48, Brigham Young Office Files; Ezra T. Benson to Brigham Young, March 26, 1857, Brigham Young Office Files; Charles W. Penrose, *Journals*, February 25, 1857, MS 8911, CHL; Griffith Roberts, *Reminiscences and diary*, typescript, 18–19 (March 1857), MS 16760, CHL.

99. South Africa Mission General Minutes, 1853–1951, July 26, 1857, LR 8452 11, CHL.

In this reformation, ward members often prepared for and then participated together in mass baptisms. In American Fork, the ward gathered at the water's edge, and "Prest John Young gave some good instructions on the nature of covenants." Everyone then entered the water and were rebaptized.<sup>100</sup> "Some may think it strange," Provo stake president James Snow confessed to a leadership meeting after the October conference, "that we should be required to renew their Covenants & do their first works over again." Snow then listed ways the Saints had fallen short—from lying and eating too much to speaking against the Lord's anointed and not bathing. "We have the privilege of being thrown into the batch & being ground over before we are baked (i.e) We have the privilege of going into the waters of Baptism & doing our first works over again."<sup>101</sup>

The prayers for these baptisms were, however, not the same as when they were first baptized. During the Reformation, Brigham Young authorized that the baptismal prayer be changed to explicitly indicate the purpose of the ceremony.<sup>102</sup> The revised prayer began, "Having been commissioned by Jesus Christ, I baptise you for the renewal of your covenant and remission of your sins."<sup>103</sup> The use of altered baptismal prayers remained in practice long after the Reformation, and when asked about the propriety of it, Young responded simply that "when an Elder baptizes any one, it is proper for him to say what the object of the baptism is."<sup>104</sup> This was the case for first baptisms as well as rebaptisms,<sup>105</sup> and altered baptismal prayers appear to have been used for the renewal of covenants until the 1890s, as discussed below. Specific prayers for baptism for

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100. American Fork Ward Historical Record, 1851–1883, October 21, 1856, LR 10636 22, CHL.

101. Provo Utah Central Stake General Minutes, 1849–1977, vol. 10, October 16, 1856. Another leader also suggested that Church members, all of whom voted to be rebaptized, wash themselves before being baptized so that they could be rebaptized "with clean hearts as well as Clean bodies." Provo Utah Central Stake General Minutes, 1849–1977, October 12, 1856.

102. German Baptist Brethren in the United States during this time similarly included the purpose of the baptism in the prayer, namely "for the remission of sins." *Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Brethren*, 190.

103. Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:203 (October 12, 1856). See also George Q. Cannon, "Editorial Thoughts: The Armies of the World," *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 7 (April 1, 1892): 217; School of the Prophets Salt Lake City Records, 1872–1874, March 3, 1873, digital images of manuscripts, CR 390 7, CHL.

104. Brigham Young to William Jefferies, January 6, 1870, Brigham Young Office Files. This letter was in response to William Jefferies to Brigham Young, December 30, 1869, Brigham Young Office Files.

105. John Taylor, sermon, October 7, 1864, transcription from George D. Watt's shorthand by LaJean Purcell Carruth, digital images of transcript, CHL.



health endured until Church leaders deprecated the practice in the 1920s. Rebaptism for the remission of sins and the renewal of covenants was a normative practice from the Reformation forward. Individuals, entire wards,<sup>106</sup> newly called local leaders,<sup>107</sup> and far-flung missionaries<sup>108</sup> all sought covenant renewal in the waters of rebaptism. There were, however, two special cases where it was required beyond the newly immigrated: before attending temple ceremonies and before joining a United Order.

### Rebaptism and the Temple

Once the Endowment House font was dedicated, it was used for baptisms for the dead, in which case records were kept. It was also regularly used for rebaptisms, though no records were kept for these baptisms, and some suggested that “a cold running stream” was preferable.<sup>109</sup> Regardless of where the rebaptism was performed, as John Taylor reaffirmed after the death of Brigham Young, “no person will be eligible to receive” any temple ceremonies “except they have been rebaptized.”<sup>110</sup> Before Taylor’s daughter Ida could be sealed in marriage to John M. Whitaker in 1886, they were both baptized by “Brother J. Leatham, who has charge of baptisms at the Tabernacle.” Whitaker remembered that “it was necessary to get rebaptized to prepare” for the temple, ensuring that they were as “pure and clean as possible.”<sup>111</sup> These rebaptisms were to occur

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106. For example, a newly called bishop had his whole ward rebaptized for the renewal of their covenants in 1877 in an effort to unify them. Samaria Ward General Minutes, 1868–1973, November 23 and 27, 1877, LR 7849 11, CHL; George Dunford, *Reminiscences and journal*, 1879–1890, p. 91, MS 1722, CHL. The Gunlock Ward in the St. George Stake formed a Y.M.M.I.A. in 1879 and rebaptized those who joined. Gunlock Ward General Minutes, Book A, pp. 16–19, LR 3512 11, fd. 8, CHL.

107. Beaver Stake General Minutes, July 26, 1877, 1:10–11, LR 596 11, CHL. In the following month nearly every member of the stake was rebaptized. Beaver Stake General Minutes, vol. 1, September 29, 1877; October 27, 1877.

108. Belfast Branch General Minutes, 1868–1960, vol. 3, May 10, 1868, LR 615 11, CHL.

109. School of the Prophets Salt Lake City Records, January 20, 1873.

110. John Taylor to Angus M. Cannon, November 15, 1877, First Presidency Letterpress Copybook. Cannon disseminated this policy in priesthood meeting minutes, November 5, 1881, Salt Lake Stake General Minutes, 1869–1977, vol. 3, LR 604 11, CHL. For an example of rebaptism performed before endowments in the 1850s, see Donald G. Godfrey and Rebecca S. Martineau-McCarty, eds., *An Uncommon Common Pioneer: The Journals of James Henry Martineau, 1828–1918* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 28 (February 5 and 20, 1854); and Woodruff, *Journal*, 4:407–8 (March 17–18, 1856).

111. John M. Whitaker, “Daily Journal of John M. Whitaker,” 3 vols., 1:73, photocopy, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, HBLL. Compare LaJean Purcell’s transcript of Whitaker’s original shorthand diary, September 17, 1886, John Mills Whitaker Papers,

before patrons arrived at the temple, as Joseph F. Smith wrote to one stake president. When people arrived without being rebaptized, the work in the temple was disrupted and delayed as workers were “compelled to rebaptize” candidates on the spot. Rebaptisms, Smith instructed, were to be performed before the issuing of temple recommends.<sup>112</sup> The Saints were rebaptized before being endowed and before being sealed in marriage.

As the pioneer temples were constructed, their fonts were used for first baptisms, baptisms “for the renewal of covenants,” baptisms for health, and baptisms for the dead. While the first year of rebaptisms wasn’t recorded in the St. George Temple, subsequent records for all of the temples are available, and unlike the Endowment House, the temples kept records of living baptisms and rebaptisms. In the first years after opening each temple, people rushed to be rebaptized. And as the reports created by the Logan Temple recorder Samuel Roskelley show, rebaptisms were formally reported as being for the “renewal of covenants.”<sup>113</sup> Because rebaptisms in Salt Lake City generally occurred at the Endowment House or Tabernacle fonts, rebaptisms for the renewal of covenants were uncommon in the Salt Lake Temple. In contrast, rebaptism for the renewal of covenants was common at all the other temples.

### **Rebaptism and the United Order**

In the final years of his life, Brigham Young reintroduced the idea of the communitarian United Order to the Church—his “Order of Enoch.” Young required members to join United Orders, but in practice these organizations were never implemented. Members did create articles of associations for each ward, which included fourteen rules and prohibitions for members to follow spanning behaviors as varied as taking “the name of Deity in vain”; “refraining from adultery, whoredom, and lust”; and returning borrowed items to their proper owners.<sup>114</sup> These rules were similar to the

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1847–1963, MS 2, box 42, fds. 5 and 6, Marriott Library: “Brother James Letham took us in, gave us a separate Room, I took Ezra’s bathing and Ida has her own suit and I was baptized (after a word of prayer) first and then Ida followed and the Lord please see and forgive us our sins”

112. Joseph F. Smith to O. G. Snow, November 18, 1881, Joseph F. Smith Papers, digital images of Letterpress Copybook, MS 1325, CHL. See also Beaver Stake General Minutes, December 2, 1881, LR 596 11, CHL.

113. Samuel Roskelley, Holograph record book, 14, Samuel Roskelley Papers, MS 65, box 1, book 1, Merrill-Cazier Library.

114. “Rules That Should Be Observed by Members of the United Order,” in Articles of Association, M243.1 C561a 1874, CHL.



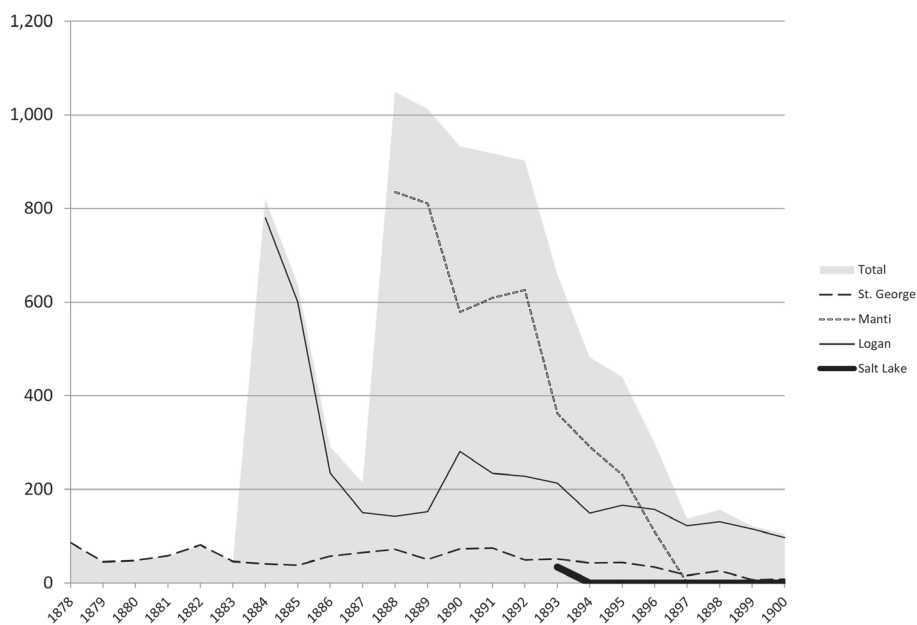


FIGURE 2. Number of baptisms for the renewal of covenants performed in temples by year.

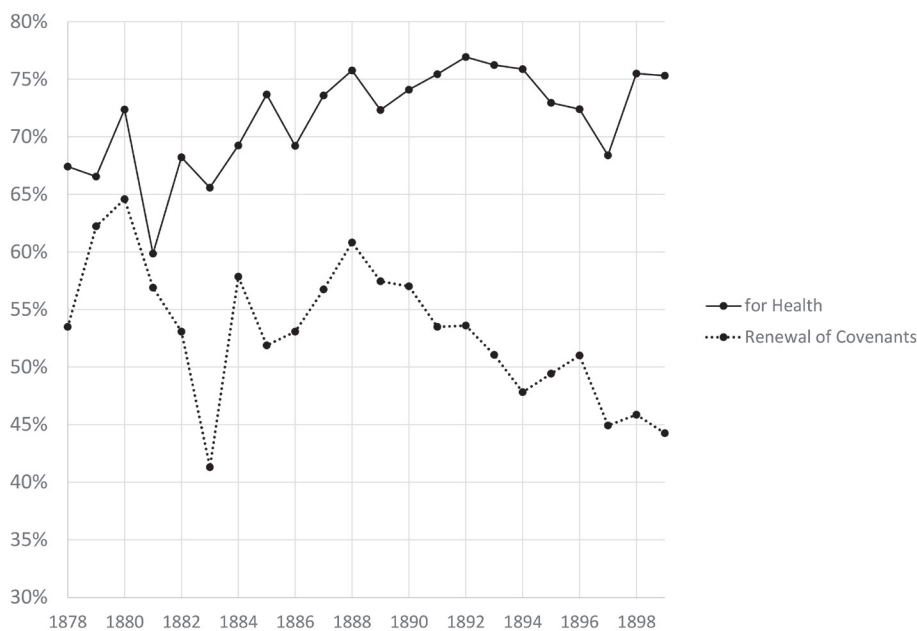


FIGURE 3. Percentage of temple rebaptisms performed for women by year.

items in the catechism used during the Reformation. And like that earlier period of reform, the Saints were to be rebaptized, the prayer being altered for the occasion. Specifically, participants were to make “covenants by Baptism to observe the rules of the United Order.”<sup>115</sup> Various versions of the prayer are documented, all with similar elements. For example, in Toquerville, Utah, one participant recorded it: “Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptized you for the remission of your sins; for the renewal of your covenants with God and your brethren, and for the observance of the rules that have been read in your hearing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; Amen.”<sup>116</sup> In St. George, someone else recorded it: “for the Observance of the Rules of the Holy United Order.”<sup>117</sup> And Apostle Brigham Young Jr. recorded: “and to observe the rules of [the] U[nited]. O[rder].”<sup>118</sup> At least in some cases, the rules were read out loud before the baptisms.<sup>119</sup> These baptisms were a primary emphasis. As one Richfield, Utah, resident wrote of a sacrament meeting in 1875, “members of the church should renew their covenants and be rebaptized was the main Text.”<sup>120</sup> During the same period, the Cedar City, Utah, ward teachers canvassed their districts to gauge the preparedness of ward members to renew their covenants by rebaptism.<sup>121</sup>

As with the consecration efforts of the 1850s, the urban Saints who joined these orders never formally put the principles of the United Order into practice.<sup>122</sup> Nevertheless, most Church members took their introspection seriously and realized spiritual blessings from reform. The women of the Salt Lake Nineteenth Ward held a regular prayer and testimony meeting during this period. People were understandably

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115. Orderville United Order History, 1873–1911, July 11, 1875, p. 53, digital images of manuscript, LR 6543 29, CHL.

116. Levi Mathers Savage, *Journal of Levi Mathers Savage* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Extension Division, 1955), 15.

117. A. Karl Larson and Katherine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 2 vols. (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1980), 1:413–14.

118. Brigham Young Jr., Journal, June 27, 1875, Brigham Young Jr. Journals and Papers, 1862–1902, vol. 16, MS 1236, CHL. This conforms to the version recorded in Logan Temple Letterpress Copybook, CR 308 5, fd. 2, 157, CHL, quoted in Richard E. Bennett, *Temples Rising: A Heritage of Sacrifice* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 200 n. 14.

119. See, for example, Cannon, Journal, August 31, 1875.

120. James M. Peterson, Diary, July 1, 1875, MSS 3870, Special Collections Miscellaneous 2, Digital Collections, HBL.

121. Cedar Ward Aaronic Priesthood Minutes and Records, 1875–1904, Teachers Quorum Minutes, September 5 and 10, 1875, LR 1514 12, item 5, CHL.

122. See Leonard J. Arrington, Feramorz Y. Fox, and Dean L. May, *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 63–78.

concerned that they might not be able to live up to the communitarian commitments. One member heard Brigham Young say that “he was in no hurry for the people to be rebaptised but to think and consider and when we renew our covenants to keep them.” Penelope Goodrich remarked, “I hope I shall be willing to go into the Order when I am called,” saying that she was “willing to go into the waters of baptism and renew my covenants.”<sup>123</sup> Others testified that “we shall have more blessings after being baptized.”<sup>124</sup> The Salt Lake wards gathered at the Endowment House with hundreds being baptized at a time.<sup>125</sup> A few months after the recommitment, one woman declared, “When I came home from being baptized I felt my sins were all forgiven me,” and another said, “Since I was baptized I have felt to rejoice, our afflictions are for our good.”<sup>126</sup> A third described how “I have experienced many blessings since my rebaptism,” and a fourth celebrated how she was able to “draw nearer to God since I was rebaptized.”<sup>127</sup>

### **Reconsideration of Rebaptism**

Bishop Frederick Kesler of the Salt Lake Thirteenth Ward kept a detailed diary, regularly documenting how rebaptism practice featured in the worship patterns of his community. He had lived through Nauvoo and the trek west, and in subsequent decades he rebaptized new immigrants and those preparing to go to the temple. Nearly every Thursday fast meeting, he helped confirm rebaptized Church members. He baptized in City Creek and in the Endowment House font—family members and ward members. Rebaptism was an integral feature of Latter-day Saint life, with adult members often having been baptized at least a half dozen times, if not more (including first baptism, then baptisms at emigration, during the Reformation, before being endowed and sealed, and then at the institution of the 1875 United Order). Kesler was himself rebaptized—the first person to be baptized in the Salt Lake Temple font.<sup>128</sup> In the first three weeks of January 1894, Kesler sent his son Alonzo with the monthly

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123. Nineteenth Ward, Salt Lake Stake, Nineteenth Ward Ladies’ Prayer Meetings Minutes, 1873–1879, August 11, 1875, digital images of manuscript, LR 6092 31, CHL.

124. Nineteenth Ward, November 24, 1875.

125. See, for example, Frederick Kesler, *Diary, 1874–1877*, November 8, 12, 29, and 30 and December 2 and 23, 1875, MS 0049, Pioneer Diaries, Marriott Library.

126. Nineteenth Ward, December 29, 1875.

127. Nineteenth Ward, January 12, 1876.

128. Kesler, *Diary*, May 23, 1893. He was baptized by Nathaniel Jones. Louisa Lula Greene Richards, “Journal Page 1893 May 23,” digital images of holograph, Louisa Lula Greene Richards Collection, 1852–1940, MS 6554, CHL.

company to be rebaptized and saw him ordained an elder by the elders quorum president, endowed in the Salt Lake Temple, and then ordained a seventy and set apart as a missionary.<sup>129</sup> At this same time, Church leaders were reevaluating baptism practice, often in the same temple, in a process that ultimately ended most rebaptisms of Church members.

### *Baptismal Prayers*

The first aspect of rebaptism critically evaluated by Church leaders was the prayer. As shown previously, Brigham Young directed that the baptismal prayer be altered to state the reason for the baptism. After Young passed away, John Taylor first led the Church as the President of the Quorum of the Twelve, and together the Quorum immediately sustained the use of rebaptismal prayers that incorporated “for the remission of your sins, and for the renewal of your covenants.”<sup>130</sup> Nine years later, however, Taylor began to revise his position. In December 1886, now as President of the Church, he responded to a local Church leader in Idaho, explaining that “the ceremony of baptism given in the Doctrine and Covenants can be used in re-baptism as well as in the first baptism.”<sup>131</sup> A month later, he wrote to fellow Apostle John Henry Smith even more explicitly: “The only form of baptism of which we know anything is given by the Lord in the Book of Covenants to his church.” The canonical prayer “should be used,” he added, for all rebaptisms.<sup>132</sup>

Taylor’s instructions were delivered while he was hiding as part of the “Underground”—a fugitive during the antipolygamy “Raid.” As a result, his directives were largely unknown, and there remained a wide diversity in baptismal practice. However, First Presidency member George Q. Cannon remembered the letters John Taylor had written on

129. Kesler, Diary, January 2, 4, 17, and 19, 1894.

130. John Taylor to Moses Thatcher, September 25, 1877, First Presidency Letterpress Copybook. This rebaptismal prayer was, as Taylor wrote, for “persons who have not been cut off the Church or dealt with for their fellowship.”

131. John Taylor to R. L. Bybee, December 1, 1886, First Presidency Letterpress Copybook. Bybee had written to Taylor, asking, “In rebaptisms should the ceremony in the Doctrine and Covenants be used, or the word ‘Rebaptise’ be used instead of ‘Baptise?’” Robert L. Bybee to John Taylor, November 26, 1886, digital images of holograph, First Presidency (John Taylor) Correspondence, CR 1 180, CHL.

132. John Taylor to John Henry Smith, January 3, 1887, First Presidency Letterpress Copybook. Smith had written to Taylor asking about baptismal prayers, noting that people had asked him and that he seemed to remember Brigham Young advocating for use of the prayer in the Doctrine and Covenants. John Henry Smith to John Taylor, December 30, 1886, digital images of holograph, First Presidency (John Taylor) Correspondence.

the topic when they were on the Underground.<sup>133</sup> In April 1891, Cannon responded to questions in the *Juvenile Instructor* about the form of baptism, because “some of the Elders insert in the form ‘for the remission of your sins,’ others ‘for the renewal of your covenants.’” Cannon concluded that “it is always safe, however, for those who officiate in baptisms to confine themselves to the written word.”<sup>134</sup> In September 1891, Cannon responded to similar questions in the *Juvenile Instructor*, again giving the same response.<sup>135</sup>

A few weeks later, the Salt Lake City stake president inquired of the First Presidency about the same topic. They all recognized that multiple prayers were in use and that they “might not be objectionable,” but that any deviation from the canonical prayers was to be at the discretion of the Church President.<sup>136</sup> When a member of the Quorum of the Twelve brought up the topic during a meeting the following November, after “considerable discussion” the conclusion was to use the canonical prayer “except where the president of the Church directs otherwise.”<sup>137</sup> However, the temple had always been a source of normative practice for the Saints, whether for healing or baptism,<sup>138</sup> and on December 3, 1891, the First Presidency decided to write to the temple presidents before a “decisive conclusion” could be made.<sup>139</sup> They wanted to know “the precise form[s]” of baptismal prayer used for all baptisms in the temple, in addition to who authorized them.<sup>140</sup>

The First Presidency learned that the written rebaptismal prayers in use at the temples included the words “for the remission of sins and for the renewal of their covenants.” They also learned that it was Brigham Young who had apparently formalized these prayers for use. President

133. Cannon, Journal, February 11, 1892.

134. “Important Questions and Answers,” *Juvenile Instructor* 26, no. 7 (April 1, 1891), 218, reprinted in “Important Questions and Answers,” *Millennial Star* 53, no. 16 (April 20, 1891), 245.

135. “Editorial Thoughts,” *Juvenile Instructor* 26, no. 17 (September 1, 1891), 535.

136. Cannon, Journal, September 29, 1891.

137. Edward Leo Lyman, ed., *Candid Insights of a Mormon Apostle: The Diaries of Abraham H. Cannon, 1889–1895* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2010), 273 (November 19, 1891). See Cannon, journal, November 19, 1891.

138. Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, “Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 67.

139. Cannon, Journal, December 3, 1891.

140. George Reynolds to Mariner W. Merrill, John D. T. McAllister, and Anthon H. Lund, December 5, 1891, First Presidency Letterpress Copybook. The letter asked for the form of baptizing new Church members, excommunicants, Church members renewing their covenants, and those being baptized for health.

Woodruff advocated for using the canonical prayer, except for baptism for health, but he believed that a final decision should be made when a full Quorum of the Twelve was present.<sup>141</sup> While it appears that a consensus was reached mid-year,<sup>142</sup> the topic arose in several meetings of the First Presidency and Twelve over the subsequent years.<sup>143</sup> A letter changing the prayers used in the temples was not drafted until May 7, 1896.<sup>144</sup> This letter directed the use of the canonical prayers for all rebaptisms except those for health.<sup>145</sup>

### *The Deprecation of Rebaptism*

In the 1890s, as Church leaders interrogated the various prayers used for baptism among the Saints, they also reconsidered the various baptismal practices themselves. At the beginning of 1892, George Q. Cannon responded in the *Juvenile Instructor* to a question about the propriety of rebaptizing someone “guilty of profanity.” In his response, Cannon noted that “there have been many occasions in the Church when the Prophet of God who held the keys has counseled the Saints to renew their covenants by baptism.” However, Cannon also turned to the Doctrine and Covenants, which he suggested taught about proper confessional practice. The observance of confession and reconciliation made it “not necessary for men and women who transgress to always be re-baptized.”<sup>146</sup> Still, Cannon adhered to the standard practices of the Church. A few months after writing this article, several of his children prepared to go

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141. Cannon, Journal, February 11, 1892; Lyman, *Candid Insights of a Mormon Apostle*, 302–3 (February 11, 1892).

142. On October 27, 1892, the president of the Hawaiian Mission instructed the missionaries: “The same prayer should be used in rebaptising as is given for the first baptism. The same rule should also be observed in reconfirmations.” Andrew Jenson, *History of the Hawaiian Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (n.p.: n.p., n.d.), 311.

143. Cannon, Journal, November 29, 1893; James E. Talmage, Private journal, November 29, 1893, MSS 229, Special Collections Miscellaneous 2; Lyman, *Candid Insights of a Mormon Apostle*, 441–42 (November 29, 1893).

144. Minutes of weekly meeting of the First Presidency and Twelve, May 7, 1896, 2–4, in Journal History of the Church, 1830–2008, CR 100 137, CHL; Jean Bickmore Wight, ed., *Church, State, and Politics: The Diaries of John Henry Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 350 (May 8, 1896).

145. Cannon, Journal, May 8, 1896; Journal History of the Church, May 8, 1896; Wilford Woodruff, George Q. Cannon, and Joseph F. Smith to temple presidents, May 20, 1896, First Presidency Circular Letters, CR 1 1, CHL.

146. “Editorial Thoughts,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 1892): 26–27. This reticence toward easy access to rebaptism was anteceded in Scotland as early as 1850. Glasgow Conference General Minutes, 1840–1856, p. 90, March 31, 1850.

to the temple for their marriage sealings, and Cannon rebaptized them himself at the Tabernacle.<sup>147</sup>

In 1891, the First Presidency had asked James E. Talmage—geologist, theologian, and future president of the Deseret University—to deliver a series of “theological lectures” to clarify Church teachings and core beliefs. The lectures were popularly attended and reprinted in the *Juvenile Instructor*. Talmage worked with a committee of Church leaders, including Apostle Abraham H. Cannon, to revise the lectures into a book for publication by the Church. Talmage systematized Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices in important ways, and the product of this labor—*The Articles of Faith*—became an instant classic, widely read to the present. In fall 1893, Talmage brought a number of questions to the First Presidency that the committee was unable to answer. First, he proposed revising Joseph Smith’s Articles of Faith to conform to the then-current understandings of theological terms, a change agreed to by the First Presidency.<sup>148</sup> Next he asked about the baptismal prayers, and he summarized the answer in his journal that “any additions to the revealed form, or any other departure therefrom is unauthorized, and to be deprecated.” Talmage then wrote that he asked about rebaptisms more generally and that “the authorities were unanimous in declaring that rebaptism is not recognized as a regularly constituted principle of the Church; and that the current practice of requiring rebaptism as a prerequisite for admission to the temples, etc. is unauthorized.” Additionally, Talmage noted that “to require baptism of those who come from foreign branches to Zion” was “at variance with the order of true government in the Church.” These were strong policy statements that were reflected in his publication six years later. However, for the time being, things were not as formalized as Talmage indicated. Abraham Cannon’s summary of the meeting noted simply that “it was also decided that frequent baptisms will not be allowed, and that this sacred ordinance is becoming too common.” Moreover, Talmage noted himself that “nothing should be put in the way of anyone renewing his covenants by rebaptism if he feels the necessity of so doing.”<sup>149</sup>

147. Cannon, Journal, April 8, 1892.

148. Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 92–93.

149. Talmage, Personal journal, November 29, 1893. See Lyman, *Candid Insights of a Mormon Apostle*, 441–42 (November 29, 1893). See also Cannon, Journal, November 29, 1893. Talmage had previously documented his own rebaptism upon emigration and his wife, May Talmage’s, baptism for her health in the temple. Talmage, Personal journal, July 12, 1876; and November 3, 1891.



As mentioned above, several months after this meeting, Alonzo Kessler was rebaptized before going to the temple and serving a mission. It appears that it took some time to implement stricter rebaptism rules Churchwide. In a priesthood leaders' meeting of the April 1895 general conference, Joseph F. Smith spoke, and as summarized by an attending stake president, he indicated that some people in the Church wanted to be baptized "for every little thing" and that this was improper. Smith exhorted that people should confess their sins. He also told the Church leaders present that immigrants and people going to the temple for the first time would no longer be rebaptized. Rebaptism was to be reserved for who have "sinned especially."<sup>150</sup> At the same time, George Q. Cannon published an editorial in the *Juvenile Instructor* which suggested that rebaptism be reserved to those who had spent a significant amount of time not practicing their faith and those who had sinned against the brothers and sisters in their ward in disruptive manners. He noted that "it is far better for the Latter-day Saints to live day by day, so as to not be under the necessity of renewing their covenants" by rebaptism. He explained that "if the Church observes the sacrament properly, sins are confessed and forgiveness is obtained before partaking of the bread and the contents of the cup."<sup>151</sup> This placed the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the position of reconciliation between the Saints and God, and between the Saints themselves.

Church practice is difficult to change without a public and concerted effort. In 1897, Apostle Mariner Merrill spoke at the Cache Stake conference about, among other items, rebaptism being too common. He exhorted the Saints who had sinned to "repent and seek forgiveness, and that is all that is necessary."<sup>152</sup> George Q. Cannon made a similar point in the following general conference: "The First Presidency and the Twelve have felt that so much re-baptism ought to be stopped." Church members must, if they commit sin, "repent of the sin, confess it, and make the confession as broad as the knowledge of the sin."<sup>153</sup> By the end of the century, the Church had published James Talmage's *Articles of Faith*, which clearly stated that "there is no ordinance of 're-baptism' in the

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150. Godfrey and Card, *Diaries of Charles Ora Card*, 286 (April 8, 1895).

151. "Concerning Baptism," *Juvenile Instructor* 30, no. 8 (April 15, 1895): 243.

152. J. E. Wilson, Stake Clerk, "Cache Stake Conference," *Deseret Weekly*, July 17, 1897, 148.

153. George Q. Cannon, in *Sixty-Eighth Semi-annual General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1897), 68.



Church,” and that “repeated baptisms of the same person are not sanctioned in the Church.”<sup>154</sup> Nevertheless, the Logan Temple continued to rebaptize for the renewal of covenants for another decade. Church President Lorenzo Snow required rebaptism for the renewal of covenants of those who had participated in the temple liturgy, ceased to participate in the Church, and then returned before they were authorized to wear the temple garment.<sup>155</sup> Church President Joseph F. Smith maintained this practice and also established a policy that those who were guilty of sexual sin but were penitent should not be excommunicated but should be privately rebaptized “for the renewal of covenants,” with no record of the baptism kept.<sup>156</sup> After his administration (1901–1918), rebaptisms appear to have been limited to penitent excommunicants.

Rebaptism’s trajectory of declension mirrors in some ways the decline of baptism for health.<sup>157</sup> Both baptismal practices were rooted in Joseph Smith’s teachings and were a prominent feature of the lived experience of Church members during the nineteenth century. As Church leaders critically evaluated teachings and practices with a focus on rooting them in the canonical texts, both rebaptism and baptism for health became incongruous with the outlook of Church leaders. However, whereas

154. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1899), 145, 147.

155. Journal History of the Church, 675, November 18, 1902.

156. Joseph F. Smith, Special Priesthood Meeting of the General Conference, April 8, 1916, in James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75), 5:12. See also the following letters in the First Presidency Letterpress Copybook: to William A. Hyde, October 26, 1916; to John W. Hart, March 17, 1916; to Stephen L. Chipman, June 11, 1915; to Walter P. Monson, May 17, 1915; to William H. Smart, May 5, 1915; to John L. Herrick, November 28, 1913; to Lewis S. Pond, October 30, 1913; to A. Theodore Johnson, June 20, 1913; to James W. LeSueur, September 27, 1912; to William C. Parkinson, September 10, 1912; to Lucius N. Marsden, February 25, 1912; to Reuben G. Miller, March 12, 1910; to German Ellsworth, August 17, 1908; to Nephi Pratt, April 20, 1907; to Edward J. Wood, October 4, 1905; to Morris Peters, June 22, 1905; and to William A. Hyde, February 12, 1904. See also Joseph F. Smith to George J. Walser, August 17, 1914, Joseph F. Smith Stake Correspondence, CR 1 191, box 9, fd. 42, CHL. During Smith’s administration, in some cases, when ward or branch records had been lost or destroyed and there was insufficient evidence of faithful membership, people were also to be rebaptized. *Annual Instructions to Presidents of Stakes and Counselors, Presidents of Missions, Bishops and Counselors, Stake Mission and Ward Clerks and All Church Authorities* (n.p.: n.p., 1909), 35–36. See also *General Handbook of Instructions*, no. 21 (n.p.: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1976), 63.

157. See Stapley and Wright, “They Shall Be Healed.”

Year	Baptisms			
	1st Bapt	Ren of Conv	Healt	Dead
Total to End of Year 1900	1654	3952	8316	309,985
1901	223	163	347	10,845
1902	243	63	315	9801
1903	286	55	323	17983
1904	304	68	305	12960
1905	294	57	288	16258
1906	292	51	277	16133
1907	319	33	222	16035

FIGURE 4. Baptisms in the Logan Temple, Samuel Roskelley, Holograph record book, book 1, p. 14, Samuel Roskelley Papers, MS 65, box 1, Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

some forms of rebaptism are uncontroversially maintained within the tradition (in the case of former members), baptism for health has not been practiced at all since the Grant administration.

## Conclusion

Patty Sessions, whose journal entry describing her rebaptism in Winter Quarters opened this article, joined the Church in 1834 when traveling missionary Daniel Bean immersed her in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Technically, this was also her first rebaptism, because she had been baptized a Methodist nearly twenty years earlier.<sup>158</sup> In this way, she shares experiences with generations of Latter-day Saint converts to the present. Latter-day Saints are not alone in requiring the rebaptism of converts who have not had what they perceive to be valid baptism. However, Sessions was also a witness to rebaptism practices that are exceptional within the Christian tradition.

According to family tradition, her son-in-law had been excommunicated and rebaptized in Nauvoo.<sup>159</sup> Besides her own rebaptism at Winter Quarters, she noted the rebaptisms of her daughter, granddaughter, and other family members over time.<sup>160</sup> She wrote after being rebaptized again during the Reformation that “I never felt so weel [*sic*] in my life.”<sup>161</sup> These sorts of distinctive Christian rebaptisms were a regular feature of her religious life, just as they were for all Latter-day Saints who lived at the time, regardless of where they lived. And though members of the Church in good standing are no longer rebaptized today, the practice played a central role in the development of the Latter-day Saint covenant theology that animates the contemporary Church.

In the nearly two hundred years since the early Restoration, some Christians have drifted from theological commitments that prohibit rebaptism. Today Christians of every denomination make pilgrimages to Israel and visit the Jordan River. There, many Evangelical Protestants enter the water to be rebaptized.<sup>162</sup> Though Apostle George Smith traveled to Israel in 1873 with several other Church leaders and was

158. Smart, *Mormon Midwife*, 16, 342.

159. Smart, *Mormon Midwife*, 21.

160. Smart, *Mormon Midwife*, 208.

161. Smart, *Mormon Midwife*, 243.

162. Hillary Kaell, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: American Christians and Holy Land Pilgrimage* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 129–30, 168–69.

rebaptized “where it is said John baptized the Savior,” today Latter-day Saints do not join them.<sup>163</sup>

Analyzing the patterns and purposes of rebaptism among Latter-day Saints helps historicize the most prominent beliefs and practices of the Church. Church members strive to follow the “covenant path” and seek to regularly renew their covenants.<sup>164</sup> Rebaptism was the first liturgical method to renew covenants in the Church. This history helps us see that Latter-day Saints largely view covenants in terms of what other Christians see as promises and vows and helps distinguish important theological differences between traditions.

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163. George Albert Smith to John Taylor, April 22, 1873, in “Correspondence,” *Deseret News*, May 28, 1873, 268.

164. For instance, see D. Todd Christofferson, “Why the Covenant Path,” *Liahona* 45, no. 5 (May 2021): 116–19.

# Jesus Makes Everything Better

## A Eulogy for Kate Holbrook

*Sam Brown*

*Kate Holbrook (born January 13, 1972) died on August 20, 2022. She was academic collaborations director at the Church History Department, noted author, and cohost, with her husband, Sam Brown, of the Committed Conversations podcast series (coproduced by BYU Studies and the Church History Library). This is Sam's eulogy delivered at Kate's funeral on August 27, 2022.*

I've been writing this eulogy in my head for some years now. Several times it has seemed clear that Kate would be leaving us soon. But then she has stayed. And now she is gone.

The image I keep returning to in my mind, year after year, is of my wife's funeral as the worst day of my life. I was right. It is the worst day. And, yet, true to form, even this terrible day is made brighter and better by the very fact of Kate. That's the effect she has on the world. That's the meaning of her being. Kate makes everything better.

She does so in the very specific ways she has lived. Characteristically, she asked that our eulogies tell stories of the love of God and the bounties of life in Jesus. So, for these precious moments, I will share stories about Kate and about Jesus. Who also makes everything better.

Jesus started his ministry as a Jewish prophet from Israel's northern wilds. His followers and his enemies disagreed about a lot, but they agreed on one thing. This Messiah from Galilee was anointed to be the new David, the King to unite broken Israel and Judea. He would overthrow the Romans and destroy the puppet regime in Jerusalem. Israel's

centuries of heartbreak would end when he assumed the throne. That's why disciples followed him and enemies wanted him dead. As best as anyone could tell, that was Jesus's life mission until the very end.

And then, suddenly, he was hanging dead from the stiff remnant of a lifeless tree. Those earliest Christians knew what God had in store for them, and the degraded corpse of an executed criminal could not possibly be the Messiah. There would be no liberation, no hope for the future. Their whole world had died with this broken man from Nazareth.

And then, unimaginably, on the first Easter Jesus made everything better. Horrible, yes. Beyond description. And also, gloriously better. This is what Jesus does. This is who Jesus is: a new world, a new story, a new God, new power, new life. Not what we wanted or expected. Not at all. Better than that.

Although I brought to our marriage a secure belief in God, Kate has taught me to believe with my whole heart in the reality of Jesus. Not just as the wilderness prophet or a moral teacher or a great idea, but as the Word of God, the creative force that sustains, enlivens, and gives meaning to the cosmos of otherwise blind atoms and mindless quantum fields. And also as the Jesus who is the embodied, resurrected Savior living out our eternal connection to our heavenly parents.

When the cancer returned, in her liver, four-and-a-half years ago, we realized that there would be unwelcome limits to Kate's lifespan. That was hard going. As we thought about what her early death would mean, she told me that her greatest desire was to help mother the children of our beloved children. And there was one other thing. She'd always had a sense that she had a mission to minister to the women of the Church on a global stage, perhaps even as the churchwide Relief Society president. There was no arrogance in her, no raw ambition. Just love and an inner spiritual calling. She despised the limelight but was willing to bear the heat of those bright lamps if God asked her to. We wondered, among other things, what would happen to those worthy dreams if her cancer had metastasized in her middle forties.

Life did not turn out how we hoped it would. And life has been glorious. This life has been better than it would otherwise have been because of Kate and because of Jesus. Jesus makes everything better. The Atonement so intimately associated with Jesus is a real force of setting right and sitting together in love. Jesus and his Atonement are the deepest form of empathy, an embracing love that transforms both the lover and the beloved. Kate knew that reality and lived it.

Before COVID, we spent a lot of time in what we called “community grandparenting.” Sacrament meeting was like a trip to an old-time county fair, as we collected babies from tired parents and entertained them on our pew. It was a family affair, involving all the Holbrook-Browns fighting playfully for the right to hold the stolen infant of the day. Outside of church, we did free babysitting. We watched our friends and neighbors love their children, and we loved the whole lot of them. We didn’t get to grandparent the way we wanted, but grandparent we did. It has been wonderful.

Shortly after her cancer returned, she was called as Relief Society president for our ward. She served with passion and commitment. I loved to watch her eyes light up as she pondered the next, best thing to do for someone in need. When she developed complications from her cancer treatments, she had to step away from that formal calling. But she had served well. Around the same time, she was asked to be an expert scholar on a global broadcast covering topics in Church history. She became an overnight celebrity in our Latter-day Saint world. People sometimes walked up to us in the Salt Lake City airport to tell her she was famous and *who exactly was she?* or, more pleasantly, to explain how her influence had changed their lives for the better. At a friend’s wedding this year, a thirty-something we sat next to at a dinner table said, “You’re famous for something.” I took great pleasure in introducing myself as Mr. Kate Holbrook for these last few years. She served well, and she served as the person she truly was. A careful and capacious thinker who loved God, loved the Saints, and loved the Church. A daughter of God passionate about the dignity of women and the opportunities for female power to help our community grow in strength and love.

She and I have even had the compromised pleasure of growing old together. It took her therapist making that comment to help us see that fact. But there it was, right in front of us. Her body aged several decades in six months. And I received the sacred opportunity to be of use to her in her advanced age. It was hard and hallowed work that extended to the very last moments of her mortal course. We have grown old together, sad, so sad, and also whole.

Following a contemporary cultural script, sometimes people in recent months have told her how horrifying or terrible her plight was. Their hearts were and are in the right place. They have loved well and bounteously. But Kate couldn’t understand those comments. No life is horrible, no vouching of life a mistake. Life was holy to Kate, and blessed.



Even as her own physical life painfully faded, she was grateful. It was never excruciating. It was hard for a while. And it was glorious too. Jesus makes everything better.

Atonement is a force, made real in the person of Jesus, that brings together incomparable realities. Earth and heaven, human and divine, terrible sadness and overwhelming joy. Atonement says and makes real the fact that life is not *merely* anything. Life is not simple or straightforward. It is better than that, holier than that. More than that.

Kate's last book, which will be published after her body is buried in earth, hinges on her awareness that, often, "both things are true." That is Kate's sacred vision of Atonement. And this is where we now stand, in the encompassing shadow of Christ. With our right hand, we shelter the truth that death is not the end, while our left hand encloses the reality that death is a terrifying tragedy. With our right hand, we hold the fact that we must live in community or die. In our left, the reality that we must bring into that community the person that we really are and the person we truly may become. In our right hand, today is the worst day of our lives. In our left hand, it is a day of sublime joy and ardent celebration. Maybe that's what we mean when we bring our two hands together in one traditional sign of prayer. We can hold the world's contraries in our hands and in our hearts. Because they are true and because they are ours.

Kate had me see a therapist when her cancer recurred. I was struggling terribly with my vision of what life would be like without her. He told me I should be resilient and wrote the name of an academic book on the topic on a sticky note. I never saw him a second time. But I did read the book. It was a circular argument about how you can handle stress better if you're already psychologically healthy. That didn't help me much, as I felt like I was already broken by the anticipatory grief. "To get well you have to be well" sounded like the dumbest thing I'd heard in decades.

As I've lived with this question and as I've grown into the yoke of the cancer husband, though, I've come to see this psychological fascination with resilience in a new light, the light of Christ. What people call resilience was for Kate a story about living in atoning relation with Jesus. We do not need to be well to get well. Not at all. We need Christ. We need to trust that, together, we are adequate to whatever may come.

Jesus used an old Jewish aphorism in his Sermon on the Mount to make this crucial point. "Don't fret about tomorrow," he said. "Every day has enough troubles of its own" (see Matt. 6:34). This isn't Buddhism, as much as I respect Buddhism. Nor is it Stoic indifference, what the



ancient Greeks called *ataraxia*. This is pure Jesus—in Christ we can hope for and yearn for and love what comes to us, *and* we can work hand in hand with each other to make what does happen better than it would otherwise have been. We will seek, and we will adapt. Life will not go how we want it, even if sometimes our hopes will in fact align with the divine order. But life in Christ is the possibility of all things made better than they would otherwise be.

Through community grandparenting, Kate honored her sacred and righteous desire to co-parent our children's children. Through her scholarship and public ministry, she was able to serve the great and mighty union of the global Relief Society. As she faded from life, we grew old together.

That, I believe, is the story that needs to be told: Our lives are enriched beyond any imagining by the yoke that binds us, heavily, to Christ and to each other. Life will not have the contour we have chosen for it. But our lives will have a glorious shape, made better by our straining forward. Sometimes we will walk, sometimes run, sometimes stumble. And all things will be better in Christ. I pray that we may live and, when our time comes, die in that glory. That prayerful beating of my soul's heart is inspired by sweet and wise Kate Holbrook and offered, to you and to her, in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## From Cotton McGintey's Rain Sermon to Boy Scout Troop 167 at Agassiz Meadows, High Uintas

Remember how rain drummed your tent  
last night? And when you were outdoors,  
how it wrapped you up? Brightened  
every sniff of spruce and lightning-  
sparked ozone. When we were boys  
once, Merl and I were scrambling  
along the north face of Bald Mountain  
in those clouds clinging to rock.  
Tingly-feeling, watched-over-like.  
We got between two plains of clouds.  
Then the lower cloud plain parted—  
Willowcreek at our feet a mile below.  
We dropped on down into those meadows  
where avalanche rollouts had twisted  
quaking aspens like pretzels, like Dr. Seuss  
playing, tendrils of cloud curling over  
and around us, wind spreading through meadow,  
I thought, This breeze across the back of my neck—  
the breath of God, Merl thinking the same.  
Which we didn't tell each other for years.  
Well, just look at you boys, how you watch  
meadow grass and overhanging spruce  
for wind sign. Whatever we touched  
that daysoaked us forever.

—Warren Hatch

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This poem was a finalist in the 2022 Clinton F. Larson Poetry  
Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.

# How the Book of Mormon Reads Ancient Religious Texts

*Kristian S. Heal and Zach Stevenson*

The Book of Mormon turned the Latter-day Saints purposefully toward ancient religious texts. Early converts connected the Book of Mormon with lost texts recorded in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The space left by these lost books could be filled by the Book of Mormon. But not by the Book of Mormon alone. There was room to spare, and with it, a growing desire not only to find lost scriptures that were known but also to restore lost scriptures that were until then unknown (see D&C 9:2). This fervor was centrifugal, compelling Joseph Smith and others to seek out and reveal ancient texts at every opportunity, exemplified by the purchase of expensive Egyptian artifacts at a time of great financial difficulty.<sup>2</sup> The coming forth of the Book of Mormon seemed to mark the commencement of a great age of discovery and gathering of ancient texts intimately connected to the Restoration project. Some texts were accepted as scripture; others, like the Apocrypha, contained valuable insights that could be obtained with the aid of the Spirit (see D&C 91).

The discovery has continued unabated. We live in a world awash with ancient religious texts. Among the most famous discoveries made since the publication of the Book of Mormon are (in order of discovery) the Royal Library of Ashurbanipal, the Cairo Genizah, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, the Ras Shamra tablets, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Nag Hammadi library. What is our responsibility as Latter-day Saints

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1. See, for example, John Corrill's statement in the prologue below.

2. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 286.

toward these other texts? How are we to read them? To answer these questions, we go back to the beginning, to the first and grandest ancient text of the Restoration, to the Book of Mormon. We look to the Book of Mormon to help determine four fundamental strategies that can guide our future engagement with ancient texts as a community of Saints. The Book of Mormon explains and enacts an ethic of reading that promises not only to enlighten but to redeem us from a misguided sense of sufficiency and to direct us to attend to the outpouring of light that followed in its wake. As we recognize this prompting, we begin to understand that God has spoken, does speak, and will continue to speak to his children through ancient religious texts.

## Prologue

When John Corrill (1794–1842) first encountered the Book of Mormon, he “searched the Scriptures again to see if God had ever concealed or hid up his word, or commanded his servants to do so for a wise purpose.” His 1839 *Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* recounts this investigation and its results:

I always thought before, that we had all the Scripture that we ever should have, and that the Bible was complete; but on searching the Scriptures, I found to my surprise, that they, in many instances, refer to books for information that they do not contain; nor are they any where to be found,—such as the Book of Jasher, of the wars of the Lord—of Nathan the Prophet—of Shemaiah the Prophet, of Goed [Gad] the Seer, and of Iddo the Seer, &c.—(1 Chron. xxix. 29; 2 Chron. ix. 29, and xii. 15,) and many others which I need not mention at this time. This satisfied me at once, that there was much of the word of God that we had not got, and still are referred to it for further information: therefore, the Scriptures are not complete without it.<sup>3</sup>

For Corrill, then, the narrative of biblical sufficiency was disrupted by the Bible’s own account. The canon had once been bigger, so why not again? The Book of Mormon prompted a discovery that is in fact enacted by the Book of Mormon: it is the recovery of the Bible in the book’s opening chapters (1 Ne. 3–5), a Bible that included lost scripture (1 Ne. 13:23), that laid the foundation for the writing of an entirely new volume of scripture. Corrill’s is one of many examples of how, as Janiece Johnson has observed,

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3. Karen L. Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David A. Whittaker, eds., *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 139.

“the Bible played an essential role in leading [people] to accept the Book of Mormon as scripture.”<sup>4</sup> However, in this case, it was the Bible’s witness to lost scripture that provided for the possibility of the Book of Mormon to a potential convert.

Corrill was not alone in making the connection between the Bible’s lost books and the Book of Mormon. Fredrick G. Williams (1787–1842) ends his handwritten index to his first edition of the Book of Mormon with a list of twenty books not mentioned in the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Such handwritten notes became published study aids when, in 1842, Benjamin Winchester included a list of “books mentioned in the Bible that are not to be found among the sacred writings” in his *Synopsis of the Holy Scriptures*.<sup>6</sup> Lost scripture was not, however, simply a compelling idea or a useful rhetorical strategy for introducing the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon presaged a new age of discovery and a vigorous interest among the Saints in ancient texts and the restoration of lost scripture. As Joseph’s history of the Church for 1830 puts it, “Much conjecture and conversation frequently occurred among the saints, concerning the

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4. Janiece Johnson, “Becoming a People of the Books: Toward an Understanding of Early Mormon Converts and the New Word of the Lord,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 42.

5. As an extension of this interest, William E. McLellin (1806–1883) has an extensive hand-produced index in the back of his first edition that includes a category, “Books or Records,” mentioned in the Book of Mormon. On McLellin and Bible paratexts and tools, see Seth Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 54. We are grateful to Janiece Johnson for sharing these two notes from her important research on early readers of the Book of Mormon. The details of these annotated copies of the Book of Mormon will be included in Dr. Johnson’s future publications.

6. Benjamin Winchester, *Synopsis of the Holy Scriptures and Concordance, in which the Synonymous Passages are Arranged Together.—Chiefly Designed to Illustrate the Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Philadelphia: United States Book and Job Printing Office, 1842), 23. The list includes the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num. 21:14); the Book of Jasher (Josh. 10:13, 2 Sam. 1:18); the Book of the Statutes of the Kingdom of Israel (1 Sam. 10:25); the Book of the Acts of Solomon (1 Kgs. 11:41); the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kgs. 14:19); the Book of Nathan the Prophet (1 Chr. 29:29); the Book of Gad the Seer (1 Chr. 29:29); the Book of Ahijah the Prophet (2 Chr. 9:29); the Book of the Visions of Iddo the Seer (2 Chr. 9:29); the Book of Shemaiah the Prophet (2 Chr. 12:15); the Book of the Story of the Prophet Iddo (2 Chr. 13:22); the Book of Jehu (2 Chr. 20:34); the Book of the Sayings of the Seers (2 Chr. 33:19); the Book of the Story of the Kings (2 Chr. 24:27); Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians, which is not in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5:9); Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians written from Laodicea (Col. 4:16); Jude’s Epistle on the Gospel or Common Salvation (Jude 1:3); the Prophecy of Enoch (Jude 1:14); and the many different authors upon the biography of Christ, written before the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 1:1).

books mentioned and referred to, in various <places> in the old and new testaments, which were now no where to be found.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Joseph Smith’s 1833 statement that “we have not found the book of Jasher nor any of the othe[r] lost books mentioned in the bible *as yet* nor wille we obtain them at present” suggests a culture of inquiry into these lost records and an expectation that more records would emerge.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the recovery of lost scripture was fully absorbed into the Restoration project, and it soon became a source of encouragement and strength to “the faith of his little flock” that the Lord would “giv[e] some more extended information upon the Scriptures; a tran[s]lation of which had already commenced.”<sup>9</sup> As Robin Jensen and Brian Hauglid put it, “Joseph Smith looked to ancient cultures in search not only of the language of the divine but also of promised records.”<sup>10</sup>

For some scholars, these same references to lost scripture provide a compelling context for the acquisition of the Egyptian mummies and papyri and the production of the Book of Abraham.<sup>11</sup> This seems an entirely reasonable conclusion. However, another response to this culture of interest in ancient texts is to trace it back to the Book of Mormon text itself. The Book of Mormon seems aware that ancient texts would create space for it and that they would follow in its wake (see 1 Ne. 13:39). It therefore seems reasonable to ask about ancient texts within the Book of Mormon. How does the Book of Mormon read ancient religious texts?

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7. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 80, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/86>.

8. “Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 25 June 1833,” in *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, ed. Gerritt J. Dirkmaat and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2014), 149, emphasis added.

9. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 80.

10. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), xxii. The continued eagerness to acquire additional records is evident in a passage from an 1840 letter sent by Brigham Young and Willard Richards to the First Presidency: “We have lately visited a museum, where we saw an E[gyptian] Mummy, on the head stone &c are many ancient &c curious characters, & we asked the privilege of copyi[n]g them for translation but have not receivd an answer, yet, Shall we copy them & send them to you for translation?” “Letter from Brigham Young and Willard Richards, 5 Sept. 1840,” 11, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-brigham-young-and-willard-richards-5-september-1840/11>. We are grateful to Christopher Blythe for this reference.

11. Jensen and Hauglid, *Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, xxii.

How does it teach us to engage with them? Can we find in the Book of Mormon a theological ethic of reading ancient religious texts?

What we find when we carefully consider the Book of Mormon's engagement with and self-conscious inclusion of ancient texts is not just a key to understanding the Book of Mormon's composition history but also the presentation of a model for reading ancient texts. To put this another way, we believe the Book of Mormon is interested in enacting and instructing its readers on how to read ancient religious texts ethically, productively, and constructively. We want to suggest that ancient texts also provide a different vantage point for reading the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon stumbles upon ancient texts, describes their translation, sees their transmission into the future, and turns them into scripture. It also anticipates its own coming forth amid a proliferation of ancient texts and seems to offer itself as a hermeneutical key to reading them. We propose to examine the Book of Mormon's statements, actions, and enactments in order to expose an ethic of reading ancient texts. This paper will consider the ethic of reading under four headings.

## 1. Production, Preservation, and Transmission

Through both description and enactment, the Book of Mormon teaches us to recognize and honor the production history of ancient texts.<sup>12</sup> The Book of Mormon demands that we read the Bible this way. Toward the end of 2 Nephi, we are given a multichapter prophecy of the cultural environment within which the Book of Mormon would come forth. Famously, this passage includes the prediction that Gentiles would reject the book because they already have a text that satisfies all of their scriptural needs: "A Bible, a Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible." Usually, this response is labeled as problematic because it presumes to limit God's ability to speak to his children. However, the verses that follow this imagined response go further and question the Gentiles' right to claim ownership of the Bible without acknowledging those who produced it: "Yea, what do the Gentiles mean? Do they remember the travails,

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12. By enact, we mean the process of acting out or demonstrating something. This is what we normally think of as teaching by example. Citing its inclusion of the Lehite, Mulekite, and Jaredite civilizations, Terryl Givens argues that the Book of Mormon describes and enacts the "doubling and redoubling of providential history." Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50. Drawing on similar scriptural references, we argue that the Book of Mormon also prescribes and enacts careful attention to a text's production history.

and the labors, and the pains of the Jews, and their diligence unto me, in bringing forth salvation unto the Gentiles?” (2 Ne. 29:3–4). The message is clear: the Gentiles cannot claim to own the Bible, let alone claim to read it correctly, without recognizing and reverencing the work of the Jews who created it.<sup>13</sup>

This message resonates with John Witherspoon’s essay “To the Reader,” which was first printed in the 1791 edition of the King James Bible prepared by Isaac Collins and republished in two bibles known to have been in Joseph Smith’s possession. Witherspoon notes:

To the Jews were first committed the care of the sacred Writings, and for many ages they were in a manner confined to that chosen people. There was then no need of translations into other languages; yet was the providence of God particularly manifest in their preservation and purity. The Jews were so faithful to their important trust, that, when copies of the law or the prophets were transcribed, they observed the most scrupulous exactness: they not only diligently compared the one with the other, but even counted the number of letters in each book, and compared and recorded the numbers.<sup>14</sup>

What is a mere historical observation about the role of the Jews in the transmission of the Bible in Witherspoon becomes a God-spoken rebuke and an admonition in the Book of Mormon: “O fools, they shall have a Bible; and it shall proceed forth from the Jews, mine ancient covenant people. And what thank they the Jews for the Bible which they receive from them” (2 Ne. 29:4).<sup>15</sup> The implication is that one natural result of reading an ancient text with gratitude is an increased desire to understand the otherwise-hidden history of the text’s production and transmission.

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13. This emphasis on the Jewishness of the Bible would seem to confirm Joseph Spencer’s contention that in his apocalyptic vision, Nephi is taught to understand the Bible as “a Jewish book aimed at clarifying for non-Jews the heart of Judaism’s historical encounter with God.” Joseph Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 5.

14. John Witherspoon, “To the Reader.” On Witherspoon’s introduction, see Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority*, 18 and 121, where Perry notes, “Two bibles which Smith is known for certain to have personally owned feature John Witherspoon’s ‘To the Reader’ essay.” On Isaac Collins and the publication of this American edition of the King James version, see Richard F. Hixson, *Isaac Collins: A Quaker Printer in 18th Century America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968), esp. 137–57.

15. A recent treatment of the important themes found in this chapter is found in Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement? Outlining a Possible Apostasy Narrative,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2021): 105–27.



Drawing on the religious criticism of Harold Bloom, Richard L. Bushman has used this same scripture to argue that the Book of Mormon offers a “strong reading” of the Bible, or a reading that rests on the understanding of scripture “as the product of a people whose labors and pains must be acknowledged along with their records.”<sup>16</sup> Such a view demands that we historicize and humanize the scripture-making process. This requirement extends to all phases of the process, and not just to the site of initial production. Readers are explicitly asked to honor the work the Jews did in creating the Bible, but the implication of the phrase “bring forth salvation,” is that the work is incomplete until a long series of events brings the Bible to the Gentiles. In other words, the Bible’s transmission history must be recognized and appreciated. But this principle can be elaborated even further if we read 2 Nephi 29:4 as not just diagnosing a myopic reading of the Bible but also condemning a problematic relationship with the world in general. Fundamentally, this verse is about the folly of claiming ownership of something without bothering to find out what that “something” is. At the same time, however, it suggests that the project of uncovering an object’s hidden multitudes will not result in more credible claims to ownership. Instead, a book that you regarded as Christian will be recognized as Jewish, and the object that you thought was unambiguously your own will become a gift from others.<sup>17</sup>

The Book of Mormon is quite straightforward with its readers about their obligation to read the Bible with an eye to its production history. The long history of labor and care seen in the Bible’s composition and

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16. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 100. Bushman reads this verse as establishing a person’s obligation to the people who produced their scripture. While we agree with this reading, we argue that the definition of production ought to be extended beyond the initial act of transcribing God’s word to also include the processes of preservation, translation, and transmission. For example, if we were to apply this ethic to the small plates of Nephi, we would express gratitude for the succession of prophets (Nephi, Jacob, Enos, and others) who created that scripture as well as for Mormon, who “searched among the records,” discovered the small plates of Nephi, and appended them to his record (W of M 1:3).

17. Interestingly, this complication of the idea of ownership intersects with Joseph Spencer’s theorizing on the principle of consecration in his book *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope*. Spencer argues that central to the idea of stewardship is a distinction between “use” and “ownership.” To be a steward is to “disentangle use from ownership, and specifically by owning *as though not* owning what she owns.” By encouraging its readers to realize that what they claim to own is not actually their own, the Book of Mormon prescribes just this sort of “owning as though not owning” orientation toward the Bible and other ancient texts. See *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 150–51.

recomposition and in the painstaking transmission of the text from one generation to another—all of this work that went into producing the Bible that we read today—really matters. A close reading indicates that the Book of Mormon wants itself to be read the same way. Multiple scholars have noted that the Book of Mormon tracks the arc of its own creation with great care—as Bushman observes, “Throughout the Book of Mormon, there is a recurrent clanking of plates as they pass from one record-keeper to another.”<sup>18</sup> Terryl L. Givens argues that a “preoccupation . . . with authenticating the record’s provenance” is one of the central concerns of the book.<sup>19</sup> Seth Perry makes a similar observation about the “exhaustively documented trail of authorship” in the Book of Mormon.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Givens and Perry begin with the same incisive observation but come to radically different conclusions. For Givens, the Book of Mormon’s obsession with its provenance runs counter to the early nineteenth-century assumption that scripture was something entirely divine that remained above and beyond human voices and human hands. For Perry, the Book of Mormon’s concern with its “material reliability” places it squarely within a culture concerned with the impact of translation and transmission processes on the credibility of scripture.<sup>21</sup>

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18. Richard Bushman, “The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” in *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 69.

19. Terryl Givens, “Joseph Smith’s American Bible: Radicalizing the Familiar,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18, no. 2 (2009): 7.

20. Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority*, 119. Interestingly, while Perry thinks that this “exhaustively documented trail of authorship” is intended to buttress the reliability of the Book of Mormon, Jared Hickman sees it as having the opposite effect. Hickman argues that by consistently linking itself to its human narrators, the Book of Mormon actually undermines its own authority: “A certain friction is generated by the narrative’s frank embeddedness in particular viewpoints and memory practices. Any theological authority accorded to the content is intimately bound up with the identity of the author-narrator.” Jared Hickman, “*The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse*,” *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 447. The idea of the Book of Mormon’s moving through space and time is addressed in Jared Hickman, “‘Bringing Forth’ the Book of Mormon: Translation as the Reconfiguration of Bodies in Space-Time,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 54–80.

21. Givens and Perry also disagree on the audacity of Joseph Smith’s claim to have recovered and translated new scripture. Givens argues that the “Christian audience of Joseph’s day would have considered scriptural history to move inevitably toward completion and closure.” Givens, “Joseph Smith’s American Bible,” 15. Thus, the Book of Mormon would have been deemed blasphemous. Citing the rise of specified Bibles—a “family”

Whatever the explanation for the Book of Mormon's preoccupation with its own creation—that is, whether one sees this as counterdiscursive and thus confirmatory of the text's status as an ancient relic, or instead of evidence of its indebtedness to early nineteenth-century discourse—that preoccupation is undeniably a persistent and significant feature of the book.

One telling enactment of the theme of scriptural production occurs in the story of the twenty-four gold plates of Ether. Limhi's explorers bring them back as evidence of the ruins they had found while looking for Zarahemla (Mosiah 8:9), Mosiah translates at least a portion of these plates (Mosiah 28:17), Mormon promises to include an account taken from the plates (Mosiah 28:19), and Moroni finally provides that account (Ether 1:1). By describing the transition of these plates from material evidence to exciting oddity, to valuable history, and finally to a text with spiritual relevance, the Book of Mormon traces the process whereby an ancient record becomes scripture. Like the stones shaped by the brother of Jared, the raw materials of scripture are destroyed in transformation and are touched by the hand of God to become scripture. The result is revelatory rather than reality. The intent is not history, but scripture—light-filled and light-giving scripture.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. From Records to Scripture

Before a text can become scripture, it must first be read. Ancient texts that cannot be read, like the twenty-four plates, need to be translated. When linguistic ability is lacking, God provides for texts to be translated by the gift and power of God, even if the text is not scripture. King Mosiah had “wherewith that he can look, and translate *all* records that are of an ancient date; and it is a gift from God” (Mosiah 8:13, emphasis added). The verbs used here and in verse 6 are “translate” and “interpret” (nominalized as “interpreter”). The purpose of translation, as given later in the chapter, is to “know of things which are past” and to make known “things which are not known” and things “which otherwise could not be known” (Mosiah 8:17). The Book of Mormon articulates this yearning for unknown and hidden things, or the “myster[ies] contained with

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bible, a “pulpit” bible, a “Baptist” bible—Perry argues that the Book of Mormon came forth in a culture comfortable with, or at least grudgingly permissive of, an abundance of variations on the Bible. Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority*, 118.

22. This argument is also made in Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2021), 54–69.

these” ancient texts, and “rejoice[s] exceedingly” in the gift of translation, and in those able to translate ancient texts because “doubtless [they are] prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men” (Mosiah 8:19). This valorizing of translation seems to have been deeply influential in Joseph Smith’s own vision of the Restoration.<sup>23</sup>

When King Limhi asks Ammon if he knows of someone who can translate the twenty-four plates that Limhi’s explorers found, the reasons Limhi offers for the plates’ value are historical (Mosiah 8:12). Limhi hopes that the plates will provide information about a civilization that no longer exists. He is particularly concerned with the cause of this civilization’s collapse. Limhi’s interests in the plates are shared by the people of King Mosiah. They too are “desirous beyond measure to know concerning those people who had been destroyed” (Mosiah 28:12). Importantly, neither Limhi nor the people of Mosiah say anything about the spiritual message of the twenty-four plates. And it would be surprising if they did, considering that the plates were retrieved for the purpose of substantiating the tales Limhi’s forty-three explorers told of a land covered by “bones of men, and of beasts, and . . . ruins of buildings of every kind, . . . a land which had been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel” (Mosiah 8:8). Initially, then, the twenty-four plates performed the same function as the golden plates: provide a witness to a previously unknown chapter of ancient history.<sup>24</sup> The Book of Mormon is here enacting the work of translating an ancient text purely to better understand an ancient people and signaling the importance of this act by placing a prophet and the spiritual gift of translation at the center of the story.

Though the earliest readers of the twenty-four plates were primarily attuned to the plates’ historical importance, Mormon and his son Moroni were concerned with detecting the plates’ spiritual pulse. In the

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23. See Bushman, *Believing History*, 240 for a discussion of how the story of King Mosiah translating the twenty-four Jaredite Plates influenced Joseph’s conception of what it meant to be a translator. Bushman further refers to the fact that Joseph Knight’s account includes neighborhood money diggers and the judgment that Joseph Smith cared more about the translators than the golden plates. David F. Holland uses this detail (that the translators interested Joseph more than the golden plates) to further his argument that Joseph Smith “felt that the discovery of the Book of Mormon represented the beginning of inquiry rather than the end.” David F. Holland, “American Visionaries and Their Approaches to the Past,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 52.

24. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 90–91.

process of abridging the record for inclusion in the Book of Mormon, it became a text that resonates with the purpose of the Book of Mormon—that is, a text aligned with the two themes established on the title page: God’s covenant with Israel (“that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever”) and Jesus as the eternal and universal Christ. Grant Hardy argues that Moroni accomplishes this correlation project by using direct comparison, geographic references, parallel narrative elements, and shared phrases to “deliberately highlight [Jaredite] connections with the Nephites and Lamanites and minimize differences.” According to Hardy, however, the most significant thing that Moroni does is structure his abridgment to make it seem that the Jaredites were Christian.<sup>25</sup>

Moroni’s reworking of the Jaredite record raises valuable questions about how we read and receive ancient texts. More to the point, how can we reconcile Moroni’s manipulation of the Jaredite record with an ethic for the reception of ancient texts that is predicated on the principle of charity, meaning a desire to see and understand a text in its own terms first? After all, Moroni’s Christianization of the Jaredite record finds a problematic analog in historical Christianity’s orientation toward the Old Testament, which Marilynne Robinson characterizes as the idea that the Old Testament is “a tribal epic which includes the compendium of strange laws and fierce prohibitions Jesus of Nazareth put aside when he established the dominion of grace.”<sup>26</sup>

The easiest explanation for Moroni’s heavy-handed treatment of the twenty-four plates is that Jesus himself directed this treatment. As Grant Hardy notes, “Through overt, interruptive comments, [Moroni] is able to transform [the Jaredite record] into something different from what it seems to have been originally. He reportedly does so with the express permission and guidance of Jesus himself.”<sup>27</sup> Hardy doesn’t cite a specific verse to back up his claim about Moroni’s project being condoned by Jesus, though he seems to be suggesting that Jesus’s involvement in the

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25. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 235. Hardy argues that Moroni accomplishes this primarily by invoking Jesus in his frequent editorial comments: “with a single exception, specific references to Jesus Christ appear only in Moroni’s editorial remarks” (235). Further valuable work on Moroni’s editorial process is found in Frederick W. Axelgard, “More Than Meets the Eye: How Nephite Prophets Managed the Jaredite Legacy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 135–64.

26. Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2012), 96.

27. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 240.

project (see, for example, Ether 13:13) implies his approval. This response, however, avoids the question rather than answering it. We contend that Christ was unconcerned about this treatment of the twenty-four plates because earlier readers (really, listeners) had already approached the plates on their own terms by reading them as a historical record. In effect, Moroni's purposeful misinterpretation, an act that might productively be thought of as interpretative violence, was obviated by earlier readings. There is, then, a contrast between the work of a scholar who wants to historicize and analyze a text and the work of someone speaking scripture. "The scholar must not handle ancient texts violently," warns Anthony Grafton, "tearing them into their tiny original shreds, but gently, trying to release their original flavor and texture."<sup>28</sup> This is the scholar's craft, but as we have seen, it is not necessarily the way of the maker of scripture. There seems to be, rather, a violent handling of texts inherent in making and remaking scripture. Violence, that is, from a modern academic perspective.

However, as Grant Hardy has already suggested with the editorial work of Moroni in making the book of Ether, the sensibilities of the scholars and the practices of the prophets are sometimes quite different. A scholar trained in the historical-critical method of reading scripture might be surprised, for example, by this anecdote by Elder David A. Bednar: "Now, here comes the part that may make you laugh. I next used my scissors to cut out the scriptures I had copied and sorted them into piles by color. The process produced a large pile of scriptures marked with red, a large pile of scriptures marked with green, and so forth. I then sorted the scriptures within each large pile into smaller piles. As a first grader I must have really liked cutting with scissors and putting things into piles!"<sup>29</sup> However, it is the recreative violence of Elder Bednar cutting and pasting scriptural passages that makes new scripture—a process that ignores context, variation in authorial intention, hermeneutical consistency, and so on, in the service of recreating scripture anew. It is the violence of creation and recreation, birth and rebirth, the process whereby a record becomes scripture by passing through the stage of the historical record.

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28. Anthony Grafton, "A Passion for the Past," *New York Review of Books*, March 8, 2001, 52, referring to Burckhardt's use of sources in contrast to the source critics.

29. David A. Bednar, "A Reservoir of Living Water," Brigham Young University devotional, February 4, 2007, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/david-a-bednar/reservoir-living-water/>.

Moreover, the Book of Mormon teaches the making and remaking of scripture as a fundamental act of religious devotion with Christ at the center. “And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Ne. 25:26). Each life, each family, each generation must have its own conversation, its own sorrow and rejoicing, its own prophecies, and write and rewrite its own scripture. Scripture’s power is not in its creation, but in its invitation to be recreated, to be ingested, remembered, and renewed, to bring life.

### 3. A Fractured and Scattered Reality

The third requirement for reading ancient texts offered by the Book of Mormon is, ironically, an acknowledgment of a given text’s inherent *limitedness*. Any ancient text, even ancient scripture, is only one record in a “river of bibles cascading down through time from the diverse peoples of the earth.”<sup>30</sup> The concept of a “river of bibles” is described quite clearly in 2 Nephi 29:12, where we are told that Jews, Nephites, the lost tribes, and “all nations of the earth” will have their own scriptural canon. Thus, no single scripture can claim to be comprehensive, or, indeed, sufficient. As Elizabeth Fenton has noted, “The Book of Mormon complicates the very notion of an ur-text and offers a model of sacred history that depends upon iteration and proliferation.”<sup>31</sup> Relatedly, David Holland has argued that this unique paradigm of sacred history, a series of prophetic voices bounded by time and space, ran counter to the tendencies of Joseph Smith’s religion-making contemporaries Mary Baker Eddy and Ellen White, as well as Smith’s own instincts. All three exhibited an affinity for universality and wholeness, yet Smith’s desire to “mend a fractured reality,” to borrow from Philip Barlow,<sup>32</sup> went unfulfilled in the realm of scripture-production. Instead, Smith was forced to realize that “the grandeur of God’s earthly drama would only

30. Bushman, “The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” 71.

31. Elizabeth Fenton, “Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in *The Book of Mormon*,” *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 343. An urtext is an original text. Thus, Fenton is arguing that Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon argue that God works in the world through a proliferation of scriptures rather than pointing toward some kind of pristine original text.

32. Philip L. Barlow, “To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith’s Project,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 28–50.



fully be conveyed through the chorus of many historical voices, not its distillation into one.”<sup>33</sup>

In a passage referenced earlier, King Limhi tells Ammon that he wants the twenty-four plates translated for the reason that “they will give us a knowledge of a remnant of the people who have been destroyed . . . ; or, perhaps, they will give us a knowledge of this very people who have been destroyed” (Mosiah 8:12). Limhi’s distinction between the “remnant of the people” and the “very people” demonstrates an awareness of a given text’s limited capacity to tell.<sup>34</sup> He has no pretensions to comprehensiveness but instead knows that the twenty-four plates are the record of a particular people, or even a particular subset (“a remnant”) of that people. Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, Jesus Christ himself asks us to attend to the fragmentary nature of his communication with humanity. In 3 Nephi 26, Mormon intends to record Christ’s explication of all (3 Ne. 26:1–5), but the Lord forbids him from doing so (26:11). Here was Mormon’s chance to provide a comprehensive account of providential history, articulated by the author of that history, but instead he is forced to return to the laborious and decidedly uncomprehensive task of combing through records and painstakingly stitching together scripture from the narrative of Nephite history.

#### 4. A Gathering of Texts

The ethic articulated above cannot merely be one of privileging fracture over wholeness. The Book of Mormon teaches us to respect gaps in the scriptural record while at the same time recognizing that those gaps will be filled (2 Ne. 29:14). That is, records will not proliferate ad infinitum.<sup>35</sup> Rather, as Lehi tells his son Joseph, they will come together and complement one another. The records produced by Judah’s posterity will join the records produced by Lehi’s posterity, and together they will confound false doctrines, lay down contentions, and establish peace (2 Ne. 3:12). This harmonious merging, however, is not inevitable; it requires great effort and care on our part. As Richard Bushman has pointed out, this type of attentive gathering and preservation of texts is modeled

33. Holland, “American Visionaries and Their Approaches to the Past,” 50.

34. Elsewhere, the Book of Mormon is conscious of its own inability to satisfactorily or completely narrate the events it records, as in, for example, 3 Nephi 17:17; 28:14.

35. See, however, John Durham Peters, “Recording beyond the Grave: Joseph Smith’s Celestial Bookkeeping,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 842–64.



in the Book of Mormon. It is described in 2 Nephi 29, where the Lord tells the Nephites that the interactions he has had with different peoples will not only be recorded (“and they shall write it”) but also shared: the Jews will inherit the Nephite records, the Nephites will inherit the words of the Jews, and both the Nephites and the Jews will inherit the words of the “lost tribes of Israel” (2 Ne. 29:12). The next verse indicates that this textual gathering will be directly connected to the gathering of peoples; the gathering of the “house of Israel” will be replicated in the movement of the Lord’s word, which “also shall be gathered in one” (2 Ne. 29:14). In other words, eventually sacred history will move toward closure and completion, but not before we bear witness to the full extent of that history.

The process of record sharing and absorption plays out in the story of the people of Limhi. Limhi instructs the emissary from Zarahemla, Ammon, to give a history of all that had occurred in Zarahemla since Zeniff led a group to the land of Nephi (Mosiah 8:2). Additionally, Limhi provides Ammon with his people’s record of that same period of time (Mosiah 8:5). Finally, the return of Limhi’s people to Zarahemla sparks another public exchange of histories. Bushman observes that these local exchanges of records and histories prefigure the global exchange prophesied in 2 Nephi 29: “The ritual of exchanging histories practiced in miniature by Limhi, Mosiah, Alma and Ammon would be replicated on a grand scale.”<sup>36</sup>

In 3 Nephi 16, the resurrected Jesus reframes this literal sharing of histories as a secondary solution to the inevitable lacunae in sacred history. The primary solution is knowledge that comes as a result of prayer and the Holy Ghost. Jesus tells the assembled Nephites that he has “other sheep” whom he has not yet visited but whom he plans to visit shortly (3 Ne. 16:1). He then tells them to “write these sayings” so that they can be delivered to the Gentiles, who will restore the Lamanite remnant to a knowledge of Christ and their covenantal status. However, this is necessary only because Christ’s disciples in Jerusalem “do not ask the Father in my name, that they may receive a knowledge of you by the Holy Ghost, and also of the other tribes whom they know not of” (3 Ne. 16:4). If the Old World Christians would simply ask, then the Holy Ghost would inform them of Christ’s other sheep. If they would only ask, then they could accomplish the gathering of scattered Israel on their own, and no

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36. Bushman, “Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” 71.

Gentile intermediaries would be necessary. Thus, prayer can yield the same capacious understanding of God's work among his children that comes because of the gathering of records. A point of clarification is necessary here. We do not read this scripture as implying that scripture is unnecessary insofar as a person has sufficient faith to obtain through prayer the same knowledge available in the scriptures. Instead, we see it as saying that (1) our knowledge of ancient people is not entirely dependent on our discovery of ancient records and that (2) God is so concerned that we learn the radically expansive scope of his salvific work that he has established multiple avenues through which that learning might occur.

In the chapter referenced above, Richard Bushman posits that Nephites understood records as "surrogates of peoples." It is a little unclear what he means when he says that Nephites equated records with peoples or how that conception is distinct from understanding a record as a history of a people. However, Bushman seems to think that this unique view of ancient texts is in part explained by the linking of the physical gathering of Israel with the gathering into one of the sundry and scattered scriptural canons. In this case, a people's record is their representative, the instrument which gives them a "part in the grand orchestra of the nations."<sup>37</sup> If Nephites did indeed view records as surrogates of peoples, then Jesus Christ's resurrection of the corporate and covenantal theology of salvation in 3 Nephi acquires a new degree of significance. Grant Hardy notes that in his second discourse to the Nephites, Jesus Christ "modifies standard Book of Mormon soteriology" by focusing on "collective redemption." Hardy writes that "in the rest of the Book of Mormon, Christ is preeminently a personal savior whose atonement has made it possible for individuals to return to God, but as the resurrected Jesus defines his own role in 3 Nephi, his primary task is to save a people, *his* people."<sup>38</sup> If we combine this observation with Bushman's contention that Nephites understood records as surrogates of peoples, then it follows that the preservation of scripture is a salvific task. By viewing ancient texts as surrogates of peoples, and by treating those texts with great care and attentiveness, the Nephites could emulate God's grand project of redemption.

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37. Bushman, "Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," 72.

38. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 205, emphasis original.

When asking what the Book of Mormon has to say about a gathering of texts, it is important to remember that three of the records mentioned in the Book of Mormon were discovered accidentally—and even the recovery of the brass plates involved a certain serendipity. As mentioned above, Limhi's explorers discovered the twenty-four gold plates of Ether when they were looking for Zarahemla. In *Words of Mormon*, Mormon tells us that he stumbled upon the small plates of Nephi while perusing the records he had been given (W of M 1:3). Finally, it seems likely that the “large stone” of Jaredite origin mentioned in *Omni* was also recovered unintentionally, though we only learn of it when it is delivered to King Mosiah, so the circumstances surrounding its initial discovery are unknown (*Omni* 1:21–22). This pattern of serendipitous discovery seems to imply a few different things. First, it reinforces the notion of an ever-expanding canon as discussed earlier. Second, it implicitly recommends a certain reorientation toward the world, a renewed sense of awe for the sanctity of what we have been given. It seems as though the earth is teeming with ancient texts, and so it may not be inappropriate to approach it with a profound sense of gratitude and reverence, and even with the conviction that “wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.”<sup>39</sup>

The Book of Mormon seems to suggest that we need to be willing, as Alma told his son Helaman, when encountering an ancient text, whether newly discovered or transmitted carefully over time, to see that “it is for a wise purpose that they are kept” (Alma 37:2). “Kept” here implies both the active act of preservation and the divine acts of keeping—records “kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord” (Alma 37:4). When we find an ancient cuneiform tablet that is as clear today as when the wedges were first pressed into soft clay, or a Syriac manuscript kept for a thousand years in an Egyptian monastery that is as legible today as it was when it was first written—records that have “retain[ed] their brightness”—perhaps we should be inclined to wonder whether these survivors of the ravages of time might not “contain that which is holy” (Alma 37:5). There seems to be purpose in such preservation. Perhaps these ancient texts have and will continue to “enlarg[e] the memory of this people, yea, and convinc[e] many of the error of their ways, and [bring] them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (Alma 37:8). “Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things

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39. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 289.

brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise” (Alma 37:6). How many ancient texts are waiting to be read by one who “is enlightened by the Spirit” so that we can “obtain benefit therefrom” (D&C 91:5)?

Finally, the theme of accidental discovery in the Book of Mormon teaches us to be humble, insofar as humility is a recognition of one’s smallness in comparison to the grandeur of God’s work. The proliferation of ancient texts anticipated in the Book of Mormon is humility-inducing on its own, but the fact that that proliferation will occur on its own terms and without our direction underscores the fact that, in the words of Adam Miller, “the world is much rounder, time much deeper, and the earth more eccentric than [we’ve previously realized]. . . . We live in a postdiluvian world, and the rain falls harder every day.”<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The “restitution of all things,” inaugurated by the reestablishment of Jesus Christ’s Church on April 6, 1830, includes within its scope the recovery of ancient records, such as the Book of Mormon. According to this understanding, the Book of Mormon shattered the notion of a closed canon not merely by coming forth itself but also by signaling the imminent arrival of other texts, other voices, and other unknown chapters of world and sacred history. This article contends that the Book of Mormon is not only aware of its situation within a vast library of similar records, but also that it teaches its readers how to receive and attend to the records of which it prophesies. In both what it says and what it models, the Book of Mormon establishes a series of methods for engaging with ancient texts. First, the Book of Mormon asks that we attend to the production history of a text by acknowledging those who wrote it, those who preserved it, and those who transmitted it. Second, it asks that we mine a text for historical significance before we read it theologically. Third, it demands we recognize the limited perspective of any single text—that we respect the reality of fracture, without reifying that fracture. Fourth, the Book of Mormon encourages us to not lose sight of the eschatological gathering of all texts into one, but to recognize that, eventually, texts will be gathered and the divisions between them healed. By approaching an ancient text with these methods in mind, we can successfully enact a “hermeneutics of love” and emulate, through

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40. Adam Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 2018), 54–55.

our local saving of ancient records, the God of Israel's global redemption of peoples.<sup>41</sup> By abiding by these principles, our engagement with other ancient texts can be transformed into something profoundly sacred, a type and shadow of the ever-ongoing salvific work of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

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41. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).

# Sacred Space

*Jacqueline Price*

**M**y painting is about how an ordinary space can be made sacred when we invite the heavenly and earthly realms to align more closely.

As a young woman reading her scriptures looks up towards heaven for inspiration, light and the Spirit of God fall upon her, and a connection is made.

Flowers have dropped from her dress, and it begins to take on the appearance of a dress she will one day wear in the temple. The fallen flowers represent first the falling away of the world around her as she communicates with Deity through the Spirit. Second, they symbolize the momentous actions that took place in the Garden of Eden and the garden in Gethsemane, the latter giving us the gift and opportunity not to suffer the effects of the former.

The model for this painting is Faye, a young woman of African American heritage in my ward. This pose was one of many I asked her to do, though at the time I just had a vague idea of painting a picture about reading the scriptures. As I looked at and thought about the pose, the floral pattern of the dress she'd worn suggested the idea of it transforming into a temple dress as she began to be bathed in the Spirit of God. As one thought led to another, I saw that the flowers that would have been on the front of the dress could be used to deepen the symbolism of the painting.

# “None That Doeth Good”

## Early Evidence of the First Vision in JST Psalm 14

*Walker Wright and Don Bradley*

The First Vision has been a center of both faith and controversy. While millions of Latter-day Saints affirm it as the beginning of the Restoration,<sup>1</sup> others see it as an ever-growing fish tale. The multiple accounts of the First Vision vary in detail, with Joseph Smith's earliest written account (1832) lacking some of the elements found in his later accounts.<sup>2</sup> However, some of these elements—particularly the

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1. For the bicentennial celebration of the First Vision, the Church announced the official proclamation “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-restoration-of-the-fulness-of-the-gospel-of-jesus-christ/a-bicentennial-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

2. An earlier revelation seems to allude to the First Vision and the forgiveness of sins mentioned in his 1832 and 1835 accounts: “For after that it truly was manifested unto the first elder that he had received remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world, but after truly repenting, God visited him by an holy angel.” “Articles and Covenants, circa April 1830 [D&C 20],” [4], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/articles-and-covenants-circa-april-1830-dc-20/1>. Some have argued that the earliest recorded reference to the First Vision occurs in the Book of Mormon. Much like Joseph Smith's “official” 1838 First Vision account would describe the Lord warning him that various sectarians “draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (JS-H 1:19), 2 Nephi 27:25 describes the Lord telling the unlearned man who would translate the Book of Mormon, “This people draw near unto me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their hearts far from me, and their fear towards me is taught by the precepts of men.” See S. Brent Farley, “Nephi, Isaiah, and the Latter-Day Restoration,” in *The Book of Mormon: Second Nephi, the Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 227–40; *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, Maxwell Institute

appearance of God the Father as part of the First Vision experience—are laced throughout Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible. These historical threads ultimately culminate in his translation of Psalm 14, which weaves together many of the elements supposedly lacking in Smith’s earliest account of the First Vision.

But why bring these threads together in Psalm 14? What was its connection with his First Vision? A basic comparison of Psalm 14 with elements of the First Vision shows that elements of this psalm are found in the background of the vision, as Joseph Smith narrated it, and even in the words of Deity spoken within the vision itself.

When Alexander Neibaur recorded Smith’s telling of his First Vision in 1844, he recalled the divine answer to Smith’s question “Must I join the Methodist Church[?]” to be “No = they are not my People, all have *gone astray there is none that doeth good no not one*, but this is my Beloved son harken ye him.”<sup>3</sup> Over two decades later, Brigham Young offered a similar telling of Joseph Smith’s First Vision: “Joseph was naturally inclined to be religious, and being young, and surrounded with this excitement, no wonder that he became seriously impressed with the necessity of serving the Lord. But as the cry on every hand was, ‘Lo, here, is Christ,’ and ‘Lo, there!’ Said he, ‘Lord, teach me, that I may know for myself, who among these are right.’ And what was the answer? ‘They are all out of the way; they have *gone astray, and there is none that doeth good, no not one.*’”<sup>4</sup>

Both of these later, secondary accounts appear to capture a genuine feature of Smith’s first encounter with Deity. In Smith’s 1832 account, the Lord is said to declare to the young boy, “<behold> the world lieth in sin at this time and *none doeth good no not one they have turned asside* from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments.”<sup>5</sup> The italicized portions

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*Study Edition*, ed. Grant Hardy (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018), 119 n. g25. (Thanks to Tanner Johnson for making us aware of this connection and these resources.) Joseph Smith linked the “learned man” with Charles Anthon and the “not learned” man with himself. Isaiah 29:11–12; Joseph Smith–History 1:63–65; Larry E. Morris, “‘I Cannot Read a Sealed Book’—Martin Harris’s Venture to Eastern Scholars: February 1828,” *A Documentary History of the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 224–49.

3. “Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract,” [23], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/alexander-neibaur-journal-24-may-1844-extract/1>, emphasis added.

4. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 12:67 (June 23, 1867), emphasis added.

5. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3>, emphasis added.



of these various sources are quoted from the King James Version (KJV) rendition of Psalm 14:3: “*They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one*” (emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> Earlier in the 1832 account, Smith paraphrases Psalm 14:1: “Well hath the wise man said <it is a> fool <that> saith in his heart there is no God.”<sup>7</sup> This psalm apparently had a significant impact on the way Smith recalled his first heavenly visitation.

As mentioned above, Smith would further connect Psalm 14 with his First Vision through his inspired translation or revision of the Bible. Sometime between July 1832 and July 1833, Joseph Smith completed this inspired Bible revision.<sup>8</sup> It was during this period that he recorded both his 1832 account of the First Vision *and* his new rendition of Psalm 14 (see table 1).<sup>9</sup> The most probable dates of completion for the translation of Psalm 14 (January or February 1833) and the writing of the 1832 account (July–September 1832) put the two accounts within four to seven months of each other.<sup>10</sup> When the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) of Psalm 14 is compared to the various First Vision accounts, it shows “a distinct overall affinity with the First Vision story.”<sup>11</sup>

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6. William Smith makes a possible allusion to Psalm 14 in his recollection of his brother's First Vision: “While praying he saw a bright light, like the brightness of the sun. In that light he saw a personage; and that being pointed him out as the messenger to go forth and declare his truth to the world; for ‘*They had all gone astray; Every man was going his own way.*’” See “William B. Smith: Experience and Testimony,” in “Sketches of Conference Sermons, reported by Charles Derry,” *Saints' Herald* 30, no. 16 (June 16, 1883): 388, emphasis added. For more recollections from Joseph's family, see Kyle R. Walker, “Smith Family Recollections of Joseph Smith's First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 47, no. 2 (2021): 1–22.

7. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3. “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” Psalms 14:1.

8. For the timeline of Joseph Smith's Bible translation project, see Kent P. Jackson, *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022), 2–6.

9. “Old Testament Revision 2,” 85, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-2/92>.

10. For the January–February 1833 dating of JST Psalm 14, see David A. LeFevre, “Give Me Right Word, O Lord’: The JST Changes in the Psalms,” in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 349–66, <https://rsc.byu.edu/ascending-mountain-lord/give-me-right-word-o-lord-jst-changes-psalms>. For the July–September 1832 dating of the 1832 account, see the historical introduction to “History, circa Summer 1832,” 1, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1#historical-intro>.

11. Matthew B. Brown, *A Pillar of Light: The History and Message of the First Vision* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2009), 193 n. 1.

Table 1. Joseph Smith’s Inspired Changes to KJV Psalm 14

Psalm 14:1–7 (KJV)	Psalm 14:1–7 (JST; changes are <b>bolded</b> )
1. The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.	1. The fool hath said in his heart, <b>There is no man that hath seen God, because he sheweth him self not unto us, therefore</b> there is no God. <b>behold</b> they are corrupt; they have done abominable works, <b>and none of them</b> doeth good.
2. The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God.	2. <b>For</b> the Lord look down from heaven upon the children of men, <b>and by his voice said unto his servant, seek ye among the children of men,</b> to see if there <b>are</b> any that <b>do</b> understand God. <b>And he opened his mouth unto the Lord, and said; behold all these who say they are thine.</b>
3. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.	3. <b>The lord answered and said,</b> they are all gone aside, they are together become filthy. <b>Thou canst be hold none of these that are doing good,</b> no, not one;
4. Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge? Who eat up my people as they eat bread, and call not upon the Lord.	4. <b>&lt;all&gt; they have for there teachers, a &lt;are&gt; workers of eniquity, and there is no knowledge in them. They &lt;are they&gt;</b> who eat up my people, they eat bread, and call not upon the Lord.
5. There were they in great fear: for God is in the generation of the righteous.	5. <b>they are</b> in great fear, for God <b>dwells</b> in the generation of the righteous. <b>He is the counsel of the poor, because they are ashamed of the wicked, and flee unto the Lord for there reffuge.</b>
6. Ye have shamed the counsel of the poor, because the Lord is his refuge.	6. <b>Then &lt;they&gt; are ashamed of</b> the counsel of the poor, because the Lord is his refuge,
7. Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! When the Lord bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad.	7. O that <b>Zion were established out of heaven,</b> the salvation of Israel. <b>O Lord, when wilt thou establish Zion?</b> When the lord bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, Isreal shall be glad.

JST text from “Old Testament Revision 2,” 85–86, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 5, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/old-testament-revision-2/92>.

David LeFevre similarly perceives the changes in JST Psalm 14 as “autobiographical expressions” of the First Vision.<sup>12</sup> He also notes the “subtle and appropriate shift in theology” in JST Psalm 14 relative to the KJV:

In the KJV, the Lord is the one looking down and seeking to know the current state of things while, in the Prophet’s revised psalm, the Lord is instructing his servant about what is happening. . . . First, the Lord asks his servant to consider if anyone around him understands God. The servant’s reply is that they all claim to speak for God, but it is a response of confusion and uncertainty, just as Joseph felt prior to his vision. Then the Lord states his position on these people: as Joseph can readily see, . . . they live in apostasy, work iniquity, and lack the knowledge of the truth.<sup>13</sup>

Such parallels have been explored in detail only between JST Psalm 14 and the 1832 First Vision account. Matthew Brown noted sixteen parallel phrases or concepts between these two texts,<sup>14</sup> but extensive comparison has yet to be made between this JST psalm and other accounts of the First Vision or between other, related, portions of the JST and the First Vision. Numerous elements found in later accounts appear in JST Psalm 14, indicating that the fundamental First Vision narrative remained far more consistent across time than has been assumed. Systematic comparison below will demonstrate several major parallels between JST Psalm 14 and the various primary and secondary accounts of the First Vision and also between other JST passages intertwined with Psalm 14 and the First Vision accounts.

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12. LeFevre, “Give Me Right Word, O Lord,” 349.

13. LeFevre, “Give Me Right Word, O Lord,” 357–58.

14. “(1) ‘The fool hath said in his heart . . . “There is no God”’ / ‘it is a fool that saith in his heart, “There is no God,”’ (2) ‘There is no man that hath seen God’ / ‘I could find none that would believe the heavenly vision,’ (3) ‘they are corrupt’ / ‘they . . . keep not my commandments . . . their hearts are far from me,’ (4) ‘abominable works’ / ‘abominations,’ (5) ‘none of them doeth good’ / ‘none doeth good,’ (6) ‘the Lord looked down from heaven’ / ‘the Lord opened the heavens,’ (7) ‘the children of men’ / ‘the inhabitants of the earth,’ (8) ‘His voice said unto His servant’ / ‘the Lord . . . spake unto me saying . . . my son,’ (9) ‘see if there are any that do understand God’ / ‘the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind,’ (10) ‘all these who say they are thine’ / ‘those of different denominations,’ (11) ‘they are all gone aside’ / ‘they have turned aside,’ (12) ‘they are together become filthy’ / ‘the world lieth in sin,’ (13) ‘workers of iniquity’ / ‘wickedness . . . ungodliness,’ (14) ‘there is no knowledge in them’ / ‘they had apostatized from the true and living faith,’ (15) ‘they who eat up my people’ / ‘contentions and divisions,’ (16) ‘call not upon the Lord’ / ‘I cried unto the Lord.’” Brown, *Pillar of Light*, 193–94.

**“There is no man that hath seen God” (JST Ps. 14:1)**

- **King James Version:** “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.”
- **Joseph Smith Translation (1832/33):** “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no man that hath seen God, because he sheweth him self not unto us, therefore there is no God.”<sup>15</sup>
- **Smith, 1832:** “I . . . could find none that would believe the hevnlly vision.”<sup>16</sup>
- **Smith, 1838/39:** “He treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them” (JS–H 1:21).
- **Neibaur, 1844:** “The Methodist priest . . . said this was not a age for God to Reveal himself in Vision[.] Revelation has . . . ceased with the New Testament.”<sup>17</sup>

By making a small expansion to Psalm 14’s opening passage that introduces the idea of theophany, and of its rejection, Joseph Smith resituates the entire psalm, implicitly placing the psalm’s subsequent dialogue between the Lord and his servant in the context of a theophany and making the immediate matter of dispute not whether God exists but whether God appears to human beings. Smith’s revision connects the biblical “fool’s” denial of God with the “fool’s” lack of experience of God and with his rejection of *anyone* having seen God. Consequently, those who reject the occurrence of theophanies *become* the “fool” in question.

Smith himself reported encountering such persons when he initially attempted to share his First Vision. While others’ rejection of Joseph’s vision is briefly acknowledged in the 1832 account, it is described in greater detail in his 1838/39 history. After describing the vision to “one of the Methodist preachers” (JS–H 1:21)—possibly George Lane<sup>18</sup>—Smith was taken aback by the minister’s vehement a priori rejection of his

15. “Old Testament Revision 2,” 85.

16. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 3.

17. “Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract,” [24].

18. Larry C. Porter, “Reverend George Lane—Good ‘Gifts,’ Much ‘Grace,’ and Marked ‘Usefulness,’” 199–226; and Richard L. Anderson, “Joseph Smith’s Accuracy on the First Vision Setting: The Pivotal 1818 Palmyra Camp Meeting,” in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2012), 91–170.

theophany. Joseph similarly told Alexander Neibaur of such a ministerial rejection in 1844. So when Smith expands Psalm 14:1 to incorporate the rejection of theophanies, this expansion makes the psalm more accurately reflect his own experience after the First Vision.<sup>19</sup>

Joseph first changes Psalm 14 by importing into it a statement from elsewhere in the Bible, one he had already encountered twice in his work on the JST—“No man hath seen God” (John 1:18; 1 Jn. 4:12). While Joseph did not report what prooftexts the Methodist minister who criticized his vision employed, the statement “No man hath seen God” provided perhaps the readiest prooftext a biblically literate listener could invoke to justify rejecting Smith’s theophany.

Significantly, several months before Smith’s circa–January/February 1833 revision of Psalm 14, he had already revised the Johannine passages he would import *into* the psalm—John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12—transforming them from potential prooftexts against his theophany into passages *supporting* it. In its KJV form, John 1:18 reads, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Smith’s revision (in the handwriting of Sidney Rigdon) adds a condition on which the Father can be seen: “<And> no man hath seen God at any time, *except he hath born record of the son*. For except it is through him no man can be saved.”<sup>20</sup> In Smith’s rendition, God the Father can be seen, with the proviso that he always bears record of the Son to those privileged to see him. This, as Smith would describe it in later First Vision accounts, is precisely what occurred in

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19. For background on the similarities and differences between the First Vision and other contemporary visionary accounts, see Richard Lyman Bushman, “The Visionary World of Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* 37, no. 1 (1997–98): 183–204; Christopher C. Jones, “The Power and Form of Godliness: Methodist Conversion Narratives and Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 2 (2011): 88–114; Jeremy Talmage, “‘Effusions of an Enthusiastic Brain’: Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the Limits of Experiential Religion,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2020): 25–48. A distinction between Smith’s reported vision and many contemporaneous visions was its very literal sensory and corporeal character, which may have also contributed to its rejection.

20. “New Testament Revision 2,” 105–6 (second numbering), Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/new-testament-revision-2/164>, emphasis added. The statement in KJV John 1:18, “He hath declared him,” carries some ambiguity regarding the referents of “he” and “him.” While the statement is most naturally read to indicate that the Son has declared the Father, it can also be read to say that the Father has declared the Son. Joseph’s revision to the passage indicates that he understood it to carry the second meaning and saw this as offering a proviso on which the Father can be seen—when he declares the Son. Joseph therefore reorganized the passage to make this its clear reading.

his own theophany when he saw two personages, one of them attesting to the identity of the other, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (JS-H 1:17). In an exact echo of John 1:18, the KJV of 1 John 4:12 reads, “No man hath seen God at any time.” Smith again qualifies this with a proviso in his translation: “except them who beleive [*sic*].”<sup>21</sup> In both alterations—made, respectively, between fall 1831 and February 16, 1832, and between February 16 and March 24, 1832, several months *before* Smith’s earliest recorded account of the First Vision,<sup>22</sup> God the Father is made visible. And in each alteration, a condition is presented on which the Father *can* be seen—a condition *met* by Smith in his First Vision: before he saw the Father, he exercised faith and became one of “them who believe,” meeting the condition specified in JST 1 John 4:12; and he heard the Father bear “record of the Son,” meeting the condition specified in JST John 1:18.

Given Smith’s changes to these passages—in each case qualifying the apparent absoluteness of the statement “No man hath seen God”—it is intriguing that he imports this very phrase into the beginning of his revised Psalm 14. Having revised the two Johannine passages to stipulate conditions on which human beings can see God the Father, he puts any objection to his own theophany based on the unrevised passages on the lips of the “fool” who denies God in Psalm 14:1.

Joseph thus wrestles with the Johannine phrase “No man hath seen God” *three* times in his 1832–1833 Bible revision, each time in a way that seems to relate to his First Vision and that possibly serves to defend it against any who would use this phrasing to refute it. In his third engagement with the phrase, in Psalm 14, he adapts the psalm to change the “fool” from a village atheist<sup>23</sup> to (as we will see in the succeeding verses) a “teacher” who claims to be part of the Lord’s people, but who, in denying God’s power to show himself, effectively denies God’s existence.<sup>24</sup>

21. “New Testament Revision 2,” 148 (second numbering).

22. Historical introduction to “New Testament Revision 2.”

23. Though often read this way, the psalm in its ancient context was likely not describing atheism in the modern sense. As Robert Alter notes, “The thrust of this line is more moral than theological. The concern is not a philosophical question of God’s existence but the scoundrel’s [fool’s] lack of conscience, his feeling that he can act with impunity, because he thinks he need not fear divine retribution.” *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 40 n. 1.

24. The reasoning here, in Joseph’s revision of Psalm 14:1, is similar to Nephi’s in his exposition of Isaiah 29 in 2 Nephi 28, where Nephi says that churches that claim to be the Lord’s yet deny his continuing power in the world in effect deny his continued existence: “For it shall come to pass in that day that the churches which are built up, and not unto the Lord, when the one shall say unto the other: Behold, I, I am the Lord’s; and the others

Fascinatingly, it appears Joseph began this implicit defense of the First Vision in his Bible revision even before he recorded any formal accounts of the First Vision. His changes to the KJV of John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12 attest that he had already shared the vision before these fall 1831–spring 1832 JST revisions—and had it rejected by critics employing these biblical prooftexts.

Joseph's 1832 changes to these Johannine texts and his related 1833 changes to Psalm 14 also enhance the existing evidence for elements of Joseph Smith's First Vision that appear in later accounts. Smith's 1832 account does not (1) describe Smith seeing God the Father, (2) narrate the voice of the Father declaring the Son, or (3) discuss Smith sharing his theophany with a Protestant minister who rejected it, yet Smith does include these elements in his 1838 account. However, evidence for the Father's involvement in the First Vision occurs first in the 1832 account itself, when Smith describes "receiving the testamony from on high" at his First Vision.<sup>25</sup> The phrase "the testimony on high" was often used in the nineteenth century to refer to testimony borne by the Father of the Son, such as at the Mount of Transfiguration, when a voice (identified explicitly as God the Father in 2 Peter 1:17–18) testified of Jesus from heaven—"This is My Beloved Son" (Matt. 17:5).<sup>26</sup> In line with such evidence in Joseph Smith's 1832 account of the First Vision, Smith's revisions to the Bible discussed here evidence that all three of the supposedly late-developed elements of the First Vision actually *predate* even this "earliest" First Vision account. His fall 1831–spring 1832 revisions of the Johannine passages on seeing God the Father add conditions on which the Father may be seen, allowing for *Joseph* to have seen the Father as part of the

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shall say: I, I am the Lord's; and thus shall every one say that hath built up churches, and not unto the Lord—And they shall contend one with another; and their priests shall contend one with another, and they shall teach with their learning, and deny the Holy Ghost, which giveth utterance. And they deny the power of God, the Holy One of Israel; and they say unto the people: Hearken unto us, and hear ye our precept; for behold *there is no God today, for the Lord and the Redeemer hath done his work*, and he hath given his power unto men" (2 Ne. 28:3–5, emphasis added). Notably, the phrasing in 2 Nephi 28:5, "There is no God," likely also comes from Psalm 14. The phrase, used in the sense of denying the continuing power of a Supreme Being, appears in the King James Bible only in Psalm 14:1 and in its echo in Psalm 53:1.

25. "History, circa Summer 1832," 1.

26. See Gregory Smith, "More Testimony from on High? A Note on the Presence of God the Father in Joseph Smith's 1832 First Vision Account," unpublished manuscript, in authors' possession. Also see James B. Allen and John W. Welch, "Analysis of Joseph Smith's Accounts of His First Vision," in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestation, 1820–1844*, ed. John Welch, 2nd ed. (Provo: BYU Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 36–77.



First Vision on those conditions, including the condition of the Father declaring his Beloved Son. And his 1832–1833 revision of Psalm 14:1 reinforces that God can be seen and puts contrary use of the Johannine passages on the lips of a sectarian “fool.” These early 1830s revisions preserve one side of a largely lost conversation, a conversation in which a sectarian critic had once rejected Smith’s theophany, and which Joseph later responded to repeatedly and forcefully. Indeed, Smith would identify that conversation explicitly in his 1838/39 account of the First Vision as a conversation with “one of the Methodist preachers” (JS–H 1:21).

Steven Harper concludes that Joseph’s “1832 and 1838/39 memories are best read as responses to the Methodist minister.”<sup>27</sup> This is also the best way to read the consistent pattern of changes Joseph made involving the phrase “no man hath seen God” in the JST of 1 John 1:18, 1 John 4:32, and Psalm 14:1.

#### “Behold they are corrupt” (JST Psalm 14:1)

- **King James Version:** “They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.”
- **Joseph Smith Translation (1832/33):** “Behold they are corrupt; they have done abominable works, and none of them doeth good.”<sup>28</sup>
- **Smith, 1832:** “I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind the contentions and divi[s]ions the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind.”<sup>29</sup>
- **Smith, 1838/39:** “I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt” (JS–H 1:19).
- **Smith, 1842:** “They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom.”<sup>30</sup>

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27. Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 32.

28. “Old Testament Revision 2,” 85.

29. “History, circa Summer 1832,” 2.

30. “Church History,” 1 March 1842,” 707, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/church-history-1-march-1842/2>.



- **Richards, 1843:** “received for answer that none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting cove[n]t was broken.”<sup>31</sup>
- **White, 1843:** “I then, addressed this second person, saying, ‘O Lord, what Church shall I join,’ He replied, ‘don’t join any of them, they are all corrupt.’ . . . When I went home and told the people that I had a revelation, and that all the churches were corrupt, they persecuted me, and they have persecuted me ever since.”<sup>32</sup>

The 1832 account seems to describe a general prevalence of apostasy and wickedness, while the later accounts are more specific regarding the Christian churches of the day. This portion of the JST falls more in line with the 1832 account. However, this verse is more of an introduction by the psalmist than speech from the Lord himself. Similar language, however, is attributed to the Lord in verses 3 and 4 (which are addressed in greater detail below).

#### “Behold all these who say they are thine” (JST Psalm 14:2)

- **King James Version:** “The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God.”
- **Joseph Smith Translation (1832/33):** “For the Lord look down from heaven upon the children of men, and by his voice said unto his servant, seek ye among the children of men, to see if there are any that do understand God. And he opened his mouth unto the Lord, and said; behold, all these who say they are thine.”<sup>33</sup>

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31. “Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843, extract,” 16, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/levi-richards-journal-11-june-1843-extract/2>. An 1831 revelation to Smith declares, “Wherefore I the Lord knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the Earth called upon my Servents Joseph & spake unto him from heaven . . . that faith also might increase in the Earth that mine everlasting Covenant might be established.” See “Revelation, 1 November 1831–B [D&C 1],” 126, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-1-november-1831-b-dc-1/2>.

32. “Interview, 29 August 1843, extract,” 3, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/interview-29-august-1843-extract/1>.

33. “Old Testament Revision 2,” 85. The claims by those who “say they are thine” yet are not the Lord’s parallel closely the contending sectarians in Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah 29: “For it shall come to pass in that day that the churches which are built up, and not unto the Lord, *when the one shall say unto the other: Behold, I, I am the Lord’s; and the*

- **Smith, 1835:** “Being wrought up in my mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking <at> the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong and considering it of the first importance that I should be right.”<sup>34</sup>
- **Smith, 1838/39:** “My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. . . . I asked the Personages . . . which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join” (JS–H 1:18).<sup>35</sup>
- **Smith, 1842:** “I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred me to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection: considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully.”<sup>36</sup>
- **Richards, 1843:** “Pres. J. Smith bore testimony to the same— saying that when he was a youth he began to think about these these things but could not find out which of all the sects were right— he went into the grove & enquired of the Lord which of all the sects were right.”<sup>37</sup>
- **White, 1843:** “There was a reformation among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood where I lived, and I became serious, and was desirous to know what Church to join.

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*others shall say: I, I am the Lord's; and thus shall every one say that hath built up churches, and not unto the Lord*” (2 Ne. 28:3). We observed in note 24 that this section of 2 Nephi also paralleled Joseph Smith's revision of Psalm 14 in the idea that to deny God's ability to manifest himself is tantamount to denying his existence. Along with his First Vision, Joseph Smith may have had 2 Nephi 28 in mind as he revised Psalm 14.

34. “Journal, 1835–1836,” 23, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/24>.

35. Earlier in the same account, however, Smith recalls, “In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together?” (JS–H 1:10). For important context regarding this supposed discrepancy, see J. B. Haws, “Reconciling Joseph Smith—History 1:10 and 1:18–19,” *Religious Educator* 14, no. 2 (2013): 97–105. It has been asserted that, according to his 1832 account, Smith “had *already* concluded, prior to praying, that none of the churches was correct.” Gregory A. Prince, “Joseph Smith's First Vision in Historical Context: How a Historical Narrative Became Theological,” *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 4, (2015): 83. JST Psalm 14:2 seems to fit with the 1838/39 account.

36. “Church History,” 1 March 1842,” 706.

37. “Levi Richards, Journal, 11 June 1843, extract,” 16.

. . . I kneeled down, and prayed, saying, ‘O Lord, what Church shall I join.’”<sup>38</sup>

- **Neibaur, 1844:** “Mr Smith then asked must I join the Methodist Church.”<sup>39</sup>
- **Brigham Young, 1867:** “Joseph was naturally inclined to be religious, and being young, and surrounded with this excitement, no wonder that he became seriously impressed with the necessity of serving the Lord. But as the cry on every hand was, ‘Lo, here is Christ,’ and ‘Lo, there!’”<sup>40</sup>

Rather than determining *before* the heavenly encounter that all people had “gone aside,” the servant (Smith) offers “all these who say they are thine” as examples of those who “understand God” (JST Ps. 14:3). The servant is under the impression that at least *someone* among those claiming to be the Lord’s is legitimate. While the 1832 account may give the impression that Smith had his mind made up before entering the grove, the 1832/33 JST translation and later First Vision accounts indicate that he still assumed a divinely authorized people or church was in existence somewhere.

#### “Workers of eniquity” (JST Ps. 14:4)

- **King James Version:** “Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge? who eat up my people as they eat bread, and call not upon the Lord.”
- **Old Testament Revision 2 (1832/33):** “<All> they have for there teachers, <are> workers of eniquity, and there is no knowledge in them. They <are they> who eat up my people, they eat bread, and call not upon the Lord.”<sup>41</sup>
- **Smith, 1838/39:** “The Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt” (JS–H 1:19).

While the 1832 account focuses on a kind of general apostasy and wickedness, the 1838/39 account is more pointed and focused with its blame. Harper argues that by this time, Smith “remembered to reject and

38. “Interview, 29 August 1843, extract,” 3.

39. “Alexander Neibaur, Journal, 24 May 1844, extract,” [23].

40. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:67 (June 23, 1867).

41. “Old Testament Revision 2,” 85.

replace the minister and the authority he represented. Smith's 1838/39 perspective is enlarged and institutional. From that point of view the vision was not simply another manifestation of Christ to a born-again soul. It was an indictment of apostate churches and their creeds—not simply the marvelous acts of Joseph Smith but the story of 'the rise and progress of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.'"<sup>42</sup>

However, this rejection and replacement of the Methodist minister is found in JST Psalm 14. The "corrupt" professors the Lord rejects in the 1838/39 account (or the "corrupt" churches of White's interview<sup>43</sup>) parallel and appear to be reflected in the "teachers" the Lord rejects as "workers of eniquity" in the revised Psalm 14. The divine condemnation of other churches and their leaders found in the 1838/39 account is thus already present in Smith's 1832/33 translation of Psalm 14.<sup>44</sup>

### "O Lord, when wilt thou establish Zion?" (JST Ps. 14:7)

- **King James Version:** "Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! When the Lord bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad."
- **Old Testament Revision 2 (1832/33):** "O that Zion were established out of heaven, the salvation of Israel. O Lord, when wilt thou establish Zion? When the lord bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, Isreal shall be glad."<sup>45</sup>
- **Revelation through Joseph Smith, April 6, 1830 (D&C 21):** "Him [Joseph Smith] have I inspired to move the cause of Zion in Mighty

42. Harper, *First Vision*, 32.

43. "Interview, 29 August 1843, extract," 3.

44. It is arguably even earlier in Smith's revelations. See "Revelation, October 1830–B [D&C 33]," 44, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-october-1830-b-dc-33/1>. This revelation features the Lord saying, "My vineyard has become corrupted evry whit & there is none that doeth good save it is a few only <& they err in many instances because of Priest crafts> all having corrupt minds." In this revelation, not only is Psalm 14:3 once again quoted ("none that doeth good"), but it is done in conjunction with a description of the Lord's vineyard being corrupted by priestcraft. Priestcraft was understood to be "the stratagems and frauds of priests; fraud or imposition in religious concerns; management of selfish and ambitious priests to gain wealth and power, or to impose on the credulity of others." Dictionary of the English Language, 1828, s.v. "priestcraft," <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/priestcraft>. This shows that the targeting of religious authorities using Psalm 14:3 goes back to at least 1830 and continues in an explicit way in Smith's 1832/33 translation.

45. "Old Testament Revision 2," 85–86.

power for good & his dilligence I know & his prayers I have heard yea his weeping for Zion I have seen & I will cause that He shall mourn for her no longer for his days of rejoicing are come.”<sup>46</sup>

- **Smith, 1842:** “I was expressly commanded to ‘go not after them,’ at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me.”<sup>47</sup>
- **Orson Pratt, 1840:** “[Smith] was expressly commanded, to go not after them; and he received a promise that the true doctrine—the fulness of the gospel, should, at some future time, be made known to him.”<sup>48</sup>
- **Orson Hyde, 1842:** “He was also told that he should not join any of the religious sects or denominations, because all of them erred in doctrine and none was recognized by God as his church and kingdom. He was further commanded, to wait patiently until some future time, when the true doctrine of Christ and the complete truth of the gospel would be revealed to him.”<sup>49</sup>

Smith’s inspired additions regarding Zion seem to have in mind this promise of the future restoration of God’s Church and kingdom on earth. Yet this connection of the Lord’s servant’s longing for Zion in JST Psalm 14 and Joseph Smith’s seeking after the restored Church are not obvious until the key is provided by the revelation Joseph received when his quest for that Church was fulfilled. On April 6, 1830, the day the long-promised Church was established, this revelation (D&C 21) equated Joseph’s longing for *the restored Church* with his longing for *Zion*.<sup>50</sup> The

46. “Revelation, 6 April 1830 [D&C 21],” 28–29, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-6-april-1830-dc-21/1>.

47. “‘Church History,’ 1 March 1842,” 707.

48. “Appendix: Orson Pratt, A[n] *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions*, 1840,” 5, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-orson-pratt-an-interesting-account-of-several-remarkable-visions-1840/5>.

49. “Orson Hyde, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste* (A Cry out of the Wilderness), 1842, extract, English translation,” Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/orson-hyde-ein-ruf-aus-der-wste-a-cry-out-of-the-wilderness-1842-extract-english-translation/1>.

50. Earlier work on his Genesis translation also placed Zion front and center in Smith’s theology. JST Psalm 14:7 mentions Zion being “established out of heaven,” echoing the anticipated return of Enoch’s Zion (see Moses 7:62–64). Richard Bushman explains, “Though modeled after Enoch’s Zion, Joseph’s New Jerusalem was not to follow Enoch’s ‘City of Holiness’ into heaven. Quite the reverse. In Enoch’s vision, latter-day

cry of the servant in JST Psalm 14:7, who elsewhere parallels Joseph, thus mirrors Joseph's own "weeping for Zion," and the rejoicing that accompanies Zion's coming in this passage mirrors Joseph's rejoicing when Zion's day has come.<sup>51</sup>

JST Psalm 14 connects the concept of Zion with the First Vision narrative, making the ending of the servant's theophany brim with anticipation of Zion's establishment. Thus, as early as 1832/33, Smith associated his first encounter with Deity with the future hope of Zion: "a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto me."<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

After comparing Joseph Smith's First Vision with the divine encounter experienced by the Lord's servant in JST Psalm 14, it is difficult to disagree with Joseph Fielding McConkie's judgment: "The JST rendering of this Psalm reads like another account of the First Vision."<sup>53</sup> The several parallels between JST Psalm 14 and the various First Vision accounts provide potentially fruitful avenues of historical and theological exploration. If, as the evidence signifies, Joseph Smith modeled JST Psalm 14 after his First Vision experience, this offers insights into the nature of the Joseph Smith Translation; and the new translation, in turn, opens

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people gather from all over the earth into a holy city, 'called ZION, a New Jerusalem.' Rather than rising, this city stays put, and Enoch's city descends from heaven to meet the people of the New Jerusalem on earth. . . . The millennium begins in a happy union of two holy peoples on a cleansed earth." Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 141.

51. JST Psalm 14's identification of Smith's quest for Christ's church with the longing for Zion again evokes 2 Nephi 28, which, as seen in the footnotes above, has sectarians quote Psalm 14:1—"There is no God"—and parallels JST Psalm 14:2—"Behold all these who say they are thine"—in having the various sectarian churches all declare, "I am the Lord's." The misguided sectarian churches of 2 Nephi 28 also proclaim that "all is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well," which in context is equivalent to declaring, "I am the Lord's"—that is, denying that there has been an apostasy (2 Ne. 28:21).

52. "'Church History,' 1 March 1842," 707.

53. Joseph F. McConkie, "Joseph Smith and the Poetic Writings," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Things*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Monte S. Nyman (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 111. It is worth noting that McConkie's father, Bruce R. McConkie, recommended in 1980 that JST Psalm 14 be canonized in the Pearl of Great Price. Stephen O. Smoot, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Study Edition for Latter-day Saints* (Springville, Utah: Book of Mormon Central, 2022), 162–63.

a window onto how he understood his vision in 1832–1833.<sup>54</sup> Already by 1831–1832, Joseph Smith’s translation of John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12 intimates that he connected his First Vision with the idea of seeing God the Father and of God the Father bearing witness: “This is My Beloved Son” (JS–H 1:17). In his 1832/33 translation of Psalm 14, Joseph reinforces that God the Father was part of the First Vision and weaves in further elements of the First Vision that will not appear in his formal accounts thereof for several years.

All of this attests to a much more consistent First Vision narrative than is often assumed. John Welch and James Allen have observed, “There is . . . striking consistency throughout the [First Vision] narratives; they combine impressively to give a consistent and coherent picture. A high percentage of the elements . . . sporadically appear in multiple accounts, both early and late, showing a high degree of independent, cumulative, concurrent corroboration among these accounts.”<sup>55</sup>

This observation holds even beyond the formal accounts of the First Vision. From Joseph Smith’s inspired 1831/32 translation of John 1:18 to his private 1844 testimony to Alexander Neibaur, Joseph’s words give evidence that the Father had borne witness of the Son. And from his 1832/33 translation of Psalm 14 to that same testimony to Neibaur shortly before the martyrdom (and even Brigham Young’s recollection after the martyrdom), he affirms that the Son told him, “All are gone aside,” and none were doing good, “no, not one.” Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible thus bears witness that he was consistent in attesting to these events from the beginning of his prophetic career to the end.

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54. For recent work on the JST, see Thomas A. Wayment, “Intertextuality and the Purpose of Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible,” in *Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources*, ed. Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74–100; Thomas A. Wayment and Haley Wilson-Lemmon, “A Recovered Resource: The Use of Adam Clarke’s Bible Commentary in Joseph Smith’s Bible Translation,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 262–84; Kent P. Jackson, “Some Notes on Joseph Smith and Adam Clarke,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 15–60.

55. Allen and Welch, “Analysis of Joseph Smith’s Accounts of His First Vision,” 72.

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# Rethinking the Rod of Iron

T. J. Uriona

Near its beginning, the Book of Mormon relates the dream of an Israelite father and visionary prophet named Lehi. About 600 BCE, Lehi and his family “tarried in the wilderness,” having fled Jerusalem for a promised land, guided by the Lord (1 Ne. 8:2). In this dream, Lehi saw a symbolic scene with multiple elements, including a tree with desirable fruit and a river running near the tree. “And,” he said, “I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree” (1 Ne. 8:19). Lehi observed how people made their way through darkness to the tree by grabbing the end of the rod and “holding fast” to it (1 Ne. 8:30). Later, in his own apocalyptic vision, Lehi’s son Nephi discerned the meaning of the iron rod: “I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life.” Nephi learned that the fountain and the tree typified the love of God (1 Ne. 11:25).

The iron rod is iconic within Latter-day Saint culture. It is the subject of lessons and sermons and songs.<sup>1</sup> Media and art regularly depict it as some type of handrail.<sup>2</sup> This concept of the iron rod as a type of rail or

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1. Mary Jane Woodger and Michelle Vanegas Brodrick, “Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision as Used by Church Leaders,” in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 374–92; Richard G. Oman, “Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life: A Cross-Cultural Perspective in Contemporary Latter-day Saint Art,” *BYU Studies* 32, no. 4 (1992): 5–34.

2. For example, see the image results for an internet search on the terms “iron,” “rod,” and “lehi”: <https://www.google.com/search?q=iron+rod+lehi>.

balustrade may at first appear to be the only possible way to understand and visualize the iron rod.<sup>3</sup> A close reading of the Book of Mormon in light of the ancient Near East yields a surprisingly distinct interpretive possibility. To Lehi and those of the ancient Near East, the rod symbolized the right to rule and was held in the hand of gods, kings, and shepherds.<sup>4</sup> The Israelite narrative contains extensive references to the rod in this context and provides strong support for conceptualizing the rod of iron as something other than a handrail when it is first introduced in Lehi's vision.<sup>5</sup> In that verse ("And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended" [1 Ne. 8:19]), the verb "extend" gives the impression that the rod, as the subject in the sentence, is what extends, like a railing or handrail. However when the rod is viewed in an ancient context<sup>6</sup>—as a discrete rod or shepherd's tool—it suggests that there is an implied agent, the Lord, who is extending the rod of iron to shepherd those of Lehi's dream.<sup>7</sup> When read in this way the "extended" rod matches well with the symbolism of the rod in the ancient Near East and the biblical account of Jesus Christ as the "Good

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3. It has even been suggested by those who claim Joseph Smith fabricated the Book of Mormon that he got the idea for the rod of iron from a "substantial iron railing hundreds of feet long" found in Rochester, New York. Jeff Lindsey, "The Great and Spacious Book of Mormon Arcade Game: More Curious Works from the Book of Mormon Critics," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 161–235; Rick Grunder, "The Great and Spacious Building," *Worlds without End*, April 27, 2015, <http://www.withoutend.org/great-spacious-building/>.

4. Mary Abram, "A New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings: Emblems of Time and Eternity," *Studia Antiqua* 10, no. 1 (2011): 15–36.

5. For an indication as to how Joseph Smith might have conceptualized the "extended" rod of iron in Lehi's visions see note 51. Joseph Smith also tells of a dream where he used a rod of iron to help free himself from his adversaries. "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 1, 21 December 1842–10 March 1843," [141–43], Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-1-21-december-1842-10-march-1843/149>.

6. It is worth noting that Laman and Lemuel did not ask Nephi "what the rod of iron is." It appears they understood what it was and how it was used. They were merely confused as to what it meant. See 1 Nephi 15:23–24.

7. Because a rod is not a normal part of life for us today, it is harder for us to see the implied agent working on the rod, and thus the verse is read as if the rod is what extends or lengthens. This reading is clarified when the words *rod* and *extend* are replaced with words that have cultural relevance today, such as *car* and *drove*. "I beheld a car, and it drove along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood." Because a car presently can't drive itself, it would be an anachronism to assume that the car drove itself along the bank of the river to the tree. It is therefore implied that someone is behind the wheel, driving the car. However, this reading is quickly becoming less obvious because soon the majority of cars may very well drive themselves.

Shepherd.”<sup>8</sup> Rethinking the rod of iron, when it is first introduced in the Book of Mormon, as a shepherd’s rod extended by Christ, significantly multiplies the symbolic potential of the image.

### The Rod in an Ancient Context

In the ancient Near East, as early as 3000 BCE, rods in a variety of forms were used as a symbol of power and the authority to rule.<sup>9</sup> In one form, the rod is held along with a ring as an attestation of the divine. This is the case for the ancient Mesopotamian sun god, Samas, who is often depicted holding the rod and ring. Of him it was written, “May Samas lengthen his staff, may he shepherd his people in justice.”<sup>10</sup> Anciently the gods are often depicted extending the rod and ring to kings and priests.<sup>11</sup> In a wall painting from 1770 BCE showing “The Investiture of Zimri-Lim,” the king is seen touching a rod, which is extended by the god Ishtar, with one hand while the other is raised in a gesture of reverence.<sup>12</sup> Further, like Lehi’s vision the painting also incorporates water and plant imagery as another important element associated with the rod and ring motif.<sup>13</sup> The rod and ring as a symbol of the divine was widely used until nearly the time of Lehi.

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8. On the other hand, the scriptures contain no additional references to a railing or handrail, which complicates the handrail interpretation by making it singular. Furthermore, ironworking during Lehi’s time had not developed to the point where an iron railing could be produced, and thus the idea of an ongoing handrail is conceptually anachronistic. In Lehi’s time, structures such as walls and battlements are mentioned as a means of support or protection. Israelite law even prescribed such protection: “When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence” (Deut. 22:8). Zachary Nelson, “The Rod of Iron in Lehi’s Dream,” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 51, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol10/iss3/5>.

9. Claus Ambos, “The Curved Staff in the Ancient Near East as a Predecessor of the Etruscan *lituus* (zusammen mit Ingrid Krauskopf),” L. Bouke van der Meer, ed., *Material Aspects of Etruscan Religion. Proceedings of the International Colloquium Leiden*, May 29 and 30, 2008, *Babesch Suppl.* 16 (2010): 127–53.

10. Joan Goodnick Westenholz, “The Good Shepherd,” *Melammu Symposia* 4 (2004): 292.

11. Abram, “New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings,” 35–36; Pauline Albenda, “The Burney Relief Reconsidered,” *JANES* 2 (1969): 87–93.

12. Abram, “New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings,” 29–30.

13. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ronan James Head, “The Investiture Panel at Mari and Rituals of Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 4 (2012): 1–42.

The scepter and staff symbol, like the rod and ring, was also a well-established symbol in the ancient Near East, but it symbolized the king's right to rule (see Esth. 4:11; 5:2). In the Sumerian myth of Etana's kingship, in the early third millennium BCE, the scepter, crown, and shepherd's crook were retrieved in heaven by Etana before descending from heaven on the back of an eagle to become king and shepherd of Kish.<sup>14</sup> The scepter was an embellished form of the rod that shepherds used, along with the staff, in caring for their sheep. The Babylonian king Hammurabi in the second millennium BCE, said of himself that "the great gods having chosen me, I am indeed the shepherd who provides well-being, whose staff is straight/just."<sup>15</sup> In the ancient Near East, the scepter and staff were the dominant symbols of the king's divinely appointed authority to shepherd the people.<sup>16</sup> The Assyrians took these ideas further and began associating the symbol of the rod with military power.<sup>17</sup> The prophet Isaiah warned Israel saying, "O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation" (Isa. 10:5–6). Here the rod and staff describe the function of the Assyrian nation as the Lord's implement to return Israel to the correct path. By Lehi's lifetime, the rod had evolved from its humble beginning as the tool of the shepherd to a culturally recognizable symbol of divinely sanctioned power.

To the Israelites, the archetype of the shepherd king of the ancient Near East was David. He was anointed to gather, rule, and defend Israel from all its enemies. The record indicates that David's time spent in the care of his father's sheep taught him to be fearless.<sup>18</sup> In facing Goliath, David would only take those tools he had used in defending his father's sheep: a staff, a sling, and a resolute belief that the Lord would be with him. David's defeat of Goliath would be the first of many triumphs that eventually led to his coronation as king of Israel. As king and shepherd of Israel, David would work to fulfill the Lord's covenant to gather his people and succeed in once again unifying the tribes of Israel. Isaiah

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14. Jonathan Gan, "The Metaphor of the Shepherd in Zechariah 11:4–17" (master's thesis, University of South Africa, 2010) 6, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43167778.pdf>.

15. Westenholz, "Good Shepherd," 291–93.

16. Abram, "New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings," 19, 34–35.

17. Dana M. Pike, "Jesus, the Great Shepherd-King," in *Celebrating Easter: The 2006 BYU Easter Conference*, ed. Thomas A. Wayment and Keith J. Wilson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 61–86.

18. 1 Samuel 17:34–36; Psalm 78:70–72.

prophesied of a future king, with authority in the form of a rod, who would arise from a branch of David's royal line to rule all Israel once again. "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa. 11:1 and 2 Ne 21:1). Joseph Smith inquired as to the meaning of the "rod" as quoted by Nephi and found in Isaiah 11. The answer to this inquiry is recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants:

"Who is the Stem of Jesse spoken of in the 1st, 2d, 3d, 4th, and 5th verses of the 11th chapter of Isaiah?

"Verily thus saith the Lord: It is Christ.

"What is the rod spoken of in the first verse of the 11th chapter of Isaiah, that should come of the Stem of Jesse?

"Behold, thus saith the Lord: It is a servant in the hands of Christ" (D&C 113:1-4).<sup>19</sup>

Christ as the stem of Jesse holds the rod or royal scepter in his hand to rule as king over all Israel, and it is his prophets that are commissioned to speak his words. Psalm 2 is generally considered a coronation psalm for the future King and Shepherd, the Messiah, that would come from the stem of Jesse to once again unify Israel.<sup>20</sup> Speaking of the Messiah, the psalm says, "Thou shalt break<sup>21</sup> them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:9).<sup>22</sup> By designating

19. Being an "instrument in the hand of God" is a common theme in the Book of Mormon. See 2 Nephi 1:24; 3:24; Mosiah 23:10; 27:36; Alma 1:8; 2:30; 17:9,11; 26:3,15; 29:9-10 (has wording that relates to Lehi's vision and the rod of iron); 35:14.

20. William H. Brownlee, "Psalms 1-2 as a Coronation Liturgy," *Biblica* 52, no. 3 (1971): 321-36.

21. The Vulgate, Septuagint, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions of Psalm 2:9 render "shalt break them" as "shall feed them," "shall rule them," or "shall shepherd them." In Egyptian coronation and jubilee rituals, the king smashes vessels inscribed with the names of foreign nations as a demonstration of his power. This imagery is symbolic of the shepherd's role as king and ruler over his flock. Assyrian kings also engaged in this practice of smashing vessels. See also Psalm 110:1-2.

22. "In Assyrian representations and in Psalm 2:8, military power and the shepherd's office are vested in the godhead. The representation of the king with a shepherd's staff is familiar amongst Assyrian sources. . . . Verse 9 alludes to the temple walls, rock walls and other depicted scene against which the king dashes his iron scepter. . . . Verses 10-12 deal with the exhortation to the nations to serve Yahweh. The psalm reaches a climax with the (messianic) king of Zion not turning to weapons, but to the word, in order to persuade the kings of the nations to take the road that leads to God's kingdom." Cas J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 68. Psalm 2 depicts a messianic king holding a rod of iron in verse 9, and in verses 10-12 that image is transformed from one that works like a weapon to the word of God that persuades the nations to take the

the rod that Christ was to hold as one of iron,<sup>23</sup> the record establishes that this was no common rod. A rod of iron conveys an image of a divine power that cannot be broken. Iron's strength and, at times, cosmic origin lent it a sense of power.<sup>24</sup> That the rod in Lehi's vision and David's psalm is a symbol of strength and heavenly power and authority is made clear by its being made of iron.<sup>25</sup> This idea is conveyed in the three other cases a rod of iron is mentioned in the Bible.<sup>26</sup> The Apostle John in the book of

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path that leads to God. This shift matches what Nephi saw in vision and the explanation that Nephi gave to his brothers concerning the rod of iron that their father had seen in his dream. See 1 Nephi 11:25; 15:23–24.

23. There are examples of staffs being plated in precious metals starting in the second millennium BCE. See Ambros, "Curved Staff in the Ancient Near East," 132.

24. For example, the Egyptian word for iron, *Benipe*, is represented by the hieroglyphical inscriptions of the squared stone and the heavens and is understood to mean the "stone of heaven." Basil Henry Cooper, "The Antiquity of the Use of the Metals, and Especially of Iron, among the Egyptians," *Report and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art* 2 (1867): 402–3. In another example, the Akkadian idiom "(cattle) of iron" paralleled the saying "(animals) which do not die" in a legal context. A. L. Oppenheim, "A Note on 'son barzel,'" *Israel Exploration Journal* 5, no. 2 (1955): 89–92. In a treaty widely distributed by the Assyrian King Esarhaddon around 660 BCE, it speaks of making the "ground like iron (so that) nothing can sprout from it" or, in other words, unbreakable. See Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty (VTE), paragraph 63, <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/saao/saao2/corpus>, SAA 02 006. In the ancient Near East, iron was initially of ornamental and symbolic value before being widely used for its metallurgic properties. W. Revell Phillips, "Metals of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 36–41, 82; Radomir Pleiner and Judith K. Bjorkman, "The Assyrian Iron Age: The History of Iron in the Assyrian Civilization," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 118, no. 3 (1974): 283–313; Paula M. McNutt, "Inquiry into the Significance of Iron Technology in Early Iron Age Palestine" (master's thesis, University of Montana, 1983) <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/2712>.

25. Iron in the scriptures is often related to the Lord's power and strength. See Deuteronomy 8:6–10; 33:25; Job 40:18; and Jeremiah 15:12. This is in contrast to Egypt being compared to a "staff of reed" in their support of the house of Israel (Ezekiel 29:6). In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Thanksgiving Hymn 11 (formerly 6) says, "I thank Thee, O Lord, for Thou art as a fortified wall to me, and as an iron bar against all destroyers. . . . Thou hast set my feet upon rock . . . that I may walk in the way of eternity and in the paths which Thou hast chosen." Geza Vermes, trans., *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 7th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 268. In Hebrew, the word for bar can also be translated as rod. Nephi said the rod of iron would protect against the attacks of the "adversary" or destroyer, who would "lead them away" from the path (1 Ne. 15:24).

26. Biblical scholar Margaret Barker proposes that the English translation of the Bible would be more accurate in conceptualizing the rod of iron in the context of a tool the Lord uses to shepherd the nations and that this harmonizes well with the Book of Mormon's use of the rod of iron. Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 69–82.

Revelation describes the royal scepter Christ uses to rule all the nations as a “rod of iron.”<sup>27</sup>

“And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father” (Rev. 2:27).

“And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron” (Rev. 12:5).<sup>28</sup>

“And he shall rule them with a rod of iron” (Rev. 19:15).<sup>29</sup>

In the context of the ancient Near East culture, to be king was to lead as the shepherd, and the rod functioned as a symbol of that leadership.<sup>30</sup> This conception of leadership is illustrated in the events associated with Nephi’s initial use of the word “rod” in his record. When an angel stops Laman and Lemuel from beating Nephi and Sam outside the city of Jerusalem, the angel establishes Nephi’s right to rule over his brothers by declaring, “Why do ye smite your younger brother with a rod? Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you” (1 Ne. 3:29). The rod wielded by Laman and Lemuel to beat their brothers is stilled, and the angel’s declaration of Nephi’s leadership figuratively passes the rod as such to Nephi.<sup>31</sup> Given the background from which Nephi emerged, it is possible that the next time a rod appears within his narrative, as part of Lehi’s vision, it can likewise be understood as a symbol of kingship and the right to rule. If this is the case, then it would follow that to see a rod of iron extending, which leads those who take hold of it to the tree of life, would be to see the anticipated Messiah working as the divine Shepherd-King to gather his flock. This image also has the potential to connect future readers of Nephi’s

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27. Nephi records that during his vision he was shown things that he was not permitted to write and that those things were to be written by the “apostle of the Lamb” and “that the name of the apostle of the Lamb was John” (1 Ne. 14:27). Further, the angel indicates that both Nephi’s record and John’s record are to be taken together, the one establishing the other, and both are to establish the “one Shepherd over all” (1 Ne. 13:41).

28. Nephi likewise sees a virgin bearing a child that an angel says is the Son of God, and his ministry is associated with a rod of iron (1 Ne. 11:20–25).

29. The Greek word *poimanei* is translated “rule” in the King James Version of the Bible, but the word means to act as a shepherd. The same word is also translated “feed” in the King James Version (Acts 20:28). James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, red letter ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 4165.

30. Early Christian art often depicts Christ holding a staff or rod when performing miracles such as turning water into wine. Lee M. Jefferson, “The Staff of Jesus in Early Christian Art,” *Religion and the Art* 14, no. 3 (2010): 221–51.

31. Isaiah connects the Lord’s word to a rod and staff that will beat down Assyria in Isaiah 30:31–32. See also Isaiah 14:29 for a rod that is used to smite and Val Larsen, “Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order,” *Journal of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007).



record to John the Revelator's vision, which describes Christ ruling with a rod of iron that has power over all other rods<sup>32</sup> as "Lord of lords and King of kings" (Rev. 17:14).<sup>33</sup> John speaks of Christ as the lamb of God who will shepherd his people to living water, emphasizing his mode of invitational leadership (Rev. 7:17).<sup>34</sup> Nephi would further see that Christ embodies the ideal Shepherd-King because he was willing to condescend below all things for the eternal welfare of the flock (1 Ne. 11:31–33).<sup>35</sup> As the Lamb, Christ successfully walked the path that leads to the tree of life, and in Lehi's vision the rod extending can be seen as an invitation to now "follow" him.<sup>36</sup> In this way, it is the rod of iron, with all that it implies in the ancient Near East, that can symbolize the invitation to "follow" the Shepherd-King to the fountain of living water and the tree of life.<sup>37</sup>

### Lehi's Dream and Shepherdding

Lehi's dream is essentially a pastoral dream. It engenders images of open fields with paths, trees, and flowing water. Further, its message is one of drawing people away from a flawed urban landscape to a more idyllic landscape. The dream was deeply personal to Lehi because it first dealt with drawing his immediate family to safety. However, more broadly, it dealt with the necessity to safely gather all the inhabitants of the world to the place most desirable for their eternal well-being.<sup>38</sup> In this way, it fits well within the broader context of the Israelites as a people in need

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32. This image is also conveyed in the story of Moses and his interactions with the sorcerers of Pharaoh. See Exodus 7:10–12.

33. Pike, "Jesus, the Great Shepherd-King," 61–86.

34. Nephi would refer to Christ as a Lamb more than any other place in scripture (58 times).

35. Marc Zvi Brettler, "God Is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series 76 (1989): 36.

36. This idea is represented in the scriptures when they speak of Christ "succoring" his people (Heb. 2:13–18; Alma 7:12; D&C 62:1), defined as giving assistance or support, a function of the shepherd's rod.

37. In Nephi's vision, it was only after seeing the ministry of Christ that he was shown the rod of iron. Those who followed Christ's words were "led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life" and, as in Lehi's vision, fell "down at his feet," an action traditionally reserved for gods or kings. See 1 Nephi 8:30; 11:24–25.

38. Like Lehi, once Enos had tasted the joy of Christ (the tree) via his reception of forgiveness, he desired that his family should join him, and he began to plead on behalf of his brethren the Nephites. After he had received assurance that the Lord would visit his brethren, he began to worry for the welfare of the Lamanites—or in other words, those not of his family but the other inhabitants of the world. Enos would be reassured by the Lord that by the power of his "holy arm" or that which extends the rod, the Lamanites could find "salvation" or the tree of life (Enos 1:13).



of a shepherd to gather them. If we recognize the vision as a pastoral dream, it invites the reader to view the Lord as the Shepherd, similar to Psalm 23.<sup>39</sup>

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:1–4).

Like the shepherd of David’s psalm, it is only when Lehi realized his complete dependence on the Lord and pleaded “that [the Lord] would have mercy on [him], according to the multitude of his tender mercies” (1 Ne. 8:8) that he is delivered from the darkness that engulfed him. Lehi’s desire to follow the Good Shepherd over anyone else would,<sup>40</sup> for him, be but the first step in obtaining the fruit of the tree.<sup>41</sup> It was in crying out for the Lord’s mercy in prayer that Lehi finally obtained the tree.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, tender mercies are manifest in the shepherd’s ability to hear and carefully provide for every want of his flock. Like David, Lehi experienced the comfort of having the Lord as a personal shepherd, guiding his way.<sup>43</sup> As such, their narratives share many of the same elements:

David’s Psalm	Lehi’s Dream
The valley of the shadow of death	Dark and dreary waste
Restoreth my soul	Filled my soul
Lie down	Fell down
Green pastures	Large and spacious field
Leadeth me beside the still waters	Extend along the bank of the river
Leadeth me in paths of righteousness	Obtain the path which led unto the tree
Thy rod and staff <sup>44</sup>	Rod of iron

39. See Genesis 49:24; Psalms 79:13; 95:6–7; 100:3–4; Ezekiel 34:11–15, 31.

40. I would like to thank Terryl Givens and Loren Spendlove for pointing out that the person Lehi first encounters in his dream may not have been the Lord. It is when Lehi follows this person that he finds himself in a “dark and dreary waste” (1 Ne. 8:5–8).

41. It is also possible that the spirit guide in the early part of Nephi’s vision was also Christ. Nephi sees that this guide is replaced by an angel at the moment he sees the virgin holding the Son of God in her arms (1 Ne. 11:12–21).

42. The blind man Bartimaeus was in darkness until he cried out to Jesus, the “Son of David,” for mercy. Jesus restored his sight, and Bartimaeus followed him. See Mark 10:46–52.

43. This is in contrast to what Isaiah describes will happen to those that try to walk by the light of their own light; “ye shall lie down in sorrow” (Isa. 50:11 and 2 Ne. 7:11).

44. In Psalm 23, the Hebrew word translated as rod is *shebet* (Strong, 7626), which can mean rod, staff, club, scepter, or tribe. The Hebrew word translated as staff is *mishènah* (Strong, 4938), which can mean support or staff but is never translated as rod.

Lehi's dream taps into a rich tradition that utilizes the symbols of a pastoral life and milieu that derive from the Israelites' identity as a shepherding people.<sup>45</sup> To the Israelites, the shepherd and shepherding are symbols of the Lord and his covenant to gather his people; the rod is his tool for doing that work.<sup>46</sup> Fittingly, the anticipated Messiah would first be proclaimed by the shepherds that were tending their flocks in the field. The lambs they cared for were a similitude of the "Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep" (Heb. 13:20). Jesus the Messiah would proclaim, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine" (John 10:14) and "the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Christ is the Good Shepherd, and "he gathereth his children from the four quarters of the earth; and he numbereth his sheep, and they know him; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep,"<sup>47</sup> and in him they shall find pasture" (1 Ne. 22:25).<sup>48</sup>

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied of a day when the Lord, in his role as shepherd, would gather his people and inspect and number the sheep<sup>49</sup> by passing them under his rod.<sup>50</sup> "And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant" (Ezek. 20:37).<sup>51</sup>

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45. Shepherds of the Old Testament: Abel (Gen. 4:2), Abraham (Gen. 21:28), Lot (Gen. 13:5), Isaac (Gen. 26:12–14), Jacob (Gen. 31:4), Rachel (Gen. 29:9), Laban (Gen. 30:31), Jacob's twelve sons (Gen. 47:3), Moses (Ex. 2:17), David (1 Sam. 17:34), Saul (1 Sam. 21:7), and Amos (Amos 1:1). For a synopsis of shepherding in the Book of Mormon, see Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 244–45.

46. To the Nephites, the resurrected Christ said, "And I will remember the covenant which I have made with my people; and I have covenanted with them that I would gather them together" (3 Ne. 20:29; see also Isa. 49:9–11; Ezek. 20:37; 1 Ne. 21:9–11).

47. See Isaiah 40:11 and Micah 7:14. See also notes 19 and 26.

48. For more examples of Jesus Christ as the Shepherd see also Mark 14:27; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4; 1 Nephi 13:41; Mormon 5:17.

49. This is similar to the parable of the shepherd separating the sheep and the goats. See Matthew 25:31–33.

50. Similar to sheep passing under the rod of a shepherd, a king, in much the same way, grants his subjects justice and mercy with the touch of his sword. In the scriptures, the sword is often used as a symbol in much the same way as a rod, and, at times, the words are even used together. See Exodus 4:15–17; 5:1–3; Ezekiel 21:13; Revelation 19:15. The sword is also compared to the rod by its relation to the word of God (Isa. 11:4; Eph. 6:17; Alma 31:5; D&C 11:22).

51. Ezekiel also received a revelation that relates to joining two different "branches" of the tribes of Israel: Judah and Joseph with their companies (Ezek. 37:15–17). It is worth noting that Lehi taught his sons that "the house of Israel was compared unto an olive tree" (1 Ne. 15:12) and that they were a branch of Joseph, whose records, along with that of

With the aid of a rod or staff, the Lord is able to guide the sheep into the bond of the covenant. A modern shepherd, Phillip Keller, speaks of using a staff to guide his sheep in this way:

Being stubborn creatures, sheep often get into the most ridiculous and preposterous dilemmas. I have seen my own sheep, greedy for one more mouthful of green grass, climb down steep cliffs where they slipped and fell into the sea. Only my long shepherd's staff could lift them out of the water and back onto solid ground again. . . . I have seen a shepherd use his staff to guide his sheep gently into a new path or through some gate along dangerous, difficult routes. He does not use it actually to beat the beast. Rather, the tip of the long slender stick is laid gently against the animal's side and the pressure applied guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go. Thus the sheep is reassured of its proper path.<sup>52</sup>

For millennia the rod and staff have been critical for both protecting the flock from danger and caring for their needs. Though the rod and staff were distinct tools in the hands of the shepherd, the scriptural narratives connect the two in word and symbolism.<sup>53</sup> Both are fashioned from the branch of a tree, and the Hebrew words for both (*matteh* and *shebet*) are also interchangeable with the word for branch.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps

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Judah's records, would work together to remind Israel of the Lord's covenant with them. When the two sticks of Ezekiel's prophecy are joined end to end in the hand of the Lord, the imagery becomes that of a single rod/staff or the word of God (records of Judah and Joseph) in the hand of the Shepherd, to aid in the gathering of Israel.

52. Phillip Keller would also say, "I have been fascinated to see how a shepherd will actually hold his staff against the side of some sheep that is a special pet or favorite, simply so that they 'are in touch.' They will walk along this way almost as though it were 'hand-in-hand.'" Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Minneapolis, Minn.: World Wide Publications, 1970), 100–103.

53. John A. Tvedtnes, "Rod and Sword as the Word of God," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 32–39; R. Raymond Lloyd, "The Staff: More Than a Walking Stick," *Biblical Illustrator* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2014): 89–93.

54. *Matteh* (Strong, 4294) and *shebet* (Strong, 7626) constitute the bulk of the instances where a word is translated into English as "staff" or "rod" in the Bible. See also Ezek. 19:10–11. The Egyptian word *mdw*, pronounced *mateh* in Lehi's day, sounds much like *mattah*, and like *mattah* can mean "staff" or "rod" but also means "to speak." This is a connection Nephi made when he said the rod of iron was the word of God. See Matthew L. Bowen, "What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?" *Insights* 25, no. 2 (2005): 2–3; see also Book of Mormon Central Team with contribution by Jeffery M. Bradshaw, "The Names of Moses as 'Keywords' (Moses 1:25)," *Book of Moses Essay #39: Moses 1 in Its Ancient Context* (2021), <https://interpreterfoundation.org/book-of-moses-essays-039/>.

because of this linguistic connection, there is a resonance with the way the shepherd uses the rod and how these words can describe the different branches or tribes, which are to be grafted back to a mother tree.<sup>55</sup> “Thy brethren also of the tribe [*matteh*] of Levi, the tribe [*shebet*] of thy father, bring thou with thee, that they may be joined unto thee” (Num. 18:2).

As a rod or staff, the iron rod not only helps to guide an individual toward the tree of life but simultaneously draws upon the image of the scattered branches of Israel themselves returning home, gathered and grafted into their mother tree.<sup>56</sup> Thus, in Lehi’s vision, when he wanted his family to join him at the tree, the appearance of the iron rod extending before him carries additional nuance and meaning when it is understood not as a handrail but rather as the guiding rod or staff of the shepherd.<sup>57</sup>

The extension of the iron rod, in Lehi’s vision, has its parallel in the scriptures with the word “stretched.”<sup>58</sup> Throughout the scriptures stretch and extend are used to symbolize the support the Lord provided in gathering Israel.<sup>59</sup> This gathering can involve action taken to correct Israel

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55. See Isaiah 11.

56. This is evident in the extensive genealogies found in the scriptures. In the Book of Mormon, the recording of the genealogies was considered important as part of the sacred record. See 1 Nephi 5:14; 19:1–2; Jarom 1:1; Omni 1:1; and Alma 37:2–3. See also Jacob 5 and James E. Faulconer, “The Olive Tree and the Work of God: Jacob 5 and Romans 11,” in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob Five*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 347–66.

57. In Egyptian, the verb *m3* means both to extend and to lead, guide, or direct. See David Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 26 (2017): 269–96, for more discussion on potential wordplays related to the words *rod* and *extend*. There is also a potential early relationship between the word *shepherd* and the term *stretch out*. See W. F. Albright, “Notes on Egypto-Semitic Etymology, II,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 34, no. 4 (1918): 215–55.

58. Extended and stretched are often translated from the same Hebrew word, *natah* (Strong, 5186). They were also understood to be synonymous in Joseph Smith’s time. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “extend,” accessed June 3, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Extend>. John Gee, “A Different Way of Seeing the Hand of the Lord,” *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 113–27. Further, the Hebrew noun for rod, *Matteh* (Strong, 4294), comes from a word that means “stretched out,” which would reinforce the play on words Nephi is making in his record.

59. Doctrine and Covenants 3:8 connects the extended arm of the Lord with the support the iron rod provided against the fiery darts of the adversary (see 1 Ne. 15:24; see also Isa. 14:29). The revelation was given after the loss of the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, which presumably contained accounts of Lehi’s and Nephi’s vision.

and at other times to comfort and protect.<sup>60</sup> Lehi's contemporary Jeremiah speaks of the Lord stretching out his arm to bring the Israelites out of Egypt: "And [thou] hast brought forth thy people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs, and with wonders, and with a strong hand, and with a stretched out arm" (Jer. 32:21).

Jeremiah draws on the symbolism of the power and authority of the rod in Moses's outstretched hand as he protected the children of Israel during their exodus from Egypt. In contrast to showing divine mercy, the Lord can also stretch out his rod in a show of divine justice.<sup>61</sup> When the Lord speaks of stretching out his hand in justice, it is usually in the context of administering punishment.<sup>62</sup> "Therefore, is the anger of the Lord kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them; and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still" (2 Ne. 15:25; see also 2 Ne. 19:12; 20:4).<sup>63</sup>

Alternatively, in the scriptures when the Lord "extends" something, it never implies a punishment. On the contrary, "extending" always expresses the Lord's mercy, such as the Lord's arm being extended, or the extension of a promise or an offering of peace.<sup>64</sup> It is noteworthy that many uses of the word "extend" throughout the Book of Mormon are connected to symbols found in Lehi's dream: the tree of life, holding tight, the shepherd, and filled with joy.<sup>65</sup>

"When I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea,

60. See also Numbers 24:17; Psalm 2:9; Proverbs 22:8; Isaiah 10:15; 14:5; 28:27; and Jeremiah 48:17.

61. Pharaoh's crook is used like the staff for support or to guide, and the flail is used like the rod for defending or punishing. See Psalm 89:13–14; Jacob 4:10; Mosiah 5:15; Alma 26:20; 32:16; 3 Nephi 26:5.

62. See Exodus 3:20; 6:6; Deuteronomy 11:2; Isaiah 5:25; Ezekiel 14:9–13; 20:33–34; Mosiah 12:2.

63. Punishment is also the Lord's intent when he speaks of his hand being stretched out still, meaning his anger is still not turned away.

64. "Extend" is a unique word in scripture and is only found fourteen times in the Book of Mormon, four times in the King James Version of the Bible, and once in the Doctrine and Covenants. See Mosiah 1:14; 16:12; 29:20; Alma 9:16, 24; 17:15; 19:36; 29:10; Ezra 7:28; 9:9; Psalm 109:12; Isaiah 66:12; Doctrine and Covenants 3:10.

65. Daniel Belnap, "'There Arose a Mist of Darkness': The Narrative of Lehi's Dream in Christ's Theophany," in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 75–106.

then do I remember his merciful arm which he extended towards me” (Alma 29:10).

“Cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you” (Jacob 6:5).

“Yea, I say unto you, that in the latter times the promises of the Lord have been extended to our brethren, the Lamanites. . . . And this is according to the prophecy, that they shall again be brought to the true knowledge, which is the knowledge of their Redeemer, and their great and true shepherd, and be numbered among his sheep” (Hel. 15:12–13).

Additionally in the Book of Mormon the word “extend” is frequently used in relation to repentance, an act that implies a turning away from sin.<sup>66</sup> In this case, what the Lord extends provides support or protection from the dangers of sin, as symbolized by the filthy water, and comfort and reassurance along the path to the tree of life.<sup>67</sup>

“Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life” (Alma 5:33–34).<sup>68</sup>

Before Lehi sees the rod extend, he is occupied with the desire to gather his family at the tree of life. Seeing his two sons Laman and Lemuel, who had placed themselves near the river of filthy water,<sup>69</sup> Lehi called out to them to turn and come away from the water, to repent, and join him at the tree. Sadly, he says, “they would not come unto me and partake of the fruit” (1 Ne. 8:18).<sup>70</sup> In that moment, Lehi experienced the painful reality of a son or daughter realizing their agency and refusing to answer the call

66. The Hebrew word *shub* (Strong, 7725) is translated as “repent” and conveys the idea of turning back or returning.

67. Sin is the “awful gulf, which separated the wicked from the tree of life and . . . God” (1 Ne. 15:28). There is a Hebrew verb, *yatsa* (Strong, 3331), which is translated as “extend” in only a few translations of the Bible, that would work well in this case to convey the act of providing protection or comfort. It carries with it an underlying idea of “to come out” or “bring out.”

68. See also Jacob 6:5; Mosiah 16:12; Alma 5:33; 9:15–16, 24–25; 17:15; 19:36.

69. It was during Nephi’s vision that he learned that the water was filthy (1 Ne. 12:16). Lehi didn’t actually see that the river of water was filthy because, as Nephi said, “so much was his mind swallowed up in other things” (1 Ne. 15:27). This could be related to his oldest sons’ unwillingness to come to him, something that made him “fear exceedingly” (1 Ne. 8:4) for Laman and Lemuel.

70. It is possible that the inability of Laman and Lemuel’s to understand their father’s teachings was due to a cultural revolution taking place in Jerusalem during their lifetime, which put forward the idea that the Lord’s word or rod was no longer found in visions like Lehi and Nephi had experienced. See Neal Rappleye, “The Deuteronomist Reforms

of a pleading parent. It is at that heartbreaking moment when Lehi may have perceived not just a rod of iron that could lead his family to the tree but actually the Good Shepherd extending a rod of iron to guide and protect his wayward sons. This then changes the image from one of heartless metal to one of personal warmth as Lehi once again puts his trust in the tender mercies of the only one with power to rescue us all: Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd.<sup>71</sup>

### The Rod and the Word of God

In Lehi's dream, those who were safely gathered to the tree were those "holding fast" to the rod of iron (1 Ne. 8:30).<sup>72</sup> This act could be associated with "hearken[ing] unto the voice of the good shepherd" (Hel. 7:18). Nephi records that he saw the rod of iron, which his "father had seen" (1 Ne. 11:25), only after beholding the ministry of the Son of God. He goes on to say that the rod of iron "was the word of God"<sup>73</sup> and that it

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and Lehi's Family Dynamics: A Social Context for the Rebellions of Laman and Lemuel," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 16 (2015): 87–99.

71. Ironically, when Laman and Lemuel were threatened with literal drowning, they were willing to repent (1 Ne. 18:20; see also Mosiah 16:12). King David likewise pled for the Lord to seek after him when he, like a sheep, went astray (Ps. 119:176).

72. Lehi indicates that the individuals always "caught hold of the end of the rod of iron" and then pressed forward either "clinging" or "holding fast" to it (1 Ne. 8:24, 30). Webster's 1828 dictionary defines the adjectival form of "fast" as "set, stopped, fixed, or pressed close," while the adverbial form is defined as "immutably": something that holds fast is something that holds in an immovable manner (American Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. "fast," accessed June 3, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Fast>). To hold fast to the end of a rod and then press forward are two separate, though connected actions. While it is possible to read this description as holding onto a railing while one moves along it, in this reading, the hold or grip actually goes through a series of tightening and loosening as the hand slides along the rod. In contrast, to hold fast to the rod and then press forward implies that the grip is not loosened in the act of pressing forward. In other words, the person grips the rod, and the rod—being a discrete, mobile, tool—remains in that grip, which does not change, through the action of pressing forward. This understanding seems to be reflected in what Nephi would say at the end of his record: "Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ" (2 Ne. 31:20).

73. Loren Spendlove's observation related to the phrase "word of God" is insightful here. He says, "The word of the Lord and the word of God are common expressions in the Bible. Frequently, these phrases refer to the written or spoken covenantal words of God to his people as given through the prophets. However, exegetical study of these expressions has revealed that they also serve as metonyms, or substitutions for the name of God himself. In this paper I explore these metonymous usages of the Word of the Lord and the Word of God as stand-ins for Christ in the Bible and in the Book of Mormon. . . . In the Book of Mormon we encounter several events and stories in which *the Word of the Lord* or *the Word of God* can be profitably interpreted as direct references to Christ." Loren Spendlove,



led “to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life” (1 Ne. 11:25). The narrative of the shepherd, the rod, and its relation to the word of God, finds its fullest expression in the life of Moses.<sup>74</sup> Nephi draws on the Exodus tradition when framing his family’s journey out of Jerusalem and the Lord’s shepherding them to the promised land.<sup>75</sup> Moses’s story of the Exodus works as a master narrative of how God works to rescue his people and shepherd them to a promised land.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, a better understanding of the rod in Moses’s exodus narrative adds important context for the rod as Lehi and Nephi saw it in vision and its connection to the word of God.<sup>77</sup> In Moses’s theophany, the rod played a prominent role in his transition from a shepherd in the service of his father-in-law<sup>78</sup> to a shepherd in the service of Jehovah, gathering Israel.<sup>79</sup>

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“The Word of the Lord as a Metonym for Christ,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 137–66, emphasis in original.

74. In Lehi’s vision, it is possible see that one of the roles of the rod was to draw out those caught in the filthy water, a meaning given to the name of Moses by Pharaoh’s daughter (Ex. 2:10). See also Nathan J. Arp, “Joseph Knew First: Moses, the Egyptian Son,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 187–98; Mark J. Johnson, “The Lost Prologue: Reading Moses Chapter One as an Ancient Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 145–86.

75. Bruce J. Boehm, “Wanderers in the Promised Land: A Study of the Exodus Motif in the Book of Mormon and the Holy Bible,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 187–203.

76. Just prior to the Exodus, the Israelites were told to prepare for the Lord of the Passover by each individual taking the “staff in your hand” (Ex. 12:11).

77. Nephi’s equating the rod of iron to protection against the “fiery darts of the adversary” could be an allusion to Moses’s rod and its power over Pharaoh and the god Ra when freeing the Israelites (1 Ne. 15:24). The snake on Pharaoh’s headdress was a representation of the goddess Uraeus, who defended Ra by spitting fiery darts at the enemies of Ra. John Coleman Darnell, “The Apotropaic Goddess in the Eye,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 24 (1997): 35–48; Karen Randolph Joines, “Winged Serpents in Isaiah’s Inaugural Vision,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86, no. 4 (1967): 410–15. See also Isaiah 50:8 and 2 Nephi 7:8.

78. The significance of Moses’s rod is expanded in the extracanonical traditions of the Jews, which teach that the Lord took a branch of the tree of knowledge and gave it to Adam as a sign that he, after his fall, was not cast off forever. Some writings further elaborate that the branch may have been made of pure sapphire, as an expression of God’s light (Ex. 24:10; Ezek. 1:26). That same rod was passed down through the Patriarchs until Moses received the rod from his father-in-law Jethro. The rod reflects God’s desire to bless his children with light and knowledge throughout the generations. Christine Meilicke, “Moses’s Staff and the Return of the Dead,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1999): 345–72.

79. The biblical narrative of the exodus often refers to two different rods, one that Moses used and one that Aaron used. However, this distinction is not always clear (see Ex. 7:20), and in the symbology of the rod, they are seen as one and the same rod, an



“And calling upon the name of God, he beheld his glory again, for it was upon him; and he heard a voice, saying: Blessed art thou, Moses, for I, the Almighty, have chosen thee, and thou shalt be made stronger than many waters; for they shall obey thy command as if thou wert God. And lo, I am with thee, even unto the end of thy days; for thou shalt deliver my people from bondage, even Israel my chosen” (Moses 1:25–26).

And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee. And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught<sup>80</sup> it, and it became a rod in his hand: That they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. (Ex. 4:1–5)

The Lord endowed Moses with power in the form of a rod and charged him, with his brother Aaron, to gather the children of Israel and bring them out of bondage. Consistent with the rod as both a symbol of divine justice and mercy, the Lord would command Moses to stretch out or extend his rod in aiding the Israelite’s journey to the promised land. “And the Lord spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch forth thine hand with thy rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:5).

In another instance, the Lord asked Moses to have Aaron stretch out the rod to bring forth lice to afflict the Egyptians. However, in this case, as in Nephi’s account of the rod, the text does not explicitly identify a hand or arm stretching out while holding the rod. Instead, the arm or hand holding the rod is implicit in the action of stretching itself. “And the Lord said unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the land, that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:16).

Finally, after the Lord smote Pharaoh and the Egyptians seven more times, the Israelites were set free. Moses, the shepherd of Israel, with his rod gathered the Lord’s flock and brought them to the banks of the Red

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expression of Jehovah’s divine authority and, ultimately, best identified as “the rod of God” (Ex. 4:20; 17:9).

80. *Chazaq* (Strong, 2388) can also mean to take hold, grasp, or bind and its relation to a rod in this context parallels those who took hold of the iron rod in Lehi’s dream (see 1 Ne. 8:24–30). Isaiah uses this same verb to describe those who take hold of the Lord’s strength, which causes them to take root and fill the world with fruit (see Isa. 27:5–6).

Sea. Pursued by the armies of Pharaoh, Moses once again raised the rod to demonstrate God's power and delivered the children of Israel from the advancing armies.<sup>81</sup>

"And the Lord said unto Moses, . . . lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea. . . . And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back" (Ex. 14:15–21).

The Israelites had been gathered and freed from an adversary that had held them captive for over four hundred years. After traveling for three days in the wilderness, they complained<sup>82</sup> because the water was bitter.<sup>83</sup> The Lord instructed Moses to take the branch of a tree and cast it into the water to make it sweet. This act was to prove to the Israelites that the Lord would provide for them if they would "diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord" (Ex. 15:26). Later Moses would use the rod to provide life-sustaining water for the children of Israel as they journeyed in the wilderness.<sup>84</sup>

"And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel" (Ex. 17:5–6).<sup>85</sup>

81. On the third day of Creation, God gathered the water into one place and made the dry land appear (Gen. 1:9). When Moses lifted up the rod, the waters were pushed back, and the dry land appeared. Moses's act rescued the Israelites from the armies of Pharaoh and, like God's word in the Creation story, made pasture possible for their flocks (see Isa. 50:2 and 2 Ne. 7:2).

82. After a three-day journey in the wilderness, on the same side of the Red Sea where the Israelites found themselves, Laman and Lemuel likewise complained because Lehi had followed the commandment of the Lord (1 Ne. 2:2–12).

83. Jesus Christ was willing to drink the bitter cup (Matt. 20:22; 3 Ne. 11:11) both in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:27–28, 39, 42) and on Golgotha (John 19:28–30). See also Doctrine and Covenants 19:18–19.

84. See Isaiah 48:21; 49:9–11; John 4:11–15; 1 Nephi 17:29; 20:21; 21:9–11.

85. It is worth noting that when Nephi tells the story of Moses's dividing of the Red Sea and smiting the rock to bring forth water (1 Ne. 4:2; 17:26–29), he substitutes the word "rod," as found in the biblical account, with "word." This substitution suggests Nephi connects the "rod of iron," which he learned is "the word of God" (1 Ne. 11:25) with the rod Moses used to lead the Israelites in the wilderness. Nephi next equates their being led in the wilderness not by Moses but by the Lord leading them "according to his word" (1 Ne. 17:30–31) or the "rod of iron."

The water, which came out of the rock, moved with the Israelites for nearly forty years as they wandered in the wilderness. When it finally ran dry, the Israelites murmured rather than “diligently hearken[ing] to the voice of the Lord” for their support (Ex. 15:26). Up until this point, Moses’s rod had been a symbol of support to the Israelites. Like a shepherd’s rod, Moses’s rod had gathered the Israelites, protected them from their enemies, and led them to pure water (Ps. 77:20). Now that the Israelites needed the Lord’s support again, he would make it clear to them that he was the power behind the symbol of the rod. This time, instead of commanding Moses to strike a rock with his rod to bring forth water, the Lord said to Moses, “Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock” (Num. 20:8).

The rod was a symbol of the power of the Lord’s word, and by *speaking* to the rock to bring forth water, that lesson was made clear to all Israel. With the rod in hand, Moses gathered together the Israelites, but frustrated by their rebellion, Moses struck the rock twice to bring forth water. In doing this, Moses disobeyed the commandant of the Lord to “speak” to the rock. Because of this, Moses and Aaron were not permitted to enter the promised land. As a servant in the hands of the Lord, Moses had failed to “smite the earth with the rod of his mouth” (Isa. 11:4, see also 2 Ne. 21:4).<sup>86</sup> In doing so, Moses’s own words, “Hear now, ye rebels” (Num. 20:10), would condemn him (see Jacob 1:7–8). Moses’s actions had failed to teach the Israelites what should have been painfully clear: that the power and authority of the “rod” of God is the same as the “word” of God.<sup>87</sup> Significantly, the first reference in the Bible relating leadership to shepherding came when Moses asked God to make Joshua the leader

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86. The apocryphal book Psalms of Solomon speaks of “an iron rod to shatter all their substance, to destroy the lawless nations by the word of his mouth” (Psalms of Solomon 17:24, <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/31-pssal-nets.pdf>). Hittite legal texts of the sixteenth to thirteenth century BCE state that “the words of the *tabarna*, the Great King, are of iron, not to be rejected, not to be broken” (Oppenheim, “Note on ‘son barzel,’” 91). Similarly, Nephi would tell his brothers that the unbreakable word or “iron rod . . . was the word of God” (1 Ne. 15:23–24; see also Ps. 17:4–7).

87. The Egyptian word *mdw* can mean both rod/staff or word/speak. The Israelites had just spent four hundred years in Egypt, and Nephi wrote his record in reformed Egyptian, so both Nephi and Moses were probably aware of this connection. See also Proverbs 10:13; 14:3; Ezekiel 20:37; Zechariah 11:10, 14; Ephesians 6:17; and Doctrine and Covenants 19:15. Bowen, “What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?” Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1962), 122.

of the people after his own death, so “that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd” (Num. 27:17).

The Exodus context for the rod broadens the conceptual space of the rod itself: in Moses’s hands, the rod is an active power effecting change in the world via the liberation, protection, and guidance of Israel.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, the Exodus narrative associates the rod with the word of God in its power and efficacy. Given Nephi’s own clear understanding of his family’s journey in terms of the Exodus narrative, it is reasonable to posit a sympathetic resonance between the rod of Moses and the rod of iron in his and his father’s visions.<sup>89</sup> This is reflected in the Lord’s words to Nephi, “I will also be your light in the wilderness; and I will prepare the way before you, . . . ye shall be led towards the promised land; and ye shall know that it is by me that ye are led” (1 Ne. 17:13). Moses with his rod tried to take Israel to the mountain of the Lord to experience his glory (see Ex. 19:3–11). Likewise, in Lehi’s vision it is possible to see Christ extending a rod, or his word, to help light the way on the ascent back to the tree of life.<sup>90</sup> As such, Lehi’s visions play out as a reversal of the story of Adam and Eve.<sup>91</sup> Adam and Eve move *from* the tree of life to the lone and dreary wilderness. In contrast, Lehi’s vision shows that Christ, with his word or his rod, can shepherd us *back to* the tree of life. Significantly, in this reversal we are no longer a lone man at the tree of life but gather as families as Lehi experienced. If we see the rod of iron in Lehi’s dream in this way, Christ with his iron rod does what no other rod in antiquity did. By offering all that will lay hold of the rod the opportunity to ascend “to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life,” Christ makes possible to all what was once only reserved for gods and kings (1 Ne. 11:25). The extending of a rod of iron can be seen as a symbolic gesture by Christ

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88. We see this reflected in the “Song of the Sea” that Moses sang after the Lord delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians. In that song, three verbs are phonetically related: *natiata* “You stretched out,” *nahita* “You led forth,” and *neihalta* “You guided.” See Exodus 15:12–13.

89. See 1 Nephi 4:2; 17:26–30; 2 Nephi 3:17; 25:20.

90. Jehovah’s word, in the beginning, brought light to a world in darkness. That same word was symbolized by the rod that brought welcome light to Lehi in his dream, and Christ likewise offers to bring light. “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). See also John 1:4–9; 12:35–36, 46; Revelation 21:11, 23–24.

91. Corbin T. Volluz, “Lehi’s Dream of the Tree of Life: Springboard to Prophecy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 14–38; David Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 26 (2017): 269–96.

that invites all who are willing to trust his unbreakable word to join him in becoming kings and queens in godly sociality.

## Conclusion

All specific references to a rod in the Book of Mormon end after the first two books of Nephi. However, when the rod of iron in the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon is seen as a tool actively utilized by Christ to guide the children of Israel along the covenant path, allusions to that extension of the rod of iron can be seen throughout the text.<sup>92</sup> This active extension is significantly illustrated in the book's central event: the visit of the resurrected Christ to the descendants of Lehi.<sup>93</sup> In this visit, Christ describes his atoning sacrifice in terms of extension: "Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me. Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God" (3 Ne. 9:14–15; see also 1 Ne. 8:24, 30; 11:25; 15:23–24).

Some time after hearing his voice, the people worked their way to the temple where Christ appeared to them.<sup>94</sup> Significantly, when Christ appeared to them there, he first "stretched forth his hand" (3 Ne. 11:9) in a gesture that resonates with the extension of the shepherd's rod. The result of this act allowed the people to witness "for themselves" and then "they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him" (3 Ne. 11:16–17), just as those who reached the tree of life after "continually holding

92. For example, when Mormon speaks of laying hold of the word of God (the rod of iron extended by the Lord in Lehi's and Nephi's visions) in Mormon 7:8, he creates a unified record that begins and ends with an inclusio around the motif of Jesus Christ as the Lord and Shepherd. Nephi's record likewise contains an inclusio that starts with the vision of the rod of iron in 1 Nephi 8 and ends by revisiting that vision and the rod of iron in 2 Nephi 31:10, 17–21. For other examples alluding to the rod of iron, see Jacob 6:5–8; Enos 1; Alma 5:33–60; 26:15; 36:16–22; and Helaman 3:29; 15:8–13.

93. Daniel L. Belnap, "Even as Our Father Lehi Saw': Lehi's Dream as Nephite Cultural Narrative," in *The Things Which My Father Saw: Approaches to Lehi's Dream and Nephi's Vision*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap, Gaye Strathearn, and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 214–39.

94. Joseph Smith's First Vision shares many of the same elements as Lehi's dream and Christ's appearance to Lehi's descendants after his resurrection. For example, Joseph found himself in darkness and was delivered from the darkness by the word of God. He also beheld God and his Son in a grove of trees (tree of life) and approached God on his knees (fell down). See Joseph Smith—History 1:15–17.

fast” (1 Ne. 8:30) to the iron rod in Lehi’s dream.<sup>95</sup> In each case, reading the text in terms of active extension produces a pattern of individual witness accompanied by the witness’s own embodied act of devotion and worship. Additionally, each event underscores the theme of gathering family members to provide them with their own opportunity to participate. Lehi wished for his family to eat the fruit from the tree of life (see 1 Ne. 8:12), and later the people who gathered at Bountiful saw their little ones “encircled about” (3 Ne. 17:24) with the blessings of heaven. This act of divine blessing and acceptance experienced at the resurrected Christ’s appearance to Lehi’s descendants is, at its heart, the very thing Lehi desired his “family should partake” of (1 Ne. 8:12) after he tasted the fruit of the tree of life.

When the rod of iron is conceptualized in this way, the sweetness of the fruit one obtains after reaching the tree of life grows out of an appreciation for our guide and Shepherd-King, Christ.<sup>96</sup> He personally extends the end of his rod to guide each of us as we make our ascent to the tree of life. The rod can still provide security and support, but as a mobile tool in the hand of a loving guide, it does so without the assumptions of fixity created in the handrail reading.<sup>97</sup> If the rod is no longer secured as a rail along one specific location, then the way to the tree will be unique for each of us. Furthermore, once we obtain the path, by way of the rod and the help of the Savior, our experience and progress along the covenant path will likewise be unique to each of us. This then changes the nature of the path. Instead of a handrail along a well-worn, singular path, the rod is capable of guiding us on numerous crisscrossing, overlapping, but distinctly individual paths.<sup>98</sup> While the destination and the direction

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95. Proskynesis or the act of falling down or prostrating oneself in the presence of a king is well attested in the ancient Near East and throughout the Book of Mormon. Nephi said, “Christ is the Holy One of Israel; wherefore ye must bow down before him, and worship him” (2 Ne. 25:29). In the case of Lehi’s vision, it was the group described as a “multitude” (1 Ne. 8:30), which fell down after making it to the tree and did not later fall away. A “multitude” is also used to describe the group that fell down at the feet of Jesus in John’s apocryphal vision (Rev. 7:9–10) and of the Nephites after their conversion in the time of Jacob and King Benjamin (Jacob 7:21; Mosiah 4:1). Matthew L. Bowen, “And Behold, They Had Fallen to the Earth: An Examination of Proskynesis in the Book of Mormon,” *Studia Antiqua* 4, no. 1 (2005): 91–110.

96. See Exodus 15:13, 17; Psalm 73:23–24; John 14:6; Ephesians 1:20–23; 2:18–19; Hebrews 7:25; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 Nephi 17:12–14; and Alma 32:42–43; 36:18–22.

97. The rod can also be seen as a sort of measuring device for our life’s journey. See Abram, “New Look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Rings,” 15–16; and Nelson, “Rod of Iron in Lehi’s Dream,” 52.

98. This reading provides support for the reading that describes the path in Lehi’s dream as “strait” instead of “straight.” Strait means both narrow and close and intimate

remain the same, because of the covenants we make, following the path under the guidance of Christ and his rod becomes both a commitment to keep moving, even when one feels lost or uncertain, and a commitment to respond to the guidance and direction received during the journey as we “hear” the voice of the Lord. Additionally, in this interpretive framework, the rod itself is never beyond our reach because Christ is never distant.<sup>99</sup> Further, we are never alone in the darkness when we take hold of the rod and trust in the grace of Christ. In contrast to an inanimate railing, Christ, with his rod of iron, extends an active, ongoing invitation to come follow him as the central figure in both Lehi’s and Nephi’s visions. As we take hold of the rod of iron, we can walk side by side with Christ as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel did.<sup>100</sup>

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and reminds the traveler of the importance of an intimate relationship with Christ, via the rod of iron, as you make your way along the path. *Webster’s Dictionary 1828: American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “Strait,” accessed June 3, 2020, <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Strait>. For more on this topic see Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, “Was the Path Nephi Saw ‘Strait and Narrow’ or ‘Straight and Narrow,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 30–33; Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Straightening Things Out: The Use of Strait and Straight in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 58–71; John S. Welch, “Straight (not Strait) and Narrow,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 18–25.

99. The parable of the Good Samaritan portrays a Savior who is willing to bind up our wounds and lead us safely along the path. See Luke 10:33–35, where the Samaritan sets the wounded traveler “on his own beast, and brought him to an inn.” The Greek word for “brought” (ἤγαγεν, Strong, 71) suggests being led by laying hold of, and in this way to bring to the point of destination, much like the way the rod of iron in Lehi’s vision was used.

100. See Genesis 5:22; 6:9; 28:15.

# Holy Places

I watch the sunset from the corner  
of Country Mill and Western Drive  
and note how rooflines echo Frary Peak  
on Antelope Island—bent pyramids  
black against the sky and rimmed  
with light like glowing magma.

These homes are little mountains of the Lord,  
hollows filled with congregants  
who follow daily ritual—eat, sleep,  
breathe, read, pray, succor, sacrifice,  
speak key words from memory  
again and again and again,

and when one forgets, another whispers  
cues into inclined ear, restoring the rhythm.  
All are connected by lines of light,  
tethered to a central point  
so as day draws down and wraps  
shadow around and between them,

they are not alone. God, who knows  
what grows or crumbles within,  
holds all loose threads in hand  
and pulls them taut, thrums them  
like the strings of an instrument  
to fill His temples with music.

—Merrijane Rice

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# An Experiential Pathway to Conversion

## Learning in the Yoke of Christ

Robert K. Christensen, Matthew D. Wride, and Neil R. Lundberg

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*  
—Matthew 11:29–30

*This life is not lineal; it is experiential. It is not really chronological, though we use clocks and calendars and wristwatches. It is essentially experiential.*  
—Elder Neal A. Maxwell<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Smith's formal education did not extend beyond the third grade.<sup>2</sup> His life did not extend beyond the final years of his thirties. The person he became and his work in restoring the gospel of Jesus Christ, however, extend into eternity. John Taylor observed that "Joseph Smith, the Prophet and Seer of the Lord, has done more, save Jesus only, for the salvation of men in this world, than any other man that ever lived in it."<sup>3</sup>

In this article, we write about the power of experiential learning as a tool of conversion. We begin with Joseph Smith because, although

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1. Neal A. Maxwell, "If Thou Endure Well" (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, December 4, 1984), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/neal-a-maxwell/if-thou-endure-well/>.

2. "Joseph Smith and the Restoration," Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/joseph-smith-and-the-restoration>.

3. "John Taylor," Church History, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/content/testimony/john-taylor>.

he lacked much of what one might call traditional education, he was a marvelous, if not unparalleled, experiential learner. Thankfully, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, education is not a prerequisite for receiving revelation or spiritual experiences: “Spiritual experience, revelatory experience, sacred experience can come to every one of us in all the many and varied stages and circumstances of our lives if we want it, if we hold on and pray on.”<sup>4</sup>

But how might experiences lead to conversion? Do traditional and contemporary models of education provide any insight? We argue that they do, particularly experiential learning theory (ELT). We propose, however, that we must make some meaningful adaptations in order for earnest seekers to yoke themselves to Christ as their experiential guide. We bookend our argument, by way of illustration, with two impressive examples of experiential learning: the lives of Joseph Smith and Russell M. Nelson.

In Joseph Smith’s life, many experiential learning examples are prominent, but few are more poignant than those occurring in winter 1838–39. In a prayer penned in the squalid conditions of Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith exclaimed: “O God, where art thou? . . . How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?” (D&C 121:1–2). In response to this pleading, the Lord offered this pedagogically rich counsel: “Know thou, my son, that *all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good*” (D&C 122:7, emphasis added).

Elder Holland clarifies that “those experiences . . . were ‘school teachers’ to Joseph and can be to us, experiences that contribute so much to our education in mortality and our exaltation in eternity.”<sup>5</sup> The key to transforming experiences into conversion, according to Elder Holland, is “bonding” ourselves to God.<sup>6</sup> We argue that this bonding, poignantly captured through the symbol of the yoke, channels the Savior’s constant invitation: “Take my *yoke* upon you, and *learn* of me” (Matt. 11:29, emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> The proximate appearances of yoking and learning are significant.

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4. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail” (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 7, 2008), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/lessons-liberty-jail/>.

5. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

6. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

7. All biblical quotations come from the Authorized (King James) Version.

In the following sections, we discuss learning models both in and out of the Church. We focus specifically on ELT. We then offer an update to traditional ELT models to better reflect Christ's central role, drawing on the symbol of the yoke to best facilitate learning that ultimately leads to conversion.

### **Learning and Conversion in the Restored Church of Jesus Christ**

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a long and rich history of educating its members. In 1832, the Lord commanded the Saints to establish what Joseph Smith would call the School of the Prophets, and in October 1847, the first school in the Great Basin opened, only months after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. In the midst of a race for their very survival, the Saints desired to educate themselves and deemed that constructing a place of education was essential. The next sixty years would see the establishment of the Church Board of Education and nearly forty academies that opened in Utah and the surrounding areas. The foundation and expansion of educating the Saints has been an ongoing priority that continues to this day, not only in churches, schools, and universities but also, more importantly, in the hearts and homes of all the Saints.

In October 2018, the Lord, through his prophet and leaders, asked his Saints to embrace a new model for Church education and learning. This change was dramatic, not in the doctrine but in the process and setting. Focusing on enhanced teaching and learning in the home, this approach has been referred to as home-centered, Church-supported learning. The principal emphasis of this approach is teaching and learning within the home, with parents shouldering primary responsibility for their children's religious development. The Church stands ready to support this massive undertaking with a huge stable of resources, which includes everything from manuals to videos, from podcasts to artistic renderings. But what more must happen to effectively bring about this home-centered, Church-supported approach?

The introductory materials for *Come, Follow Me—for Individuals and Families: Book of Mormon 2020* contain the following statement:

The aim of all gospel learning and teaching is to deepen our conversion and help us become more like Jesus Christ. For this reason, when we study the gospel, we're not just looking for new information; we want to become a "new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This means relying on Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ to help us change our hearts, our views, our actions, and our very natures.

But the kind of gospel learning that strengthens our faith and leads to the miracle of conversion doesn't happen all at once. It extends beyond a classroom into an individual's heart and home. It requires consistent, daily efforts to understand and live the gospel. True conversion requires the influence of the Holy Ghost.<sup>8</sup>

Because the aim of this kind of gospel learning is to lead individuals to conversion, how can individuals and families more effectively participate in this lofty aspiration, particularly in light of this new home-centered, Church-supported approach to gospel learning? In this article, we explore these questions and more, beginning with the Church's brief statement on the conversion process:

Conversion includes a change in behavior, but it goes beyond behavior; it is a change in our very nature. It is such a significant change that the Lord and His prophets refer to it as a rebirth, a change of heart, and a baptism of fire.

The Lord said: "Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God, changed from their carnal and fallen state, to a state of righteousness, being redeemed of God, becoming his sons and daughters;

"And thus they become new creatures; and unless they do this, they can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God" (Mosiah 27:25–26).

Conversion is a process, not an event. Conversion comes as a result of righteous efforts to follow the Savior. These efforts include exercising faith in Jesus Christ, repenting of sin, being baptized, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end in faith.<sup>9</sup>

Conversion, then, is change: a change of behavior and change of nature, a rebirth and baptism of fire. Conversion is transforming into a new creature, and transforming is a process—an experiential process, not a onetime event.

In the Church, members regularly discuss the concept of conversion and read about examples of the conversion process in scriptural accounts. However, true conversion requires more than talking and studying about the topic. Therefore, if conversion is an experiential process of transformation, then further understanding the experiential learning process may be useful to both individuals and families—particularly because the

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8. *Come, Follow Me—for Individuals and Families: Book of Mormon 2020* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019).

9. Gospel Topics, "Conversion," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/conversion>.

relatively new home-centered, Church-supported curriculum requires members to play a more active role in teaching and learning the gospel. While numerous scholars have studied and written about experiential learning, few have applied ELT to religious education, and none that we are aware of have clearly articulated its application in a home-centered, Church-supported environment. To this end, we begin with a brief overview of experiential learning and then discuss applications to religious education and learning focused on a home-centered, Church-supported approach.

### Experiential Learning Theory

Learning scholars suggest that two broad categories describe the learning process, in general: reproductive and transformative. The former is a “reproductive conception which sees learning as reproducing facts and information acquired through memorisation,” which is primarily delivered through didactic instruction.<sup>10</sup> The latter category views learning as a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience.”<sup>11</sup>

In our experience, Western<sup>12</sup> teaching and learning have historically been focused on the reproductive model—this type of pedagogy is often referred to as “sage on the stage.” Until the 2018 change noted earlier regarding home-centered learning, religious education within the restored Church of Jesus Christ was generally structured using a reproductive, teacher-centered model. Hence, the burden for learning was placed squarely on the instructor, and the learner was relegated to the tasks of absorbing and retaining.

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10. David Boud and David Walker, *Experience and Learning: Reflection at Work, EAE600 Adults Learning in the Workplace: Part A* (Victoria, Australia: Deakin University, 1991), 101.

11. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984), 41.

12. In using the term *Western*, we refer to concepts primarily developed and cultivated within the modern, Western cultural framework. “Western culture, sometimes equated with Western civilization, Western lifestyle or European civilization, is a term used very broadly to refer to a heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, belief systems, political systems, and specific artifacts and technologies that have some origin or association with Europe. The term has come to apply to countries whose history is strongly marked by European immigration, such as the countries of the Americas and Australasia, and is not restricted to the continent of Europe.” Freebase, “Western Culture,” Definitions, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.definitions.net/definition/western+culture>.

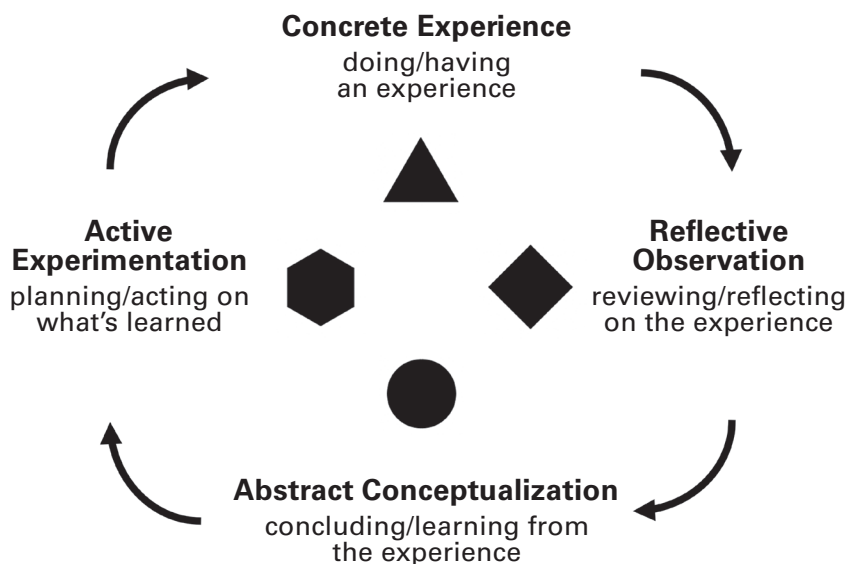


FIGURE 1. Graphical representation of the standard cycles of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT).

In stark contrast to this reproductive model, ELT structures knowledge as a taxonomy of themes and mental models that are acquired through a cyclical process (see figure 1). First, learners engage in new experiences. Second, learners then intentionally reflect on those experiences. Third, learners identify gaps between what was previously understood and what the new experience suggests. Finally, learners develop new ideas, themes, mental models, and understandings as they come to new conclusions, thus leading to application and the testing of new knowledge.<sup>13</sup> In a very real sense, ELT is learner focused as opposed to instructor focused.

13. By way of preface, we recognize that both experiential and transformative learning constitute separate streams of research. Each has received important scholarly attention in its own right. However, for simplicity's sake, and due to considerable overlap between ELT and TLT (transformative learning theory) as well as precedent to consider these together, we include transformative learning concepts and citations under the general umbrella of ELT. See Rachel Percy, "The Contribution of Transformative Learning Theory to the Practice of Participatory Research and Extension: Theoretical Reflections," *Agriculture and Human Values* 22, no. 2 (2005): 127–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-004-8273-1>.

At its core, ELT has constructivist beginnings, based on the work of many theorists and authors.<sup>14</sup> Constructivism posits that meaning and individual learning are actively constructed based on previous experience and that these experiences are tied to an individual's social and cultural context.<sup>15</sup> Thus, experiential learning is an extension and application of constructivist philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

An example of the experiential learning process at work has been described by Jack Mezirow.<sup>17</sup> He discussed a scenario in which an individual faces a disorienting dilemma, an experience that forces the individual to reconsider his or her current view of the world and the way he or she lives in it. As a result of this experience, the individual reevaluates his or her assumptions and beliefs and often comes to a sense of dissatisfaction regarding his or her current standing or perspective. The individual needs opportunities for reflection and discourse regarding previous assumptions and beliefs so he or she can develop a plan and begin testing out new approaches and gaining new skills based on a new way of seeing the world.<sup>18</sup>

With ELT, the instructor's role is to act as an experiential guide or a facilitator to help the learner work his or her way through the ELT cycle and to ensure that the necessary steps of reflection and future action take place properly (see table 1). As a learner navigates through the ELT process, the learner is the primary person in charge of constructing meaning from the experience, not the mentor or instructor. The learner's tasks

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14. Most notably, Dewey (1929), Bruner (1961), and Piaget (1980). J. Dewey, "Experience and Philosophic Method," in *Experience and Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1929), 1a–39, <https://doi.org/10.1037/13377-001>; J. S. Bruner, "The Act of Discovery," *Harvard Educational Review* 31 (1961): 21–32; Jean Piaget, "The Psychogenesis of Knowledge and Its Epistemological Significance," in *Language and Learning: The Debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky*, ed. Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1–23.

15. Ratna Narayan and others, "Constructivism—Constructivist Learning Theory," in *The Handbook of Educational Theories*, ed. Beverly J. Irby and others (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2013), 169–83.

16. Many will argue that a constructivist view of truth—relative and constructed by the individual—is antithetical to the *sine qua non* of religious dogma that truth is fixed and absolute. Our intent is to demonstrate that experiential learning is highly useful in facilitating the conversion process at an individual level without violating the doctrine that truth is inviolate and unchanging.

17. Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 168.

18. Kevin J. Pugh, "Transformative Experience: An Integrative Construct in the Spirit of Deweyan Pragmatism," *Educational Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (2011): 107–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2011.558817>.

**Table 1. Experiential learning cycle explained**

Phase in the ELT* cycle	Learner's actions
Experience	New experience/concrete experience; disorienting dilemma, an experience forcing one to reconsider
Reflect	Reflect on previous assumptions; think/come to new realizations
Analyze	Learn by analyzing gap between old and new (self-evaluation)
Act	Apply and test; plan, act, acquire, and reintegrate

\*Experiential learning theory.

are to develop new skills, chart a course for new behaviors, and further develop his or her identity. Thus, experiential learning is a process of change and potential transformation.

Figure 2 demonstrates a traditional ELT conceptualization.<sup>19</sup> The learner is the one in charge of constructing meaning from his or her experiential environment. The learner is the focal point and, over time, constructs new meaning and understanding. The challenge with this more traditional view is that truth becomes constructivist and relative to the learner. In the figure, the passing of time is represented on the X axis as the learner constructs new understandings of his or her environment (in gray/dotted) based on previous experiences.

While ELT has been shown to be a powerful model and has been applied in numerous fields and settings, authors have identified its shortcomings from a religious and spiritual perspective. As Ellen Marmon argued, the experiential learning process has not previously drawn on, nor sufficiently recognized, spiritual domains or the possibility of an objective truth beyond the socially and culturally constructed environment upon which the experiential learning process could be built.<sup>20</sup>

### ELT and General Religious Education

Scholars, largely outside of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have turned increasing attention to the role of experiential

19. Adapted from Peter Jarvis, *Paradoxes of Learning: On Becoming an Individual in Society* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 25.

20. Ellen Marmon, "Transformative Learning Theory: Connections with Christian Adult Education," *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 2 (2013): 424–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F073989131301000212>.



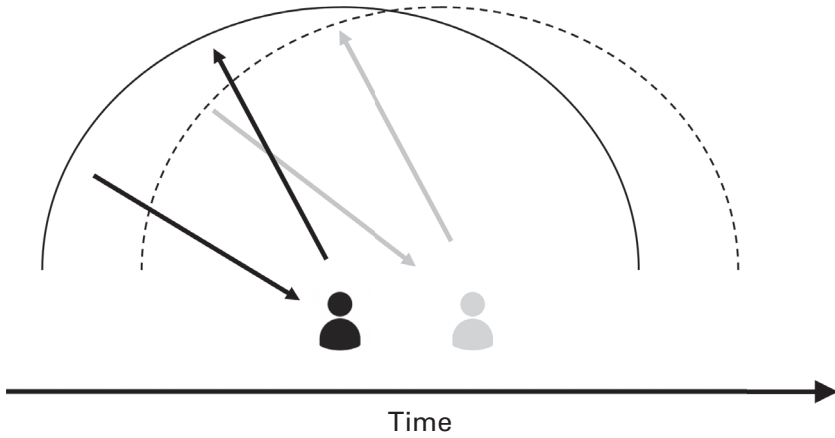


FIGURE 2. Graphical representation of the model of experiential learning that is centered on the learner, a traditional ELT model.

learning theories in and their application to religious study and spiritual growth. In *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education*, for example, Perry Downs emphasized the importance of informal, experiential processes in one's spiritual development.<sup>21</sup> Downs observed that "Christian living must be an experienced reality, or it is no reality at all. *Words apart from experience, are dead.*"<sup>22</sup> Rather than concede experience as the process of socially or individually constructing knowledge and truth,<sup>23</sup> however, Downs argued that experiential learning relative to spiritual growth must be rooted in, or guided by, truth. He argued that it would be dangerous to found one's development on "experience that is not based on truth. . . . Christian experience must be filtered through the grid of biblical and theological understandings. . . . Experience must be judged by the standard of the Word of God."<sup>24</sup>

21. Perry G. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Academic, 1994).

22. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164, emphasis added.

23. Downs's approach implicitly contrasts with Steinaker and Bell's, who stipulate that all experience is ontologically real or true. Norman Steinaker and M. Robert Bell, "A Proposed Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Experiential Domain," *Educational Technology* 15, no. 1 (1975): 14–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44418219>.

24. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164.

Beyond Downs's early writings in this area, a few other scholars suggest (1) a more central role for Christ-centered objectivity in the experiential, spiritual process and (2) experiential learning focused more on conversion than pedagogical approaches. Alison Le Cornu, for example, extended the role of experiential learning toward change.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, her approach largely focuses on the position of the learner relative to their environment—similar to a standard psychological development/ELT approach. Le Cornu observed that “change is part of the process of learning and is a fundamental way in which people construct significant parts of themselves. Internalization takes the form of people ‘acquiring their [objectified] culture through socialization’ [suggesting that] the principal means by which this happens is through reflection.”<sup>26</sup>

Le Cornu went on to describe reflection as the “transformation of knowledge into knowing and hence representing a second stage of the learning process, the first of which Jarvis defines as ‘the transformation of experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions and the senses.’ The outcomes of these are ‘integrated into [people’s] own biographies.’”<sup>27</sup>

We read these varieties of conversations as evidence of a wider recognition of the utility of experiential learning in religious studies. However, along with ELT’s application comes ELT’s more constructivist heritage. Surprisingly, few scholars specifically talk about ELT in the religious education context with the nonconstructivist approach of experiencing and knowing truth through Christ versus through one’s environment and personal preferences. In fact, many push against this type of approach as dogmatic and seemingly narrow-minded. In a 2001 study, Le Cornu expounded that “truth is by its very nature relational. Nevertheless, when either presented or perceived as objective and propositional, as has generally been the case in Christianity, it assumes or is attributed an inherent authority which directly (and potentially adversely) influences the growth and development of the learner.”<sup>28</sup> Certainly some efforts have been made to nuance

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25. Alison Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing: Learning Processes and Faith Outcomes,” *Religious Education* 100, no. 4 (2005): 425–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080500308637>.

26. Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing,” 428, quoting Jarvis, *Paradoxes of Learning*, 19.

27. Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing,” 428, quoting Peter Jarvis, *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: Theory and Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: RoutledgeFarmer, 2004), 111.

28. Alison Le Cornu, “Is Adult Theological Education through Distance Learning Self-Defeating?: An Exploration of the Relationships between Truth, Authority and

truth and experience, but the result, to us, seems the same. For example, Jarvis argued that “at the heart of religion is experience. . . . We cannot teach the primary experience but only learn from it[,] but we can teach religious belief systems. . . . Experiences are fundamental to our humanity whereas the explanations reflect only the cultures within which they were had—the explanations are not the experiences!”<sup>29</sup>

An outstanding question, perhaps *the* outstanding question, in extending this stream of literature is quite simply this: What happens when an individual puts Christ at the center of his or her experiential learning? How does ELT better inform religious study and conversion if Christ is the objective truth serving as the reference for internalizing the experience that one has? If one were to adapt the ideas from Le Cornu<sup>30</sup> and Jarvis,<sup>31</sup> how might the following conceptualization gain utility if modified?

Figure 3 presents a modified ELT model that underscores two main differences. First, the learner is no longer the sole center of the learning process. Instead the learner “yokes” with Jesus Christ to gain greater understanding into his or her experiences (Matt. 11:29–30). So doing, he or she appeals to Christ for insight, comfort, and divine assistance, learning more of Christ’s nature and power along the way. This, in turn, raises the second difference: in addition to learning how to construct one’s experiences, the learner can also become more converted to Christ through the yoking process of learning. We capture this process in figure 3 with the arrow drawing the left half (learner) of the yoke toward the right (the Savior).

Several scholars seem to offer support for our suggested ELT modifications. For example, Jane Thayer’s study<sup>32</sup> explicitly used Kolb’s learning modes (ELT) to measure spiritual growth and learning, facilitating the “concept of spiritual development modes that are defined as learning modes by which one engages with God and others through the spiritual disciplines [for example, Bible reading, fellowship, repentance, and

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Self-Development,” *British Journal of Theological Education* 11, no. 2 (2001): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jate.v11i2.9>.

29. Peter Jarvis, “Religious Experience and Experiential Learning,” *Religious Education* 103, no. 5 (2008): 566, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344080802427200>.

30. Le Cornu, “People’s Ways of Believing.”

31. Jarvis, *Paradoxes of Learning*.

32. O. Jane Thayer, “Constructing a Spirituality Measure Based on Learning Theory: The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile,” *Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 23, no. 3 (2004): 195–207.

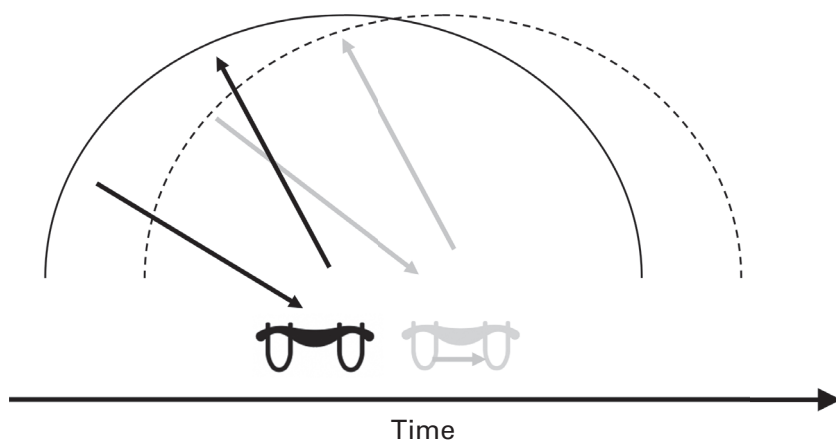


FIGURE 3. Graphical representation of the model of experiential conversion that is centered on the learner who is yoked to Christ, a modified ELT model.

service]. These modes are hypothesized to be means through which the Holy Spirit transforms Christians into the likeness of Christ. The most important point of the theory is that holistic spiritual growth requires different kinds of learning obtained by active participation in a relationship with God and God's word, active participation in relationships with other people, and critical reflection on both relationships."<sup>33</sup> In short, Thayer seems to advocate an experiential path informed by God's objective truths. Jarvis echoed this concept to some extent: "We cannot teach anybody religious experience—they have to experience that for themselves and learn from it; perhaps, however, traditional religious systems of meaning can actually help us interpret our experience from within the framework of our own religious narrative."<sup>34</sup>

As we shall argue in greater detail below, Christ is the narrative through which one's experiences can lead to conversion. Returning to Downs's early work in this area, we contend that "experience must be judged by the standard of the Word of God,"<sup>35</sup> and as noted by the Apostle John, the "Word is God" (John 1:1).

33. Thayer, "Constructing a Spirituality Measure Based on Learning Theory," 204.

34. Peter Jarvis, *Learning to Be a Person in Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), 128.

35. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164.

In summary, Marmon observed that “early on, [ELT] was criticized for being too cognitive at the expense of affective and spiritual domains. Its constructivist roots call into question whether or not objective truth exists outside of each person’s perceptions.”<sup>36</sup> Yet Marmon further noted, “The key dynamics of [ELT] are elements of education that Christians value: honest relationships, life experience, thoughtful consideration of what God is teaching through the experience, and possible realignment of attitudes, dispositions, and actions to reflect God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>37</sup>

### **The Yoke as a Symbol of Experiential Learning Rightly Understood: Coupling Conversion with Christ**

For learners, experiential learning is about renegotiating what they can do and even who they are based on their experiences. In the process of renegotiating who they are and who they want to become, their experiences teach them that they can actually do more than they thought they could do and become more than they thought they could become. While most secular expansions of experiential learning put the learner in the center of the experiential journey, our primary point is that the learner should center his or her experiential learning *on* Christ and, particularly, *with* Christ. We advocate Christ-centered experiential learning that yokes the learner and the Savior together so that he can serve as the guide. In this way, experiential learning can build true conversion—the highest form of learning.

On the surface, elevating experiential learning in this way may seem time-consuming and perhaps even a little unclear and overwhelming. Modern followers of Christ rarely need one more thing “to do.” With those concerns in mind, we make four observations to help unpack the concept of yoking oneself to Christ.

First, *yoking* makes the undertaking of experiential learning more manageable and less overwhelming because it invites divine tutoring and companionship. Christ will surely help the individual learn and, ultimately, convert. He even promises that the process can bring added peace (D&C 19:23). His revelations and commandments promise the transformation that follows yoked learning. Matthew 11:28–30 beautifully clarifies the invitation and promise related to learning, experiencing, and yoking oneself to Christ: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy

36. Marmon, “Transformative Learning Theory,” 429.

37. Marmon, “Transformative Learning Theory,” 429.

laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

In examining this passage, several concepts seem noteworthy. First, there is an equivalence between learning and the yoke: the Savior tells the individual to take upon him or her the yoke in order to learn his ways and his gospel. Hence, step 1 in Christ-centered learning is experiential because “yoking” oneself to Christ is an action, an experience. By yoking oneself to him, one naturally orients his or her learning as an experience with Christ, his ways, and his teachings.

How then do we specifically yoke ourselves to Christ? Yoking is the process of binding two forces, typically animals, together in order to pull a load that could not be managed alone. Yoking oneself to Christ suggests that we bind ourselves to Christ in order to manage life’s burdens that we would not be able to bear alone. Yoking ourselves to Christ does not, however, suggest we are on equal footing with Christ. For training purposes, a master might yoke a younger, weaker animal to a more experienced animal to teach it how to effectively and successfully manage especially heavy loads through a yoked relationship. Symbolically, this is clearly the case as we strive to yoke ourselves to Christ. We have an opportunity to be taught and trained by the Savior’s perfect example of love, service, and truth and therefore to manage life’s most difficult challenges.

The process of yoking oneself to Christ might be achieved in numerous ways. President Nelson recently invited members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to yoke themselves to Christ by increasing their faith. In the April 2021 general conference, he pleaded, “*Start today to increase your faith.*”<sup>38</sup> He went on to recommend five ways our faith can be more experiential, thereby binding, or yoking, us to Christ: “First, study. Become an engaged learner. . . . Second, choose to believe in Jesus Christ. . . . Third, act in faith. . . . Fourth, partake of sacred ordinances worthily. . . . And fifth, ask your Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, for help.” In these five recommendations, President Nelson illustrates the experiential nature of faith and how faith yokes us to Christ.

Our second observation is that the experiential learning process is clearly evident as we yoke ourselves to Christ. By yoking ourselves to Christ, we deepen our relationship with him and permit his tutoring

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38. Russell M. Nelson, “Christ Is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains,” *Liahona* 45, no. 5 (May 2021): 102, emphasis in original.

and guidance. We propose that yoking oneself with Christ includes the full experiential process—particularly using Christ and his teachings as a guide to reflect on life's experiences, analyzing experiences through the lens of Christ's teachings, and then making plans and taking action inspired by Christlike love and his commandments, especially the first two great commandments.<sup>39</sup>

Regarding the experiential process of yoking ourselves to Christ, our reasoning is fairly straightforward: individuals can better relate to Christ through lived experience and real-world application than they can through a theoretical lens of abstract knowledge. Experiences provide the medium in which individuals relate to and receive help from others and from Christ. Consider how people connect to their fellow sisters and brothers here on earth. As social beings, humans generally find that the power of shared experiences and connecting with others is significant.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the power of sharing experiences, when individuals experience or engage in a common struggle, bonding increases, and they are more inclined to provide future support when needs arise.<sup>41</sup> When individuals share experiences together, relationships develop. Strangers often become friends and family, more dear when they share experiences together. Individuals not only learn to like and support their experiential companions but also even learn to become like them.

The same logic applies as we yoke ourselves to Christ and invite him into our lives through shared experiences and engaging with him in our common struggle. Individuals learn to love Christ and, more poignantly, to become like him. For Christ, this connection is possible because he can perfectly relate to every and any experience an individual chooses to share or yoke with him (Alma 7:11–12). For the individual, he or she draws closer to Christ as he or she chooses, through faith, to accept him as a trusted companion, a divine being with whom one shares experiences and who is engaged in a common struggle through this mortal experience. Having an all-perfect, all-powerful, and all-loving brother to share experiences with makes all the difference in an individual's learning and, ultimately, his or her conversion. This process works because the individual becomes more powerfully connected to Christ through

39. See Matthew 22:36–40.

40. See Vivien Williams, "Mayo Clinic Minute: The Benefits of Being Socially Connected," News Network, Mayo Clinic, April 19, 2019, <https://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/mayo-clinic-minute-the-benefits-of-being-socially-connected/>.

41. Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *The Power of Moments* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 214.

their shared experiences when he or she sees Christ as someone to connect with during the struggles of mortality.

Ultimately, the bond that can grow through sharing or yoking experiences with Christ is the essence of the Atonement, literally an “at-one-ment.” Anyone can become one with Christ because he understands everyone perfectly and has sacrificed himself so that all can transcend their fallen state and transform themselves to be more like him. This transformation can only happen when we submit to Christ and become yoked to him in shared experiences as he journeys with us through our mortal lives.

Like all learning, experientially yoking oneself to Christ is a learning process that requires practice and is not perfected easily. “Becoming perfect like Christ will not happen overnight. Becoming like Him is a slow and steady process that will take you an entire lifetime, and even beyond. It is a process that you can start today, one step at a time.”<sup>42</sup> Experiential yoking accommodates the “wisdom and order” that King Benjamin referenced when he observed that “it is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27).

Finally, the symbol of the yoke in experiential learning is not meant to convey constraint but assistance and companionship in magnifying the divinity and power that is within each of us. Experiential yoking accommodates the exercise of agency that the Lord points to in Doctrine and Covenants 58:27–28: “Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness. For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.”

As individuals exercise their agency, the Lord—their partner and trainer in the yoke—will not yank them away from their individual journeys. Rather, he will accompany them on their individual journeys, attending to their interests, failures, and successes. As long as individuals continue to strive to follow Christ and his teachings, they “shall in nowise lose [their] reward” (Matt. 10:42). This type of companionship is beautifully illustrated in Christ’s attending to the recently deceased Lazarus. Lazarus’s sisters were yoked to Christ and invoked his help and intervention in their lives and journeys. Rather than tugging Mary

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42. “Following His Footsteps,” Latter-day Saints Channel, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 8, 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/inspiration/following-in-his-footsteps>.



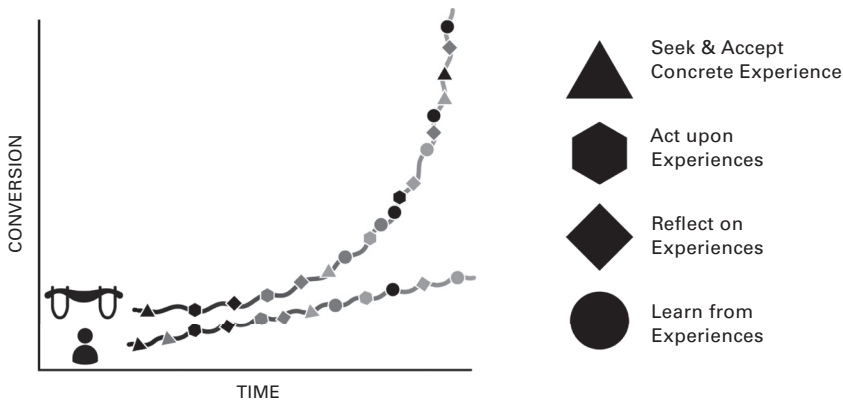


FIGURE 4. Graphical representation of the model of yoked experiential learning and conversion, a modified ELT model.

and Martha away from Lazarus's tomb, Christ went with them, participating fully in their grief, and performed a miraculous transformation for all who shared in that sacred experience with him.

With these observations in mind, we distinguish our approach from that of most other experiential learning scholars. We illustrate these distinctions in figure 4, which incorporates figures 1–3. Figure 4 captures the various aspects of the traditional ELT cycle but proposes that when the learner is yoked with Christ, the learner can exponentially increase his or her highest form of learning: conversion. The yoked, exponential learning is initiated when the ultimate facilitator, Christ, comes into play. In this Christ-centered model, aspects of the ELT cycle can come with increasing frequency and productivity.

Early ELT scholars largely left learners to process their experiences by themselves. In their view, self was the primary, if not only, reference point in the learning process. Downs, however, declared that “Christian living must be an experienced reality, or it is no reality at all.”<sup>43</sup> Downs’s observation underscores our argument: learning from mortal experiences must be done in a Christ-centered, not a self-centered, approach. The process of yoking oneself to Christ is an experiential process and an expression of our faith—through reflection, analysis, and action. It

43. Downs, *Teaching for Spiritual Growth*, 164.

ensures that one's experiences are based on and understood in the light of truth. No one can expect the unyoked, natural man to teach himself anything that can help him transcend his fallen state or transform himself into a more converted being.

To this end, our argument parallels Elder David A. Bednar's inspired insights on learning. He observed that "learning by faith and from experience are two of the central features of the Father's plan of happiness."<sup>44</sup> Rather than separate "faith learning" from our "experiential learning," one can follow Elder Bednar's prescription to bring all learning "in one, in Christ."<sup>45</sup> As one yokes his or her experiences in faith with Christ, one stands to gain conversion and intelligence, "the application of the knowledge we obtain for righteous purposes."<sup>46</sup>

### **The Importance of Everyday Experiences in Yoking Ourselves to Christ**

In addressing the role of experiential learning in a gospel context, we believe that everyday, seemingly ordinary experiences matter. First, consider the puzzling reality that oftentimes miraculous or otherworldly experiences do not lead to conversion. Why is this the case? Indeed, the scriptures contain numerous stories of people who beheld heavenly manifestations but failed to become converted. A simple example is Laman and Lemuel from the Book of Mormon: they personally witnessed numerous miracles and yet became "past feeling" (1 Ne. 17:45). So, why do some extraordinary experiences fail to produce the change in behavior that we might expect? Differentiating ordinary everyday spiritual experiences from the extraordinary will help us better understand the process of conversion.

Recent work by Mat Duerden and his coauthors<sup>47</sup> helps clarify the difference between ordinary and extraordinary experiences that can be applied to the conversion process. *Ordinary experiences* are routine occurrences that hold an individual's attention long enough for him or

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44. David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," *Ensign* 37, no. 9 (September 2007): 63.

45. David A. Bednar, "Special Witnesses of the Name of Christ," *Religious Educator* 12, no. 2 (2001): 10.

46. David A. Bednar, "Learning to Love Learning" (commencement address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, April 24, 2008), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/david-a-bednar/learning-love-learning/>.

47. Mat D. Duerden and others, "From Ordinary to Extraordinary: A Framework of Experience Types," *Journal of Leisure Research* 49, nos. 3–5 (2018): 196–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2018.1528779>.

her to complete a task, but the experience lacks an emotional resonance or significant meaning. *Extraordinary experiences*, on the other hand, can be subdivided into three types: (a) memorable, or an experience that has an emotional connection and therefore creates a lasting impression; (b) meaningful, or an experience that includes emotion and personal relevance, discovery, or learning; and (c) transformative, or an experience that evokes emotion and meaning and creates a change within the individual.

Based on this clarification regarding ordinary, memorable, meaningful, and transformative experiences, we see that it is not the activity in and of itself, or the regularity of an activity, that makes it ordinary or extraordinary. Instead, it is the emotion or meaning that is associated with the experience. Therefore, everyday activities, if filled with faith and action, will yoke us to Christ and be transformative. Faith-filled activities applied through the experiential learning process of intentionally reflecting, analyzing, making plans, and taking action will create an extraordinary effect leading to transformation and conversion. As Elder Bednar instructed, when we bring all learning in one, in Christ, our experiences become an essential thread in the tapestry of conversion.

President Spencer W. Kimball taught that conversion-forging experiences most often come to individuals drop by drop. He used the Lord's parable of the ten virgins as a backdrop to explain this concept: "Attendance at sacrament meetings adds oil to our lamps, drop by drop over the years. Fasting, family prayer, home teaching, control of bodily appetites, preaching the gospel, studying the scriptures—each act of dedication and obedience is a drop added to our store. Deeds of kindness, payments of offerings and tithes, chaste thoughts and actions, marriage in the covenant for eternity—these, too, contribute importantly to the oil with which we can at midnight refuel our exhausted lamps."<sup>48</sup>

Thus, prophetic counsel teaches that making time for the Lord every day<sup>49</sup> is a vital source, the most important source, of conversion-strengthening fuel. The application of experiential learning in the gospel context is the key to utilizing experiences in the quest to become more like the Savior Jesus Christ. It is vital that in the desire for extraordinary spiritual experiences, individuals appreciate the daily habits and

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48. Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1972), 256.

49. Russell M. Nelson, "Make Time for the Lord," *Liahona* 45, no. 11 (November 2021): 120–21.

occurrences that are so meaningful. These seemingly ordinary experiences help individuals discover the incremental changes they need to make, thereby transforming them step by step through the mercy and grace of Jesus Christ.

### Experiential Learning in the Restored Gospel

While the concept of experience plays a prominent role in many discussions and teachings within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (for example, D&C 122:7), ELT<sup>50</sup> has yet to be effectively utilized within the current home-centered, Church-supported approach to gospel learning. We note a few exceptions and parallels that lead us to our main argument: experiential learning, properly understood, can help individuals learn and teach in ways that will lead to more complete conversion. For example, Anthony Sweat, writing for the *Religious Educator*, drew considerable attention to the role of experiences in spiritual learning: “If students do not have the opportunity to *act* physically, mentally, or spiritually during the learning process (the *means*), they usually will not have a spiritual experience (the *end*). It is proverbially said that experience is the best teacher, and from a gospel perspective, we know that we are here on earth to gain experience. Metaphorically speaking, we can see life as a large participatory classroom where we can learn through experience to choose good from evil (see 2 Ne. 2:27) and gain attributes that will enable us to become like God.”<sup>51</sup>

In terms of experiential learning in the restored gospel, Cheryl Preston provides another Latter-day Saint perspective: “Horizontally, the Church is formed by the use of lay leaders, councils, and the communitarian and experiential learning processes.”<sup>52</sup> She also observed that “the form and function of the organization pushes [members and lay leaders] toward hands-on, experiential learning.”<sup>53</sup>

Kevin Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, promoted a realignment of BYU and its mission toward an objective he called

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50. See note 13, which details our rationale to largely consider experiential and transformative learning under the umbrella of ELT.

51. Anthony Sweat, “Active Learning and the Savior’s Nephite Ministry,” *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 75–86, <https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-10-no-3-2009/active-learning-saviors-nephite-ministry>, emphasis in original.

52. Cheryl B. Preston, “‘The Spiritual Concept of Form and Function as One’: Structure, Doctrine, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (2014): 39.

53. Preston, “Spiritual Concept of Form and Function,” 66.

“inspired learning.” Inspired learning focuses on learning by experience, and President Worthen used the term *experience* over sixty times in his speech. He expounded inspired learning in this way:

Experiential learning has become somewhat of a buzzword in academia in recent years. However, for us there is a deeper, even doctrinal reason for pursuing learning by experience in a systematic way. We are all quite familiar with the scriptural injunction that we “seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” That describes two key ways by which we learn important truths: by study and by faith. But those are not the only ways by which we learn essential knowledge and skills. Gospel teaching instructs us that we learn by study, we learn by faith, and we learn by experience. Learning by experience is a central purpose of our mortal journey. As Elder David A. Bednar once observed, “Learning by faith and from experience are two of the central features of the Father’s plan of happiness.” We could not have simply memorized celestial laws in our premortal life and declared ourselves fit for the celestial kingdom. We needed to come to this mortal existence to experience certain things we could not experience in our premortal life and to learn from those experiences. Experience is a key part of our mortal learning process.<sup>54</sup>

These few examples clearly identify an emphasis toward experiential learning, and we propose that even more can be done at home and at church to fully realize the power of ELT as we yoke ourselves to Christ. Two prominent resources currently exist for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that exemplify the power of ELT and the opportunities for application in a home-centered approach. First, the Church’s new *Come, Follow Me*<sup>55</sup> curriculum encourages families to use object lessons, draw pictures, sing songs, and role-play, all experiential learning approaches. Using the ELT process—including reflecting on experiences, analyzing or identifying opportunities for improvement, making plans to act, and then trying out new behaviors—can add additional structure and enhance the experiential activities identified in the *Come, Follow Me* curriculum.

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54. Kevin J. Worthen, “Inspiring Learning,” (Brigham Young University Conference address, Provo, Utah, August 22, 2016), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/kevin-j-worthen/inspiring-learning/>, quoting Bednar, “Seek Learning by Faith.”

55. “Ideas to Improve Your Family Scripture Study,” *Come, Follow Me*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/come-follow-me-for-individuals-and-families-old-testament-2022/family>.

The Church's current approach to youth programming is a second example of experiential learning that has the potential to lead to conversion, especially when implemented using the full ELT process. In the Church's youth guidebook for personal development,<sup>56</sup> the experiential process takes on the form of discovering interests and potential areas for development, and then planning, acting, and reflecting as a process for personal growth. Young people are encouraged to plan by setting goals, act on them, and then reflect on the experience, leading to additional planning, acting, and reflecting as an ongoing process. Recognizing this process as an experiential learning approach intended to lead to conversion is critical for the youth who participate and for parents and adult leaders who support the process. Merely discovering interests and setting goals is not enough. Experiences are essential, but so too are the opportunities to analyze and evaluate the experience and to intentionally draw out the meaning and learning that comes from an experience.

While these examples identify the ways in which the Church of Jesus Christ is encouraging experiential learning, the potential for conversion can be enhanced by using the full ELT process, particularly when centered in Jesus Christ. Making Christ the centerpiece of the ELT process is how we conceptualize yoking oneself to Christ. Yoking ourselves to Christ facilitates conversion as one's identity becomes aligned with Christ through an interactive process of Christ-centered experiential learning.

To further facilitate this process, we provide four principle-based suggestions to help those who desire to implement a Christ-centered experiential learning approach. First, learn to look at experiences as opportunities for growth. Soon, you may find learning opportunities that were previously obscured, and you will start to see a whole new canvas of opportunities to learn and reflect. Second, engage in the experiential learning process with Christ as the unwavering standard. In other words, learn to filter your experiential lessons through the Savior's teachings. This process includes intentionally reflecting on experiences, analyzing your actions and consequences, making plans for new and different approaches, and taking action, thus leading to new experiences and the continuation of the process, all inspired by Christ and his perfect love for us. Third, seek the quiet. Christ-centered experiential insights are rarely found in the noise. Fourth, understand the different aspects of

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56. "Personal Development: Youth Guidebook," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/personal-development-youth-guidebook>.

the ELT cycle and how the Savior can facilitate yoked learning. Figure 4 visually conceptualizes such processes, but of course, we encourage you as an experiential learner to adopt your own yoked approach.

Accompanying these suggestions, table 2 offers some reflective questions to help individuals engage in the ELT process while yoked to Christ:

**Table 2. Suggestions for using the experiential learning process**

Step in the process	Objectives	Actions
Seek and accept experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build confidence and faith in experiences as part of the <i>divine</i> plan.</li> <li>• Start to see experiential patterns and learn to identify experiences that will lead to learning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and describe learning experiences.</li> <li>• Counsel with others on how to engage in Christ-centered experiential learning.</li> <li>• Brainstorm with others on how and when to add meaningful experiences for those you teach or mentor.</li> </ul>
Reflect after experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find opportunities to include reflection personally and when leading or teaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Add reflection after personal experiences or when leading activities or teaching lessons.</li> <li>• Record reflections.</li> <li>• Use ordinances (sacrament and temple) as a divinely appointed opportunity for reflection.</li> </ul>
Analyze and evaluate experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify what was learned from reflecting.</li> <li>• Analyze the gap between the old self and what has been recently discovered (desired new self).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the Lord, and significant others, What can I learn from this experience? Is there more for me to learn? How can this increase my faith? What promptings am I receiving? Are the attributes of Christ represented in what I am learning?</li> </ul>
Act in faith using lessons learned from Christ-centered experiential learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply lessons from reflection and analysis.</li> <li>• Be willing to stretch, to get outside of your comfort zone.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specifically identify and plan for new behaviors you will implement.</li> <li>• Help those you teach or mentor set specific goals about behaviors they will implement.</li> <li>• Follow up.</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

Over the past few decades, ELT has shown promise as an effective method for teaching and learning in the secular arena and is beginning to be encouraged within the Church of Jesus Christ. We propose that yoking ourselves to Christ is an essential component of using ELT as a home-centered approach leading to conversion. In this article, we have articulated a model where ELT is a highly effective way for individuals to draw near unto Christ, but only so far as Jesus Christ is the central focus of the ELT process. This model stands contrary to most models of ELT, where the learner stands alone in the center of the experiential learning process.

We introduced Christ-centered experiential learning with an illustration from the life of Joseph Smith: the yoked learning that took place in Liberty Jail. There, Joseph sought for and received insight from Christ about the purpose for his experiential journey. As examiners of ELT, we cannot help but surmise that Joseph's accomplishments were, in large part, a result of his incredible willingness to learn from his experiences and his unswerving focus on Jesus Christ as his experiential guide. Indeed, Joseph Smith endeavored to yoke himself to the Savior, from the earliest stirrings in his inquiring heart to his final testimony.

We conclude with a similarly inspiring illustration from the life of President Russell M. Nelson. In a message to members of the Church, he recalled: "My wife Dantzel and I were sitting on the sofa holding hands while we watched television. Suddenly, she collapsed. Despite being well trained to treat the very thing that ended her life, I could not save my own wife. Dantzel and I were blessed with nine daughters and one son. Tragically, I have lost two of those daughters to cancer. No parent is prepared to lose a child. And yet, despite *these and other difficult experiences*, I am incredibly grateful, eternally, for so very many things."<sup>57</sup> How does President Nelson feel such gratitude despite his heartbreaking experiences? Returning to the symbol of the yoke in our experiential learning, President Nelson offers this answer: "You come unto Christ to be yoked with him and with his power, so that you're not pulling life's load alone. You're pulling life's load yoked with the Savior and Redeemer of

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57. Sarah Jane Weaver, "President Nelson Invites Us to #GiveThanks. Read His Full Message on the 'Healing Power of Gratitude,'" Church News, November 20, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2020-11-20/president-nelson-special-message-gratitude-spiritual-remedy-healing-hope-covid-19-198180>, emphasis added.



the world, and suddenly your problems, no matter how serious they are, become lighter.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, we offer this final observation. Our experiences, properly understood, can change who we are—orienting us and converting us to Christ as we learn to make him the center of this mortal experience. The act of keeping Christ at the center of our experiential learning is one way we implement Christ’s enduring commandment to yoke ourselves to him and his gospel.

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58. Russell M. Nelson, “The Mission and Ministry of the Savior,” *Ensign* 35, no. 6 (June 2005): 18.

## Seeing

Grandpa Lewis is losing  
his sight. None of us knows

what he can or can't see.  
He's not like the blind

who develop exceptionally good hearing.  
He's losing that too.

Sometimes he knows you're there,  
and sometimes he doesn't.

Every morning he walks past our house.  
I watch him from the window.

Now and then he looks over, as if  
seeing for the first

or maybe last time  
where his daughter lives.

Mostly he just stares straight ahead  
and keeps trudging.

He knows sooner or later  
he'll get there.

—Dave Nielsen

# Constancy amid Change

## Latter-day Saint Discourse on Gender and Sexuality

Michael Goodman and Daniel Frost

Few issues are more sensitive and in need of serious study than gender and sexuality. Taylor Petrey's book, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Sexual Difference in Modern Mormonism*,<sup>1</sup> contributes much to that study. The book provides a nuanced view of Church leaders' attempts to understand and teach the nature of gender and sexuality. Petrey shows that Latter-day Saint discourse on these issues has changed substantially, especially since World War II. Petrey has gathered a trove of material for scholars and others who seek to better understand how culture, tradition, and theology have shaped teachings about gender and sexuality. Though there is much to appreciate, we conclude the book presents an incomplete picture of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine. Conclusions could have been strengthened, and at times changed, through consideration of disconfirming evidence.

Petrey's analysis raises important questions. Some include, How should this history be interpreted? What is the relationship between changes in how Church leaders discuss gender and the claim that gender is an essential part of our eternal nature? Are inconsistent teachings on certain aspects of gender and sexuality evidence that gender and sexuality are only social constructs? Does changing discourse indicate that gender and sexuality do not "ontologically exist" (13)?

Petrey's main thesis is that the Church's teachings on gender and sexuality are more queer than people realize. He writes, "While Latter-day Saints have often expressed the values of gender and sexual essentialism, I started to see that this was a rhetorical effort to cover over a different ontology of gender and sexuality" (ix). Petrey's claim is that Church

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1. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

discourse suggests an understanding of gender and sexuality open to fluidity and change. The fact that the Church supports certain understandings of sex and gender “with strong ecclesiastical, legal, and cultural norms” demonstrates that “in modern Mormonism, gender is a fluid concept” (15). In a rhetorical question that sums up the argument for the book, he asks, “*If gender is essential and eternal, on what basis could it change?*” (14, emphasis original).

Petrey explicitly bases his analysis on queer theory. Queer theory is “an approach to literary and cultural study that rejects traditional categories of gender and sexuality.”<sup>2</sup> Petrey explains, queer theory “challenges the idea of the natural and self-evident and instead seeks to historicize and question claims about essential and stable identities” (10). He believes that this approach will help “produce the best explanation of Mormon approaches to these topics” (10).

Petrey does not present an argument in favor of queer theory. He simply assumes its legitimacy throughout the book. This is understandable in the context of academic writing to those familiar and often in agreement with queer theory. But such an approach presents a dilemma for lay readers, as well as for scholars with concerns about queer theory. Queer theory makes a host of ontological, epistemological, and moral assumptions. Many of these assumptions are in direct conflict with the way general Church leaders and many members understand their own beliefs.

Petrey’s readership will likely not be confined to academics who are well-versed in poststructuralism, critical theory, and queer theory. Non-specialist LDS readers may not realize how contestable the framing of the book is. The first part of our review is intended to help an educated LDS audience understand the claims that queer theorists may take for granted.

It is not clear that queer theory is necessary to establish many of the historical claims in the book. Though the book begins and ends with theoretical discussions of queer theory, the bulk of the book is descriptive, a kind of “just the facts” narrative that details various aspects of Latter-day Saint history. We will argue that the changes in some of the Church’s teachings on sex and gender are often more accurately understood in

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2. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “queer theory (n.),” accessed October 14, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/queer%20theory#h1>. For a more technical definition from the author, see page 10. Queer theory is related to other critical theories. For more information, see James Bohman, “Critical Theory,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/critical-theory>.

ways that don't fit within the assumptions of queer theory. For example, queer theorists often assume that changes in narrative about sex or gender demonstrate that these are social constructs. This approach often leads to confirmation of theoretical assumptions rather than convincing evidence that those assumptions are accurate. Competing or complicating historical facts are only occasionally noted and rarely considered (examples provided below). If one accepts the assumptions that guide the selection of historical materials and the analysis in the book, then both the narrative structure and the conclusions seem inevitable.

Therefore, we believe it is necessary to begin this review with a brief evaluation of some aspects of queer theory. We will then engage some of the specific historical claims made in the book. The book often draws conclusions without considering complicating evidence and has a tendency to mistake emphasis for exclusivity in the historical record. This happens, for example, when one aspect of Church teaching is continually reiterated without placing it in dialogue with other currents of Church teaching. As we attempt to show below, the book's account of race, gender, and sexuality omits important historical moments and data. We also note that this review is not an argument for gender essentialism<sup>3</sup> as regularly taught by Church leaders. That would be another project.

### Queer Theory

Queer theory is famously resistant to definition; it is the "discipline that refuses to be disciplined."<sup>4</sup> Lengthy scholarly works on queer theory have a hard time identifying exactly what it is that queer theory "wants."<sup>5</sup> Any definition of queer theory would constitute a limitation and thus frustrate a core purpose of the theory: blurring and crossing (or transgressing) boundaries. Be that as it may, in this section we focus on three ideas that we believe can be fairly attributed to queer theory and that are presupposed in the book: genealogy and historicism, antiessentialism, and normative antinormativity. We show some limitations of each.

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3. In gender studies, gender essentialism is "the belief that males and females are born with distinctively different natures, determined biologically rather than culturally," Oxford Reference, s.v. "gender essentialism (n.)," accessed October 14, 2022, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095846595>. Church leaders reference eternal, not simply biological, differences regularly, as will be discussed below.

4. Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), v.

5. William B. Turner, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

## Philosophical Genealogy and Historicism

Near the end of the book, Petrey claims that the “norms that define gender and sexual difference . . . have already proven to be historically contingent” (221–22). Historically contingent in this context means culturally created and defined. It is not clear how the evidence provided leads to this conclusion. The background assumption seems to be that a genealogical approach (one that traces how a given concept or narrative has changed over time) to Latter-day Saint discourse can show that gender (and related concepts) do not “ontologically exist” (13).

It will be useful to pause briefly to discuss the idea of “ontological existence.” In a basic sense, ontology deals with the nature of being or reality. To deny that something “ontologically exists” seems to be a way of saying that it is not “real;” it is simply a social construct without any permanent or eternal reality. In contrast, ontological realism “claims that at least a part of reality is ontologically independent of human minds.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, if something ontologically exists, it exists independent of our thoughts, beliefs, or perceptions.

Philosophical genealogy has a complex relationship to the question of whether some things “ontologically exist.” Finding its own origins in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche,<sup>7</sup> philosophical genealogy (hereafter, simply “genealogy”) embraces the goal of providing an alternative account of the origin of certain beliefs. According to this view, many of the concepts we accept as true or real are simply social constructs without any essential nature. This view claims that if we look closely, we find that the history of many concepts is characterized by contradictions, discontinuities, contingencies, and power struggles. For example, Nietzsche tried to show that values such as humility, compassion, and obedience were not divinely inspired virtues, but rather were weapons that the enslaved Hebrews used to combat their oppressors.

As Michel Foucault (the second most important practitioner of genealogy) writes, if the genealogist “listens to history, he finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence

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6. Illka Niiniluoto, “Realism in Ontology,” in *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2003), 21–41, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199251614.003.0002>.

7. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (1887; New York: Random House, 1967).

was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, in this view genealogy debunks the view that some truths are based in permanent (or eternal) reality. It seeks to show the contingency and therefore relativity of our beliefs.

Is *Tabernacles of Clay* a genealogy in this sense? It would seem that Petrey sees himself as writing in this general methodological approach. In the introduction, he writes of the need to analyze the “modern genealogies of gender and sexuality” (10), and much of the book can be read as an attempt to accomplish this task. Petrey seems to believe that two claims can be drawn from this research: (1) there are no stable and consistent concepts of “gender” or “sexuality” in Latter-day Saint discourse, because teachings on these ideas have been inconsistent and changeable (221); and (2) that “gender” and “sexuality” do “not ontologically exist” (13).

The first claim is the major focus of the book’s argument. The second claim is assumed by the author and reinforced throughout. We engage the claim that gender and sexuality do not ontologically exist in this section and the claim about Latter-day Saint discourse in subsequent sections.

We argue that genealogy cannot directly prove (or disprove) the truth or falsity of a claim about ontological reality. At best, it can show that some people’s understanding of an issue has changed over time. It can show that some people who believed in something have held inconsistent beliefs about it or perhaps that certain origin stories are inaccurate. But changes in belief or inconsistency on the part of believers do not prove an idea has no ontological existence. A statement can be true even if a person who speaks about it has believed other things in the past or will believe other things in the future. We argue that a change in discourse should not automatically be taken as evidence that an issue is merely a social construct. Such an approach assumes the conclusion before the analysis begins. Not all queer theorists or genealogists make this assumption,<sup>9</sup> but much of the analysis within *Tabernacles of Clay* appears to make just such an assumption.

General Authorities (or other leaders) saying new and different things about gender or sexuality could be evidence for at least four

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8. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 78.

9. Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 47–48.

different scenarios, only one of which is considered in the book. First, a descriptive change may be no more than a focus on a different aspect of the same issue. Gender and sexuality are rich and multidimensional categories. Drawing attention to different aspects could simply be a change in emphasis rather than an ontological break with the past. Second, no one—including Church leaders—has a perfect understanding of any issue. We all “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). As understanding deepens and improves, explanations change. Again, that does not necessarily indicate that an issue has no essential or stable identity. Third, descriptions can vary if changed circumstances require novel applications of principles. For example, one can know that tithing means paying “one-tenth of all their interest annually” (D&C 119:4) but not be sure if certain kinds of benefit (for example, a college scholarship, or employer contributions to a retirement account) count as income. In such cases, changes in discourse need not suggest a changed ontology. They could indicate variation in practice and behavior given new circumstances. Fourth, it is possible that changes in discourse are evidence that an idea or concept is socially constructed and lacks any stable identity. This is the approach assumed throughout *Tabernacles of Clay*.

To determine which explanation fits best, the evidence should be evaluated with respect to these (and perhaps other) possible explanations. This rarely happens in *Tabernacles of Clay*. As will be discussed in this review, the conclusions reached could have been strengthened, and in some cases made more accurate, by considering evidence that would support one of the other three scenarios noted above.

Understanding the reasons why changes in discourse are insufficient to disprove ontological reality is crucial. If a changing, even at times a conflicting, narrative is valid evidence that something is only a social construct, then all claims of eternal reality with any history will fail. Consider the nature and reality of each of the following: God the Father, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, premortal beings, the Creation, the Fall, the Atonement, faith, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and so forth. How many differing, and at times conflicting, narratives pertain to each? Does inconsistency or even disagreement prove that there is no God? Did Christ not atone for sin because there are several different atonement theories?<sup>10</sup> Does our identity as children of God have no

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10. For a detailed summary of different atonement theories, see Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).



ontological reality because of the differing discourse surrounding “intelligence,” our premortal life and nature, and so forth?

Such an epistemological approach (that is, a means of knowing truth) would require rejecting any transcendent reality for which any inconsistency of belief exists. Further, a primary focus on changing narratives can cause us to disregard those aspects of an issue that remain constant. Several aspects of core Latter-day Saint doctrines have little to no inconsistency. But a genealogical approach often ignores these aspects of the historical record.

More concerning, the genealogical approach used throughout this book does not identify any standard necessary to show that gender is entirely historically constructed, that it “does not ontologically exist” (13). Again, constancy or the lack thereof cannot prove or disprove truth claims about ontological reality. If eternal truths do exist, our understanding of them will depend on more than an analysis of the historical narrative. It will require something like moral or spiritual insight—our ability to perceive moral or spiritual truths out of the data of our experience.<sup>11</sup>

Further, genealogy alone cannot make a moral claim. A recitation of historical facts can provide material for moral insight to investigate, but it cannot substitute for applied moral judgment. Much genealogical analysis in queer theory (especially since Foucault) has focused on the concept of power. It can be tempting to move directly from *descriptive* accounts of power to *normative* accounts of power, which assert that certain kinds of power relationships (those that involve domination, oppression, and so forth) are morally wrong. But without a moral theory that explains how and why certain kinds of power relationships are morally problematic, descriptions of power relations tell us nothing about what we should or should not do. Nietzsche, of course, was not particularly troubled with many kinds of asymmetrical power relationships; the “herd” of humanity did not strike him as worthy of much respect. Later we discuss normativity and moral truth in more detail, but here we simply flag the point that genealogy alone cannot make a moral claim.

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11. For interesting approaches to these issues, see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 3, 5th ed. (1957; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Ethics* (1953; Steubenville, Ohio: Hildebrand Press, 2020).

## Antiessentialism

At a deeper level, the issue does not seem to be the methodological approach of genealogy but rather the ontological antiessentialism that undergirds it. Antiessentialism is the view that words and categories do not correspond to some “real” structure of the world. Humans are not capable of discerning the way things really are. Rather, words and categories structure our understanding in a historically contingent way and always in a way that privileges some perspectives over others. Antiessentialism is arguably a (and perhaps *the*) central commitment of queer theory.

Because there are many varieties of essentialism and antiessentialism, we cannot hope to survey this literature in any detail here.<sup>12</sup> However, in this section we briefly engage two related arguments that Petrey references in favor of an antiessentialist interpretation of gender and other constructs: performativity and the structural possibility of transgression. Petrey does not flesh out these arguments, so we draw on the writings of Judith Butler (whom Petrey frequently cites) to elaborate these ideas. These are not the only arguments that could be given in favor of antiessentialism, but they are arguments that Petrey seems to rely upon.

Performativity is the idea that certain speech acts not only communicate meaning but also have the power to change reality. For example, when someone makes a promise, a new obligation is brought into being. The performance of the promise (“I promise . . .”) helps constitute the reality of the promise. In an analogous fashion, Butler argues that gender is brought into existence and sustained by repeated actions that constitute the meaning of gender in a particular culture. People perform, or “do,” gender. Gender has no reality apart from the gender roles and behaviors that society enforces as culturally acceptable. There is no internal state that gender corresponds to and no natural order it is a part of.<sup>13</sup>

However, it is not clear how performativity destroys the ontological possibility of something like gender (or sex). Other performative actions are partially socially constructed but also tap into a deeper reality. Promising, for example, has a performative element but also corresponds to

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12. See, for example, Teresa Robertson Ishii and Philip Atkins, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/essential-accidental/>.

13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 2002), 185–89.

ontologically real features of human intention and moral commitment. Why couldn't a practice be performative (and hence have socially constructed aspects) and also ontologically exist?

Similarly, Petrey makes the claim (summarizing Butler), that "the structural possibility of transgression against the norm of gender reveals the way that any gender or sexual identity is always contingent—subject to change and failure because it is measured against a norm" (14). In other words, because people can act contrary to gender and sexual norms, the norms must be contingent. But it is never explained how the structural possibility of transgression reveals the contingency of all gender norms (or perhaps all norms?). This would be true only if one assumes that for any characteristic to be essential (that is, have ontological existence), its expression must be incapable of change or variation. But this is a particularly unhelpful assumption to make in the context of human agency. Agency unavoidably deals with ideals and aspirations.

Of course, knowing which aspects of our identity are essential—central to who we are as human persons, children of God—is no simple task.<sup>14</sup>

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14. The key question seems to be this: What does it mean for some human trait or characteristic to be "essential"? The basic outlines of a response to this question were elaborated by Aristotle long ago. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle casts virtue (understood in a certain way) as a human possibility which, though not inevitable, is part of our nature: "Neither by nature, therefore, nor contrary to nature are the virtues present; they are instead present in us who are of such a nature as to receive them, and who are completed through habit." Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 26. In other words, humans are the kinds of beings who are, by nature, capable of virtue, whereas other creatures and objects (for example, rocks) are not capable of virtue. Even more to the point, it is in the nature of humans that they are *completed* by virtue—they become what they truly are when they become virtuous through repeated action. At the same time, humans can (and often do) fail to be virtuous, and human agency influences whether we reach our potential or not. Of course, Aristotle's account will face the same (or perhaps more) difficulties that other accounts of virtue face, but the basic point is that variation need not destroy essence. A certain plasticity seems inherent in the human condition, but this plasticity neither destroys the idea of human nature nor the idea that humans are fulfilled by living up to certain ideals. It is possible to acknowledge the ways our thinking is mediated by language and history and still believe that words refer to something beyond the play of discourse. See Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 119–219. Martha Nussbaum argues that many desirable qualities have the same structure as gender according to Butler: "Come to think of it, justice, understood as a personal virtue, has exactly the structure of gender in the Butlerian analysis: it is not innate or 'natural'; it is produced by repeated performances (or as Aristotle said, we learn it by doing it), it shapes our

A good deal of what was once thought essential with respect to gender has been (thankfully) discarded. But this could mean that (1) there is no reality to our conceptions of gender, and there never could be; or (2) our notions of gender needed to be altered in order to more fully align with reality and thus help us reach our true potential. To repeat, we do not offer an account of gender essentialism in this paper, but the fact that some aspects of sex and gender have been discarded or changed does not mean all notions of sex and gender are historically contingent. Further, the aspects of each that have been consistently taught in Latter-day Saint discourse are never explored in the book or put into dialogue with the discontinuities that are highlighted throughout.

### Normative Antinormativity

Another major challenge for queer theory is its general critical posture toward “normativity.” At the broadest level, a norm is simply a directive that gives guidance about how people should act—a norm tells you that you *should* or *ought to* do (or be) something. As we have seen, Petrey asserts that the structural possibility of transgression regarding gender and sexuality show that these norms are historically contingent. But this need not follow, and in fact undermines, the normative claims that queer theory relies upon.

Some norms, such as those involving etiquette, are nonmoral, at least most of the time. On the other hand, some norms make a stronger claim. Charles Taylor uses the term “strong evaluation” to refer to determinations of “right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which these can be judged.”<sup>15</sup> Generally, questions of morality and justice fit into this category. When someone makes a claim that they have been treated unjustly, they (generally) are appealing to an objective standard; a standard that stands above our preferences and opinions. Let us use the term “moral truth” for these sorts of strong normative claims. Does *Tabernacles of*

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inclinations and forces the repression of some of them. These ritual performances, and their associated repressions, are enforced by arrangements of social power.” Martha C. Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler,” *The New Republic*, February 22, 1999, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody>.

15. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4.

*Clay* (and queer theory more generally) have an account of moral truth? The answer seems to be yes, but a “yes” that is significantly compromised by queer theory’s general outlook and suspicion of normative standards.

On one hand, there is no doubt that the narrative in the book assumes the existence of moral truth. The selection and framing of materials reveal a moral evaluation that the Church has gotten it wrong in many ways that have been (and continue to be) harmful to its own members and other people. Morally laden terms such as “compulsory heteronormativity,” “dehumanizing,” “stigmatize,” and “marginalize” and attributions of ill-intent such as “a goal of [correlation] was to diminish women’s authority in the church in deference to the male priesthood . . . [and to] displace female autonomy” (37) abound in the text. Even though, as we mentioned above, much of the book simply aims to state “the facts,” an amoral reading of the book seems inconsistent with the selection and framing of the facts.

Does queer theory have resources to justify these moral judgments? There are reasons to think it does not. Much of queer theory’s outlook suggests that constraints, standards, or limitations are inherently oppressive. For example, a recent articulation of queer theory in the social sciences states that “a queer stance necessarily entails the rejection of normativity in any form.”<sup>16</sup> This statement seems to be within the mainstream of queer theory; the authors of the article do not offer any qualifications or commentary. However, one wonders how a reasonable (or even an intelligible) moral view could be built on such a foundation. Moral claims are *by definition* normative, and thus the elimination of normativity entails the elimination of morality.<sup>17</sup> One cannot recommend rejecting all norms without accepting the norm that norms ought to be rejected, which of course is inconsistent with what one is recommending.<sup>18</sup> As one of our students once said, “No rules’ is still a rule.”

In fairness, some queer thinkers are more self-conscious and careful about their moral claims than others. Butler’s more recent writings,

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16. Phillip L. Hammack, David M. Frost, and Sam D. Hughes, “Queer Intimacies: A New Paradigm for the Study of Relationship Diversity,” *Journal of Sex Research* 56, nos. 4–5 (2019): 559.

17. Richard Burnor and Yvonne Raley, eds., *Ethical Choices: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy with Cases*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–7.

18. “It is one thing to say that we should be humble about our universal norms, and willing to learn from the experience of oppressed people. It is quite another thing to say that we don’t need any norms at all.” Nussbaum, “Professor of Parody.”

for example, include serious attempts to clarify certain moral issues.<sup>19</sup> Still, in our estimation, there is a vast gulf between the moralistic writing of many queer theorists and the actual arguments they give to sustain their moral judgments. Queer theory undermines the argumentative resources that could help recommend it to a sincere seeker of moral truth. It has not escaped normativity, but by making normativity its enemy it has made the search for moral truth (as well as its own moral criticisms) opaque.

### Race, Gender, and Sexuality in LDS Discourse

Having reviewed several theoretical and overarching concerns with the book, we now analyze representative examples of how *Tabernacles of Clay* deals with race, gender, and sexuality. We will briefly summarize some of the main findings on each topic. We then show how consideration of complicating evidence and avoiding the conflation of *emphasis* and *exclusivity* could have strengthened the analysis.

It may be helpful to explain the need to address complicating evidence in qualitative or narrative-based studies such as *Tabernacles of Clay*. Though quantitative studies have their own limitations, they have robust tools to guard against drawing conclusions from skewed data or nonrepresentative samples. Qualitative or narrative-based studies have fewer formal ways to control for skewed data or nonrepresentative samples.

One of the primary requirements of rigorous qualitative research to guard against such bias is considering plausible counternarratives or alternative explanations.<sup>20</sup> Academic editors and peer reviewers regularly require researchers to show evidence that they have confronted complicating evidence. They require such complicating evidence to be placed in dialogue with evidence that supports one's thesis. Without this check, inaccurate conclusions can be drawn by not attending to other facts or possible explanations. In *Tabernacles of Clay*, seeking out and directly addressing complicating evidence would have created a more

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19. For example, see Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020).

20. Jane F. Gilgun, "The Four Cornerstones of Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Health Research* 16, no. 3 (March 2006): 436–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305285338>; Jane F. Gilgun, "Deductive Qualitative Analysis and Family Theory Building," in *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*, ed. Vern L. Bengtson and others (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2005), 83–84.

complete and balanced picture. This would allow readers to better evaluate the strength of the arguments made and the conclusions drawn.

## Race

Petrey draws a direct connection between the Church's racial policies in the nineteenth century and marriage. He argues that the Church's discouragement of interracial marriage was an attempt at maintaining white racial purity (29). In keeping with queer theory, the Church's racial teachings are seen as exercising power and control over marital decisions. Petrey later argues that the Church uses gender and sexuality to replace race when race no longer affords Church leaders leverage to control marriage. "The coexisting conflicts over interracial marriage and gender roles were not historical accidents but intersected on the issue of boundary production and maintenance" (20).

## Consideration of Complicating Evidence

Petrey clearly shows an evolution in interracial marriage discourse within the Church. A few nineteenth-century leaders made explicit statements regarding white racial purity. Though rare, at least one early-twentieth-century leader used similar terms. The presence of such statements provides preliminary evidence for the book's argument that the reason for race, gender, and sexual norms was to allow Church leaders to control marriage. The concept of white racial purity would rightly be condemned today. Most Church members would be shocked to realize that some past leaders held such views.

Such sentiments were unfortunately quite commonly held in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Interracial marriage itself was illegal in forty-one out of the fifty states for much of the nineteenth century. Most of those laws continued through much of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> But even if common then, most people today would agree that such statements reflect a false view of the value and dignity of Black people and other minorities.

Petrey uses these past statements as evidence that Church leaders sought to maintain white racial purity through exercising power over marriage. However, a more complete investigation of the historical record reveals a more nuanced view. No attempt to comprehend the normative

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21. Laura Walker, "Interracial Marriage in the United States (1850–2017)," Towards Data Science, December 12, 2019, <https://towardsdatascience.com/interracial-marriage-in-the-united-states-1850-2017-d6dfc3678e07>.



or authoritative understanding of any issue in the Church could be complete without seeing how it is addressed in scriptures and general conference talks. A search of general conference addresses from 1851 to 2020 for the words “race,” “races,” “racial,” “racism,” “black,” “Negro,” “Caucasian,” and “skin” (almost 2,200 references) failed to produce a single direct reference to maintaining white or any other racial purity.<sup>22</sup> There were problematic race-based statements in general conference that showed the speaker did not believe in the equality of different races.<sup>23</sup> However, none of the general conference statements explicitly advocated for maintaining white or any other kind of racial purity.

Knowing of the several explicitly racist statements by early Church leaders, some of which are listed in *Tabernacles of Clay*, we expected to find many such statements in the more than two thousand references in general conference since 1851. We were surprised at the result. Again, there were a few statements that would be justifiably considered racist by most people today. However, by a margin of well over 20 to 1, the majority of statements from general conference regarding race affirmed the dignity and worth of all people and called upon Church members to do better in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward all races.<sup>24</sup> Some of these statements explicitly condemned the belief in white racial superiority. One example is David O. McKay, who condemned those in the world who were “arrogating to themselves racial superiority.”<sup>25</sup>

It might be tempting to believe that the teachings of the latter half of the twentieth century created this largely nonracist teaching record. But

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22. All general conference searches were done using Corpus of LDS General Conference Talks, 1851–2020, <https://www.lds-general-conference.org/>; Scripture Citation Index, <https://scriptures.byu.edu/>; and Periodical: Conference Report, <https://scripture-tools.net/periodicals/conference-report?lang=eng>.

23. It should be noted that some scripture verses indicate that some ancient authors also viewed others through prejudicial lenses, whether because of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, economics, or other factors.

24. Examples often spoke of the oneness of man, that God is the father of all of us, that all are alike (often quoting or paraphrasing 2 Nephi 26:33), that all are called to be saved, that all have equal rights, that all humankind’s spiritual nature is that of God’s children, and so forth. Several of these statements came from individuals for which we also have record of more racist statements, including Brigham Young (May 1871), Charles Penrose (April 1880), George Q. Cannon (April 1879, October 1880), and Orson F. Whitney (April 1928).

25. David O. McKay, in *One Hundred Fifteenth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1944), 78.



that is not what the actual search found. Statements about racial equality and human dignity were spread throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. It is also true that the few problematic statements were predominately from the nineteenth century. This comprehensive search of every talk in general conference shows the complex nature of racial understanding even in the early days of the Church. Would it be accurate to state that Church leaders held no racist beliefs because the overwhelming majority of their statements about race in general conference were remarkably egalitarian? No—we have sufficient counterexamples to disprove that view. Would it be accurate to claim that Church leaders believed and regularly taught white supremacy and the need to maintain white racial purity since the historical record shows that a few did? No—such a claim is not supported by the overall record. Placing all or even the majority of the focus either way paints an incomplete picture that hides the complex reality on the ground.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

Having documented discourse change regarding race, Petrey now focuses more directly on the central concepts of the book: gender and sexuality. He argues that “gender and sexuality must be analyzed together to produce the best explanation of Mormon approaches to these topics” (10). Four chapters are devoted to arguing that Church leader teachings of “gender and sexual essentialism” are “a rhetorical effort to cover over a different ontology of gender and sexuality” (ix).

These chapters seek to demonstrate that “essentialism [the belief that the categories of male and female are based on eternal identity and that heterosexuality is based in our eternal nature] simply doesn’t work as an explanatory theory of human behavior in Mormon teaching. This book challenges the view that modern Mormon leaders have consistently taught gender essentialism as the sole or even primary theory of sexual difference. Appeals to essentialism cover over the fear of sexual and gender fluidity” (14).

As we argued above, the possibility of variation in discourse does not necessarily undermine essentialism. But putting ontological claims to the side, Petrey is right to say that Church leaders regularly spoke of aspects of gender and sexuality that were considered malleable. His claim that appeals to essentialism were an attempt to deny that sexuality or gender are socially constructed is less clearly established. This is especially true since many of the essentialist claims long predate the issues Petrey says they were meant to cover over.

## The Patriarchal Order of Marriage

The examination of gender-related topics begins with the “patriarchal order of marriage.” Though never explicitly defined in the book, this concept was consistently used to refer to hierarchical domestic relationships entailing a “strict division of gendered labor” (16) between men and women. That definition does not match common usage in the Church from its founding until today. However, using the tools of queer theory, Petrey explores Church leaders’ approach to male and female power dynamics politically, economically, and in the family. The transition to a discourse on hierarchical gendered relationships is interpreted as Church leaders’ attempts to further exercise control.

The argument is that Church leaders pivoted from race to sexuality and gender in a further attempt to control members’ approach to marriage. “The old doctrines [interracial marriage] had to be replaced with something else” (52). Petrey is not always clear about how intentional these changes are.<sup>26</sup> Queer theory’s focus on power and control is consistent throughout the book. Petrey demonstrates, accurately for the most part, that Church leader teachings regarding gendered relationships evolved from a male headship model to what he refers to as a “soft egalitarianism” (119). The argument is made that this change resulted from Church leaders’ reaction to feminist social pressure, especially regarding the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This fits with the assumptions of queer theory emphasis on power dynamics, which holds that change only happens as external forces apply pressure.

## Consideration of Complicating Evidence

Petrey refers to changes in how Church leaders addressed power dynamics in support of one of his primary hypotheses: that change in rhetoric “suggests a theory of gender that does not rest on an essential foundation” (222–23).

Petrey acknowledges that Church leaders have posited gender essentialism as the “primary theory of sexual difference” (14). However, little time is spent examining actual statements from Church leaders on this topic. No serious attempt is made to examine or place these statements

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26. Petrey consistently refers to Church leaders creating and exercising new forms of power through their discourse regarding race, gender, and sexuality, but it’s not clear whether he believes they are consciously actually exercising agency in these decisions. See pages 52, 60, 65, 101, 174 and 215 for examples.

in dialogue with statements about nonessential aspects of gender. Of the 140 references in the book regarding Church leaders' claims that gender is eternal or essential, we found only two actual statements from Church leaders. One comes from James E. Talmage and is critiqued by the author as inadequate. The other was the family proclamation statement that gender is essential. Additionally, one scholar (Terryl Givens) is quoted as stating that "gender is eternal' is a 'position that has never varied in Mormon theology'" (8). Without examining the many statements on gender essentialism from Church leaders and placing these in dialogue with teachings that show malleable aspects of gender, it is hard to assess how they relate. How do they contradict or complement each other, and what conclusions can be drawn from the overall record?

The lack of actual statements on the essential nature of gender is understandable if the author is simply showing that Church leaders have spoken about gender and sexuality in nonessentialist ways. Petry does this convincingly. But what does the tension between essentialism and fluidity mean in regard to gender and sexuality in Church discourse? Following queer theory, does this evidence show that there really is no essential nature to gender? Or is it evidence that there are multiple facets of gender and sexuality, some of which may be essential or eternal in nature while others evolve?

To analyze such a question, we would need a more complete portrayal of both essentialist and nonessentialist teachings, which is not provided in the book. It would have been helpful to examine the dozens of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century prophetic statements regarding the essential nature of gender, including the context of each statement. But this is never done.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the book quotes dozens of statements regarding changing gender roles. As stated

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27. For some representative examples, see Brigham H. Roberts, in *Seventy-fourth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1904), 14–20, <https://archive.org/details/ConferenceReports1900s/page/n753/mode/2up>; Orson F. Whitney, in *Ninetieth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1920), 119–24, <https://archive.org/details/ConferenceReports1920s/page/n119/mode/2up>; James E. Talmage, "The Eternity of Sex," *Young Women's Journal* 25, no. 10 (October 1914): 600–604; James E. Talmage, "The Eternity of Sex," *Millennial Star* 84, no. 34 (August 24, 1922): 539–40; John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1932), 64–65; and the numerous other statements since "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" was given.

above, this approach is insufficient to allow readers to understand how such statements align with, contradict, or build upon more essentialist rhetoric from Church leaders.

### *Conflation—Exclusivity vs Emphasis*

The book seems to import the contemporary meaning of “patriarchy” (a hierarchical system in which men have power over women) and impose it on the historic use of the term “patriarchal order.” This is not simply an issue of imprecise terminology but of meaning, as will be explained. We were surprised at this usage, since, at best, it captures only a partial understanding of how the term has been used in the Church.

The terms “patriarchal order” or “patriarchal marriage” were used fifty times in general conference in the nineteenth century. Each referred to the institution of eternal marriage between men and women (often eternal plural marriage), not gender roles.<sup>28</sup> The terms were used thirty-two times in the twentieth century, again with each reference speaking of eternal marriage between men and women and none speaking about gender roles. We then searched “patriarchal” and “father” together and “patriarchal” and “preside” together but again found few references to gender roles.

We wondered if Petrey had found numerous uses of the term in other sources that emphasized male headship teachings, so we looked up each reference to the word “patriarchal” in *Tabernacles of Clay* (102 individual references). We did not find a single reference that was an actual quote from a General Authority using the term “patriarchal order” or “patriarchal marriage” to refer to gender roles. Every occurrence of either term that referenced gender roles was the author’s own statement.

Interestingly, though not referenced and not spoken in general conference, there are statements that refer to the patriarchal order as an order where men preside over their families that could have more strongly connected the construct and the label. But as Petrey accurately points out, even that becomes problematic since the term “preside” itself has undergone an evolution in Church discourse from the concept of male headship to what the book refers to as “soft egalitarianism” and what modern Church leaders insist must be a “full and equal partnership.”<sup>29</sup>

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28. For a brief review of how the term has been used in the Church, see Terryl L. Givens, *Feeding the Flock: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Church and Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 117–121.

29. M. Russell Ballard, “The Sacred Responsibilities of Parenthood,” *Ensign* 36, no. 3 (March 2006): 29. See also Gordon B. Hinckley, “I Believe,” *Ensign* 22, no. 8 (August

None of this argues that male headship was never taught in the Church. It was, and not infrequently. And certainly, marriages in the 1800s (the time period with the most mentions of patriarchal marriage) were more hierarchical than modern marriages. Perhaps this was the reason the author chose to define patriarchal marriage in terms of gender roles. But the conceptual conflation of patriarchal order with the modern concept of patriarchy creates more than definitional confusion.

In the Church, the patriarchal order refers to an order of marriage that requires men and women be sealed for eternity leading to the exaltation and perfection of members of both genders. The most official explanation of the concept of patriarchal priesthood is Doctrine and Covenants 131:1–4. It states that men and women who do not enter into this “order of the priesthood [meaning the new and everlasting covenant of marriage]” cannot enter into the highest level of the celestial kingdom. As Cree-L Kofford explains, this “order of the priesthood” is “simply another way of saying ‘patriarchal order.’ Thus, that portion of section 131 could read: ‘And in order to obtain the highest, a man must enter into the patriarchal order of the priesthood.’ The patriarchal order refers to priesthood government by family organization.”<sup>30</sup>

Instead of referencing hierarchical gender roles (which clearly existed), the patriarchal order consistently refers to the necessity of men and women being eternally sealed together to qualify for exaltation. This regular usage actually points to the essential nature of gender as consistently taught in the Church and the need for both male and female genders in the plan of salvation. Putting such statements into dialogue with more malleable aspects of gender could have been used to provide more nuance in interpreting the competing essentialist and nonessentialist aspects of gender in Church discourse.

Regarding hierarchical gender roles, Petrey points out that “LDS officials did not believe that a husband and father’s rule over his family was an unchecked authority” (35) This point could have added meaningful nuance to the discussion of changing Church teachings regarding gender roles. Established Church doctrine actually holds out a much more egalitarian approach to gender roles than at times was understood or lived in the Church. Doctrine and Covenants 121 clearly teaches that

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1992): 6; L. Tom Perry, “Fatherhood, an Eternal Calling,” *Ensign* 34, no. 5 (May 2004): 71; Henry B. Eyring, “Women and Gospel Learning in the Home,” *Ensign* 48, no. 11 (November 2018): 58.

30. Cree-L Kofford, “Marriage in the Lord’s Way, Part One,” *Ensign* 28, no. 6 (June 1998): 12.

when any man exercises “control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood or the authority of that man” and that “no power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; by kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile” (D&C 121:37, 41–42).

This scripture and its accompanying teaching were used regularly to teach about family relations throughout the majority of the period covered in detail by the book. Spencer W. Kimball memorably taught that if a husband tells his wife, “I hold the priesthood and you’ve got to do what I say,” that husband “should not be honored in his priesthood.”<sup>31</sup> Given this doctrinal background from the early days of the Church, it is arguable that the Church’s move toward more egalitarian relationships in the latter half of the twentieth century actually brought it more in line with an underlying concept of eternal marriage and more doctrinally sound understanding of gender equality.

It would have been interesting to put such teachings in dialogue with some of the less egalitarian teachings so as to be able to better understand what they meant. Petrey acknowledges a move toward “soft egalitarianism,” connecting it to the Church’s fight against the ERA in particular and feminism in general. To some extent the timing does line up. However, several statements regarding more egalitarian relationships in marriage are from general leaders that predate the ERA. Those statements seem to simply be based on correct principles rather than being a reaction to social and political events.<sup>32</sup> Looking at these teachings could add nuance and depth to our understanding of these issues. Again, this review is not attempting to claim that this more egalitarian approach to gender relations was fully understood or lived for much of the history of

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31. Spencer W. Kimball, quoted in Dallin H. Oaks, “Priesthood Authority in the Family and the Church,” *Ensign* 35, no. 11 (November 2005): 26.

32. Several of these statements from general conference date to the late 1800s. One later example is the conference address by Joseph F. Merrill in April 1946, where he taught, “A Latter-day Saint marriage is a union of two equal partners, obligated to build a home where mutual love, respect, trust, fidelity, tolerance, patience, and kindness are some of the essential operating factors.” Merrill, in *One Hundred Sixteenth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1946), 29, <https://archive.org/details/ConferenceReports1940s/page/n1793/mode/2up>.

the Church. It can take time and growth to develop any aspirational gospel ideal. But that does not make the ideal less real or less representative of the Church's official stance on an issue.

One final challenge to the book's thesis that comes as a result of assuming exclusivity instead of emphasis was that the focus on gendered power dynamic was assumed to result from the failure of race to provide sufficient Church control over sex, gender, and marital issues. But what is never explained is how this could be the case when the concept of male headship—even if conceptualized as benevolent patriarchy—did not begin in the middle of the twentieth century when race ceased to be associated with marriage in any meaningful way. Familial as well as societal roles of men and women were as hierarchical in 1830 as they were in the 1950s. Therefore, how could Church discourse on hierarchical relationships flow from the failure of race to provide sufficient power and control for Church leaders?

Petrey points to a much more likely reason for much of the retrenchment discourse on gendered power dynamics. For the first time in modern history, many women entered the work force in large numbers at this time. Concern over this issue was explicitly spoken of by leaders throughout this period. This would seem to be a much more likely reason than the failure of race to provide Church leaders with control over sex, gender, and marital issues. Of course, the argument could still be made that, regardless of precipitating events, the motive was to allow Church leaders to maintain power and control rather than as a good-faith effort to help families succeed. But reliance on the argument that this was a reaction to race ceasing to be an effective method of control for Church leaders sidetracks a more thorough investigation of what the historical record could tell us about Church leaders' concerns regarding gender roles.

### *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*

The next step in the evolution of gender and sexuality covered in *Tabernacles of Clay* focuses on Church leaders' alleged attempts to maintain power and control through "the heterosexual order." The argument is that with race and patriarchy ceasing to be effective means of asserting control, "the heterosexual family finally replaced the patriarchal and racially segregated family of previous decades" (17). Petrey argues that leader's efforts to fight against modern feminist movements like the ERA, as well as the societal acceptance of homosexuality, moved the Church from a hierarchical to an egalitarian emphasis on marriage to maintain power and control.



“As church leaders relaxed their teachings on racial difference and gendered hierarchy, they increased their attention to sexual difference as a defining aspect of human identity—especially as it was manifest in sexuality” (52). In the analysis, “these moves were not unrelated but jointly reordered LDS thought about gender and sexuality away from the patriarchal order to the heterosexual order” (16). As he explains, “Doctrines about gender roles, and the worries about gender fluidity, morphed into new concerns and spawned new forms of power. In its most pointed form, homosexuality became the ultimate threat of gender fluidity and its most prevalent expression” (52).

The evolving Church narrative about certain aspects of same-sex attraction is seen as evidence for this thesis. Petrey documents how Church leaders initially spoke of the causes and responses to same-sex attraction largely from a sin perspective. They then took a medical perspective and finally a psychological perspective toward same-sex attraction. The book acknowledges that this evolution largely mirrored the larger societal narrative. Until 1973, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) classified homosexuality as “abnormal and pathological” (75). Using the language of disease and pathology, both medical professionals and lay Church leaders spoke of homosexuality being “cured.” This narrative began to fall out of vogue when the APA removed homosexuality from its list of disorders in 1973.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Church leaders regularly used the language and tools of psychology to teach and minister to members regarding same-sex attraction and behaviors. Though Church leaders continued to condemn same-sex sexual behavior as morally wrong, they also employed counselors and provided extensive training for ecclesiastic leaders to create a culture of care and rehabilitation. As Petrey points out, there has been an increasing effort to encourage compassion and kindness both from members to those who experience same-sex attraction and from such individuals toward themselves.

Church leaders became more focused on helping LGBTQ+ individuals know that God loves them, that he has a plan for them, and that they have a place in God’s Church and kingdom. Church leaders also have deemphasized causal explanations, whether biological, familial, or psychological. Instead, they focused on encouraging members to approach same-sex attraction within the framework of Church doctrine and principles.

Petrey also outlines the Church’s approach to transgender persons, although this topic receives only a few pages in the book. Such limited



coverage is somewhat surprising for what would seem to be a central topic in a book on gender and sexuality. The truth is that there is much less to go on by way of Church discourse, as the author acknowledges. Church leaders have consistently taught that feelings of gender dysphoria, though real, do not change a person's sex—meaning biological sex. But similar to the issue of same-sex attraction, the Church's approach to explaining and ministering to persons who identify as transgender or who experience gender dysphoria is still developing.

### *Consideration of Complicating Evidence*

The picture painted of the evolving narrative regarding same-sex attraction in *Tabernacles of Clay* is largely accurate. It accurately documents the different approaches Church leaders took in their efforts to teach about sexual orientation, same-sex sexual behavior, and how to minister to LGBTQ+ members. This evolving discourse is once again used as evidence that Church leaders approach sexual orientation as a malleable, nonessential construct. Petrey argues that “rather than appealing to an absolute, essential, and eternal form of sexual difference, Mormon leaders in the postwar period actually saw the pre-mortal and post-mortal periods as extensions of the gender fluidity and malleability of the mortal phase of human existence. That is, Mormons in this era were more likely to see sexual difference as the result of intentionally chosen gendered practices than as an unalterable nature of human identity” (40). He further states, “Conservative religious communities, like Mormon leaders, rejected modernist ideas of essentialism and put the fluidity and malleability of identity to use” (55).

What gets lost in the book's discussion is the reality that while Church leaders' narratives regarding the causes of same-sex attraction and the means of teaching members how to live faithfully with same-sex attraction have changed, Church leaders' teachings regarding the role of sexuality in the plan of salvation and the moral and spiritual consequence of same-sex sexual (not simply affectional) behavior are remarkably consistent.<sup>33</sup> Putting the two threads together more consistently would have

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33. In an effort to indicate an actual change in the moral and spiritual seriousness of same-sex attraction, Petrey seeks to make the case that the Church did not consider same-sex sexual sin as overly serious by referring to the case of Joseph F. Smith, the presiding patriarch to the Church, who was released from his calling but not excommunicated as a result of purported same-sex sexual behavior, while Richard R. Lyman was excommunicated for adultery (62–63). However, as anyone who has ever presided over

allowed the reader to evaluate how this tension fits into the larger tapestry of Latter-day Saint theology and discourse.<sup>34</sup>

The increased emphasis that experiencing same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria is not cause for condemnation or shame effectively demonstrates evolving Church leader discourse. However, leader discourse has been completely consistent (and insistent) that the only appropriate exercise of our sexual nature occurs in marriage between men and women. From the first reference to same-sex sexual behavior in the Restoration to the most recent general conference, every mention of same-sex sexual behavior has taught that such behavior is contrary to our eternal nature and God's plan for our eternal destiny. No effort is made in the book to explore how this consistency of message provides a counterpoint to the predominant message of the book—that we should understand these constructs through the lens of historicism and antiessentialism. Furthermore, for the Latter-day Saint lay person reading the book who is not only trying to follow the historical development of dialogue but to understand the actual nature of these ideas, providing a more complete picture of Latter-day Saint dialogue would help readers understand what Church leaders have actually taught.

### *Exclusivity vs. Emphasis*

Perhaps the most important question to ask regarding the entire discussion of same-sex attraction in *Tabernacles of Clay* is why that topic is being used as evidence that Church leaders approach gender primarily as a social construct. Though there is growing conflict between some groups within the LGBTQ+ community, up until very recently the meaning of sexual orientation has depended upon the existence of relatively stable gender categories. For example, a gay man was someone who was attracted to *men*, understood as biological males, not just persons who perform stereotypical masculine roles. As longtime gay rights

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a disciplinary council can attest, the outcome of a disciplinary council is determined by far more than one variable and hence is not sufficient grounds to judge the doctrinal severity of the issue at hand.

34. Petrey does bring to the different constructs the fact that Latter-day Saint discourse claims an eternal reality, such as his reference to James E. Talmage's claims that sex (meaning male and female sex) is eternal (42). But such claims are regularly dismissed or problematized. This would not be a problem if the same approach were taken for the more nonessentialist Church leader dialogue that makes up the majority of the book—thus showing the complexity more fully and giving the reader more information with which to analyze the meaning of the discourse.

activist Andrew Sullivan writes, “The core of the traditional gay claim is that there is indeed a very big difference between male and female, that the difference matters, and without it, homosexuality would make no sense at all.”<sup>35</sup> So it would seem that sexual orientation, at least as it has been commonly understood, has required the existence of separate categories of men and women, understood as male and female.

Of course, queer theory challenges this premise. Judith Butler famously argues in *Gender Trouble* that sex is just as socially constructed as gender. But even though sexual orientation may challenge aspects of the “heteronormative order,” its traditional commitment to the existence of men and women suggests that concepts of male and female are not as dispensable as queer theory imagines. Though perhaps legitimate to combine gender identity and sexual orientation through queer theory to discuss power dynamics, it would seem less appropriate to infer that this shared power dynamic is evidence that they share the same ontological nature.

## Conclusion

*Tabernacles of Clay* is an important book because it deals seriously and substantially with the social history of race, gender roles, and sexual orientation in Latter-day Saint thought and practice. The book invites readers to think more carefully about the evolving discourse Church leaders have shared over its history, especially since the 1950s. By centering his analysis in queer theory, Petrey seeks to highlight ways in which Church leaders demonstrated a belief in a nonessentialist view of gender and sexuality even while continuing to claim both were ontologically essentialist in nature.

Petrey effectively demonstrates that some aspects of Church leaders’ teachings on sex and gender evolved. A question that readers (especially Latter-day Saint readers) will likely grapple with is what we can learn through this analysis of dialogue. Are the differences in discussion simply representative of focusing on multifaceted and complex concepts? Are the differences representative of improved understanding? Are the differences simply representations of behavioral aspects that differ based on time, circumstance, and ability? Or do those differences exist because there is no essential nature or ontological identity connected to them?

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35. Andrew Sullivan, “The Nature of Sex,” *New York Intelligencer*, February 1, 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/02/andrew-sullivan-the-nature-of-sex.html>.

Petrey assumes the latter and interprets all changing discourse accordingly. For his Latter-day Saint readers to determine how to interpret those disparate messages would require a much more complete examination of the evidence with a willingness to allow the totality of the evidence to guide our conclusions.

Ultimately, through an examination of the assumptions of queer theory and a more complete examination of the historical record, we are skeptical that the historical record indicates that gender as understood and communicated by Church leaders is forever liminal and socially constructed. Though there are clearly socially constructed aspects of each subject that have evolved, there are also core aspects of gender and sexuality that have never changed in Church discourse. Petrey acknowledges, "My view is not that there is no essentialist binary in Mormon thought but that the supposedly fixed binary between male and female is not all that there is" (14–15). However, the book goes beyond simply stating that there is more than an essentialist binary. Repeatedly the claim is made that gender in Latter-day Saint thought and discourse is actually not based on an essential foundation.

Though earlier Church leaders often taught hierarchical views of male and female relationships, the emphasis they gave to the ontological reality of male and female gender and its theological role relating to exaltation has never changed. The need for men and women to be sealed together to fulfill our eternal destiny was taught by Joseph Smith and has been reiterated without exception since that time. This is true in every iteration of family life espoused and taught throughout the Church's history. The one thing that each variation had in common was marriage was made up of at least one man and one woman (and sometimes more) sealed together for eternity. Finally, though Church leaders' understanding of the cause of same-sex attraction and the method of ministering to LGBTQ+ members evolved, again the necessity of men and women being sealed together for eternity has never changed and has always been the primary doctrinal reason given for the Church's teachings on sexual orientation.

The consistency regarding core aspects of gender and sexuality does not, by itself, prove that the Church's ontological claims about them are true. The type of evidence that is accessible in a historical study such as this (or in a review of that study) simply does not provide sufficient evidence to prove or disprove such transcendent realities. Nor do inconsistencies in the historical record negate the fact that Church leaders (and members) have taught and believed different things about several

aspects of gender and sexuality. These differing claims invite us to learn to differentiate between evolving gender roles and the concept of the ontological reality of eternal gender. But the continuities and constancies do call into question the conclusion that gender and sexuality are themselves devoid of constancy and ontological reality in Church teaching.

However, *Tabernacles of Clay* does provide a rich opportunity for serious students to understand that there are socially constructed aspects of gender and sexuality in the Church that are also important to understand. We agree with Petrey that the historical record clearly illustrates that Church dialogue surrounding gender roles and the causes and ministerial approach regarding same-sex attraction has changed over time. In and of itself, this is a valuable contribution and can lead to a more nuanced and healthy approach to understanding the socially constructed aspects of gender and sexuality today. We agree with the author that many past representations of gender roles and sexuality were problematic and that members of the Church should be wary of conflating these socially constructed aspects with the idea of eternal gender. Thus, this book is an important resource for serious students to consider as they seek to understand what conclusions to draw from the various teachings surrounding gender and sexuality in the Church.

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*Terrible Revolution:  
Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse*  
By Christopher James Blythe

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020

*Reviewed by Tona Hangen*

When a costume-clad man wielded a Captain Moroni “title of liberty” flag at the Capitol insurrection of January 6, 2021, it was a notable reminder that revolutionary end-times ideology has a long and evocative presence in the culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and adjacent religions. Christopher Blythe’s timely and wide-ranging book explores these themes across time, geography, and even denominational boundaries. He defines apocalypticism both as a distinct Jewish-Christian scriptural literary form found in Hebrew and Christian texts and malleable perfectionist ideology embracing “catastrophic millennialism,” to borrow Catherine Wessinger’s coinage. In brief, apocalyptic rhetoric exhibits “the belief that society [i]s headed toward cataclysmic events that would uproot the current social order in favor of a divine order that would be established in its place” (2–4). This is a capacious enough definition that many different threads can be explored under its rubric, and indeed at times in the book it might prove daunting for readers without extensive prior understanding of Latter-day Saint history and theology to connect all the dots on their own.

Within Mormon culture broadly—and under that term Blythe enthusiastically includes the main body of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as related schismatic, noncanonical, and fundamentalist groups—apocalyptic themes appear in reported prophecies, dreams, visions, folktales, speeches, publications, and artistic renderings, in both official and unofficial contexts. Their meaning, content, and context are not fixed and have changed dramatically over time. Blythe documents Latter-day Saint apocalypticism over four broad periods of time: in the lifetime and immediate postmartyrdom of Joseph Smith; during the Utah territorial era; at the turn of the twentieth century when Mormonism became Americanized; and over the twentieth century,

with a brief afterword addressing the 2012 “Mormon moment” during Mitt Romney’s U.S. presidential campaign. As that chronology suggests, the book is weighted toward Mormonism’s first century and only briefly sketches the contours of more contemporary iterations.

Drawing on extant wells of Biblical apocalypticism as understood by nineteenth-century Christian evangelicals like Millerites and others who anticipated the imminent return of Jesus Christ, beliefs of the leaders and members of the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during Joseph Smith’s lifetime echoed the prevailing culture while adding some unique elements (20). The Book of Mormon’s pattern of cyclical destruction and renewal and its characterization of the American continent as a promised land peopled by divine intention fueled the young denomination’s intense millennial expectation. A “strain of political messianism” arose during the Nauvoo period (39), in which “the image of Latter-day Saints salvaging the imperiled [United States] constitution became a standard component of Mormon last days prophecy” (40), culminating in establishing the Council of Fifty as a permanent “theodemocracy” on earth (45). Another uniquely Mormon twist on “redeemer nation ideas and Anglo-Saxon triumphalism” identified Mormons and Indians (23) as chosen people who were integral parts of a larger divine historical arc for the tribes of Israel and the eventual redemption of Zion (25–27).

Joseph Smith’s murder raised questions about the future and fate of the movement, such as: Were these traumatic events unforeseen and therefore untimely? Or was this the Lord’s will for his people, perhaps evidence of Smith’s ascension to an expansive postmortal ministry? Might Smith return as a resurrected being to lead the Church again in some form? Would God now judge and curse the nation that had killed a prophet? Rhetoric steeped in vengeance abounded in the wake of the martyrdom, including folk stories about the hideous fates of those who participated in the Carthage mob (79–85). With the loss of its central visionary, “non-hierarchical . . . voices” (97) brought confusion and schism even as the main body of Mormons symbolically and rhetorically shook the dust from their feet, turned westward, and abandoned the nation to what they believed would be certain destruction. Those beliefs seemed justified during the national crucible of the Civil War, another peak era of American Protestant apocalypticism.

During the 1850s to the 1890s (a critical era in Mormon–U.S. relations), Blythe calls attention to new additions to the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants that carried “apocalyptic themes” such as the Civil War prophecy and commentaries on portions of Revelation and Isaiah (D&C 87, 77, and 113). He also notes widely circulated vision discourses—some

anonymously authored—describing plagues, urban social breakdown, and desolation on a biblical scale. Visions and dreams infused with fears of invasion, destruction, and mortal threat (in which only armed defenses, the temple, or divine intervention provided protection) marked the persecuted and nationally isolated generation prior to Utah statehood. Blythe points out that few Church leaders disavowed these folk theology explorations at the time, since they “bolstered the church’s authority and strengthened the Saints’ resolve to endure in the face of American oppression. Meanwhile, this separatist apocalypticism was frightening to non-Mormon Americans and won the Mormons few friends” (178). He documents a spike in Mormon millennial expectation for the Second Coming of Jesus around 1890–91, timing supposedly prophesied by Joseph Smith before his death (181–84). Around that same time, “more and more Saints recorded their recollections of the words of Mormonism’s departed visionaries” (206), including Edwin Rushton putting the so-called “White Horse Prophecy” in writing supposedly from his memory of hearing it fifty years earlier—a detailed noncanonical narrative often attributed to Joseph Smith but not actually found among his verified personal writings (207–11). Only after Utah statehood in 1896 and the formation of expatriate Mormon communities in Canada and Mexico would Latter-day Saints formally begin to fuse their religion with American patriotism, downplay literal geographic gathering (whether to a reclaimed Missouri “Zion” or to the intermountain West), and scorn earlier forms of ecstatic religious performance (visions, tongues, female healing by laying on of hands). For Blythe, these developments provide evidence that “the Mormon concept of the apocalypse shifted into an institutionally regulated [cultural] space” with a markedly Americanized tone (194). Resurgences of interest in the White Horse Prophecy and other vernacular apocalyptic writings like the racist, fearmongering Horseshoe Prophecy at particular moments of American political crisis trace Mormon cultural anxieties over the state of the world and their role in its trajectory (239–42).

Blythe’s final chapter catalogues a dizzying array of post-1945 books from prophecy enthusiasts with ties to Mormonism and varying levels of religious authority. These include Robert W. and Elisabeth A. Smith’s *The Last Days* (1931), Bruce R. McConkie’s *The Millennial Messiah* (1981), Avraham Gileadi’s *The Last Days: Types and Shadows from the Bible and Book of Mormon* (1991), and excommunicated Mormon Ronald Garff’s video series *Today through Armageddon* (early 1990s). The chapter’s broad sweep captures elements as disparate as prophecy writings from Mormon fundamentalist sects, self-published near-death experience narratives, and chatter on the online subscription forum Another



Voice of Warning. Many more could be added to this list, such as the prolific dispensationalist writings by W. Cleon Skousen, who published under the Church's official Deseret Book imprint and with independent publisher Bookcraft from the late 1940s (for example, *Prophecy and the Modern World*, 1948) through the 1990s (including his posthumous *The Cleansing of America*), or the early 2000s end-times Mormon-themed Times of Turmoil novel series by Chad Daybell. The chapter's highly impressionistic rendering makes it difficult to compare the significance or scope of influence of these various texts and authors or to identify how much these tracked with or simply held up a Mormon mirror to wider Cold War fears and popular Christian end-times theologizing like the 1990s fiction series *Left Behind*. Here and there, Blythe hints at traceable connections between Latter-day Saint apocalypticism and American far-right political groups, anti-UN sentiment, prepper culture, antigovernment militia movements, white supremacy organizations, and off-the-grid separatism, yet it is often unclear precisely how these interconnections are distinctively "Mormon" in nature.

As a case study in how a new religion accommodates change and polices its ideological boundaries, *Terrible Revolutions* fascinates on multiple levels. It aspires to do for Mormonism something similar to what David Hall did for Puritans in *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (1989), exploring how ordinary people of faith make sense of their time and place and see divine signs in the events and natural phenomena unfolding around them. Blythe's decision to selectively include so many noncanonical figures in his account contributes to the ongoing larger project of both folklore studies and social history: privileging and centering marginal voices instead of church leaders and elites. Certainly, the book reveals a rich lode of apocalypticism that persists *and* changes within religious traditions that lay claim to be the restoration of all things prior to the earth's final dispensation. In so doing, it invites promising further work by scholars of religious futurism.

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*Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins,  
and the Fight for American Religious Freedom*

By Spencer McBride

New York: Oxford University Press, 2021

*Reviewed by Jordan T. Watkins*

In *Joseph Smith for President*, Spencer McBride provides an illuminating and reader-friendly account of Joseph Smith's presidential campaign. McBride, who is a scholar of American religious and political history and an associate managing historian of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, firmly situates the early history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints within antebellum contexts. In doing so, he contributes to a body of scholarship that examines the early Saints' experiences in ways that shed light on and correct assumptions about American historical developments. In one recent example, which addresses some of the same themes, Benjamin E. Park's *Kingdom of Nauvoo* (New York: Live-right, 2020) describes the Saints' unique political, legal, and economic responses to a culture that had failed them and, in doing so, underscores the unsettled nature of democracy in antebellum America. Similarly, McBride's study challenges popular narratives that assert the universal enjoyment of religious freedom by showing that states' rights doctrine shaped the government's unresponsiveness to the Saints' petitions.

McBride's attention to national and local contexts is indicated in his narrative scope, which begins with Smith's trip to the nation's capital in late 1839 and concludes with the Smiths' assassination in mid-1844. His chapters neatly narrate political developments in Illinois, governmental developments in Nauvoo, attempts to extradite Smith, Smith's successful use of local legal resources, the Saints' persistence in seeking federal support, national politics and presidential campaigning, the creation of the Council of Fifty and its role in Smith's campaign, national and local nominating conventions, the rise of anti-Mormonism in western Illinois, and Smith's assassination. At times the narrative wanders from its central characters and concerns, but overall McBride's contextual approach yields a rich account of Smith's campaign.

Smith's visit with President Martin Van Buren is a familiar tale, but McBride's telling clarifies Smith's desires. We learn that he hoped Van Buren would mention the Saints' plight in his annual address to Congress (known today as the State of the Union), because Smith believed that this executive attention would pave the way for a favorable legislative response to the Saints' petition. When Van Buren failed to acknowledge the Saints' suffering and Congress ruled that it had no jurisdiction in the case, Smith directed his righteous indignation at the president. While McBride might have done more to connect Van Buren's statements and Congress's decision to the era's federalism, which supports his overall argument, McBride's close attention to a large cast of characters provides helpful insight into the Saints' hopes and their subsequent actions.

McBride's succeeding chapters highlight local legal and political developments. He narrates the Saints' manipulation of state politics to secure a liberal charter, Smith's successful use of local laws and powers to avoid extradition, and the Saints' unpredictable bloc voting. McBride shows how these developments contributed to the rise of anti-Mormonism in western Illinois. In his discussion of Smith's use of the right of habeas corpus, McBride does not detail how Nauvoo's city council bolstered this right over time, a process that contributed to anti-Mormon sentiment. If this kind of omission is the cost of a streamlined narrative aimed at a general audience, the price is minimal, since McBride still demonstrates that the Saints' use of local powers drew contempt from onlookers such as anti-Mormon newspaper editor Thomas Sharp.

McBride explains how the rise in anti-Mormon sentiment led Smith to again seek federal help and shows that when this latest effort failed it sparked his presidential campaign. McBride details Smith's correspondence with five prospective presidential candidates, some of whom responded with the tired excuse of a lack of jurisdiction, as in the cases of Lewis Cass and John C. Calhoun, or by expressing sympathy but promising nothing, as in the case of Henry Clay. McBride shows that during the same period, Nauvoo's city council approved a plan to petition Congress to make Nauvoo a federal territory, which, if successful, would have resolved the issue of jurisdiction. While pursuing multiple means of redress, Smith fumed at the politicians' responses, which instigated the Saints' desperate attempt to elect him as president.

McBride's approach allows him to identify the ordinary and unique aspects of Smith's presidential platform as contained in his campaign pamphlet. In celebrating the founding era and the decades that followed, the pamphlet partook of a broader narrative tradition before it departed from that tradition in ascribing the nation's recent decline to Van Buren's

presidency. It is worth noting that other groups, including abolitionists, also narrated progress and decline and, like the Saints, anticipated divine justice. McBride addresses each plank of Smith's platform, which included calls for a reduced Congress, a stronger executive, measured territorial expansion, compensated emancipation, a new national bank, and legal justice reform. McBride explains how each of these issues related to existing political conversations and to the Saints' own experiences. In discussing Smith's call for prison reform, for example, he usefully describes the rise of the American prison system and refers to Smith's own prior imprisonment.

McBride's emphasis on the Saints' varied efforts to secure their religious freedoms sets the stage for his discussion of Smith's creation of the Council of Fifty in March 1844. While the council was meant to serve as a governing body during Christ's millennial reign, Smith also found it useful in organizing his campaign and, alternatively, seeking a place of refuge in the West. During the same months, the Saints petitioned the government to place Smith at the head of a group of U.S. Army volunteers aimed at protecting western settlers and to provide the Saints a large tract of land. As McBride demonstrates, the beleaguered Saints were willing to pursue almost any means necessary to secure their religious freedoms.

On this score and others, McBride's narrative compares well with John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts of Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), which details an interracial alliance among four abolitionists. These figures also advanced a millennial vision that reimagined a pluralistic nation ordered on righteousness. Their group coalesced in the short-lived Radical Abolition Party in 1855. While pursuing abolition through politics, they proved willing to abolish slavery by any means necessary. Like Stauffer, McBride highlights crucial developments on the margins of antebellum society through the examination of a failed political campaign.

In discussing Smith's use of missionaries as electioneers, McBride describes how his campaign aligned with and departed from broader developments. This differs from Derek Sainsbury's *Storming the Nation* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2020), which brings to light the work of the electioneers and their enduring impact on the Church. McBride's wide lens reveals that while this was an unprecedented electioneering force, the Saints followed contemporary trends in holding elections to select electors, organizing a national convention, and making use of a burgeoning print culture. McBride explains that the Saints' efforts to select electors in each state demonstrates Smith's seriousness about the campaign, while also noting that Smith recognized the unlikelihood of success, as indicated in his pursuit of other resolutions.

McBride answers several other popular questions about Smith's campaign, including queries about its relationship to his assassination. McBride's investigation of both local and national developments indicates that Smith was not killed because he was a presidential candidate. His campaign may have exacerbated local political opposition, but in the wake of the *Nauvoo Expositor's* destruction, it was the anti-Mormon sentiment in western Illinois and internal dissension in the Church that conspired to bring about Smith's demise. By situating Smith's campaign firmly within the antebellum context, McBride corrects some of the assumptions about Smith's presidential aspirations and the murderous motivations of his assassins.

McBride's account underscores the fact that universal religious freedom in America has been more an ideal than a reality, though he might have pursued this theme in greater depth. Outside of the introduction and conclusion, explicit discussion of this topic is sparse. Although McBride explains the Saints' efforts to secure religious freedom, he does not situate those efforts in relation to similar efforts made by other religious minorities. Doing so would allow us to locate Smith's proper place among those who have argued for religious freedom. In a few instances, McBride does describe the era's anti-Catholicism. When discussing this topic in a later chapter, he makes the critical point that "to many Americans . . . defending religious freedom meant defending their own rights to worship—freedom for certain types of Protestants, but certainly not for all Americans" (157). A sustained examination of the ways in which this restricted form of religious freedom functioned in antebellum society might reveal even more about how the Latter-day Saint experience uniquely complicates and clarifies the history of religious freedom.

Even still, in his account about Smith and the Saints, McBride succeeds in demonstrating that "the states' rights strategy was as effective at impeding efforts to establish the full citizenship rights of religious minorities as it was at blocking efforts to establish the personhood of men and women of African descent enslaved in the American South" (209). This is a crucial historical and historiographical insight. Resting on a foundation of extensive primary source research and informed by sharp scholarly insight, McBride's book is a supremely accessible landmark study of Smith's presidential campaign.

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## *Understanding Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible*

By Kent P. Jackson

Salt Lake City: Deseret Book;  
Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022

*Reviewed by Kerry Muhlestein*

Kent Jackson has spent about three decades studying Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible and has put all that research together in a masterful volume that is informative yet not overwhelming for the non-academic. While there are a few minor things that could have been done differently, this book, combined with Jackson's recent *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: The Joseph Smith Translation and the King James Translation in Parallel Columns* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), have made it possible for us to better use and understand Joseph Smith's translation than ever before.

Jackson begins by describing the evidence available for learning about Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible and what that evidence does and does not allow us to do. He makes it clear that there are no accounts from the Prophet or his contemporaries about the translation process, and that as a result we are left to draw conclusions from surviving manuscripts of the translation about what that process may have been like. He describes in detail the manuscripts, the scribes who created those manuscripts, and a timeline for the translation, which spanned from June 1830 through July 1833 (1–12). Some of his descriptions of scribal works include information that was hitherto unknown and thus is first made public in this volume (22).

Jackson then delves into the translation process itself, stating clearly that while he does not pretend to “enter into the mind of God and the mind of his Prophet,” there is a great deal we can learn from the manuscripts (14). From June 1830 through February 1832, Joseph Smith dictated his translation in full, including every word from the Bible that he did not change. After that point, he made notations in his Bible only where there were changes, and his scribes wrote down what those changes were, rather than writing every biblical word.

Jackson argues that the Urim and Thummim were not used in this process. He also argues that Joseph Smith kept a very tight control on the process of editing and revising his translation (19). He demonstrates that the Prophet put a great deal of effort into editing and revising his new translation and that, historically, there has been a misunderstanding as to which manuscripts represented the final revisions. This confusion has resulted in the publication of versions of the translation that do not reflect the Prophet's intended final version of the text. Jackson's parallel column publication of the translation, noted above, represents the only full publication of the text the way it seems Joseph Smith intended for it to be published, according to the evidence Jackson so ably lays out. Jackson uses modernized and standardized punctuation and editorial procedures in that volume.

Jackson next discusses the kinds of changes and additions we find in Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible. In order to do so, he outlines several different types of revisions and provides examples. Jackson avers that the changes and additions consist of

1. Restoration of original text in the Bible
2. Restoration of original text that was in sources other than the Bible
3. Restoration of things said or done that were never written anywhere
4. Modernization of the text
5. Clarification of the text
6. Harmonization with similar passages elsewhere in the Bible
7. Commonsense revisions to correct apparent misunderstandings

As a result, Jackson writes, we find three kinds of texts in Joseph Smith's additions and corrections: (1) new text without a biblical counterpart, (2) revisions that change the wording of existing text but not the meaning, and (3) revisions of existing text that change its function and meaning.

The book then turns its attention to going through the various phases of the translation. Jackson outlines the revelations that came to Joseph Smith that stem from his work with the early part of Genesis, which constitute the most significant additions resulting from his translation work. These revelations are now found in the book of Moses, which can sometimes veil the fact that they are Joseph Smith's New Translation of the first part of the Bible. Jackson provides not only a summary of content but also of important doctrinal contributions of these additions.



He shows us how original the material that is now in Moses 1 is and how the accounts of the Creation and Fall are smaller, though significant, revisions of the material in Genesis. He then informs us that “the Prophet added over six hundred words of new text between the end of Genesis 3 and the beginning of Genesis 4, words that give Latter-day Saints a unique understanding of the experiences of Adam and Eve following their expulsion from Eden” (51). A brief explanation of that material is followed by Jackson’s informing us that “the largest addition of new text came at Genesis 5:22, where over the course of several days, on eight densely written manuscript pages, and using the services of three different scribes, Joseph Smith added about forty-five hundred words of new text regarding the ministry and teachings of the biblical patriarch Enoch” (52). Jackson points out that it is in this material that we encounter history’s first recorded reference to the name *Jesus Christ*, though he was referred to by other terms in the first verses of the New Translation (53).

Jackson spends some time helping us see how clear the teachings about Christ are in this record, as opposed to the Genesis account. He points out that the notion of an Only Begotten Son, the idea of our being children of God the Father, and the roles of the Holy Ghost and Satan are not found in Genesis but become key foundations of LDS theology in the New Translation of Genesis. Jackson explains that these very Christ-centered teachings were not only new, but that they refuted many popular doctrines in Joseph Smith’s day. He then avers that the manuscript evidence demonstrates that this new Christian view of Genesis came “spontaneously and without premeditation,” with no evidence of a careful reworking of old ideas, but rather of a rapid reception of new ideas (58–59). Jackson explains how the manuscripts show us evidence of a seer at work as he receives revelation.

As Jackson continues to summarize the new information gained from the New Translation of Genesis, he demonstrates how thoroughly Christian prophets like Melchizedek and Abraham were and how teachings about the priesthood were restored, as well as prophecies about the last days. He also demonstrates that our understanding of the loss of the Melchizedek priesthood and the installation of a lower priesthood and law are based upon Joseph Smith’s translation work.

Jackson follows the timeline of the work on the translation by shifting to the New Testament after going through Genesis, just as Joseph Smith did when he worked on his New Translation. Jackson provides



examples of several types of changes made in Joseph Smith's prophetic revision of the New Testament. These consist of

1. Enhancing the narratives of the Gospels
2. Expanding the words of disciples and opponents
3. Adding to Jesus's teachings by
  - a. Restoring the context of those teachings
  - b. Explaining metaphors used by the Savior
  - c. Expanding the message

The next section of the book outlines what, after years of studying Joseph Smith's biblical revisions, Jackson felt were the "guiding instincts" behind much of what the Prophet did. This is not in regard to revelations of large passages, but rather in terms of small alterations repeatedly made. Jackson notes several kinds of frequent changes, such as revising words that are italicized in the King James Version, resolving ambiguity, and updating the language to match idioms of his day. Jackson also discusses how Joseph Smith improved narrative flow. This begs the unexplored question as to how these changes to the narrative do or do not mirror the way the narrative flows in the Book of Mormon. Since the New Translation project began almost immediately after the Book of Mormon was printed, one wonders if the earlier project affected the later one and if any of Joseph's revising practices were in common between the two projects. This is a topic that is worth further research.

Some of Jackson's explanations are subjective, which is unavoidable given that he is looking at circumstantial evidence as he tries to deduce Joseph Smith's instincts, and he explicitly says he cannot deduce intent. For example, Jackson speaks of the Prophet having an instinct to explain metaphors and lists several examples. One of these comes from Exodus 7:1, where the KJV says that God will make Moses a "god to Pharaoh: and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet." Joseph Smith changes this to say that God "will make [Moses] a prophet to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy spokesman." While I agree with Jackson's unstated assessment that the text was not being corrected, but rather explained in a way that did not confuse modern readers, it is possible that this was a correction. In other words, Jackson unavoidably makes subjective valuations of the kinds of changes Joseph Smith made. While I agree with most of his assessments, we must ever keep at the forefront of our minds that we are not sure about the intent behind almost all these

changes. I suppose the book would have been too long if Jackson had gone into the different possibilities of every type of change, but this is fertile ground for further research.

Jackson suggests that another of the Prophet's instincts was to remove sexually suggestive language. I think he is correct that Joseph Smith tends to edit sexual language, but in Jackson's examples, sexual language does not seem to be removed or softened. On the contrary, it seems to me that Joseph Smith was making it clear, using acceptable language for his day, that sexual activity was intended. In Jackson's three Old Testament examples (122), the phrases "go in unto her," "went in also unto Rachel," and "come in unto me," were replaced with "go and take her," "slept with Rachel," and "come in and lie with me," respectively. The Prophet's revisions seem to me to be less ambiguous about the sexual behavior being alluded to. The New Testament example Jackson provides, having to do with Mary's question about how she could be pregnant, does indeed seem to remove the sexually charged language.

Jackson also addresses what he sees as an instinct to correct errors. While I would largely agree with him, this is difficult to fully assess because labeling something an error is highly subjective. For example, Jackson discusses the proclivity of the authors of 1 and 2 Kings to hold David up as an example to which his descendant kings are compared and should aspire. Joseph Smith often "corrects" these comparisons, changing the text to portray David as a bad example. Jackson is probably right that Joseph Smith viewed holding David up as an example as an error, as do many of my own students. However, I do not agree. I believe the biblical text is fairly consistent in holding David up as an example of a king who did not pursue idolatry and that this is the criterion that is constantly being addressed when David is used as a good example. As far as the record portrays David, he was an excellent example of eschewing idolatry, and thus this would not be an error in the biblical text but rather an error in how the biblical text was perceived in Joseph Smith's day. I would agree that Joseph Smith often corrected perceived errors in the text, but that those perceptions were not always true errors. Still, since most people perceive(d) as the Prophet did, such corrections can be helpful. It is not altogether clear whether or not Joseph Smith also perceived these things as errors, or whether he recognized that they were not but was willing to correct them to help his contemporaries avoid confusion.

Jackson himself identifies such an instinct as he speaks of the Prophet's tendency to correct things that had come to be understood in such a way

that they portrayed the character of God incorrectly. For example, the Bible often speaks of God as “repenting.” Jackson explains the translation choice by the King James translators that led to the text depicting God as repenting and demonstrates that Joseph Smith often “corrected” what was really a misunderstanding (128–30).

The next section of the book is a discussion of the New Translation of Matthew 24, demonstrating its thematic and historical tie to Doctrine and Covenants 45. Jackson also demonstrates that at times the New Translation relied on similar passages in the Book of Mormon, but at other times it differed from Book of Mormon passages in meaningful ways.

One of the most significant portions of this volume is when Jackson explores the relationship between the New Translation and the revelations that would eventually be put in the Doctrine and Covenants. In 2008, I researched this topic myself, focusing on the material of the New Translation that is published in the book of Moses. Kent Jackson’s work up to that point was helpful in my research, and he offered suggestions to me that improved my assessments. At that time, I called for further research to be done on the relationship between the revelations and Joseph Smith’s Bible translation project.<sup>1</sup> I revised my research and renewed that call in 2021.<sup>2</sup> The eighteenth chapter in Jackson’s book furthers that research in a way I have been looking forward to for years. Jackson highlights a number of interactions between Joseph Smith’s translation work and other revelations. Among some of the more significant connections are those between the translation of John 5 and the reception of the revelation that would become Doctrine and Covenants 76, and between Exodus 34 and what would later be labeled as Doctrine and Covenants 84.

A particularly fascinating section of Jackson’s work is the comparison of passages that seem to have been accidentally translated twice. This provides Jackson, and us, with a unique insight into the Prophet’s translation process. Because the multiple translations of the same passage are

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1. Kerry Muhlestein, “One Continuous Flow: Revelations Surrounding the ‘New Translation,’” in *The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 40–65.

2. Kerry Muhlestein, “The Doctrine and Covenants and the Book of Moses: An Outpouring of Revelations and the Beginning of Joseph Smith’s ‘New Translation’ of the Bible,” in *Tracing the Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses, Volume I*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and others (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2021), 97–136. I made this call at the conference held online in 2020, but the publication came out in 2021.

not identical, we can conclude that the Prophet was not receiving these translations word for word. Yet Jackson opines that “the most remarkable thing about the two translations is the similarity between them. . . . In the majority of cases in which he added substantive content to the text, he added it in *both* of the new translations” (176, emphasis in original). This seems to demonstrate that Joseph Smith had the important concepts of the translation revealed to him but not always the precise wording. This was already suggested by the fact that he kept making revisions after the translation, but the conclusion is greatly strengthened by observing the similarities and coinciding differences between multiple translations of the same passages. As Jackson notes, “Perhaps it would be reasonable to propose that as Joseph Smith was working his way through Matthew 26, dictating the text to Sidney Rigdon in the spring of 1831 and again to John Whitmer the next fall, impressions came to his mind in the form of pure intelligence, enlightened understanding, and sudden strokes of ideas—but not necessarily in English words” (179–80).

I believe it would be worth exploring whether there is enough evidence or not to determine if the process of receiving large new revelations, such as the stories about Enoch, may have had more precise words being revealed to the Prophet than did the process of translating passages with fewer changes. Jackson himself notes that the visions of Moses and other material from early in Genesis create more of an impression of being revealed in “verbal completeness” than the smaller revisions elsewhere in the Bible (183). One can only hope that, as scholars with a variety of backgrounds and linguistic and textual skill sets turn their attention to this topic, they may conduct further research on this question.

Jackson next walks us through the timing of various publications of the New Translation, from portions of it appearing in *The Evening and Morning Star* to the canonization of the Pearl of Great Price and the inclusion of portions of the translation in the Church’s standard works. One of his more interesting conclusions is that Joseph Smith had learned a lesson from the loss of the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon translation: he would not let “the final New Translation manuscripts out of his hands” (189). We can also see evidence of this tendency in the creation of the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. This has interesting implications for book of Abraham manuscripts, since none of the copies we currently possess seem to be the copy that Joseph Smith personally kept. If he continued his practice of personally keeping the most correct copy of his translations, then we do not currently have that copy. This should help inform book of Abraham research.

As Jackson traces the history of New Translation manuscripts and publications, he demonstrates that the publications we have used up to this point were publications of inferior or unfinished versions of the translation. This heightens the importance of Jackson's new publication mentioned previously, which employs the most correct version of the New Translation. What a gift!

The penultimate section of the book is the summation of what Jackson has come to see as the most consistent and profound truth gained from Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible. Jackson writes, "From its beginning, indeed from its very first page, the Joseph Smith Translation is a witness of Jesus Christ" (229). Jackson explores how the New Translation highlights—in a way that is not presented in any other religious text—that the gospel of Jesus Christ was had from the beginning of time and was handed down through the generations. He demonstrates that the New Translation contains a great number of prophecies about Christ from the earliest generations. He shows us how the changes made to the New Testament help us better understand who Christ is. He explores how the New Translation shows us that Jehovah is the Messiah. He explains how it teaches about Christ being the sinless Son of God. The information that Jackson accumulates and presents creates a new appreciation for the profundity of the New Translation. It helps us see how it fundamentally affects not just our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but also of how God has transmitted that gospel throughout time, which helps us to understand God himself. After reading this section of the book, I do not think I can overstate how important the New Translation is to shaping the way members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints view God, Christ, and the gospel. That translation has created a lens through which we more correctly view the most important concepts of our faith.

Jackson wraps up his volume by exploring Joseph Smith's calling to bring about this translation. He compares Joseph Smith to other scriptural authors and helps us see the authority by which Joseph Smith engaged in this fundamental project. He makes it clear that this was part of Joseph Smith's mission and that God worked with the Prophet in a variety of ways to bring about this important restoration of truth. Jackson aptly ends the book by stating that "the untold number of hours of difficult labor that the Prophet invested in the New Translation was one of the important contributions of his prophetic ministry, and we are the beneficiaries" (253).

While in many ways this new book of Jackson's represents a reworking of some of his other publications, it is an immensely valuable

contribution. New information is presented, some of which was only discovered because Jackson was working on this volume. Other information is synthesized with this entire work in a new way rather than presented in isolation. That seems to have forced Jackson to grapple with ideas in new ways and come to new understandings. Creating this volume also seems to have helped this eminent scholar of the Joseph Smith translation to carefully consider what the most important implications of the New Translation are. As a result, we now have the most complete description of the New Translation we have ever had. Fertile ground for new research emerges along with a profound summary of the work that has already been done.

I will admit there are a few small things I would have done differently had I been writing this volume, and there are a few things I would have concluded differently. Those are small and insignificant. At the same time, as a career-long scholar of the New Translation, I expected to find in this volume a competent and comprehensive summary of this important topic. While I did indeed find just that, I also discovered that I learned a great deal and came to a more profound understanding of and appreciation for the fundamental way the New Translation affects our understanding of the gospel and how God works with us. I suspect that Jackson himself underwent a similar learning process as he wrote this book and that all who read it seriously will have a similar experience.

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*Mormon Studies: A Critical History*  
By Ronald Helfrich Jr.

Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2022

*Reviewed by Roger Terry*

This short but dense critical history of Mormon studies<sup>1</sup> is unique in several ways. First, author Ronald Helfrich Jr. is a self-described “Gentile” scholar who spent “probably far too many years,” including a year as a visiting professor in the Department of Sociology at Brigham Young University, researching and writing this history. Second, the book is surprisingly thorough. I have been the editorial director at BYU Studies for the past sixteen years and thought I had a fairly decent grasp of Mormon studies, past and present, but Helfrich repeatedly describes the work of historians and other scholars with whom I am not familiar. These writers have tackled the movement Joseph Smith started in one way or another, and Helfrich is aware of both their work and how it fits into the framework he has constructed to examine the origins and history of this movement. Third, this book is not just a description of who has written about the Latter-day (or Latter Day<sup>2</sup>) Saint movement and what they have said; Helfrich also presents his own theory on some of the major underlying questions. Finally, this book is forthright in addressing certain tensions that exist both in Mormon studies and in the Latter-day Saint religion—between anti- and pro-Latter-day Saint apologetics (our views are true) and polemics (your views are false), between “old” (hagiographic) and “new” (scholarly) Mormon studies, between Church leaders and

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1. While this book is primarily an analysis of the work of scholars who study The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Mormon studies” is a field of research and publishing that extends beyond the Salt Lake City-based organization. Consequently, the book’s author and this review use the terms *Mormon* and *Mormonism* when referring to this broader field of study and to the many branches of the movement launched by Joseph Smith.

2. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and some other branches of Mormonism use this spelling.



intellectuals, and between the New Mormon Studies (launched primarily by Leonard Arrington) and what Helfrich calls the New Mormon Faith Studies (anchored largely by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], now reborn as the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship).

Helfrich, a retired professor who taught history, cultural anthropology, and sociology, is admittedly “old school” (x) and is heavily influenced by Max Weber; consequently, he looks at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through sociological, cultural, political, and economic lenses, but in describing the theories regarding the Restoration movement espoused by various scholars, he inevitably finds them all lacking. As Helfrich puts it in his conclusion, “Yes, humans and human social groups are impacted by economic factors. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by political forces. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by geography. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by biological or demographic factors. Yes, humans and social groups are impacted by social and cultural psychological factors. All of these forces have impacted and currently impact human life everywhere at every time. . . . But none of these alone or in combination can fully help us understand the rise and culture of social and cultural movements such as Mormonism” (147).

While Helfrich sees the organization Joseph Smith founded as “the product of a number of geographic, economic, political, and demographic factors including the intersection of the economic transformations wrought by the Erie Canal, the rise of Jacksonian democratic politics, the mostly New England and New York backgrounds” of Joseph’s followers, “and the varying class and status backgrounds of . . . believers” (148), he seems quite unaware of what is undoubtedly the primary factor in explaining the rise and shape of the movement—a shared spiritual conviction that Joseph Smith was telling the truth about his visions, his revealed texts, and his translations of ancient documents. Other factors certainly influenced how the culture of the unfolding Restoration took shape, but overwhelmingly it was and is a spiritual movement bound together by beliefs and confirmations regarding events that took place in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s.

Still, Helfrich’s history is a valuable summary of the expanding discipline that has come to be known as Mormon studies. Chapter 1 explores apologetics and polemics among those who defend the Church as well as among its critics. Chapter 2 discusses the intellectuals and academics who, while not viewing themselves as apologists or polemicists, “have



also waded into the normative debate about how to classify” both the Church and its members (36). Chapters 3 and 4 contrast the “old” Mormon studies with the “new,” Leonard Arrington being the pivotal figure in the transition. In chapter 5, Helfrich discusses social theory, social movements, and Church origins, viewing the Restoration through economic and political approaches to explaining social movements. Chapter 6 explores “the cultural approaches that practitioners of the New Mormon Studies . . . have applied to the study of” Church origins (92). Chapter 7 addresses Mormon studies and its discontents, focusing on what Helfrich calls “the ‘new’ Mormon culture war” (127) between “New Mormon Studies” (Arrington and those who populated his “Camelot” years in the Church Historian’s Office) and “New Mormon Faith Studies” (primarily FARMS).

At the end of his exploration, Helfrich concludes with the question “Whither Mormon Studies?” (146). His answer is both safe and imprecise. Borrowing a metaphor from Armand Mauss, he expects “the tensions between the angel of [Latter-day Saint] distinctiveness and the beehive of [the Church’s] wish to fit in in broader American society, to continue to ebb and flow, and, as a result, I suspect that this cultural schizophrenia will continue to produce tensions within [Latter-day Saint] culture” (147). This is somewhat akin to predicting that the sun will continue to rise and set.

On a final note, as an editor I have one quibble with this book: it seems that the text has somehow found its way into print largely unedited. Many of the sentences could be made more readable; there are a significant number of misspelled words and names; and the random absence, misuse, and overuse of commas are distracting. But if a reader can ignore these textual speedbumps, the book does contain a wealth of valuable information and insight.

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Roger Terry has been the editorial director at BYU Studies since 2006.

*Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide*, by Daniel Becerra, Amy Easton-Flake, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Joseph M. Spencer (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022)

The aptly titled *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide* gives readers a welcome, straightforward, and helpful overview of where the field of Book of Mormon studies has been, where it is currently, and where it may go in the future. The book is coauthored by Daniel Becerra, Amy Easton-Flake, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Joseph M. Spencer—all professors of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.

The book begins with an introduction, explaining its premise and purpose. The first chapter, “Looking Back,” is particularly interesting in that it traces the beginnings of the Book of Mormon as a field of study. The authors take us back to the nineteenth century and Orson Pratt, then move us into the twentieth century and discuss the early contributions of George Reynolds and B. H. Roberts. Book of Mormon studies as a truly academic endeavor begins with the pioneering work of Hugh Nibley, M. Wells Jackman, and Sidney B. Sperry, whose works the authors summarize. Readers are reminded of the founding of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS, now under the umbrella of the Maxwell Institute). The authors also discuss the contributions of other scholars in the field and bring us into twenty-first-century Book of Mormon scholarship.

The second chapter, “The Field,” gives readers an overview of the broad subdisciplines scholars and interested students have been pursuing. These areas include textual production, historical origins, literary criticism, intertextuality, theological interpretation,

reception history, and ideology critique. Time is spent on each of these seven categories to provide a helpful overview. While some of these subdisciplines have been explored since the beginning, such as textual production, others, like reception history and ideology critique, have recently emerged.

Chapter 3, “Overcoming Obstacles,” outlines some of the hurdles in Book of Mormon studies. These include dealing with tensions between old and new academic techniques and having “academic charity” (76) for those with different points of view, defined as “the practice of attributing the most reasonable or most defensible argument to one’s opponent before critiquing” (76).

The next chapter, “Common Questions,” poses the seven most common questions in dealing with the Book of Mormon, namely: “How was the Book of Mormon translated?” “Why have changes been made to the text of the Book of Mormon?” “Did the Book of Mormon derive from nineteenth-century texts?” “What about anachronisms in the Book of Mormon?” “Does language from Isaiah belong in the Book of Mormon?” “Does the Book of Mormon depend on the New Testament?” and “Where did the events of the Book of Mormon take place?” (84).

Chapter 5, “New Directions,” looks “at the new questions and methods that have arisen in the twenty-first century, largely positioned beyond the questions and concerns of twentieth-century Book of Mormon studies” (109). Some of these new questions and methods include identity, politics, and meaning.

The conclusion provides a nice summary of the book and invites readers to engage in Book of Mormon studies. The authors recognize that the field has changed over the years and will continue to change. With all that is intellectually stimulating, the authors remind

their readers to not lose sight of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon itself—its “spiritual truth,” its “historical truth,” and its theological truth (128–29).

One of the most useful, and possibly enduring, aspects of this book is found in the appendix. As described in the book, “the purpose of this appendix is to serve as a guide to books, articles, and institutions relevant to students of the Book of Mormon” (131). The appendix has five sections that may interest readers and will certainly provide many with a list of books and articles for future reading. The sections are: “getting started,” “getting serious,” “getting specialized,” “getting around,” and “other sources we’ve cited along the way” (131–32). The first four parts are for those interested in progressively getting deeper into the scholarship of Book of Mormon studies. The last part is a traditional bibliography of sources that were not included in the previous four.

Each chapter of this relatively brief book (182 pages) is written in an engaging and conversational tone. Whether you are new, have been away for a little while, or are a veteran of the field of Book of Mormon studies, this book provides precisely what the title promises: “an introduction and guide.”

—Matthew B. Christensen

*Utahisms: Unique Expressions, Inventions, Place Names, and More*, by David Ellingson Eddington (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2022).

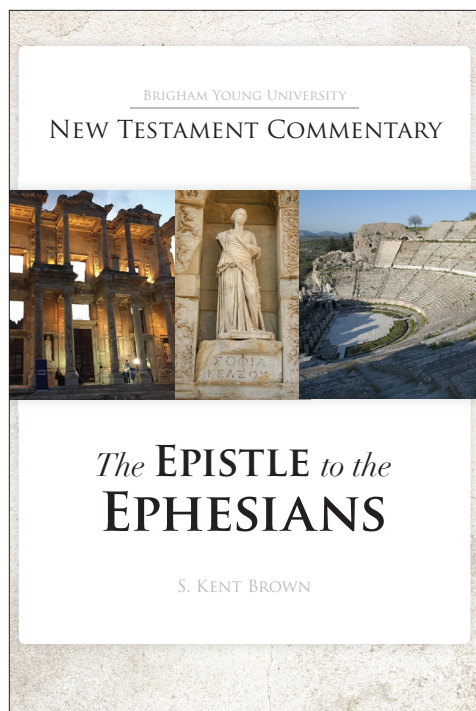
This slim volume by Brigham Young University linguistics professor David Eddington should interest anyone who grew up in Utah, lived in Utah, or is curious about the linguistic, geographic, and historical curiosities of the Beehive

State. The book offers numerous surprises and debunks several common misconceptions about the origins of Utah names, places, inventions, and novelties.

Chapter 1 tackles “Utah Critters,” from the minuscule (potato bugs and water skeeters) to the massive (Pando). Chapter 2 explores Utah vocabulary and expressions, from Latter-day Saint terms such as Mutual and Primary to funeral potatoes, flipper crotches (or crutches), and “for cute” (which comes from Norwegian). Chapter 3 examines Utah pronunciation, including fish in the crick, American Fark, and Utah’s moun’uns. Eddington shows that many of these supposedly unique Utah pronunciations are actually predictable vowel shifts that turn up in other parts of the United States. Chapter 4 delves into the origins and pronunciation of Utah place names, including Duchesne, Hooper, Hurricane, Levan, Mantua, Timpanogos, and Tooele. The fifth and final chapter corrals a variety of “Other Utah Stuff.” Did you know, for instance, that the Frisbee (originally the Pluto Platter) was invented by Walter Frederick Morrison of Roosevelt, Utah, or that the traffic light was invented by Salt Lake police detective Lester Wire, or that the machine that resurfaces ice rinks was invented in California by Eureka, Utah, native Frank Zamboni?

At a mere ninety-one pages, plus notes and bibliography, *Utahisms* is a quick and entertaining read about some of the unique aspects of the state settled by the Latter-day Saints. Not surprisingly, many of the expressions and pronunciations have a connection to pioneer immigrants who uprooted from Europe and the eastern U.S. and settled in Utah.

—Roger Terry



## *The Epistle to the Ephesians*

by S. Kent Brown



Published by  
BYU Studies

bibliography, scripture index,  
subject index  
688 pages, 6" x 9"

\$29.99 hardcover

ISBN-0-8425-2594-7

Tucked into the New Testament after Galatians and the Corinthian correspondence, the Epistle to the Ephesians casts a warm, quieting glow when compared to the strident character of Galatians and the rather tough lines that Paul penned to former associates in Corinth. In Ephesians, by contrast, the Apostle Paul has shined a bright light on both an overly generous God the Father, who “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20), and the Gentiles whom he has recently welcomed into the celestial fold, making them “no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (2:19). But there is much more, for the letter opens on the scene of the premortal council and ends with church members clothed in God’s sacred, protective armor that helps them “to stand against the wiles of the devil,” an indicator of the looming apostasy (6:11). In addition, enfolded within Ephesians are a tightly woven strand of family-centered interests, including an expectation of eternal families, pointers to sacred rituals, and the joyous assurance to believers that Christ “hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:6). This exalted position is made possible because of one of the grandest gifts that comes from the Father through the Son—“redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (2:7). Hallelujah!

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