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- Educated nonspecialist readers
- Scholars whose work merits publication in a venue committed to both revealed and discovered truth
- Students who gain experiential learning while making vital contributions
Articles

4  The Stewardship of Our First Freedom
   Elder Clark G. Gilbert

19  On Gospel Methodology at Brigham Young University
    Richard D. Osguthorpe and Justin Collings

39  The Psalm of Nephi in an Age of Anxiety and Division
    Patrick Q. Mason

58  I Have Dreamed with Her: The Fruitful Relationship between
    Minerva Teichert and Alice Merrill Horne
    Laura Paulsen Howe

81  Richard Bushman’s BYU Years: The Beginnings of an Influential Career
    J. B. Haws

111 Building an Innovative “Latter-day Saints without Borders” Organization
    Warner Woodworth

121 “Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing”: New Context for the “Skin of Blackness” in the Book of Mormon
    T. J. Uriona

141 “Dumb” Puns in Alma 30: A Mesoamerican Twist on Korihór’s Talionic Punishment
    Mark Alan Wright and Neal Rappleye

149 Reclaiming the “Primary Question”: A New Beginning for Joseph Smith’s First Vision
    William G. Perez
Essays
103  Knit Together
    Liz Busby

167  The Dance
    Michelle Forstrom

Poetry
18   Mary’s Assumption
    Christopher Bissett

56   One Day’s Return, Long Past Childhood
    Dixie L. Partridge

57   Thoughts, in Threes
    Isaac James Richards

170  Forgiveness
    Erik Jacobsen

183  Boxwoods
    Andrew Maxfield

Book Reviews
171  Susa Young Gates: Daughter of Mormonism by Romney Burke
    Reviewed by Dave Hall

175  The Mormon Military Experience: 1838 to the Cold War
    by Sherman L. Fleek and Robert C. Freeman
    Reviewed by Kenneth L. Alford

Book Notices
179  Restless Pilgrim: Andrew Jenson’s Quest for Latter-day Saint History
The King Follett Sermon: A Biography
Both Things Are True
Mormon Envoy: The Diplomatic Legacy of Dr. John Milton Bernhisel
Figure 1. S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Window at Newhouse III. David Lassman | dlassman@syracuse.com. May 2015. Merlin No: 66495774.
The Stewardship of Our First Freedom

Elder Clark G. Gilbert

This keynote address was given at the BYU Religious Freedom Annual Review, hosted by the Wheatley Institute and the International Center for Law and Religion, June 15, 2023.

Introduction

When Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints spoke at the University of Oxford’s Pembroke College about the impact of religious freedom on public morality, he charged people of faith to be effective stewards of religious freedom. Elder Cook stated, “There is no better demonstration of the great benefits associated with religious liberty than for devoted members of various faiths who feel accountable to God to model principles of integrity, morality, service, and love.”¹ In this sense, our religious freedom stewardship extends not only to society but also to God.

Religious Conscience and the Need for a Bill of Rights

Today’s religious freedoms have instructive historical underpinnings. When the Constitution was presented, many feared its creation would establish a federal authority so powerful that it would threaten not only

states’ rights but also our God-given individual rights. Emblematic of these concerns was the fear of an established state religion. With some irony, it was James Madison, the founding architect of religious protections in Virginia, who now argued that individual religious freedoms did not require the inclusion of a separate Bill of Rights. Constitutional scholar Noah Feldman points out in his book *Divided by God* that Madison felt religious diversity would guarantee religious freedom. Madison argued, “For where there is such a variety of sects, there cannot be a majority of any one sect to oppress and persecute the rest.”

Madison’s Baptist and Presbyterian constituents, who had once worked so closely with him to disestablish the Anglican Church in Virginia, did not agree. They demanded that the Constitution be paired with a companion Bill of Rights that specifically outlined the inalienable rights so many had fought for in the first place. Despite his Federalist allegiances, Madison began to work on the compromise that led to the creation of the Bill of Rights and became the principal architect of the First Amendment.

**Our First Freedom**

Let us now turn to the language of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

There are two common misperceptions of the First Amendment as it relates to religion. First is the argument that the Establishment Clause was designed to protect Americans from religion, rather than simply prevent government from establishing a state religion. In reality, the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause are best understood as complementary attempts to protect religious conscience and religious exercise.

There is considerable historical evidence that the purpose of disestablishment efforts was, in fact, to preserve religious conscience.

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President Dallin H. Oaks of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints echoes this belief: “The prohibition against ‘an establishment of religion’ was intended to separate churches and government, to forbid a national church. . . . For almost a century this guarantee of religious freedom has been understood as a limitation on state as well as federal power [over religious practice].” In other words, the Establishment Clause was meant to protect religious exercise from governmental encroachment. Further evidence of this can be seen in the companion Free Exercise Clause: “Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the free exercise [of religion].” By pairing these rights together, the framers simultaneously protected religious conscience from a dominant religion, while also protecting religious exercise for all religions. These paired rights—or complementary components of the same right—ensured diverse religious participation. Professor Michael W. McConnell, director of the Constitutional Law Center at Stanford Law School explained, “Religion would flourish better if it were left free. . . . Just as free enterprise is good for the economy, free exercise is good for religion.”

A second misperception of the First Amendment’s religious clauses arises in efforts to disassociate religious freedom from other first freedoms. A visual representation of this might come from the Newhouse School of Journalism, where the opening of the First Amendment is graphically and perhaps symbolically truncated to elevate freedom of speech and freedom of the press (fig. 1). Elder Neal A. Maxwell, a former Apostle in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, stated, “The First Amendment is a major branch of the tree from which one ought not try to prune any of the limbs of liberty. Those . . . who are not concerned with religious freedom, but solely with freedom of speech, will find that any pruning of the freedom of religion will adversely affect freedom of speech.”


The Heritage of Religious Freedom

This has been a long preamble on the First Amendment. The heritage of our first freedoms is inspiring. I love the visual of the Minutemen, called up to leave their plows at a moment’s notice. When the Continental Army lacked for resources and soldiers, Thomas Paine penned his classic plea: “These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer-soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered: yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheaply, we esteem too lightly.”

We also have modern-day defenders who answer the call for religious freedom. I recently attended the Becket Canterbury Medal Gala. At the event we reflected on religious freedom victories in the Supreme Court, including cases vindicating religious freedom in religious education:

Hosanna-Tabor v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2012). In this case, described as “the most important religious liberty case in half a century,” the Supreme Court affirmed ministerial exceptions for religions to choose their own teachers without government interference.

In Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer (2017), the Supreme Court ruled that the government cannot discriminate against churches that would otherwise qualify for funding just because they are religious institutions.

In Our Lady of Guadalupe v. Morrissey-Berru (2020) the Supreme Court once again built on its previous ruling in Hosanna-Tabor to affirm that the government cannot dictate whom religious schools employ to teach their faith in a religious school setting.

12. The Court reaffirmed this principle in Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue (2020).
In *Carson v. Makin* (2022), the Supreme Court ruled that the government cannot exclude religious schools from public tuition assistance programs simply because they are religious.

The strong majorities in most of these cases demonstrate that religious conscience is not a partisan issue. Recent victories are a testament to the devoted work of modern champions of religious liberty, whose efforts extend the work of our early founders.

**Religious Freedom Is a Stewardship**

How will we use these hard-fought victories? Religious freedom is not an end unto itself. Our first freedom comes as a stewardship for which we are accountable both to society and to God.

**Thoreau’s Telegraph**

Ironically, increased opportunity can lead to decreased accountability. I refer to this paradox as Thoreau’s Telegraph. As communication technology began to expand in the mid-1800s, the telegraph created unprecedented ability to send messages quickly and efficiently across previously insurmountable distances. Henry David Thoreau noted this phenomenon with the observation: “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.”

Today we face the equivalent of a Religious Freedom Telegraph. Like a transcontinental telegraph, there is an entire infrastructure for religious freedom that requires construction, maintenance, and even defense to function properly. But the stewardship of our first freedom causes us to ask how we are using those opportunities. As organizations like Becket, the Wheatley Institute, the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, and others continue to strengthen and protect our religious rights, we have a companion duty to use those rights in ways that amplify our faith as a source of meaning, hope, and service to others.

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Beyond Legal Scholars

I felt this stewardship poignantly at the recent Becket Canterbury Medal Gala. We attended the event with Brigham Young University president C. Shane Reese and his wife, Wendy. During the evening we celebrated further progress in the Religious Freedom Telegraph—continued Supreme Court victories, the creation of religious freedom clinics, and insightful scholarship. So, what is the resultant responsibility of a university president and a commissioner of education? We are not legal scholars. We will never stand before a court to defend religious rights. Sure, we can cheer on and elevate the efforts of others, but other than donning a black tie and attending such celebrations, how do we engage in this effort? The answer is to become committed stewards of our first freedom.

C. S. Lewis addressed the difference between fighting for freedom and using it for good in his lecture “Learning in Wartime.” On the precipice of the Second World War, in front of a packed congregation at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, at Oxford University, Lewis asked (and I paraphrase), If we are facing a global conflict, why shouldn’t every effort be invested in this looming battle? Is it not selfish or even unpatriotic to send our youth off to school? For our purposes, we might ask, Why study any other discipline? Shouldn’t we all become legal scholars to preserve religious freedom? Lewis then turns the argument to a higher form of inquiry: “How it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology.” His answer is tied to spiritual stewardship: our efforts “become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly ‘as to the Lord.’” Lewis’s words suggest that we honor our stewardship to first freedoms by offering our separate and distinctive gifts to heaven.

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On the evening of the Becket Gala, Professor Michael McConnell was recognized as the Canterbury medalist, the organization's highest honor for defenders of religious liberty. As I looked over other past recipients, I noted other individuals whom I have long admired, including the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who spoke at a Wheatley Forum just before his passing, and of course, President Dallin H. Oaks, former BYU president and First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I will draw briefly on insights from each of these Canterbury medalists as I explore “The Stewardship of Our First Freedom.”

It was during Professor McConnell’s Becket address\(^\text{19}\) that the idea of the stewardship first hit me. McConnell cited Friedrich Nietzsche's tale of a madman who runs through the marketplace declaring, “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!” In his novel \textit{Thus Spake Zarathustra}, Nietzsche has his mythic hero carry this same message throughout the world until he discovers a believing hermit who has isolated himself in the woods. Zarathustra marvels, “Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead!” Zarathustra has pity on this holy man, whose sincere belief has him mumbling his praise for God alone in the forest. Rather than declare that “God is dead,” Zarathustra leaves the humble hermit alone, fearing his refrain would take away something naïve, but precious, in this man’s sincere belief. McConnell observes, “And in like manner, the post-modern world is willing to leave the believer in peace, at least while he remains in the forest. Religious belief, even the secular world realizes, is precious to those who have it, and it would be pointless and mean to interfere with it.”\(^\text{20}\)

There are at least two conclusions I draw from Professor McConnell’s analysis of our post-modern critics. If we are to hope for more than pity, we must first find opportunities to step away from our isolation in the forest of faith and then do more than “mumble” arguments for belief.

\section*{Leaving the Forest of Faith}

Let me speak first of leaving our isolation in the forest of faith. It is true that secular pressures are affecting religious communities. You are aware,

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\begin{itemize}
  \item 20. McConnell, “On Singing.”
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no doubt, of growing percentages of Americans who specify no religious affiliation. Pew Research’s most recent estimate is that nearly 30 percent of Americans do not now identify with any religion.\(^{21}\) A Gallup study showed formal church membership also recently dropped below 50 percent for the first time ever.\(^{22}\) Beyond the decline in religious affiliation and practice, many faiths, including Christian faiths, increasingly feel under attack. Pew Research has shown that 70 percent of conservative Evangelical Christians experience “some” or “a lot” of religious discrimination. The percentages are even higher for Muslims and Jews from across the political spectrum.\(^{23}\) We may have won increasing legal protections, but cultural pressures mount. As Paul Edwards and Justin Collings recently summarized in a Wheatley Horizon Report on the Constitution, “Although there have always been sharp critiques of various aspects of our Constitution, today’s challenges to the fundamental legitimacy of . . . constitutional norms—from many quarters—feel more existential. . . . One risk is that major recent jurisprudential gains in religious liberty could be overwhelmed in the court of public opinion if the Supreme Court and its rulings are delegitimized.”\(^{24}\)

Such pressures lead many to self-isolate like Nietzsche’s religious hermit. Conservative commentator Rod Dreher’s antidote is what he calls the “Benedict Option.” In the language of the book’s cover, Dreher cites how St. Benedict of Nursia, “horrified by the moral chaos following Rome’s fall, retreated to the forest and created a new way of life for Christians. . . . His spiritual centers of hope were strongholds of light throughout the Dark Ages and saved not just Christianity but Western civilization.”\(^{25}\) Certainly, there is a need to preserve religious identity and community in an increasingly secular world. Eboo Patel of Interfaith America declares,

\(^{24}\) Wheatley Institute Horizon Report Constitutional Government, Brigham Young University, First Quarter 2023, 1.
“There is no diversity without particularity.” And certainly, religious communities, including religious schools, are critical in preserving the religious particularity required for a pluralistic America.

But particularity need not require persistent isolation. Most religious universities gather in their students for a season before sending them back out to contribute to broader society. Think of BYU’s motto: “Enter to learn, go forth to serve.” Russell M. Nelson, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has said, “Obtaining an education and getting knowledge are a religious responsibility. We educate our minds so that one day we can render service of worth to somebody else.” By preserving religious particularity, we not only preserve the religious identity but we also preserve a unique wellspring of motivation that can lift and build others across society. In a special issue of Deseret Magazine entitled “Dare to Be Different,” we worked across faiths to emphasize the importance of the distinctive character of religious universities.

President Peter Kilpatrick noted that at Catholic University “We are serious about who we are.” President Linda Livingstone described how Baylor University is “unapologetically Christian.” Rabbi Ari Berman of Yeshiva University outlined the difference for students that a covenant relationship makes versus the more common consumer relationship. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and former president of BYU, has stated this university will only realize its destiny as it “embraces its uniqueness, its singularity.”

Stop Mumbling

Leaving the safety of our religious enclaves will require more than just mumbling about our faith. We have an obligation to study the arguments for religious freedom and articulate religion’s deeper contributions. The


International Center for Law and Religion Studies, in partnership with the Wheatley Institute, has introduced a new resource called the Religious Freedom Library.\(^{30}\) Studying these and other resources can help us sharpen our thinking and clarify our message.

We also have a duty to tell the broader story of faith’s impact. Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education and former undersecretary of education in the Obama administration, recently stated, “[Religious universities] represent a significant part of American higher education and we need to figure out ways to take the work that you do and make it as important in the national dialogue as [your impact suggests].”\(^{31}\) Contrast this with a recent conversation I had with the editor of a prominent national publication who said to me, “We’d like to do more on religion in higher education, but frankly, the only stories we see are white nationalism and LGBTQ issues.” While we might be tempted to criticize such a narrow perspective, I wonder how much responsibility we share as religious institutions for allowing such a narrative to persist. Is it the media’s obligation to come and find us in the forest and decipher our “mumbling,” or is it people of faith who must tell our own story with clarity and conviction?

The Apostle Peter charged Christians to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15). The editorial team I mentioned earlier eventually provided us a chance to share how religious identity helps address some of the most vexing issues facing higher education. I shared with them how BYU–Idaho’s cost innovations allowed the university to triple in size without increasing its inflation-adjusted costs (fig. 2). I went on to show how the global reach of BYU–Pathway Worldwide has opened access to students who never thought they would have access to an education, particularly a high-quality education of the kind we are now providing to over seventy thousand students across the world with more than eighteen thousand students in Africa. Clearly, this conversation transcended the narrower framing the secular editor had originally supposed for religious universities.

Sometimes we must work across religious traditions, coming together to tell our story in ways that are hard to ignore. We saw this recently at a convening of presidents of religious universities hosted by the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C. Shirley Hoogstra, president

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\(^{31}\) Quoted in Tad Walch, “The Case for Faith-Based College Education.”
of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, and I discussed with Jeff Selingo, former editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, how religious identity can shape university innovation. That was followed by a panel with former BYU president Kevin J Worthen and Reverend John Jenkins, president of the University of Notre Dame, discussing how faith can lead to distinctive forms of scholarship. Not every media outlet covered the event, but everyone there knew these religious universities were serious about their missions and were prepared to represent them with determined conviction.

Our religious stewardship also requires us to leave the forest with the courage to engage even when we do not fit societal norms. This is what Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks referred to as being “creative minorities” in his remarkable *First Things* essay of the same title.32 Rabbi Sacks describes the Prophet Jeremiah’s charge to the Israelites in Babylonian exile to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”33 Rabbi Sacks encourages his Christian friends to look to the example of the Jews who have long been religious minorities in exile. His

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counsel is to take courage, knowing that creative minorities can thrive religiously even as they strengthen society around them.

BYU’s Wheatley Institute carries the torch of public scholarship on the role of religion in strengthening society. In his 2018 address to the G20 Interfaith Forum, Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints described this as “protecting the good religion does.”34 For example, multiple large-sample studies demonstrate how religious engagement correlates with overall societal well-being. In their study of religious restrictions in 198 countries, Brian Grim and Roger Finke show the positive relationship between religious freedom and social stability, socioeconomic progress, and freedom of the press.35 Of course, the social science literature shows the robust benefits of religious practice for overall human flourishing,36 ranging from marital stability37 to increased happiness38 to decreased risk of suicide and other deaths of despair39 to reduced recidivism after incarceration40 and increased educational attainment.41 Jason Carroll and his colleagues at the Wheatley Institute have shown how the measures of human flourishing are elevated, not only with increased personal religious participation but also through


shared family religious participation. It turns out that home-centered worship intensifies and extends the societal benefits of religious devotion. Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reminds us of the public virtue religion brings to society, declaring, “The good of religion, its reach, and the daily acts of love which religion inspires only multiply when we protect the freedom to express and act on core beliefs.” As President Oaks has affirmed, “Most religions exhort their believers to give to the poor. Most also teach their believers that they are accountable to God for this duty.” In other words, yes—religious freedom is a constitutional right, but it is also a compelling public good. It deserves protection on both counts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I express my gratitude for our first freedoms—for the founding-era framers as well as modern-day defenders who have fought to preserve our religious liberty. But if we are to respond to our secular critics and, more importantly, fulfill our accountability to God, we must go beyond our formally protected rights. We must remember and honor the stewardship of our first freedom. In response to modern Zarathustras, we must declare, “No, God is not dead.” But we cannot assert this claim if we hide nervously in the forest of faith and merely mumble the reason for the hope that is in us. Our defense of religious freedom is always compelling when it preserves our rights of conscience. But it is most inspiring when it moves us to articulate and act on our call to serve others, lift those who struggle, and shine a light to the world.

Elder Clark G. Gilbert is a General Authority Seventy and the Commissioner of Education for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He and his wife, Christine, are the parents of eight children. His alma maters include Brigham Young University, Stanford University, and Harvard University.


Mary’s Assumption

On resurrection morning
surely He appeared to you,
His mother.

No touch me not pretenses
and excuses about Father
could keep your hands away—
You would have to hold Him
in your arms.

Flesh of your flesh and bone
of your bone,
you would be the first to run
your fingers through the marks
of crucifixion—
and then caress His hair
in that way that mothers do.

You’d think how resurrection
(like growing up) had changed Him
and then see all the ways
that He was left unchanged.

Though victory was won
and the serpent’s head was crushed
you’d weep, even then,
with a mother’s human tears.

Thinking of it all,
you would find the words to say—
Son of Woman, second birth
was so much harder than your first

—Christopher Bissett

This poem won third place in the 2023 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
On Gospel Methodology at Brigham Young University

Richard D. Osguthorpe and Justin Collings

In recent years, both university and Church leaders have placed renewed and welcome emphasis on President Spencer W. Kimball’s “Second Century Address,” one of the central texts in the BYU canon. Of the many stirring ideas in that landmark address, one of the most evocative is President Kimball’s declaration that “gospel methodology, concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”¹ Current BYU leaders have reflected on the concept of “gospel methodology,” and at the August 2022 university conference, Academic Vice President C. Shane Reese invited BYU faculty to explore “what gospel methodology might look like in [our] particular disciplinary context . . . [and] what concepts and insights [we] might incorporate into [our] personal teaching.”²

We offer the following reflections as one response to that invitation. Our aim is to draw on gospel concepts and insights to provide a loose (not exhaustive) framework for considering components of a gospel methodology that apply to any teaching context regardless of discipline. These reflections are not intended as a precise prescription for practice³.

³. See appendix.
but as underlying principles to ponder and as an invitation to think more openly and deeply about what it might mean to be consecrated in every act of teaching and learning at Brigham Young University.

**Methodology as Motive and Means**

We begin with a working definition, however tentative and incomplete, of gospel methodology. With respect to teaching, we suggest that gospel methodology encompasses both (1) the basic framework through which we view our subject, our students, and the fundamental purpose of our teaching and (2) the ways in which we teach. On this understanding, gospel methodology is about the *why* and the *how* of instruction—the motive and the means of education. We will have more to say about the second part of this formula later. For now, it is important to note, as AVP Reese observed in his university conference message, that the “how” of gospel methodology transcends mere technique (though technique is critically important) to encompass the Christian virtues that the teacher practices during the process of instruction.

The “motive” part of our formulation is, in a key sense, prepedagogical; it precedes any actual teaching. It encompasses the teacher’s entire *outlook, purpose, and character*. These elements must be in place before the teacher ever enters the classroom. They must inform everything that happens within the classroom.

**Outlook.** The essence of any methodology is an underlying principle or set of principles. The essence of *gospel* methodology is the set of principles comprised by the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is also known as the plan of salvation, the plan of redemption, and the plan of happiness. That plan is the fundamental prism and focal lens of gospel methodology. To employ gospel methodology is to view all things and all people in the context of our Father’s eternal plan. It is to view all people as children of God created in his image. It is to view each student as “a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents,”4 destined, if willing, to draw progressively closer to God and to become increasingly like him.

**Motive.** In addition to leading us to embrace God’s plan as our fundamental outlook, gospel methodology requires that we embrace God’s motive and purpose as our own. That motive is summarized in one of

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the most-cited of all scriptures: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). This motive is entirely unselfish; it is utterly consumed with promoting others’ eternal advancement and blessing. To employ gospel methodology is to shed selfish motives and to promote the eternal flourishing of one’s students. It is to have “an eye single to the glory of God” (D&C 4:5), which entails both (1) promoting the immortality and eternal life of God’s children (Moses 1:39) and (2) pursuing “intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36). Gospel methodology must rest, then, on obedience to the two great commandments: love of God and love of God’s children— inseparable, but in that order.

**Character.** This call to embrace selfless, Godlike motives points to the centrality of the teacher’s own character in the foundation of gospel methodology. Bitter fountains don’t yield pure water, and corrupt trees don’t produce good fruit. Gospel methodology can be employed only by a teacher who is striving to live the gospel. This doesn’t mean that teachers need to be perfect—that would reduce the teaching pool effectively to zero. But it does mean that we need to conscientiously cultivate a Christlike character.

The pure motive needed to ground a gospel methodology—what the revelations call “an eye single to the glory of God”—does not emerge in a vacuum, and it cannot stand alone. It develops in a virtuous, symbiotic cycle along with other Christlike attributes. Descriptions of those attributes are scattered throughout the scriptures, but succinct summaries are found in at least three crucial places: the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–12), the great revelation on missionary work (D&C 4), and the Prophet Joseph Smith’s letter from Liberty Jail (D&C 121:34–46). Collectively, these scriptures outline the constitution of a Christlike character. Such character, strengthened and solemnized by temple covenants, becomes the sine qua non of gospel methodology.

We believe that the kind of outlook, motive, and character just described is an essential condition for gospel methodology. But having dubbed that condition “prepedagogical,” we hasten to add that the necessary character refinement need not precede our actual teaching. Indeed, it cannot entirely precede teaching because much of the needed refinement comes through teaching. It comes as we practice in our teaching the virtues we need to acquire. Such practice forges the necessary link between the motive and the means of gospel methodology—between why we teach and how. Let us turn now to five principles or distinctions that provide gospel insight into how we teach.
1. Effective Teaching and Good Teaching

In his prophetic “Second Century” description of Brigham Young University’s future, President Kimball makes a clarion call for placing “heavy and primary emphasis . . . on the quality of teaching at BYU.”5 This petition for quality has multiple possible interpretations, but it forms a foundation for President Kimball’s subsequent invitation to employ a gospel methodology. An analysis of its root meaning suggests that for teaching to be of quality, it must be both effective and good6—good in a moral/gospel sense. In other words, quality teaching must be successful in realizing its intended learning outcomes, but effectiveness is not enough. The nature of the subject matter cannot be dismissed, nor do successful outcomes (defined in terms of effectiveness) justify means that are incompatible with gospel principles.

For example, as faculty, we might be successful in teaching our students obscure facts with no relevant application (perhaps because the knowledge of those facts can be measured on a multiple-choice test), or we might find that shaming students in class for forgetting those obscure facts coerces other students to fearfully comply and demonstrate mastery of that information on a future exam. But neither of these examples of effective teaching constitute quality teaching because the subject matter (obscure facts) and the instructional methods (shaming) are morally indefensible. Thus quality teaching must be effective, but it also requires morally good content and morally good methods of instruction; quality teaching must be both effective and good in a moral/gospel sense.

For many faculty, the task to teach morally good subject matter is fairly straightforward. In the most direct way, that subject matter might be the gospel itself. However, it also includes the content of every discipline and course offering, so long as that content is good—true, correct, proper, right, decent, and so forth, as measured by the gospel of Jesus Christ. One way to enhance its goodness is to follow President Kimball’s admonition to teach every subject matter “bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel.”7 Such bathing can take many forms, including (but not limited to) seeking after relevant content that is “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (A of F 1:13); making connections (or distinctions) between secular theories and gospel truth; explaining key

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concepts (or challenging underlying assumptions) in relation to core doctrine; and providing gospel scaffolding to better understand disciplinary content.

The charge to keep our subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel receives further specification in the guardrails provided in the BYU Academic Freedom Policy, suggesting that anytime faculty discuss or analyze any secular position/theory that runs counter to key doctrine, it is necessary to take a faith-affirming stance in support of doctrine. It is not enough to present both sides of a controversial issue that conflicts with fundamental Church doctrine and leave students guessing as to the position of the faculty—even for the sake of discussion and analysis. To employ gospel methodology, we must bear witness of gospel truth. In these and other ways, faculty bathe their content in the light and color of the restored gospel.

2. Teaching Morality and Teaching Morally

Teaching the gospel as content (such as teaching one of the cornerstone courses in Religious Education) or bathing disciplinary content in the light and color of the restored gospel (such as presenting the theory of evolution in a biology course with reference to prophetic teachings about the plan of salvation) represent a necessary part of a gospel methodology. But morally good content, though necessary, is not sufficient. That content must be taught with morally good methods rooted in gospel principles. Put another way, we are only sometimes in a position to teach morality. But we are always in a situation to teach morally—to teach in ways that align with what is good, right, virtuous, and caring in a gospel sense.8 Teaching is a moral act.9 It is an inherently moral endeavor.10 And at BYU, every method and interaction must be informed by the principles and practices of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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Certainly, these gospel principles and practices include prayer. Sincerely praying for guidance regarding what and how to teach is obviously crucial to gospel methodology. The same might be true of supplicating the heavens as a class to invite the Spirit to facilitate revelation and inspiration or of praying privately in behalf of our students. But teaching morally in the spirit of a gospel methodology entails more than inviting heavenly participation. When we teach morally, we teach in ways that align with gospel principles and are informed by moral virtue (or Christlike attributes). Thus, in a gospel methodology, our methods of teaching are modified, in an adverbial sense, by Christlike character. This might be part of what our mission statement means when it says that BYU “must provide an environment enlightened by living prophets and sustained by those moral virtues which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God.”

In an address at the April 2022 President’s Leadership Summit, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland suggested that the fourth section of the Doctrine and Covenants provides a powerful list of Christlike attributes that might inform our gospel methodology: “And faith, hope, charity and love, with an eye single to the glory of God, qualify him for the work. Remember faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence” (D&C 4:5–6).

One way to follow Elder Holland’s counsel is to remember that faith, hope, charity, and love with an eye single to the glory of God are prerequisite for teaching at BYU. With these embodied attributes, faculty should then teach faithfully, virtuously, knowledgeably, temperately, patiently, kindly, charitably, humbly, and diligently. In this respect, we might strive to patiently explain key concepts of our disciplines in relation to key doctrine of the restored gospel, kindly respond to student questions with grace for the novice learner, humbly acknowledge gaps in our own subject-matter understanding, temperately react to misinformed or misguided student comments (especially those that differ from our own ideological commitments), diligently prepare lesson plans to meet the needs of individual learners (instead of teaching to some hypothetical “average” student), and so forth.

An additional delineation of Christlike attributes germane to teaching morally is found in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–43: “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—reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy."

In an effort to incorporate these Christlike attributes into our teaching, we might seek to gently persuade students to recognize the reasonableness of opposing viewpoints; meekly accept the limits of discipline-specific rationality and reason; guilelessly design assessments that accurately measure student learning—without cunning and clever artifice employed to trick students under the guise of rigor; genuinely and lovingly balance justice and mercy in grading assignments, papers, and exams; compassionately correct student missteps and mistakes; inspirationally provide feedback on written student work that is timely and exact; magnanimously show an increase of love after any possible perception of negative reproof; and honestly (without hypocrisy) set expectations for ourselves that match our expectations for our students.

Importantly, these expressions of Christlike character are not techniques and methods in the strict sense; rather, they represent the manner in which certain techniques and methods are enacted. Likewise, these expressions are suited to individual faculty, such that these attributes might modify our individual teaching methods in unique ways. In short, and in essence, we as faculty teach who we are. Some of us might be more naturally inclined to exhibit certain Christlike attributes in certain ways than others. Similarly, we all have different spiritual gifts that we will naturally bring to bear on our teaching. Our collective diversity of gifts immeasurably enhances the cumulative power of our teaching on this campus.

In all of these ways, we as faculty can employ morally good methods that are rooted in gospel principles. We can teach in ways that are morally good in a gospel sense.

3. Acting and Not Being Acted Upon

Quality teaching through gospel methodology—effectively teaching morally good subject matter with morally good methods—places
paramount importance on the Christlike attributes and capacities of faculty and how those attributes inform our teaching practice. However, gospel methodology also requires an approach that places demands on the attributes and capacities of students—particularly on their capacity to choose (exercise moral agency) and their capacity to receive personal revelation (exercise faith). Gospel methodology, in other words, requires that we teach in ways that empower students to exercise their moral agency, to act and not simply be acted upon. “And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:26).

When we employ gospel methodology in our teaching, we provide opportunities for learners to act—and not simply be acted upon by us or by the course content. Put another way, we teach in ways that place maximum demand on the agency and intelligence of the learner.18 When we teach in ways that give students an opportunity to act for themselves, we provide a rich and engaging curriculum with multiple pathways for agentic learning and development. Most often, these pathways are grounded in our students’ questions—including their questions of the heart19—and we provide scaffolding to support student growth. In this way, we can serve as mentors, guiding student learning in a subject-matter path that closely follows disciplinary norms and expectations. Within those content area standards, we hold students accountable. We also place maximum demand on our students’ intelligence and agency by identifying the level at which they can learn with (and only with) our assistance.20 In all of this, we must never seek disciples of our own but must strive instead to strengthen our students as disciples of Christ.21

To illustrate what it means to methodologically maximize the intelligence and agency of the learner, consider the continuum of teaching in figure 1.22 This continuum displays how we as faculty might influence either the behavior or beliefs of our students through teaching methods that place less and less demand on their agency as the methods move further away from the midpoint. For example, instead of placing maximum demand on the agency and intelligence of the learner, we might (less

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21. Hence the scriptures’ repeated warnings against priestcraft (see 2 Ne. 26:29) and against “aspir[ing] to the honors of men” (D&C 121:35).
22. Adapted from Green, Activities of Teaching, 33.
desirably) instruct the learner in a certain set of beliefs or even attempt to indoctrinate the learner by encouraging uncritical acceptance of a set of true beliefs. Instruction is certainly a form of teaching that places some requirement on the agency and intelligence of the learner (particularly instruction that involves discussion of reasons for belief). Indoctrination, however, places little to no demand on the agency and intelligence of the learner. When indoctrination aims to instill beliefs that ultimately contribute to reasoned, intelligent, or inspired understanding, it might be considered a form of teaching. However, if inculcating certain beliefs is the end goal—without any future attention to the reasons or justification for those beliefs—then indoctrination is not teaching.

Similarly, to influence the behavior of the learner, we can also engage in teaching practices that do not place maximum demand on the learner’s agency and intelligence. As we move away from this maximum demand, we risk engaging in techniques and strategies that run counter to gospel methodology. For example, to influence the behavior of the learner we might appropriately provide training in a certain skill or technique, but we might also mistakenly attempt to condition learners to mindlessly change their conduct in response to certain rewards or consequences. Training is certainly a form of teaching that places some requirement on the agency and intelligence of the learner, particularly when that behavior is an “expression of intelligence.”

23. See Green, Activities of Teaching, 26.
conditioning occurs as a way of training certain behaviors that will lead to intelligent expression, then it might be considered a form of teaching. However, if conditioning certain behaviors is the goal—simply an automatic response to stimuli—then conditioning is not teaching.

Within this region of teaching and learning, it is possible for learners to act, exercise their capacity to choose, and engage their intellect. But once we, as faculty, cross the line of this region, even as we begin leaving the midpoint where maximum demand is placed on the learner’s agency and intelligence, we are simply acting upon the learner. We are manipulating a change in behavior or seducing a change in belief (miseducation). Whereas the region of teaching and learning includes most forms of training and instructing (as well as some kinds of conditioning and indoctrinating), the region of gospel methodology is constrained much more closely to the midpoint.24

This important principle of gospel methodology (and the line that cannot be crossed) is well described in Doctrine and Covenants 121, which warns against exercising “control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness” (v. 37). The call to resist unrighteous dominion and compulsion does not preclude us from exerting authoritative influence, but any such influence must be moderated by Christlike attributes. Our influence, like our teaching methods, must be animated “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” (vv. 41–42).

There is no room within gospel methodology for unrighteous dominion—including forms of indoctrination and conditioning. Our influence as faculty should be exerted only in gentle, loving ways devoid of cunning or coercion. Gospel methodology thus requires more than conditioning or indoctrinating, and even more than training and instructing (although these methods can certainly be applied appropriately and morally). Avoiding hypocrisy and guile is a minimum threshold; placing maximum demand on the intelligence and agency of the learner is the aspiration. This component of gospel methodology leads to learning that lasts because “without compulsory means it shall flow unto [the learner] forever and ever” (D&C 121:46).

4. By Study and By Faith

Like the principle of moral agency, the capacity of the learner to receive personal revelation is another component of gospel methodology that...
places demands on the attributes and capacities of students (as well as of faculty). As teachers, we should seek revelation for ourselves and strive to foster revelation among learners. In section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants, described by President Dallin H. Oaks as “the basic constitution of Church education,” it is prophetically clear that we are to learn by both study and faith: “And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (v. 118, emphasis added).

The capacity to receive personal revelation is rooted squarely in the first principle of the gospel—faith—and represents the most dramatic and unique departure from what might be considered an appropriate methodology at other universities committed to principles and practices of quality teaching. That is, faculty at any university might reasonably be expected to effectively teach morally good content in morally good ways while placing maximum demand on the agency of the learner. However, there would certainly be no expectation in that generic methodology for any attention to the exercise of faith and the pursuit of personal revelation. At BYU, “learning that leads to inspiration or revelation” was beautifully described by former president Kevin J Worthen as “inspiring learning.”

This inspiring component of gospel methodology resides in epistemologies of practice that the secular academy has long since abandoned in favor of an exclusive focus on more scientifically trusted empirical and rational ways of knowing. There is no serious methodological debate within the broader academy that questions the primary or even sole reliance on observation, sensory perception, logic, and reason over inspiration and revelation (particularly as a product of faithful exercise).

Within gospel methodology, by contrast, we provide opportunities for our students to learn both by study and by faith. We design assignments and class activities that encourage or perhaps even require the exercise of faith and lead to inspiring learning. These assignments and activities call on students to place their trust in God, who “giveth . . . liberally” to those who ask (James 1:5). They also encourage students to trust not the “arm of flesh” (2 Ne. 4:34) and to trust in the Lord instead—leaning not unto their own understanding (Prov. 3:5).

Notably, in a gospel methodology, learning by study and by faith is not an either/or proposition. We learn by study and by faith or, put
another way, by study-and-faith. That is, our exercise of faith comple-
ments empirical and rational ways of knowing in a manner that opens
the door to revelation and inspiration: “Observation, reason, and faith
facilitate revelation and enable the Holy Ghost to be a reliable, trustwor-
thy, and beloved companion.” 27 It is in this synergistic approach to learn-
ing that “belief enhances inquiry, study amplifies faith, and revelation
leads to deeper understanding.” 28

Such assignments, activities, and discussion require students to seek
revelation—to be inspired—not simply to absorb and then recite the pre-
sented facts, figures, and ideas of faculty or to simply “download” the
information from a text. When students learn by faith in the Lord Jesus
Christ, they access the enabling power of his Atonement to increase in
understanding. In this way, the inspired ideas (not rote facts) come from
the heavens through personal revelation, and they belong to the learner.
The learning experience increases the student’s capacity to receive rev-
elation, instead of the student’s capacity to release regurgitation. And
instead of a perfunctory performance, prayer becomes the most impor-
tant instrument for accessing answers and fueling creative capacity.

Gospel methodology thus creates conditions that require us not
only to imbue our methods with gospel principles but also to provide
opportunities for students to apply gospel principles to their learning.
Through carefully constructed learning experiences, students exercise
their agency and their faith. They are given opportunities to act (to be
anxiously engaged and not simply acted upon) and thereby to increase
their capacity to choose. And, similarly, they are required to learn not
only by study but also by faith (to seek inspiration for answers to their
subject matter questions) and thereby to increase their capacity to
receive personal revelation.

5. By the Spirit and with the Spirit

These components of gospel methodology represent a loose framework
for thinking about how we, as faculty, apply gospel principles and con-
cepts to our teaching. There are surely many other ways to conceptu-
alize and operationalize an approach to teaching that is rooted in the
restored gospel of Jesus Christ. However, it would be difficult to suggest

address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, August 22, 2023, https://speeches.byu
brand-platform.
that any conceptualization would be complete without underscor-
ing the essential role of the Holy Ghost in gospel methodology. Gos-
pel methodology imposes the same exacting standard as all divinely
approved teaching: “Verily I say unto you, he that is ordained of me and
sent forth to preach the word of truth by the Comforter, in the Spirit of
truth, doth he preach it by the Spirit of truth or some other way? And if
it be by some other way it is not of God” (D&C 50:17–18).

Any other way is not of God; any other way is not gospel method-
ology. This perspective is particularly important at BYU, given the oft-
quoted prophetic admonition from President Brigham Young to Dr. Karl
Maeser (the then–newly called principal of Brigham Young Academy):
“You ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables
without the Spirit of God.”

Consistent with this charge, which John Tanner has called “BYU’s
prime directive,” we as faculty must recognize the role of the Holy
Spirit in every aspect of teaching and learning at BYU. We must teach
both by the Spirit and with the Spirit. That is, the Spirit must both inform
what we teach and carry our teaching into student minds and hearts.

When we teach by the Spirit, we teach to some extent like the prophet
Nephi of old—not knowing beforehand where we are going or what we
should do: “And I was led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand the
things which I should do” (1 Ne. 4:6, emphasis added).

This of course does not mean that we don’t prepare lessons or define
learning outcomes beforehand. As President Boyd K. Packer often coun-
seled, “We first adopt, then we adapt.” But we can also create structured
opportunities to teach as directed by the Spirit, to engage in meaningful
discussion based on the questions of learners. In this respect, inspiration
can inform method midstream.

Similarly, in those structured opportunities for student learning, we
can teach with the Spirit. When we teach with the Spirit, we teach in
a way that invites the Holy Ghost to communicate the content to the
learner’s heart and mind.

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This component of gospel methodology is possible only when we as faculty place maximal demand on our students’ agency, intelligence, and faith. Likewise, it requires testimony of gospel truth or belief in disciplinary content (bathed in the light of the restored gospel) to call upon the Spirit to accompany the message. In these sacred moments, regardless of the subject matter (the gospel itself or disciplinary content), the Spirit does the teaching. Moreover, an approach to teaching that relies on the Spirit of God—and that honors learners’ agency and faith—also highlights our aspiration that all will have an “equal privilege” to speak and participate so that “all may be edified of all” (D&C 88:122). In a large university setting, this aspect of teaching by and with the Spirit possibly poses the biggest challenge—but also presents the greatest opportunity—for gospel methodology.

**Conclusion**

Gospel methodology requires a consecrated faculty. This requires more than faculty who are willing to teach the gospel. It requires faculty who engage in quality teaching practices and teach in consecrated ways—who teach morally good content with morally good methods. These methods draw on both our character as faculty—the Christlike attributes we cultivate—and on our employment of a pedagogy of the Spirit that places demand on the agency, intelligence, and faith of our students. Such a methodology results in inspiring learning and gives both students and faculty access to the moral rewards that are internal to the practice of teaching. These rewards include a sense of common cause in the most important work on the earth today and point Brigham Young University to the most magnificent realization of its sacred mission: to assist others in their quest for perfection and eternal life.

Richard D. Osguthorpe is Associate Academic Vice President for Undergraduate Studies with a faculty appointment in the David O. McKay School of Education at Brigham Young University. He teaches and researches about the moral work of teaching and teacher education.

Justin Collings is Academic Vice President with a faculty appointment in the J. Reuben Clark Law School at Brigham Young University. He is a scholar of constitutional law, comparative constitutional law, and constitutional history.

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32. See appendix.
Appendix

The following notes provide additional commentary on substantive, important points that do not necessarily stand alone as principles of a gospel methodology. Each point is connected to a specific principle and provides additional commentary, reflection, or elaboration.

1. **Heuristic Framework.** The principles of a gospel methodology presented herein should not be interpreted as a set of procedures that, if followed, will result in certain learning outcomes (related to a given subject matter or the gospel itself). Just as it would be a mistake to conclude that a certain technique for teaching a particular concept or skill will automatically lead to comprehension or expertise, there is no gospel methodology that guarantees perfection and eternal life. This lack of guarantee is, in part, due to the agency of the learner. It is also related to the “ontological dependence” of teaching and learning— the idea that the concept of teaching is conditioned on learning occurring at some point, but not always (similar to the way that one might race and not win or fish and not catch fish). Put simply, these principles of gospel methodology should be interpreted as a loose heuristic framework for examining, and possibly improving, teaching practices in a direction that is aligned with the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Any purposeful and positive result would be a product of moving in that direction but would not be caused by the scripted implementation of certain techniques or strategies.

2. **Importance of Prayer.** If asked, faculty and students would likely suggest that the most obvious and prevalent component of gospel methodology is a prayer to begin class (and, possibly, an accompanying spiritual thought). Proponents of a rich conception of gospel methodology would correspondingly point out that a prayer to begin class is only one part of a much larger whole. Unfortunately, such an argument runs the risk of diminishing the importance of prayer in classrooms at BYU, if we interpret this exchange as a criticism of prayer itself. When viewed as censure or reproval, it is possible to mistakenly conclude that prayer is an insignificant piece of a gospel methodology because prayer is a simple, basic, ordinary way to begin class—quite disconnected and separate from the content of the lesson plan and disciplinary subject matter.

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Of course, if the prayer to begin class is a perfunctory one, then the claim for insignificance is accurate. However, even in the most expansive view of gospel methodology, it is difficult to identify a more important component than heartfelt, fervent prayer. The restoration of the gospel itself began with Joseph's prayer, and there are countless invitations in the scriptures, such as to “pray always, and not faint; that ye must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ” (2 Ne. 32:9, emphasis added). In this way, prayer finds itself in “first place” in a gospel methodology and is the key to a consecrated performance.

When we as faculty, along with our students, “ask in faith, nothing wavering” (James 1:6), we stand as witnesses of one of the most fundamental doctrines of the restoration—that the heavens are open. The strength and subsequent application of this witness depend not only on the faith of the believers (faculty and students) but also on the appropriateness of the context—namely, the lack of wisdom. The heavens stand ready to give liberally to those of us who lack wisdom and ask in faith, but it then follows that we need to organize our class instruction and activities in ways that require such supplication to the heavens. In our preparations for classroom instruction and activity, we might do well to ask ourselves, “Am I teaching anything in any way today that would benefit from heavenly assistance—to either my students or myself?”

3. **Rigor and Unrighteous Dominion.** When academic rigor is interpreted as setting high expectations for students that challenge students' intellect and capacities at a level just beyond their reach without assistance from faculty, then we help students realize the intellectual purposes of higher education (and the Aims of a BYU Education). In this spirit of rigor, students should embrace challenge and struggle as an important part of their academic learning, growth, and development. However, at times we substitute a different understanding of rigor for this elevated, even sacred sense of challenge, struggle, adversity, and trial. This divergent application of rigor to academic learning is more akin to rigidity, inflexibility, cruelty, and authoritarianism. In this sense, rigor is connected to methods of instruction (mechanical, preprogrammed lectures), assessments (cunning/deceptive exams), or assignments (excessive reading or busy work) that overburden students. And the content is overly complex.

Notably, in this approach to teaching and learning, it is not possible for us, as faculty, to intervene in any meaningful way to improve the experience. The challenge to the students’ intellect and capacities is too far beyond their own reach—and no faculty assistance will help those students overcome the substantial gap. That is, there is nothing in this approach that lends itself to remedial teaching—it goes without saying that there is no helpful remedy connected to additional preprogrammed lectures, more deceptive exams, or extra excessive reading and busywork.

In this way, the pursuit of academic rigor becomes a form of unrighteous dominion. As faculty, we place the desire for difficulty—particularly hardship that places no demand on us to intervene—above the well-being and ultimate learning of students. The move toward unrighteous dominion, in such a case, is the prioritization of an unreachable standard with rigid, inflexible, authoritarian expectation: “It emphasizes tasks and agendas at the expense of human relationships and the welfare of souls.”

In this sense, “we should never reprove beyond the capacity of our healing balm to reach out to the person reproved.” Placing any expectation on students without placing concomitant responsibility on ourselves to successfully support those students creates the potential for unrighteous dominion. The expectations for students in any class must be accompanied by adequate pedagogically appropriate scaffolding provided by faculty.

4. Grading. It would likely prove an impossible task to have all faculty, across all disciplines, come to an agreement on what a gospel methodology entails for grading students. But the improbability of the quest should not prevent us from embracing a paramount gospel principle for grading—namely, that “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). Such a tenet does not mean that students should not be held accountable for their learning, nor does it mean that some students will not learn more than others, nor even does it preclude the possible ranking and sorting of student performance. However, this gospel truth does suggest that the results of grading should not be predetermined by students’ backgrounds. In other words, when grading reinforces achievement


36. Neal A. Maxwell, “Jesus, the Perfect Mentor,” Ensign 31, no. 2 (February 2001): 14, paraphrasing Brigham Young, Deseret News, March 6, 1861, 1: “They deserve chastisement, but God forbid that I should chasten beyond the healing balm I have to save them and make better men of them.” See also Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1856–86), 9:124 (February 17, 1861).
gaps between groups of students, it is possible that some element of the course pedagogy or grading procedure has departed from gospel methodology. Some preexisting disparities might persist stubbornly despite a teacher’s best efforts to employ gospel methodology, and it remains a reality that our students come to us with varying levels of general academic and subject-matter preparation. But we should never be complacent on this front. These types of achievement gaps exist at every level of education, including higher education, but it is the office of a teacher and of a university to work to reduce them. This is especially true for teachers at BYU with a shared commitment to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and to teaching with gospel methodology.

5. Spiritual Gifts. It would be a mistake to assume that all faculty ought to exhibit the same Christlike attributes in exactly the same way. As with the conferral of spiritual gifts, it is likely that “to some it is given” to teach morally in one way and to some in another. We all have different gifts as teachers, and those gifts are conditioned differently by our individual development of appropriate Christlike attributes that modify our practice. In this respect, the congruity with which some faculty naturally connect their Christlike character to their practice is likely a product of their seeking “earnestly the best gifts” (D&C 46:8). Moreover, it is a strong tenet of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ that all of God’s children can develop such spiritual gifts and Christlike character—it is a gospel of repentance and change (Alma 5:12–13), or what President Nelson has called a “gospel of healing and progression.”37 Thus, we should cultivate those Christlike aspects of our character that are most readily applicable to our practice and also earnestly seek the best gifts, enabling the Savior to “make weak things become strong” (Ether 12:27).

6. The Region of Teaching and Gospel Methodology. On the continuum of teaching (see fig. 1), there are approaches to teaching and gospel methodology that certainly include meaningful instruction and training. For example, a student might be trained in a certain procedure for a lab experiment or be instructed that racism should be rooted out. Such training and instruction might, for well-intended reasons, initially avoid explaining the underlying science or articulating the underlying doctrine. But if we are to implement gospel methodology more fully, we must at some point move toward more agentic, intelligent learning. If our goal is to simply encourage conditioned response to stimuli or uncritical acceptance

of belief, then our methods fall outside the region of teaching and gospel methodology. The same is true *a fortiori* if we try to condition a response or belief based on premises or foundations that are incompatible with the truths of the restored gospel. In all of this, it is important to remember that because gospel methodology is always moving toward placing maximum demand on the intelligence and agency of the learner, merely instructing, indoctrinating, training, or conditioning will never be sufficient.

7. **Moral Rewards of Teaching.** The payoff for the learner in a gospel methodology is self-evident and reflected in the learning outcomes of the course. In broad terms, students experience meaningful learning that lasts—perhaps best described as “understanding.”

But there are also rewards, including moral rewards, for the faculty. Moral rewards might include increased self-efficacy and fulfillment, an enhanced sense of common cause, a heightened awareness of noble and sacred purpose, genuine contentment with practice, greater satisfaction with authentic student participation, and more meaningful connection with students. Access to these moral rewards is contingent on faculty teaching morally (employing the Christlike attributes of a gospel methodology) because the goods internal to a practice are available to faculty only when they exercise virtue.

Put another way, moral rewards are not achieved simply by engaging in certain types of practices or pedagogy. When learning outcomes are not the direct result of teaching methods that are modified by moral virtue (teaching morally), then the moral rewards are not accessible to us as faculty. Simply going through the motions brings no sense of fulfillment, no enhancement of common cause, no genuine satisfaction, no strengthened relationship. In this way, the goods associated with any practice might be external, internal, or both. But the achievement of goods internal to a practice are accessible only through the exercise of moral virtue (Christlike character). If we are to feel a sense of fulfillment in helping a struggling student, for example, then we will need to exhibit patience, long-suffering, and diligence in our teaching. In a purely gospel-methodology sense, this type of moral reward might be captured best in the Book of Mormon’s description of how Alma and the sons of Mosiah felt a sense of common cause and an awareness of sacred shared purpose when they reunited as

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“brethren in the Lord” after their patient, long-suffering, diligent, prayerful work as missionaries (Alma 17:2–3).

Notably, these moral rewards—internal to the practice of teaching—are sometimes elusive for us because the focus of evaluation for professors is so squarely rooted in external rewards. The goods external to the practice of teaching include advancement in rank and status, high student evaluations, honors and awards, praise of colleagues, and so forth. Of course, a gospel methodology points away from any gratification of pride, vain ambition, and honors of men (D&C 121), but such honors are certainly valued and even expected in academe. Perhaps the greatest loss in this misplaced focus is that it precludes access to the moral rewards of teaching. And this potential loss highlights the perverse nature of the incentives (often stipulated or recognized in policy) that are supposed to motivate us as faculty. Moral rewards provide a particularly sweet fruit for faculty who employ gospel methodology.
The Psalm of Nephi in an Age of Anxiety and Division

Patrick Q. Mason

It is probably fair to say that readers over the years have responded more positively to the Book of Mormon’s religious teachings and spiritual power than to its purely literary merits. When Parley P. Pratt famously wrote that “sleep was a burden when the night came, for [he] preferred reading to sleep,” it was not because of the Book of Mormon’s page-turning plot. Rather, Pratt testified, “As I read, the spirit of the Lord was upon me, and I knew and comprehended that the book was true.”

On the other hand, those uninspired by what they discovered in the book’s pages have often sounded more like nineteenth-century preacher and theologian Alexander Campbell, who called the Book of Mormon “the meanest book in the English language,” or the novelist Mark Twain, who slyly characterized it as “such a pretentious affair,” “an insipid mess,” and “chloroform in print.” Even one of the Book of Mormon’s principal academic defenders and advocates, Grant Hardy, stopped short of claiming that it is literarily on par with the Bible, making instead the more modest claim that “the Book of Mormon is a much more interesting text—rewarding sustained critical attention—than has generally been acknowledged.”

Whether one finds the Book of Mormon inspired, interesting, or something else, one passage—a group of twenty verses in the modern Latter-day Saint edition—arguably rivals the lyricism, pathos, beauty, and spiritual depth of the Bible’s beloved psalms. Penned roughly halfway through writings by Nephi, the Book of Mormon’s first narrator, this passage, 2 Nephi 4:16–35, has come to be known as the Psalm of Nephi. Although Hugh Nibley considered the text to be more of a hymn than a psalm, more recent analysis by Matthew Nickerson identified this passage as following the classic form of individual lament, which is one of the four major types of psalm present in the Hebrew Bible. According to Nickerson, a psalm of individual lament contains five parts: first, an invocation, or “initial call to God” (vv. 16–17); second, a complaint, “where the supplicant describes his woes to the Lord” (vv. 17–19); third, a “declaration of trust in the Lord and his abilities to relieve and reward the sufferer” (vv. 20–30); fourth, a petition in which “the suppliant seeks the Lord’s help in alleviating the sorrows or sufferings described in the complaint” (vv. 31–33); and finally, “a vow to sing a song of praise or thanksgiving” to the Lord (vv. 34–35). This is just one example demonstrating how scholars have fruitfully applied the methods of literary and form criticism to better understand the text.

This brief essay supplements the prior scholarship on the Psalm of Nephi by asking two questions: How have readers understood this passage over time? And how might the Psalm of Nephi be a particularly useful text today? To answer these questions, I provide a reception history of the text, documenting how these twenty verses have been received and interpreted by various readers since the Book of Mormon’s publication. I then interpret what the historical evidence suggests—that the Psalm

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of Nephi has become increasingly popular in recent decades after being virtually neglected for about a century. Finally, I will offer a distinctive reading that highlights the text’s current resonance and relevance in our contemporary age of anxiety and division.

**Reception History**

If not quite on par with 1 Nephi 3:7 or 3 Nephi 11, the Psalm of Nephi is often mentioned by contemporary Latter-day Saints as one of their favorite, most edifying passages. This was decidedly not the case, however, for the Book of Mormon’s early readers. Indeed, it seems that nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints barely noticed the psalm’s existence at all. In the original 1830 edition, the entire psalm was embedded in one very long paragraph corresponding with verses 13–35 in the modern (1981) edition. Early indices of the Book of Mormon did not list the passage as worthy of note. In guiding readers to notable sections within the book, “References to the Book of Mormon,” published in Kirtland in 1835, included headings for “The death of Lehi” (2 Ne. 4:12) and “Nephi seperates [sic] from Laman” (2 Ne. 5:5–7) but nothing for the intervening psalm. Indices published in 1841 in Liverpool and 1842 in Philadelphia similarly referenced Lehi’s death and burial but not Nephi’s ensuing lament. Historian Grant Underwood painstakingly recorded every Book of Mormon passage mentioned or quoted more than once in early Church periodicals, pamphlets, and tracts, and Nephi’s psalm did not make the list. While serving in the First Presidency in 1883, George Q. Cannon published a book called *The Life of Nephi, the Son of Lehi*. One might expect some mention of the psalm in this book entirely dedicated to Nephi’s life and teachings, but Cannon does not mention the verses in the psalm at all, even in passing. The same held true when Cannon published his *Book of

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9. See George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Nephi, the Son of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 77–79.
Mormon Stories for children a few years later. Even George Reynolds’s important 1888 book, The Story of the Book of Mormon, failed to comment on the passage. Widely considered to be the first substantial Book of Mormon commentary, Reynolds’s account skips straight from Lehi’s death to the departure of Nephi and his followers from the land of Nephi in order to separate from Laman’s followers. Reynolds’s lengthy entry on Nephi in his 1891 Dictionary of the Book of Mormon follows the same pattern. In all of the Church’s general conference addresses in the nineteenth century, there was only one quotation clearly taken from 2 Nephi 4:16–35. In sum, it’s not just that the text we now call the Psalm of Nephi was unimportant to the Book of Mormon’s first readers—it seems they hardly even noticed it was there.

Things began to change in the middle of the twentieth century thanks to the Latter-day Saint scripture scholar Sidney Sperry. In 1931, Sperry became the first devout Latter-day Saint to obtain a PhD in biblical studies. In 1947, he published a book called Our Book of Mormon, in which he applied many of the methods and insights he had learned from his study of the Bible. Sperry loved and believed in the Book of Mormon, but he was not the greatest salesman for its literary value. Regarding the book as a whole, Sperry observed that it was written by “simple, unsophisticated [Nephite] men” who were “not . . . outstanding writer[s] or orator[s].” He asserted that the book “has little sustained literary beauty” or “elegance” and that its real power comes from the “profound spiritual fervor” with which it teaches religious principles. In spite of Sperry’s tepid view of the Book of Mormon as literature, he did grant that there are some prominent

10. See George Q. Cannon, Book of Mormon Stories, No. 1 (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1892), 43–44.
13. Orson Pratt, in Journal of Discourses, 26 vols. (Liverpool: E. D. Richards, 1955–86), 16:336 (December 28, 1873): “I ponder upon the things of God continually which he has revealed unto me.” A handful of other general conference addresses use language reminiscent of phrases that are found in 2 Nephi 4:16–35 but are not unique to that passage. A good example is the phrase “hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy” in verse 33; similar wording is found in Job 3:23, Lamentations 3:7, Hosea 2:6, Mosiah 7:29, Ether 9:33, and Doctrine and Covenants 122:7. Given the scarcity of attention paid to Nephi’s psalm in general, it is just as (if not more) likely a speaker had one of those other scriptural passages in mind.
14. Sidney B. Sperry, Our Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1947), 79–82.
Psalm of Nephi in an Age of Anxiety

exceptions, a few passages that in his opinion contain “considerable literary merit.” He pointed specifically to the second half of 2 Nephi 4, which he proposed should be called “The Psalm of Nephi.” Sperry argued that this is the only psalm in the entire Book of Mormon. He favorably compared its cadence, rhythm, and “deep religious feeling” to the biblical psalms, acknowledging influence from the poetic writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah as well. As far as I can surmise, Sperry was not only the one who coined the term “The Psalm of Nephi,” but he was the first to recognize that this text provides a window into the narrator-prophet Nephi’s inner emotional life, declaring that it “lays bare to us the very depths of Nephi’s soul.”

Sperry’s book was a turning point. It marked the first step of the Psalm of Nephi’s transformation from a barely noticed passage into a celebrated scriptural masterpiece, a beautifully composed text giving valuable insight into the interior life of one of the Book of Mormon’s main figures. Perhaps not coincidentally, following Sperry’s treatment, references to this passage in general conference talks immediately began to increase, with twenty-six references to the psalm in twentieth-century addresses after 1947 and another twenty-five in our current century (through the April 2023 general conference). Sperry’s analysis prompted additional scholarly studies of the text until the psalm had become, by the end of the twentieth century, a regular subject of analysis and commentary. Two of the major scholars of the Book of Mormon in the twenty-first century, Grant Hardy and Christopher Thomas, have each noted the psalm’s significance as a literary device employed by Nephi in presenting his personal and family narrative. In their Book of Mormon commentary, Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming offer a social justice-oriented interpretation of the passage, suggesting that we should read the psalm’s movingly emotional language “in the voice of anyone who is fleeing danger, abuse, or violence.” This is not just Nephi’s soul yearning for deliverance; this is more expansively “the prayer of those seeking safe passage” of any kind. An exception to the recent trend is Terryl Givens’s

16. I used the Scripture Citation Index (https://scriptures.byu.edu) to perform this count.
17. See the sources listed in notes 4 and 5 above.
Brief Theological Introduction to 2 Nephi, which mentions the psalm only glancingly.20

The psalm of Nephi has also increasingly taken hold in the artistic imagination of Latter-day Saints. One remarkable example of this is a stunning piece by artist Ahmed Jamal Qureshi called Mazmuur Naafi: The Arabic Psalm of Naafi.21 In this digital print on paper, Qureshi—the son of a Pakistani Muslim father and Norwegian Latter-day Saint mother—wrote out the entire psalm of Nephi in Arabic calligraphy. The name Allah (Arabic for “God”) is written in the center, with the names of the four men who brought us the book of Nephi—Lehi, Nephi, Moroni, and Joseph Smith—written in the circles in each corner. This follows a pattern common in Ottoman mosque domes, where God’s name would be at the center and the names of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, or friends and successors to the Prophet Muhammad, would be written in roundlets at each corner.22 Qureshi’s piece is an outstanding example of Latter-day Saint art expanding beyond its traditional Euro-American aesthetic context, as well as of the power that Nephi’s psalm has on its readers.

Once the psalm began to get noticed by Book of Mormon readers, its lyricism easily lent itself to song. Over the past quarter century in particular, the psalm has been set to music by several professional and amateur composers. The most successful of these compositions is the song “I Love the Lord,” with lyrics written by John Tanner based on 2 Nephi 4:16–35 and set to the tune of Jean Sibelius’s “Finlandia,” arranged by Ronald Staheli. Performed twice in general conference and recorded in 2018 by the BYU Men’s Chorus, the song movingly captures the psalm’s emotional depth. Tanner later wrote an additional adaptation of the psalm called “Sometimes My Soul,” set to an American folk tune.23 Brandon and Brett Stewart adapted the lyrics for a song called

23. For a discussion of these two songs, see John S. Tanner, “Two Hymns Based on Nephi’s Psalm: Texts and Commentary,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 10, no. 2 (2001): 34–41, 70. “I Love the Lord” was performed in general conference in October 1999 (Ensign 29, no. 11 [November 1999]: 3) and April 2007 (Ensign 37, no. 5 [May 2007]: 2) and appeared on the 2018 BYU Men’s Chorus album, Set Apart: Beloved Missionary Hymns.
“I Glory in My Jesus (The Psalm of Nephi),” performed by the Millennial Choirs and Orchestras on their 2009 album, *That Easter Morn*. At least two hymn lyrics inspired by the psalm have won Church Music Submission awards. Perhaps the most musically ambitious setting of the psalm is a song cycle by Christian Asplund, a professional composer and professor at Brigham Young University. And as a simple YouTube search will indicate, numerous missionaries and other amateur composers have tried their hand at setting the psalm to music.

**An Age of Anxiety**

What explains the growing popularity of this particular passage from the Book of Mormon? If the Psalm of Nephi was all but ignored by readers for over a hundred years, how do we account for the fact that it suddenly began to resonate with a wide range of readers beginning in the mid-twentieth century? Sidney Sperry’s elevation of the passage as the lone psalm in the Book of Mormon surely helped give it attention and legitimacy, but that does not fully explain why so many recent readers have turned to these verses for consolation and healing in the midst of discouragement, depression, and perfectionism when their nineteenth-century forebears apparently did not. Why the shift?

It is impossible to know in every case, but the timing of the psalm’s growing popularity tracks well with the rise of a therapeutic culture that took hold in the United States beginning especially in the 1950s. Numerous scholars have observed a substantial cultural transformation that crystallized in the postwar period and was characterized by a shared belief that “feelings are sacred and salvation lies in self-esteem,

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that happiness is the ultimate goal and psychological healing the means.”27 While of course there is nothing new about humans wanting to be healthy and happy, the twentieth century did see a decisive turn toward quests for self-realization, self-liberation, and self-discovery as ends in themselves.28 What is natural to us now appears in sharp contrast to older worldviews in which the search for personal autonomy and fulfillment was seen as a symptom of rebellious pride, while suffering silently and dutifully enduring all manner of pains were ennobling, even sanctifying.29 In addition to the broader culture, these shifting trends have also had a demonstrable impact within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As one indicator, the phrase “plan of happiness” appeared in only one general conference address from the 1850s through the 1960s. There were 2 mentions of the phrase in the 1970s, 12 in the 1980s, and then an astonishing 85 in the 1990s, 125 in the 2000s, and 132 in the 2010s.30 This is not to say that Latter-day Saints did not care about happiness prior to the 1980s. Only in recent decades, however, has


30. Data from LDS General Conference Corpus (1851 to April 2023), accessed September 25, 2023, https://www.lds-general-conference.org/. There are thousands of more references simply to the word “happiness,” including hundreds in the nineteenth century, but the overall trajectory of usage increased from the 1980s to 2010s. The phrase “plan of happiness” originates in Alma 42:8, 16.
“happiness” become so closely correlated in official Church teachings with God’s plan for humanity.

As therapeutic language suffused American culture in the late twentieth century, Latter-day Saints came to recognize the therapeutic power of 2 Nephi 4. In a 1986 *Ensign* article, marriage and family therapist Elizabeth Ryser suggested ways that Nephi’s psalm can help readers struggling to overcome discouragement. For instance, she highlights Nephi’s practice of journaling in which he candidly recorded his “thoughts, feelings, and desires.” This simple practice can be healing for people who are depressed or anxious. She also points out how through the course of the psalm, Nephi gave space to his negative thoughts but then “replaced them with positive ones,” seeking a mindset shift that opened him up to transformation through God’s love.31 Similarly, a 1978 article by institute director Steve Gilliland seems like it could have been written today, as he considers how to help those with thoughts like, “I feel so worthless,” “No matter how hard I try to perfect my life, I’m becoming more and more aware of how weak I am,” and “I feel so out of place at church. Everyone there but me seems to have [their] life in order.” Gilliland suggests that those who wrestle with feelings of depression and despair can draw inspiration and guidance from 2 Nephi 4. Even in the midst of his despondency, Nephi’s recollection of God’s prior care and protection bolsters his sense of inherent worth and gives him confidence to confront his discouragement constructively.32 These sentiments have also found their way into official Church curriculum. The Church’s 2020 *Come, Follow Me* resource for studying 2 Nephi 1–5 observes that Nephi “felt surrounded by temptation and was discouraged because of his sins.”33 Recognizing that everyone will encounter different circumstances in life, the manual encourages readers to individually reflect on how Nephi’s response to his familial, emotional, and spiritual challenges could help them better face their own struggles as

they seek to live “after the manner of happiness” (2 Ne. 5:27). The corresponding resource for 2024 uses the language of mental health even more explicitly, pointing out how Nephi “found comfort when he felt overwhelmed and anxious” and acknowledging that Church members may experience “similar feelings.”

As a corollary to the ascendant therapeutic culture, readers today are more attuned to and interested in the interior life of authors. What makes them tick? How do they identify and wrestle with their inner demons? How do their thoughts, feelings, insights, and experiences relate to me? How can their struggle for self-improvement inform my own? It is precisely in this space that I suggest the Psalm of Nephi is so attractive—indeed, successful—to contemporary readers in ways that did not fully register for earlier generations of Book of Mormon readers. In the sectarian conflicts of nineteenth-century America—“priest contending against priest, and convert against convert,” as Joseph Smith put it (JS–H 1:6)—the Book of Mormon appeared primarily as a book of doctrine, a guide to proper Christian living, and evidence of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling and the distinctive claims of the Restoration. Those outcomes are still present in a therapeutic age, but the book is also valuable insofar as it helps me become my best self, fosters an individual connection with God, and promotes personal healing, happiness, and wholeness. In short, the Book of Mormon speaks differently to people depending on the historical and cultural context in which they live.

The ever-stalwart Nephi is inspiring, to be sure—an icon of faithful obedience. However, to modern readers who are accustomed to even their superheroes being flawed, or who personally struggle with feelings of perfectionism, the protagonist of 1 Nephi can seem just a bit too good, someone whose unfailing righteousness is commendable but also unrelatable. But a Nephi who admits that his “soul grieveth because of [his] iniquities,” who is “encompassed about” by “the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset” him, whose “heart groaneth because of [his] sins,” whose “soul linger[s] in the valley of sorrow,” who is “angry because of [his] enemy” (2 Ne. 4:17–19, 26–27)? This is a Nephi who needs therapy (or at least a good, empathetic bishop or Relief Society president). This is a Nephi we can relate to.

A 2010 article in the New Era perfectly captured this dynamic. Shauna Skoubye reports wanting to be everything that Nephi was: “strictly obedient, extremely faithful, and deeply spiritual.”\(^{35}\) She desired nothing more than “to be just like him, or at least beginning to possess even a portion of his excellence.” But then she hit a wall, challenged by a “mini-crisis,” feeling inadequate, hopeless, and overwhelmed. She would never be as good as Nephi. When Skoubye poured out her concerns to her father, “he promptly stood up, walked over to the bookcase, and pulled out one of his copies of the Book of Mormon. Without saying a word, he opened it to 2 Nephi 4.” As she read Nephi’s lament of wretchedness, “chills spread through [her] body like electricity.” But then she wondered, if faithful Nephi called himself “wretched, what did that make [her]?\(^{35}\)” As Skoubye kept reading, she discovered Nephi’s testimony of God’s mercy and redemption. “The dark clouds of [her] mind . . . parted,” she reported, and gave way to “an open blue sky and bright sun.” She felt “illuminated . . . filled [with] hope, inspiration, and joy.” Rather than giving up on her quest for self-improvement, she now had greater confidence. Because Nephi “was humble and willing to admit his faults,” she also could trust in a God who would deliver her in her weakness. In an age of anxiety when vulnerability and authenticity enhance rather than erode moral authority, Nephi suddenly becomes accessible and relatable. Nephi’s psalm makes him a saint for the twenty-first century.

**Family Anxieties**

We can read Nephi’s lament through a somewhat different lens to see another way that his psalm speaks powerfully to readers today. It is important to remember, as Grant Hardy notes, that “Nephi is not recording events as they happen. Instead, he is a middle-aged man recounting incidents from his teens and early twenties, with the full knowledge that life in the Promised Land has soured, that there has been an irreparable breach with his brothers, and that his closest relatives have spent years trying to kill each other.”\(^{36}\) In addition to his primary prophetic purpose of testifying of God’s goodness and work, the narrator Nephi is implicitly wrestling with the question, “What went wrong?” It is noteworthy that Nephi, writing his account decades later, inserts his psalm immediately before narrating the final breakup of his family. In anguish of soul, he cries out, “O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth

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36. Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon, 13.
because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities. I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me” (2 Ne. 4:17–18).

From the sound of it, Nephi is spiraling. But while poignant, this passage is a bit vague. Why exactly does the obedient Nephi call himself a “wretched man”? What “iniquities,” “temptations,” and “sins” is he talking about? After all, to this point in Nephi’s narrative, he has consistently contrasted his own faithfulness with his brothers’ inconstancy. We get greater insight later in the psalm when Nephi shifts from generalities toward the particular and reveals the fundamental nature of his internal struggle: “Why am I angry because of mine enemy?” (2 Ne. 4:27).37

At this moment in the narrative, Nephi’s brothers and their families are the only enemies he has; the conflict with Laban is far in the rear-view mirror.38 Accordingly, the psalm can be read as an expression of regret and longing for family harmony that might have been. At this juncture, Nephi does not target his brothers’ choices—he has already amply detailed their murmuring and violence. Significantly, Nephi’s tone is one of lament, not imprecation, the type of psalm that calls for divine curses or calamities to befall one’s enemies.39 Instead of raining down retribution on his brothers, we hear Nephi expressing remorse for his own role in the strife. Maturity has brought greater self-awareness. The seasoned prophet (and memoirist) can now acknowledge that his own anger has also contributed to the family rift. Nephi abruptly stops his narration on the very cusp of the family’s breakup, which he knows in retrospect was decisive, and gives us his soul-anguished psalm. It is as if he at last recognizes—or at least finally is willing to admit—that no matter how bad his brothers have been over the years, he also has some culpability in the tortured family dynamic. Perhaps this grief at missed opportunities for reconciliation is at least partly what causes Nephi to cry out: “O wretched man that I am!” (2 Ne. 4:17).

37. This section draws on and is adapted from Patrick Q. Mason and J. David Pulsipher, Proclaim Peace: The Restoration’s Answer to an Age of Conflict (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), 54, 59–60.

38. For a contrasting interpretation arguing that Nephi may still have been thinking about Laban when he wrote his psalm, see Eugene England, “Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 22, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 43.

39. Psalms 69 and 109 are considered the major imprecatory psalms, though there are imprecatory elements in many others.
By now, however, the family dynamic has been well established. Now that the family patriarch and matriarch are dead and the leadership of the family is truly at stake, Laman and Lemuel cannot get past their years of well-nurtured indignities. They dig in; they are unpersuadable. They resort (again) to violence. Where he previously rehearsed their various attacks at some length, here a weary Nephi skims on details, sighing, “It sufficeth me to say, that they did seek to take away my life” (2 Ne. 5:4). Even as Nephi acknowledges his own anger (2 Ne. 4:27), his older brothers and their people are too far down the path of nursing theirs. Festering, unreconciled grievance becomes the wedge that splits the family apart. Deep animosity sets in, then calcifies. Bitterness and malice become the defining features in the ensuing years, then centuries, of the conflict between erstwhile kin who now call themselves “Nephites” and “Lamanites” rather than “family.”

**An Age of Division**

Ours is not only an age of anxiety but also an age of division, a time when all kinds of tensions are threatening to unravel the fabric of our nations, communities, and families. Anger at other human beings has been insidiously cultivated and commodified by leaders, media, and industries who feed what some have called the “Outrage Industrial Complex.”

Social media algorithms goad us into identifying deeper and deeper with our own tribes while never being exposed to other people and ways of thinking except to identify them as sources of grievance against us, dangerous threats that must be contained or even eliminated. In a perverse way, we need our enemies because they give us identity, meaning, and purpose. We are we because they are they. We can itemize every insult and injury they have committed against us. Our righteousness exists in inverse proportion to their evil. They imperil our way of life,

even our very existence, and thus we are justified in responding by any means necessary.\textsuperscript{41}

Nephi captures the feeling of what it feels like to be surrounded by enemies. To be angry at those enemies. To want God or some other force to confound those enemies, to cause them to quake, to have their ways hedged up, and ultimately to remove them as stumbling blocks impeding our way. As narrated in 2 Nephi 5, Nephi’s proximate wish—to have the way cleared before him so that he could “escape [from his] enemies” (2 Ne. 4:33)—was granted. But he knows, writing decades later, that the Lamanites are still there. God may have intervened to protect Nephi and his people, but he did not eliminate Laman’s people. If anything, the conflict between the two groups has gotten worse over the years, not better. Nephi has been redeemed from personal sin and despair. He and his kin have been protected and preserved—for now. But there has been no broader reconciliation. The family is broken.

As he closes his record at the end of his conflict-laden life, Nephi writes powerfully about the universality of God’s love, which he clearly longs to model. “I have charity for my people,” he writes. “I have charity for the Jew. . . . I also have charity for the Gentiles” (2 Ne. 33:7–9).\textsuperscript{42} Nephi’s heart is expansive—but notice who is missing from this list. Nephi is curiously silent on the question of whether his love extends so far as to include his estranged family, the Lamanites. Perhaps the wounds of the family’s violent rupture are still too raw. Perhaps there are personal losses that he cannot forget and struggles to forgive. Or perhaps the anguish of prophetically knowing his descendants will eventually be destroyed by the Lamanites is too exquisite. Whatever the reason, Nephi never utters the words, “I also have charity for the Lamanite.” That level of enemy-love would remain a project left to later generations.

The command to love our enemies—those who curse us, hate us, spitefully use us, and persecute us—is perhaps of the hardest of Jesus’s hard sayings (see Matt. 5:44; 3 Ne. 12:44). Who can blame Nephi for his anger, after he suffered so many attempts on his life at the hands of his older brothers? Perhaps there is a broader lesson that when he

\textsuperscript{41} My thinking here has been shaped by an extensive literature on identity, belonging, and violence. For two examples, see Michael Ignatieff, “The Narcissism of Minor Difference,” in The Warrior’s Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997), 34–71; and Amin Maalouf, In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong (New York: Penguin, 2003).

\textsuperscript{42} This paragraph is adapted from Mason and Pulsipher, Proclaim Peace, 61–62.
fled to the wilderness to gain some distance from his serially abusive brothers, he did so not only for his own safety and the protection of those he loved, but also at the Lord’s behest (2 Ne. 5:5). Some divisions are regrettable and avoidable, while others become necessary for survival and well-being. Surely there were moments over the years when Nephi could have been more patient, more humble, more forgiving, more Christlike; that’s simply what it means to be human. Yet the voice we hear in the psalm is not that of a failed disciple, but rather that of a soul that has been tested, tried, and refined. Sometimes it is the people who have drawn closest to the Lord who have the liveliest sense of their own “wretchedness.” And it is often the individuals who most deeply desire love, harmony, and reconciliation who also most acutely feel their own shortcomings in a relationship, even if those shortcomings pale in comparison to all they have given and the repeated hurts they have received in return. Nephi feels godly sorrow for family divisions he could not heal. He cannot change the past, and his power over the present situation is highly constrained. He has reached the limits of what he can do on his own. For that he feels genuine anguish and turns to the only option he has left: “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever” (2 Ne. 4:34).

**Conclusion**

Like other divinely inspired passages of scripture, Nephi’s psalm has multiple layers of meaning that can resonate differently with different readers functioning in different contexts. It testifies of a loving and merciful God. It serves as a healing balm in our age of anxiety, when we are so aware of and invested in the ways that mental and emotional health relate to spiritual health. It is also a testament to how even the best among us are sometimes unable to bridge the divides that separate us from those we love. The psalm occurs at the point of the Book of Mormon narrative when the failure to effectively transform small-scale, interpersonal conflicts sets the stage for what will later develop into massive wars and eventually the destruction of an entire civilization. Nephi’s soul-searching questions—“Why should I yield to sin . . . ? Yea, why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace . . . ? Why am I angry because of mine enemy?” (2 Ne. 4:27)—can inspire our own introspective stock-taking. Why are we angry because of our enemies? Do we want to participate in a world of perpetual outrage? Where is the off-ramp from the superhighway of unreconciled grievance?
The Book of Mormon offers a “heart wrenching history,” as Elder Ahmad Corbitt noted, in part “so we don’t repeat it.” In times of exigency, our prayers may simply be that God provides a way of escape. But to whatever degree we can, followers of Jesus are called to be transformative agents in our spheres of influence, to choose the way of peace and peacemaking especially when divisiveness and contention are the norm. The difference between Nephi and twenty-first-century readers is not the basic experience or raw emotion; we all have enemies who make us angry. The difference is that Nephi is frozen in time on the printed page. Empowered by his words, we can write our own futures, individually and collectively. While mindful of the safety of ourselves and those we love, we can actively seek the kind of healing and reconciliation that Nephi so desperately craved but never fully realized. Finely attuned to the anxieties and divisions of our time, the Psalm of Nephi can help us fulfill the Book of Mormon’s invitation to “be more wise” than even our prophetic predecessors (Morm. 9:31).

Nephi ends his psalm with stirring expressions of faith in God’s redemptive power. He longs for God to “encircle [him] around in the robe of [God’s] righteousness.” He prays that God will “clear up [his] way before [him].” He testifies that God is “the rock of [his] righteousness” to whom his “voice shall forever ascend.” He praises the God who will “redeem [his] soul” and declares that he “will trust in [God] forever” (2 Ne. 4:30–35). This is the desire for redemption, deliverance, and healing that so many readers resonate with. This is the balm for those struggling with anxiety, despair, feelings of worthlessness, and hopelessness in the face of seemingly irreconcilable conflicts. Nephi’s God—our God—will deliver, save, protect, and heal. This is why the Psalm of Nephi has become a text suited perfectly for our age. It speaks to individual feelings of inadequacy, anxiety about one’s standing before God and about relationships with others, and the despondency that so often accompanies broken relationships and divided families. But the psalm does not wallow in the valley of despair. It testifies of the liberation, strength, and resilience that people can find in their relationships with


Psalm of Nephi in an Age of Anxiety

a God who makes their paths straight and is the rock of their salvation. “Nevertheless,” Nephi testifies, “I know in whom I have trusted” (2 Ne. 4:19). The particulars of our age of anxiety and division are different than what Nephi experienced. But his “nevertheless” is timeless, as is the one in whom he invites us to trust.

Patrick Q. Mason is a professor of religious studies and history at Utah State University, where he holds the Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture. He is the author or editor of several books for academic and Latter-day Saint audiences, including most recently Restoration: God’s Call to the 21st-Century World and, with David Pulsipher, Proclaim Peace: The Restoration’s Answer to an Age of Conflict.

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One Day’s Return, Long Past Childhood

*It is time . . . to locate ourselves
by the real things we live by.*
—William Stafford

You walk out beyond pasture
to see where it will take you. Dawn
blossoms from the hilltops. No breeze.
You come to still drowsing fields, a rock slope
with buttercups congregating.

Something in you scours the earth
for what memory knows you’ve wanted.
Bright flags of paintbrush, always erect.
A Meadowlark calling a brief pliant prayer.

Foothills now, and a stream
with its easy moving on. . . .
Scent of sage like remembrance.
Regrets come back with a sudden
moving shadow: overhead a hawk
glides and glides
then falls—
the clean precision of a blade.

Should you feel guilt for days
of loving something easy? You try
to pay attention—*all this normal beauty!*

In the press of high altitude sun,
you will turn back to the farmhouse
and cooling spring water . . .
bone ache almost welcome.

Soon dusk will rise up lavender
from all the hollow places—benediction
for one day’s passing.

__________
—Dixie L. Partridge

This poem was a finalist in the 2023 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
Thoughts, in Threes

Between husband and wife, a vow. Between past and present, the now.

Between crime and punishment, a jury. Between here and there, a journey.

Between request and action, permission. Between life and record, omission.

Between hatred and desire, yearning. Between trial and error, learning.

Between front cover and back, the pages. Between origin and future, the ages.

Between yes and no, maybe. Between light and dark, shady.

Between question and answer, deliberation. Between known and unknown, speculation.

Between drum and brass, a gong. Between words and music, a song.

Between hurting and healing, a balm. Between poem and prose, a psalm.

Between silence and scream, a voice. Between right and wrong, a choice.

Between young and old, is youth. Between extremes, is truth.

—Isaac James Richards

This poem was a finalist in the 2023 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
Figure 1. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), Portrait of Alice Merrill Horne, undated, oil on canvas, 39 × 27 inches. Courtesy Mary Alice Clark and the Springville Museum of Art.
I Have Dreamed with Her

The Fruitful Relationship between Minerva Teichert and Alice Merrill Horne

Laura Paulsen Howe

Minerva Teichert was asked to give the eulogy at the funeral of her agent, mentor, and friend, Alice Merrill Horne, in 1948. “I think one of the greatest things [Horne] did,” Teichert mused in her speech, “was to insist that I get a washing machine. I had lived too long in Fort Hall Bottoms. I looked open-eyed, almost horror stricken, as I said—‘You don’t mean an electric washer, do you?’ ‘Of course I do,’ she answered, ‘why not? No one deserves one more than you. I’ll sell some thing and help you out. You’d have your washing done in an hour instead of a whole day and you wouldn’t be worn out for the rest of the week either.’” Then Teichert told the assembled audience, “Wonder of wonders, it worked! And so I painted.”

The result of Teichert’s painting was a body of more than two hundred works of art, held in museums and private collections across the American West and in buildings belonging to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—the religion to which Teichert belonged. In 2010, there was a fire in the Provo Tabernacle. Among the catastrophic losses that occurred that day, a Minerva Teichert painting, Restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood, burned with the building. In response to that painful loss, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints examined how it could better care for the legacy of Teichert, an effort that resulted

1. Minerva Teichert, “Tribute to Alice Merrill Horne,” MSS 2243, box 5, folder 6, Laurie Teichert Eastwood Collection on Minerva Kohlhepp and Herman A. Teichert, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. All quotations were transcribed exactly as written, including spelling, punctuation, word repetition, grammatical mistakes, and other errors.

BYU Studies 62, no. 3 (2023)
in evaluating original art in Church-owned buildings, conserving other
works by Teichert in the Church’s stewardship, and opening an exhibi-
tion at the Church History Museum. I began working as the art curator
at the museum in 2019 and was delighted that my first assignment was a
Teichert exhibition. I worked on the exhibition for four years. With This
Covenant in My Heart: The Art and Faith of Minerva Teichert opened on
July 6, 2023. It is anticipated the show will run through August 2024.

Any exhibition begins with a research phase. In several sources,
I found repeated one quotation by scholar Marian Ashby Johnson. In
1988, Johnson published “Minerva’s Calling,” an article in the spring
issue of Dialogue. She began: “[Teichert] created . . . in a virtual vacuum,
working on an isolated ranch in Cokeville, Wyoming, for nearly forty-
five years with no associates who understood her effort to translate
Mormon values into art, no professional art community to reinforce her
efforts or pose as a critical foil for her work, and no warmly appreciative
audience of admiring patrons.”2 Certainly, living on a cattle ranch dis-
tant from art centers was a challenge. But between 1929 and 1947, when
Teichert produced many of her religious works, she had associates, an
art community, a critical foil, and an appreciative audience either in the
person of or because of Alice Merrill Horne (fig. 1).

Horne was the biggest player in the Utah art world for the first half
of the twentieth century and served on the Relief Society general board.
Horne’s connections gave Teichert an art community and made The
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Teichert’s primary patron for
two decades. Horne had trained as an artist and offered Teichert critical
feedback of her work. She was also a mother and was in a unique posi-
tion to lend support to Teichert as a woman balancing multiple roles in
life. Beyond that, she was a friend. The Church History Museum exhibi-
tion With This Covenant in My Heart: The Art and Faith of Minerva Tei-
chert spends some time exploring the relationship between these women.
Gratefully, this space in BYU Studies affords me room to tell more.

When Horne was in her fifties, she published an account in the
Relief Society Magazine about an important experience from her child-
hood. She said that Eliza R. Snow gave her a blessing in the presence
of Zina D. H. Young, Bathsheba Smith, and Emmeline B. Wells. Snow
blessed Horne “to bring forward a work which no one else could do and

which would bring great joy in its accomplishment.” Horne felt she was personally called to what she called the “gospel of beauty.” She explained, “Life in the influence of art trains the soul to respond to the God-like in man and nature, to feel the beautiful and to cherish and follow higher ideals. Soul greatness is the ultimate end and aim of all effort.”

As a child in the 1870s, Alice Merrill Horne lived with her grandmother Bathsheba Smith. Smith (later the fourth Relief Society General President) was an early Latter-day Saint artist who had taken art lessons from William Major, a significant early Latter-day Saint artist in Nauvoo, Illinois. Smith had carried her paintbrushes and paints across the plains and was eager to share these resources with her young granddaughter. Bathsheba was married to George A. Smith, counselor to Brigham Young in the Church’s First Presidency and the Church Historian and Recorder. In his travels, President Smith had gathered visual resources from Europe, and this library of art information uniquely available to Horne in Salt Lake was influential. As she grew, Horne took lessons from nineteenth-century Utah art greats: George Ottinger, James Harwood, Mary Teasdel, and John Hafen. Although Horne decided her

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5. "Autobiography of Bathsheba W. Smith, 1874–1875," 32–33, in Bathsheba W. Smith Collection, 1842–1948, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. This version of Smith’s autobiography is written in Alice Merrill Horne’s hand. At least three different versions of Smith’s autobiography exist (none in Bathsheba’s hand), evidencing that Horne edited and made additions to Smith’s account. This version (the only version to include this paragraph) reads, “At Nauvoo I was privileged to study drawing and painting from an artist, Mr. Majors, who allowed us to draw copies of Reynolds and Gainsborough. I had to leave my two children with a relative while at the art class. I was most fond of portrait. When I came home from the art class one day my baby cried and I was shocked to find that my thoughts were more occupied in how I should draw her mouth than the quieting of my child. I have still my drawing book that I used in Nauvoo as well as portraits painted there.” The sketchbook and at least some of the portraits referenced are in the Church History Museum collection.

6. Alice Merrill Horne, “Alice Merrill Horne Family History Record, 1912–1935,” 166, Smith Collection. Horne wrote, “The most wonderful of all were Grandmas box of watercolors and her book of drawings—heads—copies of Gainsborough and others. The box of water colors brought from England by an old friend, and presented to Grandma just before the pioneers left for Utah. They were used in the camps of the Saints and had its place in their wagon crossing the plains. Sundays were all so long but many a tedious hour grew charmed when the watercolors were brought out—for Grandma would not let me play but I could paint or draw on Sunday.”
contributions would be as an art advocate, her training made her more than an agent; she gave detailed critiques to the artists she championed.7

In addition to learning art under the tutelage of her grandmother, Horne learned how to lead. Bathsheba’s dearest friends included Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. H. Young, and Emmeline B. Wells. While serving as the Relief Society General President, Snow encouraged Horne to organize a “Juvenile Association” with herself as president where the girls in the neighborhood met weekly to bear testimony, sing hymns, pray, quilt, and gather donations for the poor and the Salt Lake Temple construction.8

In 1898, Horne determined that Utah needed a state initiative to advance the arts, and she was elected to the Utah State Legislature (the third woman elected) on a platform of founding a state arts agency.9 Her art bill passed the Senate unanimously and was also passed by the House. This measure created the Utah Arts Institute, established an annual art exhibition, and created a plan to purchase art annually for a state arts collection.

By the time Minerva Teichert sought an association with Alice Merrill Horne, Horne (twenty years her senior) had been influential in the Utah art world for nearly thirty years and had earned the title “Mother Horne” from Utah artists.10 Thirty-nine-year-old Teichert and

7. A few still lifes painted by Horne exist, owned by her descendants.
8. Horne, “Alice Merrill Horne Family History Record,” 177. Horne wrote, “We organized a little society we called the Juvenile Association which we held weekly at the Prayer Room in the Historian Office. I was president, Edna Wells, Fannie Young, Katie Young, and Lulu Clawson were the counsellors and Daisy Woods was secretary. We bore our testimony sang Hymns, had prayers, made blocks for quilts, gathered up donations for the poor and donated a quilt to the building of the Salt Lake Temple. . . . Every Saturday that Grandma [Bathsheba W. Smith] went to the Retrenchment Asso. in the 14th Ward I accompanied her and sat by her on the stand and stood up and read the minutes of our Juvenile Association which seemed to please the sisters. Eliza R. Snow was so pleased with our organization that she talked much with me about it and visited us and talked of organizing something like it for the children, which she did after and which is now called the Primary Association.”
9. Horne, “Alice Merrill Horne Family History Record,” 272. Horne wrote, “In 1898 the Democratic party invited me to run on their Legislative ticket. . . . The largest vote on the floor of the convention gave me the nomination and at the polls I was elected with a thousand votes to spare. I accepted this solely in the interest of art. I wanted to write a law on our statute books in the interest of art for the masses. Something to support what the first Utah Pioneers had done, had idealized and dreamed of.”
her husband, Herman A. Teichert, had purchased a ranch in Cokeville, Wyoming, in 1927. Teichert longed for a way to incorporate painting into her ranch life; she began by affixing a canvas to her ranch home wall and maintained correspondence with Robert Henri, her art instructor from the Art Students’ League in New York. Despite these efforts, at Henri’s death in 1929, she had not sold many paintings in nearly a decade. In 1929 the stock market crashed, and the Teicherts, having assumed a mortgage in better times, were unable to make payments on the ranch. The family began to operate a dairy to increase their income. By 1931, Teichert sought a way to make her painting profitable. She wrote to Alice Merrill Horne, requesting an exhibition. Horne responded, asking Teichert to bring her a sample of her work.

Teichert had donated a painting to the Church as tithing in 1929 that hung in her local church building (fig. 2). She retrieved the painting from the Cokeville meetinghouse, rolled it up, and showed it to Horne, who was hanging an exhibition at the Newhouse Hotel in Salt Lake City. “Mrs. Horne,” Horne remembered Minerva saying, “please look at my work.” Horne described the painting. “It unrolled to reveal a wonderful handcart picture; two men, red heads, drew the cart! At the back of the cart, a lady walked supporting a baby as it sat up. A little girl went along, holding with one hand the lady’s dress. I was amazed!” Horne promised to adjust her busy exhibition calendar and host a show for Teichert in two weeks. She explained, “Mrs. Teichert said she must hurry back to look after the milking—so was gone.” Horne held that first exhibition for Teichert in July 1931. The Salt Lake Tribune, under the headline “Wyoming Painter Introduced,” described the show. “With the exhibition now hung at the Newhouse gallery, an artist unfamiliar to its patrons makes [her] initial appearance—a portraitist and mural painter of Cokeville, Wyo., who is Minerva Kohlhepp Teichert.”

14. Orson Bennion to the Presiding Bishopric, December 30, 1929, CR 4 18, box 60, folder 6, Presiding Bishopric Stake Correspondence, 1903–1946, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
15. Horne, “Alice Merrill Description on Teichert’s Handcart Mural.”
In September 1931, Horne wrote Teichert a letter to hash out their business arrangement. “Dear Minerva,” she wrote, “you must let me put the prices on your pictures. I do not add commission to your price, you must make your price include my commission so that if you sell or I sell they must be the same.” She then offered, “Nothing does so much good as to sell a picture. Nothing damages so much as to give a picture away, it is unprofessional.”

By February 1932, Teichert confessed the desperate situation of the Teichert ranch. “I can not tell you how sorry I am to receive your letter,” Horne responded. “Nothing stirs me so much as your danger of losing your old home.” Horne then made a plan to use her excellent connections with Church leaders: “Do this for me, send the man’s name (what Smith?) who has your mortgage and I will get some influential people to see him and see if something can be done til I can make some sales.” Those influential people included David O. McKay, Apostle and General Superintendent of the Deseret Sunday School Union; Louise Yates Robinson, General President of the Relief Society; Ruth May Fox, General President of the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association; George Albert Smith, Apostle and General Superintendent of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association; and May Anderson, General President of the Primary Association. Robinson proposed that each organization pay one hundred dollars to purchase *Handcart Pioneers*. Since she was selling a painting to the Church that it already owned as a tithing donation, Horne made a stop to see Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon. Horne explained that Teichert planned to make another painting to substitute as her tithes and offerings and asked Cannon to step in if any of the organizations did not pay one hundred dollars. Horne followed up on the amount owed in a letter to Teichert, asking, “Please let me know right away so that I can have the Bishop (Cannon) assist us. He is converted to art.”

Figure 2. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *Handcart Pioneers*, 1930, oil on canvas, 72½ × 52½ inches. Courtesy Museum of Church History and Art.
In the end, each organization paid one hundred dollars, and the Pre-
siding Bishopric accepted a substitute painting as Teichert’s tithing.\textsuperscript{21} The debt on the ranch was paid. This sale cemented a relationship that would last nearly two decades. Horne quickly began using her influence to get Teichert published in Church magazines. Horne met with Harrison R. Merrill, editor for the \textit{Improvement Era}, to arrange use of Teichert’s \textit{Not Alone} as the frontispiece for the February 1933 issue. “I told [Merrill] you were the most important Western artist,” Horne wrote in a letter to Teichert. “Some have taken exceptions to my championing you but I have just kept on and intend to just keep doing it.”\textsuperscript{22} Teichert paintings would appear in the \textit{Instructor}, the official magazine of the Deseret Sunday School Union in July 1936, July 1939, August 1941, and December 1941, and in the \textit{Relief Society Magazine} in December 1944 (fig. 3).

Soon, Horne arranged for a number of large commissions. “I have the best news for you,” Horne wrote Teichert in 1935. Teichert would paint two very large murals for the President’s Suite in the Hotel Utah (figs. 4 and 5).\textsuperscript{23} The paintings needed to measure eight feet by twelve feet and were to illustrate handcart and covered wagon pioneers. Horne suggested Teichert paint them onsite, adding wryly, “I wonder if they can feed the cows and chickens and water the stock and horses without you. Ha! Ha!”\textsuperscript{24} Whether Teichert’s family could do without her was not determined. Teichert’s daughter Laurie recalled her mother painting these enormous paintings in her living room studio. Teichert folded each canvas in half, tacked the canvas to her living room wall and painted one half at a time. When she finished both halves, Teichert took the canvases outside and attached them to the end of her house so she could see the entire painting at once.\textsuperscript{25}

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\textsuperscript{21} Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, October 15, 1932, box 4, folder 10, Eastwood Collection; Minerva Teichert to Edward C. Rich, December 17, 1932, CR 4 18, box 59, folder 10, Presiding Bishopric Stake Correspondence.
\textsuperscript{22} Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, undated, box 4, folder 11, Eastwood Collection.
\textsuperscript{23} In 1935, Heber J. Grant (President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) was president of the Utah Hotel Company. Under his direction, Guy R. Toombes was hired as the general manager that year. He immediately spent $150,000 on improvements to the Hotel Utah. Teichert’s commission came as part of these renovations. Leonard J. Arrington and Heidi S. Swinton, \textit{The Hotel: Salt Lake’s Classy Lady} (Salt Lake City: Westin Hotel Utah, 1986), 34–35, 97.
\textsuperscript{24} Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, July 10, 1935, box 4, folder 10, Eastwood Collection.
\textsuperscript{25} Eastwood, \textit{Letters of Minerva Teichert}, 27 n. 12.
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**Figure 3.** Cover of the *Instructor*, August 1941, showing Minerva Teichert's *Christ the Shepherd and His Sheep*. Courtesy Church History Library.
Figure 5. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *Covered Wagon Pioneers*, 1935, oil on canvas, 101 × 85 inches. Courtesy Church History Museum.
One of Horne’s most successful endeavors was to place original art in public schools, including several by Teichert. With “soul-greatness” the purpose of art, Horne sought to have art accessible to all Utah children. Sometimes children contributed their own money to the project. Often, donor Ella Quayle Van Cott contributed money toward Horne’s goal. This project is the basis for the art collections in many Utah school districts today, although some districts have auctioned off their collections. While several Teichert paintings were placed in public schools through this program, a large collection of Teichert murals, including a work titled Trappers, was purchased by Van Cott and placed in South High School in Salt Lake City. Horne would say of this collection, “Perhaps no other high school in the country has a finer original collection of western life.”

Alice Merrill Horne was still looking for places for Minerva Teichert’s art when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints renovated the Manti Temple in the 1940s. The Manti Temple, dedicated in 1888, had murals painted directly onto plaster in some of its interior rooms. C. C. A. Christensen painted the room designated as the Creation Room, and it is believed Danquart Weggeland painted two other rooms: the Garden Room and World Room. But by the 1940s, the plaster was failing in the Garden and World Rooms. The rooms were replastered in 1946 and canvas was adhered to receive new murals.

Although it is not certain how Teichert’s name was submitted for consideration for the Manti project, it seems reasonable, given Alice Merrill Horne’s decade-and-a-half of championing Teichert with Church leaders, that Horne was involved. Certainly, Horne staged a conveniently timed exhibition at the Z.C.M.I. Tiffin Room in Salt Lake City while Church leaders were mulling over approvals. Teichert wrote her daughter

27. “Generous Donor Lends Impetus to Art Interest in Utah,” Salt Lake Tribune, July 3, 1938, 8E.
29. William Folsom to John Taylor, April 6, 1886, First Presidency (John Taylor) Correspondence, 1877–1887, Church History Library, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e620094a-1e4-857-b-dc5df44f/0/0. William Folsom, the architect and contractor who designed and oversaw the completion of the Manti Temple, wrote to John Taylor: “also have spoken to Daniel Wiggland about painting Garden & Telestial. Please let me know if this meets your mind.”
on March 14, 1947, “Yesterday we . . . had meeting on Manti murals. . . . Church Authorities will visit my exhibition en masse about tomorrow.”

For the Manti Temple, Teichert submitted a proposal for a peopled narrative outlining the gathering of Israel and the Gentiles to Zion (fig. 6). Once the plan was approved, Teichert worked quickly, finishing the bulk of the murals in just twenty-three days. After dating a letter to her daughter May 8, Teichert wrote with a mix of exhaustion and pride: “Laurie dear, I’m guessing at the date. The authorities told me to do this thing speedily and believe me as it nears conclusion it has been the speediest giant any American painter ever concocted.” Teichert would continue to be called back to the project several times to lay the paint down thicker, and Horne was her companion on at least one occasion.

Horne came down to observe the murals after Teichert’s twenty-three-day push. On June 15, after Teichert had finished the bulk of the work, Horne exclaimed, “You don’t know how fresh I feel with that work by your side. There is so much to learn when I am with you. I called Mr. [Edward O.] Anderson and told him about what you had accomplished in the short week. He is delighted, also that I went along. He thinks it will help them to appreciate and value what you have accomplished.” Horne returned to Manti in August and wrote to Teichert: “My brother had to go to Manti so I went along and the gardiner let me in to look at the room you paint on. It would be even lovelier if you could paint or someone else could paint the ceiling blue. It would stop its feeling like a box. . . . But much as I love all of it the thing most artistic, great is the unfortunate things down in the shadow contrasting with the great and well dressed—the perfumed set.”

Besides selling her works and helping her earn commissions, Alice Merrill Horne gave Teichert access to a connected art community. Horne had shown the works of at least seventy artists in her many exhibitions. Horne’s stationery on which she addressed letters to Teichert

33. Minerva Teichert to Laurie Teichert Eastwood, June 8, 1947, box 11, folder 4, Eastwood Collection.
35. Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, August 1, 1947, box 4, folder 11, Eastwood Collection.
Figure 6. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), Manti Temple North Wall World Room Mural Study Sketch, 1947, watercolor and graphite on paper, 14 1/2 × 29 1/2 inches. Courtesy Church History Museum.
Figure 7. Letter from Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, July 10, 1945. Courtesy L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
in 1935 advertised an organization Horne headed called the “Utah Artists’ Exhibitions” (fig. 7). The motto inscribed at the top of the letterhead proclaimed, “Foster the Climbing Artists that Presently They Will Be the Old Masters.” On the left were listed “Artist Advisors.” In addition to Teichert, the stationary lists esteemed Utah artists including Mahonri Young, Florence Ware, Waldo Midgley, Mary Teasdel, J. T. Harwood, Myra Sawyer, B. F. Larsen, Irene Fletcher, Caroline Van Evera, Bessie Alice Bancroft, Henri Moser, and J. M. Stanfield. Horne’s wider influence is apparent as some of the advisory patrons included were President and Mrs. Heber J. Grant, and President and Mrs. Anthony W. Ivins, two members of the First Presidency of the Church and their wives.37

Horne solicited feedback from the larger art community for Teichert’s works. She showed a work Horne called Indian Blankets to Florence Ware and J. T. Harwood, who praised the painting. Horne wrote to Teichert, “Another thing Harwood wondered if you had put on the color thick enough to cover the canvas so that after a while it could be varnished. He wondered if the varnish would go through the canvas. I think you told me that you put schalack on before starting to paint. We are in such a dirty state that these will need washing so have to be varnished when well dried.”38 In 1933, Horne wrote, “I am glad you know so much, dear Minerva, you fill me with satisfaction. The artists delight in your work.”39

Horne also gave specific feedback on Teichert’s paintings. She praised changes Teichert had made in the 1935 painting, Miracle of the Gulls (fig. 8). “The pink lady is much better,” Horne said assuredly. “I think, I feel the body in the dress now and before it did not give me the impression of a solid figure. Especially around the waist line I feel an improved modeling. The head is much lovelier with the curl on her shoulder. Yes it is pink but there is something that reminds me of those changeable silks my grandmother had that was brought from England. The sleeves are good and she is kneeling more solidly—before I hardly knew whether her knees were touching the grain field. You have perhaps put a few dark notes there or what you did on other parts have influenced that.” After discussing another painting, Horne returned to Miracle of the Gulls: “It

37. Anthony W. Ivins passed away in 1934. It seems Horne had not yet updated her letterhead.
38. Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, April 9, 1935, box 4, folder 10, Eastwood Collection.
was worth while to send [the painting] back if only for the curl on her
shoulder.”

In response to Handcart Pioneers, painted for the Hotel Utah, Horne wrote Teichert, “I have been thinking all night that your handcart people are up in the mountains and going up” (fig. 4). “There is little sky,” Horne continued. “That is what gives so much dignity to your canvas. There is a lofty feeling that with lots of sky they will be lost.” Horne counseled Teichert to be inspired by hymns: “Read the Morning Breaks the shadows flee Lo Zion’s standard is unfurled only morning hasn’t broken yet. I love the stones and flowers used as you do—nothing to distract from that Zion’s band.”

Horne also served as a sounding board for topics to paint. As early as 1935, Teichert desired to paint scenes from the Book of Mormon. Horne, perhaps desiring Teichert to paint more marketable scenes, encouraged her: “After you have done six more of trappers and Indians of Utah and Western early life will be time to think of Book of Mormon—that must come but don’t break in until you have reached a certain facility you are surely acquiring, that would mean defeat.” Horne assured Teichert that she was the right advisor. “Keep this to yourself,” she counseled. “Talking much of these precious ambitions to those not close to you, you lose something of purpose a weakening of ambition comes with talk, I always think. However, to me it will help and stimulate you to achievement, I believe.”

In addition to counseling Teichert in artistic matters, Horne gave her advice on how to balance home and public life. Horne was a mother and had six children (one of whom passed away shortly after birth). When her oldest child, Mary, was a toddler, Horne’s husband, George, was called on a mission to the southern states. While he was away, Horne taught school and advanced her education with her daughter in tow. Horne wrote the experience from Mary’s perspective: “In the afternoons, on her Mother returning from the Washington school, Mary would often accompany her ma to the Art class or ‘Hart’ class as Mary would call it.

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40. Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, February 14, 1936, box 4, folder 10, Eastwood Collection.
41. Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, undated, box 4, folder 11, Eastwood Collection. The hymn referenced by Horne is “The Morning Breaks,” 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. 1.
42. Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, May 16, 1935, box 4, folder 10, Eastwood Collection.
Minerva Teichert and Alice Merrill Horne

She was quite the idol of the class, and all the students would take much interest in the young art student.”43 Later, as Horne’s children grew and she was busy hanging exhibitions, her son remembered driving a car full of paintings from one location to another. Indeed, Horne understood the difficulties of balancing a public life and a home life. It was with experience that Horne told Teichert, “Well, your greatest masterpieces are your children. You’ll never paint any thing to equal them—but you could put the little darlings to sleep earlier. It would be better for them and better for you, then paint for an hour while they sleep.”44

Horne also served as Teichert’s friend. “My dear Minerva,” Horne began one letter. “Mr. Wade told me the morning you were very sick with the Flu. I cannot write how sorry I am and do hope that you will be better when this reaches you. If there is anything I can do do not hesitate to let me know. We have been together thru so many of our troubles and my heart aches for you now. My prayers and thots will be all for you until I hear that you better again. Always your sincere friend, Alice.”45 Because of that friendship, Teichert was supported as Horne challenged her: “I am constrained to still remember you and hope and pray that your life may be spared to do the things no one but you are prepared to do.”46 Teichert’s daughter-in-law Shirley Teichert, who often helped Teichert paint the background of her paintings, commented on their determined friendship: “If you ever wanted to see anything cute, you should have seen those two little whiteheaded ladies just hustling and bustling around here talking about paintings.”47

In 1935, as Teichert sought a way for her son to attend Brigham Young University, Horne arranged with Franklin S. Harris, president of the university, to exchange Teichert’s paintings for tuition. “I am enclosing a copy of the letter I have just written to Mrs. Horne,” Harris wrote to Teichert. “If this arrangement is agreeable to all concerned we shall be glad to send you credit for the $800, and then shall charge to this account the $86.50 for this year’s tuition.” For the next sixteen years, nineteen young

44. Minerva Teichert, “Tribute to Alice Merrill Horne,” Eastwood Collection.
45. Alice Merrill Horne to Minerva Teichert, undated, box 4, folder 11, Eastwood Collection.
people, including several neighbors from Cokeville, would attend BYU due to Teichert’s paintings and Horne’s arrangement. 48

Alice Merrill Horne passed away in 1948. With her death, Teichert and the rest of the Utah artists lost their best contact with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Church organizations largely stopped spending money on art in the 1950s, and Teichert, who was feeling ready to paint Book of Mormon scenes, was unable to convince Church leaders it was worth the investment. Her disappointment in these later decades underscores the importance of Horne and her significance to Church patronage.

Teichert painted a large mural of indigenous women riding in procession as a tribute to Horne and hoped to have an exhibition in her honor (fig. 9). 49 Teichert was asked to give a eulogy at Horne’s funeral. She tenderly recalled, “Last night I held the hand of a beloved friend. She could not hear me speak but I felt a responsive pressure of her hand in mine. So soon she crossed the threshold and stepped into the big reception room, then probably on through beautifully lighted galleries and massive halls. I almost envied her for I’m still out in the kitchen scrubbing floors, rattling pans and preparing eats for a few of us hungry mortals.” Teichert used the opportunity to celebrate Horne’s encouragement: “Always was this great woman looking after the welfare of the artists, hoping they would be able to ‘make a go of it’ financially and still grow in spirit. Few people are so forgetful of self. Sometimes she’d lose patience with those she thought worldly, if they didn’t see her way. Sometimes she forgot on what a pinnacle she stood. We couldn’t crane our necks high enough to get her lofty view point. I have eaten with her, wept and prayed with her. I have slept with her and dreamed with her. How great were our dreams!”

Teichert would find another agent, a woman in Laramie, Wyoming, named Ethel Murrell. 50 Teichert continued to paint prolifically, but the majority of her sales were of western scenes without religious context. In addition to the Book of Mormon scenes she painted, Teichert self-published an illustrated book, Selected Sketches of the Mormon March,

49. Minerva Teichert to Laurie Teichert Eastwood, January 30, 1949, box 11, folder 8, Eastwood Collection. Teichert wrote, “Mrs. Horne loved the Indians—always wanted me to paint them.” It seems likely that Horne encouraged Teichert to paint subjects that were marketable, and scenes of indigenous peoples sold well in the 1930s and 1940s.
51. Minerva Teichert to Laurie Teichert Eastwood, Charles Eastwood, and “four little fairies,” July 18, 1956, box 12, folder 6, Eastwood Collection.
Figure 9. Minerva Teichert (1888–1976), *Moving South*, 1949, oil on canvas, $59\frac{1}{2} \times 101\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Brigham Young University Museum of Art, gift of the Stark Museum of Art, Orange, Texas, 2012.
and hoped her scenes would be useful to the Church. She painted until she broke her hip in 1970. In her 1937 autobiography, Teichert expressed, “Eternity seems very real to me. It’s just a continuation. I want a touch of red in my heaven and to be able to paint after I leave here. Even though I should come back 9 times I still would not have exhausted my supply of subjects and one life time is far too short.”

The works of Minerva Teichert have inspired Latter-day Saints worldwide. Many find inspiration in the way she balanced her life; others are inspired by her style, looser than other artists whose illustrative paintings have been reproduced by the Church. But it is important to remember the rich partnership of Horne and Teichert. Indeed, it is likely that without Alice Merrill Horne, the Latter-day Saint world would not know Minerva Teichert.

Laura Paulsen Howe is Art Curator over Global Acquisitions at the Church History Museum. After receiving her master’s degree in art history and curatorial studies at Brigham Young University, she taught art history and writing at BYU before beginning her current position in 2019. She curated the 12th International Art Competition: All Are Alike unto God and With This Covenant in My Heart: The Art and Faith of Minerva Teichert. Her research has focused on places of display, analyzing how the meaning of a work changes when shown in different environments. She will author a chapter on the history of international art competitions at the Museum of Church History and Art to be published in an anthology of Latter-day Saint art by Oxford University Press in 2025.

52. Minerva Teichert to Laurie Teichert Eastwood, May 8, 1953, box 12, folder 3, Eastwood Collection.
Richard Bushman’s BYU Years
The Beginnings of an Influential Career

J. B. Haws

The case can be made—and has been made\(^1\)—that Richard Lyman Bushman has been as influential as anyone in his generation in shaping the way that Latter-day Saints think about, write about, and talk about our shared history. His seminal books on Joseph Smith, his essays on historical philosophy, his two decades of mentoring graduate students every summer—all of these have had a real and discernible impact on Church publications and paradigms.

And his colleagues saw this coming. Brigham Young University history professor Marvin Hill wrote in a 1984 review of Bushman’s *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* that “years from now Bushman’s work may be standard fare in Sunday school classes and seminars, for it is a voice of reason and of considerable persuasion on many difficult points.”\(^2\)

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Historians may indeed make poor prophets most of the time, but at least in this instance, Marvin Hill scored a memorable point for historians everywhere. He proved to be prophetic. The day he wrote about is here. Hill sensed that Bushman was doing something important, something potentially and uniquely impactful. “From the standpoint of the Church,” he wrote, “[Joseph Smith and Beginnings of Mormonism] may be the most important book of our time, for it boldly attempts to introduce new sources with their implicit challenges to faith in a way that can educate Latter-day Saints and not alienate.”3 What Hill wrote about Joseph Smith and Beginnings of Mormonism seems doubly true of Bushman’s 2005 full biography of Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling, now almost twenty years on. Straight-line connections can be made from Rough Stone Rolling to the landmark publication of the Church’s new official history Saints—and to the Church’s Come, Follow Me curriculum.4 And this is just one example of his broad influence.

These are big claims—and there is a larger story to be told.5 But in the meantime, this article proposes something more modest. This article is interested in one piece—and a piece that may be underappreciated—of that larger story of the interplay between influence and credibility, and how credibility accrued in this case. It is interested in the first phase of Richard Bushman’s illustrious academic career, his decade on the faculty at Brigham Young University, his first university appointment. This article asks what we can see in Richard Bushman’s early career years at BYU that might point to what would follow later. What episodes and interactions from this time take on new significance knowing what we know now about what these episodes and interactions would portend?

4. See, for example, Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, vol. 1, The Standard of Truth: 1815–1846 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), chap. 1 n. 9; chap. 3 nn. 3, 26; chap. 4 n. 6; and so on. Among many others, see footnote 34 in chapter 20, “Do Not Cast Me Off,” Saints, 1:229; and compare Richard L. Bushman, Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 299–302, for the discussion of a fight between Joseph Smith and his younger brother William. Also compare, for example, the retelling of the Camp of Israel/Zion’s Camp episode in Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 249, and Saints, 1:201–3, and the hyperlinks embedded for this section of Saints in the Come, Follow Me curriculum for Doctrine and Covenants 102–5, scheduled for September 13–19, 2021, at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/come-follow-me-for-individuals-and-families-doctrine-and-covenants-2021/38.
5. A volume on Richard Bushman is under contract to be published by the University of Illinois Press as part of the press’s Introductions to Mormon Thought series.
Key moments during Bushman’s tenure at BYU reveal a young professor already fleshing out and expressing the ideas and approaches that would become characteristic of all of his work. BYU was an important first stop because of the school’s unique mission and because of the way that mission resonated deeply with him.

Here is a sampling of those kinds of BYU moments that will appear in the narrative: University president Ernest Wilkinson asked Bushman to help in recruiting potential faculty members. Robert Thomas appointed Bushman as an associate director of BYU’s still-new Honors Program. Bushman was also appointed to the university’s speaker committee, charged with approving proposed speakers for campus assemblies. During his BYU years, Bushman participated in a Harvard seminar with the renowned Erik Erikson, which led to forays into psychohistory. And he taught a number of students who themselves would become important scholars in the field. (It is also worth noting that he published during those years several pieces in the pages of this very journal.6)

What emerges is a picture of a Richard Bushman who was thinking and writing about and advocating the kinds of positions that he would pursue at Boston, then Delaware, then Columbia, and beyond. And that is the central point. Bushman’s consistency in the philosophical approach that he has advocated since his BYU days seems to be a factor in all of this that cannot be missed. BYU, and its mission to integrate heart and mind and faith and scholarship, offered the setting for Bushman to think through and practice a deeply held value that manifested itself as a primary intellectual—and religious—posture of his: fearlessness, a fearlessness born out of integrity—integrity as wholeness—and trust. The argument being made here is that this consistency has given his approach an authenticity, a testability, and an observability that have contributed to the persuasive power of this approach—and its permeating influence.

A Busy Decade

When Richard Bushman accepted a faculty job at Brigham Young University in 1960, it was a well-fitted match. Bushman had his sights set on BYU, and BYU—especially university president Ernest Wilkinson—had

sights set on Bushman. Wilkinson had been building BYU with dogged determination for a decade. Wilkinson would serve in his position for twenty years—he was just about halfway through his tenure when he recruited Bushman. By the end of those twenty years, Wilkinson had steered BYU through an increase in the student body by a factor of six—from some four thousand students to twenty-five thousand—and an increase in permanent buildings on campus by a factor of twenty.\(^8\)

The growth that was taking place on the Provo campus was staggering. Wilkinson was also intent on bolstering the strength of the faculty. Hence, it was no surprise that a Latter-day Saint graduate student with Harvard credentials—Bushman earned his AB there in 1955 and ultimately finished his PhD in 1961—would stay squarely on Wilkinson’s radar.

It was a job prospect that fit Bushman’s hopes well too. He was keen on offering his services in the cause of educating Latter-day Saint young people. In fact, “only in working toward that end can I feel that I will make the maximum contribution toward the work of the Kingdom,” Bushman had written to Wilkinson in 1958, two years before finishing at Harvard. Bushman told Wilkinson that he counted himself among the “number of young Church scholars whose highest professional aspirations can only be fulfilled at the Y.”\(^9\) Wilkinson replied warmly, “I am happy to note that you are ultimately looking forward to being at this university. So are we.”\(^10\)

But Bushman’s start at BYU came with an unexpected—and not entirely welcome—twist. He found out during the job-negotiation process that he was being hired to teach in the university’s College of Religious Instruction. As committed as he was to the BYU mission to blend religious and secular learning, Bushman was taken aback, to say the

\(^7\) See, for example, Ernest L. Wilkinson to Richard Bushman, June 27, 1955, MSS 2052, box 1, folder 13, Richard L. and Claudia L. Bushman Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah: “Dear Dick: I am delighted to know that you were the class orator for the graduating class this year.” Bushman’s response was telling: “The Latter-day Saint student group at Harvard watch with interest the growth of the BYU. I believe there are many of us who hope that eventually we can make a contribution to the Church University.” Bushman to Wilkinson, June 29, 1955, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

\(^8\) Figures are taken from Gary James Bergera and Ronald Priddis, Brigham Young University: A House of Faith (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 26; also Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 746.

\(^9\) Richard L. Bushman to Ernest L. Wilkinson, April 5, 1958, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.

\(^10\) Ernest L. Wilkinson to Richard L. Bushman, April 10, 1958, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.
least. He had expected to teach history, his field of training. What he later learned was that President Wilkinson was so intent on bringing Bushman to BYU that he had imposed something of his presidential prerogative to fast-track the hire. The College of Religious Instruction was more amenable than the History Department to this kind of administrative exceptionalism, and that meant Bushman would teach mostly religion classes with a couple of history classes to fill out his expected load.\textsuperscript{11}

This rocky start notwithstanding, Bushman tamped down his frustration and jumped in with enthusiasm. He may have felt underprepared to teach courses in religion on a college level without much advanced warning—he wrote to his friend and new department chair in Religious Instruction, Truman G. Madsen, that he felt more comfortable teaching American history than he did Latter-day Saint Church history\textsuperscript{12}—but that did not mean Bushman was anything but keenly interested in religion. In fact, the intersections of religion and history in society had always been at the forefront of his interests at Harvard. Upon returning to school after two years of missionary service in the New England States Mission, Bushman chaired a Harvard-commissioned student committee that wrote a report on the state of religion at the university;\textsuperscript{13} he then wrote his senior honor’s thesis on the Church’s expulsion from Jackson County, Missouri; and only two years before joining the BYU faculty, he had written in his application for a Harvard graduate fellowship that “certain autobiographical facts partly explain my specialization within history. I am a Latter-day Saint who takes his religion seriously. Since our Church has grown up in the United States I am especially concerned to discover the meaning of our development in the American environment. This is a personal reason for specialization in American religious and social history. On a less parochial level”—and it is worth pausing here to note that this was a Richard Bushman who was already thinking bigger—“I am interested in the social and intellectual transformations that make personal faith in God seemingly more difficult today than, say, three hundred years ago. This last question has personal significance because I believe a deep reverence for life and the something beyond each individual which is also life is a beautiful and important attitude.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] See Richard L. Bushman to Truman G. Madsen, April 7, 1960, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.
\end{footnotes}
Formerly this reverence was comprehended by religious faith. My ques-
tion is why this kind of reverence has declined and what has replaced it.”


16. See Bushman’s handwritten notes on the reverse of a letter from BYU academic vice president, Earl C. Crockett, to Richard L. Bushman, March 9, 1960, box 1, folder 13, Bushman Papers.
much he felt that he lacked as a teacher: “I was so discontented with my classroom techniques last year that I began discussing some problems with a few friends who were also relatively new.” He and several other young professors “met regularly, once a month or oftener, to share ideas in what became an informal seminar.” Bushman proposed participation for the group in a summer program focused on improving teaching.  

In all of this, assistant professor Richard Bushman manifested many of the qualities that colleagues and associates would see in him throughout his career: self-awareness, desire for improvement, planned course of action, thinking in collaborative terms, and naturally reaching out to colleagues. And he had experience with the benefits of fellowship opportunities—Richard and Claudia and their two young children had spent the 1958–59 school year in Europe on a Sheldon Fellowship from Harvard, during which he had extended time to read broadly in areas related to his dissertation.  

In line with these impulses, Bushman organized a BYU group application for summer 1962 to be in Bethel, Maine, with the National Training Laboratories for an intensive college-teaching seminar.  

Bushman may have been more self-conscious about his teaching than he should have been. A young Dean May—who would himself become a distinguished professor of Utah and Latter-day Saint history at the University of Utah—wrote a note to Bushman to say that Bushman’s 1961 class on intellectual history was “one of the two finest I have had in my undergraduate work.” An anonymous student review questionnaire from those early years captured an expression of similar high praise: “If you don’t know History 170, nobody does. You have created an interest within me for history which I didn’t think was there.”

17. From a draft of a letter from Richard L. Bushman to Earl Crockett, undated, box 1, folder 14, Bushman Papers. See also Richard L. Bushman to Douglas Bunker, February 3, 1962, and Bunker to Bushman, February 3, 1962, both in box 1, folder 14, Bushman Papers. Bunker was a training consultant at the National Training Laboratories, where Bushman hoped to secure a summer spot for his BYU team.  

18. Any biographical project on Richard Bushman would be woefully incomplete without attention to his remarkable marriage to and partnership with Claudia Lauper Bushman. For a personal retelling of their courtship and early marriage, see Claudia L. Bushman, “Courtship,” BYU Studies Quarterly 59, no. 3 (2020): 204–11.  


20. Dean May to Richard L. Bushman, January 8, 1964, box 1, folder 18, Bushman Papers; see also May to Bushman, December 19, 1963, box 1, folder 16, Bushman Papers.  

It was more than just classroom teaching, too; Bushman was attuned to mentoring. That was obvious in the number of students over the years who asked him for letters of recommendation.\(^22\) (Dean May was the recipient of one of those Bushman endorsements—and to May’s credit, he didn’t mention his fond memories and high praise of Bushman’s class until after Bushman had written the letter!) Bushman himself had benefited from mentors. One of his Harvard dissertation advisors, Oscar Handlin, alerted Bushman to a new fellowship opportunity at Brown University. It was a chance for a young scholar to do interdisciplinary work in a secondary field. So, after only three years at BYU, the Bushmans (now five of them) and their imported Volkswagen (another legacy of their year in Europe) were headed back to New England for a two-year fellowship in Providence.\(^23\)

Psychology was the natural choice for a secondary field for Bushman. As we’ve already seen, he had been reading Freud since his first year at Harvard. And Bushman’s timing at Brown was fortuitous. Erik Erikson was offering a seminar at Harvard, and Bushman was drawn to the prospects of psychobiography represented in Erikson’s acclaimed biography, *Young Man Luther*—only four years off the press at that time.\(^24\)

Bushman made the trip to Cambridge from Providence to ask Erikson if he could join the seminar. The meeting became something of a legend in Bushman lore. Bushman marveled at the famed psychologist’s ability, almost effortlessly, to draw out of Bushman an unbroken stream of self-analysis. Bushman in turn found himself, almost involuntarily, confessing that he seemed to have this need to challenge all of his professors. When Bushman expressed his worry that he would inevitably do the same in a seminar with Erikson, the Harvard luminary placidly replied, “I feel perfectly safe in your hands.”\(^25\)

Thus, every week for a semester, Bushman made the hour-plus trip from Brown to Harvard to study with Erikson. Bushman wrote three essays in the psychobiography vein—two on Jonathan Edwards and one

\(^{22}\) See, for example, copies of letters of recommendation in box 1, folder 18, Bushman Papers.

\(^{23}\) See Oscar Handlin to Richard L. Bushman, December 19, 1962, box 1, folder 16, Bushman Papers.


on Benjamin Franklin. They are pieces that drew the admiration of colleagues—and Bushman made an impression on his psychohistory mentor. A decade later, the University of California at Santa Barbara planned a retrospective conference on the life and work of Erikson. The psychologist made a special request of the conference organizers that they invite Bushman to be one of the key participants. Bushman’s schedule meant that he had to decline the invitation—he had just returned from a month of teaching at a naval station in Antarctica (Antarctica!) as part of a military remote college instruction program, so he was thick into catching up in his regular classes. But Erikson’s esteem was obvious. By that time, though, Bushman’s enthusiasm for psychobiography had waned. He was concerned about the implications of this approach of turning all of his historical subjects into patients. Yet it is not hard to see Bushman’s sensitivity to psychology in his biographies of Joseph Smith and in a number of his essays—especially in his attention to the relationship between Joseph Smith Junior and Senior.

It is also not hard to see this kind of sensitivity in Bushman’s attentiveness to students—and in his Church ministry. By all accounts, the Bushmans are, characteristically, root-planters. Even though Richard was only going to be at Brown for two years, he jumped into the local Latter-day Saint community. He and Claudia knew many in the congregation from their New England States Mission–wide MIA days, when they had been youth leaders while Richard was a Harvard graduate student. Now back in Providence, Bushman was called as the branch president. And he also signed a contract to teach part-time for the Church Educational System’s local Institute of Religion, offering religion classes for Latter-day Saint college students. Bushman received a letter from William E. Berrett, CES Administrator for Seminaries and Institutes, expressing “full approval for the course” that Bushman had proposed, including a vote of support for his “taking an occasional


27. See Nancy [Roelker] to Richard L. Bushman, April 6, 1965, box 2, folder 3, Bushman Papers; and David Hall, interview by the author, April 28, 2021.


29. See Bushman’s discussion of this in “The Inner Joseph Smith,” 69–81.
session devoted entirely” to “frank discussion of student problems.”

As he was launching this institute class, Bushman wrote a note to fellow institute teacher, Terry Warner, who was then at Yale: “I find I miss teaching religion more than I realized.”

Pastor and professor—a pattern was emerging.

The Bushmans returned to Provo for the 1965–66 school year, where new assignments were waiting for Richard. BYU Honors Program director Robert Thomas tapped Bushman as an associate director; the program was five years old at the time. President Wilkinson appointed Bushman to the university speakers committee. Wilkinson turned to Bushman as an ad hoc adviser to get his thoughts on influential books and speeches of the day. Bushman was even asked to consider taking on the editorship of *BYU Studies*, but ultimately university administrators agreed with Bushman’s entreaties that given his other responsibilities with the Honors Program and an upcoming research leave, the timing was not right.

One of those other responsibilities that had come to Bushman was a special role in recruiting new faculty. He wrote to Martin Hickman, then at the University of Southern California; Hickman would come to BYU as the first dean of a new College of Social Science in 1970. Bushman also wrote to John Sorenson, then at a California think tank, who would come to BYU as a professor of anthropology, and to his former Harvard classmate Carlfred Broderick, who expressed sincere interest in BYU but ultimately left Penn State for a position at the University of Southern California instead.

These were heady days at Brigham Young University—but challenging ones too. Bushman was very forthright in a May 1966 letter to outside accreditors about what he saw as BYU’s weaknesses—low faculty morale, faculty who did not invest in research efforts as they should, a serious

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32. See Stephen R. Covey to Richard L. Bushman, October 21, 1966, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

33. See, for example, Ernest L. Wilkinson to Richard L. Bushman, September 20, 1966; Wilkinson to Bushman, November 15, 1966; Bushman to Wilkinson, January 26, 1967; Wilkinson to Bushman, December 5, 1967; and Bushman to Wilkinson, December 7, 1967, all in box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

34. See Richard L. Bushman to Earl C. Crockett, November 28, 1966; and Crockett to Bushman, December 16, 1966, both in box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.

35. See “Faculty Recruitment,” box 2, folder 6, Bushman Papers.
disconnect between the president and the faculty—and strengths—a general (and perhaps unexpected) “openness to all viewpoints,” in that “teaching is never censored,” and a religious environment that inspired a seriousness of intent and purpose “because so much is at stake.”36 Yet even in that candid letter—and especially in letters to potential faculty members—Bushman was optimistic about the direction things would go.37 Bushman remembered that Robert Thomas had inspired him and Truman Madsen with the possibilities of mapping out a future for BYU curriculum.38 There was no question that Bushman felt called to be at BYU.

But that did not stop others from calling on him.

Bushman’s successes and his resume meant that a steady stream of academic suitors reached out to him. And Bushman did not immediately shut all of them down. Bushman’s attitude at the time seemed to have been that it would take a lot to persuade him to leave BYU, but he was dispositionally suited to keeping his options open, even as a religious nod to his sense of providence. Bernard Bailyn, his other Harvard mentor, wrote Bushman a note in 1964, saying that he would keep his “eye open” for opportunities for a new position for Richard.39 It is hard to know whether this represented Bushman’s initiative or simply Bailyn’s estimation that Bushman could do better than BYU. It seems more the latter than the former. Harvard’s graduate office provided a service to its alumni of distributing curricula vitae when history departments across the country made inquiries. Bushman took advantage of this service and

36. Richard L. Bushman to Laurence Gale (academic vice president, University of Montana), May 5, 1966, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.
37. See, for example, this passage in Bushman to Gale, May 5, 1966: “As one who has tutored at Harvard (as a graduate student) and taught at Brown (as a research fellow and lecturer in history), I can assure you that our campus compares favorably as a forum.” Seven months later, Bushman wrote to Carlfred Broderick, “BYU seems to be on the edge of a time of greatly accelerated academic growth. . . . I personally believe, and others share my opinion, that our limitations will be our foreshortened imaginations rather than inadequate funds.” Richard L. Bushman to Carlfred Broderick, December 29, 1966, box 2, folder 6, Bushman Papers. See also Richard L. Bushman to Robert K. Thomas, March 29, 1968, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers. Bushman informed Thomas that he had turned down a job offer from UCLA, saying, “I came through the whole experience feeling better than ever about BYU.”
asked for his vita to be mailed to various inquirers—but he always came back to BYU. He was a serious candidate at Tufts in 1965, but even before Tufts had announced a decision, Bushman informed the search committee there that he had decided to renew his BYU contract. UCLA offered him a job in 1968, but Bushman decided to stay at BYU. Nor was he swayed by interest from other schools in California or Montana or Texas. BYU always won out.  

But then came interest from Boston University.

Bushman had won the Bancroft Prize, that premier prize in the American historical profession, in April 1968 for his first book, *From Puritan to Yankee*. So prestigious was the award that President Wilkinson, who had received confidential word of the pending announcement, jumped the gun in his enthusiasm for publicizing that a BYU history professor had won. Bushman had to fire off a quick note to Wilkinson to say that the public announcement needed to come from Columbia University.

When word did come out through official channels, Bushman, whose stock had already been on the rise, drew all kinds of new attention. The most intense came from Sidney Burrell, chair of the history department at Boston University. Burrell was not to be deterred. When Bushman responded to Burrell’s initial overtures by referencing his deeply felt commitment to BYU and its mission, Burrell was quick to assure Bushman that Boston University would be happy to have Bushman’s services even for just a handful of years. In other words, he said, Come to BU for a few years and return to BYU when you feel like you should.

The offer was too good for the Bushmans to pass up. They could not deny Boston’s gravitational pull on them, after all of their years and life experiences there; Bushman has said that he had never felt more himself than at Harvard—and that was something that Sid Burrell had going for him. He was courting the Bushmans while they were already in Boston; Richard had a yearlong fellowship at Harvard’s Charles Warren Center at the time. Bushman took Burrell’s offer and communicated with BYU accordingly. Administrators at BYU were happy to hold out hope for a few years that Bushman would indeed return, but that was not to be.

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40. See the items in folder “Jobs Correspondence,” box 2, folder 3, Bushman Papers.
41. See the announcement of the prize in “Columbia Presents Bancroft Prizes in U.S. History,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1968, 43C.
42. See Richard L. Bushman to Ernest L. Wilkinson, April 10, 1968, and Wilkinson to Bushman, April 12, 1968, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.
44. Bushman, interview, July 23, 2020; see also the items in folder “BU Jobs Correspondence,” box 2, folder 9, Bushman Papers.
It is not hard to see why Richard Bushman would say that winning the Bancroft Prize “changed the trajectory of my life,” considering the chain of events it triggered.\(^45\) In an autobiographical sketch for his twenty-five-year class reunion at Harvard, Bushman said that his life “oscillated between two poles”—between Salt Lake City and Boston.\(^46\) His life would continue to oscillate between those two poles in a number of respects literally and metaphorically, but geographically the Bushmans would become permanent East Coastiers. And that move would indeed prove consequential in all else that would follow.

**Advocating for Fearlessness and Trust**

Still, and even in this high-level overview of Bushman’s decade as a full-time faculty member at BYU, one can see traces—marks—of the institution’s impact on Bushman, and Bushman’s impact on the institution. But more than that, two key moments in his BYU years stand out for the way Bushman articulated a philosophy, a modus operandi, and a mindset. These two moments matter for what they show of Bushman’s consistency and his characteristic approach to Latter-day Saint history—and it is this approach that has proven compelling and persuasive.

Early in his tenure as a young professor at BYU—pre-Brown University fellowship—Bushman remembered feeling “furious” with university president Ernest Wilkinson. By all accounts, *furious* is not a note on the Richard Bushman register that gets played very often. The Bushman children all attest that the equanimity Richard inherited from his father was rarely ruffled. But Bushman remembered that he “blasted” Wilkinson—and that is Bushman’s word—in an open letter to Wilkinson (and to the school’s *Daily Universe* newspaper) to express his displeasure.\(^47\) The occasion? A university assembly in May 1963 at which a Russian speaker had been invited to represent the Soviet point of view to a BYU audience—only the BYU audience learned at the end of the speech, much to their surprise, that the Russian speaker was actually an actor who had been engaged to show the ridiculousness of the Soviet position. It was, as Bushman came to realize, an intentional caricature—and he had been deceived. His anger was not just over the deception, however. It was centered on the lack of trust in the BYU audience. “Why can’t we be trusted to listen for Russians to speak for themselves?” Bushman wondered. And in a note that reflected again his inherent “hermeneutic

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\(^45\) Bushman, interview, November 13, 2020.
\(^46\) Richard L. Bushman, “Class Life,” typewritten draft, box 6, folder 4, Bushman Papers.
\(^47\) Bushman, interview, December 18, 2020.
of generosity”—to use that really fitting phrase that Stuart Parker has
used in analyzing Bushman’s work—Bushman saw the hypocrisy in
this counterfeit communist stunt: after all, Bushman noted, “We want
Mormons to speak for themselves!”

“After the first anger passed,” he noted in his open letter,

I saw that the capacity crowd in the field house could teach us all a les-
son: our students would like very much to hear a real live communist.

I believe they attended in such large numbers because they know
they have nothing to fear from trying to understand communism. If they
were afraid they might have been won over, they would have stayed away.
Apparently our students believe in constitutional democracy and free
enterprise strongly enough that they could risk hearing an opposite point
of view.

By implication, what might it say to students and faculty, Bushman was
asking, that university administrators seemed reluctant to let an authen-
tic advocate for the Soviet system present his or her ideas for consider-
atation? In other words, what did a position that seemed based on fear
communicate instead?

It was a theme he took up again, five years later, in a letter to then–
New England States Mission President (and eventual Church Apostle)
Boyd K. Packer. The letter is framed as a continuation of an interrupted
conversation that Bushman and President Packer had been having at
church on the previous Sunday. This was when the Bushmans were liv-
ing in Boston for Richard’s yearlong fellowship at Harvard’s Charles
Warren Center. Packer and Bushman had been discussing the best way
to screen and select speakers for BYU assemblies, and Bushman had an
insider’s perspective: he was on the university’s speakers committee.

(As a not-insignificant sidenote, it is worth highlighting here that it
seems to say something about the character of both Ernest Wilkinson
and Richard Bushman—and their relationship—that Wilkinson even
appointed Bushman to the speakers committee at all in the fall of 1966.
Wilkinson made that appointment even after Bushman’s serious objection

Scholarship of Richard Bushman,” Journal of Mormon History 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012):
12–27.
50. Richard L. Bushman to Ernest L. Wilkinson, May 15, 1963, box 1, folder 17, Bush-
man Papers.
51. Richard L. Bushman to Boyd K. Packer, May 16, 1968, box 2, folder 14, Bushman
Papers.
to the “counterfeit communist” assembly in 1963, and especially after Bushman’s spring 1966 letter to accreditors with some frank descriptions of what Bushman saw as Wilkinson’s alienating of faculty with his “intransigent advocacy of rightist philosophy” and the corresponding string of highly conservative speakers Wilkinson consistently invited to the university—and Bushman had sent a copy of that letter to Wilkinson! The speakers committee was a committee that the president’s administrative assistant, Stephen R. Covey, described to Bushman in his letter of appointment as a “very very important committee” in the president’s mind. It seems that Bushman had cultivated with Wilkinson a special kind of respect for his unvarnished appraisals of Wilkinson’s actions, even beyond university assemblies, something that Wilkinson apparently appreciated. That seems to be something worth noting for its own sake.)

While Bushman’s letter to mission president Packer does not indicate what Packer’s position was, in terms of the university’s process for approving proposed speakers, Bushman made it clear that the two of them were in strong agreement in their opposition to offering a BYU platform to any speaker who would openly or brazenly advocate for something indisputably evil: “Evil men are heard clearly enough elsewhere and their message reaches us perfectly well,” Bushman wrote. What made for more complicated cases, in Bushman’s mind, were speakers who fell into “the gray areas,” who were not so easily categorized. Bushman presented two possible approaches—and he then made a strong case for the second of the two. As a first possible approach, Bushman presented a scenario in which the BYU faculty speakers committee might feel compelled to regularly turn down the student council’s recommendations for assembly speakers out of concern for giving the podium to those who might advocate for ideas that were counter to gospel ideals. However, as Bushman pointed out, in this thought experiment, because not all books or speakers are so straightforwardly classified, this could lead to a divided faculty committee: “Our committee which is composed of solid members of the Church simply cannot tell which figures in the secular world are for the Gospel and which against, and we are compelled to send on the names to a higher authority.” Ultimately, such an approach would essentially require “an index, an authoritative pronouncement on what is acceptable to Church authorities and which not.” As problematic

53. Stephen R. Covey to Richard L. Bushman, October 21, 1966, box 1, folder 17, Bushman Papers.
as creating such an index would be, even more problematic, in Bushman’s view, would be the sense students would have that their teachers and leaders did not trust them to choose the speakers, or even to be confronted by the ideas that the speakers propounded. Were the ideas themselves so dangerous? they might wonder. They might feel as if if the administration were saying to them that “they are still children and cannot be allowed to listen to men who may lead them astray. Their judgment and devotion are not strong enough. Gradually the feeling grows that the University is afraid of the outside world, afraid Mormon youth will not stand by the faith, afraid even to listen.”\(^{54}\)

In his characteristically generous way, Bushman acknowledged that this would certainly not have been “the original intent of the administrators” in such an approach. “There was no fear in the original policy, only a determination to stand for the right.” Bushman was quick to see a positive motive in those who would advocate for this more cautious handling of selecting speakers. “But that policy leads almost at once to an index, to judgments about what is right in the gray areas, and to the interpretation *that* fear underlies the policy.”\(^{55}\)

It was this perception of fear as the driver that worried Bushman—and he had an alternate proposal at the ready:

Let me now suggest another view of the University, an idealized one, but the one toward which policies might be directed. The motive in the first place is the same as before—a desire to present the Gospel clearly to the world and to identify evil wherever it may lie. But in this case the first response is to listen carefully whenever a worldly voice speaks.

Say, for example, that [an author] has just published [a] book on the new morality. Word reaches Provo that this book is having a powerful influence over the lives of young people. Since that is of the greatest concern to us, we immediately invite him to visit us. We want to know precisely what he stands for. We listen to him courteously, ply him with our questions, and then talk it over carefully among ourselves. Out of our discussions comes a clear and fair understanding of what [the author] believes, an exact definition of the differences between his position and ours, and probably an appreciation of Gospel morality we did not have before. (*Comparisons always illuminate truths you felt you already understood.*) We are now ready not to refute [the author], because as you said that is a fruitless exercise, but to state clearly where we stand on the

\(^{54}\) Bushman to Packer, May 16, 1968.

\(^{55}\) Bushman to Packer, May 16, 1968, emphasis added.
issues he raises and to describe what we see to be the consequences of our respective positions.

The general tone of the campus under this policy is open and free. Students do not feel restricted; they feel trusted. We do not have an index because we do not undertake to identify every evil voice in the world but to state our own position more precisely and persuasively.

There are dangers in this policy. Some students hearing [the author] may be persuaded by him. Freedom requires that good men constantly exert themselves to stand for the truth. We must personally be more godly and righteous so that the superiority of our way will shine forth. There certainly is no guarantee that truth will triumph in the market place unless the truth is represented forcefully. But I think in the long run that is the only way. We must advance our cause not by excluding all evil, [or] building a wall around Zion, but by living and speaking the truth.56

The fearlessness that Bushman advocated for—and the inherent risks that he acknowledged as the inevitable byproducts of such openness—should not be mistaken for indifference to the spiritual welfare of the students he taught or the Church members he shepherded. His was not a “take it or leave it” attitude. It was just that he had come to realize that all attempts at sheltering would, ultimately, break down. He preferred to be open about that and to be engaged in the dialogue—and he was motivated by a hard-won faith from the crucible of personal experience. In a 1986 essay titled “My Belief,” Bushman recounted the creeping agnosticism that plagued him as a Harvard sophomore about to embark on his missionary service and the way that his faith had been battered by real—and imagined—questioners at Harvard. But as he came to settled faith through his study of the Book of Mormon and through, “more than anything,” what he called “church work”—his service in his callings, his ministering—he came to see that “ideas did not strike me as dangerous; they were too weak to be dangerous.”57 This is the same spirit in his 1968 letter to President Packer: Bushman had come to the conviction that religious truths would be persuasive on their own merits, especially, and perhaps primarily, when advocated for—and made concrete—by those who, as he wrote, were striving to “personally be more godly and righteous.”

56. Bushman to Packer, May 16, 1968, italics added, underlining original.
Some Later BYU Touchstone Moments

Two decades after this exchange with then–mission president Packer, Bushman echoed these same sentiments, with a memorable metaphor, in an address to BYU graduates at the university’s summer commencement ceremonies in 1991, something of a homecoming for Professor Bushman, now tenured at Columbia. His talk offered the students a dose of realism not always typical of such celebrations: “We take a great risk when we invite you here to join the world of scholarship. . . . [The university] cannot and does not attempt to remove from the shelves every book that attacks the Church, casts doubt on the existence of God, or criticizes traditional standards of conduct. These books are in the BYU library as they are in every other university library in the land.” Bushman then related an experience that his son and daughter-in-law had when they lived in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in the opening days of what would become the Gulf War. Because of the pressing fear of chemical warfare at the time, gas masks had been issued to the family—even specially designed masks for their two very young children. Bushman told the BYU audience that “our son said that their two children could not abide the gas masks and would not keep them on for a minute. Likewise, there is no way you can be sealed off against ideas that oppose the gospel. It cannot be done. You would not tolerate such treatment in this university either, and furthermore, it would not be right to subject you to it. You were not sent here to be isolated from evil. It would be wrong to attempt to create a safe room, and it would not work.”

What to do, then? “What can we your teachers, your believing teachers, say to you about the unbelief in the world of scholarship? How could we have asked your parents to send you to the university where you learn about error as well as about truth?” Bushman’s response in that instance reflects the credo he has lived by: “We can only say one thing: you will, with God’s help, find the path. Having taught you what we believe and what we know, we trust you. That is the only way: trust.”

Six years after that commencement address, in June 1997, the same month that he celebrated his sixty-sixth birthday, Richard Bushman was back at BYU, standing in front of half a dozen students as they launched the first “Archive of Restoration Culture” summer seminar. This quiet

60. See published papers from the seminar as Archive of Restoration Culture: Summer Fellows’ Papers, 1997–1999 (Provo, Utah: Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day
inauguration of what would become a two-decade annual tradition on the Provo campus may, in the long view, stand out as the Richard Bushman-at-BYU moment that most deserves to be remembered.

The seminar began as something of a summer research team to help Bushman collate source material as he was writing *Rough Stone Rolling*—but it quickly expanded beyond that initial purpose and became a wide-ranging summer experience of expansive forays into Latter-day Saint history and thought. The list of seminar alumni is remarkable and includes at the time of this writing the current occupants of the Mormon Studies professorships at Utah State University, Claremont Graduate University, and the University of Virginia; the current editor in chief of *BYU Studies*; and the current managing director of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ History Department, as well as his immediate predecessor—to name only a few. David Holland, Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard Divinity School and a member of that inaugural 1997 group, put it this way: “It is not an exaggeration, it is not hyperbole, to say that he [Richard Bushman] is the reason I am a historian today.”61 “He is a father in the church, literally a patriarch,” *BYU Studies* editor in chief Steven Harper reflected, “and he is a father to a hundred people like me.”62

The key point here is that Bushman’s mantra in those seminars was simple—and it was the same approach he had been advocating since his first decade at BYU: we will skirt no issue, but we will go right through the center of every issue. We will not be driven by fear.63 Student after student, year after year, affirms that is precisely what they did. And in six-week chunks, summer after summer, Richard Bushman shaped a generation of Latter-day Saint thinkers.

There is something fundamentally “Latter-day Saint” in this approach, something fundamental to the cosmology of the restored gospel—and that may be a primary reason why Bushman’s half-century-plus of advocating for this approach has proven to be so influential. It resonates for Latter-day Saints on a deep level with their religious sensibilities. The backdrop against which all of these calls for fearlessness and vulnerability


63. See, for example, Mark Ashurst-McGee, interview by the author, June 20, 2014; Jed Woodworth, interview by the author, September 10, 2021.
and trust play out is the Latter-day Saint conception of the plan of salvation, where each human’s existence began long before birth on earth—and where individual growth is contingent upon agency exercised freely. Bushman’s words to the BYU graduates in 1991 mirror what Latter-day Saints essentially imagine God may have declared about the experience—and risks—of mortality in general. This is the ultimate grounding for Bushman’s confidence; this, Latter-day Saints would say, is God’s way.

In response to a letter from a concerned Latter-day Saint leader who wondered early on if Rough Stone Rolling, with its in-depth analysis of Joseph Smith’s life and times and its consideration of appraisals from critics and coreligionists alike, might aid and abet the Church’s enemies, Bushman wrote this: “Thanks for your candid letter about my biography of Joseph Smith. I can understand why some of the stories may worry people. I certainly hope that no one’s testimony is damaged by anything they read. If you hear of anyone who is upset by the book, please have them write me. . . . I want young Latter-day Saints to know that one historian has looked at all the evidence, suppresses none of it, and still believes in Joseph’s divine call. . . . As you can tell, I am one for getting everything out on the table. Personally I believe that is the only secure position. If we are not candid and open, young Latter-day Saints doubt us when they hear the negative stories from another source.”

There is deep resonance here with something Bushman wrote nearly forty years earlier—in 1968—to BYU administrators who asked his advice on how to handle a request from a graduate student at another university who wanted to see materials in the BYU archives—materials that could potentially paint some unflattering portraits of university leaders in BYU’s past. Bushman wrote then, “My feeling is that suppressing material is only short term wisdom. In the long run it would be preferable to clear all scholars to make sure they have a serious interest and are reputable. (Everyone allowed into the British Museum reading room has to have character references.) Then leave the rest to them. Certainly we will get stung on occasion, but the reputation for being open and candid is much more valuable than avoiding an occasional sensational piece that dies and is forgotten shortly after it appears.”

The same Bushman who recognized for himself in 1950 the futility of keeping Freud from “pounding on the walls” if Freud were to be placed in

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64. See Richard L. Bushman letter, January 7, 2006, box 74, folder 13, Bushman Papers.
some kind of separate mental compartment was the same Bushman who, in 2006, responded to a Church member who had just read *Rough Stone Rolling* and had written in to ask how he might think through the new things he was learning about Joseph Smith and the history of the Church. “I personally think it is never good to let problems like this swim vaguely around in your head,” Bushman wrote in reply.

Be sure you get all the facts right. . . . Consider the biases, both pro and con, of those who describe the events. . . . Try to be hard-headed about this. Don’t let your feelings swamp you. . . . If you are going to do all this in the Latter-day Saint way, you will also put your trust in that Spirit that leadeth to do good (D&C 11:12–14). You will ask, What are the consequences of these beliefs? Have they resulted in good in your own life and the life of others you have known? If they have, then you want to treat them with respect. As with science, a religion that works and produces results has to be taken seriously.

And the key takeaway for Bushman was that there was nothing to fear in doing this: “Others might give you other advice, but this has worked for me. After all these years of studying Joseph’s life, I believe more than ever.”

These kinds of exchanges beat in rhythm with counsel that Elder M. Russell Ballard gave in a February 2016 worldwide broadcast to all religious educators in the Church Educational System. “You should be among the first,” Elder Ballard said, “outside your students’ families, to introduce authoritative sources on topics that may be less well-known or controversial so your students will measure whatever they hear or read later against what you have already taught them.” And Elder Marlin K. Jensen, the Church Historian and Recorder (from 2005 to 2012) who shepherded the Joseph Smith Papers, the inception of initiatives like the Gospel Topics essays, and the four-volume *Saints* project, told a gathered audience at the Mormon History Association meetings in 2012 as his time as Church Historian was ending, “I’m also pleased that we have

68. The essays are accessible at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/essays, and on the Church’s Library app under the “Church History” tab.
labored diligently to be completely open and honest about the Church’s past. After all, it is of truth that the Holy Ghost testifies. The internet almost mandates transparency as the order of the day, but it is also the right way to do our historical business.”

As much as—or more than—Bushman expounded the same kind of historical philosophy that Elder Ballard and Elder Jensen described, the summer seminar participants affirm that Bushman simply modeled this. He modeled a commitment to the highest professional ethics and a commitment to historical honesty and openness and candor that were to him religious commitments, as well. This was, after all, the Richard Bushman who had written in 1969 an essay he called “Faithful History,” a manifesto of sorts that he published in the journal Dialogue—an essay that he later described as “the fruit of my six years at Brigham Young University.” Bushman said in that essay that to be true to the kind of historian he wanted to be—to be a Latter-day Saint historian, and not just a historian of the Latter-day Saints—to write the kind of history he wanted to write, he could not “[neglect] any of the evidence. . . . As I look at the world in my best moments, this is how I see it. I am not lying to any part of myself, neither the part that prays nor that which interprets documents.” This, he said, is “faithful history.” And it is a fearlessness and an integrity that Richard Bushman has encouraged Latter-day Saints everywhere to try on—and trust—for themselves since his first days in a BYU classroom.

J. B. Haws is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. He is the executive director of BYU’s Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.


70. See Bushman’s introductory comments to a reprint of “Faithful History” in Bushman, Believing History, 3. For the original essay, see Richard L. Bushman, “Faithful History,” Dialogue 4, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 11–25.

Knit Together

Liz Busby

“That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love.”
—Colossians 2:2

The unusual thing about knit fabric is that it’s one continuous strand. Woven fabric consists of a warp and weft where individual strands arranged in a grid weave in and out, touching but ultimately separate. The knit fabric on everything from an ugly Christmas sweater to your favorite soft t-shirt looks like it’s made of hundreds of little “v” shapes, but it’s not. It loops in and through itself over and over and over, but it’s all connected. One long piece of yarn.

When Paul wrote to the Colossians that we should have our hearts knit together in love, did he understand this? Was he trying to tell us that we are not as separate as we appear? That we are all made of the same star-stuff, god-stuff, the fabric of the cosmos and of community? That you and I are not just you and I but one family of God?

I can’t really remember my first knitting project. I assume it was like most of the other first projects I’ve seen over the years: a cheap acrylic rectangle of variable width and thickness, nominally a scarf. In my imagination, it’s a shade of fuchsia and slightly fuzzy.

Did I learn to knit at a Young Women’s activity? It’s entirely possible. Certainly my mother didn’t teach me; her craft of choice was cross-stitch. All I remember clearly was that my first pair of needles were translucent blue plastic. My young teenage self worked hard to complete that lumpy swath of yarn, was proud that I had finished, and was perfectly content to be done with knitting after that one project.
I’m not sure if my sister picked up knitting from me or I from her. As sisters only fourteen months apart, our lives flowed together through many of the same tracks. We both wrote and read fan fiction. Each year, our parents bought us parallel but differently colored Christmas presents. When we stepped out of our junior-high art classes across the hall from each other, someone would inevitably say, “Oh my gosh, are you twins?”

But we couldn’t see it. I kept my side of our room neat, while her floor accumulated items like the gradual fall of snow—until suddenly it was six inches deep and our mother was demanding that a walkway be cleared. When my sister was interested in cooking, I couldn’t be. When I chose academics over hanging out with friends, she had to do the opposite just to feel like herself. We differentiated ourselves by fleeing to the ends of the spectrum.

Knitting felt like one of those things. Possibly because I had neglected it, my sister picked up knitting and ran with it. A collection of needles of various sizes and colors appeared and scattered across her room. She discovered online knitting magazines full of stylish projects—lots of boho wrist warmers and tams. Often on Saturday afternoons, she would sit on the worn plaid couch in the basement, watching the extended editions of *The Lord of the Rings* while she worked through the long stretches of a scarf. This happened so many times that she memorized even the commentary tracks. Knitting became part of who she was, a part that separated us, like the many other things that we began to fight over as we grew our separate ways toward adulthood.

The language of knitting patterns takes some time to get used to. It’s full of arcane lowercase acronyms that appear like an alien language: slwyib (slip the stitch with yarn in back), kbf (knit through the front, back, and front again), m3 (make three new stitches). The amazing thing is that a two-dimensional text will eventually sculpt your straight rows into the three-dimensional reality of a hat or a sweater. Two stitches will start far apart and then through a series of gradual decreases be brought together. You don’t need to understand why. You can’t go wrong if you just follow the pattern. And if you’re lucky, at some point in your work, you’ll have a flash of insight where you can suddenly see how all these steps are adding up.

When Paul talked about hearts knit together in love, did he understand this? Was he trying to explain that human relationships aren’t always understandable? That where we were is not always where we will be? That sometimes the directions of our lives and relationships make sense only in retrospect?
I picked up knitting again in college as a way to keep myself focused in class. I found note-taking tedious, but having a craft in my hands kept my mind on the lecture. My freshman year, as the professor lectured about ancient Greek philosophy, a bumpy purple-and-red-variegated yarn looped over my new wooden needles, gradually forming a pair of wrist warmers.

Just like the ones my sister used to make.

As the older sister, I was embarrassed to be jealous of my younger sister’s coolness. At the end of our teen years, we had been so different that she’d shut me out of her life, rarely talking even though our bedroom doors were six feet apart. But I needed help with my next project, so I called her up.

It turned out she was excited to teach me about something she loved. One phone call became more. We began to talk frequently on the phone and at the holidays about the latest patterns on Knitty, about the intricacies of intarsia (in which you knit two layers of yarn at the same time to make a two-colored pattern), about whether to use double-pointed needles or the magic loop method for knitting socks. With my sister’s sage advice, I made a Harry Potter scarf knit in the round rather than worked flat, which would have saved time but looked terribly amateur.

As we talked, I found my sister again as she began to ask me for advice in return: what classes she should take, how to write that analysis of a Shakespearean sonnet, and how to deal with her roommates who would never do the dishes. I didn’t always understand why some things that seemed obvious to me came with such difficulty to her, but I tried

Courtesy Liz Busby. Photograph by Cooper Douglass.
to give her the benefit of the doubt. Though our campuses were hours apart, we were suddenly, strangely closer than we’d ever been under the same roof.

What makes knitting different from crochet is that all of the stitches are live all of the time. With crochet, you only have to deal with one open loop at a time, while the rest of the piece is safe from unraveling. With knitting, the entire length of your piece is a liminal edge, little loops of possibility. Should you drop one and not notice, every stitch below it will come undone. You’ll have to pause and go down the column, picking up all the stitches that depended on the one you lost.

When Paul talked about hearts knit together in love, did he understand this? Was he trying to tell us that we have not one relationship but many? That when we establish new relationships, we still need to keep an eye on the others? That the greatest lie in the world is that we could practice self-care apart from the web of relationships that comprise us?

The biggest knitting project I’ve ever taken on was making Christmas stockings. The pattern was called “New Ancestral Christmas Stockings,” and it was just as pretentious as it sounds. It was full of complex patterns involving techniques like intarsia and duplicate stitching, all meant to create a stocking composed of three blocks: a plaid, a stripe, and a gorgeous snowflake. As a young mother looking to establish our family’s Christmas culture, I fell in love with it—not considering that I’d be making three of these, one each for me, my husband, and our one-year-old son. Each one took a lot of work; by the time I’d finished the ones for the adults, I’d decided to simplify the baby’s by taking out the snowflake block.
Then Christmas chocolate somehow melted all over my son’s stocking during the festivities. In my rush, I forgot the cardinal rule of wool and threw it in the wash, wherein it quickly shrunk and matted into felt. I cried when I thought of all that wasted work. Next year, I’d have to knit him another one along with one for the new baby.

I complained about it on the phone to my sister, now three states away. We were still talking regularly, sometimes about knitting, sometimes to brainstorm an ending for her latest novel, sometimes to discuss her struggles with her latest singles ward.

I don’t remember when our conversations changed. Three stockings became five. I was constantly tired, chasing three boys around the house and across the playground and into the bathtub. I was too exhausted to write, much less be thoughtful of others. But this is all an excuse. Looking back, I can see that the signs were there in our phone conversations, but I missed them.

“How come I always have to call you?”

In truth, I never called anyone because I was always just trying to keep my head above water or steal a few moments of silence for my introverted brain to recover from the constant noise. I was too exhausted even to write a few sentences.

“Don’t you have any problems?”

Mostly, my problems were things she couldn’t relate to, like childcare questions I outsourced to my playgroup. Other issues I kept between me and my husband. Did she think that because I didn’t complain to her that my life was perfect? Or that I didn’t care about her problems just because I kept mine to myself?

Looking back, I understand now that it could have been exactly that. Or perhaps it was too painful for her to keep talking to me when my life continued to move along the expected track while she felt hers was going off the rails. I didn’t notice. Our conversations went from weekly to monthly, then disappeared entirely.

Nothing induces dread in a knitter as much as finding an unexplained hole in a hand-knitted sweater or sock. Sometimes a piece gets snagged on something and rips; other times, the yarn just tires after years of tension and pulls apart. After all, it’s just fibers spun together. There’s no glue, just the gentle twist of the plies and interlocking stitches. But there’s a sense in which the panic provoked by a hole is absolutely justified. All of your hard work can evaporate as the stresses of normal wear will
cause the hole to expand in all directions until it becomes irreparable. The worst thing you can do in this situation is to pull on or cut the ends that are sticking out. The yarn must be carefully rethreaded through the pattern of the lost stitches, rejoined, and knotted back together, or it will continue to unravel.

When Paul talked about hearts knit together in love, did he understand this? Was he trying to tell us to notice problems when they are small and repair them quickly? That the hurt will only grow, not diminish, if we try to pull those lost threads? That the human heart is a matter of delicacy and urgency?

When we decided to move back to Utah halfway through the COVID-19 pandemic, I was forced to confront the mass of knitting supplies I had acquired over the years: leftover yarn from the baby blankets I’d made for each of my kids, incomplete sets of double-pointed needles I’d lost in various couches, the jars of plastic eyes from when I’d gone through a phase of knitting stuffed animals. All remnants of a time when I’d poured my creativity into something I could do on autopilot while watching kids race cars down a track over and over again. But I hadn’t opened some of these boxes in years. As my kids were growing older and more self-sufficient, my mind returned to writing, and perhaps I didn’t need knitting as much anymore. But I had such good memories with it that I couldn’t let it go entirely. I winnowed my yarn and supplies down into one set of plastic drawers, wrapped clear packing tape around it, and loaded it into the moving van.

We could have moved anywhere, but I longed for my kids to have a relationship with their grandparents beyond what our biannual visits could bestow. It would be good for them to have aunts and uncles in their life to set examples for them, form more connections with them, tell them how things are when their parents can’t get through.

But partly it was for me. I wanted to have closer relationships with my siblings. Sometimes my inability to maintain long-distance relationships felt like a moral failing. Then again, perhaps there’s a reason that the Church is organized around geographic wards. Contact breeds closeness.

Or at least I hoped so. I depended on this principle to bring my sister back to me.

We started seeing each other at least a couple times a month, but sometimes it still felt like we were states away. After Sunday dinner, I’d
sit at the table playing a board game, talking with my other siblings, while she would sit on the couch with her knitting, refusing to be drawn into the game. Was she genuinely interested in what my dad was watching on the TV, or was she actually stewing over something I had said? I could never tell. I was afraid to ask her if she was still writing, if she was dating again, how she was doing beyond the most basic of small talk, because I didn’t want to seem pushy.

Perhaps I should have asked.

I can’t even recall now the words that I said. All I know is that on Christmas Day she stormed out. After an exchange of angry emails and texts, she let me know that she’d no longer be attending any family event I was present at.

The scariest knitting technique, in my opinion, is Norwegian sweater steeking. You knit a solid tube of fabric, usually with an intricate fair-isle pattern. To add the sleeves and introduce shaping, you have to do the one thing you should never do: take scissors and cut through each of your stitches straight up the middle. Sure, you add some machine sewing to reinforce the edges beforehand, and theoretically the sticky quality of the wool should keep the pattern from unraveling. Still, it’s so stressful that some knitters joke that a bottle of beer is a required part of the process, to steel the nerves before the first slice.

When Paul talked about hearts knit together in love, did he understand this? Was he trying to tell us that against all instinct, sometimes our relationships must be broken in order to be reshaped? That our final form may not be the one we started in? That we must trust the process even when it seems to be destroying everything we worked so hard for?

Lately I find myself writing more than knitting. Still, writing can be stressful, especially when you’re trying to build a career. To give myself a break from deadlines and expectations, I started a knitting project—a shawl with stripes of blue, beige, white, and orange yarn that came in a color pack called London Fog. Somehow, two years later, it’s still incomplete, languishing in my drawer, brought out every few months as I tell myself with fervor that this time I will finish it.

Over and over, I find myself writing about broken relationships being mended. I try to write the characters in a balanced way on both sides, really allowing the reader to gain sympathy for both parties. To
give the sense that we are all real people, that our problems can be solved, but that the solution is not “if only they would change.” The reconciliation should not require one to admit the other was right, and yet it should feel real, like both sides are compromising to come together again into something new. I fiddle with the words, trying to create what I can’t find.

Yet in real life, it’s never that easy. I often can’t see the beam in my own eye in my rush to clear the mote from my sister’s eye. I pray over and over for my heart to see more clearly.

Perhaps, like my latest shawl project, it will just take time, faith, and hope. Time for the ripped seams to be stitched back together. Faith that the man who understood carpentry and fishing and shepherding also understands this process of knitting. Hope that my relationship with my sister is not ultimately a dropped stitch, a hole, or a ripped seam, but part of a larger pattern.

This essay by Liz Busby received second place in the 2023 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.
Building an Innovative “Latter-day Saints without Borders” Organization

Warner Woodworth

This article is a reflection and a call to action for many readers who may share a concern about how to reduce human suffering and empower the poor around the world. It is an attempt to describe stories of Latter-day Saints who became social entrepreneurs by laboring to practice our religion—that is, people willing to help the poor, feed the hungry, serve the homeless, and bless the sick everywhere. Attending sacrament meetings on Sundays, accepting a Church calling, doing weekly temple service, being a neighborhood ministering brother or sister, holding daily prayer and scripture reading—all are well and good. Yet such practices are simply the beginning of truly living the gospel.

This year has been especially poignant because of the untimely death of our forty-two-year-old son Ryan last summer in 2022. Yet in the months since that tragic day, I’ve also seen a great deal of death, disease, and suffering in others’ lives as I labor among the global poor. So far, my friends and the nonprofit leaders I work with around the world now total 156 who have died from COVID-19 and related causes. Many were colleagues I hired to lead village development organizations for reducing human suffering. Of course, when these tragedies come to your own family, they become more painful than perhaps otherwise, but my colleagues were just like family to my wife, Kaye, and me.

As the two of us have reflected on and evaluated our personal sorrow and the loss of Ryan our triplet son, I’ve thought of so many others experiencing death or severe illness, both locally and globally. Many who struggle, like our friends in Ukraine, experience devastation, invasion, and war. Millions of others are now homeless, including many in Turkey and Syria,
where a series of earthquakes killed more than 59,000 and destroyed thousands of homes and buildings. Many suffer in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, places where we have labored over several decades, as people there try to cope with droughts, hunger, hurricanes, earthquakes, civil conflicts, floods, and more. Comparatively, our lives are pretty comfortable.

As a young person, I was startled to read a tremendous decree by the Prophet Joseph: “A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world anxious to bless the whole human race.” This clarion call has been my life’s mission ever since I felt this cry from my beloved prophet to reach out with a global perspective to others, not just those I’m closest to or most comfortable being around. Together with friends, my wife, my family members, hundreds of my former students and volunteers, and thousands of others, we have labored to change the world as we have learned and worked around the globe for over four decades. At times, I have rallied my BYU students as well as students from other schools where I have served as a visiting professor, including in Brazil, Switzerland, California, and Hawaii and at the University of Utah, Harvard, Stanford, and my alma mater where I earned my PhD, the University of Michigan.

I believe our collaboration is an exciting testimony of how believers in Christ can uplift the poor and improve society today. We can each become a blessing to others. Our approach is not what the institutional Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may officially do. President Gordon B. Hinckley referred to this when he voiced his concern that we not depend solely on large organizations or institutional service, even on the Church: “We must take care of [the poor] and we must have the facilities to do so. But we must be careful not to overinstitutionalize that care. . . . I think there is a tendency among us to say, ‘Oh, the Church will take care of that. I pay my fast offering. Let the Church take care of that.’ We need as individuals, I think, to reach down and extend a helping hand without notice, . . . to give of that with which the Lord has so generously blessed us.” So, he advocated that we also engage in noninstitutionalized acts of service to the poor.

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I am not writing about the things that government programs, the World Bank, the United Nations, big business, and others can accomplish. Instead, I want to focus on what Jesus taught—that we, like him, should go “about doing good” (Acts 10:38). In this dialogue on practical Christianity, I will share examples of just a few associates with whom I’ve been blessed to serve, including some who later established their own private humanitarian initiatives. They reached out with both faith and action to make a long-term, sustainable difference. So far, as of 2023, my associates and I have designed and implemented some forty-one NGOs (nongovernmental organizations, or nonprofits). We currently have fifty-four paid staff working in sixty-two nations, as well as others in the United States.

In some instances, my associates felt motivated when they saw people’s suffering and felt determined to lessen the pain of those across the planet. Sometimes their efforts were unappreciated and unnoticed. But they continued to make quiet commitments to carry out humanitarian efforts, often in far-flung corners of the world, whether or not they received recognition.

Individual Cases of Work That Became NGOs

For instance, Sarah Carmichael Parsons, a neuroscience graduate student from Canada, helped me organize an NGO named Wave of Hope (2016) after an earthquake and a tsunami struck eleven countries around the Indian Ocean at Christmas in 2004. Instead of a “wave of destruction,” we decided to offer “hope” after 250,000 victims died and millions were injured in the region. I mobilized students in my class at BYU’s Marriott School of Management and formed teams to go assist those suffering in the coastal villages of Thailand. Sarah became the team leader of the project for the tough and complex work of jump-starting the Thai village economy and rebuilding destroyed communities. She had both the spirit and the leadership skills to help mobilize college volunteers who possessed the moral energy and new skills to make an impact. We couldn’t do everything, but we felt we could each do something. Because more than 11,000 Thais had died and many coastal communities were devastated, we began a decade of work to ensure long-term sustainable results. Our efforts included rebuilding homes; recovering the thousand-year-old fishing economy with new boats, motors, and tackle; cleaning and painting wrecked schools for hundreds of children; serving newly widowed mothers and the many new orphans whose parents
had both died; teaching the people how to make rudimentary furniture for their new houses; and much more. Sarah gave her heart to lead this project for the next few years, even while her fiancé, Chris, was fighting for America against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan to help those countries.

In our early labors, some experts with whom we consulted considered us a kind of “Students without Borders” project growing out of my BYU course on organizational behavior, which was called “Becoming a Global Change Agent/Social Entrepreneur.” Additionally, I recruited a few older professional volunteers, including Utah bankers, consultants from Texas, former Thai missionaries, and others. After a decade, the Khao Lak region along Thailand’s coast was largely rebuilt, and we merged the organization with other NGOs I had founded. Sarah served on their boards and eventually launched her own charity with her husband, Chris, and their growing family. Taking a cue from Wave of Hope, she named it Dolls of Hope (2023). So far, they have engaged thousands of Latter-day Saint women to produce handmade soft, cuddly dolls and teddy bears totaling over sixty thousand and have given them to kids in refugee camps in more than forty countries. To this day, Sarah continues her service to those who struggle.

As I see it, we believers in the scriptures and teachings of our latter-day prophets and apostles can each become global ministers by providing humanitarian service in three principal ways. First are the traditional Church programs, such as paying tithes, making personal offerings, or going abroad as a group or even serving as international missionaries in a needy African country, for example. A second area of outreach and humanitarian assistance can be provided through partnering with other institutions. These may consist of Church programs like Latter-day Saint Charities, the Perpetual Education Fund, or regular Church welfare and self-reliance services. Friends from other faiths may also benefit from our work because the Church also collaborates with other religious groups like the Adventists’ ADRA, Catholic Relief, and the Muslim Relief Society. Such partnerships and a variety of outreach efforts enable us to bless our neighbors in need as global ministers. A third category, the one I will primarily describe in this essay, involves each of us taking independent action by engaging in individual acts of consecration and stewardship.

These are what we might refer to as personal initiatives—not the Church’s established programs as an organization but rather actions.
Building an Innovative “Latter-day Saints without Borders” Organization

Inspired by experiences as we pray about how we might help those around us or when we see on the nightly news the devastation impacting a community, region, or country. Even our own neighbors right next door and others who may suffer and struggle in our community deserve our financial support, illustrated by the past winter months of horrific destruction and death from hurricanes in the South, massive snowstorms hitting much of the country, and other natural disasters that have recently torn up regions of the United States: the horrific winters in upstate New York, the wildfires in California, the droughts in the Navajo Nation. I believe it is crucially important that we engage in these kinds of activities locally, not merely globally, because those struggling in difficult circumstances around us typically affect our own lives, and thus we can affect their lives much more easily, more rapidly, and with fewer costs than we can affect people globally. However, in this essay I will specifically emphasize international humanitarian initiatives.

**Living a Practical Christianity**

I believe that serving and empowering the global poor enables us to provide individual acts of consecration and stewardship—the kind that show we can go beyond simply depending on large organizations, as President Hinckley admonished us—and take the initiative to engage in noninstitutionalized acts of service to others.

Such faithful Christian disciples have characteristics such as being self-starters who recognize others’ needs and act to meet those needs. They believe in not waiting to be “command[ed] in all things” (D&C 58:26). Instead, such people take action when they see a problem. They are authentic individuals. They are true to themselves. They are not motivated by external rewards or pressure or recognition. Rather, their high-impact service comes from pure and authentic motives, as the scriptures command.

For example, Mentors International was founded in 1990 when I responded to the pleas of the Filipino Saints in Manila and mobilized a group of Latter-day Saint business executives, a few of my BYU students, and several Filipino Latter-day Saints and evangelical Christians in the island nation. When Mentors was being designed in Manila with a team of U.S. and Filipino founders, its mission was “to build self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit within those who struggle for
sufficiency in developing countries.” Working first in the Philippines and now having expanded to seventeen countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, Mentors works with hired indigenous staff, building increased self-reliance among the recipients of its aid. Efforts are made to charge for consulting services based on ability to pay, which transforms the typical donor-receiver dependency relationship into a more effective, character-building consultant-client relationship. Early on, we hired in Manila Tony San Gabriel, a returned missionary with a management degree, as Mentors executive director. He worked with us as we established the project, and then as we expanded our work, he managed it as a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization. Its primary interventions included training, consulting, walk-in services, professional referrals, and access to microcredit loans. Still today, Mentors depends on individual, foundation, and corporate donations to achieve its goals. As of early 2023, it had raised more than $176 million to train people and provide them with loans. Those efforts, in turn, have established more than one million new jobs, thus benefiting some five million poor people in the developing world. Several years ago, the Church’s First Presidency honored our NGO as an example of initiative-taking service to the global poor. While we appreciated their kindness, we neither sought nor needed such a reward.

An additional case of doing good is that of a recent acquaintance I met while serving to rebuild communities high in the Himalayan mountains after devastating earthquakes. Her name is Ellen Dietrich, an LDS convert from Germany. Several decades ago, she launched a small humanitarian organization, Self Help Nepal (now called Home of Hope), to help Nepalese orphans. But her efforts accelerated after the severe earthquakes in 2015 when her little nonprofit was able to provide emergency aid such as food and tents for some of the earthquake victims. Although she had begun her life’s work earlier with a small

4. Estimate compiled from annual board reports in possession of the author.
Building an Innovative “Latter-day Saints without Borders” Organization

Ellen has now officially graduated some 150 children in Kathmandu. She successfully draws on university students and trainees, both Latter-day Saints and those of other faiths, Germans as well as Americans. They teach the children and foster other projects, such as organizing free-time activities in which the volunteers use their own interests and talents to teach the children pursuits such as sports, singing, dancing, theater performances, and drawing. Since Nepal is a nation of many cultures, volunteers also plan celebrations for Hindu, Buddhist, and Tibetan holidays with the children.

Ellen began by saving her own money, later securing additional funds from German associates, and established the Home of Hope, operating two houses. One is the “old house,” home to children ages eight and older, while the younger children have lived and studied in the “new house” since 2016. The children live in family-like structures in both houses and are taken care of by a Nepalese family, additional employees, and volunteers. The children are subsidized until they complete their education and may then be funded to go on to vocational training or academic study to build a better future of their own. Ellen’s personal, independent ministry to serve “the least of these” (Matt. 25:40) is a wonderful example of what other Latter-day Saints might accomplish in blessing others.

Over my years of working, teaching, and consulting in my chosen vineyard with the poor, I have met many faithful Latter-day Saint humanitarians who have developed what I refer to as social entrepreneurial acumen—the capacity to see problems and then take action. Many draw on business and other training to establish nonprofit start-ups of their own NGOs. As I have been privileged to be a part of growing that movement, I see a powerful trend that, in some ways, I would argue is far more important and may ultimately give us better recognition as Church members than would the typical for-profit business start-up or other means of wealth generation.

Instead, I think what we are seeing now is the flourishing of the means for building civil society rather than for-profit businesses. These include private nongovernmental organizations as well as third-sector institutions that have an enormous impact in benefiting the lives of the poor around the globe. Many such humanitarians have launched initiatives in the past several decades, acting as “social entrepreneurial” Christians who draw on their faith, rely on scriptural values, harness
their educations, and call forth their business skills in designing and launching effective humanitarian services strategies. We see in the preceding illustrations of Sarah Carmichael Parsons, Tony San Gabriel, and Ellen Dietrich various efforts grown by Latter-day Saints within the United States, outside the U.S., and across the world in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. They are Church members who start their own similar programs, draw on that same faith, and, as a result, achieve significant impacts for good.

The Church members with whom I have collaborated have primarily been BYU students, BYU alumni, and some alumni from other schools. So far, the total number of young people joining forces with us to change the world comprises some 4,200 volunteers. My colleagues and I have also reached out for volunteers beyond academia, such as homemakers, retirees, engineers, artists, businesspeople, schoolteachers, accountants, musicians, and lawyers. Our collective fundraising exceeds $1.5 billion! Yes, that’s with a “B.” In all our work, we try to use Latter-day Saint principles defining “charity”—the very term that comes from old words for “Christian love”—to elevate the poor in such a way that they may help themselves and, in turn, help others. We labor using this notion of a beneficial ripple effect. It’s not a handout but a hand up. It’s not building dependency or simply giving out things and goods. And it’s not a form of creating a culture of wanting more and living passively while charity and relief simply continue to flow to the recipients. Rather, the LDS ministering that my friends and I seek consists of helping people learn principles and develop systems so that the poor may empower themselves and then reach out and empower others toward self-reliance.

Why are such Latter-day Saint humanitarians needed today? Because the reality is that a great many people on the face of this earth are suffering. According to the World Bank, 719 million people, 10 percent of the world’s population, live on less than $2.15 a day. According to Brigham Young, this is wrong: “We will take a moral view, a political view, and we see the inequality that exists in the human family. . . . It is an unequal condition of mankind. . . . What is going to be done? The Latter-day Saints will never accomplish their mission until this inequality shall cease on the earth.”


Building an Innovative “Latter-day Saints without Borders” Organization

It is clear to me and other experts that critical needs are not being met by enormous systems or large institutions, whether they be governments, the United Nations, or the International Red Cross. And the reality is that, even if we gave away all the money we have as a church, or as a country, it still wouldn’t solve the problems of the global poor. More about these problems and private Church-member initiatives can be found in my recent book on LDS humanitarian efforts, *Radiant Mormonism*. The challenge is to learn how we can be “practicing Christians” by using capital—whether financial, human, or organizational—to build a better world and address these terrible problems that the worldwide poor face and, by doing so, help the people lift themselves up.

**Conclusions**

In this essay, I’m advocating that we believers in Christ organize our humanitarian efforts into what I’m calling “Latter-day Saints without Borders.” It will become an association of our Church members’ humanitarian organizations that collaborate and learn from each other. But it will not become just another monolithic organization operating as one. Rather, it will become a network for learning innovations and best practices from each other while remaining independent and more innovative than a bureaucracy. When I began proposing this concept in the 1980s, I felt the time was not right and our efforts were too young. Now the day has finally come to make a more significant difference in the world. I believe these mini-cases offer glimpses of the many ways that we can utilize our God-given talents to carry out what the Church teaches. We can mobilize our efforts, not in one big bureaucratic institution with mountains of red tape and rigid policies but rather in bottom-up, grassroots global initiatives.

In 1985, we established the first two NGOs in Utah: the Ouelessebougou Alliance and CHOICE Humanitarian. Acquaintances predicted neither would succeed. They warned that these nonprofits would lack money and volunteers and would disintegrate within a couple of years. Such predictions were dramatically wrong. Each has lasted thirty-eight years and is now stronger than ever, having raised many millions of dollars and produced amazing socioeconomic impacts for thousands of villages in a dozen nations.

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Since that humble beginning, Church members have founded and developed some 267 other global NGOs that serve those who struggle in over a hundred countries. The time is now to collaborate further, to exchange and learn from each one’s best practices, and to partner with Latter-day Saint innovators throughout the world so that together we can truly generate great blessings to the entire human race. Long live Latter-day Saints without Borders!

Warner Woodworth’s life has been one of working to reduce poverty in a hundred countries. With collaborators, he has helped established forty-one NGOs (nongovernment organizations) that currently operate in sixty-two nations. Married and blessed with ten children, he has served in multiple bishoprics, in a mission presidency, and on several high councils. Formerly, he was an institute director, a full-time seminary teacher, and a professor at multiple colleges, primarily at the Marriott School of Business, Brigham Young University. He has published twelve books and more than three hundred articles, and he has presented his research at nearly a thousand academic conferences. But those were his “day jobs.” This paper draws on his life as a Latter-day Saint global-change agent, as well as a practicing academic. Now in his eighty-second year—after teaching at BYU and other universities such as Rio de Janeiro, the University of Michigan, and Claremont in southern California—he is accelerating his writing to bear witness of Christ and advocate for the poor. Seeking to engage others in applying their abilities to serve the world’s “have-nots” is his lifelong mission.
“Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing”
New Context for “Skin of Blackness” in the Book of Mormon

T. J. Uriona

For many readers of the Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 5 can prove rather challenging. Not only does this chapter contain the actualization of a curse and the apparent genesis of an outgroup, but it also states that “the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon” this group because of their iniquity (2 Ne. 5:21). Given the prevalence of racial thought in society today, this passage has been interpreted as a hurtful reference to a phenotypic change in skin color brought on by a divine curse, leading many researchers to propose alternatives to a purely racialized understanding of the text.¹ In support of this approach, senior leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have rejected any racialized reading of the passage but at the same time have given no formal interpretation.² In this paper, I will present a new context with which to interpret the phrase “skin of blackness” that builds on apparent intertextuality between Nephi’s writings, those attributed to Moses,

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¹. This is reflected in the varied interpretations this phrase has received over the years. For a review, see David M. Belnap, “The Inclusive, Anti-discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon,” Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 42 (2021): 195–370.

and an example of a similar curse found in a prominent treaty from the ancient Near East.

**Contextualizing 2 Nephi Chapter 5**

The Book of Mormon begins with an epic wilderness journey of a small group of Israelites. It describes their passing over a great body of water before obtaining the land the Lord prepared for them. Sometime after they arrived in this new land, a separation took place within the group. Those who followed Nephi, the first author of the Book of Mormon, had recognized their need to leave Jerusalem and accepted Nephi’s prophetic message of the coming of the Messiah. According to Nephi, “All those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words. And we did take our tents and whatsoever things were possible for us, and did journey in the wilderness” (2 Ne. 5:6–7). Nephi would write further that “we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (2 Ne. 5:10).

In many ways, Nephi seems to relate the record of his family’s journey to Moses guiding the Israelites. When Nephi references those who “hearken[ed]” to his word and who “ke[pt]” the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord, he mirrors language found in Moses’s request to the Israelites before they entered the land the Lord had prepared for them:

> If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the...  

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4. See also Leviticus 26:14–15; Deuteronomy 4:5; 6:1; 7:11–12; 8:11; 26:17; 1 Kings 2:3, 8:53; Nehemiah 1:7; 9:13; 10:29; and Malachi 4:4. In 1 Kings 2 and 8; Nehemiah 1, 9, and 10; and Malachi 4, the admonition to keep the judgments, statutes, and commandments is credited to Moses. In 1 Nephi 17:22, Nephi’s brothers also credit Moses with this admonition, as does Samuel the Lamanite in Helaman 15:5.

5. The following observation by Noel B. Reynolds is informative in relation to this point: “Lehi may have compared himself to Moses as a rhetorical device to help his children see the divine direction behind his actions. In his final words to his children, Lehi invokes Moses’ farewell address to the Israelites [found in Deuteronomy]. In so doing, Lehi casts himself in a role similar to that of Moses. Nephi portrays himself in similar terms on the small plates, apparently following the pattern set by his father.” Noel B. Reynolds, “Lehi as Moses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): abstract.
“Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing”

law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, . . . I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. . . . I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live. (Deut. 30:10, 15–16, 19)

According to this passage in Deuteronomy, blessings come from “hearken[ing]” to the voice of the Lord and obeying his commandments “in the land whither [one goes] to possess.” Thus, if Nephi’s prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the Messiah were indeed the word of the Lord, then (a) blessings should have followed those who hearkened to Nephi’s words, and (b) curses should have followed those who did not. In 2 Nephi 5, we get Nephi’s description of the fulfillment of this promise. In many respects, this chapter reflects the pattern for covenant renewal that is found within the books of Moses and was common to the ancient Near East. Jan Martin suggests that


7. “The view that divine beings played a role in political history through blessings and curses was pervasive in the ancient Near East. It shaped and shoved foreign relations to the extent that it reinforced the normative principle that promises should be kept.” Lucas Grassi Freire, “Foreign Relations in the Ancient Near East: Oaths, Curses, Kingship and Prophecy,” Journal for Semitics 26, no. 2 (February 2018): 664.

“Lehi may have wanted to formally reaffirm ‘the continuity of the Mosaic covenant in a New world setting’ by holding a covenant-renewal ceremony similar to the one Moses held for the Israelites as they prepared to enter and establish themselves in the promised land of Canaan (see Deuteronomy 1–30). Nephi may have honored this important transition in the family’s life by commencing a new book, 2 Nephi, and by recording activities that reflect Moses’ behavior in Deuteronomy.”

Stephen Ricks first showed how the ancient Near East practice of covenant renewal was being used in the Book of Mormon in his analysis of King Benjamin’s address. He pointed out that “the formal structure of the Benjamin pericope has equally striking parallels to the covenant passages in the Hebrew Bible and to the treaty literature of the ancient Near East.” The parallels that Ricks identified in King Benjamin’s address are from the formulaic structure of the suzerain-vassal treaty (or covenant). There also seem to be striking parallels to the formal structure of the suzerain-vassal treaty in what Nephi wrote in 2 Nephi 5 (see table 1).

Taylor Halverson points out that “the core purpose of the suzerain-vassal covenant was to secure prosperity in the land if one was faithful to the commands of God or the king.” This idea seems to be central to what Nephi wrote in 2 Nephi 5, which begins with a quote from Nephi’s brothers who said, “For behold, we will not have [Nephi] to be our ruler; for it belongs unto us, who are the elder brethren, to rule over this people” (2 Ne. 5:3). However, Nephi’s brothers had been admonished earlier by their father, Lehi, to “rebel no more against your brother [Nephi]” (2 Ne. 1:24). Lehi also said that if they “will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish. And if ye will hearken unto him I leave unto you a blessing” (2 Ne. 1:28).

In accordance with the suzerain-vassal covenant formula, Nephi affirmed his divine appointment to rule in 2 Nephi 5 by describing the blessings that came to those who followed him and mentioning a curse.

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11. To learn more about the suzerain-vassal treaty, see Halverson, “Origin and Purpose.”
that came upon those who did not. In this chapter, Nephi seems to take great care to show that those who hearkened to the Lord and followed him received the promised blessings that brought prosperity and life. When evaluating these blessings, what stands out is how closely they seem to match the blessings promised to the Israelites when they “hearken unto the voice of the Lord” (Deut. 30:10) during a time of covenant renewal described in Deuteronomy (see table 2).

Table 1. Comparison of the Suzerain-Vassal Covenant Formula with the Nephites’ Covenant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Structure</th>
<th>\textit{2 Nephi 5}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The great king or God identifies himself (see Ex. 20:2).</td>
<td>Nephi introduces himself as the appointed king (2 Ne. 5:1–8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical review: The great king or God reviews his past relationship with the vassal (subjects), while emphasizing his blessings to evoke loyalty and allegiance (see Ex. 20:2).</td>
<td>Nephi provides a historical review of the blessings received by those who followed Nephi (2 Ne. 5:11–18).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stipulations: The great king or God promises security in a promised land insofar as the vassal demonstrates total fidelity and loyalty by keeping the covenant stipulations (see Ex. 20:3–17).</td>
<td>Nephi stipulates the need to keep the judgments, statutes, and commandments of the Lord (2 Ne. 5:10).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording and depositing the text: The covenant is recorded and deposited in a secure or lasting location, such as at a temple (see Ex. 25:21).</td>
<td>Nephi records and later deposits the text with his brother Jacob, whom he ordained as a priest (2 Ne. 5:26, 30–33; Jacob 1:1–3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of witnesses: God and angels serve as witnesses, though people can as well (see Ex. 24:3).</td>
<td>The people witness that they will follow Nephi (2 Ne. 5:9).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curses and blessings: Consequences are stipulated for obeying or violating the terms of the covenant (see Deut. 27–28).</td>
<td>Nephi identifies the consequences of violating the terms of the covenant (2 Ne. 5:20–25).</td>
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14. Exodus 15:26 also alludes to the need to hearken and keep the statutes and commandments of God. In this verse, the Lord further promises that “I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians.”

15. After arriving in the promised land Nephi would say that “we were blessed in abundance” (1 Ne. 18:24). In that instance he would also list some of the very same blessings he chronicles after separating from his brothers Laman and Lemuel (1 Ne. 18:24–25).
Nephi’s repetition of blessings found in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26 further suggests that Nephi is using the suzerain-vassal covenant as a framework. Therefore, when Nephi says next that the Lord “had

16 Starting with Josiah’s reforms, there seems to have been an increased emphasis on the book of Deuteronomy, or the “book of law,” which led to what is often called the Deuteronomist reform. Because of this renewed emphasis on Moses’s writings, it is reasonable to expect that Nephi’s approach to his theological agenda would reflect the social context surrounding the Deuteronomist reforms. See Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon
caused the cursing to come upon [his brothers], yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity” (2 Ne. 5:21), the Deuteronomic formula of “life and death, blessing and cursing” (Deut. 30:19) would suggest that death would follow. If this is the case, it is possible that when Nephi says next that “the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon” those that refused to accept his rule (2 Ne. 5:21), the “skin of blackness” might not be an explicit reference to the curse itself—that is, what is often interpreted as a change in phenotypic skin color or some other physical mark—but rather a reference to the possibility of death for those cursed as Moses warned. Strikingly, we find support for this interpretation of the “skin of blackness” in a Neo-Assyrian treaty that contains a similar curse. This example would have been contemporary to Nephi’s writings and to date apparently has not been explored. The significance of this example in relation to the Book of Mormon phrase “skin of blackness” cannot be understated, given how troubling this expression has been historically to many who read the Book of Mormon.

**Neo-Assyrian Skin of Blackness**

The Neo-Assyrian empire is considered by many to be the first true empire in the ancient Near East. It reached its zenith just prior to Lehi.

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18. In the book of Jeremiah, we find a rhetorical argument that should give pause when attempting to interpret what Nephi said as a change in skin color: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” (Jer. 13:23). “Jeremiah’s rhetorical question implying nothing more than immutability has its parallel in an ancient Egyptian wisdom saying, ‘There is no Nubian who leaves his skin,’ as well as in the Greek proverb, ‘It’s like trying to wash an Ethiopian white!’” David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 38.

19. Old Persian cuneiform was deciphered around 1830. The writing system of the Assyrians (cuneiform) was not deciphered until about 1850. Therefore any potential parallels between Neo-Assyrian records and the Book of Mormon have to be by chance or because they share a common milieu.

and Nephi’s time and was responsible for the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and Lehi’s ancestral homeland. The threat of destruction by cursing was an important part of the suzerain-vassal treaties between a sovereign, such as the Neo-Assyrian empire, and a vassal state, such as Israel and Judah. Curses were used in these treaties as a linguistic tool for elucidating the threat of destruction. One notable example of this type of treaty from the ancient Near East is the Neo-Assyrian Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon (713–669 BC), which has one of the most extensive sections of curses ever found.

In order to ensure a safe transfer of power following his death, the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon drafted a succession treaty that appointed his son Aššurbanipal the crown prince of Assyria, despite the fact that, like Nephi, Aššurbanipal was not the eldest son. Significantly, Esarhaddon’s treaty is believed to be one of the most widely distributed and widely known treaties in the ancient Near East. Because Judah was a vassal state to the Neo-Assyrian empire, it is a real possibility that a copy of the treaty, written in both Akkadian and Aramaic, would have been on display within the royal court of the temple in Jerusalem. Many scholars believe that the widespread distribution of this treaty contributed to other record keepers and scribes—including biblical ones—adopting or alluding to motifs found within the treaty. Therefore, Nephi’s language

21. There are some potentially intriguing parallels in Nephi’s writings with Neo-Assyrian motifs, rhetoric, and iconography, which would suggest that he was familiar with the Neo-Assyrian tradition. See Todd Uriona, “Assyria and the ‘Great Church’ of Nephi’s Vision,” Interpreter 55 (2023): 1–30.

22. Noel B. Reynolds makes an important observation related to this point that again ties Nephi’s writings to Moses’s record. “It is in the speeches in Deuteronomy that Moses declares Joshua as his successor (see Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28; 31:3, 14, 23). . . . Lehi similarly seizes on the occasion of his pending demise to appoint Nephi as his successor, though in a somewhat indirect way. Recognizing the unlikelihood that Nephi will enjoy the same support that the early Israelites gave Joshua, Lehi promises and warns his sons that ‘if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish’ (2 Nephi 1:28).” Reynolds, “Lehi as Moses,” 29.


when speaking of his brothers being cursed could reasonably reflect this historical reality.

Within the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, there is a malediction pronounced on those who are not faithful to the treaty, which in many respects is similar to what we find in Nephi’s record. This example reads, “May they [the gods] make your skin and the skin of your women, your sons and your daughters—dark. May they be as black as pitch and crude oil.”

In his work looking at parallels between Neo-Assyrian writings and the book of Nahum in the Bible, Gordon Johnston points out that changing the color of the skin as an “expression of judgment is without parallel in the Old Testament, and its only ancient Near Eastern parallel appears in the Vassal Treaty of Esarhaddon.”

In Esarhaddon’s succession treaty, this curse was linked to a failure to safely transfer power to Esarhaddon’s younger son, Aššurbanipal. Similarly, Nephi’s mention of a “skin of blackness” was in the context of the legitimate transfer of power to Nephi in spite of the fact that he was a younger brother to Laman and Lemuel. Given these similarities in context, along with Nephi’s training as a scribe and the historical significance of Esarhaddon’s treaty, it would not be surprising for Nephi’s record to contain a likely parallel to the Neo-Assyrian “skin of blackness” curse. If we acknowledge that such a parallel might exist, then Esarhaddon’s treaty provides us with more clues to better interpret the meaning of Nephi’s “skin of blackness” curse.


26. Johnston, “Nahum’s Rhetorical Allusions,” 432. In another translation, the curse reads, “(Ditto, ditto;) may they make your flesh and the flesh of your women, your brothers, your sons and your daughters as black as [bitumen], pitch and naphtha.” “Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty,” in Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths, ed. Simo Parpola and Kasuko Watanabe, State Archives of Assyria, vol. 2 (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988), 54 (no. 6, row 585). Johnston’s translation of this verse differs from the State Archives of Assyria translation in translating the word šīru as “skin” instead of “flesh.” However, a few verses after this verse, it says, “May your flesh and the flesh of your women, your brothers, your sons and your daughters be wasted like the chameleon, . . . just as the honeycomb is pierced with holes, so may they pierce your flesh.” “Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty,” 54–55 (no. 6, rows 591–94). These verses would suggest that the semantics of “flesh” are not unreasonably understood as “skin,” as we get in Johnston’s translation.


because the treaty connects blackness to pitch and bitumen: “May they be as black as pitch and crude oil.”

**Skin Black as Pitch**

Shiyanthis Thavapalan suggests in her work looking at the meaning of color in Mesopotamia that “the meaning of a color could be based on convention, wherein the relation between it and the object or phenomenon it is ascribed to is arbitrary and must be learned. The association of blackness with death, in particular with the words *salmu* and *tarku* in Mesopotamian divinatory writings is a good example of this.” Interestingly, when we look at divination practices involving the sick, we find that the color association between blackness and death is in fact ascribed to pitch or bitumen. Leiden Stol describes this relationship in this way: “At the entrance of a house two divine guardians, fighting with each other, made of gypsum and [bitumen], were drawn on the walls or set up as puppets. The door of the room of a sick person was smeared with gypsum and [bitumen] and an ancient commentary identifies gypsum with Ninurta and [bitumen] with the demon Asakku and explains: ‘Ninurta chases Asakku.’”

Therefore, the meaning ascribed to the blackness of bitumen in Mesopotamian divination practices is that of death. It is likely then that in the curse found in the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon (where pitch and bitumen are used to ascribe some meaning to the blackness of the skin), the meaning of blackness is also death. We find further support for this suggestion in an apocalyptic vision of Aššurbanipal, the appointed king in the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon. That vision describes a demon from the underworld that had the face of

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29. Steymans, “Deuteronomy 28 and Tell Tayinat,” 13. Bitumen is a form of petroleum now commonly referred to as asphalt. The Akkadian word for bitumen can also be translated as “pitch.”


32. R. J. Forbes says that “perhaps the connection always made by medieval writers between pitch and bitumen and the devils and other dark creatures is a survival of a much older tradition contrasting black and white magic and assigning to each its specific ingredients.” R. J. Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, vol. 1 (Leiden, Neth.: E. J. Brill, 1955), 96.

33. The Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon was written to ensure that Aššurbanipal became king following Esarhaddon’s death.
Asakku (or Anzû), which in the divination for the sick was made of bitumen and was associated with death, and a body as “black as pitch.” The text of that vision states, “There was a man, his body black as pitch, his face resembling that of Anzû; he was clad in red armor. In his left hand he carried a bow, in his right hand he wielded a dagger, while he tramped on a snake with his left foot.” Commenting on this passage (and its relationship to Anzû described in the Epic of Gilgamesh), Helge Kvanvig writes, “The dark face in the Death-Dream symbolized ill fortune, as does also the black color generally in Akkadian texts. The first part of the description of the man, which concerns his body, seems then to be formed on the basis of the Anzu-bird symbolism and the intention to present the man as ‘a bringer of misfortune’.”

In another commentary on this vision, Alexandre Loktionov explains, “In the context of a composition with other ‘Egyptianising’ elements, the presence of a pitch black man in the underworld could be seen as reminiscent of Osiris, who was regularly portrayed with black skin. Moreover, a face similar to Anzû would imply a bird-headed individual who is otherwise human: while this could conceivably be Mesopotamian, it

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34. In Aššurbanipal’s vision and the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, salmu is the word used to describe the blackness that was to cover the skin like pitch. Thavapalan indicates that the meaning for the Akkadian salmu is “to grow dark, be dim, black’ but also ‘to be enveloped in mist, grow blind (said of eyes)’ or ‘be obscured’” and that the semitic equivalent to Akkadian salmu in Hebrew is “selem ‘black or dark’ and salmawet ‘gloom, pitch, darkness.’” Shiyanthi Thavapalan, *The Meaning of Color in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2020), 154. Both the Akkadian and Hebrew roots are equivalent words: Ugaritic šlim; Akkadian šalāmu, “be dark, black”; šalmu, “black, dark”; šalamu, “blackness” = Hebrew אֲרֶם; šalmut, “darkness” (Ps. 107:10, 14; Job 24:17, 34:22). Hayim ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew: Etymological-Semantic and Idiomatic Equivalents with Supplement on Biblical Aramaic* (Jersey City, N.J.: KTAV, 2009), 323–24.


36. “There was a man, his expression was grim, / his face was like a ravening Anzû-bird.” A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Text*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 301 (ll. 65–66). Commenting on this verse, A. R. George says, “The fact that the figure displays the face of the Anzû-bird confirms the identification, for according to a phrase quoted by a commentary on *Sakikkû V*11, ‘Death (has) the face of Anzû.’” George, *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 306 no. 66.

37. Helge S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man* (Neukirchener-Vluyn, Ger.: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 411–12.
is also entirely typical of Egypt where bird-headed deities like Horus, Sokar, and Thoth all have important Underworld roles.”38 Both of these commentators seem to suggest that the black color of the demon’s skin described in Aššurbanipal’s dream is to be understood as a sign of misfortune, the underworld, or death.39 Furthermore, like we saw in the Mesopotamian divinatory practices, the reference to pitch and bitumen helped in ascribing that meaning.40

**Egyptian Skin of Blackness**

The ascribed connection between the blackness of pitch (or bitumen) and death might be reflected in Egyptian mummification practices. Lucas notes that “from a study of the writings of the Egyptian, Arab, Greek and Latin authors, who treat the subject of mummies and mummification, there would seem to be no doubt whatever that either bitumen or pitch, or both, were extensively employed by the ancient Egyptian [sic] in the preservation of the dead.”41 Recent chemical analysis of mummies supports this observation for mummies dating after the New Kingdom (1250–1050 BC). A team of scientists recently found that “the use of bitumen in balms becomes more prevalent during the Third Intermediate Period, ca 750 BC and was extensively used during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods.”42 This change in the process of mummification correlates to the time period in which Neo-Assyrian literature begins to speak of skin being black as bitumen and pitch and to the time period in which Nephi used the expression “skin of blackness” as part of his record. We see then that during this time, according to Clark and his colleagues, “both practical and theological associations with bitumen are responsible for the increase in its use, and of dark coloured balms generally, in the latest periods of Egyptian history, as it democratized death and the transformation of the deceased into Osiris.”43

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The increased use of bitumen by the Egyptians does not seem to have gone unnoticed by the Israelites, who used bitumen to formally bury sacred records in caves and Genizahs. According to Hugh Nibley, this was accomplished “in specially-made earthen jars, wrapped in linen which was ‘coated with wax or pitch or asphalt [bitumen] which proves that the scrolls were hidden in the cave for safe preservation, to be recovered and used later again.’ . . . The peculiar method of storage also indicates very plainly that the documents were meant for a long seclusion. . . . [The Israelites laid] a roll away with the scrupulous care and after the very manner of entombing an Egyptian mummy.”

This process of preserving records suggests that an association between the blackness of bitumen or pitch and death would have been well understood during the time that Nephi referred to a “skin of blackness.” We find support for this in the Bible. For instance, the armies of Sodom and Gomorrah flee in the direction of the Dead Sea, where pits of bitumen or pitch are found. As it is told, in their retreat, some of the men “fell there” (presumably meaning the bitumen pits) and perished, whereas the rest “that remained” fled into the mountains (Gen. 14:10). This story provides yet another example in which being covered with bitumen or pitch, thus becoming black, is connected to death.

**Skin Dark as Pitch and Death**

While most references to “skin as black as pitch” within Neo-Assyrian literature seem easily interpretable as a motif for death, there is one example, presumably referring to a Nubian king of Egypt, that may be misconstrued—as Nephi’s “skin of blackness” sometimes is—as a reference to skin color. Like the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, this example describes the cursed fate of the defeated king that failed to honor Assyrian sovereignty. The interpretation of this particular example is complicated because it was applied to a Nubian king of Egypt who, as such, would have had what we identify today as “black skin.” However, interpreting this example as literally referencing a person’s skin color fails to recognize the fact that the description involving the Nubian

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king came after the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, in which the phrase “black as pitch” is applied without respect to a specific individual or group of people.\textsuperscript{46} Furthermore, this fragmented example of the Nubian king is not isolated but rather comes as part of a greater narrative describing the destruction that came upon the king and his people after they failed to recognize Assyrian sovereignty: “into his plundered palace, . . . his wives, his sons and [his] daughters, . . . [who] like him, had skins as dark as pitch.”\textsuperscript{47} Just prior to these lines, the text describes how Aššurbanipal and the Neo-Assyrian army massacred the people of the city. Following the reference to “skin as dark as pitch,” the text goes on to describe all the spoils Aššurbanipal took from the defeated king.\textsuperscript{48} All this suggests that this reference to “skin dark as pitch” probably has more to do with a motif for death\textsuperscript{49} than with phenotypic skin color, especially since the fate is not limited to the king but also affects his “wives, his sons and [his] daughters.”\textsuperscript{50}

One more Neo-Assyrian example worth considering describes the death of a rebellious king. It comes from a manuscript\textsuperscript{51} that details the rebellion and subsequent death of Aššurbanipal’s brother, the king of Babylon.\textsuperscript{52} In this example, we again see how the blackness of pitch

\textsuperscript{48} Lambret, “Booty from Egypt?,” 66.
\textsuperscript{49} Thavapalan supports the idea that the reference to “skin black as bitumen” in Esarhaddon’s succession treaty is suggestive of death, despite not making that connection with the reference to the Nubian King. Concerning Esarhaddon’s succession treaty, she says, “The blackening alludes to the idea of burning skin or flesh and death.” Thavapalan, Meaning of Color in Ancient Mesopotamia, 155.
\textsuperscript{50} Nephi also indicates that the curse that came upon his brothers would afflict those they associated with (see 2 Ne. 5:21–23).
\textsuperscript{51} This manuscript is an Aramaic text in Demotic script. In describing the text, Richard Steiner says, “This largely poetic text is the liturgy of the New Year’s festival of an Aramaic-speaking community in Upper Egypt, perhaps in Syene. It seems to have been dictated by a priest of the community, possibly at the beginning of the third century BCE, to an Egyptian scribe trained in the fourth century BCE.” Richard C. Steiner, “The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script (1.99),” in The Context of Scripture, vol. 1, Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2003), 310.
\textsuperscript{52} “When Esarhaddon named his successors, he split the empire between two of his sons, with Aššurbanipal as king of Assyria and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn as king of Babylonia. This arrangement functioned until 652 BCE, at which point a civil war began between the brothers. The war ended with Aššurbanipal’s victory and Šamaš-šuma-ukīn’s death
is used to convey an association with death. According to Shana Zaia, the “cursed Babylonian king Sarmuge (Šamaš-šuma-ukīn) receiv[es] the advice of his frustrated sister that, if he does not return to Nineveh and make amends with his brother Sarbanabal (Aššurbanipal), he should build a room full of incense, perfumes, tar, and pitch so that he can set himself, his family, and his palace on fire when Babylon inevitably falls to Assyria.”

It is telling that in this story the rebel brother is encouraged to cover himself and his family with pitch, in this case a type of pitched sepulcher, in anticipation of his impending death. Aššurbanipal’s rebellious brother had been unfaithful to his father’s treaty, and the phenomenon used to ascribe meaning to his subsequent cursing and death was being covered with the blackness of pitch. This story, which seems to have been passed down for many years before it was recorded sometime after Nephi’s lifetime, is strikingly similar to what we find in Nephi’s record describing the cursing and skin of blackness that came upon his rebellious brothers. Therefore, when understood as a motif for death, Nephi’s use of the expression “skin of blackness” is not unprecedented for his time and place.


4. Forbes says that according to Assyrian law “for certain transgressions hot bitumen is poured over the head of the delinquent.” Forbes, *Studies in Ancient Technology*, 96.

5. Nephi and Aššurbanipal were both appointed by their father to rule over their older brothers. They were both trained as scribes and were in control of the family records. The stories of their brothers being cursed appear to have been told as part of the liturgy of the New Year and both were recorded using an Egyptian script. Steiner, “The Aramaic Text in Demotic Script (1.99),” 309–27; John S. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 123–50.

6. The use of blackness and whiteness is evident in some other biblical texts: Daniel 12:10, “Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried”; Psalm 51:2, 7, “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. . . . Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow”; Song of Solomon 1:5–6, “I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me”; Acts 9:18, “And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith”; and 2 Nephi 30:6, “Their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and many generations shall not pass away among them, save they shall be a pure [white] and delightsome people.” Compare 2 Nephi 5:21–22; Jacob 1:12–14; 3:8; Alma 5:21, 24, 27; 13:12; 32:42; and Mormon 5:15.
Biblical Examples of a “Skin of Blackness”

The phrase “black skin” is also used as a motif for death and destruction in the Bible.57 One of the earliest examples is in the book of Job: “For I know that thou wilt bring me to death. . . . My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat” (Job 30:23, 30). In these verses, Job describes the deathly appearance of his diseased body by indicating that his “skin is black.” In another example, the prophet Nahum foretells the fate of the Neo-Assyrian empire, describing the people of Nineveh: “the heart melteth, and the knees smite together, and much pain is in all loins, and the face of them all gather blackness” (Nahum 2:10). This particular example can be understood to be a subversive reversal of the “skin . . . black as pitch” curse found in Esarhaddon’s treaty. According to Johnston, Nahum uses the language of Esarhaddon’s Treaty to describe how the faces of the Ninevites went “dark at death.”58 In another example, the Israelites in Jerusalem would suffer a similar fate to that of the people of Nineveh at the hands of the Babylonians. Around the same time Nephi made his record, the book of Lamentations describes a devastating famine that came as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem: “Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities. . . . Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine” (Lam. 5:7, 10). All these examples depict the approach of death—from disease, war, or terrible famine—as a “skin of blackness.” This sampling from the Bible helps provide context for Nephi’s statement that a “skin of blackness” came upon his brothers and suggests that Nephi was using a well-documented motif for death in the ancient Near East, rather than referring to phenotypic skin color.59

In the book of Lamentations, we find another example where being “black” is once again used to describe the appearance of suffering individuals and an impending death. This example comes at a time when the prophet Jeremiah had warned of a “curse” that would come to the inhabitants of Jerusalem if they, like Nephi’s brothers, failed to hearken

57. This is especially true for writings around the time Nephi wrote his record. See Isaiah 50:3; Jeremiah 8:21; 14:2; Ezekiel 32:7–8; and Micah 3:6. The two examples in Jeremiah use the Hebrew word qadar, which means to be dark and, by implication, to mourn in sackcloth or sordid garments. This same word is used for the second meaning in Job 5:11; 30:28; and Psalm 35:14; 38:6; 42:9; 43:2.
59. Song of Solomon 1:5–6 also refers to being “black” and can likewise be understood in relation to a distressed state.
We read in Jeremiah 6:19, “Hear, O earth: behold, I will bring evil upon this people, even the fruit of their thoughts, because they have not hearkened unto my words, nor to my law, but rejected it” (see also Jer. 6:10, 17; 7:24, 26–27; 17:27; 25:3–7; 26:3–6; 36:31; 37:2). This evil that came upon those who remained in Jerusalem is later described in Lamentations in a similar way to the cursing of Nephi’s brothers. Lamentations describes how failure to hearken led to a cursing where the “white” appearance of the inhabitants of Jerusalem is contrasted with a “black” one following their destruction: “Her Nazarites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk. . . . [But after their destruction] their visage is blacker than a coal; they are not known in the streets: their skin cleaveth to their bones; it is withered, it is become like a stick. They that be slain with the sword are better than they that be slain with hunger: for these pine away, stricken through for want of the fruits of the field” (Lam. 4:7–9). According to Kotze,

the “darker than soot” appearance of the [Nazarite] in Lam. 4:8 has been variously understood by modern readers. To name only three examples, scholars have taken it as a symptom of the undernourishment of the [Nazarite], as the result of sunburn, or as an indication of how dirty the [Nazarite] became when they rummaged through the refuse heaps looking for food. The expression [darker than soot], however, does not have to be interpreted literally and may rather be another literary image that associates the [Nazarite] with the realm of the dead. Comparable images appear in Mesopotamian texts of different genres.

Similar ideas have been put forward for how to interpret the “skin of blackness” in the Book of Mormon that are likewise based on a literal reading. However, like the “blacker than a coal” example in Lamentations, the “skin of blackness” in the Book of Mormon need not be interpreted literally and might better be understood as an association with death.

Kotze further compares Jeremiah’s words, “their visage is blacker than a coal,” to Aššurbanipal’s vision of the underworld, which, as we saw earlier, describes “a man, his body black as pitch.” Kotze says, “Given that death and the netherworld were associated with gloom, including darkened bodies, . . . in Lam[entation] 4’s larger cultural and intellectual

60. Jeremiah 26:6. Nephi indicates that he has at least some of the writings of Jeremiah. See 1 Nephi 5:13.
environment, it is possible that the sentence [“their visage is blacker than a coal”] in v. 8 is an expression of this association that depicts the [Nazarites] as ‘dead men walking.’”

Given that Jeremiah and Nephi shared the same “cultural and intellectual environment,” such a reading should be considered when interpreting Nephi’s reference to a “skin of blackness.” If we apply Kotze’s logic to Nephi’s words, Nephi’s reference to a “skin of blackness” does not have to be interpreted literally and might instead be saying that his brothers have become “dead men walking” because of their failure to hearken to the voice of the Lord. After all, Laman and Lemuel were once “white, and exceedingly fair and delightful,” but then God caused a “skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Ne. 5:21), a contrast which is strikingly similar to how the book of Lamentations contrasts the once-pure and “whiter than milk” inhabitants of Jerusalem to a “blacker than a coal” appearance after their failure to hearken (Lam. 4:7–8).

If we understand Nephi’s reference to a “skin of blackness” as a motif for death, related to the effect of being cursed (that is, they became “as dead men walking”) rather than the curse itself, we are better able to see how Nephi is using Moses’s promise of “life and death, blessing and cursing” to frame the narrative related to his brothers’ rebellious failure to hearken. Given the way in which Nephi’s record seems to allude to Moses’s warning in Deuteronomy, a failure to hearken would have brought upon Laman and Lemuel the curse and death. When the “skin of blackness” is understood as a motif for death, this expression fits well within the broader culture of the ancient Near East and once again shows that the Book of Mormon can profitably be studied in that light.

**Conclusion**

The phrase “skin of blackness” is only used once in the Book of Mormon as part of Nephi’s unabridged account of his life and prophecies. This makes the phrase, as Gerrit Steenblik has pointed out, “unusual”

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64. Kotze supports this claim by specifically referencing the “flesh . . . black as pitch” phrasing found in the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon. Kotze, *Images and Ideas of Debated Readings*, 83.
65. Nephi says that Laman and Lemuel were “cut off” (2 Ne. 5:20) because of their failure to hearken to God’s words. Alma equates being “cut off from the presence of the Lord” to “spiritual death as well as a temporal [death]” (Alma 42:9).
and suggests it might be unique to the ancient Near East culture that Nephi was familiar with. Support for this suggestion comes from the fact that in a prominent treaty dating to around Nephi’s time we also find something similar to Nephi’s phrase “skin of blackness.” In the Succession Treaty of King Esarhaddon, “skin black as pitch” seems to be used as a motif for death in relation to being cursed. Understood in this way, the phrase “skin of blackness” brings to mind the promise found in Deuteronomy of “life and death, blessing and cursing” (Deut. 30:19) and the need to hearken to the Lord and his appointed representative. This understanding is consistent with Lehi’s plea to choose life and not death (2 Ne. 2:27–29) and avoid being cursed by trusting in Nephi’s leadership (2 Ne. 1:21).

Just before his death, Lehi charged his sons “that ye may not be cursed with a sore cursing; and also, that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you, unto the destruction, yea, the eternal destruction of both soul and body. Awake, my sons, . . . rebel no more against [Nephi]” (2 Ne. 1:22–24). Lehi’s remarks confirm the possibility of a curse and death if his sons were to rebel against Nephi. In this way, Lehi’s remarks also seem to echo Moses’s remarks to the Israelites just before his death. On that occasion, Moses also instructed the Israelites to enact a covenant-renewal ceremony after entering the promised land.67 It is significant, therefore, that 2 Nephi 5 seems to be patterned after the standard suzerain-vassal covenant formula used during times of covenant renewal. Prominent to the covenant formula is the enactment of the curse that Lehi feared would come upon Laman and Lemuel and lead to the “destruction of both soul and body” (2 Ne. 1:22). Nephi’s account of his brothers’ cursing speaks to this reality and points the reader to see the phrase “skin of blackness” as the ancient Near East motif for death.

Understanding Nephi’s “skin of blackness” as a motif for death does not eliminate additional nuance to its meaning. The fact that Nephi used this unusual phrase, rather than specifically referencing death, to

67. The recently discovered Hebrew text found on Mount Ebal potentially speaks to the importance of that event and the salient message that cursing brings death. According to Noel Reynolds, “The inscription has been translated into 23 English words as a curse text that corresponds to the instruction in Deuteronomy 27:9–26 that the curses should be read from Mount Ebal.” The text reads: “Cursed, cursed, cursed Cursed by the God YWHW You will die Cursed Cursed You will surely die Cursed by YWHW Cursed, cursed, cursed.” This discovery highlights once again the importance of covenant renewal and matches Nephi’s message in 2 Nephi 5 if we understand the skin of blackness to be a motif for death. Noel B. Reynolds, “Modern Near East Archaeology and the Brass Plates” Interpreter 52 (2022): 126.
allude to Moses’s promise of cursing and death suggests that additional nuance was intended. It is therefore possible that the phrase speaks to other realities that defined the separation that took place between the Nephites and the Lamanites. To this point, Lehi seems to have alluded to these potential realities when he warned Laman and Lemuel that “the Lord your God should come out in the fullness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever; or that a cursing should come upon you for the space of many generations; and ye are visited by sword, and by famine, and are hated” (2 Ne. 1:17–18). It is therefore possible that this phrase might speak to conditions such as Job’s diseased skin or the starved bodies described in Lamentations. Others have suggested that the Lamanites may have worn a dark skin garment,68 painted their bodies,69 or even tattooed their bodies.70 Whatever additional meaning may have been implied in Nephi’s use of the phrase “skin of blackness,” the phrase also works as a powerful reminder of Moses’s and Lehi’s admonitions to choose life and the consequences of failing to hearken to the Lord and those appointed by the Lord. Furthermore, this reading offers an alternative to a purely racialized reading of the text of the Book of Mormon that is grounded in examples from the ancient Near East and helps illuminate the greater narrative within the Book of Mormon—that all are invited to come unto Christ (compare 2 Ne. 26:33).71

T. J. Uriona works as a biologist and received a BA and PhD from the University of Utah. He is grateful for all the help he received in preparing this manuscript.

“Dumb” Puns in Alma 30
A Mesoamerican Twist on Korihor’s Talionic Punishment

Mark Alan Wright and Neal Rappleye

Evidence for the use of both puns\(^1\) and talionic (or reciprocal) punishment\(^2\) by peoples of the Book of Mormon is well attested. To complement previous research in these areas, which focused primarily on data from the ancient Near East, we argue that Mesoamerican wordplay and legal systems may also be evident in the account of Korihor recorded in Alma 30. Recognizing these connections to the text’s plausible cultural and linguistic context illuminates why Korihor receives the punishment he is given: it was no arbitrary consequence, but one tailored to his accusations in an irony-laden narrative that would have been easily recognized by an ancient Mesoamerican audience.\(^3\)


Puns and Wordplay in Mesoamerica

Punning is very common and highly valued in both verbal and visual arts in Mesoamerica.⁴ Regarding the literature of the Quiché Maya, Allen Christenson notes that “particularly with regard to names and archaic words used in ceremonial contexts, Quichés derive a host of meanings from them, including puns and other word plays.”⁵ As Federico Navarrete observed, “Punning had deep roots in Mesoamerican cosmology, which considered that no similitude was accidental and that beings in different cosmic levels (including signs and images) were magically related to, and influenced by, their counterparts.”⁶ Among the modern Maya, a person’s ability to incorporate wordplay into verbal sparring matches is considered a gauge of “social maturity, linguistic competence, intelligence, and political potential.”⁷ Even images of violence and human sacrifice “had their sardonic and ironic twists within the Mesoamerican worldview,”⁸ not entirely unlike the gallows humor or dark comedy favored by many late-night talk show hosts of our own day.

Ralph Roys—one of the great Mesoamerican ethnographer-linguists of the twentieth century—notes that Maya ritual language incorporates “frequent play on words of the same, or somewhat similar, sound, but with different meanings. They abound in puns, near-puns, and sometimes very bad puns. . . . The Maya language lends itself to such a device, for it contains many homonyms and other similar-sounding words.”⁹ In

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short, punning and related wordplay permeate Mesoamerican art and
discourse.

Talionic Punishments in Mesoamerican Legal Systems

John W. Welch noted that talionic retributions are “often related sym-
bolically to the offense” in biblical law. Like those of the ancient Near
East, Mesoamerican legal systems also often affixed talionic punish-
ments to certain crimes. For example, Aztec women who lied were pun-
ished by having their lips slit, because it was from their lips that the lying
words flowed. Among the Maya of Yucatan, the phrase *u nabinah u taa’*
means “llovió o cayó sobre él el daño o mal que intentaba o procuraba
para otro, o pagó la pena del talión” (roughly, “the damage or evil that he
tried to bring about for someone else came raining down on him, that
is, he paid the talionic penalty”). Legal historian John M. Seus found
that in the ancient capital city of Texcoco, “talion law was applied to the
false witness, probably much in the manner found in the Old Testament
[Deuteronomy 19:19]. He was punished as the accused would have been
had he been guilty of the offense charged.” While criminal law was
generally harsh across the ancient world, Seus found that “uniquely, the
[Aztec] state would accept ecclesiastical confession and penance in lieu
of its own punishment.” Space does not permit a more complete dis-
cussion here, but the concepts underlying talionic punishments were
widespread in ancient Mesoamerica.

Seus also notes that Aztec men who were caught lying “were dragged around until they
were dead,” and historians “who should record fictitious events” were prescribed death
by the ruler Nezahualcoyotl.
Yucatec word *Nokop* carries similar talionic connotations. The entry gives as an example
phrase *nokopni u tak ho’l Juan yok’ol: llovió sobre Juan lo que acusó a otro, pagó la pena
del talión (“What John accused another of came raining down on him; he paid the tali-
onic penalty”). The phrase *(u) tokil tak ho’l* is simply defined as “*talión, la pena del tanto*
(“talion, the penalty for both”), but a more literal translation would be “he makes things
to burn atop another’s head.” That precise definition is also given as a subentry to the
word *numya* (which on its own variously means “tribulation,” “work,” “misery,” and
“adversity,” among other things) for the phrase *u numyail tak ho’l, u tokil tak ho’l: The
word *pak* is likewise defined as “la pena del talión o del tanto por ciento” and “castigar con
la pena del talión” (“to punish with a talionic penalty”).
Struck Dumb within a Mesoamerican Worldview

To understand the penalty assigned to Korihor for his crimes, we also need to delve briefly into a Mesoamerican etiology of disease and deformity. Across the region, the people attributed any illness, disease, deformity, and even death to supernatural forces and interpreted them as signs of divine disfavor. As Aztec scholar Frances Berdan states, “Beyond this world of mortal, physical punishments lay a vast world of supernatural sanctions. These punishments (such as disease and deformity) most commonly applied to religious infractions and were carried out during a person’s lifetime.”

Ritual specialists were both feared and revered in Mesoamerica because their powers could be summoned to either inflict illness, injury, or death on an enemy or to cure those who had been so afflicted. A Colonial-era Yucatecan manuscript known as the Ritual of the Bacabs contains forty-two incantations used by Maya shamans, many of which are devoted to the healing of various maladies, both spiritual and physical. Roys found that “nearly one-third of the Bacabs manuscript is devoted to incantations for various so-called seizures. The term is tancas, a contraction of tamacas, which is the name of a number of complaints. Among these are madness, frenzy, numbness, spasm, and falling sickness. [Falling sickness] is defined as ‘a frenetic malady which strikes dumb, crazes, and deafens the person who has it.’” Significantly, being struck dumb is explicitly associated with other “symptoms” such as deafness, madness, and frenzy throughout the Ritual of the Bacabs. The phrase ten chub a chi (or slight variants)—which Roys conceptually translates as “I curse you”—occurs some nineteen times throughout the manuscript. However, the phrase literally translates to “I cause your mouth to grunt” (or “mutter inaudibly,” “grumble to yourself,” “babble indistinctly”), or “I make your mouth small,” or “I deform your mouth.” In short, to “curse” someone is to strike them dumb.

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17. Roys, Ritual of the Bacabs, xviii.
18. Translation by Mark Alan Wright; compare entries s.v. “ch’ub,” “ch’ub chii’,” and “ch’ub chi” in Vásquez, Diccionario Maya Cordemex.
Semantic Overlap of Key Terms in Mayan Languages

The association of “madness” and “frenzy” with muteness or deafness is widely attested to in Mayan languages due to the use of identical or closely homophonous terms for them. In Mopan, the root *b'es* means “mute, dumb” but also “silly, fool[ish],” and *ajb'es* means either “mute person” or “fool.” In Poqomchi’ and Kaqchikel, the root is *mem* or *meem*, and the associations are identical. In Quiché, the verb *man-ta taj* means “to be deaf,” and *man-ta' taj* means “to be an idiot” (the only difference being the glottal stop in the latter). The exact same connotations hold true for other Mayan languages such as Chol and Tzotsil. In Yucatec Mayan, *ah ch'uch'* means “enmudecer” (“to strike dumb”) as well as “tonto, loco, lunático” and “demente” (“silly, crazy, lunatic,” and “demented [or deranged]).

In Classic Mayan, Stela 24 from Naranjo (ca. 702 AD) describes Lady Six Sky with the epithet *ah nun*, most likely meant to identify her as a “foreign-speaking woman,” but more literally meaning a “person who speaks poorly.” According to Martha J. Macri, the Mayan root *nun* was a loanword related to *nontli* (“mute”) in Nahuatl and was used to refer to a person who did not know the local language or spoke poorly. It could also refer to a coarse, unlearned person, or even someone who is “ignorant, stupid, lazy, retarded.” Its use to identify foreigners may go back to as early as the fourth century AD, when a foreign ruler named Yax Nuun Ayiin was installed at Tikal. Ironically, it was evidently used as a mark of prestige or status by foreign ruling elites.

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There is evidence that non-Maya groups also used terms for muteness in derogatory ways. For instance, the Xinka, non-Mayan speaking neighbors of the Kaqchikel, use the K’iche’en loanword *meem,* “mute, dumb,” to also mean “crazy.” The traditions of the Kaqchikel also tell of an unidentified foreign group that they called the Nonoalca-Xulpiti, a name based on Nahua loanwords meaning “mute” (*montli*) and “stupid, idiot, crazy” (*xolopiti*).

A final lexical item from Yucatec Mayan worth highlighting here is *wayak,* which means all of the following: “symbol” or “sign,” “prophecy,” “prediction,” “dream,” “visionary dream,” “fantasy” or “illusion,” or “dreamed-up image.” The root of the word, *way,* likewise has a wide variety of meanings, including “ver visiones como entre sueños” (“to see visions as though in dreams”) but also “hechizar” (“to bewitch”). Furthermore, when the agentive *ah-* (meaning “he of”) is added to *way,* it means “brujo, nigromántico, encantador” (“witch, necromancer, enchanter”), and there is a subentry in the Cordemex dictionary for *ah way xibalbá,* “hombre que hablaría con el demonio” (“man who speaks with the devil”).

**A Mesoamerican Twist on Korihor’s Talionic Punishment**

This brings us to Alma 30. Korihor, the Anti-Christ, has a number of words or phrases that are unique to him, all of them derogatory: “frenzied mind,” “derangement of your minds,” “silly,” “foolish ordinances,” and “ancient priest.” Korihor declares that the Nephite belief in Christ was “the effect of a frenzied mind; and this derangement of your minds comes because of the traditions of your fathers, which lead you away

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27. Vásquez, *Diccionario Maya Cordemex,* 915–16, s.v. “way,” “(ah) way.”
into a belief of things which are not so” (Alma 30:16, emphasis ours). He mockingly—and repeatedly—refers to Nephite beliefs as “foolish” (Alma 30:13, 14, 23, 27), as well as “vain” (Alma 30:13) and “silly” (Alma 30:31) all of which fall under the various meanings ascribed to ah ch‘uch’. Korihor also contends that the priests keep the people down by “their dreams and their whims and their visions and their pretended mysteries,” and Korihor repeatedly demands that Alma show unto him a sign (Alma 30:28, 43, 45, 48, emphasis ours); all of these concepts, as noted above, are covered by the word wayak’. It is perhaps important that the words silly, frenzied, derangement, and whims are unique to Korihor; they appear nowhere else in the Book of Mormon. Likewise, being struck dumb as a sign (and a punishment) is also unique to Korihor. 28 Even Korihor’s confession plays off the root of wayak’, as he states that “the devil hath deceived me” (Alma 30:53), essentially identifying himself as an ah way xibalbá. Furthermore, after his confession, “he besought that Alma should pray unto God, that the curse might be taken from him” (Alma 30:54), suggesting that he expected his ecclesiastical confession to replace his talionic punishment, as would have been the case in Aztec law.

The confluence of these factors within a single narrative unit suggests to us the presence of both intentional and meaningful Mesoamerican wordplay and parallelism. Maya poetics make use of a variety of parallelism: grammatical, lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic, paradigmatic, and syntagmatic. 29 Lexical parallelism “refers to the vocabulary and sets of words used in the organization of [a] parallelism,” whereas in paradigmatic or syntagmatic parallelism, “one thought can substitute for the other’ by means of repetition, paraphrasis, synonymy, and antithesis.” 30 While we lack the original text of the Book of Mormon, one could almost argue for the possibility of lexical parallelism in Alma 30 since so many Mayan languages use the exact same word to mean both “dumb” and “foolish,” “frenzied,” and so forth, but even lacking a copy of the plates, we can confidently consider these examples of paradigmatic parallelism.

28. While there are others in the Book of Mormon who are temporarily made dumb through astonishment or fear (including Alma himself in Mosiah 27:19; the only other example involves a group of Lamanite prison guards in Hel. 5:25), Korihor is the only one who is explicitly struck dumb by God and told that the cursing would be permanent.


In sum, Korihor mocks the Nephites for relying on wayak’ (in its sense of “dreams” and “visions”) but demands a wayak’ (in its sense of “sign”) before he will believe. He ridicules the Nephites for being ah ch’uch’ (in its sense of “silly,” “foolish,” “frenzied,” and “deranged”) and is then cursed to become ah ch’uch’ himself (in its sense of being “struck dumb”). When viewed through a Mesoamerican lens, the interplay between puns and talionic justice in Alma 30 becomes deeply ironic, perhaps even a bit sardonic. Korihor’s punishment fits his crime like a glove: he is cursed to become the very things he falsely and derisively accused the Nephites of being.

Mark Alan Wright earned his BA in anthropology at UCLA and his MA and PhD in anthropology (with a subfield of specialization in Mesoamerican archaeology) from UC Riverside. He has conducted research in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. Dr. Wright was an associate professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University and a past associate editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.

Neal Rappleye is the director of research for Scripture Central, where he researches on a wide range of topics related to the historical and cultural context of Restoration scripture, particularly the Book of Mormon. He has been published by BYU Studies, the Interpreter Foundation, Greg Kofford Books, and Covenant Communications.
Reclaiming the “Primary Question”
A New Beginning for Joseph Smith’s First Vision

William G. Perez

Preparing for the Bicentennial
In October 2019, Russell M. Nelson, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, reminded Church members that “in the springtime of the year 2020, it will be exactly 200 years since Joseph Smith experienced the theophany that we now know as the First Vision. God the Father and His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph, a 14-year-old youth. That event marked the onset of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in its fulness, precisely as foretold in the Holy Bible.”1 President Nelson then designated 2020 as a bicentennial year and invited listeners to prepare for a memorable commemoration. Among his suggestions for preparation was “reading afresh Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price.”2 His remarks and the subsequent bicentennial celebration evidence the First Vision’s status as a founding narrative and key collective memory for Latter-day Saints. While the Pearl of Great Price remains the traditional place to brush up on Smith’s account, the twenty-first-century Church’s approach to his historical record has expanded. Despite the existence of an official, canonized version of the story, speaking or teaching about Joseph Smith’s experience without significantly referencing its multiple accounts has become virtually impossible.

In response to their prophet’s invitation, two institute teachers, employees of the Church’s Seminaries and Institutes of Religion system,

developed a new course for young adults titled “Preparing for the Bicentennial.” Joseph Smith’s First Vision was a prominent part of their curriculum. At the conclusion of the semester, the group of around 150 students was rewarded with a field trip to the Church History Museum, where a docent personally met with them. One of the teachers described his experience as follows:

One of the coolest things for me was to walk into that Church History Museum. . . . They had a room that was reserved for our group, . . . and he [the docent] goes, “How many of you are aware that there are multiple accounts of the First Vision?” And he kind of takes a deep breath like, “I’m going to drop a bomb on you, and I want to be really careful.” All my students raised their hand. I was like, “Yeah!” . . . And he goes, “What? Wait, no, no, multiple accounts of the First Vision.” And I’m like, “We’ve just been teaching this.” . . . And I felt a little bad for him, because . . . I was taking steam out of whatever he was going to teach for the first 45 minutes.³

This teacher later reflected,

I’m glad that the message of a boy-prophet’s visitation and charge from Deity has remained the message of curriculum and of teachers (this teacher at least) throughout my career. The “shift” from only teaching (like early curriculum mostly brought forward) that Joseph went into a grove of trees to “find out which church was true,” to messages like . . . forgiveness of his sins, nine accounts that differ, the reality of different data from those accounts—such as how old he was or audience for the account, etc. . . . has been thrilling to watch.⁴

The religious educators in the Seminaries and Institutes program have had not only front-row access to watching this shift but also opportunities to help bring it about.

The First Vision as a narrative has long been in flux. Scholars have documented a cultural recovery of Joseph Smith’s First Vision by the Church in the twentieth century. This revival came about through a reemphasis on the First Vision in the wake of the Reed Smoot hearings.⁵ It was also fostered by a need to defend the Church’s origin story during the development of a “new Mormon history” and by the onset of

³. Zoom interview with author, April 24, 2023. Some of the responses and interviews have been lightly edited for readability.
the information age. The twenty-first century has likewise seen a raising of the stakes with regard to Joseph Smith's story. This renaissance has led to an intentional focus on the multiple accounts of the First Vision as exemplified in a new Gospel Topics essay, a Foundations of the Restoration institute course, worldwide devotionals in which General Authorities have discussed the various accounts, a short film depicting Smith's experience as compiled from the multiple accounts, and a foregrounding of the Sacred Grove as part of the two hundredth anniversary of Smith's theophany. A significant cultural turn resulting from these institutional strides is that attention has shifted away from interpreting the First Vision primarily as the validation of a “one true church” doctrine and toward emphasizing it as a witness of Jesus Christ's universal love and forgiveness. To chart this new beginning, I surveyed seventy-six Seminaries and Institutes educators to document how the twenty-first-century developments mentioned above have impacted the way they frame and teach the First Vision. They overwhelmingly reported feeling increased confidence and capacity in doing so. Additionally, they described a much more nuanced understanding of why Smith went into the grove in the first place. The resulting shift in perspective—approaching the First Vision inclusively instead of defensively—will likely have a significant impact on Church culture and education in the years to come.

**A New Memory**

To some extent, the assertion that a new narrative has formed around the First Vision—or at least a new interpretation of the old narrative—has been alluded to already by historians Richard Bushman and Steven Harper. It hinges on Joseph Smith's 1832 account, the first of nine existing first- and secondhand contemporary sources for the First Vision. As a prelude to his theophany, Smith reports feeling the need “to mourn for my own sins and the sins of the world.” After crying to God for mercy, Smith wrote, “I saw the Lord and he spake unto me saying Joseph my son thy sins are forgiven thee.”

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7. The author received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Florida State University for this project prior to soliciting and collecting survey responses. Study 00003695 was approved on December 13, 2022.
the subsequent forgiveness that he received are not mentioned in the
 canonized account, although they are alluded to in some of the others. 
 During a devotional address at Brigham Young University–Hawaii in
 November 2016, Richard Bushman briefly recounted the historiography 
of Joseph Smith’s First Vision and the newfound ability to go “beyond 
 this one familiar account.”10 Sharing that he was “particularly attracted”
 to the 1832 account, Bushman recounted its context and contents and
 offered the following interpretation: “To my way of thinking this account
 throws a new light on the Restoration. The 1838 account, the traditional 
 one emphasizes the problem of churches; which church is true? The 1832
 story brings redemption to the fore—forgiveness and atonement. Even
 the prophet of the Lord stands before God in need of forgiveness. . . . To
 me that is what the 1832 account of the First Vision promises us—a God
 who will forgive us and lift the burden of sin from our backs.”11 Bush-
 man’s remarks manifest an expansion of the traditional way that the
 First Vision had been approached in Latter-day Saint religious education
 settings.

 This approach first caught my attention in two sentences written by
 Steven Harper as he highlighted the significance of Bushman’s address. 
 Published in his 2019 book, First Vision: Memory and Mormon Ori-
 gins, and later extended in a 2020 article entitled “Raising the Stakes:
 How Joseph Smith’s First Vision Became All or Nothing,” Harper noted,
 “Bushman was offering a new memory of the seminal story. In the twenty-
 first century, it could be less about feeling embattled and persecuted and
 debating the nature of the one true church. Attention could shift instead 
 to the universal message of redemption through Christ.”12 If this was to
 be a “new memory,” what was the old one? It stemmed from what Patrick
 Mason has termed a “fortress church”13 mentality, one in which truth is
 constantly under siege and boundaries are essential for survival.

 Historians have described the canonized 1838–39 account as being
 developed during a time of intense persecution mingled with “Smith’s

 10. Richard L. Bushman, “What We Can Learn from the First Vision” (address, BYU
 Center of Religious Studies, Laie, Hawaii, November 15, 2016), https://speeches.byuh.edu/
devotional/what-can-we-learn-from-the-first-vision.
 13. Patrick Q. Mason, “The Fortress Church,” in Restoration: God’s Call to the 21st-
vivid recollection of rejection.”\textsuperscript{14} Consistent opposition and imprisonment bubbled over into the need for a “defensive, resolute” memory that would defiantly assert the Church’s truth claims and distinguish it from the other denominations of its day.\textsuperscript{15} Ultimately, “this is the version of Smith’s memory that was eventually canonized. Many saints have parts of it memorized. It shapes their identity as a people persecuted for transcending creedal Christianity and accessing God directly.”\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, this stance carried over into the twentieth century, during which, urged on by fundamentalism and attempts to debunk the sacred story, “the line was drawn at Joseph Smith’s first vision, and it remains a battleground over which people fight, negotiating their identities and relationships relative to the restored gospel as they join or leave, fight for or against the faith.”\textsuperscript{17} These high stakes, centered on the apostate status of Christendom and on the bringing forth of the one true Church, became the crux of mainline interpretations of the 1838–39 account.

The walls of the fortress Church have in many ways receded in recent decades. One impact of this abatement is an intentional transparency centering on Joseph Smith’s First Vision accounts. In October 2013, the Joseph Smith Papers project made all historical accounts of the First Vision easily accessible on its open-access website. The following month, the Church released an essay attempting to spotlight the accounts and candidly address speculative concerns.\textsuperscript{18} In February 2016, Elder M. Russell Ballard, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, addressed Latter-day Saint religious educators and acknowledged the potency of “less known or controversial” topics, including varying accounts of the First Vision.\textsuperscript{19} He urged teachers to become proficient at faithfully, thoughtfully, and accurately addressing such concerns, inviting them to master the content of the now-available Gospel Topics essays.

\textsuperscript{14} Harper, \textit{First Vision}, 18.
\textsuperscript{15} Harper, \textit{First Vision}, 18.
\textsuperscript{16} Harper, \textit{First Vision}, 19.
\textsuperscript{17} Harper, \textit{First Vision}, 187.
Later that year, another General Authority, Richard J. Maynes, spoke to young adults worldwide. In his remarks, he referenced and read from the Church's essay regarding First Vision accounts and from each of the primary accounts of the First Vision. Quoting from them at length, he emphasized that “they together tell Joseph’s consistent, harmonious story.” The surge in awareness and devotional use of the multiple First Vision accounts was compounded by their invigorated inclusion in Church curricula, an innovative official video drawing from each account, and the 2018 release of Saints, a new narrative history of the Church. These advancements have aided in the creation of the “new memory” described by Harper and Bushman and have trickled down into Latter-day Saint seminary and institute classrooms across the world.

The “Primary Question”

In gauging the impact of the accentuated accessibility of multiple accounts of the First Vision on religious educators, I expected to chart a mostly positive response and to find evidence of an increasing emphasis on forgiveness and a decreasing overtness in matters of religious exceptionalism. I asked religious educators these questions: How long have you been teaching seminary or institute for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? How has the Church’s twenty-first-century emphasis on multiple accounts of the First Vision impacted the way you present and teach the First Vision to your students (if at all)? What principles or doctrines do you feel are most important for students to understand and relate to from your framing and teaching of the First Vision? Have these emphases changed throughout your teaching career? If so, how? Respondents answered anonymously via a Google survey that was disseminated at a grassroots level.

While I generally found what I had anticipated, I was surprised by a deeper shift that I had not detected before. It was a matter of not only the what that was being drawn from First Vision accounts but also the why. Along these lines, one response that struck me expressed, “I think the emphasis, clarity, and openness of the multiple First Vision accounts has helped me teach Joseph Smith’s experience with greater power and richness as I have been able to introduce appropriate or needed additional details from other accounts into the account found in the Pearl of Great

Price. I think more students in this generation appreciate the fact that Joseph’s primary question was about his standing before God.”²¹ I had not yet considered that a key piece of the cultural shift I was attempting to tap into revolved around a different understanding of why Joseph Smith decided to pray in the first place. Another respondent wrote,

> With the help of these resources, I have come to understand better what Joseph’s primary concern was in his pursuit of answers. More than anything, Joseph wanted to know his standing before God and how he could be saved. This differs in important ways from the question often presented to me by my childhood teachers of “Which church is true?” Joseph’s question was focused on his relationship to God, and by extension, which church was his Church. This is the emphasis I choose to place on my teaching of the First Vision. When I do this, my students seem to have a deeper, richer experience because Joseph’s concern about his standing before God resonates with their own current experiences far more than the question of which church to join (perhaps because a majority of my students have already chosen to accept The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the Lord’s Church).²²

A fixation on the “Which church is true?” question and the subsequent response was at the forefront of the older, more defensive identity drawn from the canonized account of the First Vision. However, a different primary question—relating to Joseph Smith’s standing before God and his desire for salvation—is more characteristic of a new mode of interpreting the First Vision, one which seemingly “resonates with . . . current experiences far more than the question of which church to join.”²³

While reflecting on this pattern in the survey responses, I decided to listen to *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast*. Released in early 2020 (the year of the bicentennial), the podcast is a six-part series that explores the history and legacy of Joseph Smith’s First Vision. It was written and hosted by Spencer McBride, a historian and editor on the Joseph Smith Papers team. On a different platform, McBride described the podcast project as not “your grandpa’s Church history.”²⁴ Its aim was to allow listeners to dive into the First Vision through a historian’s eyes, and on

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²¹. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 9. Note that several of the responses have been silently edited for spelling and style for clarity.
brand with the twenty-first-century trend, this included weaving together the multiple accounts of the First Vision. I was led to this resource because it was mentioned by a few of the respondents as extremely helpful (many more mentioned the Joseph Smith Papers project in general). I had not yet thought to include it in my list of developments that contributed to the present interpretive moment. As I made my way through the podcast, I noticed a consistent stressing of a “primary question” that is different from the traditional take. It was almost as if some of the survey respondents had quoted the podcast’s explication verbatim.

In episode 2, Spencer McBride has a conversation with Steven Harper. They address the conventional narrative and place it in the context of another one:

Spencer: So far in this episode, we have talked a lot about answers. Let’s take a moment to talk about questions—specifically, the questions to which Joseph Smith was seeking answers. And in the way that many Latter-day Saints have heard the story, the pressing question for Joseph Smith was, Which of all the churches is true? Which one was the correct church, or the church teaching the correct doctrine of Jesus Christ? And he did ask that question. But there was an important question that preceded it. Joseph wanted to know about salvation. He wondered about the state of his soul, about his standing before God. He wanted to be forgiven for his sins. He wanted to know the path to eternal salvation.

Steve: Joseph’s question is an ultimate question. He’s asking about the most important concerns a person can have, the most eternal ones. He’s not asking, “What church should I join?” like we might choose from a variety of grocery stores or . . . country club options. He’s asking about redemption.

Spencer: And so, Joseph only arrives at the question of which church is true as he seeks the answer to this larger question—as he seeks resolution to these bigger concerns. And, as Steven Harper sees it, this small shift in how we tell the story of the First Vision can help us understand the connection Joseph Smith saw to the restoration of the Church of Jesus Christ and the salvation of God’s children.

Steve: The only reason to know which church is true is to know which one leads me to Christ, which one is His, which one can I find forgiveness in. So, it changes everything. It makes our association with church more than about which doctrines are right. It’s a lot less theological or, at least, it’s much more practical. It’s about my salvation, not just about a theological argument.

Spencer: And that’s the big question that Joseph Smith is seeking: How can I be forgiven of my sins? His question about the state of his soul
prompted the other questions that ultimately led him into a grove of trees to pray. It was only in seeking answers to the pressing questions of his soul that Joseph Smith determined that he must find out which of all the churches was true.25

McBride returns to this point in episode 4. Quoting the 1832 account, he relates, “Jesus told Joseph that his sins were forgiven—‘Joseph, thy sins are forgiven thee’—and urged him to walk in His statutes and keep His commandments. This was a direct answer to Joseph’s primary question. Remember, he had worried about the state of his soul and desired forgiveness of his sins. Now, he had answers. Now, he had forgiveness. Now, he had a profound sense of God’s love for him.”26

The story summoned throughout the podcast is not grounded in the defiantly toned 1838–39 account, where all other creeds are abominable, and their ministers are corrupt. Instead, the entire narrative takes a much warmer tone. As McBride summarizes in the final episode, “Answers to prayer. Spiritual direction. Forgiveness for sins. That seems to bring us back to where it all started for Joseph Smith. A young boy trying to sort through deep questions about his soul, wanting to know and connect with God.”27 In theory, this retelling, less theological and more practical, will resonate deeply with modern-day seekers.

The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast was extremely well received. During its debut week, it ranked in the top twenty-five of all podcasts on iTunes. Steven Harper’s work on the First Vision and memory illustrates how throughout its history, the origin story has had powerful interlocuters who, having selected specific memories from individual and communal recollections, relate them meaningfully to a shared history and then consistently repeat them in a variety of settings. This process eventually creates a stable narrative “in the ongoing process of collective memory consolidation and recursion, especially between


generations.” Speaking to a newer generation, *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast* and the scholars behind it are a new wave of influential selectors, relators, and repeaters, “offering a new memory of the seminal story.” And that new memory includes the reclamation of Joseph Smith’s primary question.

**Confidence, Revelation, and Redemption**

If not selectors of memory themselves, the religious educators of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are certainly able relators and repeaters, allowing for an alternative application of the First Vision to take root among the rising generation. An army of paid professionals who also train volunteer teachers throughout the globe, Seminaries and Institutes personnel are on the front lines of the “war of words, and tumult of opinions” about Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Of the seventy-six respondents, ten reported that the twenty-first-century resources and emphases on multiple First Vision accounts had minimal to no impact on their teaching. As one teacher succinctly (and maybe rather defensively) stated, “Truth is truth no impact at all.” Another expressed frustration in recounting, “We teach, kids still search for answers on the W[orld] W[ide] Web.” Of the ten teachers reporting minimal or

30. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourages high-school students to attend an early-morning or release-time seminary class. It encourages adults ages eighteen to thirty to enroll in an institute course. Its religious education offerings cover the Latter-day Saint standard scriptures as well as a variety of other topics such as Church history and doctrines. Although the number of volunteer teachers is far greater, a Church General Authority shared that there were a total of 2,878 full-time professionals employed by Seminaries and Institutes of Religion (S&I) in 2017. Of that number, 1,849 of them were employed in the United States, and 1,029 of them were employed outside of the United States in 128 countries. The number of S&I employees who work as teachers is presumably lower than 2,878, accounting for administrative and other roles. See Gerrit W. Gong, “And Jesus Said unto Them: I Am the Bread of Life” (address to Church Education System religious educators, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, February 17, 2017, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/evening-with-ga-elder-gerrit-w-gong/2017/02/and-jesus-said-unto-them-i-am-the-bread-of-life?lang=eng).
no impact, one had been employed with Seminaries and Institutes for seven years, and another for four months, possibly making them impervious to the longer-term shift. Although the lines are sometimes blurry, the remaining respondents were separated into those who reported some impact on their teaching (seventeen respondents) and those who reported significant impact (forty-nine respondents). Their time of employment with Seminaries and Institutes ranged from one year to forty years.34

Two themes from the survey responses came to the fore. The first was an increased confidence in understanding the multiple accounts of the First Vision and being able to teach students about them. Second was a heightened emphasis on personal applications of the First Vision in terms of communing with God and receiving divine love and forgiveness. The latter speaks to a shift away from interpreting the First Vision primarily as the validation of a “one true church” doctrine and toward emphasizing it as a witness of Jesus Christ’s universal love and forgiveness. This shift is not necessarily at the expense of the implications of exclusivity drawn from the First Vision. Nor does it serve as a complete substitute. However, respondents did not mention the traditional line of interpretation nearly as often as they did others.

A final note in terms of authenticity—describing seminary and institute teachers as relators and repeaters in this ongoing shift is not to label them automatons, stripped of individual agency in the process. As one respondent explained, “As I have grown and personally studied these accounts over and over again [the principles I choose to emphasize when I teach the First Vision] have changed because I have changed and grown as a person because of personal life experiences.”35 Rather than simply repeating the latest party line, these teachers have made a sincere emotional investment. They have dived into the First Vision accounts and resources and made them their own. Moreover, having been repeatedly charged with preserving doctrinal purity in religious instruction, the fact that so many of these educators are embracing this new mode of interpretation speaks to its perceived soundness.36

34. Of the seventy-six S&I employees surveyed, sixteen have been employed with S&I for zero to ten years, twenty-one have been employed with S&I for eleven to nineteen years, and thirty-nine have been employed with S&I for more than twenty years.
36. For example, in the most recent broadcast geared toward Latter-day Saint religious educators worldwide, Elder Neil L. Andersen of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles counseled teachers to keep “the Lord’s doctrine pure and understandable, [being] careful
The following are samples of the survey responses that illustrate the themes of increased confidence and personal applications of the First Vision (revelation and redemption). Although many respondents mentioned all of the above and more, each response included below will be from a different respondent, allowing for more of them to have a voice and to illustrate how prevalent these emphases are.

Confidence

All of these emphases and resources have helped me tremendously to teach the First Vision. I feel that before all of this came out, . . . if I brought up the other accounts that I was bringing up issues or challenges that the students didn’t need to deal with. Wow, was I wrong! . . . The emphasis has given me great confidence to teach all accounts on the same level without elevating just the Pearl of Great Price account that has been canonized. Before I felt I should only have that one elevated, but now I can teach all of them on the same level without worry or hesitation in doing so.37

I have been influenced greatly. I am tremendously grateful for the recent emphasis on multiple accounts. It’s almost like we are able to take an arrow out of the quiver of the adversary when we teach the First Vision proactively, utilizing multiple primary and secondary accounts.38

Without the Multiple First Vision Accounts Gospel Topic Essay, I would not [have] felt safe or authorized to teach principles that differ from the 1838 account. I am tremendously grateful for the emergence of this essay and the JS Papers Project and Podcast.39

My approach to teaching the First Vision has evolved over the last decade of teaching in what I feel are significant ways. I have emphasized the multiple accounts of the First Vision and encouraged students to study the different primary accounts. Early in my career it felt like a less productive use of time to go to various accounts instead of focusing on the 1838 account in the scriptures that everyone was familiar with. . . . I would not say that my shift has been compelled by any single...

twenty-first century emphasis, however my personal study of the multiple accounts on the Joseph Smith Papers website as well as the Gospel Topic essay on the subject, and teaching the cornerstone course on Foundations of the Restoration have been impactful.40

The essay and the short film have impacted the way I teach and present the First Vision to my students the most. First of all, having the full accounts available online has allowed me to study them and appreciate the First Vision more. I am able to bring up the fact that there are multiple accounts without fear that my students may bring up something I haven’t studied in depth already. I have been able to answer their questions by having them read directly from the accounts themselves. I have been able to help students see the need for the different accounts and learn more about how their Heavenly Father feels about each of them because of things said in each account especially the [1832] account. . . . I only wish there were more accounts we could learn from!41

I would say that because the resources for teaching the First Vision have improved and have been expanded, my ability to teach the First Vision has also improved and expanded. I do all that I can to point my students to the wealth of resources so they can learn for themselves, deepen their conversion to the Savior, and find the spiritually relevant principles to their lives.42

Early in my career, I taught the First Vision to my students. As I have become more skilled in my profession and in my understanding of the content, I teach my students using the First Vision.43

Revelation

We can learn—by revelation—for ourselves. . . . My teaching has changed over the years. I emphasize more the example of Joseph Smith to receive revelation, which is the only way we can know if the First Vision is real.44

The principles and doctrines I feel are most important for students to understand and relate to are God speaks today through personal revelation and prophets, we can turn to God with our questions, and it can be difficult and even [feel] weird when we reach out and connect with God.45

42. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 15.
43. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 29, emphasis added.
President Nelson’s talk about how Heavenly Father introduces the Son has changed how I teach the First Vision. Discussing “Hear Him” and receiving revelation. Focusing on asking questions and how the Lord will answer—these have become recent changes.46

The principles of acquiring spiritual knowledge are all taught in the First Vision. With our directive and emphasis in teaching these principles, Joseph Smith becomes a model for finding answers. This is also evident in President Nelson’s talk on revelation as he used Joseph Smith as an example. While I taught some of these principles early on, the training we have received for the principles of acquiring spiritual knowledge makes the [teaching] of the First Vision a great opportunity to teach these principles.47

[The principles and doctrines I feel are most important for students to understand and relate to from my framing and teaching of the First Vision are] that God knows you personally and is eager to answer your prayers. That you can receive forgiveness from your sins and find joy in Jesus Christ. That questions are good and seeking is an important part of conversion. . . . I feel like I have put greater emphasis on the idea that questions are good in most recent years. I never discouraged questions in the past, but I feel like generally as a Church, we have [more recently] put greater emphasis in helping our students become seekers rather than doubters.48

Redemption

What I have changed in my teaching since the emphasis on multiple First Vision accounts is from the 183549 account. I love to point out to my students Joseph’s desire to be forgiven of his sins and [to] make connections to various stories in scripture and from modern times [about] how repentance often leads to revelation.50

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47. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 30.
49. It is likely that this respondent meant to reference the 1832 account instead of the 1835 account. However, the 1835 account does mention Joseph Smith receiving forgiveness. See “Journal, 1835–1836,” 24, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed May 5, 2023, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25. Joseph’s desire to be forgiven of his sins is more fully captured in the 1832 account.
[The twenty-first-century emphasis on multiple accounts of the First Vision has] completely changed the way I present it. I use the four first-hand accounts each time I present the First Vision.51

From the 1832 account, I focus on the love and mercy the Savior shows to Joseph in forgiving his sins (Joseph’s main purpose for going to the grove). This emphasis is highlighted in the 1832 account and is in large part lost if the Vision is presented without this account.52

These multiple accounts have also guided my own presentation and teaching as Joseph seeking forgiveness and support as much as seeking truth and revelation for the restored Church. It has given all of us a greater appreciation for God’s love for all his children in this gift that is the Restoration, not just a restored Church, but restored truths that point us more fully to his Son, Jesus Christ!53

I include information from all the accounts each time I teach the First Vision. I focus on Joseph’s desire to receive forgiveness of sins.54

Most important [principle and doctrine for students to understand and relate to] is Joseph’s desire to be forgiven of sins, and to receive that confirmation for himself. Second would be the immense faith that Joseph showed in getting his answer. Third would be a clear picture of how the Great Apostasy affected people in that era (even until today). Fourth would be the true nature of God as resurrected personages of light. These emphases have changed during my teaching career. I have shied away from teaching which church is true or saying that other sects have a “form of godliness but deny the power thereof” (JS–H 1:19).55

For my teaching the most important idea that has come about from the emphases of the First Vision has been the understanding that Joseph Smith was searching for the true Church because he was concerned for the salvation of his soul. It was a very personal yearning of his heart, not a curiosity for truth. I think in years past I have focused more on the religious confusion of Joseph’s day that he was experiencing and his heartfelt quest to find God’s true Church, but it has [been] taken to another deeper level to see his desire to find the true Church for his own salvation. He didn’t just want to know where to go—he wanted to know where to go to find salvation and redemption.56

52. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 22.
I have emphasized various accounts of Joseph’s First Vision much more to my students. I make them all aware of where they are on the Gospel Library app. In particular I place additional focus on Joseph seeking for forgiveness of his sins and the Savior’s response to this in the earlier accounts. It helps the students relate to Joseph even more.\textsuperscript{57}

I feel it is so important for students to understand that one of the reasons Joseph was so intent on finding out which church was true was because he wanted to know who could teach him the correct way to receive forgiveness for his sins. He desired to experience the Atonement of Jesus Christ and his grace. This was one of the driving forces in his desire to know truth. I have emphasized this more over the years as the Church has made access to his First Vision accounts so readily available.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{A Twenty-First-Century Approach}

The twenty-first century is ushering in a new beginning for Joseph Smith’s First Vision.\textsuperscript{59} A wealth of digestible resources and an emphasis on incorporating all known versions of the experience are helping to create a new memory, a narrative that is less abrasive to the current generation than traditional interpretations. In many ways it seems that this broader retelling feels more relatable to modern-day consumers of the story. One teacher reflected on the appeal of approaching the First Vision from a different vantage point:

My teaching focus has shifted dramatically. In my teenage and missionary and post-missionary years, I tended to learn (and teach) the First Vision story from a standpoint of answering “With so many good churches claiming to have the truth, which church is true?” In the twenty-first century, I started to realize I was approaching the First Vision story with an attempt to answer a question very few seem to be asking. Instead of asking “Which church is true?” more seem to be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 9.
\item \textsuperscript{58} “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 22.
\item \textsuperscript{59} A recent example of this expanded paradigm can be seen in the way President M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles described Joseph Smith’s primary motivations for entering the Sacred Grove in two general conference addresses—one delivered in April 1998, and one delivered in October 2023. In 1998, he said, “One of the most extraordinary events in the history of mankind occurred on a spring day in 1820 when Joseph Smith Jr. went into a grove of trees near his home to ask God for direction, light, and truth.” “Marvelous are the Revelations of the Lord,” \textit{Ensign} 28, no. 4 (May 1998): 31. In 2023, President Ballard reflected, “We know who God is; we know who the Savior is because we have Joseph, who went into a grove of trees as a boy, seeking forgiveness for his sins.” “Praise to the Man,” \textit{Liahona} 47, no. 11 (November 2023): 74
\end{itemize}
asking “Why do I even need a church?” As a result, I tend to come at the First Vision with an emphasis on “how can I discover the truth for myself when so many divergent opinions exist?”, “what can I learn about adversity that arises when I want to connect with God?”, “what can I learn about the Father and the Son from their interaction with Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove?”, “what important truths were taught in the Sacred Grove through the visit of the Father and the Son?”, etc. In many ways, I feel like these twenty-first century approaches have invited the Spirit more strongly.60

As a new generation of Latter-day Saints and potential Church members engage with the event that “marked the onset of the Restoration,”61 altering the primary question has expanded the pool of relevant answers.

Interestingly, the 1832 account of the First Vision, which has seen such preferential resurgence, was initially written off and then mostly unremembered.62 Its tone and approach, which are becoming so meaningful for Latter-day Saints today, reflect a traditional style of Methodist conversion testimonial that became “ultimately unsatisfying” to Smith himself.63 While it incorporated language that would have been familiar to its contemporary audience, the 1832 account did not end up meeting the needs of a persecuted church seeking to establish a unique identity. It essentially disappeared until 1965. As circumstances have changed both for the Church of Jesus Christ and for society in general, could it be that the version of the origin story that seemed so impractical in the nineteenth century is now a godsend in the twenty-first?

While the canonized account of the First Vision contributed to a consistent interpretive lens, the novel diversity of First Vision accounts has augmented the implications of Smith’s theophany. Newfound ways of approaching the narrative are resulting in a shift from a more defensive, or exclusive, depiction of the founding experience to a broader, or more inclusive, witness of divine communication and forgiveness. The

60. “Sharing Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” 22.
62. Harper writes that “in light of [Joseph Smith’s] later memories of the same event, his 1832 autobiography is best understood as a conflicted consolidation—an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile his experience with a socially safe identity. . . . For these or other reasons, the 1832 memory did not shape the saints’ story.” Harper, First Vision, 27. There have also been allegations of an intentional suppression of the 1832 source by Joseph Fielding Smith in an attempt to avoid presenting seemingly contradictory accounts of the First Vision. See Harper, First Vision, 201–2, 252–53; and Stan Larson, “Another Look at Joseph Smith’s First Vision,” Dialogue 47, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 37–62.
trending paradigm will influence identity creation, proselytizing efforts, and historical interpretation from Church headquarters down to small seminary classrooms. Larger data sets—including Seminaries and Institutes students—will be needed to continue to track the prevalence and permanence of these shifts. Despite the ever-evolving reception history of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, one thing remains unchanging: what individuals (and the global Church) choose to emphasize from the accounts directly determines how they relate to and share the story. As the present-day generation stakes its claim on the collective hallowed history, their ensuing redirection of the narrative’s major takeaways will extend the shelf life of the First Vision well into the twenty-first century.

William G. Perez is a PhD candidate in American religious history at Florida State University. His research interests include Mormon studies, Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, religion and politics, and religion and emotion. Prior to commencing his PhD, he worked as a release-time teacher and coordinator for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion. He has recently rejoined Seminaries and Institutes as a coordinator in Tallahassee, Florida.
Growing up, I was the singer and my sister was the dancer. I would practice my art songs, arias, and Broadway ballads, and Danielle would drill away at her ballroom dance routines with her partner. While I would memorize lyrics, get into character, and be cast in local musicals, Danielle would compete in Dancesport at the Brigham Young University Marriott Center. She would cheer me on at my plays, and I would be at all her dance competitions with water bottles and a towel. I would spray on her tans, sew on her rhinestones, and glue on her fake eyelashes. She would Febreze my costumes, apply my makeup, and go over and over any tricky play choreography with me. And with each song and each dance, something magical was created.

But even though she was the dancer and I was the singer, every once in a while, Danielle would sing and I would dance. And sometimes we would dance and sing together. Because of our Bulgarian mother and grandmother, the main songs Danielle and I learned to sing together were Bulgarian folk songs. And the one dance Danielle and I could easily do together was the Horo, a Bulgarian line dance with sometimes simple, sometimes complex repetitive steps and asymmetrical rhythms. We would jump up, holding hands to start the dance, and invariably the line would get longer and longer as people joined. It was a dance that organically took place at our family gatherings, weddings, and Easter and Christmas celebrations.

There was something unabashedly joyful about the Horo. We might yip or cheer as we danced. Those in the line varied from expert to beginner and everyone in between. You don’t have to be a dancer to join in.
You don’t even have to be Bulgarian. Everyone is invited, but no one is forced. You just join when the music moves you.

It wasn’t until later, on my mission to Bulgaria in 1997, that I learned just how powerful a dance can be. I was visiting a very poor member of the Church in Sofia. Her name was Elena. Her apartment was in a sketchy part of town where someone had vandalized the side of her apartment building with the English words “Welcome to Hell” in black spray paint. Elena couldn’t afford heat. Her front door was completely detached from the hinges and was propped up by the door frame. You had to move it aside to enter, like the stone in front of Christ’s tomb.

Elena’s children would defecate into a bucket in their front room because they didn’t have a toilet. Any broken windows would be mended with plastic bags and duct tape. I remember one day when we came to visit, Elena’s hands were shaking as she cut up a head of cabbage and told us it was the only food she had managed to find in a few days. Elena lived a life that I had only seen romanticized in movies but never played out in real life.

On this particular day, my companion and I were walking up the cement steps of Elena’s apartment building when we heard banging, yelling, and muffled crying. Elena’s sister, Elka (a great mountain of a woman), tore past us up the stairs and threw aside the door. In seconds, Elka had grabbed her sister’s drunken husband by the neck and tossed him down the stairs like discarded tissue. We hurried past him up the stairs and into the apartment.

Elena’s lip was swollen and bloody, and her face was badly bruised. I could see a bald spot where a patch of hair had been ripped off her scalp. The house smelled of vomit and urine. Elena encircled her sister in her arms and murmured comforting words to her as they embraced. The couch rocked with their sobs.

I sat on the duct-taped couch with my companion, trying not to stare at the sisterly intimacy. I felt a twinge of homesickness for my own sister. I wanted to solve Elena’s situation. I wanted to report her husband to someone. I wanted to wave a magic wand and give her everything she didn’t have—things like food, heat, and hope. I wanted to scream, punch through a wall, and throw her husband down another flight of stairs. But I just sat there, helpless and homesick.

After a few minutes, Elena blew her nose and Elka turned up the radio. She took Elena’s hand, and they began to dance. Elena held out her hand to me, and I looked at my companion, who gave me a quick “you’re-really-not-going-to-dance-with-this-woman-who-was-just-beaten-up?” look.
And so we danced.
Round their sticky little threadbare couch. Round their table. Round
and round the room to the blaring Romani music.
And that little circular dance lifted me. And more importantly, it lifted
Elena. It became bigger than her current circumstance. It wrapped her
in centuries of peace and power. She was no longer a penniless, battered
wife in a freezing, forgotten apartment. She was a Bulgarian princess
encircled by generations of resilience and perseverance. She was strong
and beautiful. She was proud and fierce. And I could tell that somehow
Elena and Elka would make it through.
It wasn’t until years later that I understood what the spontaneous
dance had taught me. It wasn’t until I had born my own babies into a
house I couldn’t afford to heat or until I held out to my sister the miracu-
ously won Mary Kay grand prize basket at the hospital bedside of her
stroke-paralyzed husband that I remembered. It wasn’t until my sister
helped me move furniture from my foreclosed home to a rental and
until I held her hand when the doctor told her that she had to have heart
surgery that she knew. It wasn’t until we had both experienced job losses,
rebellious teenagers, mid-mission pandemics, 4H Family camps, end-
less job applications and rejections, grueling grad programs, betray-
als, financial reversals, our Bulgarian mother slowly going blind, and
our Bulgarian grandmother gripping our hands to whisper-sing Bul-
garian folk songs one last time before she died that we knew. I could
get through this. She could get through this. We could get through it
together. Hard things happen, and they keep happening, but they don’t
last forever. Pieces of life can be difficult, but it is only temporary. We are
powerful beyond anything we could ever imagine, encircled by genera-
tions of unseen angels cheering us on. And sometimes before we know
the ending, before there is a resolution, before we truly know if we are
strong enough to make it through one more day, we just need to turn up
the music and dance.

This essay by Michelle Forstrom was a finalist in the 2023 BYU Studies Personal Essay
Contest.
Forgiveness

To release
some clutched pebble
or rock
or boulder.
To unshoulder
a worthless burden.
To drop a hurt
unchosen,
or let thaw
what was frozen.

—Erik Jacobsen

This poem was a finalist
in the 2023 BYU Studies
Poetry Contest.
Years ago, I asked a pioneering historian of Latter-day Saint women why there was no biography of Susa Young Gates. She replied that Gates's reputation for being difficult meant no one was eager to spend enough time with her to write one. But the lack of a biography of this key figure among second-generation Church leaders left a serious gap in the historical literature. Recently, Romney Burke, a retired physician and great-grandson-in-law of Gates, sought to fill that gap with his *Susa Young Gates: Daughter of Mormonism*.

Gates left behind an immense trove of papers now housed largely at the Church History Library and the Utah State Historical Society. After immersing himself in this sea of materials, Burke has produced what best fits the category of a family history. It shares some of the problems common in such works, like a deep dive into the minutia of genealogy and occasional digressions into matters of little general or scholarly interest. (I, for one, could do without the extensive verbatim selections in chapter 12, “Novels, Poetry, and Short Stories,” 257–73.) But Burke has produced an especially good example of the family-history genre. While not a professional historian himself, he has consulted them, and his efforts to encompass the reach of Gates’s rich life include references to much of the relevant historical literature. With 7 pages of introductory material, 424 pages of text (generally well footnoted), 28 pages of photographs, as well as a thorough bibliography and index, his treatment of Gates’s broad-ranging activities is exhaustive.

As Brigham Young’s daughter, Gates grew up at the nexus of the Latter-day Saint community and seems to have wished to always remain at center stage. Indeed, like Theodore Roosevelt, as described in a quip attributed to his daughter, Gates seemed to wish she was “the
bride at every wedding, the baby at every christening, and the corpse at every funeral.”

Beginning in her childhood, Burke shows that Gates was intelligent, energetic, outspoken, determined, calculating, and at times impulsive—traits exhibited throughout her life. Yet she quickly learned that her ambition and strong will pushed against the limitations imposed upon her sex. Close as she was to the center of power, she knew she would never be able to fully occupy it because of her inability to hold the priesthood. She recalled that for a long time she bridled against such gendered restrictions but ultimately came to accept her status (346). One gets the impression from Burke’s narrative, however, that such acquiescence never came easily.

Gates was Brigham Young’s forty-second child and his second daughter with Lucy Bigelow Young, who by some counts was Brigham’s twenty-seventh wife, though, Burke points out, the eleventh of sixteen who bore him children. Gates grew up immersed in the system of plural marriage, a practice she staunchly defended in idealized form throughout her life, yet, as was true for most of her generation, one she did not enter into herself.

Like her older sister, she rushed into an early marriage—in Gates’s case at age sixteen. The union ended in a bitter divorce but produced two children, one of whom, Leah Dunford, would marry future Apostle John A. Widtsoe and become an influential figure herself. Gates soon married again, this time united in a true love match with Jacob Gates, who indulged his wife’s talents and supported her ambitions. They would have eleven children together.

Gates’s family life is one topic I wish Burke had explored more fully. At the beginning of his volume, he notes his aversion to moving beyond evidence into the realm of speculation (ix). But part of a biographer’s job is to evaluate and make judgments based on her or his thorough understanding of the subject and the surrounding circumstances. Biography requires an author to interpret limited evidence as part of this process. Given this necessity, a little speculation, properly identified as such, could have benefitted Burke’s treatment of the tragic events surrounding the early deaths of several of Gates’s children.

Of Gates’s thirteen children from two marriages, eight died of causes ranging from infectious disease to unfortunate accidents before they reached maturity. Even at a time of relatively high childhood mortality, Susa seemed especially stricken. Burke gives brief treatments to each of these tragedies, but I wished for a little more detail about the
circumstances and consequences surrounding those events. In particular, I was left wanting more information about the cumulative effects these losses might have left in their wake, both on the Gates family emotionally and on contemporaries’ perceptions of Gates as a parent. These involved situations about which family lore—as unreliable as it is sometimes—might have enriched our understanding. Burke was especially well positioned to draw upon such sources. Perhaps a more thorough discussion of Susa’s lifelong rejection of modern medicine in favor of remedies like taking warm baths and drinking consecrated oil might have been relevant here as well, something Burke, as a physician, might have been especially well qualified to reflect upon.

In general, however, Burke does not avoid such knotty issues. Instead, he leads the reader through conflicts and disappointments, family tensions, financial problems, and various wrenching tragedies. While he might be seen as giving short shrift to some issues, most often it appears he did not do so purposely, but more likely because he was swept along by the rushing tide of Gates’s very crowded life. There is a great deal of activity in this biography, so much so that at times it left me wishing the author had paused a little more to reflect on what had just been recounted and in so doing had allowed me time to catch my breath.

Burke’s treatment shows Gates to have been a woman of talent and recognized ability, traits that led her into prominent Church positions, including the leadership of the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association and the longtime editorship of its journal. While unsuccessful in her effort to become coeditor of the Woman’s Exponent, Gates was the first editor of its successor, the Relief Society Magazine, and a member of the organization’s general board. Burke demonstrates that she was a key figure in promoting genealogical study in the Church and in educational and cultural developments in Utah. An important link to the larger community of women, she held leadership positions in several organizations, including the National and International Councils of Women. In all this, Gates pursued and maintained friendships with a remarkably diverse group, including radical feminist and reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

But as Burke makes clear, Gates’s strong will and drive could also alienate those with whom she associated, especially when she disagreed with them, while her criticism of those who opposed her views could be at times harsh and unfair. (See, for example, her interactions with Emmeline B. Wells, 332–33, and her criticism of Amy Brown Lyman, 352.) Concerned as Gates was about her reputation, however, Burke notes that
she generally kept such criticism out of public view (422). Similarly, she can be seen as overly ingratiating and even manipulative in her praise of Church leaders, especially close family friend and Church President Joseph F. Smith (see especially chapter 15, “Best and Truest of Friends,” 319–29). As the above implies, while Burke acknowledges and celebrates Gates’s remarkable abilities and achievements, he does not sugarcoat her life. Achieving balance is always a challenging task for a biographer, made more so for Burke as a member of the family, but despite a few quibbles of the kind mentioned above, I would say he has managed the task quite well. Under Burke’s hand, Gates emerges as a complicated and sometimes difficult figure, but such people are often the ones who move things along, and he demonstrates just how effectively she did that.

This will not be the last word on Gates. Scholars will undoubtedly want to further contextualize her experiences, especially regarding the history of Latter-day Saint women and their gendered status in the Church. Nevertheless, Romney Burke has done an outstanding job laying out the boundaries of a far-reaching and remarkably accomplished life. When scholars seek to extend our understanding of Gates, they will have this biography as a foundation to build upon.

The Mormon Military Experience, written by Sherman L. Fleek and Robert C. Freeman, is the first book to provide a comprehensive review of the Latter-day Saint military experience. The authors are to be applauded for undertaking a book of such an expansive nature and managing the subject matter as thoroughly as they have done.

Both authors are well prepared and qualified to write this book. Fleek is a retired United States Army aviation officer who served for many years, until his recent (second) retirement, as the command historian for the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. He has authored several books on Latter-day Saint and American military history, including History May Be Searched in Vain: A Military History of the Mormon Battalion (Spokane, Wash.: Arthur H. Clark, 2008) and Saints of Valor: Mormon Medal of Honor Recipients (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

Freeman is a Brigham Young University professor of Church history and doctrine, former associate dean of Religious Education, and one of the founding directors of BYU’s multidecade Saints at War Project. His numerous books about Latter-day Saint military history include Saints at War: Experiences of Latter-day Saints in World War II (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2001) and Saints at War: Korea and Vietnam (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2003).

Books of this kind benefit from an overarching thesis or theme. Instead of offering a unifying theme, the authors suggest that their book is “divided into two separate books or parts: the nineteenth century of Latter-day Saint exceptionalism as a distinctive military experience, and then the twentieth century and beyond during which LDS military service was no longer as unique but retained some distinctive qualities” (3), a decision that left me wanting. The book’s theme is perhaps most
clearly stated in the foreword by William A. Taylor (who authored *Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* [Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016]) as “chart[ing] the broad contours of the complex interactions between the LDS Church and military affairs over the course of nearly two hundred years” (vii).

The book’s opening chapter seeks to explain and define “the Mormon military experience” by appealing to St. Augustine and just war theory. The chapters that follow address the Missouri Mormon War of 1838, the Nauvoo Legion, the Mormon Battalion, the Utah War, the American Civil War, Utah’s Indian wars, the Spanish-American War, the U.S. 1916 intervention in Mexico, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the MX missile question. Each chapter summarily outlines the context, issues, history, and key players of that conflict. (The authors chose not to include the 1834 quasi-military experience of Zion’s Camp.)

The book includes an interesting ten-page photo section (139–48) with images from many of the conflicts discussed in the book, a chronology (285–97) that ends unexpectedly in 1896—the year Utah obtained statehood—and an appendix that lists Latter-day Saint Medal of Honor citations (274–84). All three sections are useful additions to the book.

While the authors explain in their introduction that “in the twenty-first century there are distinctive policies and feats that continue to underscore the Saints’ distinctive military experience” (2) and further suggest that “the scope of this book spans from the 1838 conflict in Missouri to the recent war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq and other places in the world” (3), they dedicate only four and a half pages, in an epilogue, to the past forty years. There are only fleeting mentions of 9/11 and America’s longest wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The authors justify the omissions by suggesting “it is not [currently] possible to place these conflicts in proper context, because they are too recent” (270), which makes their decision to ignore the Gulf War (1990–91) somewhat puzzling, as more than thirty years have passed since hostilities ended at Safwan, Iraq.

Historical errors are minimal, but a few are present, such as incorrectly identifying Utah as a territory prior to the arrival of Latter-day Saint pioneers in 1847 (82); stating Utah became a territory in 1851—not 1850 (96); claiming the War Department “had little choice but to contact [Brigham] Young” in April 1862 because “there was no territorial governor in office at the time in Utah” (124, 125) without recognizing
that Frank Fuller was properly serving as the territory’s acting governor; or asserting that the first Latter-day Saint U.S. military chaplain, Elias S. Kimball, was assigned in Hawaii during the Spanish-American War (173) when he actually served with American expeditionary forces in Cuba.¹

As with any book that addresses an extensive timespan, readers will certainly feel some events and personalities are given short shrift while others receive too much attention. For example, a multipage discussion of the January 1863 Battle of Bear River (which the authors propose is “now known by some incorrectly as the Bear River Massacre,” 156) seemed out of place—as the authors correctly noted that “this tragic fight was not a Mormon clash with the Shoshonis but involved the Indians with federal troops” (156).

While the book is directed primarily at a non–Latter-day Saint audience, Latter-day Saint readers may notice the authors’ frequent and repeated use of the terms “Mormon” and “LDS” throughout the book, in contradiction to the Church Newsroom request to “please avoid using the abbreviation ‘LDS’ or the nickname ‘Mormon’ as substitutes for the name of the Church.”²

Because this book addresses events covering over a century and a half, readers will not be surprised to learn that the authors include citations from almost three hundred published sources. Only five of those sources, though, were published after 2013. Research from the past decade is generally missing. Contributions from the Joseph Smith Papers, for example, are absent from this work—with the authors relying instead on the less authoritative History of the Church volumes (28, 33, 35, 44, 53, 56, 60, 61, 66, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, and so forth).

In producing a single-volume study, the authors may have been better served to slightly refocus their book as “The Mormon American Military Experience.” The few attempts made to share military experiences of non-American Latter-day Saints—such as a two-page subsection titled “A Mormon Nazi Demon” about Erich Krause (218–20)—are limited and incomplete. The story of international Latter-day Saint military experiences is worthy of a separate volume.

1. Elias Smith Kimball, journal, MS 13348, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
The authors set out to create a single-volume overview of the Latter-day Saint military experience and, despite some shortcomings, have successfully done so. Readers who are looking for a broad-brush historical overview of Latter-day Saint military service and experience would do well to begin with this book.

Kenneth L. Alford is a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University. He retired as a colonel in 2008 after serving almost thirty years on active duty in the U.S. Army. While on active duty, Ken served in numerous assignments, including the Pentagon, eight years teaching at the United States Military Academy at West Point, and four years as professor and department chair at the National Defense University in Washington, D.C. His books include Civil War Saints (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), Utah and the American Civil War: The Written Record (Norman, Okla.: Arthur H. Clark, 2017), and Saints at War: The Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020).
Restless Pilgrim: Andrew Jenson’s Quest for Latter-day Saint History by Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022)

Restless Pilgrim: Andrew Jenson’s Quest for Latter-day Saint History, written by Reid L. Neilson and Scott D. Marianno, is a captivating biography that delves into the remarkable life and passionate quest of Andrew Jenson, an assistant church historian of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, from 1886 until his death in 1941.

The book depicts Jenson’s journey from his humble beginnings in Denmark to becoming a devoted historian and advocate for documenting the history of the Church. With detailed research and engaging storytelling, Neilson and Marianno explore the trials, triumphs, and adventures that shaped Jenson’s life and inform his lasting legacy.

Restless Pilgrim highlights Jenson’s tireless efforts to gather and preserve the historical records and narratives of the Church. As a young immigrant to Utah, he witnessed the rapid growth and transformation of the Latter-day Saint community in the late nineteenth century. Inspired by his encounters with early pioneers and Church leaders, Jenson developed a seemingly insatiable curiosity and determination to chronicle the history of his faith.

The book uncovers Jenson’s pivotal role as a prolific documentarian and researcher for the Church. His monumental work includes compiling and editing the Historical Record, a significant publication that documented the history, sermons, and biographies of the Church leaders of his time. Jenson’s dedication to preserving the past and ensuring accurate historical narratives continues to influence our present-day understanding and appreciation of Church history.

Moreover, Restless Pilgrim offers an exploration of Jenson’s personal life, including his marriage, family relationships, and enduring faith. It reveals the challenges he faced as an immigrant, his commitment to his Danish heritage, and his role as a bridge between his native country and his adopted homeland.

Through their storytelling, Neilson and Marianno bring to life the trials and triumphs of Andrew Jenson, shedding light on an often-overlooked figure in Church history. Restless Pilgrim is a biography that not only illuminates the life of an extraordinary individual but also provides valuable insights into the larger context of religious history and the importance of preserving historical records for future generations.

—Matthew B. Christensen

The King Follett Sermon: A Biography by William V. Smith (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2023)

The King Follett Sermon: A Biography by William V. Smith is a carefully crafted book that delves into the life and significance of one of the most influential sermons in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Smith brings to light the story behind the creation and reception of the King Follett Sermon, delivered by Joseph Smith on April 7, 1844.

In this biography of a sermon—which in and of itself is a fascinating concept—Smith weaves together the historical accounts, other primary sources, and research to provide a comprehensive narrative of the sermon’s origins. The book explores Joseph Smith’s life, his theological thought, and the events leading up to the day in April 1844 when the King Follett Sermon was given. Smith transports readers back in time, allowing us to witness the delivery and immediate impact of the sermon.
The King Follett Sermon: A Biography goes beyond a mere historical account; it also explores the sermon’s profound theological implications and its lasting legacy for Latter-day Saints. The author elucidates the key themes and teachings embedded within the sermon, including the nature of God, the eternal progression of humankind, and the concept of exaltation. Drawing from a wide range of sources, he explores the sermon’s reception among Latter-day Saints (across two centuries) and subsequent studies by religious scholars and historians.

William Smith’s writing is engaging and accessible, making complex theological concepts approachable to readers of all backgrounds. He balances academic analysis with storytelling, ensuring that the biography remains both informative and engaging.

The King Follett Sermon: A Biography stands as a definitive and ground-breaking work on a pivotal moment in Latter-day Saint history. Smith’s research, assessment, and ability to weave a compelling account unite in a way that will captivate readers interested in Joseph Smith, his teachings, and Latter-day Saint history.

—Matthew B. Christensen

Both Things Are True by Kate Holbrook (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2023)

Kate Holbrook was a professional historian (PhD, Boston University), a gospel scholar (MTS, Harvard Divinity School), a mother of three daughters, and a champion of Latter-day Saint women’s voices. She worked for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the managing historian of women’s history and edited several books in her efforts to amplify women in the Church. Before Holbrook’s life ended, Rosalynde Welch from the Maxwell Institute asked Holbrook if she would provide her own voice as well. Both Things Are True is Holbrook’s collection of personal essays edited and compiled by Rosalynde Welch, Jana Reiss, Jenny Pulsipher, and others who knew and loved her.

Readers may remember a statement by Joseph Smith, “By p[r]oving contrar-[eties, truth is made manifest.” In Both Things Are True, each essay provides contraries Holbrook encountered during her life. Within each set of contrary truths, Holbrook shows a Christlike way.

In the first essay, “I Belong to the True and Living Church,” Holbrook explains why the Church is true and why it is living. She compares truth to wheat that the Relief Society organization has gathered, stored, and shared for over one hundred years. As we add wheat to our current store, we are each responsible for personal truth seeking, and Holbrook describes the fidelity to reputable sources and to each other that is required as we search for truth. She ends with the statement “Our Church is true and living, as we are true to one another” (50).

In the second essay, “Revelation Is a Process,” Holbrook shows that when we learn how revelations were given, received, and recorded in various past examples, we learn to be patient with our personal revelatory process and possible interpretive errors. Choosing hope in eventual revealed solutions is crucial despite “our imperfect human efforts” (71).

In the third essay, “Housework Is a Crucible of Discipleship,” Holbrook describes housework as a daily practice that may yield feelings of guilt, resentment, and drudgery. When the practice is appropriately shared, and when we see the opportunity for gratitude, we can learn to “forgive the ground for its weeds” (91).

In the fourth essay, “Forgiving and Remembering,” Holbrook provides a healing perspective on how forgiveness empowers us to act, but remembering precedes improvement. Through sharing Church history experiences, Enos’s experience with prayer, an American writer’s experience remembering slavery, and a personal experience, Holbrook reveals how healing can take place.

In the final essay, “The Weight of Legacy,” Holbrook claims that our legacies matter but that the focus should not be on ourselves. She compares our efforts to a pie’s lattice-top crust: we weave our desire to matter with our efforts to love and remember others. In the epilogue by her husband, Sam Brown, he recalls a story from Holbrook’s 2020 Neal A. Maxwell Institute lecture, in which she taught, “You matter because you love, not because you successfully compete” (140).

Prior to the essays, the book begins with a short interview, published by the LDS Women’s Project in 2018. When asked about her research on Latter-day Saint women, Holbrook said, “To put forth these examples of really savvy, independent, faithful women—to show my daughters that they’re part of this religious context—that means so much to me” (17). Throughout this book, we get to glimpse the savvy, independent, faithful life of Kate Holbrook. Readers will experience how Holbrook so precisely and compassionately navigated the inherently contrary waters of life and faith.

—Katie Lewis

Mormon Envoy: The Diplomatic Legacy of Dr. John Milton Bernhisel by Bruce W. Worthen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023)

Mormon Envoy: The Diplomatic Legacy of Dr. John Milton Bernhisel by Bruce W. Worthen is an exploration of the life and diplomatic career of Dr. John Milton Bernhisel, a prominent—though perhaps lesser known—figure in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Worthen’s research and analysis shed light on Bernhisel’s role as a diplomat and advocate for the Latter-day Saint community during an important period in American and Utah history.

In this engaging biography, Worthen delves into Bernhisel’s life, from his humble beginnings in Pennsylvania to his involvement in the early Latter-day Saint movement and subsequent leadership roles within the Church. The book places special emphasis on Bernhisel’s diplomatic endeavors, highlighting his significant contributions to securing recognition and support for the Latter-day Saint faith and its followers.

Worthen narrates Bernhisel’s interactions with key political figures of the time, including Presidents James K. Polk and Millard Fillmore, as well as influential senators and congressmen. Through Bernhisel’s correspondence and diplomatic missions, the reader gains a deeper understanding of the complex political landscape of the mid-nineteenth century and the challenges faced by the Latter-day Saint community.

While Bernhisel’s primary objective was to secure religious freedom and protections for his fellow Saints, Worthen also explores the broader implications of his diplomatic efforts. Bernhisel’s legislative advocacy to create the state of Deseret and his involvement in the
Compromise of 1850 (when the Utah Territory was created) are presented as pivotal moments in the history of the Church and American politics. 

_Mormon Envoy_ showcases Worthen’s ability to bring historical events to life through his engaging prose. The book is richly detailed, drawing on a wide range of primary sources and archival materials. Worthen’s analysis is both thorough and balanced, presenting a nuanced portrait of Bernhisel and his legacy.

Overall, _Mormon Envoy: The Diplomatic Legacy of Dr. John Milton Bernhisel_ offers a fascinating exploration of a relatively lesser-known figure in American history, shedding light on the crucial role played by diplomacy in the early Latter-day Saint experience. Worthen’s book is a must read for history enthusiasts, scholars, and anyone interested in the crossroads of religion and politics in nineteenth-century America.

—Matthew B. Christensen
Boxwoods

Your canvas drop cloth pressed like guest linens even for yard work, pungent green bits collecting at your knees as you worked the hedge flanks with the gray rechargeable clippers.

Grandpa used the red ones to fill his canvas, too, before hauling the push mower to the creek to manicure the sparser, shaded grass should guests come.

Clippers buzz and rattle, recharged and recharging in memory only—your head white, his golden always bowed in summer devotion.

Mind the ivy in the breezeway, you would say. And the leatherleaf viburnum.

At forty, I cross-cut my lawn, one diagonal for each of you, and I recall the volunteer pear tree lost in the vinca.

To think you were just fifty, sixty, so many years before this year when I’d like so much to kneel beside you again but settle for planting boxwoods of my own.

—Andrew Maxfield

This poem was a finalist in the 2022 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians, like his first, will resonate with most Latter-day Saints. Paul's battle remains remarkably relevant today because conditions and attitudes found in ancient Corinth have reemerged in the postmodern Western world. The Corinthian microcosm was largely skeptical, materialistic, pluralistic, and immoral and as such, its standards were contrary to those of the Christian community. This epistle reveals the countercultural nature of Christianity. The Apostle promotes a practical religion that translates into everyday actions and conduct both in his time and in ours. He stresses the importance of forgiving others, being hopeful and encouraging in trying circumstances, recognizing that affliction for the kingdom's sake is the Church's true glory, and being glad to suffer for God's cause. He notes the need to walk by faith and not by sight while the Christians suffer through mortality. He also encourages the Saints to be anxiously engaged. He cautions Church members about being overly eager to defend themselves against those who attack them but also insists that there are times when a strong defense is called for, especially when the integrity of the gospel has been challenged.

This book is the most comprehensive study of Second Corinthians that LDS scholars have yet produced. It relies on the LDS canon of scripture and teachings of LDS prophets alongside rigorous biblical scholarship and Paul's original Greek.
Instruction to Authors

BYU Studies publishes scholarship that is aligned with the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Submissions are invited from all scholars who seek truth “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118), discern the harmony between revelation and research, value both academic and spiritual inquiry, and recognize that knowledge without charity is nothing (1 Cor. 13:2).

*BYU Studies* features learned perspectives relevant to Latter-day Saints. Contributions from all disciplines are invited. Personal essays, short studies, poetry, art, and significant historical documents are welcomed.

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- The submission contributes new knowledge or insight.
- It is accessible to educated nonspecialists.

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The Stewardship of Our First Freedom
The Psalm of Nephi
Teaching Joseph Smith’s First Vision
Latter-day Saints without Borders
Minerva Teichert and Alice Merrill Horne
“Dumb” Puns in Alma 30
Gospel Methodology at BYU
Richard Bushman’s BYU Years

COVER
The Promised Land (1949–1951)
Minerva Teichert (1888–1976)
oil on masonite, 41 5⁄8" × 53 11⁄16"  
Brigham Young University Museum of Art, 1969