



DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

DIALOGUE

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THE SECULAR BINARY OF JOSEPH SMITH'S TRANSLATIONS

Michael Hubbard MacKay

By 1828, Joseph Smith had carefully created copies and an “alphabet” of the characters on the gold plates to take to scholars to “git them translated.”¹ At this early stage it is easy to see him feeling around to understand his boundaries and to position himself to translate.² But what did it mean to translate in a secular world? According to Joseph, he sent the list of characters and a small sample of his own translation with his friend and benefactor Martin Harris to have them examined and academically translated.³ In other words, Joseph almost immediately faced the problem of finding equivalent characters, symbols, and

1. See Michael Hubbard MacKay, “Git Them Translated’: Translating the Characters on the Gold Plates,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, edited by Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015), 83–116; Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016); Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

2. Michael Hubbard MacKay, “Performing the Translation: Character Transcripts and Joseph Smith’s Earliest Translating Practices,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, edited by Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 81–104.

3. Richard E. Bennett, “Martin Harris’s 1828 Visit to Luther Bradish, Charles Anthon, and Samuel Mitchell,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, edited by Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015), 103–15.

language to represent revelation from God. He ingenuously sent the characters and a piece of his own translation to linguists to identify a translation equivalency from the characters to English.⁴

By looking for someone to “git them translated,” Joseph opened himself up to an academic translation of the gold plates. In fact, the list of characters that he sent with Harris presented the possibility that he may have even obtained a one-to-one translation in an alphabetic format. One can only imagine Joseph Smith with a “reformed Egyptian” lexicon provided by Samuel Mitchell or Charles Anthon, sorting through the characters on the gold plates. Nonetheless, once Martin Harris returned without an academic translation of the characters, Joseph did not pursue a linguist translation or a one-to-one translation of the characters. He made a conscious decision to distance himself from a linguistic translation and accepted that the kind of translation he would produce was not done by finding equivalence between “reformed Egyptian” and English.⁵ Joseph ignored all precision for equivalence in the translation by assuming that the words revealed to him constituted a translation of the characters. In other words, Joseph Smith was not in a position to know for himself whether the translation was correct; he had to trust that God was delivering the correct translation to him.

This episode highlights a central issue in the analysis of Joseph Smith’s translation projects and positions him squarely within the secular age. Were his translations based on a verifiable correspondence of

4. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, and Robin Scott Jensen, “The ‘Caractors’ Document: New Light on an Early Transcription of the Book of Mormon Characters,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 14, no. 1 (2013): 131–52.

5. This was recognized as early as 1829 when Cornelius Blachtely asked for the possibility of accessing the gold plates to identify a one-to-one translation. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015), chap. 12; Larry E. Morris, *A Documentary History of the Book of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 375.

symbols to English words, or did the process require a disconnected metaphysics that was incommensurable to the original symbols? The debate about Joseph Smith's translations have primarily assumed that the translation was commensurable and focuses upon theories of authorial involvement of Joseph Smith. Scholars place their theories of translation on a spectrum in which God was completely responsible for the translation on one end and Joseph Smith was completely responsible on the other end. This is usually paralleled with another spectrum for how he translated, ranging from reading God's translation from a seer stone to postmodern critiques about discourse.⁶ With the intention of both contributing to and challenging these parallel spectrums of thought, this article will demonstrate Joseph's realization of the incommensurability of his own translations by looking at his attempts to produce a linguistic translation. It does this by comparing three seemingly disparate translation projects that have rarely been associated together: the Book of Mormon "characters" document (1829), the Pure Language Documents (1833/35), and the Kirtland Egyptian Alphabet (1835). Running through this examination, it will explore the tension between commensurability and incommensurability of translation.

This paper demonstrates continuity in Joseph Smith's translation projects by tracking translation and commensurability between 1828 and 1835, giving special emphasis on "reformed Egyptian" characters and their possible English translation. These documents seem to be examples of a translation process that explicitly tried to assign a specific English meaning to a specific character from the mysterious languages from which Smith was translating. Yet, this paper challenges the theory that Joseph Smith was engaged in translation commensurability, i.e., the idea that there is a direct correspondence between two languages.

6. For a remarkably clear examination and critique of the literature and evidences see Samuel Morris Brown, "Seeing the Voice of God: The Book of Mormon on Its Own Translation," in *Producing Ancient Scripture*, especially 146–67.

Rather, this paper demonstrates that Smith's translation projects, even in his most mechanical examples, relied on translation underdetermination, which refers both to the fact that his translations were not precise one-to-one linguistic translations and the broader idea that language offers multiple meanings and possible interpretations. It will illustrate Joseph's failure to provide a commensurable translation of Egyptian characters and his own acceptance of an incommensurable translation.

Linguists have made it clear that perfect equivalency in translation is impossible, but philosophers of science go even further to demonstrate that our evidence at any given point is underdetermined, or insufficient in determining what beliefs we should hold about nature. Provoking the demise of twentieth-century logical positivism, Willard Van Orman Quine's theory of the indeterminacy of translation argued that there could be multiple, equally correct translations of one word.⁷ Reflecting the problem of translating, Quine skeptically challenged whether identifying synonyms was possible, questioning even whether an idea in one's head was not a theoretical translation in the first place that needed justification, not just symbolic representation. Even native speakers misunderstand given the complex association with the language and various depths of expression and cultural meaning.⁸ Joseph Smith expressed his own sense of underdetermination in

7. Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013), chap. 2. In opposition to the indeterminism of translation, John Searle argues that this would lead to skepticism or the possibility of anyone ever understanding anyone else. John R. Seale, "Indeterminacy, Empiricism, and the First Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 3 (Mar. 1987): 123–46.

8. The recognition of the problem of translation has deep roots in religious studies and the translation of liturgy, scripture, and sermons. See Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory and Practice* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975); Lydia H. Liu, ed., *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations*

his translations, as well as in his revelations. Such a close study of what he thought he was doing can reshape the current debates about his translations by focusing on the role that revelation and religious experience played in them.

This article will examine the tension present within Joseph Smith's translations between the acceptance of an incommensurable translation and his attempts to find a commensurable translation. This binary is explored in juxtaposition with religion and secularism. The tension illustrates competing pulls between "religious" experience as the mediator of truth and a "common sense" appeal to verifiable secular knowledge.⁹ In antebellum America, the competition between religious and secular knowledge shaped the quest for "true religion."¹⁰ Historian John Modern argues that this secular impulse in the period "conditioned not only particular understandings of the religious but also the environment in which these understandings became matters

(Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); Christopher R. King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

9. Talal Asad argues that to know what the term secular means is to understand the binaries that it creates. Secularism constrains the meaning and power of terms and concepts to their binaries and disallows a singular preference within a binary. Faith is solidified by its shift and delineating relationship with Reason. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 23.

10. See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Sarah Rivett, *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

of common sense.”¹¹ In this view, the question of a religious and a secular knowledge are not in opposition to one another, but so intimately bound together as to shape and define the contours of each. This tension was the “connective tissue” in Joseph Smith’s world that made true religion, as Modern describes it.¹² In fact the formation of this tension and the creation of this relationship convinced Joseph Smith and his followers that they were religious in a secular world.¹³ Like the brilliant research of Tomoko Masuzawa in which she showed how secularism made religion universal, the incommensurability of translation made Joseph Smith’s translations legitimate, but only through that binary.

11. John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 7.

12. Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 282. Modern’s thesis is important here in its ability to identify a network of ideas that animates individuals and society to replicate and authenticate particular normative conditions. This is important for the secular idea of translation or the notion of commensurability in translation, which this article demonstrates is set in opposition to incommensurability. Compare this sense of normativity to “hyper-normativity” in Peter Coviello, *Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 25 and 100. Talal Asad writes, “Only religions that have accepted the assumptions of liberal discourse are being commended, in which tolerance is sought on the basis of distinctive relation between law and morality.” *Formations of the Secular*, 182.

13. Charles Taylor foundationally argued that secularism is a force that is opposed to religion and it is certainly not the opposite of religion. Religion in the secular age thrives, not just as a reaction to secularism but in part because of secularism. As Talal Asad has argued, secularism produces binaries that can easily be associated with good and bad religion, rational and irrational religion, both of which are relevant to the binary of commensurability and incommensurability in Joseph Smith’s translations. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 147.

The Book of Mormon

Translation was a process of change, but in Joseph Smith's experience that change was not demonstrably a process of equivalent change, like a one-to-one translation of words. In the case of the Book of Mormon, for example, even claiming that there was a commensurable change between languages fails to demonstrate how they would know that. David Whitmer was one of the few witnesses of the translation that tried to make Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon commensurable with the original characters. He apparently told a reporter that "the graven characters would appear in succession to the seer, and directly under the character, when viewed through the glasses, would be the translation in English."¹⁴ Even if David Whitmer's story of the translation process were true, in which words and equivalent characters appeared on Joseph's seer stones, he still could not experience commensurability without knowing "reformed Egyptian." This leaves Smith within a scenario in which he could not personally compare the gold plates with the English translation of the Book of Mormon. He experienced the process but he did not know through personal experience that it was correct or whether its modern translation represented a historical ontology or a nineteenth-century ontology. He simply could not know.

As early as 1829, the text of the Book of Mormon is self-aware of its incommensurability in translation. It states: "But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that none other people knoweth our language; and because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof" (Mormon 9:34). Mormon is self-aware of the problem of translation, since he is worried about his own ability to translate the records into "reformed Egyptian" and he is especially cognizant of the problem of

14. Edward Stevenson, "The Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon," *Millennial Star* 48, July 12, 1886, 437.

future peoples being able to translate his translations and abridgements. Even reading words from a seer stone, if this is considered a petri dish for perfect transmission, still has the transformation required of the reader, not to mention the reality of errors of human cognition and inevitable reassessment of the canonical text. Just think of the issue of ontological assumptions being made by the producer of the text and the ontological assumptions being made by the reader, especially if they are separated by thousands of years and culturally at odds with each other.¹⁵ The complexity of identity and cognition that come before speech inevitably problematize the outcome of Joseph Smith reading words from a seer stone, let alone translating cultural and ontologically oriented ideas.

The “caractors” document illustrates the point. Though there was a clear disconnect between the characters on the gold plates and the text in the Book of Mormon, Joseph still valued the copies of the characters that remained. Just because he could not assess the commensurability of the translation did not necessarily mean that he did not think it was commensurable. The interest in this kind of evidence for his translation and its relationship with the incommensurability of his translations eventually created a chain of interest in ancient characters from the Book of Mormon “Egyptian” to the book of Abraham “Egyptian.” There are several documented examples from 1828 to 1835 of Joseph identifying this tension. Below we will examine the examples of Joseph Smith attempting to translate Egyptian characters. In fact, even the Pure

15. Quine writes, “An artificial example which I have used elsewhere depends on the fact that a whole rabbit is present when and only when an undetached part of a rabbit is present; also when and only when a temporal stage of a rabbit is present. If we are wondering whether to translate a native expression ‘gavagai’ as ‘rabbit’ or as ‘undetached rabbit part’ or as ‘rabbit stage,’ we can never settle the matter simply by ostension—that is, simply by repeatedly querying the expression ‘gavagai’ for the native’s assent or dissent in the presence of assorted stimulations.” “Ontological Relativity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 7 (Apr. 4, 1968): 188.

Language Documents are eventually connected with Joseph Smith's most concerted efforts to verify or connect his translations back to an ancient language, or at least ancient characters.

Early Revelations

The secular tension present in Smith's translations is also present in experiences within the leadership too. An important example is found in his history, in which Joseph noted that in November 1831, when they were compiling the early revelations that would eventually be a part of the Doctrine and Covenants, they had "some conversation . . . concerning revelations and language."¹⁶ Joseph's revelation at the conference declared that through the spirit and a kind of communion with God, he produced the revelations, in which God declared that his servants were given this revelation "in their weakness after the manner of their language."¹⁷ Admitting the gap between religious experience and what his servants declared created space for others to experience the divine and to know that Joseph Smith's revelations were from God. This was similar to the idea that the text led back to enthusiastic experience. The text of the revelation was connected to an experience of the divine. Joseph's revelation promised:

I say unto you that it is your privilege & a promise I give unto you that have been ordained unto the ministry that in as much as ye strip yourselves from Jealesies & fears & humble yourselves before me for ye are not sufficiently humble the veil shall not be wrent & you shall see me & know that I am not with the carnal neither natural but with the spiritual for no man hath seen God at any time in the flesh but by the

16. "History, 1838–1856, volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834]," 161, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/167>.

17. "Revelation, 1 November 1831–B [D&C 1]," 126, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-1-november-1831-b-dc-1/2>.

Spirit of God neither can any natural man abide the presence of God neither after the carnal mind ye are not to able to abide the presence of God now neither the ministering of Angels wherefore continue in patience untill ye are perfected let not your minds turn back & when ye are worthy in mine own due time ye shall see & know that which was confirmed <upon you> by the hands of my Ser[v]ant Joseph.¹⁸

Accepting the fact that his language was flawed, Joseph was asking the elders at the conference to have this experience and testify that his revelations were from God, in spite of his inability to communicate as clearly as God.

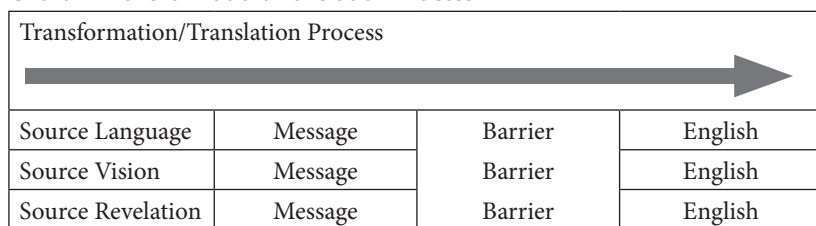
Some of the elders questioned the verity of Joseph's revelations because of his linguistic expressions. Joseph challenged them to write a revelation themselves that would be as efficacious as the revelations that he had produced. William E. McLellin, who was the primary instigator, attempted to "write a commandment like unto one of the least of the Lord's, but failed." All of the elders apparently watched eagerly as McLellin made a "vain attempt of man to imitate the language of Jesus Christ." This spectacle demonstrates the secular binaries (foundationally emerging from the binary of religion and secularism) shaping early Mormonism, never letting the divine voice stand without its companion, the secular language of humankind.¹⁹ Writing about his prophetic role to produce revelation, Joseph wrote that "it was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord."²⁰

18. "Revelation, circa 2 November 1831 [D&C 67]," 115, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-circa-2-november-1831-dc-67/2>.

19. Coviello argues that "secularism's negative, its enemy, is not religion; it is bad belief." This is framed first by the binary religion and secularism that moves to other binaries like civilizing and imbruting, or in this case, "God's voice" and "humankind's voice." They thrive off one another, but appear without analysis to be trying to eliminate each other. *Make Yourselves Gods*, 27–29.

20. "History, 1838–1856," 162.

Chart 1: Transformation/Translation Process



This builds a bridge between his translations and his revelations that we will need cross back and forth on, while focusing on translation. Before turning to another example, it's worth noting that translation can extend beyond just intra-language translation, such as the translation between religious experience and language. George Steiner explains that "translation is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor language via a transformational process," but his point lies within the fact that "the same model . . . is operative within a single language."²¹ (See Chart 1.) On one level, Joseph Smith was translating time in one language, describing the past and even prophesying the future, all in English. But on another level of translation, he was operating within one language, translating his experience. Because his translations did not include a personal transformation between two languages, it is difficult to completely untangle his translations from his revelations. As the next example will show, they were not historically separate either.

McLellan's challenge was neither the first time nor the last time Joseph Smith faced the problem of the indeterminacy of language with his colleagues. This all became more of a reality when he and Sidney Rigdon faced the problem of describing their vision (D&C 76) in early 1832. They eventually declared:

But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he showed unto us, which surpass all understanding

21. Steiner, *After Babel*, 29.

in glory, and in might, and in dominion; Which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the Spirit, and are not lawful for man to utter; Neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him, and purify themselves before him; To whom he grants this privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves. That through the power and manifestation of the Spirit, while in the flesh, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory. (D&C 76:114–18)

The Spirit was necessary to mediate the communication precisely because of the difficulty that language itself posed.

Apparently, visions were particularly difficult to translate into effective words. Yet, Joseph had produced examples of how past prophets had described their visions in some of his other revelations and translations. In fact, the Book of Mormon includes examples of visions similar to Joseph Smith's vision.²² (See Chart 2.) Nephi explains that John's vision in the New Testament (Revelation) was also a vision like unto his own ("all-seeing," panoptic, or panoramic vision). The Book of Mormon explained that both Nephi and John had "seen all things" in vision, and Nephi compared what John would write to know what he should write down about his vision.²³ They both had visions and both stayed true to their perspective of their visions.

Nephi's perception of a shared experience with John made their experiences comparable, but their individual perspectives also mattered

22. The scope of these visions is demonstrated in this passage by referencing them as including past, present, and future. "For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round" (1 Nephi 10:19).

23. "And also others who have been, to them hath he shown all things, and they have awritten them; and they are sealed up to come forth in their purity, according to the truth which is in the Lamb, in the own due time of the Lord, unto the house of Israel" (1 Nephi 14:26).

Chart 2: All Seeing Vision Comparison as an Archetype

Vision of "All Things" Nephi: 1 Ne. 14:26 "And also <i>others who have been</i> , to them hath <i>he shown all things</i> , and <i>they have written them</i> ; and they are sealed up to come forth in their purity, according to the truth which is in the Lamb, in the own due time of the Lord, unto the house of Israel" (emphasis added).				
Nephi	John	Brother of Jared	Moses	Joseph Smith
1 Ne. 14:36 "All Things"	1 Ne. 14:20–26 "he shall see and write the remainder of these things . . ."	Ether 4:4 "there never were greater things made manifest than those which were made manifest unto the brother of Jared." (Compare 2 Ne. 27:7)	Moses 1:8 "Moses beheld the world and the ends thereof, and all the children of men which are, and which were created; of the same he greatly marveled and wondered."	The vision was "concerning the economy of god and his vast creation throughout all eternity."
Nephi perceives within the text that these two are the same visionary experience.		No textual links, descriptive	No textual links, descriptive	Compares to Revelation, John's vision

and determined how they wrote about the vision. Like Nephi, Joseph Smith also compared his vision (D&C 76) with John's vision.²⁴ Having described a kind archetypical (panoptic) vision in the Book of Mormon and now having experienced his own vision, he turned to these other authors/prophets (such as John) to know how to write about his incomensurable vision. When he finally writes D&C 76, he explains that God commanded him and Rigdon to write the revelation, but he worries that he will not be able to communicate what he saw in writing.

24. According to the Book of Mormon, John is the author of the book of Revelation in the New Testament.

Eventually, he explains in D&C 76 that “Neither is man capable to make them [the experiences in the vision] known.” Language was his problem, not transcendence or knowledge, demonstrating the overarching tension of the secular binary.²⁵

Joseph’s comparison demonstrates his acceptance of the incommensurability of language. Nephi claimed that John had the same vision, and then Joseph used John’s description of his vision (Revelation) to undergird his own interpretation and perspective about his vision. Having examined the text of Revelation carefully, Joseph asked questions about the text, then God would reveal the answer with the meaning and interpretation (D&C 77). His revelation (D&C 77) about John’s vision was written down just after he had seen his own vision. This revelation suggests that he recognized his inability to write about his vision, but it also suggests that his perspective mattered. D&C 77 is an example of how he could clearly address these visionary experiences in his own context and interpretation, after accepting the incommensurability of language.²⁶

This overlap between translation and revelation became even more distinct within this project to translate his vision. In fact, his experience receiving D&C 77 led Joseph to ask additional questions about John’s vision. Instead of looking for a word for translation or an acceptable interpretation, he wanted to ask ontological questions about the nature of God. In the same format as D&C 77 (a series of questions posed from the text of Revelation followed by their respective answers), he asked God what the name of God was, provoked from the text of Revelation

25. For Samuel Brown, he has firmly moved toward the translation as metaphysical.

26. There four typical ways of interpreting Revelation, of which Joseph Smith does not conform to or attempt to conform to in his interpretation of Revelation in D&C 77. See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 20.

(3:12). The title of the revelation that he received read “First Question What is the name of God as taught in the pure Language.” This was unlike D&C 77 in the fact that it was not asking for an interpretation. It was asking for a translation in “the pure language,” or in a language that was not incommensurable. That meant that God’s name could not be delivered to him in English, or Egyptian, or Hebrew. Translation into these languages would all be incommensurable, but he seemed to be asking for something more than that. He seemed to be asking for something even more than the primordial language of Adam. He was asking to eliminate the religion and secularism binary to just have religion, which would prove to be difficult, securing him in a kind of prison.

Pure Language Document(s)

Joseph Smith was aware of the problem of translatability since his own translations contemplated a time when there was no need for translation. The book of Moses, which was written within the first year after he established the Church of Christ, expressed similar concerns with the incommensurability of translation. It establishes a timeframe in the beginning of the world when there was only one language, while also claiming that it was “a language which was pure and undefiled” or the language of Adam (Moses 6:5–6). This represents a moment of pure communication, while still finding itself under the strong arm of ontological relativity and the realization that there is still a kind of translation in the movement from prelinguistic cognition and linguistic expressions. Then the book of Moses introduces the reality of translatability within its own pages by describing Enoch trying to preserve Adam’s language amid the multiplication of languages. Even though ontological relativity played a role from the beginning of this narrative, translatability is a central concern, even a central epistemology, for Joseph Smith’s scripture at the earliest stages of his ministry and reemerging in the spring of 1832.

The “Sample of Pure Language” was not just evidence of Joseph Smith’s musings about translation—it represented an important element in his epistemology. First of all, it emerged within the context of creating a framework to transform Joseph Smith’s panoptic vision (D&C 76) into English. Second, it imagined the possibility of a prelinguistic linguistics, in which there was a time when there was a single “pure language.” Scholars have generally associated the “pure language” with the language of Adam, or the “undefiled” language described in Moses 6:5–6, or as the Joseph Smith Papers has associated it with the Jaredites and the confounding of languages.²⁷ (See Chart 3.) Nonetheless, the “pure language” could have just as easily represented a language before Adam’s language, which was the first corrupted language. Finally, this document is revelation about translation. Though it was not published in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, it was included within the manuscript version of Smith’s revelations. Even over time, it was not forgotten though it was not broadly available. Orson Pratt preached about the revelation in 1855, explaining that “there is one revelation that this people are not generally acquainted with . . . it has never been published, but probably will be in the Church History.”²⁸ This revelation demonstrates the dilemma of receiving “pure” communication and the inevitable incommensurability of translation. What Joseph was doing here has been debated for decades and few have agreed upon its purpose.

One thing that is clear is that this revelation marks Joseph Smith’s cognizance of the incommensurability of language, which reveals the secular binary. The idea of it being a “sample” suggests that the content itself was not its only purpose. Answering the question of what God’s name is was clearly important, but this document suggests that it is

27. *Joseph Smith Papers*, 2:214.

28. Orson Pratt, “The Holy Spirit and the Godhead,” Feb. 18, 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 2:342.

Chart 3: Sample of Pure Language

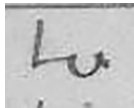
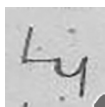


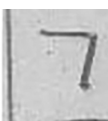

Question	What is the name of God in pure Language
Answer	Awmen.
Q	The meaning of the pure word A[w]men
A	It is the being which made all things in all its parts.
Q	What is the name of the Son of God.
A	The Son Awmen.
Q	What is the Son Awmen.
A	It is the greatest of all the parts of Awmen which is the Godhead the first born.
Q	What is is man.
A	This signifies Sons Awmen. the human family the children of men the greatest parts of Awmen Sons the Son Awmen
Q	What are Angels called in pure language.
A	Awmen Angls-men
Q	What are the meaning of these words.
A	Awmen's Ser $\diamond\diamond$ ts Ministerring servants Sanctified who are sent forth from heaven to minister for or to Sons Awmen the greatest part of Awmen Son. Sons Awmen Son Awmen Awmen

Transcribed from: "Sample of Pure Language, between circa 4 and circa 20 March 1832," 144, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/sample-of-pure-language-between-circa-4-and-circa-20-march-1832/1#full-transcript>.

a sample of an overarching question that was being asked. The question of language and its nature was a central feature of this document. Joseph was not only interested in theological answers; he was interested in epistemology and communication. He chased these ideas throughout his ministry until he died. The very idea of evoking an original language that was "pure" is an explicit acceptance of the incommensurability of language and translation. Change, or translation, was not a real possibility. Returning to the original language was the most effective way to access the pure knowledge that he sought. Yet, even in this document, the answer is still in English.

Joseph never forgets the fact that what has been revealed to him still has to be delivered in English and he keeps exploring this idea through the Pure Language Document. This is demonstrated through

Chart 4: W. W. Phelps Pure Language Chart. 1835

Reformed Egyptian (Gold Plate Character)	Phonetic expression	English kind of transliteration	Meaning
A Specimen of some of the "pure language"			
	Ah	Ahman	God
	Auz	Sonsahman	Son of God
	Aintz	Saunsahman	Sons of God ordains
	Aine	Anglo	Angels
	Anize	Sons ahman	Children of Men
	Oh	Olack	The Earth

seems to be the meaning (also drawn from the Pure Language Document) of the six characters.²⁹ (See Chart 4.)

Phelps's letter appears to be a one-to-one translation of six characters from the gold plates. His letter is the first known document

29. There are multiple nonextant documents that included characters copied from the plates. The extant document includes some of them, but Phelps may have had a different copy or document than the extant document. The fact that these line up create an interesting situation. MacKay, Jensen, and Dirkmaat, "The 'Caractors' Document," 131–52. See W. W. Phelps, Pure Language chart.

to express commensurability between the characters and an English expression of the characters. Before Phelps's chart, there was nothing. Even more remarkable is the fact that Phelps used the Book of Mormon characters, but instead of identifying a word or phrase from the Book of Mormon, he associated their meaning with the revelation that was provided in the Pure Language Document.

However, there is no extant document trying to connect the translation of the "characters" with any specific passage in the Book of Mormon. The concepts of God, son of God, humankind, and angels are used in the Book of Mormon but never the term "ahman," nor is the ontology expressed in the Pure Language Document found within its pages. Nonetheless, "ahman" becomes an important concept in the Doctrine and Covenants, especially in its association with D&C 78 and "Adam-ondi-ahman," a place where Christ would return as part of the Second Coming.³⁰ This is strange, but it does demonstrate their efforts to identify commensurability between characters and revealed text.

There is another document that also tries to identify commensurability in a similar way. Oliver Cowdery made some notes that also point toward a kind of one-to-one translation of the characters from the Book of Mormon. Having edited this document for the Joseph Smith Papers, I can say it's difficult to date its production with any accuracy and it was relegated to the appendix of *Documents Volume 1*. Nonetheless, the first part of his notes includes a verse from the book of Jacob labeled "English," followed by an indecipherable phrase labeled "Hebrew." Then the second part includes "Book of Mormon characters" presumably with their translation into English above (see "Written and Kept for Profit and Learning" below). Assuming this is produced at the same time, it demonstrates their efforts to make translation commensurable and binary.

30. Interestingly, notions of Adam and Adam-ondi-Ahman were added to Doctrine and Covenants (see changes in Doctrine and Covenants sections 27, 78, and 107) in early 1835 just before Phelps wrote his letter to his wife in May.

Egyptian Alphabet		
⌒	⌒	Alhabeth Angels
⌒	⌒	Alhabeth Ministers of God, high priests, kings
⌒	⌒	Alhabeth Ministers of God, and than high priests -
⌒	⌒	Alhabeth Ministers not ordained of God, sinful
⌒	⌒	Alhabeth Ministers who are less sinful for want of power
⌒	⌒	Alhabeth The name of all mankind - man or men

Phelps Letter		
⌒	⌒	ah Ahman - God
⌒	⌒	anz anabaran - Son of God
⌒	⌒	ainz anunahman - sons of God ordained
⌒	⌒	ainz anito - Angels
⌒	⌒	ainz anahman - children of man
⌒	⌒	Oh Ohak the Earth

The Phelps letter includes six characters that were also included in the Egyptian Alphabet. This overlap demonstrates continuity and influence from the Pure Language Document (referenced in the Phelps letter) to the Egyptian Alphabet. The definitions represent a series of different sounds and meanings, but still provide an expansion of a root sound or definition (like "beth" or "ahman") into five degrees of ministry.

What was happening here is unclear, but the Cowdery document demonstrates their efforts to develop a correspondence translation between the Book of Mormon and the "caractors." However, they fall short in two distinct ways. First, they are not connected to any specific passage and indeed even represent ideas and terms that are not in the Book of Mormon at all (for example, the phrase "the interpreters of language"). Second, they still don't know the original language in order to develop a corresponding translation (interestingly, within months they begin studying Hebrew). They rely on revelation to make their translations, but not on a verifiable translation process. Because of this, even the most mechanical and minor efforts to show a correspondence of any kind, whether tight or loose, between the English text of the Book of Mormon and the mysterious script of "reformed Egyptian" still do

not provide any evidence of a correspondence theory of translation. But that doesn't mean that it doesn't create a binary tension.

The Kirtland Egyptian Alphabets

The Phelps letter led to further attempts to create a kind of correspondence translation of the Book of Mormon and the gold plate characters. In the summer of 1835, the three individuals most interested in this work on translation and the search for a pure language over the previous eight years took another try at it. The Egyptian "characters" copied from the gold plates in 1828 and Pure Language Document that Joseph Smith began in early 1828 and in 1832 have always been considered separately from the first alphabet of Egyptian characters produced in the summer of 1835. Yet, this research shows that they started that summer by examining the Egyptian from the gold plates, not the papyri. This can be demonstrated through the "Egyptian Alphabet" documents that have been assumed to have come from the papyri. Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, and Joseph Smith each worked on three separate alphabet documents, though they were copies of each other with a few idiosyncratic changes, collectively known as the "Egyptian Alphabet"; it should be relabeled the "Combined Gold Plates Egyptian and Papyri Egyptian Alphabet," though I will continue to call it the "Egyptian Alphabet."

This proposed title change is important. These alphabets shared a similar format and organization with Phelps's chart including Book of Mormon characters, phonetics, transliteration, and meanings.³¹ Further connecting them, some characters from the Book of Mormon "characters" document ended up in their alphabets just like they ended up in Phelps's letter on pure language. Some of the Egyptian characters in the alphabet documents have exact matches to the characters associated with the gold plates in 1828 (to my knowledge, the list below is the first time this comparative list has been identified in print or otherwise). Curiously, Oliver Cowdery's edition of the Egyptian Alphabet shows

31. *Joseph Smith Papers*, 4:53.

Chart 5: Comparing Documents Associated with Reformed Egyptian Characters

Gold Plate "Caractors" 1827/8	Pure Language Sample 1833	Phelps's Spring 1835 Letter	The Egyptian Alphabet Summer 1835
Seeks the translation, creating an alphabet	Represents the ontology of God	Combines "caractors" and Pure Language sample	Combines "caractors," Pure Language sample, Phelps's letter, and compiles a new alphabet

more signs of being associated with the earlier Book of Mormon characters project. Cowdery's alphabet appears to be the original or first of the three alphabet documents. Not only do the characters match many of the extant samples of Book of Mormon characters, but Cowdery also frames his alphabet like John Whitmer did for the Book of Mormon "caractors" document by calling the symbols "characters," while Phelps and Smith called them "Egyptian." This seems to suggest a relationship between the 1828 alphabet "caractors" project and the 1835 Egyptian Alphabet project.³² (See Chart 5.)

The project that had just begun that summer to develop an Egyptian alphabet experienced an unexpected boost when the Saints came into contact with some genuine Egyptian materials. In July 1835, Joseph Smith and some helpful financiers purchased several scrolls of Egyptian papyri. Since Joseph Smith had already translated the gold plates, which were in "reformed Egyptian," the papyri became all the more intriguing and a great way to extend their study of language. After recently returning to studying the Book of Mormon's "reformed Egyptian," the arrival of the mummies and papyri in Kirtland must not have seemed like a coincidence. It's clear that Cowdery, Phelps, and Joseph were not finished with the alphabet; once the papyri arrived, Joseph continued by adding characters from the papyri to the list of Book of Mormon Egyptian. The last page of all three copies of the alphabet show the explicit

32. *Joseph Smith Papers*, 1:345–52.

shift from gold plates characters to characters taken from the newly purchased papyri. Though they stopped abruptly after including only a handful of characters from the papyri, the unfinished Kirtland Egyptian Alphabet was then a compilation of four different documents: gold plate “reformed Egyptian” characters (1828), the Pure Language Document (1833), Phelps’s letter (1835), and finally, at the end of the Alphabet, the characters from the papyri (procured in July 1835).³³ (See Chart 6.)

Chart 6

This chart demonstrates that the Egyptian Alphabet is constructed of two different sets of characters. The first set is demonstrably not from the Egyptian papyri, since six of the characters in the first set match the shape and order of six of the characters used in the Phelps letter. They are not taken from the Egyptian papyri because the Phelps letter was written before they purchased it; they also do not match any of the extant papyri. The first set resembles and occasionally matches the characters from the Book of Mormon “caractors” document, but there were multiple Book of Mormon characters documents and the “caractors” copy was likely not the primary document they used to compile the list (though there are still several exact matches with the characters from “caractors”). Cowdery wrote in 1835 that when the Egyptian papyri first arrived, they compared them to “a number of characters . . . copied from the plates.” The second set of characters does exactly what Cowdery said that it did: it compared the Book of Mormon character to the papyri characters. They copied directly from the Egyptian papyri fragment that became Facsimile 1 in the Pearl of Great Price (Fragment of Book of Breathing for Horos). The original has three columns of Egyptian characters that they copied directly from.

33. For an example of contemporary comparison see Oliver Cowdery to William Frye, Dec. 22, 1835, copy in Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, 72, photocopy at Church History Library; Cowdery, “Egyptian Mummies—Ancient Records,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, December 1835, 235.

Chart 6:

"Caractors"	A-Alphabet	B-Alphabet	C-Alphabet	Grammar and Alphabet	Sound connecting all characters
					Ah, ah, ah lish, ahlish, ahlish=
					Pha-e, Phae-e, Phah eh, Phah=eh, etc.
					Pha, pha, Phaah, Pha ah, pha=ah, pha-ah—
					Phaloeup, Pha-ho-e-oop, Phah ho e oop, Phah-ho-e-oop
					Ho up hah, Ho-oop-hah, ho oop hah, etc.
					Zi
					Kah tou man, Hah-tou-mun, Kah-tou-man, etc.
					Zie oop hah, Zi-oop=hah, Zioop-hah, etc.
					Ho-ee-oop, Ho=e-oop, Ho-e-oop, etc.

Chart 6 (continued)





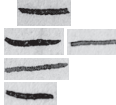










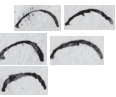




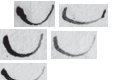




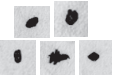
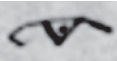


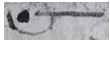
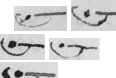
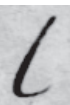



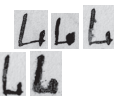











"Caractors"	A-Alphabet	B-Alphabet	C-Alphabet	Grammar and Alphabet	Sound connecting all characters
					Zip Zi, Zip-zi, Zip=zi, Zip Zi, Zipzi, etc.
					Ho-ee oop hah, Ho=e=oop-hah, Hoe oop hah—, etc.
 					one-ah-e or ohe, Oan, or ah-e, or Oh-e, sue, Sue=, Auh eh, Oan, etc.
					tone tahe or th tohe tou-es, tah eh toue, etc.
					Iota, Iata, Iota or Ki, etc.
					Iota tou-es Zip-zi, Iota toues Zip Zi, etc.
					Sue Eh ni, Su-e-eh=ni, Sueehni, etc.
 					Ho-ee oop hah pha-e, Ho=e=oop hah=Pha=e—, Hooophahphaheh, etc.
					Zub Zool oun, Zub-zool=oan, Zub-Zool-oan

Chart 6 (continued)

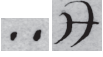



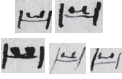




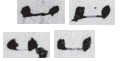
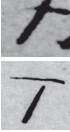



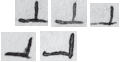
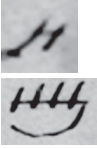



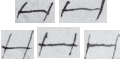





"Caractors"	A-Alphabet	B-Alphabet	C-Alphabet	Grammar and Alphabet	Sound connecting all characters
					<p>Zub Zool Eh, Zub=zool=eh; Zubzooléh; etc.</p>
					<p>Zool Eh, Zub=eh—,</p>
					<p>Zub, Zub—, etc.</p>
					<p>Zub zool, Zubzool, etc.</p>
					<p>Zool, Zool; etc.</p>

Chart 6 (continued)
Part 2




































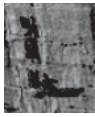
“Caractors”	A-Alphabet	B-Alphabet	C-Alphabet	Grammar and Alphabet	Sound
					Ahmeos, Ah-me-os, Ahme=os=, etc.
					Aleph, etc.
					Albeth, etc.
					Acabeth, Alkabeth, etc.
					Achebeth, Alchebeth, Alkebeth.
					Alchibeth, etc.
					Alchobeth, Alkobeth, etc.
					Alchubeth, Alkubeth, etc.
					Baeth, Ba=eth, etc.
					Baeth Ka, Baeth-ka, etc.
					

Chart 6 (continued)



Transition figure from Book of Mormon characters to characters from the Papyri.

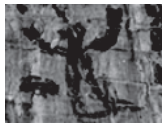

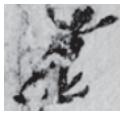


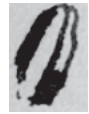




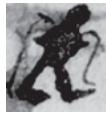


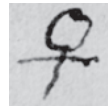


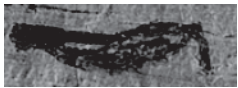




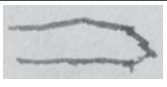
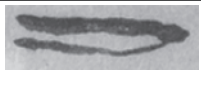


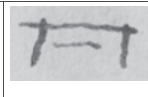
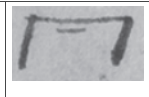
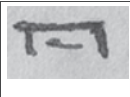

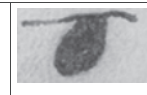
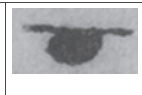
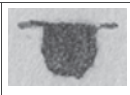

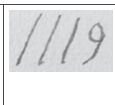

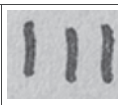

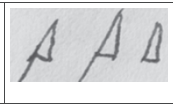
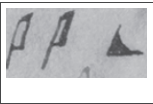
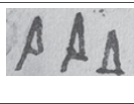

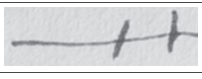
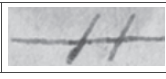

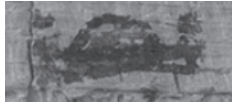
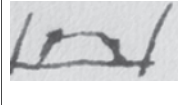


Papyri	A	B	C	Grammar and Alphabet	Sound
				Not included	Not included
				Not included	Not included
				Not included	Not included
				Not included	Not included
					

Chart 6 (continued)

					
				Not included	Not included
				Not included	Not included
				Not included	Not included
				Not included	Not included
					
					

Egyptian Grammar and Alphabet and the Book of Abraham

After producing the Egyptian Alphabet, they turned to producing a “Grammar and Alphabet.” They continued to examine characters from the papyri and showed sustained interest in Book of Mormon characters. This new extension of the project had “antecedents in the earlier Egyptian Alphabet documents, all of which are arranged in a similar

fashion,” leading back to the Phelps letter.³⁴ They continued to work through the same methodological dilemma of incommensurability. The “grammar” demonstrated a system in which each line of characters could be deepened by degrees (the Pure Language Document reflects a similar kind of five-part meaning). It explained that any given symbol (say a character, like an “I”) has five parts of speech that can be multiplied five times if a line is placed above the character. The “Grammar” document explains: “The character alone has 5 parts of speech: increase by one straight line thus 5×5 is 25 by 2 horizontal lines thus $25 \times 5 = 125$; and by 3 horizontal lines thus: $125 \times 5 = 625$.” As a general system, the possibilities of translation multiply quickly, deepening with each line or character.³⁵ In fact, one character in Egyptian can extend to an entire paragraph in an English definition.

When Smith, Phelps, and Cowdery addressed the fifth or final degree, a single character is lined up with an entire pericope of the text of the book of Abraham.³⁶ This may actually be a representation for how God’s revealed word was deeper and more profound than the surface-level definitions of the first degree. Brian Hauglid has demonstrated that some of the Egyptian characters and their associated English definitions in the “Grammar” end up in the earliest manuscripts of the book of Abraham. In those manuscripts, there is a single Egyptian character that is lined up with an entire paragraph of English. This is not a definition of a word that can be extended in its explanation

34. *Joseph Smith Papers*, 4:112.

35. The Grammar is “split into two parts, each of which is further divided into five subsections, called “degrees.” The degrees in each part appear in reverse numerical order. Part I begins with the fifth degree and works backward to the first, then part 2 starts over with the fifth degree and proceeds in the same manners.” *Joseph Smith Papers*, 4:112.

36. See Brian M. Hauglid, “‘Translating an Alphabet to the Book of Abraham’: Joseph Smith’s Study of the Egyptian Language and His Translation of the Book of Abraham,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture*, 363–90.

like a dictionary. Something else is going on besides a commensurable translation of an Egyptian character into an English word or phrase. One Egyptian character represents a paragraph of English prose, followed by a connected paragraph of English prose that is associated with another Egyptian character. What's most important for the argument here about the secular binary is that revealed text from the book of Abraham is being associated with actual Egyptian characters. Whether or not the text of the book of Abraham is revelation or simply derivative of the Egyptian or the "Grammar and Alphabet," it's still clear that revelatory translation and secular translation created a binary that represented the translation.

What could be more incommensurable? The degree system in the "Grammar" distances the characters from a one-to-one translation and adds a metaphysical component of different ranges of meaning contained within a single character. A character may refer to a single word or an entire paragraph of English. At one point they start with the fifth-degree translation and work backwards as if they know the outcome and are trying to attach the English to an Egyptian character.³⁷ This leads to the fact that what seems (at first glance) to be a kind of one-to-one translation is not what it appears to be. In fact, it looks like Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon. He has the characters from the gold plates and a revelatory English text but no possible way to tell if they are commensurable. He nonetheless sees them as commensurable, as would eventually be demonstrated through the publication of the book of Abraham that included a precursor claiming that it was a translation of the papyri.

Modern translators can demonstrate that Smith, Cowdery, and Phelps did not know Egyptian, making their efforts in the production of the Egyptian Alphabet, the "Grammar," and the book of Abraham an

37. "Part 1 begins with the fifth degree and works backward to the first, then part 2 starts over with the fifth degree and proceeds in the same manner." JSP, *Revelations and Translations* Vol. 4, 112.

attempt to create one side of the secular binary by trying to perform a linguistic translation. The binary did not have to actually be a linguistic translation but it did need to be secular and non-metaphysical. Though they may have felt they were getting closer to a linguistic translation, their work on the "Grammar and Alphabet" further demonstrates the incommensurability of translation that they were getting closer to. They don't appear to be any further along in becoming linguists or knowing Egyptian, but they show clear signs of believing that there could be a one-to-one correlation in Joseph Smith's translations with Egyptian. The efforts toward real translation also went hand in hand with the production of new scripture, since at least part of the book of Abraham was produced during their examination and study of the Egyptian papyri.³⁸

Yet, all of these efforts to produce a verifiable, commensurable translation are superseded by the actual products of the translation efforts. Translation remained revelatory, though it was identified as a secular process. Maintaining a systematic line of thinking, the relationship between the "Grammar" and the book of Abraham may be an example of the process and depth of meaning rather than definition. Their process of producing the Book of Abraham could easily make claim to the fact that Joseph's translation came from the papyri, even if none of the characters on the papyri could be directly translated into any of the words in the book of Abraham. Given their previous experience with translation, this makes sense.

The translation of the book of Abraham exhibits the same kind of method and incommensurability demonstrated in the Book of Mormon translation. In the case of Joseph Smith's 1828 translation, he produced characters to be translated by scholars, but he also apparently provided text from revelation or seer stones. Both show efforts to decipher the meanings of the characters, but both also rely on revelation to provide the English rendition.

38. Hauglid, "Translating an Alphabet."

This metaphysical process is somewhat different from what Smith and his disciples were attempting to do with the alphabets. Phelps's May 1835 letter used known text derived from the "pure language" from which he superimposed characters next to the text. It was an effort to assign specific meanings to specific characters. Joseph and his colleagues followed the structure (five parts or states of one definition) of the Pure Language Document with the system of degrees they designed in both the Alphabet and Grammar and Alphabet in the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, but it is unclear whether the text of the book of Abraham came first by revelation or whether the characters inspired the text as an explanation.³⁹ Either way, it leads back to an underdetermined transference, or experience of divine communication that was derived from their exploration of a system associated with the Egyptian characters. This is like John Modern's analysis in the fact that "true religion" is not being created by religion or religious experience, but instead it's being created by the binary of religion and secularism or revelation and translation. Let me further demonstrate this binary with one more example.

Esotericism and Symbolic Translation

Scholars have rightfully compared the incommensurable translation described above with esotericism or attempts to understand Egyptian as a symbolic system that can only be delivered metaphysically.⁴⁰ Such an interpretation fits into a well-known intellectual tradition. Europeans struggled for centuries to make sense of Egyptian, developing it into a kind of cryptic language with no logical or systematic approach.

39. This scholarly debate continues to be waged primarily between Egyptologists (John Gee and Kerry Muhlestein) and others (like Robin Jensen and Brian Hauglid). Joseph Smith was determined that it came from God.

40. For studies on semiotic translation, see Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Dinda L. Gorfée, *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation: With Special Reference to the Semiotics of Charles S. Peirce* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994).

The hieroglyphs represented mystery rather than clear expression or language. They treated the hieroglyphs like tiny pictures or symbols that could only be interpreted by ancient priests.⁴¹ As Richard Bushman has argued, this symbolic school of Egyptian interpretation may reflect what Joseph Smith was doing in the Kirtland Egyptian Project.⁴² If so, he was in good company. The Swedenborgians attached sacred meaning to the hieroglyphs, explaining that the meaning could only be accessed through divine means.⁴³ Bushman also points out that Smith used a similar approach to expand Hebrew later, in which simple words like “creation” became “a theory of creation.”⁴⁴ This symbolic interpretation of Egyptian drew on these mystical and esoteric theories of sacred language, demonstrating that what Joseph Smith was doing with translation was far less radical when placed within historical context. Egyptian was mysterious to everyone in the Western world.

However, Joseph and his colleagues did not buy wholesale into these mystical approaches either, since they show signs of using some of the nuanced academic approaches to Egyptian. French scholar Jean-François Champollion worked hard to break the Egyptian code by 1822. His breakthrough using the Rosetta Stone was the discovery that he disassociated the hieroglyphs with symbols and demonstrated that they represented sounds. Joseph Smith and his colleagues seem to be familiar with the implications of Champollion's method. Beginning with Phelps's letter, they created charts that reflected the comparative

41. Richard L. Bushman, “Joseph Smith's Place in the Study of Antiquity in Antebellum America,” in *Approaching Antiquity*, 17.

42. Samuel Brown, “Joseph (Smith) in Egypt: Babel, Hieroglyphs, and the Pure Language of Eden,” *Church History* 78, no 1 (Mar. 2009): 26–65.

43. Emanuel Swedenborg, *A Hieroglyphic Key to Natural and Spiritual Mysteries*, translated by James John Garth Wilkinson (London, 1874); Sampson Reed, *New Jerusalem Magazine* 4 (Oct. 1830): 69–71; and J. D., “Egyptian Hieroglyphs,” *New Jerusalem Magazine* 4 (Feb. 1831): 233–36.

44. Bushman, “Joseph Smith's Place in the Study of Antiquity,” 19.

diagrams in Champollion's work that juxtaposed hieroglyphs with phonetic scripts, a kind of comparison commonly found in the work of US-based scholars Samuel Rafinesque and Moses Stuart.⁴⁵ The Kirtland Egyptian Alphabet included names for the characters, pronunciations, and explanations. The pronunciations move distinctly away from the esoteric translation of Egyptian and represent the academic work of Champollion in the Kirtland Egyptian Projects by their use of phonetics.

Their exploration of Egyptian emphasized their interest in language but demonstrated more than any other project that their translations were underdetermined. They seemed to have accepted the fact that even if they were to break the code or understand the Egyptian characters, it wouldn't offer them the pure language of God or even be a perfect reflection of the book of Abraham. Egyptian was certainly the entry point, but like other languages, it was corrupt in their minds, or at least deficient in its ability to deliver the pure communication of God—even a perfect one-to-one translation was still incommensurable in this respect. They did not give up on the usefulness of language, but rather they used the system it represented to see the depth of a particular message within a written language.

This gets us to the underlying tension of this article. It is clear that Joseph Smith knew that the ancient characters he was translating were inevitably incommensurable to the English translations that he offered. He did not devalue his revelatory knowledge, but rather accepted that it was more valuable than a linguistic translation that would also end up being incommensurable. Though Smith was producing translations by revelation, it still did not stop him from trying to create a system that

45. See Matthew J. Grey, "Joseph Smith's Use of Hebrew in his Translation of the Book of Abraham," in *Producing Ancient Scripture*; Moses Stuart, *A Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, 5th ed. (Andover, Mass.: Gould and Newman, 1835), 9–10 (charts no. I–III); Samuel Rafinesque, "Tabular View of the Compared Atlantic Alphabets & Glyphs of Africa and America," *Atlantic Journal* (1832); Jean-François Champollion, *Précis du système hiéroglyphique des anciens Égyptiens* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1828).

explained and articulated that communication through language. The symbolic system of the Swedenborgians and others evoked a mystical experience by a priest, whereas Joseph was trying to give helpful precision and explanation to his translations. Comparable to Champollion's phonetics, Joseph tried to identify the pronunciations and sounds of the characters, but then accepted the underdetermined nature of language and tried to develop a system of degrees to deepen the explanation and expand it further. In other words, Joseph did not want to accept the underdetermined nature of translation, but his struggle with it demonstrates that he was cognizant of the problem.⁴⁶

The Prison of Language

Joseph Smith believed in a hierarchy of religious experience over language, but he couldn't do without language. In fact, he explained, "Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God." Yet, as he argued, "could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject."⁴⁷ Visions and revelations were his reality, while language was his prison. Joseph questioned the validity or possibility of finding synonyms, constantly turning back to religious experience for the reality of religious truth. In a letter to W. W. Phelps, Joseph articulately explained the impact of religious experience, writing that "the still small voice which whispereth through and pierceth all things and often

46. His late work on the Kinderhook plates demonstrates his distance from linguistic precision, but his continued prophetic and revelatory expressions show why he would be so intrigued by those plates without concern for a determinacy of language. See Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee, "'President Joseph Has Translated a Portion': Joseph Smith and the Mistranslation of the Kinderhook Plates," in *Producing Ancient Scripture*.

47. Joseph Smith, "Mysteries of Godliness," *Times and Seasons*, Oct. 9, 1843.

times it maketh my bones to quake while it maketh manifest.”⁴⁸ Yet still lamenting that “God holdeth up the dark curtain until we may read the sound of Eternity to the fullness and satisfaction of our immortal souls.”⁴⁹ This metaphor uses contradictory sensorial expressions of access (sight, touch, and hearing) to demonstrate the withdrawn nature of that access by claiming that one could read sound. The problem of reading sound is a perfect metaphor to help us access what was happening in his translations. Joseph described this division between God’s word and our earthly reality as a prison. He prayed that God would “deliver us in due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were [total] darkness of paper pen and ink and crooked broken scattered and imperfect language.”⁵⁰ Perhaps what he never fully realized was that he was describing the ever-present secular tension of antebellum American religion and that his religion itself was dependent upon that tension and the secular binary.

Joseph Smith’s theory of translation couldn’t be expressed any clearer than when he explained that language was like a prison. He could never quite secure his religious and spiritual foundations without secularizing them through an incommensurable translation. Smith was aware of the incommensurability of translation yet he still sought commensurability. Within the binary of religion and secularism, religion became universal, as mentioned above.⁵¹ Yet secularism also de-universalized parts of religion that were not “consistent with the basic requirements of modern society.”⁵² In Joseph Smith’s translations,

48. “Letterbook 1,” 3, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-1/15>.

49. “Letterbook 1,” 4.

50. “Letterbook 1,” 4.

51. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 29–30.

52. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 182–83.

he accepted the secular discourse of translation commensurability and maintained the tensions of the binary with incommensurability to establish the legitimacy of his translations and Mormonism. In this way, his translations were both secular and religious.

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"catharsis (no. 35),"
55" x 40", oil on canvas,
by Ron Richmond

PRAISE TO THE MAN: THE DEVELOPMENT OF JOSEPH SMITH DEIFICATION IN WOOLLEYITE MORMONISM, 1929–1977

Cristina Rosetti

“My testimony is that Joseph Smith is at the head of this dispensation; he is a member of the Godhead and he is the One Mighty and Strong. And it is his work to set the house of God in order.”

—Saint Joseph W. Musser, June 25, 1944

The Lorin C. Woolley Statement

On September 22, 1929, Lorin C. Woolley stood before a group of Mormon men and read a statement on the continuation of plural marriage. His statement began with an overview of June 1886, when leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gathered to raise their concerns about the government confiscating Church property over the issue of polygamy.¹ According to Woolley’s account, many of the men were in support of appeasing the government to preserve Church assets. Leading the charge of this position was George Q. Cannon who, along with Hiram B. Clawson, Franklin S. Richards, John T. Caine, and James Black, met with President John Taylor for his consideration. On

1. The Edmunds–Tucker Act was passed by the Senate in January 1886. The Act disincorporated the Church, dissolved the corporation, and allowed for the federal government to confiscate Church property valued at more than \$50,000. This monetary value put temples, the center of family formation and polygamous marriages, in jeopardy of confiscation.

September 26, 1886, unable to come to a consensus among the men, Cannon suggested that President Taylor take the matter to God.²

In Woolley's recollection of the evening, he sat in his room and began reading the Doctrine and Covenants, a compilation of LDS Church presidents' revelations, when, "I was suddenly attracted to a light appearing under the door leading to President Taylor's room, and was at once startled to hear the voices of men talking there. There were three distinct voices."³ Concerned for Taylor's well-being, who was in hiding for his own participation in plural marriage, Woolley ran to the door and found it bolted. Perplexed, he stood by the door until morning, when Taylor emerged from the room with a "brightness of his personage."⁴ Looking to Woolley, and the other men now gathered at the door, Taylor explained, "Brethren, I have had a very pleasant conversation all night with Brother Joseph [Smith]."⁵ Even more perplexed, Woolley questioned the voices, only to learn that the third voice was Jesus Christ. With little additional explanation, Woolley recalled Taylor placing "each person under covenant that he or she would defend the principle of Celestial or Plural Marriage, and that they would consecrate their lives, liberty and property to this end, and that they personally would sustain and uphold the principle."⁶ Following the alleged ordination, Taylor penned the revelation, popularly referred to as the 1886 Revelation, that affirmed the continued practice of polygamy and its place as an irrevocable doctrine for Latter-day Saints.

2. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," in *Priesthood Items, 2nd edition*, by J. W. Musser and J. L. Broadbent (n.p., 1933), 56.

3. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 56.

4. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 57.

5. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 57.

6. "Statements of Lorin C. Woolley and Daniel R. Bateman," 58.

The 1886 Revelation was a watershed moment for the development of Mormon fundamentalism. In light of government prosecution and internal persecution of polygamists within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the revelation became a touchstone that affirmed the fundamentalist position on plural marriage. At the same time, the revelation became a marker of an alternate priesthood lineage outside of the LDS Church. Rather than follow the leadership of Wilford Woodruff and the subsequent end of polygamy, a priesthood led by John W. Woolley was initiated to preserve the practice. However, the 1886 Revelation and subsequent statement also raised their own doctrinal questions that were continually developed through the lineage that became Woolleyite Mormonism. Namely, why was the resurrected Joseph Smith present alongside Jesus Christ at the meeting with John Taylor?

Since Smith's death in 1844, Mormonism struggled to place the martyr within their cosmology. In life, Smith's role as the prophet of the last dispensation went largely uncontested among his followers. While this remains the case, his position in death is much more complex. In Christopher J. Blythe's work on the apotheosis of Joseph Smith and the struggle to make sense of the late prophet's identity after death, he describes how early Latter-day Saints conceptualized their late leader, including the use of past sermons that alluded to Smith's identity as "veiled in mystery."⁷ The most notable and often cited of these mysterious remarks stated, "Would to God, brethren, I could tell you who I am! Would to God I could tell you what I know! But you would call it blasphemy and want to take my life."⁸ Smith's vague statement on

7. Christopher James Blythe, "Would to God Brethren, I Could Tell You Who I Am!": Nineteenth-Century Mormonisms and the Apotheosis of Joseph Smith," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 18, no. 2 (2014): 16.

8. Orson F. Whitney, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: The Kimball Family, 1888), 333.

his identity shortly before his death left a knowledge void among his believers that allowed for diverse doctrinal speculation. Summarizing the various responses to Smith's death, Blythe shows a range of positions, from beliefs that Smith belonged within the angelic hierarchy to assertions that his place was among the gods from assertions that Smith belonged within the angelic hierarchy to his place among the gods.

Through doctrinal routinization, LDS leaders sought to distance themselves from the latter position and clarify Smith's place within Mormon cosmology. Within the LDS Church, Smith was doctrinally concretized as a mortal prophet who spoke with God, but was not God. However, as the LDS Church increasingly moved away from deification, with the eventual concretization of Smith's place as the prophet of God, but not God, Mormon fundamentalists developed a doctrine of deity that named Smith as the third member of the Godhead. Most notably, Lorin C. Woolley and the men who descend from his priesthood lineage constructed a discourse on the nature of God that placed Smith back within Woolley's own speculative framework on exaltation.

This article analyzes deification as a discursive practice that, together with Mormon theology of embodiment, exalted Smith to deity. Within many of the largest Mormon fundamentalist groups, Smith's position as a member of the Godhead fills the void of Smith's claim and answers for his continued presence in the lives of the Saints. For many Mormons gathering outside of the institutional LDS Church, Smith remains present in the lives of believers and continues to serve as a source of authority for minority Mormon groups because he became one of the gods.

Mingling with Gods

Following the death of Joseph Smith, a poem turned hymn appeared in the August 1844 issue of *Times and Seasons*, an LDS newspaper that circulated in Nauvoo, Illinois. William W. Phelps wrote "Praise to the Man" to celebrate the life and legacy of the late prophet. While the

hymn underwent its own controversy and revision in the twentieth century, the chorus remained an iconic segment of the commemorative poem:

Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;
Death cannot conquer the hero again.

The writings of Phelps, and other early leaders within the Church after Smith's martyrdom, constructed and concretized norms surrounding both faith and the language that serves as its foundation. Through writing, sermonizing, and doctrinal speculation, they created doctrines that became lived realities that governed the lives of the Saints. As authors recalled and theorized Smith's existence, Smith's existence came to life. In ensuing decades, Smith became an authoritative figure who governed those who believed themselves the heirs of the faith he founded.

When Lorin C. Woolley first speculated on the nature of Joseph Smith in 1932, he began with the language of Phelps's hymn to articulate Smith's central role in both the Church and the eschaton. The first recorded reference to Joseph Smith by Woolley occurred during a meeting of his School of the Prophets on March 6, 1932. Because Woolley did not keep a diary or a record of his revelations and doctrinal developments, early Woolleyite Mormonism is best known through the writings of the men in his Priesthood Council, the group of men ordained by Woolley to maintain the principles of Mormonism outside the bounds of the institutional Church.⁹ Woolleyite doctrine recorded

9. In their later writings, the men of the Priesthood Council articulated a theology of priesthood that placed their ordinations above the LDS Church. Holding higher priesthood enabled these men to participate in rituals and practices no longer taught within the institution. Central to their mission was the preservation of polygamy. See Craig L. Foster and Marianne T. Watson, *American Polygamy: A History of Fundamentalist Mormon Faith* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2019).

in Joseph W. Musser's *Book of Remembrances* and the meeting minutes for the School of the Prophets give the most comprehensive overview of Woolley's teachings.¹⁰

In his first lecture pertaining to Smith, Woolley expounded on Smith's infamous "Would to God" statement. He explained:

J.S. repeated the statement—"Would to God I could tell you who I am.' The saints are not yet prepared to know their Prophet leader." Joseph S. is probably a literal descendent of Jesus Christ of Jewish and Ephraim lineage, the blood of Judah probably predominating—the ruling power. . . . Adam at head of Adamic dispensation; Christ at head of dispensation of the Meridian of Times and Joseph at the head of the last dispensation. "Would to God I could tell you who I am!" Being a God, he is mingling with Gods and planning for his brethren.¹¹

In the last year of his life, Smith welcomed his followers to consider their eternity and the transformative aspects of death. In the often-cited King Follet Sermon, delivered by Smith in 1844, Smith remarked, "You have got to learn how to be a god yourself in order to save yourself."¹² By articulating Smith as "mingling with gods," Woolley postulated of an already exalted Smith, placing Smith within his own theological development and asserting that through his own mortal probation Smith was exalted into the realm of the gods.

Woolley maintained Smith's unquestionable role as the prophet who restored the Church and revived the priesthood, or power of God,

10. Woolley School of the Prophets Meeting Minutes, transcribed and edited by Bryan Buchanan, 7, photocopies in author's possession. The Woolley School of the Prophets began meeting on September 1, 1932 in the homes and offices of its members in Salt Lake City. During the meeting, the men received the sacrament using bread and wine, participated in foot washing, and expounded on doctrine.

11. "Praise to the Man," *Hymns*, no. 27.

12. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton," 11, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-william-clayton/1>.

to earth. Having accomplished this mortal work, Mormons place Smith as the head of the final dispensation, or period of divine time in which an authorized leader holds the priesthood and ministers on behalf of God. As Woolley looked back on the leaders of various dispensations, he accounted for their potential exaltation, especially when viewed through the theological teachings of Brigham Young and the Adam-God doctrine.¹³ The three dispensation periods most spoken about by Woolley were the Adamic dispensation that began humanity, the dispensation at the meridian of time led by Jesus, and the dispensation of the fullness of time led by Joseph Smith.¹⁴ Placing these three individuals together, along with Smith's own comments about his identity, afforded Woolley a starting point for positioning Smith not only within the realm of deity but within the Godhead of Mormon cosmology.

In the last years of his life, Smith offered several comments that alluded to his significance beyond an earthly leader of a temporal Church. The famous "Would to God" statement, paraphrased by Woolley, not only raised the question of Smith's identity, but offered perceived sacrilege as the reason for not divulging, "But you would call it blasphemy and want to take my life."¹⁵ Smith's vague comments were not a deterrent to Woolley. Rather, they were rich with meaning but in need of order and understanding. Central to the early fundamentalist worldview was the belief that doctrines are not available to all people. The assumption being that Smith could not reveal his identity to the members of the Church, but he potentially revealed it to the members

13. Brigham Young, Apr. 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:46. Beginning in 1852, Brigham Young taught that Michael descended to earth and became a mortal, Adam. In mortality, Adam served his God faithfully and attained exaltation at the end of his life. In his exalted status, Adam is the God of this world. Young's discourse on the nature of God outlined the nature of God and offered the Saints and tangible example of Smith's exaltation doctrine.

14. Doctrine and Covenants 128:20.

15. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 333.

of the priesthood.¹⁶ In recollections of his time with Smith, Brigham Young, Smith's successor as president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, noted that revelations are reserved for a certain time and often only to those prepared for them.¹⁷ For Musser and other members of Mormon fundamentalist movements, the people best prepared for the weightier doctrines were the members of the priesthood. Whereas the Church tends toward introductory doctrine and casting aside of the more challenging principles, the priesthood is reserved to maintain the entirety of the faith, including the nature of God. Similar to Brigham Young's comment, Woolley claimed that John Taylor, the third president of the LDS Church and the one claimed to have received the 1886 Revelation and ordained the earliest members of the Priesthood Council apart from the Church, eventually came to a knowledge of Smith as a god.

One of the great challenges to historians of Woolleyite Mormonism are his unsourced statements, such as Taylor's realization of Smith as deity. Because Woolley did not make use of primary sources, Woolley's own revelations became the primary source material for doctrinal formation. As a prophet, Woolley took disparate histories and statements and transformed them into concrete reality. His power as a leader was his ability to sermonize discourse into doctrine, transforming

16. Many Mormon fundamentalists teach that God gives "further light and knowledge" to people as they are prepared to receive it. Gary Barnes, an independent fundamentalist, wrote extensively on this in his pamphlet, *Further Light Further Light and Knowledge: Understanding the Mysteries of the Kingdom*. The pamphlet outlines the journey of Adam and Eve toward God and the necessity of receiving further light and knowledge through the acquisition of priesthood keys. He argues that all human beings must follow the same journey as Adam and Eve, receiving further light and knowledge, in order to return to God. See also Janet Bennion, *Polygamy in Primetime: Media, Gender, and Politics in Mormon Fundamentalism* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

17. Brigham Young, Aug. 1831, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:333.

theological ideas into tenets of the faith. One of the greatest examples of this was Woolley's brief accounts of the moments leading up to Smith's martyrdom and the implication that Smith was aware of his divine status prior to death. At a May 5, 1932 meeting of the School of the Prophets, Woolley spoke on Smith's preaching prior to his death, "Shortly before being murdered, Joseph Smith said: 'I am going to take my place in the heavens,' until which time John Taylor did not have a clear understanding of who J. S. was—one of the Gods."¹⁸ The understanding that Smith continued working on the other side of the veil was not a controversial idea in early Mormonism. In his public sermons, Brigham Young commented on Smith's role in the afterlife and place in the final judgement, "Joseph Smith holds the keys of this last dispensation, and is now engaged behind the veil in the great work of the last days."¹⁹

Because of Smith's role as the head of this dispensation and subsequent martyrdom, Woolley's sermons and doctrinal developments assumed his exaltation alongside the great patriarchs of the Old Testament, who were themselves believed to be heads of their respective dispensations. As these developments formed, Woolley's sermons spoke Smith's deification into existence. Drawing on Smith's own theology of embodiment, Woolley preached about Smith as intermingling between the temporal and spiritual. However, it was not until the writings of Joseph W. Musser that Smith became identified with a particular deity of this world who consciously accepted a body. It was also under Musser that the doctrine was further concretized, to the detriment of all other speculative possibilities. Whereas Woolley made Smith a god in embryo, Musser transformed Smith into a god embodied.

18. Musser, *Book of Remembrances*, 11.

19. Brigham Young, Oct. 9, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289.

The Office of the Holy Ghost

In 1934, Woolley passed away, leaving Joseph W. Musser one step closer to his future role as president of the Priesthood Council. Already before Woolley's death, Musser's authorship of multiple doctrinal pamphlets and editorial work for the monthly *Truth* magazine made him the primary conduit of Woolleyite doctrine.²⁰ In his leadership role, Musser inherited a religious community marked by both outside prosecution and internal persecution. Having been excommunicated from the LDS Church, Musser joined the Woolley Priesthood Council, an organization that he conceptualized as the highest Joseph W. Musser expression of Mormon priesthood and the avenue for preserving Joseph Smith's most sacred doctrines.

While most of Musser's theology focused on the centrality of the priesthood and the continuation of plural marriage, Musser also penned the first full-length fundamentalist pamphlet on the nature of God. *Michael, Our Father and Our God: The Mormon Conception of Deity as Taught by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor and their Associates in the Priesthood* first appeared in volume 3 of *Truth* magazine and was later reprinted in four editions as a stand-alone pamphlet. The pamphlet sold for 25 cents and purportedly circulated among LDS elders quorums and Sunday Schools throughout the intermountain West.²¹ In this work, Musser articulated the necessity of embodiment for exaltation and acted as an ordering agent who clarified doctrine of God in a way that solidified its place in fundamentalist theology. Through his speculative discourses, Woolley brought doctrine to life. Through his

20. *Truth* was a fundamentalist periodical that ran from 1935 until 1956. Each issue contained excerpts from former Church leaders, community updates (including commentary on government raids), and a monthly editorial by Musser on contemporary topics. From its inception, Musser proclaimed the magazine as centrally concerned with "the fundamentals governing man's existence." *Truth* 1, no. 1 (1935): 1.

21. *Truth* 3, no. 10 (Mar. 1938): 173.

widely circulated writing, Musser solidified Woolley's speculations as truth.

During the April 7, 1844 conference of the Church, Joseph Smith stood before his congregation and emphatically stated, "We have imagined that God was God from all eternity. These are incomprehensible ideas to some, but they are the simple and first principles of the gospel, to know for a certainty the character of God."²² In line with Smith's statement on the first principle, Musser's pamphlet was an attempt at Mormon theology that both defended Young's theory of divine embodiment and accounted for human exaltation. For Musser, the goal of the pamphlet was "acquainting the Saints with the true God of Israel, His genesis, His character and attributes."²³ *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, in all of its editions, fulfilled Smith's 1844 call for the Saints to know for certain the nature of God, a not-too-distant and embodied being that was both familiar and humanity's goal.

Whereas Woolley made claims regarding the deification of Smith, and the other members of the Godhead, Musser sought to answer the mechanics of the claims. *Michael, Our Father and Our God* was foremost a critique of contemporary LDS leadership that disregarded Brigham Young's teaching of the Adam-God doctrine. This doctrine had been central to early Utah Mormonism. On April 9, 1852, Brigham Young delivered an address in the tabernacle for the semiannual general conference on the nature of God. During his sermon, Young asserted that Michael entered an earthly body in Eden and became Adam, "the first

22. "Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by *Times and Seasons*," 614, The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-7-april-1844-as-reported-by-times-and-seasons/3>.

23. Joseph White Musser, "Preface to the 3rd Edition," *Michael, Our Father and Our God: The Mormon Conception of Deity as Taught by Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, John Taylor and their Associates in the Priesthood*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City: Truth Publishing Co.).

of the human family.”²⁴ At the end of his life, having served his God faithfully, Adam was translated back into his celestial body and attained exaltation.²⁵ “As a man who was exalted and became God, Adam affords spiritual beings the opportunity to follow his mortal existence and seek embodiment for the purpose of becoming gods.

To make sense of Brigham Young’s doctrine, Musser introduced his reader to “offices” and “titles” of deities. Whereas the majority of Christianity refers to the divine person as “God,” Musser sought to identify the being and the title as distinct. He explained, “The key to understanding is the difference between the individual and the office held by the individual. ‘God’ is a title or office—a principle; and yet the being who occupies this office of God is an exalted man. The office of ‘God’ has always existed and always will exist. It, the office, is without ‘beginning of days or end of years.’”²⁶ Within this framework, Michael currently holds the office of “God.”²⁷ In a similar way, furthering the doctrine from the teaching of Brigham Young, Musser posited “Jehovah” as a

24. Brigham Young, Apr. 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:46. Musser argues that upon eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam’s body filled with blood and became mortal. This reflects the work of Benjamin E. Park, who wrote about Joseph Smith’s early conception of blood as the “‘corrupting’ factor associated with an earthly body.” Benjamin E. Park, “Salvation through a Tabernacle: Joseph Smith, Parley P. Pratt, and Early Mormon Theologies of Embodiment,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–44.

25. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 109.

26. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 85.

27. Musser argued that Elohim is the name given to Adam’s God. Within this narrative, Adam and Eve were created on another earth governed by Elohim. In general, Musser referred to the Adam and Eve account as a “stork story” (*Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 100). Like parents teaching their children about storks delivering babies, Musser argues that Moses was inspired to write the account of Adam formed out of dust and Eve from Adam’s rib as a way of explaining the origins of humanity in a way that met “the mental capacities of his day” (*Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 100).

salvific office that works alongside God by entering a temporal body in this world to redeem humanity. By completing his divinely appointed mission on earth, Jesus attained exaltation following his tenure as the savior of this world.²⁸ In looking at these two beings together, Musser recognized a similarity between the Father and Son. Both experienced mortality. With this in mind, Musser sought to make sense of embodiment as it relates to the third member of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost.

Young's doctrine faced vast criticism in the twentieth century. Musser's LDS contemporaries quickly denounced the teaching as unfounded or noted the possibility of a misquote or misunderstanding. In response, Musser was firm in his conviction that Young's doctrine of God was vital to human exaltation because it offered human beings a clear path forward and example of their future godliness. However, in speaking on the third member of the Godhead, Musser's early work is not as exact or clear. If exaltation makes use of materiality as the vehicle for godliness, the implication is that gods require bodies. Early Mormon teachings on the Holy Ghost aligned with their Protestant counterparts; even Brigham Young noted that the Holy Ghost is not "a person of tabernacle as we are."²⁹ For a faith that placed embodiment as a precursor to godliness, the Holy Ghost's lack of materiality created potential problems for the Mormon conception of God.

Rather than settle on the Holy Ghost existing as a personage without embodiment, Musser used his theory of divine offices to answer for

28. Despite his early comments equating Jesus with Jehovah, similar to the teachings of the LDS Church, Musser's later sermons and writings reflect a shift toward more traditional fundamentalist teachings. In a sermon given on July 23, 1941 in the home of Charles F. Zitting, Musser stated, "Our Brother, Jesus Christ, loves us and He is the Lord of this earth at the present time; He is not the Jehovah at the present time. He is the one who will be the Jehovah when the earth is sanctified." *The Sermons of Joseph W. Musser, 1940–1945*, edited by Nathan and Bonnie Taylor, vols. 1–2, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Messenger Publications, 2008), 61.

29. Brigham Young, Apr. 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:50.

the Holy Ghost. Early in his writing, Musser referred to the Holy Ghost as “God’s witness to mankind,” the divine presence that makes God known to humanity.³⁰ In *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel*, Elder Franklin D. Richards and amateur historian James A. Little expound on this idea: “Everlasting covenant was made between three personages before the organization of this earth, and relates to their dispensation of things to men on the earth: these personages, according to Abraham’s record, are called God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the Witness or Testator.”³¹ As someone well-acquainted with early Mormon writings, Musser was familiar with the phrase “witness and testator.” However, unlike his LDS counterparts, the phrase was familiar because of its use in reference to Joseph Smith.

Like those before him, Musser believed that Smith served greater than anyone because he both witnessed God in vision and testified of him in this dispensation through the Book of Mormon and establishment of the Church despite opposition. For this reason, Musser devoted each December issue of his magazine, *Truth*, to the commemoration of Smith’s birth and earthly mission. Like most fundamentalist work, the magazine was largely a collection of quotes and passages from previous leaders. In addition, Musser offered commentary on the happenings in the LDS Church, community updates, most of which dealt with excommunications of fundamentalists in southern Utah, and a widely read editorial section, written by Musser, that expounded on historical issues and doctrine.

In the 1937 issue of *Truth*, which Musser used to commemorate the birth of Joseph Smith, an entire section of the magazine was devoted to Smith as the witness and testator. He wrote, “Joseph Smith’s mission

30. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 4.

31. *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel, second edition*, compiled by Franklin D. Richards and Elder James A. Little (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Co., 1884), 1108.

was that of a WITNESS, a TESTATOR. He came in the ‘fulness of times,’ to re-establish God’s laws in the earth. Joseph’s dispensation is the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times, when all things are to be gathered as one, never again to be taken from the earth.”³² While Musser acknowledged Smith’s role as both witness and testator, the first public connection between Smith’s honorific title testator and attribution to godliness was not until the distribution of *Michael, Our Father and Our God*. Drawing the connection between Smith’s earthly role and the designation given the Holy Ghost, Musser offered his first public questioning of Smith’s role outside of temporality: “and why not Joseph Smith, who was the ‘Witness or Testator,’ ‘God the third?’”³³ This public question, the first time having appeared in a widely distributed publication, opened the theological possibility of Smith as the Holy Ghost for the entire fundamentalist movement. While he was not yet acting as the leader of the movement, Musser’s writings quickly became the voice of the growing community and carried an authoritative weight that was not found elsewhere in fundamentalism. With this public question, the doctrinal deification of Joseph Smith took shape.

Drawing on both the work of Richards and Little, as well as his own theological questioning in his pamphlets, Musser’s December 1940 issue of *Truth* marked a shift in the telling of Smith’s story. Whereas previous accounts recalled the First Vision, importance of priesthood restoration, and events leading up to the martyrdom, this issue responded to Smith’s curious comment, “Would to God, brethren, I would tell you who I am.” Again, drawing on Brigham Young’s sentiment that not all truths were revealed to all people, the magazine questions the great truth that Smith concealed from his Church. Responding to Richards and Little’s description of the Godhead, Musser wrote, “Who is this ‘Witness and Testator?’ None other than Joseph Smith. He alone occupies that sacred

32. “JOSEPH SMITH, The Witness and Testator,” *Truth* 3, no. 7 (Dec. 1940): 106.

33. “JOSEPH SMITH, The Witness and Testator,” 112.

office. Even now—ninety-six years since his martyrdom—the Saints as a body are unable to comprehend the great truth; and movements are afloat to nullify some of the doctrines he established, and for which he died!”³⁴ While references in Woolley’s *School of the Prophets* abound, this moment marked the first widely circulated reference to Smith as the Holy Ghost in the fundamentalist movement. As an authoritative voice and the primary circulator of fundamentalist doctrine, Musser established Smith’s position as one of the gods as not a simple matter of speculation, but a central tenet of his faith.

While Musser’s public commentary on the Godhead evolved over time, most of his comments on the subject appeared in sermons given during meetings with members of the fundamentalist movement. During these meetings, members traveled across the state to hear from their leaders, first in homes and then in the shared Priesthood House, dedicated on August 9, 1942. This space, and the community it held, was significant for Musser, who argued that the institutional Church was not prepared for some doctrines. Rather, members of the Priesthood Council were the ones responsible for the maintenance and promulgation of higher laws, such as plural marriage and the lived practice of consecration. Musser referenced this idea in his work on Adam–God stating, “The doctrine, while sound, was too strong for mass reception. And so, with facts pertaining to creation.”³⁵ Rather than preached over the pulpit in LDS meetinghouses, which Musser argued would lead to the group being “hissed out” of the Tabernacle, Musser believed that the Priesthood Council was responsible for teaching the true nature of God.³⁶

Musser’s articulation of potential LDS reaction to the doctrine not only positioned the Salt Lake Church as lacking in divine knowledge,

34. *Truth* 6, no. 7 (Dec. 1940): 157.

35. Musser, *Michael, Our Father and Our God*, 79.

36. “December 24, 1944,” in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 251.

it simultaneously positioned the Priesthood Council as holding special access to God. The distinction between the Church and the priesthood, with the priesthood functioning as the higher organizational structure, was an overarching theme of Musser's writing.³⁷ Much like his writing on the preservation of plural marriage as a function of the priesthood, the theological development of Smith as the Holy Ghost linked the priesthood to both God and the earliest moments of the Church's organization. For the minority Mormon movement seeking legitimization in a time of religious upheaval, the exaltation of Smith transformed the founder of the faith into a knowable deity who oversaw the truest expression of the faith.

It was during priesthood meetings that Musser made frequent reference to Smith as "the God of this dispensation," referencing Smith's role as the one who re-established God's authority on the earth.³⁸ His first reference on February 23, 1941 argued against placing Smith in a more subordinate position than warranted, something Musser grew increasingly concerned about during his tenure in the Priesthood Council. Musser stated: "I want to protest with all the zeal and power that I have and in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, against subordinating Joseph Smith, that great and glorious prophet. Joseph is a God, one of the trinity of this planet. Don't you understand? His own people didn't know that, for they would not have killed him had they known. He is a God in the trinity of this earth. He is going to wind up all things and will take his place with Adam our God."³⁹ Unlike traditional theologies that afford God one instance of incarnation, through Jesus Christ, Musser created a worldview where godly embodiment was the rule that punctuated human existence. Rather than simply focus on a linear trajectory between mortality and godliness, Musser presented an

37. See Joseph W. Musser, *A Priesthood Issue* (1948).

38. "June 28, 1942," in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 109.

39. "February 23, 1941," in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 40.

intricate divine relationship where the gods participate in embodiment throughout the course of history.

In order to understand Smith's role, Musser continued to draw from Richards and Little's interpretation of the Godhead, specifically the idea that the members of the Godhead entered into a covenant prior to mortality with the understanding that they would become the gods of this world: "Joseph Smith was one of the three Gods that were appointed to come here on earth and to people this earth and to redeem it—God, the Father, the creator; God the Mediator, the Savior, the Redeemer; and God the Witness and the Testator. Before they came here upon earth, and in the presence of the great Elohim of this earth's galaxy, they entered into a covenant which established them as the Gods, or the Trinity of this earth."⁴⁰

On that same year, on December 26, 1943, Musser further articulated the meeting between the Godhead to prepare for their mortal probations: "We know Joseph Smith as one member in the Godhead. He with His Father and elder brother, Jesus Christ, met before he came here in the mortal state, and met concerning their covenants with each other before they ever came here and were in their positions they assumed before ever they came here."⁴¹ Musser's articulation of Smith's prior knowledge of his divinity and future exaltation flipped the logics of apotheosis. Within Musser's framework, Smith was not only a god in embryo, but a god embodied.

Early members of the Church speculated on the role of Smith after death, some attributing him a place in the final judgement. Most notably, Brigham Young taught that, as the head of this dispensation, Smith's presence was essential for salvation: "no man or woman in this dispensation will ever enter into the celestial kingdom of God without the consent of Joseph Smith. From the day that the Priesthood was taken

40. March 28, 1943, in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 157.

41. *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 212.

from the earth to the winding-up scene of all things, every man and woman must have the certificate of Joseph Smith, junior, as a passport to their entrance into the mansion where God and Christ are.”⁴² Years later, Musser would articulate the same sentiment, arguing that Smith held an essential place in the salvation of human beings as a member of the Godhead. At a Priesthood Council meeting on December 26, 1943, Musser stated, “To me, Joseph Smith is my leader and God; he is not Adam, Michael; nor Jesus Christ; but I do not expect to pass into the presence of Jesus Christ, or my Father Adam, Michel, except when I am passed upon by Joseph Smith.”⁴³

While not shared by the Church down the street from the Council’s Priesthood House, members of the Council appeared to readily accept the doctrine, recording it in their journals alongside other meeting notes. After one of Musser’s first sermons on the topic, Joseph Lyman Jessop recorded his notes from the Sunday School meeting: “Many notable things were said. Pres. Musser said ‘Joseph Smith is the third member of the Godhead of this earth.’ He held up the book of Doctrine and Covenants and said in substance, ‘Here are the revelations of the Lord to this dispensation. Anyone claiming leadership must be in accord with these revelations or he cannot be of God.’”⁴⁴ Whereas Woolley spoke of Smith as deity, Musser’s writings and sermons created tangible doctrines that solidified the nature of God for members of the fundamentalist movement. Taken together, Musser ended speculation and alternative possibilities for Smith’s posthumous existence. Much like early leaders within the LDS Church, Musser and his priesthood group routinized Smith into godliness.

42. Brigham Young, Oct. 9, 1859, *Journal of Discourses*, 7:289.

43. “December 26, 1943,” in *Sermons of Joseph W. Musser*, 213.

44. December 20, 1936, in *Diary of Joseph Lyman Jessop, Volume 2 (1934–1945)*, 108.

Gods Above Gods Infinitely

In 1944, Musser ordained Rulon C. Allred as “Second Elder,” the title given to the man who would take his place in the priesthood succession after his passing. This ordination was not without controversy, as many of the Council did not agree with the ordination.⁴⁵ However, despite protest, Allred succeeded Musser and eventually became the president of the Priesthood Council. In this role, Allred oversaw the growth and expansion of the movement, as well as the building of a temple and the implementation of ordinances outside of the LDS Church. In addition, Allred incorporated the community into a church, acknowledging that the LDS Church no longer held authority following the lifting the priesthood restriction.⁴⁶ The church he incorporated, the Apostolic United Brethren, remains one of the largest Mormon fundamentalist churches in the nation. As the new leader of the contested fundamentalist

45. In his recollections of the events, Joseph Lyman Jessop, a member of the fundamentalist movement under Musser, recalled “At this service Bro. Jos. W Musser spoke and told the people of a revelation calling Bro. Rulon C. Allred to the Council of Priesthood. They (the Council) would not accept this and would not sustain him not help him lay hands and set Rulon apart to that office.” (May 6, 1951, in *Diary of Joseph Lyman Jessop, Volume 3 [1945–1954]*, 140.) The following year, Lyman recalled Musser instructing the Saints that they were no longer required to attend meetings with the men who did not sustain Allred. This division constituted the largest split in the fundamentalist movement and the eventual formations of the largest fundamentalist groups in the United States.

46. Allred, like many fundamentalists, argued that the government was primarily behind the lifting of the priesthood and temple ban. In addition to government pressure, Allred argued that the devil was also responsible for the pressure on the Church to “give up every principle as a Christian faith that would brand them as the Church of God.” For Allred, this included the priesthood and temple ban. “The Position of the Church Concerning Celestial Marriage and the Negro Holding the Priesthood,” in *Selected Discourses and Excerpts from Talks by Rulon C. Allred*, vol. 1, 1st ed. (Hamilton, Mont.: Bitterroot Publishing Company, 1981), 3.

movement, Allred remained committed to teaching and expanding on the doctrinal development of Woolleyite Mormonism. This included concretizing Smith's place as the Holy Ghost within the fundamentalist movement turned church.

As leader, Allred encouraged his Mormon fundamentalists to retain the principles of the gospel and live lives worthy to return to God and attain their own exaltation. Like his predecessors, Allred advocated for sermons without notes and frequently served as the final speaker at church meetings. One such meeting occurred on October 6, 1974 and was devoted to the Holy Ghost. In his address, Allred sought to expand on Doctrine and Covenants 93, a subject that was discussed earlier in the Sunday School meeting. What made Allred's doctrinal exposition particularly interesting is the way he both elaborated on the work of Musser and veered in new directions, arguing for a representational embodiment and not an embodied deity limited to one probationary period. Allred asserted the abundance that exists pertaining to the spirit of God and argued for a limitless nature of deity. He explained, "But it is so limitless that even the Gods in their various positions are eternally reaching out to its laws and its ordinances and its principles its powers, its dominions and its exaltations. Therefore, there are Gods above Gods infinity."⁴⁷ One such deity, the Holy Ghost, was viewed as so infinite in power that Allred argued no person could fully comprehend the power in mortality.

Allred's clarification conceptualized embodiment as a reason why the Holy Ghost does not remain a constant part of the believer's life, "But the Holy Ghost as an individual, does not abide in us. It is the Spirit which emanates from the Father and the Son which abides in us."⁴⁸ However, at the same time, Allred began developing a theology in which the offices of the Godhead are rotating and serve as representations of godliness in

47. "6 October 1974. Place unknown. THE HOLY GHOST," in *Selected Discourses and Excerpts from Talks by Rulon C. Allred*, 314.

48. "6 October 1974," 314.

various dispensations: "Jehovah, in His supreme power, having passed through these things more than Michael, therefor directed Michael. Michael was the agent through which both Elohim and Jehovah acted. He fulfilled the office of the Holy Ghost, representing the Father and the Son to all of the things under His direction and His creation and organization. This being so, here you have an individual representing the power of the Holy Ghost in creation."⁴⁹ Allred conceptualized his theology as the Holy Ghost "bearing of the responsibility of exaltation" within the world they presided.⁵⁰ The Holy Ghost is a messenger in a specific time and for a specific people. Within this framework, Joseph Smith acted as the Holy Ghost and served in this office, but did not necessarily retain that position as an eternal and static state. Whereas Musser conceived of Smith as embodied deity, Allred argued for Smith as an embodied representation of deity.

While the spirit of God is welcomed into the life of the believer through the confirmation ordinance, the office of the Holy Ghost remains a personage in Allred's theology. At the same time, Allred complicates the matter through his theology of infinite gods above gods. To make sense of Smith's place within the exalted sphere, Allred argued for multiple gods, some of which preside in eternity and some in temporality:

Joseph Smith in speaking of this said there were three Gods pertaining to the spiritual world, and there are three Gods pertaining to the temporal world. These three Gods were god the Father, and He is defined as Adam; God the Son, and He is defined as the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God; and God the Holy Ghost, who held the keys of the dispensation of the fulness of times. The Prophet Joseph Smith perfectly fit this office of the Holy Ghost in this *mortal world*, in that we are told repeatedly in ancient and modern scripture that there would be one

49. "6 October 1974," 314.

50. "6 October 1974," 314.

servant of God who would be raised up who would reveal all things in the dispensation in the fulness of times.⁵¹

Allred's theology pointed to the office of the Holy Ghost as the being by which all people in this mortal dispensation participated in godliness. For Allred, Smith was not the vehicle of exaltation itself, but that which represented it. Human beings are able to come in contact with godliness through the work of Joseph Smith, the witness and testator.

On January 13, 1977, Allred offered another talk devoted to the Holy Ghost. This time, the meeting was a fireside and Allred accepted questions and responded based on his knowledge of the subject, claiming much of his information from Joseph Smith and Orson Pratt.⁵² During this meeting, Allred continued his theological development of multiple trinitarian Godheads, arguing, "I cannot conclude anything else but that in the spiritual creation there were the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—Elohim, Jehovah, and Michael. In the temporal creation there is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost represented by the three distinct Beings, Adam, the Father, Jesus Christ the Son and the Redeemer, and Joseph the Prophet, the witness and testator who restored all things."⁵³ Whereas Musser alluded to a spiritual trinity outside of temporality, Allred concretized the idea and developed it into a complex theology of multiple gods in both temporality and eternity with Smith as the final member of the temporal Godhead.

In the same sermon, Allred addressed the LDS Church and stated that, while acknowledging the Holy Ghost as a personage of spirit, he could not commit to name the personage. Allred continued, "I cannot construe it in any other light, that as far as the temporal creation of the

51. "6 October 1974," 314, emphasis added.

52. "13 January 1977. Fireside. Salt Lake City, Utah. THE HOLY GHOST," in *Selected Discourses and Excerpts from Talks by Rulon C. Allred*, vol. 2, 1st ed. (Hamilton, Mont.: The Bitterroot Publishing Company, 1981), 317.

53. "13 January 1977," 318.

world is concerned, we have the perfect representation of the Father, Adam, Jehovah, God among men, the Son, the Redeemer, and Joseph Smith the Prophet, the witness and testator of both the Father and the Son, who restored all things.”⁵⁴ In response to why Allred believed the way he did, he quoted Smith, saying, “They dare not take the assumption of the Prophet Joseph Smith, who said, ‘If I were to tell you who I am, there are those upon this stand who would seek to take my life. And there is no blasphemy that can be compared with it.’”⁵⁵ Decades after Woolley first sought to fill the void left by Smith through the theological development of embodied deity, Allred affirmed that Smith’s words gave his followers a clue to the divine quest for exaltation by placing himself squarely within the doctrine.

Conclusion

Early in its founding, Mormonism radically redefined the nature of deity by centering materiality and embodiment. Through his lectures on exaltation, Smith spoke to the Saints and affirmed that God had a mortal existence much like themselves. In turn, the Saints held within them the beginnings of godliness and through mortality positioned to become gods. For Smith, mortality was not only the mediator between the temporal and spiritual, but also the vehicle back to God. At the same time, Smith began articulating his own role in Mormon cosmology with statements that were left open to interpretation and allowed for wide speculation. Though Smith’s spirit was routinized shortly after his death and concretized by the LDS Church, the theology Smith developed and his own statements on embodiment allowed for a minority of Saints to conceptualize Smith as more than a prophet.

Through the sermons and writings of Woolleyite Mormonism, the late prophet was placed within his own theological developments.

54. “13 January 1977,” 318.

55. “13 January 1977,” 318.

As this happened, the practices of writing and sermonizing brought forth a theological reality that remains uncontested for many Mormons who follow Woolley's priesthood lineage. Through Woolley's sermons, Smith attained exaltation and became one of the many gods that surround Mormon cosmology and a deity known by the inheritors of the faith. In a time of upheaval for polygamous Mormons, the writings and sermons of Joseph W. Musser transformed Smith into the embodied Holy Ghost who continues to work on behalf of a persecuted religious community. Through Rulon C. Allred, Smith became a representation of an unending universe of deities, which continues as a foundational tenet of Mormon fundamentalism. Woolleyite Mormonism offers an alternate interpretation of the late martyr that takes Smith's own statements on his divine mission, radical doctrine of embodied deity, and eternal perspective of exaltation to theologically innovative conclusions. Through the work of fundamentalist leaders who spoke Smith's exaltation into reality, Smith fulfilled this mission and became a god.

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"compassion,"
44" x 44", oil on canvas,
by Ron Richmond

MORMONISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A MATERIALIST APOSTASY

Zachary J. Gubler

The notion of apostasy is central to the identity of the Mormon people.¹ One might even say it is the *raison d'être* of Mormonism. It is the thing that explains why there needed to be a restoration in the first place and in some ways establishes the contours of that Restoration. At least since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mormon narrative of the Great Apostasy has incorporated the idea that Christianity went horribly wrong sometime after the death of Jesus when Christian thinkers began to incorporate pagan philosophy into Christian doctrine. That view, which I refer to as the “traditional” Apostasy narrative, was influenced by historical conclusions drawn by nineteenth-century Protestant historians, conclusions that in retrospect look increasingly problematic to modern historians. In this article, I want to explore the possibility that apostasy is better understood as a modern development that coincides with the emergence of “philosophical materialism,” that is to say, the idea that all of life can be explained through a scientific reductionist lens as nothing more than indifferent particles and forces.

This view of the Apostasy points to a different understanding of the Restoration than the one with which most Mormons are familiar. Instead of a re-creation of an ancient way of life through imitation, the Restoration under a materialist apostasy is an attempt to translate an ancient way of life into a new, modern context. Among other things,

1. For helpful comments on an earlier version of this article, I thank Sam Brown, Emily Clyde Curtis, Natalie Gubler, Sarah Gubler, Rhett Larson, Nate Oman, Taylor Petrey, Steve Smith, and Gerrit Steenblik. All errors are mine.

this understanding of the Apostasy and the Restoration has the effect of opening up to Mormonism the canonical works of a rich, continuous Christian tradition, including those that were influenced by Greek philosophy. The benefits of such an expanded canon are potentially significant and include an enlarged ethical and theological horizon for Mormonism, one which might, among other things, help address some of the anxieties that can lead to modern-day Mormon faith crises.

I. Why Apostasy Theories Gravitate Toward “Loss of Truth” Narratives

Beginning with Joseph Smith, the notion of apostasy in Mormonism has always had to do in large part with the loss of priesthood authority.² According to the First Vision account, this is what God himself identified as the problem with the churches of the day: “They draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.”³ In other words, the problem was not exclusively, or perhaps even primarily, the content of what was taught (after all, it had a form of godliness) but rather the lack of authority to act in the name of God. However, B. H. Roberts later expanded that predominantly authority-based view of apostasy, in reliance on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Protestant historians,⁴ to include the

2. See Christopher C. Jones and Stephen J. Fleming, “‘Except among that Portion of Mankind’: Early Mormon Conceptions of the Apostasy,” in *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, edited by Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 58–67.

3. Joseph Smith—History 1:19.

4. See B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History: A Textbook* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons Co., 1893), 181–83 (citing approvingly the Lutheran historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim’s critique of early Christianity’s syncretism with Greek philosophy).

notion that the Apostasy is associated with the corrupting influence of pagan (mostly Greek) philosophy on the early and medieval church.⁵ Thus, the Mormon view of apostasy came to be associated not only with a lack of authority but also with the identification of certain corrupt ideas.

It didn't have to be this way, of course. One can easily imagine a world where Mormonism refuses to recognize the authority of other churches but nevertheless maintains that truth can be found anywhere and therefore borrows liberally from other traditions. One reason why it's so easy to imagine such a world is that that's basically the theological universe that Mormonism occupies. Commenting on the question of where to find truth, Smith said, "Presbyteri[a]n or any truth. emb[ra]ce that. Baptist. Methodist. &c—get all the good in the world. come out a pure mormon."⁶ Nevertheless, Mormonism began to view Greek philosophy as containing untruth, at least when mixed with Christian doctrine. Why might this be the case?⁷ Clearly it cannot be because

5. See Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 229–30; B. H. Roberts, *The Falling Away, or The World's Loss of the Christian Religion and the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1931), 146–47.

6. Joseph Smith, "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 3, 15 July 1843–29 February 1844," 14, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-3-15-july-1843-29-february-1844/20>.

7. One answer to this question is that which I alluded to earlier—early Mormon intellectuals like Roberts and others were influenced by the view held by Protestant historians, like Mosheim, that early Christianity was corrupted through a syncretism with Greek philosophy. See note 5. But this answer doesn't explain why Roberts and others went looking for these historical arguments in the first place, let alone why they ultimately found them persuasive, a fact that is particularly puzzling in light of early Mormonism's cosmopolitan approach to truth. That's the question I'm asking here: what were the preconditions within Mormon thought, other than a possibly greater enthusiasm for Protestant rather than Catholic sources, that made those Protestant historical arguments appealing?

Mormonism assumes that any religious teaching by someone who lacks priesthood authority is inevitably distorted. That's inconsistent with the statement just quoted (since Smith would have viewed the Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists as all lacking priesthood authority). More generally, it is inconsistent with the Mormon notion of the light of Christ that inspires holy figures who, although lacking priesthood authority, nevertheless are able to obtain some portion of truth.⁸

In my view, the best explanation for why Mormonism began to view apostasy as something more than the loss of priesthood authority is because the Mormon view of the Restoration appears to involve something more than just a restoration of lost authority—it also involves a recovery of lost truth. And in explaining how and when that truth might have been lost, Roberts and others were heavily influenced by a particular view of medieval history, that the Middle Ages constituted the “midnight period of our world,” both spiritually and intellectually, and only ceased with the revival of learning that took place with the flowering of the Renaissance and the arrival of the Protestant Reformation.⁹ This historical view provided Roberts and others, including James E. Talmage and Bruce R. McConkie,¹⁰ with exactly what they

8. See Daniel K. Judd, “The Spirit of Christ: A Light Amidst the Darkness” in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 442–56.

9. See Roberts, *Outlines*, 229–30; Roberts, *Falling Away*, 146–47.

10. See Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, 229–30; Roberts, *Falling Away*, 1246–57; James E. Talmage, *The Great Apostasy Considered in the Light of Scriptural and Secular History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 150 (referring to the Middle Ages as the “dark ages—characterized by stagnation in the progress of the useful arts and sciences as well as of fine arts and letters”); James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1915), 749 (describing the Renaissance as “a development predetermined in the Mind of

were looking for: an explanation of how the truth was lost and when precisely it happened.

But that view is increasingly difficult to sustain, as others have pointed out. Historians simply no longer regard the Middle Ages as a dark, brutish time with little to recommend it, but rather as a period of extraordinary human intellectual and artistic achievements comparable to, if not surpassing, those of the Renaissance.¹¹ Additionally, Roberts's view of apostasy effectively eliminates from the Mormon canon some of the greatest works of natural and philosophical theology,¹² including Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, as well as earlier Greek-influenced devotional works, like Augustine's *Confessions*. The notion that *these* works of all things, works that have served as the basis for countless conversions

God to illumine the benighted of men in preparation for the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ"); Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness For the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 669–70 (describing the period from Late Antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages as “such a decadent age that man, made in the image of God, was more like an animal than a divine being. Morality, culture, literacy, learning in general, even theological inquiry—all these were at a low ebb.”).

11. See Eric Dursteler, “Inheriting the ‘Great Apostasy’: The Evolution of Mormon Views on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance,” *Journal of Mormon History* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 52–57.

12. “Natural theology . . . is the attempt to understand the metaphysical foundations of reality by the use of reason alone, without the use as evidence of anything contained in texts considered to be divinely revealed or in the religious tradition of reflection on those texts. . . . By contrast, philosophical theology is the attempt to use such philosophical tools to investigate theological claims made by a particular religion, especially those claims put forward by that religion as revealed by the deity.” Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

and formed the intellectual framework for humanistic ideals,¹³ would be the linchpin of the Great Apostasy is a difficult pill to swallow.

Thus, we are left with the observation that the Mormon notion of apostasy must explain some loss of truth. And yet at the same time, the traditional narrative—that that loss of truth has to do with the assimilation of Greek philosophy into Christian thinking sometime in the Middle Ages—is increasingly difficult to sustain. What do we do with this?¹⁴

II. Materialism as Apostasy

Although Roberts might have missed the mark in identifying how the Apostasy threatens Christian truth, he was nevertheless correct that there exists a definition of apostasy that does precisely that. Rather than identifying some corruption that took place during the pre-modern period, the Apostasy is in my view better understood as a modern phenomenon. Specifically, I'd like to explore the possibility that the Apostasy has to do with a particularly widespread idea closely associated with modernity that I'll refer to as "philosophical materialism," that is to say, the idea that since science can only measure physical matter and forces, physical matter and forces must be all that exist.¹⁵

13. What I mean by "humanism" here is not the philosophy of Petrarch and Erasmus that was in some ways a reaction against Scholasticism, but the more general commitment to equality, human dignity, and universal benevolence familiar to western-style liberalism. See Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 95–97.

14. To be sure, just because historians look askance at such history doesn't mean that the Mormon faithful do. The traditional Apostasy narrative is no doubt deeply entrenched in Mormon thinking. However, even long-held ideas are susceptible of seismic shifts, particularly when their foundations are shaky and there is a more appealing intellectual edifice to erect in their place.

15. See, for example, Ronald E. Osborn, *Humanism and the Death of God: Searching for the Good After Darwin, Marx, and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 8.

Notice that as an argument, philosophical materialism is obviously problematic, if not unsound, on its face.¹⁶ A methodology designed only to measure X can't prove that X is all that exists. Nevertheless, it's a very influential view, particularly when coupled with a certain ethical narrative that materialism is "the view of courageous adults, who are ready to resist the comforting illusions of earlier metaphysical and religious beliefs, in order to grasp the reality of an indifferent universe."¹⁷ How we got to the point where such a view can be believed by so many people is a complicated story that I won't try to recount here, although it suffices to say that Nietzsche, Darwin, and Marx all played an important role, as did earlier sources like William of Ockham and his view of nominalism (that is to say, the rejection of the existence of universals like "triangularity" or "human nature").¹⁸ The point is that it is this modern philosophical idea that makes it possible to entertain the notion of an entirely closed world structure,¹⁹ where one is cut off from notions of transcendence and the Christian God more

16. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 574.

17. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 567.

18. See Gillespie, *Theological Origins*, 21. William of Ockham, in contrast to his near contemporary Aquinas, rejected the idea that things have essential natures—for example, that it is in the nature of fire to generate heat or that it is in the nature of human beings that adultery is bad for us. He was concerned that Aquinas's contrary view would undermine God's freedom and omnipotence. The consequence of these positions was to place the will above the intellect in the order of importance, meaning that under an Ockhamist view of things, faith becomes more important than reason in the area of belief, and divine command becomes more important in the area of ethics.

19. See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 567.

generally.²⁰ For this reason, it is arguably the greatest threat to belief in thousands of years and therefore seems like a good candidate for what Mormonism refers to as the Great Apostasy.

Not only does a commitment to materialism cut one off from the possibility of transcendence, it also calls into question the humanistic values that most modern societies subscribe to, things like equality, a respect for human dignity, and universal benevolence.²¹ One might be surprised by this claim in light of the writings of popular atheists like Richard Dawkins and Steven Pinker, who insist that these humanist values follow inexorably from the view that humans are nothing but indifferent particles and forces. Nevertheless, I strongly suspect that the

20. A clarification is probably in order regarding the term “transcendence.” Here, I am referring to the relationship of a religion’s deity to the world. In the pagan religions, the deity or deities are located very much in this world whereas in Christianity (and Judaism), the sacred is located outside of time and space, to speak nothing of this world. See Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018), 111–13. Whereas the pagan religion “seeks to make its votaries at home in the world,” Christianity and Judaism create a desanctification of nature. Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, translated by Robert Savage (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 9; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955), 91. For this reason, one can say that Christianity and Judaism are religions “of distantiation, in contrast to religions of complete immersion in the world.” Assmann, *Price of Monotheism*, 43. These differences in orientations regarding the location of the sacred result in very different ideas about a whole host of issues, including nature, the ordering of goods, and sexual ethics. See Smith, *Pagans and Christians*, 116–29. Most importantly for our purposes, however, philosophical materialism closes one off from the transcendent orientation, which strikes at the heart of what it means to be Christian.

21. See, for example, Osborn, *Humanism and the Death of God*, 20 (“In a post-Darwinian, post-Marxian, post-Nietzschean age, the assumption that all persons should be treated as the bearers of a profound dignity in virtue of their humanity alone can no longer be taken for granted theoretically, and it is an open question what this might practically mean over time”).

humanism associated with this modern genre of atheism is actually the beneficiary of a rich Christian inheritance and essentially survives on borrowed time.²² For, philosophical materialism is essentially linked to ethical nihilism. Indeed, a truly serious atheist like Nietzsche seemed to understand this all too well, spelling it out in detail to truly startling effect.²³ This idea is also assumed in the post–World War II project of moral reconstruction undertaken by various Christian humanists, like C. S. Lewis and Simone Weil, who worked to rebuild the humanistic framework in recognition of the damage that philosophical materialism could do.²⁴ The fact that their project was largely unsuccessful demonstrates the hold that such a philosophy can have on society.²⁵

But perhaps to truly appreciate the threat the materialist worldview poses to notions of transcendence, it might be necessary to take a closer look at the effect of this philosophy not just on society as a whole but on individuals and households in particular. On the one hand, such a worldview can cause people to act in rather eccentric ways. For example, consider the famous materialist philosophers Paul and Patricia Churchland, who in informal, everyday conversations will replace a perfectly reasonable, commonsense phrase like “I’m frustrated” (with all of its non-materialist connotations)²⁶ with something like “my serotonin levels have hit bottom, my brain is awash in glucocorticoids, my

22. See Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019) (arguing that all of our political debates in Europe, the United Kingdom and the Americas, even the notion of atheism itself, are rooted in Christian assumptions).

23. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

24. See Alan Jacobs, *The Year of Our Lord 1943: Christian Humanism in an Age of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

25. See Jacobs, *Year of Our Lord*, 206.

26. What I mean here is that materialism can’t account for the experience of frustration, even though it might account for the physical correlates of such an emotion.

blood vessels are full of adrenaline, and if it weren't for my endogenous opiates I'd have driven the car into a tree on the way home."²⁷ This might seem harmless enough—a slightly humorous anecdote about how one's favored discipline colors one's way of seeing, like a family of lawyers bickering over whether the Coase theorem applies to the question of who should take out the trash.²⁸

However, this way of seeing the world is not so obviously benign, even putting aside the ethical nihilism it portends. Indeed, the contemporary French novelist Michel Houellebecq has made a very successful career out of exploring the effects of philosophical materialism on the individual, and the result is not for the faint of heart: Houellebecq's characters seem to sleepwalk their way through a life devoid of meaning, punctuated by loveless, emotionless sexual encounters, at least for those lucky few who find themselves winners in the market for such distractions—for in the Houellebecqian universe, everything is commodified through a type of market capitalism run amok, and youth and beauty are the only things standing in the way of suicide.²⁹ As John Updike put it, "the sensations Houellebecq gives us are not nutritive."³⁰ True enough, although they might nevertheless be instructive.

27. Larissa MacFarquhar, "Two Heads," *New Yorker*, July 21, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/02/12/two-heads>.

28. The Coase theorem says that in the absence of transaction costs, legal entitlements don't matter. Thus, one might argue that there doesn't need to be a household rule about who takes out the trash because whichever spouse most values avoiding the trash building up will take it out. To be clear, Coase's examples always included farmer neighbors, not people who have to sleep in the same bed at night.

29. See Louis Betty, *Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016).

30. Betty, *Without God*, 13.

III. Implications

There are several important implications that come from identifying the Great Apostasy with philosophical materialism. Let me focus on just two. First, this view of apostasy helps explain the nature of the Restoration—that it is not a discrete attempt at imitation but rather an ongoing effort at translation. Second, this view of apostasy allows us to view the Christian tradition without interruption, allowing Mormonism to engage with the best in Christian thinking through the ages.

1. *The Restoration as Translation*

In Mormon thought, the notion of apostasy is closely linked to that of restoration. As explained previously, it makes sense for B. H. Roberts to have viewed the Apostasy as being about something more than simply a loss of priesthood authority, creating space for Protestant criticism of the syncretism of early Christianity and Greek thought, since the Restoration is clearly about something more than just the loss of priesthood authority. Similarly, it should come as little surprise that this new narrative of apostasy I am outlining here alters in some respects the traditional way we think about the Restoration. However, I think that this new narrative of apostasy is actually more consistent than the traditional one in explaining how the Restoration actually works in practice.

If the Apostasy has to do with philosophical materialism, then it is a very different narrative than the one that Mormons are used to. That traditional narrative, handed down from Roberts, Talmage, and McConkie, views the Apostasy for the most part as a discrete historical event that is now over and done with. Relatedly, the view of restoration that accompanies this traditional view of apostasy is one where the Restoration is a re-creation through imitation of the way Christ's church was prior to the discrete event of the Apostasy. As the hymn goes, "Angels of glory shout the refrain: Truth is restored again."³¹ The idea is that there

31. "Hark, All Ye Nations!," *Hymns*, no. 264.

was an apostasy that happened a long time ago, the Restoration fixed it, and now we can get on with our lives.

The narrative of a materialist apostasy that I am urging here instead views the Apostasy as a continuous event, one that we deal with and will presumably continue to deal with for the foreseeable future because of its deep embeddedness in what the philosopher Charles Taylor has called the “social imaginary,” a phrase that is meant to convey something “broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they *think* about social reality in a disengaged mode.”³² The fact of the materialist Apostasy’s embeddedness in the social imaginary then also changes what the Restoration itself is all about. Given how deeply embedded philosophical materialism is in the way we moderns think about our society, it seems unlikely that we can deal with the Apostasy by simply restoring the way Christ’s church was at some earlier point in history. There simply is no going back. The best one can hope for is not a restoration through imitation but a restoration through translation. It’s not a return to the (perhaps idealized) past but rather an attempt to take the essence of some truth (like an ancient way of life) and resurrect it without falling into certain archaisms that might get in the way of the translation. The idea is similar to the way certain modern literary figures, like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, relied on modern literary structures to communicate themes from the Christian (in the case of Eliot) and classical traditions (in the case of Pound). According to Hugh Kenner, a preeminent critic of literary modernism, the aesthetic of Eliot and Pound (and other less well-known figures like Wyndham Lewis) was aimed at getting at a truth that was timeless, unencumbered by artifice.³³ It is perhaps for this same reason that otherwise traditionalist Catholic philosophers like Jacques Maritain and

32. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 171.

33. See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

Étienne Gilson favored abstract expressionism in painting, because it disposed of artifice and allowed the viewer a clearer view of truth.³⁴

Thus, when we view the Apostasy as having to do with philosophical materialism, rather than the mingling of Greek philosophy with scripture, one is led to view the Restoration as a continuous rather than discrete event and one focused on translating an ancient way of life rather than recreating that way of life through a sort of imitative primitivism. This might sound like it requires a radical change in Mormon thinking. However, I'm not sure that it does. In fact, it is increasingly common to think of the Restoration as something that continues to unfold.³⁵ For example, when, in 2015, women were for the first time invited to participate in three important administrative committees in the church, Sister Sheri Dew, a former counselor in the General Relief Society Presidency of the Church, said, "This is yet another important step forward in the restoration of the gospel,"³⁶ implying that the Restoration continues to unfold. Not long before Sister Dew made this comment, Elder Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve said in general conference, "Sometimes we think of the Restoration of the gospel as something that is complete, already behind us—Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, he

34. See Gregory Wolfe, *Beauty Will Save the World: Recovering the Human in An Ideological Age* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2011), 72–73 ("The common belief is that art should be an imitation of reality, rendered with a faithfulness that approaches that of the camera. But Maritain and Gilson countered that the end of art is not the mere repetition of reality through imitation, but the creation of beautiful objects that enable us to see through nature to deeper meaning").

35. As some Mormon scholars have pointed out, such a view of the Restoration might be dated to Smith himself. See Terryl Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 37.

36. Tad Walch, "In a Significant Move, Women to Join Key, Leading LDS Church Councils," *Deseret News*, Aug. 19, 2015, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865634860/In-a-significant-move-women-to-join-key-leading-LDS-Church-councils.html>.

received priesthood keys, the Church was organized. In reality, the Restoration is an ongoing process; we are living in it right now. It includes ‘all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal,’ and the ‘many great and important things’ that ‘He will yet reveal.’³⁷ If the Restoration is an ongoing process, then it makes sense to view the Apostasy in this way as well, which is the case under the narrative of apostasy as philosophical materialism I am elaborating on here.

Not only is this view of the Restoration as translation consistent with modern-day sermonizing, but it also helps make sense of certain aspects of Mormonism that might otherwise seem out of place under the traditional view that the Restoration is a type of re-creation through imitation. In particular, the Restoration as translation helps explain certain features of Mormonism that might look strangely modern; it also explains other features that, although not modern, at least lack a clear historical precedent in the early Christian church.

a. How “Restoration as Translation” Explains Mormonism’s Modern Flourishes

In some respects, Mormon thought assumes a peculiarly modern shape. Take, for example, Mormonism’s response to the question of the relationship between transcendence and human flourishing. The question has been put this way: “[H]ow [do we] define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn’t crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity?”³⁸ One can map ideologies with respect to how they answer this question, with secular humanists³⁹

37. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Are You Sleeping Through the Restoration?,” Apr. 2014, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/are-you-sleeping-through-the-restoration?lang=eng>.

38. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 639–40.

39. Secular humanists are non-theists who nevertheless affirm the humanist values of Christianity and theism more generally, including, for example, universal benevolence, equality, justice, and human dignity.

and neo-Nietzscheans⁴⁰ occupying the ordinary flourishing end of the spectrum and theists occupying the transcendence end.⁴¹ But if we were to map where Mormons fall on this continuum, it would probably be pretty close to the secular humanist side of things. This is because Mormonism makes a surprisingly modern move in talking about transcendence: it “immanentizes the eschaton” to use the phrase coined by William F. Buckley in his paraphrasing of the political philosopher Eric Voegelin.⁴² After all, Mormons believe that “that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there.”⁴³ Granted, that same verse goes on to say that that sociality will be coupled with eternal glory.⁴⁴ In other words, in Mormon thought, heaven is not exactly a place on earth,⁴⁵ but it’s pretty close. And the fact that heaven is a sort of continuation of earthly life implies that we should focus more on this life and the rediscovery of “ordinary human satisfactions.”⁴⁶ This idea, embedded in the Mormon view of transcendence is, in Taylor’s view, one of the “recurring insights of modernity.”⁴⁷ And thus for the modern person, it is a very attractive view of heaven. Perhaps this is what accounts for statements like this one made by a very sophisticated

40. Neo-Nietzscheans are non-humanists, those who reject humanist values as those of the weak-minded or gullible.

41. See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 636–39.

42. The phrase refers to any attempt to take the “eschaton” (that is to say, the transcendent, heaven-bound destiny of humanity) and make it an earthly reality. Buckley and conservatives like him used the phrase to criticize any liberal opponents who were in their view engaged in progressive utopian thinking.

43. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

44. Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

45. The allusion here to Belinda Carlisle’s 1980s oeuvre should be obvious to sensitive Gen-Xers everywhere. Listen to Belinda Carlisle, “Heaven is a Place on Earth,” *Heaven on Earth* (MCA Records, 1987).

46. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 627.

47. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 628.

and very modern non-Mormon: “Of all religions that I know, the one that most vehemently and persuasively defies and denies the reality of death is the original Mormonism of the prophet, seer, and revelator Joseph Smith.”⁴⁸

Related to this question of transcendence in Mormon thought is the question of ontology—what types of things exist in the Mormon worldview? For Mormons, God is not simply personal in the sense of what is sometimes referred to as “theistic personalism,” the notion that, in contrast to the God of natural theology, God is a person, only without our corporeal and other limitations.⁴⁹ The classical theists, typically associated with Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy, reject theistic personalism for viewing God as a person rather than personality itself. And yet, Mormonism seems to go even further in immanentizing God than even theistic personalism to say that God is not only a person but is literally of the same species as us, and we of him.⁵⁰ The idea would be considered a heresy among orthodox Christianity and an unusual one—in fact, one probably has to, ironically, go back to the Greeks to find something close to it. But for the modern mind, the idea that we are a type of god with all of the freedom that that implies is enormously attractive. Indeed, it dovetails well with modern paeans to a new sort of

48. Harold Bloom, comments from *The Mormons*, PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/mormons/etc/script2.html>.

49. See Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 11–14.

50. See Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1884), 46 (quoting the famous Lorenzo Snow couplet, “As man now is, God once was. As God now is, man may be.”). Although little is said about the process by which the first part of the couplet—God’s own exaltation—came about, the second part of the couplet—that man can become a perfected being as well—is a core doctrine of LDS belief. See, for example, “Becoming Like God,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/becoming-like-god?lang=eng>.

paganism.⁵¹ Thus, Mormonism in some respects seems to reflect certain modern ideas. While this might be difficult to explain under the view of the Restoration as an imitation of the past, it is exactly what one would expect of the Restoration as a translation of the past to a modern time.

b. How “Restoration as Translation” Sheds Light on Features of Mormonism Disconnected from the Early Christian Church

Not only does this notion of the Restoration as translation help us explain certain features of Mormonism that look unquestionably modern, but it also helps us appreciate other features of Mormonism that, while not necessarily modern, also don't appear to have a historical antecedent in the early Christian church. Let me give just two brief examples.

First, consider ministering and genealogical work. There is no indication that these important features of modern Mormonism were features of the early Christian church. Yet, they might be an example of restoration through translation. The restoration in question might be the translation of the ancient idea of theosis or deification, an idea that is certainly familiar to Mormons. Eastern Orthodox theologians in particular view theosis as the point of the Atonement, creating a way for sinful, fallen human beings to become like God. This deification process might proceed through the hard work of developing certain divine attributes. But it also might come about through “the mutuality of indwelling among persons,”⁵² something along the lines of hearts being knitted together that one finds in the book of Mosiah in the Book

51. See Anthony T. Kronman, *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016); Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

52. See Stump, *Atonement*, 167.

of Mormon.⁵³ Ultimately, the question is one of union with the divine nature,⁵⁴ an idea that requires something more than a relationship among friendly neighbors but rather a certain closeness and shared attention, the type of openness that allows for authentic empathy and understanding. It is the type of relationship that gives rise to a rejoicing with those who rejoice and a mourning with those who mourn,⁵⁵ not just as a show of solidarity but because one actually feels the joy and sorrow of others as a result of this closeness. And the reason this type of union with others might be a form of deification or theosis is that God himself exhibits this interpersonal nature in the fact that he consists of more than one divine person.⁵⁶ “The life of the one God is communal,” as Robert Louis Wilken, the greater scholar of early Christianity says, paraphrasing Hilary of Poitiers in the fourth century.⁵⁷ So must be the life of a people on the path of deification.

But there’s a problem here. One can understand how such a process of deification through union with others might work in a society like those depicted in the Book of Mormon or the New Testament, where people live their lives within tight-knit groups. How, though, does one translate that process to a society like ours, which is characterized often by movement rather than stability, alienation instead of solidarity, isolation rather than community? Genealogy and ministering might be viewed as an attempt at doing precisely that. Through genealogy, we begin to develop empathy toward our ancestors, which draws us nearer

53. Mosiah 18:21.

54. See David Bentley Hart, “The Anti-Theology of the Body,” *The New Atlantis*, no. 9 (Summer 2005): 65–73, available at <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-anti-theology-of-the-body>.

55. Romans 12:15.

56. I think this is true both on the classical trinitarian view of God as well as the sort of social trinitarianism of Mormonism.

57. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 93.

to our own family. Through ministering, we experience something similar with our ward family. In this sense, there is something very true about not being able to be saved on our own, not just because salvation requires grace, but because it requires others.

Another example of restoration through translation has to do with the temple. Much has been written about modernity's "affirmation of ordinary life,"⁵⁸ the idea that the modern world redefined the "good life" away from aristocratic activities of contemplation and citizenship to focus on more pedestrian, though nevertheless important, things like ordinary goodness, economic productivity, and family life. Indeed, this societal development probably followed from the Reformers' view of the ascetic or monastic life as a form of elitism masquerading as spirituality and their renewed focus on the holiness of ordinary life itself.⁵⁹

However, there is undoubtedly something lost in this defining of moral aspirations downward and casting off Christian ascetic practices dating back to John the Baptist. Yet, how does one recover an element of these "higher" forms of spirituality in an age that looks skeptically at anything that appears to violate egalitarian ideals? Mormon temple liturgy might be one such way. On the one hand, Mormonism, with its lay clergy, follows the Reformation's leveling effect on what counts as an authentic spiritual life. For Mormons, the leadership doesn't live differently from the rest of us. They are us, and we them.⁶⁰ However, the temple, with all the requirements to enter it—including paying a full tithe, wearing garments, and obeying the Word of Wisdom—is held out as a higher form of spirituality, albeit one that everyone can aspire

58. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), chap. 13.

59. See Taylor, *Secular Age*, 370.

60. By leadership, I don't mean the same thing as priesthood. Relief Society and Young Women presidents are leadership in this sense. To be sure, the gendered nature of the Mormon conception of priesthood falls short of these Reformation-era egalitarian ideals.

to and has the potential to achieve, thereby satisfying the democratic expectations of the age. There's no indication that early Christians had anything resembling Mormon temple worship. Yet, the Restoration here is not a re-creation through imitation. It's a translation, an attempt in a democratic age to translate this interaction between higher and lower spiritual vocations to a new context.

Thus, the Restoration as translation helps us explain some otherwise puzzling features of Mormonism. It also, I might add, fits well in a religion for which the concept of translation already occupies an important place. After all, the concept of translation resides at the heart of the Mormon origin story with the translation of the Book of Mormon and later the book of Abraham. As is common knowledge nowadays, what Smith meant by translation is very different from the translation that a multi-linguist might engage in when converting a text from one language into another.⁶¹ Rather, it was a sort of revelation.⁶² But it was revelation that was tied to some ancient source, a modern revelation with modern features⁶³ containing an ancient core. That is precisely the type of translation I'm talking about when I invoke this view of the Restoration. If the scripture at the heart of the Restoration was an exercise in this type of translation, then why not the Restoration itself?

2. *A Continuous Christian Tradition*

This view of a materialist apostasy also has the benefit of making available to Mormon thought a continuous Christian intellectual tradition, including those works that might be influenced by Greek philosophy.

61. See Kathleen Flake, "Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith's Narrative Canon," *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (2007): 497–527.

62. See Flake, "Translating Time," 497–501.

63. See, for example, Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 66–123.

This would perhaps be the most significant change resulting from substituting this new narrative of apostasy for the old (i.e., the “mingling of Greek philosophy with scripture”). There are potentially significant benefits associated with such a move. To get a sense for some of the ideas that might be at stake here, consider just two: natural theology and natural law.

a. Natural Theology

Natural theology consists of reasoning about God based on observations regarding the natural world.⁶⁴ The primary thinkers in this tradition are a veritable who’s who of Western philosophy, including Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Plotinus, among others. Although their arguments differ, they all follow a similar structure: They begin with an observation about the world, for example: the nature of change—that it happens when a potentiality inherent in something is actualized; or the composite nature of existence—that everything seems to be made up of parts; or the reality of universals—that concepts like redness or humanness or triangularity are real; or the distinction between essence (what a thing is) and existence (that a thing is). Then, they argue that to explain the observation in question, there must be a God—that is to say, there must be a being of pure actuality to give rise to change or a purely simple being to cause compositeness or a divine intellect in which to ground universals or pure existence that can impart existence without having to receive it. The resulting being, the God of classical theism, is eternal in the sense of existing outside of time (since time-dependent beings change), immaterial and incorporeal. It is not just a perfected version of a human being but something entirely different, “wholly other” as Karl Barth put it.⁶⁵

64. See, generally, Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017).

65. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 37.

To be sure, there might be any number of objections to the God of classical theism. This view of God might seem more like a thought experiment than anything else, a cold, distant abstraction rather than a personal being who can relate to us and we to him.⁶⁶ Or it might seem inconsistent with various biblical passages that describe God in personal terms—God sitting on a throne, getting mad, creating us in his image, forgiving, having compassion, and so on.⁶⁷ More problematic still, this view of God might seem so different from the Mormon view as to be incompatible.⁶⁸

But classical theism has its virtues too. For Christian classical theists, Jesus plays an extraordinarily important role, because Jesus is literally the same God of natural theology, that wholly other, but in human form. Thus, the Incarnation assumes an elevated poignancy within classical theism. It gives new meaning to the Apostle Paul's view that "Christ made himself of no reputation"⁶⁹ and what Nephi describes as

66. Classical theists typically respond by pointing out that if one follows the same logic that leads to God as pure being, actuality, or existence, one must also conclude that God must possess something analogous to what we call intellect and will as well as justice, mercy, and love. See Feser, *Five Proofs*, 169–248. Moreover, these personal attributes of God must be even superior to the analogous attributes that we possess. See Feser, *Five Proofs*, 246–48.

67. But there's no reason why these passages have to be read literally, especially considering that there are other biblical passages that depict God in terms consistent with natural theology. Indeed, the early Patristic Fathers seem to have adopted a metaphorical interpretation with respect to those scriptural passage that were not in accord with the nature of the God of natural theology, viewing them as examples of divine condescension and accommodation to men and women—God talking to his creation in a way that it might understand even if such talk doesn't accurately reflect ultimate reality. See Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

68. However, some find space within Mormonism for classical theism. See Samuel M. Brown, "Mormons Probably Aren't Materialists," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 39–72.

69. Philippians 2:7.

the “condescension”⁷⁰ of Christ, since it implies that the decision to take on human form was made not simply by a more perfect human but by a non-human, a being that is being itself, that is wholly other. Additionally, under classical theism, God doesn’t need any further explanation. He is “metaphysically ultimate.”⁷¹ In other words, this view of God doesn’t just explain human existence but existence itself. More generally, this conception of God is largely immune to the sophomoric brand of atheism that is so fashionable these days, which conceives of God as a being rather than being itself.⁷² Additionally, there is something beautiful about the idea of God as pure actuality or being or existence sustaining creation at all times, our every breath of every minute of every day.⁷³

For Mormonism, natural theology might yield pastoral benefits as well. In particular, it might be valuable to those who question God’s existence and nature after seeing their testimony of, for example, the First Vision challenged by the historical record. I think it’s fair to say that Mormons in the twenty-first century might make the First Vision support more weight than it was ever intended to bear. For nineteenth-century Mormon converts, the First Vision was almost assuredly not a basis for believing in God but for believing that God had called a prophet. Yet, I think many modern Mormons view the First Vision as

70. 1 Nephi 11:16.

71. Edward Feser, “Classical Theism,” *Edward Feser* (blog), Sept. 30, 2010, <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/09/classical-theism.html>.

72. See David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press: 2014). The atheism I’m referring to is embodied in works by people like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Jerry Coyne, and Christopher Hitchens. Better atheist arguments (although still unconvincing at least to this reader) are presented by philosophers like Walter Kaufmann, J. L. Mackie, and William L. Rowe.

73. Granted, such a view of God sustaining creation at all times also problematizes the question of how evil can exist, although not without intelligent responses. See, for example, Davies, *Reality of God*.

evidence that God exists, and so when their testimony of that vision, which of course was only the first of many visions, becomes destabilized, their entire belief structure, including belief in God and Jesus, teeters as well. Natural theology might provide a separate, independent basis for believing in God, which, once in place, might better support the First Vision's miraculous story of God calling a boy prophet.

To be clear, the point is not to persuade anyone to adopt these positions here and now but rather simply to suggest that there is something within the tradition of natural theology worth exploring, engaging with, and perhaps even embracing.

b. Natural Law

The same could be said of the natural law tradition, another area of classical Christian philosophy with which Mormonism has historically failed to engage.⁷⁴ In this context, natural law refers to the idea that there are objective answers to what is good and bad, right and wrong, and that those answers can be reached by reasoning from a thing's nature.⁷⁵ Just as it is in the nature of an acorn to grow into an oak or

74. The idea of the natural law as a moral theory is old—in fact, it really is just a variation on the biblical insight that observation of creation ought to reveal aspects of God's will. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who saw natural law as rooted in the Hebrew Bible, harmonized the concept with Greek philosophy, which influenced some of the early church fathers like Clement of Alexandria. However, it was Aquinas more than anyone else who, drawing on Aristotle, developed a robust natural law theory within the Christian context. See Richard A. Horsley, "The Law of Nature in Philo and Cicero," *Harvard Theological Review* 71, nos. 1–2 (Apr. 1978): 35–59.

75. See, for example, Ralph McInerny, "The Principles of Natural Law," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 25, no. 1 (1980): 1–15; Russell Hittinger, *The First Grace: Rediscovering the Natural Law in a Post-Christian World* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003); David S. Oderberg, *Moral Theory: A Non-Consequentialist Approach* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2000); Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 174–92.

a squirrel to escape predators,⁷⁶ it is in the nature of human beings to realize certain ends that define what it means to flourish as the type of beings we are. Human actions that further those natural ends are said to be morally good; otherwise, not. Thus, natural law theory requires a careful analysis of the purpose underlying our various faculties and capacities—reason, speech, labor, sex, and so on.⁷⁷

Like natural theology, this natural law tradition might also be useful for certain types of faith crises, particularly those that are motivated by a certain moral anxiety, including concerns about the moral prescriptions of those who are held out as God's mouthpieces on earth. More often than not, in Mormonism, these moral pronouncements aren't accompanied by reasons but presented almost as divine commands that must be followed, "thus saith the Lord." I sense this is frustrating for some, maybe many, Mormons. Part of this frustration might be because, regardless of political affiliation, Mormons tend to be for the most part small "I" liberals—I personally don't know many Mormon monarchists, although maybe they exist—and the liberal tradition tends to balk at commands divorced from the practice of reason-giving.

76. These examples come from Edward Feser. See "Whose Nature? Which Law?," *Edward Feser* (blog), Oct. 12, 2012, <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2012/10/whose-nature-which-law.html>.

77. There is a debate among natural lawyers about the degree to which natural law-type reasoning must be predicated on Aristotelian metaphysics and in particular the notion of teleology in nature, or in other words, that natural substances, powers, and processes are inherently directed toward certain ends. Classical natural lawyers say that such teleological assumptions are required. See note 73. New Natural lawyers disagree. See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Robert P. George, *In Defense of Natural Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

But I suspect there's more to it than that. Mormonism doesn't present itself as a faith rooted in "theological voluntarism"⁷⁸—there's a lot in the Doctrine and Covenants, for example, about intelligence and reason and working it out in one's mind.⁷⁹ So for Mormons, unlike many evangelical Protestants, although revelation is necessary, a lot can be known through the exercise of reason, including the nature of morality. At the same time, Mormonism doesn't have a tradition of reasoning about morality. And when Mormons look to moral sources, my impression is they tend not to look very far back in the past. This is no doubt due in part to the fact that people are products of their time. But it probably also has something to do with the traditional Apostasy narrative, which casts a pall on generations of thinking about Christian ethics through the lens of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. One doesn't have to believe in Elizabeth Anscombe's famous argument that modern moral philosophy (that is to say, "consequentialism") is hopelessly flawed⁸⁰ in order to believe that pre-modern philosophy contains rich sources and models for thinking about Christian ethics.⁸¹

78. This is the idea that God's will takes priority over his intelligence, and therefore is essentially unintelligible to his creation. To be sure, not everyone agrees that Mormonism is rationalist rather than voluntarist. See, for example, Eugene England, review of *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, by Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1999): 191–201 (drawing a contrast between his view that Mormonism is rationalist with the voluntarist take on Mormonism adopted by popular Mormon author Stephen Robinson).

79. See Doctrine and Covenants 8:2; 9:7–9.

80. Put me down as someone who agrees with her thesis.

81. Incidentally, Anscombe is a fascinating character whom I personally wish were talked about more in Mormon circles. An Oxbridge philosopher, Anscombe was simply one of the most brilliant thinkers of the twentieth century. Shunning the typical gender roles of the day, she preferred directness over politeness and pants over dresses and refused to spend her time on things she regarded as frivolous, like keeping a decorous home. At the same time, she was a devoted mother of seven children who led the life of a truly independent

How might natural law reasoning help address these types of faith crises rooted in moral anxiety? Consider a brief, highly simplified example.⁸² Take the proverbial modern Mormon who might be tempted to view the Church's position on chastity before marriage as backward and harmful, leading to unhappy marriages and the like. Such a view is perhaps supported by various scientific studies showing that cohabitation before marriage is associated with "healthier" partnerships. The case is perhaps further strengthened by anecdotal evidence of non-Mormon friends who, as couples, have followed the popular prescriptions and seem all the better for it. Against this backdrop, Mormon general conference talks on the subject of chastity might sound not just out of step with the time but downright uninformed and unscientific.

But the natural law view paints a very different picture. Under that view, our individual experiencing such moral anxiety might come to appreciate that whether an act is good depends not on whether it produces good consequences but on the nature of the act itself. Furthermore, they might learn that moral goodness is a species of natural goodness. That is to say, there is a relationship between what we observe as goodness in nature—"a good dog" or a "good oak tree"—and what it means for a human to be good.⁸³ Specifically, whether an act is mor-

thinker: she earned a progressive fan club when she publicly protested Oxford's awarding of Harry Truman an honorary doctorate because she viewed the United States president's decision to bomb Nagasaki and Hiroshima as acts of murder. But she confounded that same fan club when in her 70s she was arrested blocking access to an abortion clinic on the grounds that the activity performed in the clinic was of the same type as Truman's.

82. For a more elaborate explanation, see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, translated by Mary Thomas Noble (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 437–56.

83. Note that this notion of natural goodness is not solely the province of Christian thinkers. No less than Philippa Foot, one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century and a committed atheist, adopted it toward the end of her life. See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

ally good is determined by the ends to which it is ordered and whether those ends are consistent with what it means for a human to flourish. One might also learn that chastity is related not just to the good of the private individual but to the common good through the virtue of justice and that a breakdown in chastity is therefore related to serious societal injustices like sexual harassment and abuse. All of a sudden, one's view of traditional Mormon teachings on chastity might look very different, and the pronouncements of Mormon leaders less like the prejudices of a backward generation and more like something akin to deep wisdom.

To be clear, I'm not saying that a natural law view of morality compels one to view things in this way any more than I am saying that natural theology compels one to adopt a form of classical theism. Moreover, even if Mormon thinkers were inclined to engage with the natural theology or natural law tradition, it is entirely possible they would reach different conclusions than the traditional ones sketched above. Intriguingly, perhaps there is a Mormon-inflected version of natural theology and natural law that relies on unique insights from Mormon metaphysics. Regardless, the point I am trying to make here is that these are deep resources that have not in my view been sufficiently plumbed by Mormon thinkers and that hold out potentially significant pastoral benefits for those whose faith may waiver.

IV. Conclusion

In this article, I've tried to explore the possibility that the Apostasy has to do with a much more modern phenomenon than traditionally thought. In fact, one might say that under the traditional narrative, the Apostasy has to do with Christianity's Platonist turn whereas under the theory I've outlined here, it has to do with precisely the opposite development.⁸⁴ Besides being, in my view, more consistent with what

84. By Platonism, I don't mean Plato's theory of the forms, the notion that the physical world is a mere imitation of a higher realm of non-physical essences.

the Apostasy actually is trying to identify—an intellectual development that undermines belief in Christianity—this view has the advantage of making accessible a rich vein of philosophical resources that are largely foreclosed by the traditional Apostasy narrative. These resources could be useful in battling the faith crises of today and tomorrow. It's also arguably more consistent with the highly liberal approach to the location of truth at the origins of Mormonism. Joseph Smith said that “the first fundamental principle of our religion” is to be free “to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another.”⁸⁵ It is not clear that Mormonism has fully lived up to Smith's aspiration, but maybe reconsidering the traditional understanding of the Apostasy would be one step in the right direction.

Rather, I'm referring to the sort of “big-tent” Platonism under which a number of seemingly disparate and diverse thinkers would be categorized, including Plato but also Aristotle, Plotinus, Boethius, Maimonides, Augustine, and Aquinas. What these thinkers have in common within this big tent is what might be considered the perennial philosophy, a commitment to the rejection of certain philosophical ideas, including materialism, nominalism, mechanism, skepticism, and so on. See Lloyd P. Gerson, *From Plato to Platonism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2017).

85. Joseph Smith, “Letter to Isaac Galland, circa 22 March 1839,” 53–54, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-isaac-galland-22-march-1839/4#full-transcript>.

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"interim,"
72" x 48", oil on canvas,
by Ron Richmond

“I CANNOT DESCRIBE SALT”:
ELIZABETH WILLIS, POETS IN EXILE,
AND THE CHURCH INVISIBLE IN
THE AGE OF PANDEMIC

Jacob Bender

Ever since Socrates banished poetry in Book X of Plato’s *Republic* with a flippant “if . . . poetry can show any reason for her existence in a well-governed state, we would gladly admit her,”¹ Western poets have largely been on the defensive, mounting countless defenses of their vocation across the centuries (with Percy Shelley’s defiant “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”² being perhaps the most notorious). However, plenty of other poets have in turn questioned why they should ever want to enter Plato’s Republic in the first place—which, after all, enthusiastically endorses censorship, openly denigrates democracy as being but one step from anarchy, and was written by a man who mounted spirited defenses of slavery and eugenics. As such, there has also arisen a long and storied history of the poet as intentional outsider, one in self-imposed exile from the repressions of the Republic: the wandering bard, the pastoral hermit, the cloistered monk, Dante in Ravenna, Whitman loafing at his leisure, agoraphobic Dickinson, the English Romantics in Italy, the Modernists in Paris, the Pre-Raphaelites,

1. Plato, *The Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vols. 5–6, translated by Paul Shorey (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

2. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Defence of Poetry,” in *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays* (Charleston, S.C.: Nabu Press, 2013).

the Beats. Rather than seek entrance into the Republic, they have conspicuously and self-consciously remained outside it.

Of course, exile has practically become the default position of our twenty-first-century American poets, who overwhelmingly exist nowadays solely within the narrow niches of academia, fellowships, and school residencies—largely because they’ve had to. After all, hardly anyone outside of English majors reads contemporary poetry anymore (and even then), and haven’t for a while now. Yet this utter marginalization from the American mainstream also signifies that, for the most part, to become a contemporary poet is to know going in that one has already chosen self-exile; if their poetry is often obscure, it is perhaps because they are, of necessity, drawn toward the obscurity. This has a rough sort of logic to it: obscurity by definition hides that which cannot be found anywhere else. Once upon a time, such might have been called the Church Invisible: St. Augustine’s fourth-century concept (ironically rooted in Neoplatonism) that the true church is hidden from us—that the physical trappings of the earthly church only reveal it partially and imperfectly, “through a glass darkly.”³ The idea of the Church Invisible was centuries later embraced by the Protestants (especially the Calvinists) to illustrate how the elect and saved are known only to God. The Roman Catholics would later seek to reclaim the term in the twentieth century. Yet, one place where the term has curiously not yet gained wide currency is in Mormonism.

Only during the COVID-19 pandemic has a space been opened, a possibility created, for the Church Invisible to become present within the broader LDS discourse. Recall how by the end of March 2020, all of the Church’s chapels, temples, visitors’ centers, college campuses, and conference centers had been closed for quarantine. Bishopricks everywhere were forced to authorize the membership to perform the sacred sacramental ordinance solely within the confines of their own

3. 1 Corinthian 13:12.

homes—where many of us were shocked to feel in our living rooms the same Holy Spirit we had only ever allowed ourselves to feel in the chapel. This shift was radical not just in scale but in tendency: after an extravagant, multi-decade construction streak wherein the Church considered it a point of pride just how many buildings they had built (“the number of operating temples is . . .”, “the number of wards and branches are . . .”, “the conference center seats . . .”), suddenly the Saints weren’t gathering anywhere at all. “Family-centered, church-supported” had only recently entered the Church lexicon, but now it was literalized to a level hitherto unprecedented and unanticipated by the faith. Suddenly, it was as though there were no buildings at all. (And to be fair, we were far from the worst at this; as the sheer number of churches that fought viciously to hold live services throughout the lockdowns demonstrated, this failure to distinguish the building from the church has been general across the entire United States.) Without quite realizing it and forced largely by outside circumstances, the pandemic had impelled us all to acknowledge ourselves members of the Church Invisible. Eugene England once famously wrote that “The Church is as true as the gospel,” but that still only underscored how the Church is *not* the gospel—and that the buildings were never the Church. Ronald E. Poelman of the Seventy had been forced in 1984 to rewrite a general conference talk that dared to draw just such a distinction between the Church and the gospel, but now there was no church to be distinguished from at all. In biblical speak, there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; there was fire, but God was not in the fire; there was pandemic, but God was not in the pandemic—and there were buildings, but God was not in the buildings, but a still small voice. Our chapels and temples and tabernacles and conference centers were aggressively built to be seen; but all at once, the Church was now officially where no one was watching at all.

And yet (and here is the remarkable thing) certain poets have been there all along—right there, in the obscurity, far away from the

buildings where we had not been looking, communing in exile with the Church Invisible, long before the pandemic forced us there as well. One such LDS-adjacent poet who has explored those obscurities in particular is Elizabeth Willis (b. 1961). As a professor of creative writing at the renowned Iowa Writers' Workshop, a Guggenheim Fellow, and a finalist for the 2016 Pulitzer Prize, Willis is often ranked as one of the leading lights in modern American poetry—which naturally means she is virtually unknown everywhere else. ("More people should be reading Elizabeth Willis, one of our most gifted and historically attuned poets," raves a cover blurb—which, of course, only highlights how many people are *not*.) For that matter, few if any would accuse her of being a Mormon poet; her religious upbringing never comes up, one way or the other, in her various and sundry profiles, workshops, and interviews, and she has not apparently practiced in years, if not decades. Her self-exile from the Church mainstream seems complete, hers yet another name on the overwhelming rolls of the "less-active" (that is, if she hasn't already removed it of her own accord), whose Mormon connection is, at best, tenuous and incidental. Her poetry itself is of the contemporary cryptic variety: a series of delicate images and/or striking turns of phrase seemingly strung together without rhyme or reason, formed of the same long-standing lineage as the Imagist experiments of Ezra Pound and H. D., or the prose-poem improvisations of William Carlos Williams. Her language never forces itself upon the reader but, as in the avant-garde tradition of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets like Susan Howe (who has also praised Willis as an "exceptional poet"), invites the reader to create and tease out their own meanings from her collage-assemblage of phrases. She seems to stand as much outside the imperative "Thou shalt" religious language of the Church as she does outside of the cold, tyrannical chain-of-logic of Plato's *Republic*. She apparently has no church—at least, none that she has let us see.

But extratextual evidence indicates that although she long ago ceased any formal connection with the institutional, Utah-based

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, she has nevertheless remained engaged (in her own idiosyncratic way) with the Church Invisible, long before the rest of us were forced to out of necessity. At least, such is signaled by the fact that the Spring 2012 issue of *Dialogue* published a trio of her poems: "San Diego Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints," "Nazarín," and "Good Government in the City" (the latter of which's title, for all its vague neo-Imagism, can't help but feel like a swipe on Plato's *Republic* as well). On the face of it, there is very little to recommend them as particularly Mormon besides their venue of publication; even their titles feel more vaguely Catholic than LDS (notably, none of them appear in her career-spanning 2015 collection *Alive: New and Collected Poems*). Their sheer presence in *Dialogue*, however, does still signpost that her oeuvre is entangled with a Mormon vocabulary—a heavily defamiliarized one, mind you, one that still works in "hints, types, and shadows"—but that is still all the more present for those with ears to hear and eyes to see. Like Abraham in Canaan, ancient Israel in the wilderness, the Rechabites, the Essenes, and John the Baptist in the desert, she apparently finds her purest expressions of faith in exile. Whosoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

Take the following example (first pointed out to me by a poet I home-taught in Iowa City) from Willis's 2003 prose-poem "Drive," wherein lies nestled the deceptively simple line, "I cannot describe salt."⁴ For Gen-Xers and Millennials of a certain age, the phrase "I cannot describe salt" will set off a Proustian reverie for a time when Boyd K. Packer's 1982 address "The Candle of the Lord" was nigh inescapable, a fixture of endless seminary, institute, mission prep, and gospel doctrine classes. The talk recounts a conversation that Elder Packer once had with a "professed atheist" on some long flight, wherein he was challenged by his seatmate to describe the Holy Spirit by which he claimed to know that God lives. After Packer is unable

4. Elizabeth Willis, *Alive: New and Collected Poems* (New York: NYRB Poets, 2015), 82.

to articulate those groanings beyond utterance and the peace which surpasseth understanding, the atheist claims to have caught Packer in guile. Yet feeling “pure intelligence” flow into him, Packer counters by challenging the atheist to describe the taste of salt, as though to someone who had never before tasted it. As the atheist hems and haws and describes only what it isn’t—“it is not sweet and it is not sour” (one almost wonders if Packer had read Derrida)—he responds, “My friend, spiritually speaking, I have tasted salt.”⁵ (It is, arguably, the closest the authoritarian Boyd K. Packer ever came to sounding like a poet himself.) Ever since, “I have tasted salt” has joined Christ’s “Ye are the salt of the earth”⁶ within the religious lexicon of Latter-day Saint speak.

So what, then, does Willis mean when she writes “I cannot describe salt” in her poem? Has she implicitly put herself in the position of the atheist in this narrative: the unwitting poststructuralist who can only describe what things are not? Does she mean to indicate that she has never felt this purported Holy Spirit either—or at least, that she has no answer for (or perhaps more precisely, no use for) the authoritative speech of Boyd K. Packer? Or does she in fact mean it the exact same way Packer means it, that she *also* cannot describe the Holy Spirit, though she has tasted it as well—and moreover that her decision not to describe the salt of the earth is part and parcel of her larger refusal to describe *anything* directly—that such in fact is the nature of her enigmatic poetry, which also leaves untouched the untouchable and the sacred? For that matter, is her decision to never directly describe the salt also integral to her self-imposed exile from the Church, her communion with the Church Invisible as distinct from the institutional one? But then, the Spirit itself is also in exile—from her words, from his words, from *any* of our words. As Packer demonstrated, words cannot hope to articulate the groanings beyond utterance; hence hers don’t try

5. Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” June 25, 1982, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1983/01/the-candle-of-the-lord?lang=eng>.

6. Matthew 5:13.

to either. It is precisely where her words fail to signify that perhaps the Holy Spirit has dwelled all along—unless, of course, she really *is* just referring to salt.

The beauty of the phrase "I cannot describe salt" is that all of these potential readings are co-present, co-existent with each other (in Joseph Smith's parlance, we might even say they are "co-eternal"), and mean all things and no things at once. Rather than narrow down the number of extant meanings (as is inevitably the intention, for better and for worse, of every General Authority statement), Elizabeth Willis by contrast multiplies the number of potential meanings, "to fill the immensity of space."⁷ Long before the age of pandemic shrunk the Church down to the size of our individual households, Willis was exploring how this same exile could expand to encompass the universe—or even, god-like, create her own universe. To paraphrase another prominent LDS poem: as God is now, woman may become.

The salt also appears in her critically acclaimed 2006 collection *Meteoric Flowers*. In the prose poem "Solar Volcanos" (she has a real knack for titles, by the way), she includes the amplifying line, "Turning to salt, turning to stone, I'm turning into water."⁸ There are a lot of scriptural allusions to unpack in this compact little line: Lot's wife turning into salt; the parable of the sower and the seed thrown among stones; the waters of baptism, and/or "how long can rolling waters remain impure?"⁹ Let us take each of these allusions in turn: Lot's wife tasted the salt too, yet for her it was a curse ("the demons even believe, and tremble"¹⁰), as Willis perhaps implies it has been for her as well. Or could it be that Willis is rehabilitating Lot's wife, by turning her *into* the salt of the earth directly, reclaiming her away from yet another weary symbol

7. Doctrine and Covenants 88:12.

8. Willis, *Alive*, 101.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 121:33.

10. James 2:19.

of backsliding—as though to imply that “backsliders” like herself are as possessed of the salt of the earth as anyone? For that matter, when she writes “turning to stone,” is she now claiming to be the stony ground that can no longer receive the word of God—or is she instead the stones that will themselves sing out if we were to restrain these little ones? Or, again, is she both: the stony heart that paradoxically gives fullest expression to the inexpressible spirit of God? And as for “I’m turning into water”: is she cleansed by the water, or has she herself become the water *that* cleanses—not *receiving* the authority (as she is presently denied as a woman by the Church—which perhaps explains her self-exile from the Church as well), but *becoming* the authority itself? Even more intriguingly: Is this line laying out a sequence of transformation (from salt to stone to water), or is she *also* presenting these all as co-present, co-eternal—we are *all* salt, *and* stone, *and* water, all at once? That she only applies a personal pronoun to “water” is perhaps telling: like water, her identity is also fluid, ever-changing and ever-shifting as she constantly navigates and negotiates between all of these potentialities. What’s more, if she’s all three at once, then she’s not just any water, but *salt* water in particular: the stuff covering 70 percent of the globe, touching all lands and thus all possibilities, and (in the grand tradition of the Book of Mormon) sailing the prophets themselves across her to promised lands, from depths that even they cannot fathom.

That is, she is inhabiting spaces that even the prophets cannot see—or at least, she doesn’t trust them to see. Her crisis of prophetic confidence is perhaps hinted at in her austere 2003 poem “Autographeme,” which contains the enigmatic line, nestled amidst all its other apparent non-sequiturs, “I was fluent in salamander.”¹¹ It is a non-sense line to the uninitiated, but to anyone even passingly familiar with the world of late-twentieth-century Mormon intellectual history, any invocation of “salamander” can’t help but ring some pretty significant bells: of Mark Hofmann, the fraudulent Salamander letter he sold at

11. Willis, *Alive*, 47.

a premium to Church leaders and historians in the 1980s, his ensuing cover-ups and car bombings, the homicide investigations, and, above all, the higher-level concerns about a prophetic inspiration and purported "gift of discernment" that failed to detect Hofmann's forgery and fraud and murderous intentions before it was too late. Once one latches hold of the word "salamander," all sorts of intriguing questions immediately arise: assuming (and this could all still be too big of an assumption) that "salamander" at least obliquely refers to the Hofmann scandal, what exactly does it mean for her to be *fluent* in salamander? Could it bluntly mean that she, too, is fluent in detecting supposedly failed inspiration among Church leaders? Or, rather, that she is adept in deceiving them herself? Or, instead, that she, too, is capable of "forging" artifices—not fraudulently, but through the artifice of her own poetry, her own poetic universe, perhaps even of her own faith. For that matter, can *anything* be classified as a "forgery" when all writings are inherently artifices to begin with? Or am *I* the one forging meaning *ex nihilo* where none was previously present—at least, not until I forged it myself (the *raison d'être* of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets)?

One might here justly complain that I have raised too many questions that I have not even tried to answer over the course of this paper, save that raising questions is exactly the point. The multitudinous readings invoked by Willis's compact poetry seem to gesture toward the possibility of an alternative form of LDS discourse, one not centered (as noted earlier) on the self-assured declarations of the General Authority who seeks to forcefully pronounce once and for all, but rather one that expands its number of potential meanings till they fill eternity. Hers is a poetic voice that seeks not to "exercise dominion or compulsion upon the souls of men in any degree of unrighteousness," but rather that distills upon the soul "as the dews from heaven," flowing "forever and ever" like waters, creating and generating meanings "without compulsory means."¹² It is a radically different vision of what our Church discourse

12. Doctrine and Covenants 121:45–46.

could look like, one that would be far less familiar to us, even as it would be far more in line with our own most treasured scriptural utterances. In this age of pandemic, it might also be worth exploring how our season of forced exile from the church building and into the Church Invisible might also expand our meanings and our visions, shifting us away from the programmed strictures of the prefab chapel and structured meeting block, to instead consider anew the infinite possibilities of eternity. “Thy mind,” said Joseph Smith in the King Follett Sermon, “must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity.”¹³ Such an approach requires that we expand not the number of our meetings but of our meanings.

Further examples from her poetry, briefly: In the call-and-response of her 2011 poem “In Strength Sweetness,” she could be quoting directly from the Pearl of Great Price when she writes: “in the blood / spirit”¹⁴—that is, the blood of the Atonement signified by the presence of the Holy Ghost. When she then adds: “in the lion / the bee,”¹⁵ she is likely alluding to Judges 14:18, “What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?”—Samson’s proud boast after slaying the lion, from whose carcass there emerged “a swarm of bees and honey.” Yet intriguingly, given her upbringing, she could also have in mind the Lion House of (and Lion of the Lord that was) Brigham Young, whose architecture frequently featured the beehive of the Jaredites, still present on the seal of the state of Utah to this day. Meanwhile, in the catalogue of worries that is her 2015 poem “Survey,” she makes a direct allusion to Doctrine and Covenants 89:20: “I worry that I will faint,”¹⁶ rather than walk and

13. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 137.

14. Willis, *Alive*, 140.

15. Willis, *Alive*, 140.

16. Willis, *Alive*, 146.

not faint, nor run and not be weary. Her worries about the futility of the divine promises are further made manifest when she marries together Matthew 13:30 with Ether 12:27: "I worry the wheat won't tassel / that the weak things will become weaker,"¹⁷ as she fears that the wheat will never actually overcome the tares, that weak things will never become strong.

But which weak things does she fear for specifically? It's worth here noting that her 2003 collection *Turneresque* features a poem entitled "The Book of Matthew," an elegy to Matthew Shepard, the gay teen whose 1998 murder in Wyoming galvanized the nation. Such would indicate that the root of her disaffiliation from the Church stems at least in part from its failures with the LGBTQ+ community (in which case she has merely been ahead of the curve), a definite weak spot in Church doctrine that has certainly not yet been made strong. When her poem says of Shepard, "You've been indexed / & written in pencil on bedroom walls / & like Shelley, writ in light,"¹⁸ *Publishers Weekly* read it as "articulating at once Shepard's appropriation, historicity and humanity."¹⁹ Such a reading is certainly accurate in part, but it still does not fully account for the valences of the word "indexed" in an LDS context, which carries connotations of temple work, family history, and the redemption of the dead. Her use here of the deceptively loaded term "indexed" can be read cynically—as in, the Church, by indexing Shepard, has appropriated something and someone that does not belong to them—but it could also, more charitably, signify the integration of something and someone into a doctrine of salvation that does not yet know how to account for him and yet he is all the more present anyway. Matthew Shepard, too, is in the Church Invisible.

17. Willis, *Alive*, 146.

18. Willis, *Alive*, 79.

19. *Publishers Weekly*, review of *Turneresque* by Elizabeth Willis, June 23, 2003, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-886224-62-9>.

To be clear: I am far from advocating for an exclusively LDS reading of Willis's poetry. She clearly draws from a massive well of historical references, poetic allusions, cinematic touchstones, news items, and other wide-ranging religious imagery from numerous different faith traditions to assemble her poetry. For example, when she writes "I'm looking at the evil flower"²⁰ in her 2006 poem "The Similitude of This Great Flower," one can detect a rather obvious reference to Baudelaire's classic *Les Fleurs du mal*. Yet even within that same prose poem, she writes, "Heaven's voice has hell behind it"²¹—as though heaven can only be defined against hell; or the threat of hell must give weight to heaven's words; or heaven itself is a sort of hell for those unprepared for it ("you would be more miserable to dwell with the damned souls of hell"²²). The poem concludes shortly thereafter with "It's misty in the dream. It says you promised to go on."²³ It's an image that cannot help but evoke, for a Mormon reader, the hazy darkness at the inception of Lehi's dream in 1 Nephi 8. As a poet in exile from both the great and spacious building *and* the iron rod (which we sometimes forget can lead one back *toward* the building just as much as away from it), she perhaps has chosen to exile herself into this misty dream intentionally. Furthermore, that enigmatic "It says you promised to go on" potentially alludes to the promise of 2 Nephi 31 that, after having passed through the waters of baptism, one must "endure to the end"—but the open-ended question unasked even by Nephi is to endure *what* to the end of *what*, exactly. For Willis, the misty obscurity itself is both what she and her poetry endure, and also what she and her poetry endure *toward*.

Also, to be clear: she has been just as forced into this obscurity as the rest of us were forced by the pandemic into the Church Invisible;

20. Willis, *Alive*, 85.

21. Willis, *Alive*, 85.

22. Mormon 9:4.

23. Willis, *Alive*, 85.

to appropriate a line from Brigham Young, she went willingly because she had to. "I prefer clarity, when I can afford it,"²⁴ she writes in *Meteoritic Flowers*—yet as her entire poetic oeuvre indicates, she evidently thinks she *cannot* afford it. This theme of the costliness of clarity is expanded upon in the title poem to 2015's *Alive*, which contains some of her (comparatively speaking) most explicitly religious language to date. On a personal note, I find this poem fascinating because in my own composition courses, I am fond of telling students that half of all good writing is simply stating the obvious, since what is obvious to them is not obvious to everyone else. I have found that, when coaching college freshmen in the messy art of essay writing, this simple nugget of advice helps them more than anything else to cover a multitude of sins. I, too, "prefer clarity" and love obviousness; I think obviousness gets a bad rap and deserves to be enshrined in the annals of good writing pedagogy. In fact, I often lean so hard on this piece of advice that I find Willis's "Alive" a useful corrective for me, as she examines the grave difficulties with trying to be obvious—which are never as obvious as they seem! She writes, for example, how "I hold some truths to be obvious enough not to have to say them at all."²⁵ My comp students often make the same mistake, skipping entire important points in their arguments because they feared it was too obvious to state openly—but then, so do we all. And my students are usually writing on relatively straightforward topics, like gun control or immigration; how much more difficult, then, is it to express the groanings beyond utterance, the peace that surpasseth understanding? In these moments, being "obvious" becomes downright impossible. I am forced to remember that I, too, often cannot afford clarity, just as I cannot describe salt—none of us can.

24. Willis, *Alive*, 93.

25. Willis, *Alive*, 171.

That same frustration with trying to express the inexpressible comes up when she writes in “Alive”: “People think God is obvious, or not: everything or nothing. A hole held open by a word.”²⁶ I here suspect that Willis is critiquing the all-or-nothing binary approach of LDS apologetics in particular—“these things are true, or they are not”—as she rejects the binary and instead seeks a God who is neither obvious *nor* non-obvious, neither everything nor nothing, but something else entirely. Or, as she writes on the very next page: “When a mystery is made obvious people call it a revelation. But it was there all along, neither uncovered nor covered up.”²⁷ For it is here important to emphasize that the Church Invisible is likewise neither covered nor uncovered: it was there all along. If it was hidden in obscurity, it was only because we chose not to see it. I suspect that more than a few of us, as we blessed our own bread and water in the privacy of our own homes during the lockdowns, were likewise astounded to uncover something that was there all along, neither hidden nor uncovered, a presence and communion that never needed a building to experience.

But just because it was there all along doesn’t mean it was obvious, either. “When Paul was blinded by God and fell off his horse and said ‘now we see through a glass darkly but then face to face,’ *then* sounded like the past, but apparently he meant the future,”²⁸ Willis also writes in “Alive.” That classic Pauline line, “see through a glass darkly,” is for many of us our most honest expression of faith; we acknowledge something we cannot clearly see. Yet as Willis cleverly interrogates here, the “then” in that passage can be read to mean the future *and* the past, depending on where you weight the emphasis. She could perhaps be influenced here by the unique LDS doctrine of premortal existence, wherein we see God face to face both before *and* after this life—but in the meantime,

26. Willis, *Alive*, 172.

27. Willis, *Alive*, 173.

28. Willis, *Alive*, 179.

we confess we are strangers and pilgrims on this earth. That is, we have *all* been in exile, all along—we are members of the Church Invisible without realizing it. It was neither hidden nor covered; it was outside the walls of the church building just as much as it was inside them, because it was everywhere on this earth and vale of tears.

But even to finally recognize our ever-present and continuous membership in the Church Invisible is not to make it any more obvious. "What's next isn't obvious,"²⁹ Willis warns, and she is right: for all our pontificating about the plan of salvation, we are no more sure of what the what-is-next will look like than we ever were. And even those "plain and precious truths" that we *do* have—the most obvious of all, you might say—are nevertheless often the least legible: "The writing on the wall is too big to see."³⁰ (King Belshazzar in the Book of Daniel couldn't read it either.) That is probably why we didn't look at the writing on the wall: we have preferred the narrow limits of the Church Visible and the comforting confines of our physical church buildings. Such, however, is not pleasing to the Almighty: "How vain and trifling have been our spirits, our conferences, our councils, our meetings, our private as well as public conversation," wrote Joseph Smith from Liberty Jail, "too low, too mean, too vulgar, too condescending for the dignified characters called and chosen of God."³¹ But if our meetings have been trifling, it is of course because we have wanted them that way; since the Church Invisible has been too big to read, we prefer (understandably, I might add!) something smaller, something we can "heft" and handle. But the Almighty simply will not let us, and so one of the collateral effects of the pandemic has been to force us from the chapels for a season, exiles within our own homes—or, more precisely (and this is what probably drove the greatest number of people crazy during the lockdowns), exiles

29. Willis, *Alive*, 179.

30. Willis, *Alive*, 180.

31. Smith, *Teachings*, 137.

within our own minds. We don't like to be alone with our thoughts and will go to incredible lengths—TV, internet, anything—to avoid it. We perhaps even feel like trespassers on our own thoughts—but then, as Willis reminds us, “The poet is a trespasser.”³² And so during the lockdowns, we all became trespassers in exile. We were never supposed to join Plato's oppressive Republic in the first place; we should have been the first to leave as well (“Come to Zion” and “Babylon, we bid thee farewell” used to be hymns we meant quite literally). We were supposed to join the poets in exile—not to follow them, mind you, and *certainly* not to model them or copy them, but in order to become poets ourselves, creators of worlds. Like Whitman at the end of “Song of Myself,” the poet stops somewhere, waiting for us.

Final thought: In her 2014 poem “Oil and Water,” Willis writes, “To those who don't know we are drowning, the ocean has nothing to say.”³³ The corollary, of course, is that to those of us who *do* know we are drowning, the ocean has everything to say. We have all been drowning—in our own mediocrity, in our own doubt, in our own “trifling with sacred things;”³⁴ only during the lockdowns have we realized it. Now the ocean can finally say something to us—to help us repent, in other words. It is an ocean made of salt water, one that connects us all to each other and to the Church Invisible and to the promised land—and though we still cannot describe the salt, we still know what it tastes like.

32. Willis, *Alive*, 181.

33. Willis, *Alive*, 155.

34. Doctrine and Covenants 6:12.

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THOUGHTS ON THE SACRAMENT DURING A PANDEMIC

Lori Davis

The sacrament feels like a medical procedure these days. It's passed by men, not boys. I wondered about that requirement until I looked around the chapel at our scanty, socially-distanced congregation and found not one young man among them. Maybe not a requirement, then. Just a fact of life.

All the better, I think. Some of these men are doctors. They should know how to wash their hands.

They look like doctors, too, with their trim haircuts, their all-business-no-nonsense masks, and their blue gloves sending the scent of latex wafting through the air.

The job itself has become a multitasking challenge with strict protocols. One water tray with socially-distanced cups of bread. One bread tray for discarded water cups. The world is a very mixed-up place.

I feel very mixed up at church too. I come, I sit, I listen. Reaching out for the sacrament cup is the most active thing I do.

It didn't used to be like this. I play the piano and the organ. I sing. I teach. I speak. With all due modesty, I am good at all of it. I am usually very busy at church, and you can count on me to show up. I've never been in a ward that didn't love having me.

Now I do nothing, and I contribute nothing, and no one tells me how much they enjoyed my lesson because I didn't give one. No one is benefitted by my presence. No one would notice if I did not show up. Humility has been forced on me. If I knew how to give it back, I would.

A great many people are not showing up. Once we might have worried about them. We might have sent a text to say, "Missed you at

church! Are you okay?” Now we just assume it wasn’t their assigned week to attend. Or they’re immunocompromised. Or they worry about passing the virus to those who are immunocompromised. So many good reasons for not attending.

This has forced me to confront an unpleasant question. Why do I go? Why have I ever gone?

Is it because of faith? Or because of habit? Is it a desire to serve? Or a desire to have everyone recognize how well my talents happen to line up with the service that is (or used to be) needed at church? Is it because I love the people? Or because I need the people to love me?

Maybe a mix of all of that, and I’d rather not think too hard about the percentages. At any rate, the masked man with the mixed-up sacrament trays has reached me, and I am supposed to be thinking about the Savior.

I’ll bet it did not feel like a medical procedure when the Savior prepared the sacrament. There would have been no latex, no hand sanitizer, no antibacterial wipes. I presume he would have washed his hands. I doubt the water was tested by a water treatment plant.

It must have felt so ordinary. Just a man breaking bread, the most commonplace of foods. Saying some strange words, yes, but in actions doing nothing that was not done by everyone, multiple times every day. He gave extraordinary meaning to the most common and vital activity of the day.

I have always had trouble seeing the extraordinary in it. I’ve been told all my life that it is the most sacred part of our Sunday meetings and the main reason we come to church. I always nodded my head. But I have to admit that the sacrament has rarely been the highlight of my Sunday. I’m more likely to feel the Spirit during the music, or the speakers, or even just while talking to someone in the hallway.

At the start of the pandemic, the bishop called. He suggested I ask my ministering brother to bring me the sacrament. But I didn’t.

Back then, the whole shutdown was supposed to last just a couple of weeks. Not a big deal to skip the sacrament for a couple of weeks. Besides, I reasoned, my ministering brother is willing and wonderful but also elderly. I wouldn't want to expose him to the virus.

Actually, I didn't ask because I was frustrated that I needed to. A couple of years ago my husband was in the bishopric. Now he is very, very inactive. Among other difficulties, I now feel the sting of being a woman in the Church. I had never particularly resented not holding the priesthood, probably because I always had easy, comfortable access to someone who did. Now I don't.

It occurred to me to bless the sacrament myself. After all, the words "having authority" do not appear in those prayers. I never did do it though. Mostly because I couldn't figure out how to explain it to my daughter. Instead we just went without for five months.

I wondered whether it would seem more significant when I returned to church. Would the sacrament suddenly become extraordinary?

I once heard a talk by Truman Madsen, who was a professor of philosophy at BYU. He talked about the sacrament as a spiritual feast and compared the role of the priesthood holders who prepare and pass the bread and water to that of a woman preparing the family dinner, saying:

You faithful sisters, married or unmarried, who move daily . . . from the garden plot to the crucial minutia of food labels to the cups and measures of cookery; you, who struggle and preside in the kitchen and keep vigil; you, who reach out to the perennial needs of your family and loved ones; you, who with artistry gather flowers and turn an ordinary table into an altar that summons prayer and thanksgiving; you, who by your very presence, turn eating into a feast—into dining in the name of the Lord, and who, therefore, bring a bountiful measure of grace to your table, lend your faith to boys and sometimes inept men who officiate at the sacrament table. Let the tables turn on your serving. Lend your faith to our trying to act as you do in Christlike dignity. For

this is as close as we may ever come to your divine calling to give and to nurture life itself.¹

I think I'm on pretty firm ground when I suggest that Dr. Madsen may never have been in charge of putting family dinner on the table. It's really not a spiritual experience. Ask any mother and many modern fathers. They know exactly what I'm talking about.

There's the never-ending chore of choosing a recipe and hoping you own the ingredients. Somehow you always have less time than the recipe requires. If you've got young kids, they're clinging to your legs and screaming while you're trying to juggle hot pans and sharp knives. If you've got older kids, they're either underfoot demanding why you haven't done their laundry or they're suspiciously absent when they ought to be helping. If and when the meal is ready, you have to herd the family to the table like so many unwilling sheep. Each additional mouth exponentially increases the likelihood that someone will feel called upon to tell you that the food is unfit for their consumption. And when it's all over, you are the only one who cares that the kitchen is a mess.

Grace and Christlike dignity are not always present in abundance.

But upon further reflection I think all that mundane struggle just enhances Madsen's analogy. The Atonement was not a clean business. It involved blood and sweat and tears. It involved a Savior who didn't want to do this, begged his Father to find another way, and was denied. It involved apostles who should have stayed awake to help but didn't. It involved betrayal. It involved people then and now who absolutely reject Christ's infinite gift, and even more who don't reject it outright but just can't be bothered to fully accept it. And even when some people

1. Truman G. Madsen, "The Savior, the Sacrament, and Self-Worth" (presented at BYU Women's Conference, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Apr. 29, 1999), available at https://womensconference.byu.edu/sites/womensconference.ce.byu.edu/files/madsen_truman.pdf.

do accept his sacrifice and are washed clean, the residual consequences of past sins are often still there, making a mess of their lives.

None of that means the Atonement wasn't worth doing.

A family is nourished and sustained by the evening meal, even when they fail to appreciate it. Even when it feels so ordinary that no one thinks to thank the person who made it happen. The sacrament is the most physical reminder of the Atonement that we have. Perhaps it has nourished and sustained me, although I never realized it.

The water tray has arrived, this time with actual water in the cups. I drink it down, and it feels cool and soothing. Maybe not extraordinary. But soothing.

In such a mixed-up world, I will take soothing. I will take ordinary. And I am glad to be here.

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"water,"
20" x 26", oil on canvas,
by Ron Richmond

THE JOY AND BURDEN OF SERVING AS BISHOP: AN OPEN LETTER TO BISHOPS

Bryant Skeen Thompson

Dear Bishop,

The mantle you bear will be a delight. You will observe the healing power of the atonement of Jesus Christ and feel the love our heavenly parents have for their children. You will experience profound joy. The mantle you bear will also be a burden. You will observe the heartache associated with mortality and feel the agony of those who experience unimaginable loss. You will experience profound sorrow.

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught that we can “gain precious treasures” as we experience “the intense joys and sorrows of mortality” as we “learn to strive, to seek, and to struggle” in order to “discover truths about God and ourselves.”¹ As we come to know the intense joys and intense sorrows of mortality, we might experience ambivalence. The word “ambivalence” originates from the Latin *ambo* (both) and *valere* (strong) and refers to the tension individuals feel as they simultaneously encounter strong positive and negative experiences.² Ambivalence can create dissonance, anxiety, and frustration but can also energize, motivate, and enlighten, leading to deeper reflection and

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Your Great Adventure,” Oct. 2019, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2019/10/43uchtdorf?lang=eng>.

2. Blake E. Ashforth, Kristie M. Rogers, Michael G. Pratt, and Camille Pradies, “Ambivalence in Organizations: A Multilevel Approach,” *Organization Science* 25, no. 5 (2014): 1453–78.

softer empathy. Ambivalence, although often aversive, can be a powerful driver of increased growth, commitment, and wisdom.³

You might experience ambivalence when you see selfishness, impulsiveness, and harshness, but you will also observe heroic acts of faith, repentance, and forgiveness—often in the same people. Ambivalence might keep you up at night as you wrestle with how to best invite specific individuals to turn back to God. Choose to be as gentle as the Savior would be in guiding them through the miraculous, but difficult, return. Prioritize honoring their agency, loving them, and helping them see that God loves them. Avoid the temptation of trying to shame them into righteous behavior. Shaming is a coercive tool of the adversary; it is a control tactic that undermines the leader and harms the recipient. The tools of the adversary can only lead to regret; they cannot, by their nature, lead to that which is good. Elder Uchtdorf said, “When you fill your hearts with the pure love of Christ, you leave no room for rancor, judgment, and shaming.”⁴

You might experience ambivalence as your responsibilities weigh heavily upon you almost every day of your service. As you honor confidences, you might feel piercing loneliness. As those you love violate commandments, you will plead with God to rescue them from their path of self-destruction. As you see families torn apart, you will pray fervently to know how to comfort them. As you see individuals carry daunting burdens, you will weep with them and seek revelation to know how to help them. You might be given the gift to deeply empathize with those who suffer. This level of empathy will forge deep and lasting connections, but it might also cause you to feel burdens at a depth you have not felt before. Seek to understand, as taught by Brené Brown, that empathy is not “feeling for” other people, it is “feeling with” them in a

3. Naomi B. Rothman, Michael G. Pratt, Laura Rees, and Timothy J. Vogus, “Understanding the Dual Nature of Ambivalence: Why and When Ambivalence Leads to Good and Bad Outcomes,” *Academy of Management Annals* 11, no. 1 (2014): 33–72.

4. Uchtdorf, “Your Great Adventure.”

manner that honors boundaries and does not overwhelm emotional, mental, or spiritual resources. Empathizing—with boundaries—allows you to make generous assumptions about individuals and help them in meaningful ways without taking on their burdens. You will feel their struggles with them and walk by their side, but it is the Lord who has already taken on their burdens; it is the Lord who will heal them. As Elder Dale G. Renlund has taught, the Lord loves mercy and he delights in healing those who need healing.⁵ As you experience the Savior's healing and observe others experience it, your spirit will sing.

You might experience ambivalence as you realize you cannot solve every problem. You will observe that while many will be deeply grateful for your efforts, not everyone will appreciate you all of the time. In fact, some might become frustrated with you because of the counsel you give or a decision you make. Whether individuals express their hurt courageously, impulsively, or passive-aggressively, be gentle in your response. You cannot possibly know the full measure of their burdens or the extent of their suffering. Plead with the Lord to grant you the courage to give the needed counsel and the love to give it in a way that honors their dignity as children of God. Focus on helping them feel known, seen, and understood. Rise to the Lord's call to be a builder, a lifter, and an encourager. Validate generously and praise often without flattery or exaggeration. Actively help others know you believe in them, highlight legitimate examples of their goodness, and help them see themselves as God sees them. This is the essence of your calling: to help all within your stewardship experience the healing power of the atonement of Jesus Christ and feel the love of God.

You might experience ambivalence as you see imperfection in those with whom you serve. Those you love, admire, and respect might disappoint you at times, and you will see your own imperfections with painful clarity. You will wish you could take back something you said

5. Dale G. Renlund, "Do Justly, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with God," Oct. 2020, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/55renlund?lang=eng>.

or wish you could make a particular decision over again. You will also see moments of excellence and episodes of greatness as those with whom you serve perform remarkable acts of selfless service, overcome nagging weaknesses, and demonstrate advanced levels of resilience. Humanity will both disappoint you and delight you; that is part of our mortal journey together. Embrace this reality and choose to trust those with whom you serve and those who lead you. Be generous in your assumptions about their motives and abilities, be willing to respectfully disagree when necessary, and be as patient with them as you hope they will be with you. Be willing to deal with the messiness of mortality with unflinching hope. As you do, you will see that God can perform great miracles with imperfect people. Elder Quentin L. Cook said, “As leaders, we are not under the illusion that in the past all relationships were perfect, all conduct was Christlike, or all decisions were just.”⁶ In light of this truth, consider this wise counsel from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland: “Be kind regarding human frailty—your own as well as that of those who serve with you in a Church led by volunteer, mortal men and women. Except in the case of His only perfect Begotten Son, imperfect people are all God has ever had to work with. That must be terribly frustrating to Him, but He deals with it. So should we.”⁷

Your heart will break as you see good people fall on hard times. For those who require welfare assistance, provide this aid generously and, above all, in a manner consistent with the character of the Savior. It is your duty to seek out the poor and needy and to help them in a manner that teaches them, builds them up, and enables them to see their divine worth. As you contemplate how to help those in need, consider how you might respond if a grandparent, parent, sibling, or child were to

6. Quentin L. Cook, “Hearts Knit in Righteousness and Unity,” Oct. 2020, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/15cook?lang=eng>.

7. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” Apr. 2013, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/04/lord-i-believe?lang=eng>.

need such assistance. Then, help these good brothers and sisters in that same way: generously and compassionately—never in a condescending manner. Elder Holland said, “If we could do more to alleviate poverty, as Jesus repeatedly commands us to do, maybe some of the less fortunate in the world could hum a few notes of ‘There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today.’ . . . I pray we will not let these children of God suffer in silence and that we will be endowed with His capacity to hear the songs they cannot now sing.”⁸ As you prioritize helping others generously, you will feel heaven’s approval. You will see with new eyes and feel the awe-inspiring love the Savior has for those who struggle.

You might experience ambivalence when those you love commit evil acts against others. Your soul will ache for everyone involved. Have the courage and the commitment to our Heavenly Father to do everything you can to protect his vulnerable children from those who have harmed them or who might harm them. Do not falter in this responsibility. Act as a vigilant watchman to protect against abuse. You will always be grateful you provided real protection to those who desperately needed your intervening help.

You will weep for those who experience mental illness. Know that their burdens are real and be generous in helping them get the professional counseling they might need. As Elder Holland has taught, mental illness can become an “affliction so severe that it significantly restricts a person’s ability to function fully, a crater in the mind so deep that no one can responsibly suggest it would surely go away if those victims would just square their shoulders and think more positively.”⁹

Although the unfortunate stigma against seeking professional help to treat mental illness still lingers in our culture, Elder Holland and

8. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Songs Sung and Unsung,” Apr. 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2017/04/songs-sung-and-unsung?lang=eng>.

9. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Like A Broken Vessel,” Oct. 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/like-a-broken-vessel?lang=eng>.

others have done much to reduce this stigma by counseling those who are struggling to “seek the advice of reputable people with certified training, professional skills, and good values. . . . If you had appendicitis, God would expect you to seek a priesthood blessing *and* get the best medical care available. So too with emotional disorders. Our Father in Heaven expects us to use *all* of the marvelous gifts He has provided in this glorious dispensation.”¹⁰

You, too, can do much to reduce this stigma and alleviate suffering as you proactively help God’s children get the assistance they might need and minister to them with love and understanding. You will gain a deep appreciation for the words of Elder Renlund: “The Savior loves to restore what you cannot restore; He loves to heal wounds you cannot heal; He loves to fix what has been irreparably broken; He compensates for any unfairness.”¹¹

You might experience ambivalence when the amount of time you have with your family is not what it used to be. Some of the matters brought to your attention will be absolutely essential for you to deal with personally. For those occasions, ask the Lord to lengthen your stride and maximize the quality of your time spent in both roles. You will see that the Lord can do much more with your time than you can do with your time. You will see that he knows how to communicate with you individually and provides tailored guidance in a manner suited to your personality.

The Lord knows exactly how to amplify your capacity. The Lord will sanctify the time you spend with your family, and your family will be ministered to by angels. You will draw strength from spiritual reservoirs you did not know existed, and you will experience tender mercies that help you see that heaven is organized and operates according to families. Your ancestors will become more familiar to you, and your life

10. Holland, “Like A Broken Vessel.”

11. Dale G. Renlund, “Consider the Goodness and Greatness of God,” Apr. 2020, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/26renlund?lang=eng>.

will be richly blessed because of them. They will help you in your most trying times, and you will see that the veil is thin.

Although ambivalence does not always drive positive outcomes—simultaneously experiencing intense joys and intense sorrows may at times become too stressful, painful, or overwhelming—ambivalence is part of mortality and will likely be more pronounced for you in your service as bishop. As you seek to grow spiritually and help others do the same, consider ambivalence as a potential tool to motivate righteous striving.

As our imperfect environments and imperfect selves create a gap between our present circumstances and desired circumstances, we tend to want to fill that gap to try to quiet our ambivalence. As intense joys and intense sorrows create a gap for you, let the love of God fill that gap. The love of God is perfect, infinite, and universal. The love of God is always the answer. Elder Tad R. Callister said, “The Atonement of Jesus Christ is the grandest demonstration of love this world has ever known. The compelling, driving force behind His sacrifice was love, not duty or glory or honor or any other temporal reward. It was love in its purest, deepest, most enduring sense. . . . It was not an abstract love nor was it demonstrated by one dramatic sacrificial act and nothing more. To the contrary, it was a day-by-day, hour-by-hour, even moment-by-moment love!”¹²

Elder Uchtdorf said, “Love is what inspired our Heavenly Father to create our spirits; it is what led our Savior to the Garden of Gethsemane to make Himself a ransom for our sins. Love is the grand motive of the plan of salvation; it is the source of happiness, and the ever-renewing spring of healing.”¹³ If you feel inadequate to love as God loves, it is because we are all inadequate and would remain so without the Savior. President Gordon B. Hinckley said that loving in that manner “is not

12. Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 157–59.

13. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Are My Hands,” Apr. 2010, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2010/04/you-are-my-hands?lang=eng>.

easy” and “requires a self-discipline almost greater than we are capable of;” it requires the “mighty power of healing in Christ”¹⁴ and must be “broad enough and strong enough to encompass even the wrongdoer and the critic” as you “stand as a father”¹⁵ to your people.

Intense joys and intense sorrows are not unexpected flaws in our mortal journey, they are the essence of it. The growth we experience in this life is because of, not in spite of, our intense sorrows. The help we seek from God is in his very nature to give; what God “enjoys most about being God is the thrill of being merciful”¹⁶ because he is a God “filled with an infinite measure of holy, pure, and indescribable love.”¹⁷ As you wrestle with the ambivalence associated with mortality, trust the love of God to carry the day. It always has and it always will.

14. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Healing Power of Christ,” Oct. 1988, <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1988/10/the-healing-power-of-christ?lang=eng>.

15. Gordon B. Hinckley, “To the Bishops of the Church,” Oct. 1988, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1988/10/to-the-bishops-of-the-church?lang=eng>.

16. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Laborers in the Vineyard,” Apr. 2012, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2012/04/the-laborers-in-the-vineyard?lang=eng>.

17. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “The Love of God,” Oct. 2009, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2009/10/the-love-of-god?lang=eng>.

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SPIRIT OF PENTECOST

Samuel Wolfe

Instead of unremitting *lucha libre*, I desired *détente* between my sexuality and birth faith. A gap between graduation from law school and starting work opened a unique space for spiritual odyssey. I resumed attending church near my home in Washington DC in summer of 2006. This is from my journal:

Today I went to church and took the sacrament, I believe, for the first time in ten years. It was a beautiful, meaningful service. This is part of my preparation for my testimony next Sunday. May God be with me; God is with me.

That same Sunday, a visiting high council speaker seemed to look right at me from the pulpit when he said: “I hope you feel welcome here.” I took that, along with an earlier invitation by the local missionaries to join them at church even though I’d told them I’m gay, as a sign that maybe I could find a way within the Church. I do my best to seek, and follow, truth no matter where the path leads. What happens when we receive and surrender to God’s Spirit? I renewed my intent to advance along my best, discernable path of light.

Around that time, a chapter leader of Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families and Friends wrote about coming out to his ward during fast and testimony meeting with welcome reception. He invited others to do likewise. Riding euphoria from my recent law school graduation, I accepted the invitation as an opportunity to apply an insight confirmed by one of my research papers: Those within oppressive systems are well-placed to advance social progress over time. Bias against LGBTQ people seethes within a misperception that one’s church and other social circles only have straight people. My deepened devotion

to Jesus following a night alone in Auschwitz-Birkenau during a trek through eastern Europe six months earlier further motivated me. I was inspired by Jesus' example of ministry for those least esteemed and his opposition to exclusive tribalism.

My motivation, though, was deeper than advocacy. The Church remains one of my chief spiritual communities despite its insistence on heterosexism, as if the second great commandment could ever be fulfilled by a limp love of LGBTQ neighbors wrapped in hate of homosexuality, such as smug assurance that minority sexuality is an invalid identity.

Later that Sunday evening, favored friends Gabriel and Charlie threw a birthday party for me on their rooftop. As we sat savoring chocolate cake, another friend, Otis (who later became a minister), remarked that by age thirty-four, I'd reached my "Jesus year" because that was Jesus' approximate age when he died and was resurrected, as also recorded in the Book of Mormon (Helaman 14:30; 3 Nephi 8). Otis further noted that my testimony would occur on the day of Pentecost. The swirl of auspicious convergences included Capital Pride celebrations kicking off.

During the week, I prepared my testimony with prayer, fasting, and study about the day of Pentecost when apostles received the gift of the Holy Ghost. Peter spoke on that occasion and quoted Joel, who had earlier prophesied about the "last days" when God would "pour out [his] Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:14–18; Joel 2:28–31). The prophecy impressed upon my mind as I refined and condensed my testimony by rehearsing it before the mirrors on my sliding closet doors.

When Sunday morning arrived, some friends and a cousin joined me together with David Melson, who also planned to speak at the fast and testimony meeting. Dave had invited more LGBTQ Mormon friends from the DC area to join in support.

I was fasting and was lit with the Spirit. The music was joyous. I was about to "come out" at a new level by speaking truth to my Latter-day

Saint community that collectively continued rejecting and persecuting queer souls, especially during that era (from the mid-90s until the US Supreme Court ruling in 2015) of warring over marriage equality. Despite abuse, I choose, even before apologies, forgiveness.

Following opening and sacrament hymns, boys blessed and passed the bread and water in remembrance of Jesus' atonement. I partook and thought of my baptism, when I agreed to take upon myself the name of Jesus and follow him. I continually prayed for the Holy Spirit to be with me and felt powerful support.

After the sacrament service, the brother leading the meeting opened the time to testimonies. I wanted to go close to the start. After the first person spoke, I handed my written version to Gabriel, who was sitting next to me, then stood and walked to the podium, where, after taking a breath, I began by echoing Peter's words from the day of Pentecost, which I'd memorized:

Hearken to my words: . . . And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:14–18)

Like on Peter's day of Pentecost, the congregation appeared filled with individuals "out of every nation under heaven," I said (Acts 2:5). Such diversity is a promising sign that "despite our differences, we can all be united as children of God."

I then related my recent law school graduation to my testimony of Jesus as an advocate, including, I specified, for "the abused, the oppressed, the despised, and the outcasts. . . . He caused the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak, and the lame to walk. Jesus is my kind of advocate." Being a good advocate means being honest, I said, even though "some of us are not so sure that we are welcome here or belong here because of who we are, because of who we love, because

we are different in one way. I am different in this way: I am gay. And I am thankful to God for this difference that has been a great blessing in my life.”

When I said, “I am gay,” I perceived a slight tremor throughout the congregation, like a collectively felt shiver. More, I sensed a near-visible wave of energy from the Holy Spirit, like ripples from a staff placed in still water but more subtle. The feeling of empowerment surely related to exceeding so much of my earlier life of religiously imposed shame about an important aspect of my being. My declaration, given in Spirit, confirmed my internal integration that I prayed to help manifest more broadly, along with others who already were, or have become, engaged in the cause.

I designed my speech to reduce a chance of being stopped from speaking, yet that remained a concern. No one interrupted while I added that I also believe in being chaste and asked: what is the most inspired standard of sexuality for LGBTQ believers? We have not been given a right path. I observed that neither lifetime celibacy, nor straight marriage, nor suicide, nor a riotous life without divine light are true, generally applicable, answers to my question. I concluded with a vision of a church where the members are filled with compassion for one another as Jesus is filled with compassion for us unto the laying down of his life—and of

a church filled with members who believe and act as though they believe in “doing good to all men” (Articles of Faith 13), including to those like the marvelous gay men and women who are with us today.

Some cried during my remarks. After finishing, I returned to my seat next to Gabriel, who patted my knee and squeezed my hand for a moment. David Melson later wrote that he “never attended a more spiritual testimony meeting.” I felt the same.

The bishop then stood to remind the congregation that the Church’s position was clear: “Marriage is only acceptable in the eyes of God when

it's between a man and a woman." I had taken care not to contradict that, nor any other Church doctrine.

The topic was not finished, however. Soon after, David Melson added his testimony that being gay is a gift from God. After the meeting, many people grouped around us to thank us for our testimonies, including the bishop. A young woman said that she had been worried about her gay brother but then felt comfort. Dave heard more than one person whisper to him that they were also gay and were happy for our presence. A leader in the elders quorum who was also a law student said, "I figured you were a lawyer when you began speaking. We have leadership needs in the elders quorum; I hope you'll become more involved."

An older man confided during a quieter moment that he had been a missionary in the southern United States when the Church declined to teach Black people. That was before the 1978 revelation extending the priesthood to all eligible males regardless of race. He said that missionaries avoided Black people back then. He saw a parallel with respect to current exclusion of queer souls from spiritual equality.

Sunday School began after testimony meeting. As is customary, visitors introduced themselves. Seven or so others who had come to support me and Dave each stood and identified themselves as gay Latter-day Saints. It was amazing and, to some, stunning. Such an overt group outing, as far as I knew, was unheard of in Latter-day Saint church meetings.

The congregation's answer to my question of whether there is a place for those like me in the Church was a resounding yes: "You are part of our family." The spiritual outpouring was unmistakable, fitting for the day of Pentecost. My offering of honesty and vulnerability allowed me to receive fuller acceptance from my church family. Yet I guessed that not everyone was pleased with my testimony. I wondered how long I'd have to wait for an answer to my related question about how we may perceive true belonging for sexual minorities within God's

plan. Surely his plan extends to all of his children, even the peculiar ones. I trust in God's timeframe; yet I put faith in the divine invitation: if you lack wisdom, ask in prayer, with real intent, in faith, and it will be given (James 1:5–8). Joseph Smith did so when he was fourteen; that opened what he called a new gospel dispensation. Are miracles too much to ask for nowadays?

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LEPETIT RICHARDS AND
THE BIG DIPPER CARPET—
AN AMUSEMENT BASED ON
A REWORKING OF WHITTLE'S
RESEARCH NOTES

Simon Peter Eggertsen

Author's note: "LePetit Richards and the Big Dipper Carpet" is a fictional story, but there are some things the reader should know. Whittle is real, as am I. Benson Whittle and I grew up in the four-by-four-block square neighborhood known as the Fifth Ward in Provo. Later, being the smart guy that he was, he would turn up at Oxford, where, as part of his academic work, he created the engaging character of LePetit Richards, an early convert to Mormonism, purportedly backed up by Richards's journals and other materials, all fiction. Whittle published the Richards story as part of a special addendum to The Dictionary of Alternative Biography (1973). Now, I have refurbished that story, used the struts of Whittle's original work to refashion the early parts of this piece, then extended it. Along the way, I have enlarged on what Whittle did, even put him into the story, and introduced several new elements—including a second "conjuring" of the stars in the constellation Ursa Major, a carpet containing the same, and an inventive tract by Richards—then expanded the whole story of Richards's exploits to cover his mission years in late-nineteenth-century Canada. Three parts of this contribution are not fiction: a woodcut print, the likeness of LePetit; calculations made by Orson Pratt on the number of spirit children created in the premortal life; and J. Wilford Booth, who comes in at the very end.

This was not the only time that Richards, originally born Neville Colyer, the son of a millwright in Oxfordshire, had worked through the imagery of the stars. He had once at an earlier date, while taken with zeal for his newfound religion, tried to predict the future movement of the Mormons *after* they settled the American West. He did this by superimposing the constellation Ursa Major right-side-up, slightly askew but to scale, on an 1860s map of the United States and its Territories. Some stars fell on Mormon historical sites.

The placement of the twenty or so stars had him deciphering that rather than return to Jackson County, Missouri (“Adam-ondi-Ahman” in Mormon parlance) in the last days, as assured in the Doctrine and Covenants, the final move would be west beyond Salt Lake City to Big Sur, near Monterey Bay in California, where the bear’s tail and the last star in the sequence would have come to rest. That effort lies recorded somewhere no doubt but is held in total disregard as it contradicts common Mormon belief and scriptural history.

The second time around, he applied the constellation, containing the Big Dipper, to the 1870 map of Canada, the Dominion, as a way for setting the path for his mission there later in the same decade. To do this, Richards drew, more or less to scale, the Great Bear on the map as if he had grabbed it from the sky by the near shoulder and the hip, then dipped it “into an imaginary third dimension,” one naked to the eye, superimposing the now upside-down Bear on the map. This maneuver slightly distorted the shape of the constellation. But the placement of the supine Bear made sense to him, given the population settlement pattern of Canada. The tip-of-the-tail Star A was set in British Columbia, somewhere on Vancouver Island, then other stars scattered more or less in a line along the tail, spine, neck and head (Star I, at the nose, landed on St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, far to the east). The legs reached into the northern Arctic zones.

His initial aim was to do faithful missionary work for the Mormons with a group of colleagues, but at times they went instead

carousing around the domain, just a decade or so after Confederation (1867), living what they came to call “the robust life” at the sites matched to the way the stars settled on the map. Imagining the map to be divine direction, they followed it as they moved around, even though at times it took them to places that were unsettled. They, too, as we shall see, might have been thought of as being a bit “unsettled” themselves.

Out of all this, though, it is for a carpet featuring this same constellation, and the rather interesting backstory it represents, that Richards’s life is noteworthy, bears dressing up and retelling beyond what Whittle was able to do. But, curiously, unlike most stories, it is necessary to start at what might have been the end before making a beginning.

Richards, not surprisingly from what we now know from Whittle’s biography of him, turned out to be a bit of a rogue, a man-child, a true outlier, so much on the borderline of an independent, unpredictable ruffian despite his maudlin English upbringing that, once a Mormon and having got to Salt Lake Valley in the mid-1850s, he was refused membership in Brigham Young’s elite group of bodyguards, enforcers, and vigilantes, perhaps remnants of the earlier Danites, by none other than Porter Rockwell himself.

It is generally thought that Richards disappeared from this sphere in the late spring of 1893, when a buckboard driven by one of his wives, TokaNebo, a Paiute woman he brought with him from Utah a few years before, struck a rock while rounding a bend at speed on a narrow canyon road near Cardston, Alberta, “bucking” him off the wagon bed and into a raging river gorge of the Saint Mary River. Richards had joined the early Mormon settlers who had been called to go there by President Taylor in the late 1880s, part of the effort to take the Mormons out from under the federal government’s crusade to quash the practice of polygamy. The practice persists to this day among some of the more fundamentalist “Saints” in Canada, especially in the area of Bountiful, British Columbia, a Book of Mormon name.

He was, at the time, bound in a Turkish carpet—well, Armenian really—specially made for him by sister Saints in the Ottoman Empire at the request of a cousin as a memorial to the imagery of Richards’s Canadian mission years. Richards’s wives had hidden him in it as they fled from a family of angry Gentile ranchers, whose herds normally roamed closer to Lethbridge. He had, ingeniously, added “ds” to the brand “Rch” to make their cattle appear his, then driven them nearer to Cardston for grazing. Richards was convinced that his actions were righteous, indeed sanctioned by principles of the gospel of prosperity that was then coming to the fore in Mormon thinking—it focused on individual ingenuity and the attainment of goods in this life as evidence of God’s approval, not on obedience, repentance, and atonement. Some of its teachings, and their application, persist in the present.

In the moment of the swerve, family oral history says, Richards tumbled down the slope into a swift-moving stream and was swept away, presumed to have been killed or drowned or, if possible, both. He would have been sixty-three years of age at the time. But Richards was, if nothing else, a tough old bird. So perhaps this was not his untimely demise. And there are hints that it was not. The carpet, with its blue field and the faint outline of the bear encircling the constellation Ursa Major, was found days later a few miles downstream, empty, dry, wrapped around a solitary quaking aspen. It was retrieved, washed, and put back into service by the family. Richards, on the other hand, may or may not have been. These lines, writ in the Deseret alphabet, which Richards had learned at the behest of Brigham Young, had been incised into the tree’s bark, one word having been obscured by poor knifemanship. Here is the translation:

*Sway with the Poplars in her country lanes,
They have known exile too
And reach for their Old World home
As you might for your [own?] in absentia.*

If by Richards's own hand, these might be a vague but teasing clue that he was yet alive and headed back to England, the reference to "pop-lars" perhaps alluding to the Oxfordshire of his baptism. But there is some ambiguity here. We might never know for sure; there is a gap in his journals—though it is known that around this time he did appear in Oxford to take possession of an inheritance received from a professor there.

Somehow, the rug made it to the central valleys of Utah.

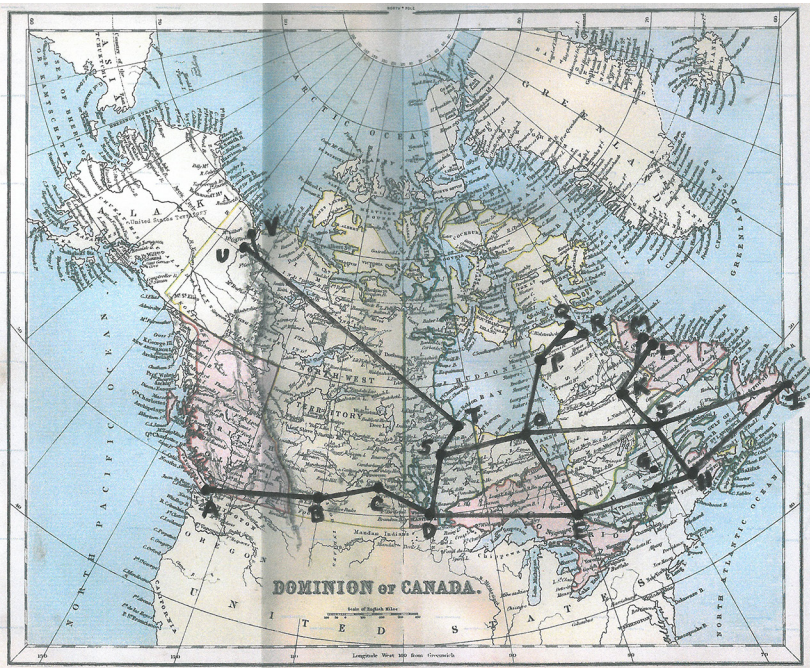
As a young man, Whittle first saw that carpet, or one like it, in the front room of Richards's granddaughter's home at the corner of First East and Second North in Provo as he was collecting fast offerings for the Church on a Sunday afternoon in the mid-1950s. The family professed the rug's history, whether fanciful or true, to him in person even as he stood on it as a thirteen-year-old. It had Ursa Major *and* the North Star, Polaris, woven into its blue field and, when turned right-side-up and put on the wall, was often used to teach children at the Parker School, across the street, about the place, structure, and purpose of this important constellation. As an exercise, the students there were often given a sheet with the early map of Canada (1870) and asked to plot the stars as Richards had done. They showed Whittle one of the "projects," a copy of which is now part of his research papers. (See example below, though the student seems to have gotten the structure of the rear legs a bit off and skipped a letter in the alphabet, so there is no Star N. She or he, no doubt, had points taken off for these errors.)

In addition, the family pointed out that in the lower right corner there was a large K stitched in white into the field, along with the small but decipherable text: "If I could hie to . . ." a reference to Kolob, it turns out, a star in the Mormon celestial firmament. This was an homage to Richards and probably had been added later by some family member, as it seems not to have been part of the original tight weave. Richards, it seems, learned the words in the carpet at an earlier time from the song written by W. W. Phelps, once the publisher of the

Evening and Morning Star, an early Mormon newspaper. One stanza scans:

If you could hie to Kolob in the twinkling of an eye,
 And then continue onward with that same speed to fly,
 Do you think that you could ever, through all Eternity,
 Find out the generation where Gods began to be?

These lines from the song raise massively interesting questions about the “Great Beginning” and the place and origin of Time, so much the interest of theoretical physicists today. They also imply that there was a time when Gods did *not* exist. This insight alone is as intriguing as it is challenging. The song itself appeared in the first Mormon hymnal



John Bartholomew, cartographer. *New map of the Dominion of Canada*. Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1870. Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015591054/>.

(1835). According to family folklore, it was Richards's modest wish to eventually go there, to Kolob, that is, perhaps be its god. There is more to say about this idea a bit later.

And the family swore that there were papers at Oxford to support all of what they had told Whittle. This sighting of the carpet, and the accompanying explanations, made a deep and enduring impression on Whittle. The story of the carpet and its imagery was seared into his memory, would influence him later to search for the Richards's papers once he himself got to England.

For the captivating, though convoluted, story of the Richards carpet, including its origins, the consequences of the star plotting, and the theological notions that spurred Richards into joining the Mormons, we can now go back to the beginning of this story, to a time when his surname was actually Colyer. All of this history is recorded in his journals, found serendipitously later in the twentieth century by Whittle. When the journals of LePetit Richards and other supporting documents came to light, including a truncated version of the Book of Mormon in French, Whittle started to compact Richards's story, writing *A Précis of the Life of LePetit Richards*, which was to become a contribution as an addendum to *The Dictionary of Alternative Biography* (1973), a compilation of the biographies of interesting but relatively obscure Britons.



As a teenager in the late 1840s, Neville Colyer, as Richards was first known, had secured through an uncle, a prosperous London book-binder, a position as a scout (a “step-and-fetch-it” and tidier for the college's students) in one of the oldest of Oxford's colleges—Merton. His own academic career had been short-lived, though he had distinguished himself for being the first adolescent taken, for his perceived brightness, from the working classes into the New Henley Middle School. Then, further, for being the first pupil sent down by the school—“rusticated”

is the word the English used then; its obliqueness hides the harshness of the word we use, “expelled.”

Colyer, it turns out, was inquisitive, a chap of innate ingenuity, but one with a propensity for counter-authoritarian delinquency. He was cited for providing fellow students with pieces of leather—some a quarter of an inch in thickness—which, when put into the backside of underwear against the skin, created an elephant-hide-like armor that made the practice of caning “ineffectual if not risible,” as Whittle’s notes say. Colyer had apprenticed with a local tanner for a summer before going to school.

Because he was not a “student” at the college, Colyer was spared the boredom of attendance at lectures, sherry parties, chapel, and hall during his employ, not to mention the pressure of learning. After six years of employment, Colyer could truthfully claim that, officially, he had never attended a lecture, had “never sat with, nor for, any tutor, academic or moral. Never written an essay nor taken an exam.” He might well have written the rhyming lines, now attributed to a fourteenth-century Cambridge monk to the effect that “Aft’ seven years of sleep and ease, I slowly lost all my degrees!” Colyer had no degrees at all to lose, so perhaps this mention, however succinct, is extraneous.

Yet, this did not mean that he was not, in fact, learning a thing or two along the way.

Aided by a friend employed in the scullery, Colyer was able to begin to assay the contents of rooms above but next to the kitchen—a collection of curious, but then very contemporary, theological texts. On his own initiative, he began spending some of his evenings there reading, having soon been befriended by the professor, an eminent theologian named de Freitas, whose library Colyer had been quietly rifling. This was all in the early 1850s. It was here that de Freitas introduced him to a stack of texts categorized with the rubric “God’s Kingdom in the Tops of the Mountains, America.”

His interest piqued by de Tocqueville's writing on religion in America, de Freitas had journeyed there, even to Nauvoo before the Saints had departed just after Joseph Smith's death in the mid-1840s, to look into the emergence of this new "American religion." It was a chaotic time, but he was able to get a firsthand sense of the evolving "Church." The de Freitas collection was quite up-to-date at the time, as he was able to add things from the Mormon missionary tracts that were then flooding England. This included a copy of the very telling Articles of Faith and some bits and pieces of the Book of Mormon, which were appearing in print as though they had been serialized like a Dickens story in newspapers. De Freitas would eventually bequeath all these papers to Richards (né Colyer).

Colyer found, among other things, a section of the papers denoted as "Words of Wisdom," though to his dismay they spoke endlessly only of health matters rather than any other unique knowledge that he might have wanted to cultivate. He was expecting something more sage. Those who followed these "advices," the text said, carried away the promise of being able to "run without being weary or faint." The same section carried an admonition against the use of spirits (alcoholic beverages in this case), except for their medicinal purposes, and tea and coffee (caffeinated hot drinks)—a ban essentially on inebriants and hot stimulants. The ambiguity of refreshing, ice-cold, caffeinated Coca-Cola had yet to present itself.

The advice about not drinking tea, he thought, would not likely go over well with the Twinings, one of whose sons was a member of the very college, Merton, where Colyer served. He thought it unwise to say anything about what he was learning in this regard, choosing to keep the suggested prohibitions to himself. The English, after all, love their tea, sherry, port, and ale, and sometimes, when they are feeling safe from rebellion, will admit to drinking Irish or Scottish whiskey. He kept thinking, though, about what those "medicinal" purposes might

be that would exempt alcohol from the ban, permit its consumption free of condemnation.

References in other parts of the documents to multiple “celestial” marriages—on earth the day-to-day adventure of Mormon polygamy—aroused his interest as he imagined, righteously of course, the possibility of having his own harem-like clutch of women at his service or vice versa. Neither the morality, the weighty responsibilities, the bullish sexuality, the paternalism, nor the inherent exploitive, or even oppressive, nature of such a practice ever crossed his mind. Later, he would come to follow the practice devotedly, even though he was not one of the select among the Mormons “officially” authorized to do so. He embraced the practice enthusiastically, seemed to flourish within it. Eventually, he took four wives on his own authority.

Naturally, being something of a mystic and an earnest egoist though yet young, Colyer was drawn to the detailing of the “three degrees of glory” in the afterlife and the chance, referred to from time to time in the papers, that he, Colyer, could himself become as God, be in charge of (perhaps even create) his own planet or star, like Kolob, at some time in the far future if he could be assigned to the highest heavenly realm, the Celestial Kingdom, in the afterlife and do well there. It did not occur to him that Kolob might only be an illusory image used to prompt members to conform to the religion’s rules in the hope of receiving some high but unseen reward.

On one piece of paper he found these words scribbled in de Freitas’s hand, “As Man is, God once was. And as God is, Man may become” (no attribution, though we now think of it as being authored by Lorenzo Snow, who came years later. So the idea might have been circulating for some time previously). In another part of one manuscript, Colyer found the words to another song that implied that there is a Mother in Heaven, just as there is a Father. This made implicit sense to him. How would all those spirit children make up their numbers in the premortal existence without some sort of conjugation between godly genders? He

could not bring himself to believe in spontaneous generation or that his very own existence was cosmically haphazard, the mere result of chance. So, this was a powerful idea.

We could forgive Colyer if he had begun to take the view that key parts of Mormon theology are derived from song. It is, of course, the other way around. The song the papers refer to here, whose lyrics were written by Eliza R. Snow, contains words to the effect that “Truth Eternal tells me I’ve a Mother there,” speaking of the premortal spirit world.

Colyer appears not to have been startled in the least, rather was intrigued, by the story of Joseph Smith’s gold plates being the origin of the Book of Mormon, parts of which he was seeing for the first time. Nor by Smith’s visions or conversations with God and angels. Colyer loved mysticism, metaphysics, and metalanguage, even magic, was beginning to have his own interesting dreams.

After some months, he came to the view, though, that ideas like these were all things that would scare the pants off of the dreary Protestants and Papists of his day and were therefore intrinsically lovely *and* praiseworthy, even of good report. And this after only one reading of the thirteenth article of faith! The article would become a keystone in Colyer’s arching beliefs, it being the one he liked best, especially for its embrace in the future of new but complementary ideas. Colyer had slowly recognized that he was in possession of entirely original material within Christianity. This gratified him. He now understood, at least in some small measure, why de Freitas undertook to collect the materials and follow the evolution of this new religion. It was fascinating!

Colyer himself was not without ambition, and this would be his undoing at Merton. He was eventually sacked from the college, a short time after his first publication came to the attention of college authorities, though the tract had almost nothing to do with the Mormons. He had been able, it seems, through a set of adroit but biblically-based calculations, to reduce the number of angels who can dance on the head of a straight pin simultaneously—one of the more pressing theological

puzzles that children of the day were fond of contemplating—from seventeen to five (four if one of them had one of those long, heralding trumpets in hand). He had discovered, it appears, that angels are much larger by several micromillimeters than had been previously thought. There was some curious arithmetic reasoning to his calculations, based on miniscule subsets of the cubit, used to measure the pieces for Noah's ark, which had led him to this conclusion. Both a hypotenuse, or was it a diameter, and a circumference, and, of course, a *sin* (a sign?) and a couple of cotangents seem to have been involved. A skilled mathematician would surely be able to decipher it all.

Further, and even more remarkably, he was able to intuit the dance the angels do while on the pin head itself—a traditional English Morris dance, legging-bells, thumping drums, and whistles, with ragtag red and black costume included, in the style associated with the boisterous, ruffian dance troop named the Shropshire Bedlam. He never says whether the angels wear this costume or not. And, there is no hint as to how he came to this surprising finding, though the editors might have deleted the normal “show your work” explanation over concerns for the article's length.

A copy of his article, with his own illustrations and some of his calculations, can be found in the *Royal Journal of Christian Minutiae and Impractical Formulae* (1852 or 53) archived at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The journal was published on the first of April each year. (Had Colyer been writing a century or so later, he might have been granted one of the Ig Nobel Prizes for Improbable Mathematics and Science that a bunch of fun-loving professors at MIT now give out. The reasoning behind the infamous five-second rule for safely rescuing food dropped on the floor by children at feeding time, for example, has won the prize, as has the science behind karaoke.)

When the dons of Merton College discovered what Colyer had been up to, they moved swiftly to mute him. He was roundly discredited among his would-be peers and dispatched from the college, another

victim of form over substance. Apparently, it was his daring to publish as a single author, *without* a university degree, that offended the college most—presumption, it was thought in that time, being nothing if not a dangerous thing. Colyer was condemned essentially for aspiring “above his station,” an offense of grave seriousness in the stratified society of the England of that day.

Those associated with the college missed, of course, the inside humor embedded in the date of publication of the *Royal Journal*. The joke was on them, poor fools, and they never figured it out. But, in the end, after a demoralizing startle, it all worked out to the good for Colyer.

By coincidence, the very day after his dismissal in late January of 1854, Colyer went to hear a preacher, who claimed to represent the unique American “kingdom” he had been studying in de Freitas’s library. The preacher, a stormy little petrel of a man who carried the surname of Pratt, was badly treated for what he had to say, jeered by the assembled crowd of several hundred and chased away by a hail of wilted, frostbitten Brussels sprouts and smelly abandoned goose eggs. It being winter, squishy, over-ripe tomatoes were out of season, unavailable as missiles. This, for what had happened, could have been the origins of the derisive insult used to this day, “What a prat!” But I digress. (For those who want to know more, though, please consult the *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

Anyway, Pratt’s description of the children of God (he referred to them also as “Saints” several times) wandering the wide plains and high mountain valleys of a faraway continent, wending their own way toward Deseret, a settlement in the isolated area of what is now Utah, caught his fancy. It whetted Colyer’s nascent appetite for the heretical and the adventuresome in equal doses, meant that there was something new that he could easily devote himself to.

Colyer followed the preacher as he retreated, and, even on that day having been “singed by the heat from the Flames of the Holy Spirit” (his

own words), was baptized into this new religion, “immersed” in the name of the Trinity in a shallow but very chilly pool, witnessed by a row of leafless, river-edge poplars, alongside the bicycle path of a tributary of the Thames, just next to the Oxford Boathouse. He was then blessed by the power of some fantastically named priesthood that he could neither spell nor pronounce, Melchizedek, for the priest who received Abraham’s tithes. At the very moment of his immersion, someone had yelled from the river, “Coming about!! Stern side row!!” Indeed. Colyer had come about and was ready to be on the move, very much apace. He later told colleagues that this was the moment he felt he was put on God’s side, a feeling he would have the whole of his life.

Colyer told the Mormon officiates at his baptism, wishing to put his most recent unhappy set of missteps and experiences behind him, that his name was LePetit Richards. Why he did this has never been made clear. There is no specific explanation for the Christian name he chose, LePetit, though it seems to be filled with its own dose of irony. Richards was a burly, slightly red-headed, young man, now nearly in his mid-twenties, muscular, broad-shouldered, imposing, well over six feet tall. It was on this day, after his baptismal blessing, that “Richards” began keeping the journals that Whittle would later find. Richards liked the idea that he could create his own scripture of sorts by making a record of his ideas, pronouncements, and experiences as though they were some kind of sacred but personal text.

Whittle, in his *Précis*, no doubt overly thorough in detail and thought, set about to enumerate what he thought were the reasons for Colyer’s sudden conversion under the heading “Motives.” These are enlightening and multiple, though not surprising. In a sense, through his study of the documents, Colyer had been amply “prepared” to embrace the moment of his conversion, had been “singled by the Holy Spirit” already even if he hadn’t recognized its more subtle forms and influence. Here is a summary of what Whittle thought, speaking of Colyer’s conversion, all of which appears in the *Précis*.

First, “The Movement” (de Freitas’s term) Colyer joined was organized on the sixth of April, 1830, *the exact date of his own birth*. The simple congruity of births confirmed for him that he was doing the right thing. In fact, there was another parallel. Colyer began working at Merton, where he would eventually come to know the Mormons, on July 24, 1847, the very day that Brigham Young stood and pronounced the Salt Lake Valley to be “the Place!”

Second, among the many papers he had reviewed in the “rooms next the kitchen” were references to the stars. Somewhere these were referred to, Whittle says, as “rococo cosmologies.” (“One wonders why not churriguesque?”—*Dictionary of Alternative Biography*, editor’s note.) Colyer was familiar with some of these, but one named Kolob he knew nothing of. Likely this intrigued him, gave him pause. He liked the idea, as the papers implied, that if he got to Kolob he could either be near God or become one. This all was another congruency, or as Colyer came to call it, “a fortuitous conjunction of circumstance,” astronomy being among his fascinations.

And third, it is possible that his penury at that very moment—Colyer was now without income—crystallized his faith as much as anything else, humbled him enough to join “The Movement.” The preacher Pratt offered him, if he would convert in “short order and without quibble” over details and theological discrepancies, free passage to the Great Basin of America with a group of fellow Saints scheduled to depart in less than a month’s time from Liverpool. He rushed to put what little of his affairs he had left in order so he could transit to the New World.

As it turns out, religion aside, Colyer and the preacher Pratt had an affinity. They both liked the challenge of calculating the incalculable. For his part, Pratt—Orson it was, not Parley—was used to dealing with larger numbers and higher levels of speculation. He had himself by this time calculated the number of spirit children created in the premortal existence necessary to people the thirty or so worlds he posited existed in the galaxies. First, he asserted that one quadrillion, twenty trillion

spirit children had been “born” in the premortal life. A truly staggering figure.

By 1853, though, he had tried something more modest. Using the biblical model for the age of the Earth *only*—seven thousand years or so—he put the number of spirits at just 100 billion for this planet alone. (To put things in perspective, it is presently estimated that from the beginning of humankind, Adam and Eve if you like, to the present, somewhere in the neighborhood of 108 billion people have lived on this Earth [Population Reference Bureau estimates, 2020]. It would have been about 94 billion by 1850. So, he was not so far off “reality” for this world.) Colyer, for his part, preferred his smaller-scale calculations, noting that they were meant to be more entertaining, easier to handle, though he appreciated that the two of them had experience in dealing with mathematical riddles. So, in this way they amused each other as they traveled to Liverpool.

“Richards,” as we know from the *Précis* and other papers, eventually found his way to the Mormons in Utah, where after twenty years or so, having been stymied, forever it seemed to him, at the level of an Elder, and passed over repeatedly for Church office, he eventually thought to call *himself* on a “mission” in the mid-1870s. In aid of this, he named a set of seven male companions to go with him to Canada, out of the way of the main body of the Church, where he thought he would be left to do much good on his own initiative. Seventy, an important number in Mormonism and the next rank in the priesthood, would have been too many to take with him, so he settled on a tenth of that figure, a “tithé’s worth of the Priesthood” he said. They would minister, in a little over four years, to the twenty or so sites identified at the sketching of Ursa Major onto the map of Canada, memorialized later in the carpet.

So, now to the mission of Richards and others, the path of which was set out by the stars.





Courtesy Louisa Hare. A woodblock print, thought to be the likeness of LePetit Richards, found by an urban archaeologist in the attic of a commercial building off of West Center Street in Provo, Utah. But, depending on how you view it, this can also be either the uncanny look of Whittle himself or of Martin Fierro, hero of the epic Argentine poem of the same name. Whittle loved that poem as much as he loved ambiguity. (The woodcut has recently been attributed to Whittle's real second wife, Louisa Hare, and, in fact, is reprinted here with her permission.)

There is luscious detail, some would say “poetic prose,” whatever that might be, in the journals Richards kept during these mission times about the customs, peoples, and settings in the far reaches he and his companions traveled in Canada during the mission, especially those passages that describe the Far North, the Arctic, all on the upside-down legs of the Bear. The stark beauty of the tundra landscape with the caribou, polar bears, the snowy owls, Arctic foxes, seals, and deep freezes all feature. As do *inuksuk*, stone piles in stylized, near-human form that mark travel routes and hunting grounds in the otherwise nearly uncharted far Northland. In his journals, Richards worked himself into

a state of high literacy, in fact sometimes wrote poetry, to describe these surroundings.

Any reader with a smidgen of a sense of juvenile delinquency would also likely be entranced by the shenanigans the group got up to as part of the “robust life” they attempted to live. This sometimes brought them to the edge of being merry pranksters. For example, they took the lungs, leftover from the slaughter of cattle and, despite their lopsidedness, blew them up, tied them off at the windpipe with bailing wire, and used them to float up the Red River, near Winnipeg (Star D) late in the summer of 1876, much as children now use those foam noodles at the swimming pool as floaties. Had they been there one year later, they would have seen the delivery of the first locomotive by steamboat up the river for the inaugural rail line to St. Paul, Minnesota.

A couple of years later, by the time they arrived at Fort McPherson (Star T in the correct alphabetical star alignment) just north of the Arctic Circle in late spring, they found themselves competing with the Catholics and Anglicans, who were already there proselytizing among the traders, government agents, and the Gwich'in, the Indigenous inhabitants of the area. Undaunted, they led with their strength to separate themselves from the others, get the attention they felt they deserved. Being abstemious by virtue of the Word of Wisdom, they opposed drinking liquor, so, they took all the drink in the local saloon and hid it in a snowbank along the Peel River, creating what they called “the Great Thirst.” For this, they were unceremoniously run out of “town.”

Whittle's notes about Richards's experiences in the vast expanses of Quebec, where, apart from the Indigenous languages like Inuktitut, Cree, and Mohawk, for the most part French would have been spoken, especially in Chicoutimi (Star G) and Quebec City (Star F), are more detailed than for other sites. And they are much more interesting.

Richards's group had as much success with conversions here as anywhere, probably due in part to the Quebecois' incipient antipathy

toward Catholicism. His journals give the names of 117 people who were baptized into Mormondom in these two towns alone in the matter of weeks during their visits. How this happened might be thought of as a mystery, given none of the missionaries spoke French. But there is an explanation or two. After a note alluding to the “gift of tongues,” here again, Richards mentions these people being quickly “swept in by the Flames of the Holy Spirit.” And, as we will see, at least one convert spoke English.

As was his habit when leaving a place, Richards left someone in charge of the converts but promised to be in touch, to give them continuing guidance. He chose Jean Pierre Prud’homme de la Paix, a ship’s chandler. He was a wise, honest, sensible man and lived in Quebec City.

But, there was a disadvantage to the swiftness of all this.

Just as swiftly, the groups were left entirely on their own, with only the merest exposure to Mormonism as a faith. This unsupervised tenure, which lasted many, many years, led, as can be imagined, to a number of changes in practice and doctrine in this small but detached realm of Mormondom. Many of these, it appears, were well-intentioned expressions of their faith, sometimes of culture and geography. The group of converts kept going, but essentially on their own terms.

Richards writes about all this in his journals, so, apparently, from time to time in later years he did keep in touch, though never visited. On the whole, because he viewed Mormonism as a dynamic creed, having had his own fundamental faith constructed around the patchwork of ideas he had discovered in the materials in de Freitas’s library, he encouraged them, over time, to be creative, take an active part in shaping the tenets of the faith and its practices. The groups took his advice.

One example of this is that, pretty soon, these converts began to refer to themselves, in French of course, as being the *Pure Laine du Bon Dieu* (the Pure Wool of a Gracious God), their equivalent of Latter-day Saints. This implied that they were “chosen” and gave them, as Richards

had instructed, an inside chance at the Celestial Kingdom in the afterlife and a better chance of becoming gods of their own domain, as Richards told them might happen through obedience. This self-naming appears to have been influenced by the repeated references to the Lamb of God in the early pages of the Book of Mormon—Richards had left them a copy or two of the 1841 English edition.

Another is that the group began, when it was in season, to use sugar maple sap water, “the sweetest of God’s tree waters,” instead of wine of their own making or water for the sacrament. The deviations did not stop there.

They eventually published their own more compact version of the Book of Mormon in French, but retitled it *Le livre de Moroni!* The translators, having immersed themselves in the language and stories in the Book, reorganized, streamlined, and reshaped it. They were not the first to do this. They took notice of the work of other “translators,” “editors,” and “abridgers” of the Book—Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and others, perhaps even Joseph Smith. They would argue later, when defending their work in messages to Richards, that the essence of this part of the scriptures improved with their rearranging and shortening, and, with the use of French, sounded, even to the untrained ear, more reverent, more sacred, even more sophisticated, certainly more lyrical. They may have had a point.

The translation was led by Prud’homme de la Paix and his wife, Marie Alouette la Parole. She was a multilingual English speaker by virtue of living and early schooling in Halifax. This fact made the translation, however laborious, possible. She was more gifted in languages than her husband, she the more able linguist and wordsmith. She even spoke some of the language of the Mi’kmaq, an Indigenous people, from her days in Nova Scotia. Marie Alouette did the vast majority of the actual drafting but *not* as a mere scribe. She gave shape to the language and the flow of the stories in the text with the skill of an experienced author.

Marie and Jean Pierre were unusual in their knowledge of the written word. Jean Pierre, for his part, as a bright and dynamic young man, had been tutored for many years by the Jesuits in Quebec as a candidate for the priesthood—though he never followed through—so was conversant, and in several languages, Latin among them, with the scriptures. Marie, fittingly given the image on the carpet, had been schooled by the Ursuline Sisters, who by that time had been in Quebec City for two hundred years. The shape and content they gave the Book are interesting but not at all unlikely. In the end, some of the changes were fundamental. They assumed from the outset that they were acting through inspiration and in good faith. Neither they nor Richards, a man of great faith but also an impetuous, well-meaning rube, knew that a French version of the complete Book of Mormon already existed!

Jean Pierre and Marie strove for a tone in *Le livre* that exuded the spirit of the thirteenth article of faith, which Richards had emphasized to them repeatedly in his preachings. They were not always successful. They recognized *Le livre* as the story of peoples with strengths and weaknesses but thought there was no reason to overdo it with too many repeated afflictions and smitings between and among themselves, even wanted to mute a bit the punishing intercessions of God. Jean Pierre had been put off by his reading of Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." They worked hard to make things more uplifting, more succinct, put more emphasis on the material about Christ and the prosperity and peace that existed when people were righteous, obedient. In the latter, they featured the work of Mosiah, the proselytizing in Alma, and the descriptions in Ether 12.

They were thoroughly enamored of the place of Moroni in all of this. They noted the seminal role he played in the "last look at" and final laying up the plates and the handing off to Joseph Smith, became aware of the role given him in the future of heralding the Second Coming. In view of this, they decided to have the title of their version of *Le livre* carry his name. They worked on their shorter edition as though

it were the work of Moroni had he the time to rework all of what his father had left him. So, their *Livre* begins with overarching words from Moroni himself, who had also seen God's face, introducing the *Le livre*, giving credit to the immense work his father, Mormon, had carried out in amalgamating, bringing the abridgement of the various plates together. All this comes before the text of Nephi's famous introduction, "I Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . ." They thought this arrangement neater, as it was Moroni who had appeared to Joseph Smith, according to Smith's own introductory testimony, which they kept, slightly altered, for its sheer power, insight, and history.

They liked the travel story of the Jaredites, buried late in the original Book of Mormon, summarized there by Moroni, more than what had been offered for a beginning in Nephi, if for no other reason than the immense faith of the brother of Jared that moved God to reveal his spirit being to him. This being so, they revised and moved some of that text to the beginning of the *Le livre*, marrying some of Lehi's departure story, as narrated by Nephi, with Jared's.

In their view this made for a stronger, dramatic beginning. In just a few pages, there were four, maybe five individuals who had seen and, in some cases, spoken directly with God. That was impressive. Beyond that, they kept to a stripped-down narrative of Nephi encompassing Lehi's allegorical dream sequence (the iron rod), the plates of Laban, and other things, including the curse and rise of the Lamanites and the scattering of the Jews and others, which would be emphasized later with Jacob's writing with the parable of the branches of the wild olive tree.

One surprise for those who would now read *Le livre* is that the migration was magic, often sub-marine, taking a hint from Jared—in seven vessels "tight as dishes" driven by the winds, sometimes "buried deep in the waves of the sea" during a voyage that lasted nearly a year. The elements of the two departure stories having been combined, the travelers were *both* Liahona-led (that "ball of curious workmanship," an orienting compass, sort of a message board) *and* enlightened by those

shining stones, touched by the finger of the God (two of which were apparently set aside to later become seer stones). They had both light and an orienting compass for their voyage! And, of course, they were, according to *Le livre*, in direct contact with God.

As a point of interest, it should be noted, though, that their translation was taking shape just a few years after the publication of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) in its original French. So, and here it is necessary to speculate some, the translators, in their choice of vessels, might have also been influenced by the very creative technology set out in the pages of that captivating novel, if they had had access to it.

They were more interested in prophecy than secular conflicts, though they may not have always captured this. In any of the remaining books they limited the cycle of faithfulness, then falling away, then contentions, then "wars and rumors of wars" to one example or less. In the same vein, they did not feel the compulsion to include each history as a linear connecting point in the story, so some of the shorter books were dropped. And they shortened or eliminated some of the lengthy, meandering preachings, those repetitive "voices crying in the wilderness."

They did not make it all totally easy though. They left enough in to honor the idea that "there needs be opposition in all things." They included a scattering of scripture that described the subversion and influence of Satan in the fight for righteousness. They maintained the engaging story of the Gadianton robbers but brought its parts together, as an example of what happens when malice and evil-doing run rampant. What with their persistence and subversive secret combinations, there were lessons to be learned even into the present. Likewise, they included the interesting character of Korihor, who, as a contrarian, spoke of the futility of looking for Christ but had equivocated, admitting he had been fooled by the devil, and was, after laying a challenge, struck dumb.

They kept other stories, scattered throughout, that were trenchant and to the point. They were entranced, for example, by the references to the adopted sons of Helaman, left those verses in as an example of belief, unity, blessedness, and the triumph of indignation, even miracle—imagine two thousand soldiers in battle without a single death! They left examples of the effect of righteousness, or its absence, like the bits in Alma where the Nephites were forced to live as a subjugated people. They kept the story of Abinadi, for his courage and statements about Christ. And, of course, they admired the devotion and the translation of the Three Nephites, post-Christ apostles, left their story untouched.

According to oral history relayed to Richards, Jean Pierre and Marie apparently, while working through the translation, came to see a parallel between the appearance of the cursed Lamanites mentioned in the original Book of Mormon and the Indigenous people among whom they lived. Armed with this insight, they did a curious thing: they altered the curse set out in the early part of the Book and continued to the end, one of the *sustaining* images in the Book.

The translators were personally perplexed by the curse of the darker skin given to the Lamanites. While acknowledging that this kind of stigma had been used before by God—remember Cain?—they didn't understand the starkness and longevity of its use over time, even if it could be thought of, as some have urged, as only a metaphor. After much thought, they eliminated references to that practice from the armory of God's tools for dealing with those who deviated from his rules or went against his peoples. They accepted that God could, and perhaps should, punish, even "curse" with strong language, *contretemps* and sundry Old Testament punishments or plagues, those who do not adhere to divine instructions, but doubted whether a darker skin shade should signal, deterministically, the perpetual unrighteousness of a people.

In all of this they might have been influenced by Richards. He had married a "Lamanite" woman, and had said, not mincing a word, that

he found the use of this curse, and the misconceptions it led to, “deeply offensive,” even thought of it at times as an example of wrong-footed whimsy. Given his own experience, he thought the promise, for those who believed and obeyed, of becoming “light and delightsome” illusory if not cruel. He had even noted in a letter, probably in a fit of peeve, that the God of the Book of Mormon seemed a “racial purist!”

But Marie and Jean Pierre wanted to include something, for the sake of the story, that would properly stigmatize the wayward Lamanites. They first toyed with the idea of using “tarring and feathering” of individual sinners, something from Joseph Smith’s own story, to serve as the dark punishment spoken of but rejected the idea. They decided, in the end, to write of a curse that “marked” the Lamanites in two ways, one of physical appearance and behavior, the other of speech. All Lamanites were given attached ear lobes and deviated septa—they would wheeze when they breathed through their noses. And, they received a slightly abnormal but recognizable pattern of speech. The Lamanites would confound and interchange the pronunciation of the English equivalents of l’s and r’s, and th’s and d’s, and r’s and w’s. They had fun with this when they transcribed the speeches of Samuel the Lamanite, who exhibited this lisp. (They made it look like God was trying out here the tool used for the confounding at Babel.) Jean Pierre, on an intellectual level, recognized that this speech curse created another group that might be stigmatized but could not come up with one that would not. They were learning that it was not easy to politically correct the actions of God.

Because of his background, Prud’homme de la Paix noticed the parallels in content in some of the later chapters of 1 Nephi and the book of Isaiah itself. They debated whether to repeat it in *Le livre*. Two things prompted them to do so. They took at face value that the brass plates brought out of Jerusalem might have included some of Isaiah, and Prud’homme himself had witnessed some of the power of this prophecy of Christ in a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*, though in

English, in Boston in 1865 while he was there ordering ships parts and material for his business.

The allusions to Isaiah, words from the Old Testament, prompted Marie to suggest adding some of Psalms for its virtuosity, even its passion, but this was not done. She held, though, to her opinion that if fragments of the Psalms weren't included neither should be the allusions to Isaiah. Marie, because of her religious background, also wanted to say something more about Mary, mother of Christ—alluded to in 1 Nephi and mentioned by name in Mosiah—but was dissuaded from doing so. Jean Pierre had had lengthy, sometimes heated, conversations, initially and then in correspondence, with Richards about the role and intercessions of Mary, whether it was Mormon or un-Mormon in idea. Richards thought *not*, and his views had prevailed.

In the end, anything having to do with Christ, including his birth, life, death, and resurrection, whether prophecy or commentary, was left, though at times they brought together various statements scattered throughout the text. They moved to 3 Nephi, even emphasized Moroni's narrative of what happened as a result of Christ's visit to the Americas, especially the detail for conferring the Holy Ghost, priesthood ordinations, and the sacrament prayers. Christ was the main point for them, really, the most important part of the *Le livre*. They would have, they implied, been satisfied with just that as the focus and content of the whole of *Le livre*, but for some reason there was much more, much more than necessary.

Naturally, with the deletions, shiftings, and reformations, their compilation of *Le livre de Moroni* was much more compact than the real Book. It was also more to the point. But, in the end, it was also a bit flawed in language and execution.



As noted earlier, Richards included here and there in his journal text poems he had written. Whittle, at one point, took the liberty, and

the time, to refashion some of Richards's works. With "Winter Ice," he retitled it, put it into the modern idiom and free verse style, filled it out a little, but kept to the subject matter and Richards's own words (*those in italics*). Perhaps these reformations are no better than what Richards originally had to offer. He was not a bad poet. But, Whittle couldn't resist tinkering. The year of the original drafting and the date of the rewrite appear after the sample poem:

And Then There Is No Difference

*When the air becomes still and cold calm,
and the north earth leans away from the sun,
the wind ceases collapsing into the water
and moisture drops into the gray-green bay.*

That is when *the ice begins to form*:

overblown white kernels of Redenbacher's
popcorn floating in hot oil,

white-capped neighbour children playing
fox and geese around and around in a vacant yard.

*For a time, white chunks circle each other—
refuse each other, keep their social distance
as if doomed if they touch.*

*One of these nights, though, the chunks will
no longer offer Nature reasons to stay apart,
the cold will persuade their blue-green edges together
in the quiet of Hudson's Bay.*

*That is when the ice begins to fasten itself to the shore,
bridges sea and stone, does what the listless sea smoke
always fails to do, holds fast to the land,
as fast as the taut rope nip of an old sailor's knot.*

*And then, on gray days, there is no difference
between the land, the sea and the sky.*

—*Mouth of the Povungnituk, QC, August 1878 (1977)*

Star O at present-day Puvirnituk (Quebec), an Inuit settlement on Hudson's Bay, would have been on one of the forelegs of the upside-down Bear. But this is also one of the sites where Richards, having followed his "star map" as God's will, found there to be no village or permanent settlement. He already knew the chances were slim, as his group had attached themselves to agents of the Hudson's Bay Company, who were reconnoitering the area from Fort Moose, far across the Bay, down on the coast further West, weighing the chances of establishing a post there (which was done only in 1921). What Richards did find, at the mouth of the Povungnituk River, were a few clusters of inhabitant Inuit families encamped for the milder weather of late summer. In this kinder, warmer setting, he imagined in the poem the obverse, what it would be like when the winter ice, snow, and gray skies came and the differentiated world he was now viewing became one.

While on the subject of poetry, there is this that will help to put an end to the story and bring us back to the origins of the carpet, which guided Richards's mission and, along with his journals, this story.

Among some of the other papers that accompany the journals that were reviewed, Whittle found another poem on a separate piece of paper, one authored by J. Wilford Booth: "How Many Winters, With Wild Wind White Fleeced?" It came out of Booth's time as a missionary among the Armenians in the late-nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey, Syria, Egypt, the Balkans, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and more). It is written in neat, metered sets of rhymed couplets. Nice alliteration and imagery in the title but decidedly nineteenth century in style and content, more than a little overwrought with longing. But it makes its point. Here are three stanzas:

Oh! How many years, my heart fain would learn,
'Twixt that kiss of farewell and the kiss of return?

How many winters, with wild wind white fleeced,
'Twixt the call "Will you go?" and the letter "Released"?

How many summers, with heart fondly yearning,
'Twixt the parting heartache and the joy of returning?

With the roundabout reference to Booth's poem, we finally come back to the subject of the carpets Richards possessed again, including the one he was wrapped in when he took his elusive tumble in Canada in 1893. Booth was the man who had carpets woven for Richards. Richards and Booth may have never met each other, but they were certainly in exchange. Beyond carpets, they seem to have traded poetry and maybe more.

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"altar,"
52" x 39", oil on canvas,
by Ron Richmond

Created in His Image

Alix Brobby

(First published in *Segullah*)

I.

The first lie they told me was
Blonde Jesus. Thick Belinda locks,
And blue ocean eyes.
He hangs on the cross, white
Like a tender lamb, or
White like a lily flower,
Or like white snow
Smothering brown ground.

II.

The second lie they told me was
Love like the sun: blinding.
Told me to wish for stars like
Supernovas burning each other
Into white rainbows. Tell me
Where is the beauty in pain
And destruction, and grinding
Past each other as you combust?

III.

In hindsight, it should have been clear.
Lie number III: lurking behind me.
My desert mirage, my Narcissus has

Hair blonde, eyes blue. So do you
See why I fell for him?
Do you see why I sat on the green shore,
Watching my star waste into himself,
A weak echo reduced to empty black holes?

IV.

The truth, they conveniently forgot to tell.
I saw it with glasses on, only
After the lamb slaughtered, flower
Starved, the snow melted to reveal
my Jesus risen from the cross.
With his brown feet on brown ground
Under clear blue sky, I see love true
In ebony eyes, my mirror moons.

Daffodils

Alix Brobbey

Your lips are melting petals,
Wilting into my mouth.
My tears not clear
Enough to revive them.

When you learn to fly,
Will they forget to dance?
Lose their maypole eyelashes
And languish, lonely, with
Wings cut.

And yet,
I pray, make me a bouquet &
For six weeks these brown arms
Will be your liquid vase.

When your yellow leafs ashy bleed,
I'll squeeze them between
The crinkly pages of my teeth.

There to bloom *ad infinitum*,
My mouth a perfumed grave.

Bi-Bestiary

Gregory Brooks

I suppose only the animals that paired off
and shuffled up the ramp
survived the flood.

So this Bishop, pointing out
that we would rather flirt
than marry—well, he built

an Ark out of the trees
lining the church property.
He grew a beard overnight

and pounded the pulpit, crazed
with the fire of righteousness,
saying—*Get thee hence, freshmen!*

*Find a temple, make babies.
See the rivers swelling with rain?
You have no time. Buy a ring.*

Every week I'm invited to the zoo.
Single salesman, white shirts and ties.
As if the weight of straight men

could convince me to marry.
In fact it sends my body into the water,
another animal, the last of its kind.

The Leper

Gregory Brooks

An armadillo dug up the grass
in my parents' yard last year—

the kind that bounce buckshot
off their back and carry leprosy.

If only I could do the same:
materialize armor, lumber along.

I could curl up while testimonies
pelt my spine on Sunday,

doubts doubting doubt.
Everything in a simmer

until I find my niche at church.
Someplace to read history and hide.

Healing happens in the dark
for those of us who burrow.

Casual Violence in Sunday School

Gregory Brooks

John the Baptist was a hairy scorpion
who skittered out from the wilderness
and began stinging folks
until they saw the Holy Ghost.

He molted like all prophets do,
lived in caves, under rocks,
until the predators found him—
took his mandibles, his head.

A dove landed in the blood,
tracked little vees across the stones.
We the ones who hear the story,
some of us too terrified to speak,

we wonder when the martyrdom
will slice our way.
And why our fathers sharpen
knives below the pew.

Emphasis on death, on liquid pride
dripping down a hanging tree.
Carry a sword, perhaps of words.
Defend, find prestige in priesthood might.

We were children when we heard
decapitation was the only course
to save the world. Just kids when
Haun's Mill came out on VHS.

I stayed up every night after my baptism,
wringing my hands, worried God
would command me to kill—
and if he did, how I would shrink.

Young Gods

Blaire Ostler

Slipping off a Sunday dress—
hoping you'll join me and undress.
No more dark slacks and white shirts,
corruption of innocence tends to hurt.
It's worship too irreverent for pews,
forgive my transgression against a holy muse,
but, trust me, crisis leads to transition.
Take your time. Steady your volition.

Have a bite of this forbidden fruit and see
nothing you knew is what it seems.
Come with me and I'll show you a sight,
as our bare souls gleam in the evening light.
Look beyond the Garden, where life is genuine—
life with real power, real risk, and real sin.
I'll crush a snake with my heel and a subtle grin.
The act barely even bruised my skin.

The world has finally made her debut.
Orange rocks, a purple sky, an ocean blue,
pink clouds, green leaves, all brilliant hues.
The lone and dreary world isn't dreary with you.
We're out of the Garden now.
Look at what has been endowed.
We'll till the earth by the sweat of our brow,
and ask all our questions—no more sacred cows.

Close your eyes and imagine eternity,
then manifest that vision with me.
Heaven is here on earth, if we're willing.
Our cup runneth over. Possibilities are spilling.
Bring your gods. I brought mine too.
Together we'll find out which ones are true.
We are that we might have joy,
and priesthood power is ours to employ.

I can see you have an appetite.
Here's my fruit, have another bite.
The work begins tomorrow at first light,
but let's laugh like young gods tonight.

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Sisterhood and the Divine Feminine

Twila Newey. *Sylvia*. Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2020. 292 pp. Paper: \$15.95. ISBN: 978-1948218344.

Reviewed by Rebecca Bateman

Like a mother opening her arms to embrace her children, the span of mountains and trees that look over my childhood home in Salt Lake City extend to the south and cradle also the homes in Provo, Utah. Those two sister cities have different personalities, and Provo has sometimes felt difficult to understand. But the mountains, the trees, and the gospel connect us, and, like a daughter knows the bedtime stories her mother tells to all her siblings, I find familiarity in the novel *Sylvia* by Twila Newey.

The focus of this story, set in the foothills and canyons near Provo, is the relationship between four sisters—Mary, Roxcy, Eve, and Anna—at the death of their mother, Sylvia. As each chapter progresses, through individual perspectives in flashbacks and reveries, the sisters’ struggles and heartaches unfold. We get to know their personalities, strengths, and weaknesses by their own admission—and we gain just as many insights from their silent judgments and allowances for each other.

Newey’s women all have a distinct relationship with their membership in the Church, and this has relevance to their characters. Each sister is named for a woman in the gospel: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Eliza Roxcy Snow; Mother Eve; and Anna the Prophetess. This spiritual inheritance serves as both a blessing and burden for each of them. But each of them finds strength and support by returning time and again to the arms and wisdom of their mother.

At face value, this novel is an enchanting, heartfelt depiction of a family affected by loss and drawn to each other for comfort. But there’s

more to it than this. Newey has woven in layers of symbolism and meaning that allow for reflection and introspection. Much like Jesus constructed his parables with a foundational narrative and deeper meaning for those looking, Newey has crafted an engaging novel that also serves as an allegory to the divine feminine.

For proof of this, one needn't look further than the title character. Newey has graced the mother in this story with the name Sylvia, meaning "forest" or "woods," and with dreamlike fluidity her posthumous presence is often felt in the rustle of the trees outside. We see the interconnected influence she had in nourishing each of her daughters through her words and embrace, her roots and branches. As Eve mused, "If Mom was the first tree, the beginning, we're just shoots she sent out, the little grove. We're all one thing, really" (153). Sylvia represents a Heavenly Mother, and the reader is invited to gravitate to the daughter whose personality most resonates with her, knowing that no matter her situation and life experience, she is a branch of the tree, a growth of the root, a part of the grove. This spiritual underpinning gives the story a poetic cadence. Newey is especially skilled in the things left unsaid, the quiet between responses, the piecing of memories.

Because there are many references to Latter-day Saint culture and especially to the city of Provo, while reading I often wondered who was the target audience for this book. There are pronounced attempts to explain unfamiliar or confusing aspects of Mormonism, such as temple garments, while other mentions of local culture, such as popular landmarks, are taken for granted. I know enough about Provo to catch some of these—the prestigious family names, the Tree Streets neighborhood, and the canyon road leading up to Sundance Resort—but I'm not sure most people living outside of Utah County would. Some members of the Church might take offense at the language and subject matter, though I assume this was not Newey's concern. My biggest criticism of this book is the frequent typographical errors that surely could have

been resolved by a few good edits. They were a distraction but not an impairment.

In all, this book is lovely. Twila Newey is a gifted writer. Her imagery is clear and sensual. She touches on the profane and spiritual moments familiar to many women with a grace reminiscent of Emma Lou Thayne. The struggles of the sisters in *Sylvia* raise difficult themes, and Newey approaches them bravely and with empathy in a way that women—through sisterhood—need. She invites us to understand the hearts of these women and reminds us that we are all connected together through the Mother Tree.

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The Dark Side of Devotion

Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner. *The Contortionists*.
Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020. 358 pp.
Paper: \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1560852896.

Reviewed by Shayla Frandsen

When a five-year-old boy tragically disappears from a quiet LDS neighborhood, grief-stricken family members, detectives, ward members, and suspects all struggle to find their footing in the agonizing aftermath.

In *The Contortionists*, the new novel from Robert Hodgson Van Wagoner, alliances shift, secrets are withheld, and readers are immersed into a propulsive, suspenseful mystery, chilling from beginning to end.

One of the novel's most compelling devices is the twining of past narratives with present, which Van Wagoner handles with a deft touch. Every structural move builds upon the last, a fine example of construction and pacing. His characters' choices in the aftermath of the boy's disappearance stand in stark contrast to—or confirmation of—the dubious actions of their past selves. The author has created characters who toggle between sympathetic and loathsome in a way that renders them entirely human, and few are spared his critical eye. The climax of this taut mystery is shocking in its revelation of the profound unknowability that lies in the human heart.

The Contortionists takes a surgeon's scalpel to LDS culture, picking apart the ways in which religious zealotry can drive families and people to ruin. Rarely has the dark underbelly of the quest for perfection—or, at least, the appearance of perfection—been so painfully, meticulously examined, nor the outcome so tragic. Sometimes the division between the sacred and the profane balances on a knife's edge, and other times it stretches across a chasm. In *The Contortionists*, it's both. It's uncomfortable to realize that, for several of the characters in the novel, all it takes to shift from acceptable Mormon orthodoxy to unhinged, maybe even murderous, fanaticism is—well, not much. A dangerous interpretation of doctrine is only the beginning. Is Van Wagoner trying to point readers to the fact that there might be something within the genetic makeup of the LDS Church specifically that, when pushed to its noxious outer extreme, could elicit more damage than good? Or is *The Contortionists* a grim fantasy in which the LDS Church is merely the backdrop, and not the catalyst, of such tragedy?

“We're all contortionists living one lie or another,” Melissa, the mother of the missing child, says in a flashback. “Sometimes it's the only honorable thing to do” (141). She's on a long-distance phone call

with her sister Karley, who quit her mission to live with a Norwegian man that she and her companion met on the stairwell in their apartment building. Although Melissa's poison-laced words are her attempt to talk some sense into Karley, the novel is titled *The Contortionists* for a reason: it explores the ways in which imperfect humans contort themselves into shapes that will best defend their worldviews from attack. Sometimes their contortions are determined by the people or events around them—purely reactionary moves driven by placation, disbelief, misery, or anger. Other times, the contortions are a solo effort, stemming from an individual obsession with fulfilling God's plan. Reading this book was like watching a performer contort their body on a stage and subsequently probing not only the shapes their limbs made but the negative space around and in between. Van Wagoner notes every glance, silence, and gaze, and readers will quickly learn that *everything*, both said and unsaid, can be a clue.

The love scenes are many and necessary, and Van Wagoner withholds nothing from the charged, intimate moments. The interrogation scenes at the police office—my favorite scenes in the book—are no less meticulously tracked. Every new page seemed to bring as many questions for me as it did for Detective Craig, the welcome beacon of humanity in a book full of moral and spiritual bleakness. There is substance abuse, trauma, and the crumbling of institutions once thought unshakable. While at times the dialogue felt unnatural and it is clear that Van Wagoner has a few favorite turns of phrase that he returns to often, the prose of *The Contortionists* is, overall, impressive. Van Wagoner has managed to write a lyrical mystery novel, sweeping both the Utah landscape and idiosyncrasies of Mormon culture into his sphere of literary depiction (lines like “If the gods sweat, it was sure to smell like the Great Salt Lake” and “Melissa's relief could have filled a Mormon temple” are a delight).

I will admit that mysteries are not the typical literary fare I turn to. When child endangerment is thrown into the mix, I recoil even more.

Yet I was surprised by how much I enjoyed *The Contortionists*, and fans of dark, suspenseful thrillers will enjoy it as well.

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Book of Mormon Poetry

James Goldberg. *A Book of Lamentations*. American Fork, Utah: Beant Kaur Books, 2020. 161 pp. Paper: \$15.99. ISBN: 979-8667443285.

Reviewed by Edward Whitley

A few years ago I was researching poems written about the Book of Mormon. I had read Eliza R. Snow's "The Lamanite" (adapted from a poem she wrote before becoming a Latter-day Saint titled "The Red Man of the West"), so I suspected that there were probably a few dozen other poems that either touched on Book of Mormon themes or retold Book of Mormon stories. In the end, I found several hundred of them.¹ It is with some confidence, then, that I can say that the handful of Book of Mormon-themed poems in James Goldberg's remarkable new

1. Edward Whitley, "Book of Mormon Poetry," in *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon*, edited by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

collection, *A Book of Lamentations* (2020), are both unique and necessary contributions to the Latter-day Saint literary canon. Most Book of Mormon poems are either epic celebrations of Lehi's triumphant journey to the New World or elegies focused on the heartbreaking image of Moroni burying the record of a fallen people. Goldberg's poems work within this tradition, but they redirect the heroic energy of the epic and the easy sentiment of the elegy into territory that demands us to take seriously the Book of Mormon's warning that our world, like those of the Nephites and Jaredites, is one of conflict, greed, and self-destructive violence.

In the first poem of the collection, "The Book of Mormon Was Written for Our Day" (3), Goldberg contrasts the platitude that this sacred text was "written for our day" by "a voice from the dust" with topics that aren't often discussed in seminary and Sunday School: climate change, nuclear proliferation, and violence against the world's most vulnerable populations.²

A voice from the dust
for a nuclear age
for a world leaning in
to its climate's change
for men gone mad with
homicidal rage which
cannot be quenched
with children's blood

The contrast between familiar Latter-day Saint talking points and the horrors of the contemporary world is precisely Goldberg's point, both here and throughout *A Book of Lamentations*. "You think you know what the Book of Mormon is about," he seems to say. "You think it's a book about avoiding the 'pride cycle' so that you can 'prosper in

2. All subsequent quotations from this poem appear on page 3.

the land.” But Goldberg reminds us that the generational sins that contribute to climate change and that increase nuclear stockpiles cannot be bracketed off from individual righteousness. Regardless of how many commandments I keep, I can’t prosper in the land if the land I live on has been rendered uninhabitable by ambient radiation or rising global temperatures.

Goldberg finds the representative figure for generational sin in the Jaredite refugee-king Coriantumr. Unlike Moroni, whose tragically beautiful story is a perfect fit for the conventions of the elegy, Coriantumr is a tattered refugee of a war of his own making; Coriantumr is an object of pity, not a subject for elegiac beauty, whose wretchedness tarnishes the gold plates themselves:

For us, a lonely
 prophet carved
 Coriantumr’s fate
 into plates
 of tarnished
 gold

In a note at the end of *A Book of Lamentations*, Goldberg glosses “The Book of Mormon Was Written for Our Day” with an insight from Kylie Turley to emphasize that Coriantumr’s tragedy is not merely a consequence of individual choices but of collective values: “Kylie Turley has said that belief in the Book of Mormon is inextricable from the weight of its warning. When Latter-day Saints say we know the Book of Mormon is true, we are saying something about human nature. We are affirming that we understand a civilization that chooses hatred and division is fully capable of destroying itself” (114). This is the warning that Coriantumr brought with him to the people of Zarahemla, and it is the same warning he offers to us today. Goldberg calls this “the truth / he buried beneath / us” (3). Coriantumr’s buried truth, however, is different from the truth that Moroni placed in the ground with the

invitation to “ask God . . . with a sincere heart, with real intent” if the Book of Mormon is true or not (Moroni 10:5). Instead, Coriantumr’s is the truth that human beings are

so very capable
of choosing death
and choosing it
and choosing it
and choosing it
until we grow numb

This repetition (“and choosing it / and choosing it / and choosing it”) updates a century-old warning from T. S. Eliot (“this is the way the world ends / this is the way the world ends / this is the way the world ends,” from “The Hollow Men”). It also reminds us that the Book of Mormon is about *three* American civilizations, two of which (the Jaredites and Nephites) already chose death while the third is increasingly moving toward what Goldberg calls “the consuming / violence of a / total / self-destruction.”

All of the poetry in *A Book of Lamentations*, whether focused explicitly on Book of Mormon themes or not, returns to this somber note. Goldberg wrote these poems leading up to and including the *annus horribilis* of 2020, when the apocalyptic messages of every sacred text (not just the Book of Mormon) seemed to take shape in the COVID-19 pandemic, the wildfires raging in Australia and the American West, the perpetuation of state-sanctioned violence against people of color, the Black Lives Matter protests, the (first) impeachment of Donald Trump, and the attendant conspiracy theories surrounding all of these events and more. One poem that feels particularly at home in 2020 is “The Waters of Mormon” (7), where Goldberg writes in the voice of a refugee from the land of Lehi-Nephi fleeing the burden of generational sin brought on by the selfish and narcissistic King Noah, a bloated egotist

who had managed to corrupt religious authorities and common citizens alike (see Mosiah 29:31).³

I was baptized in the waters of Mormon
 I signed up to flee the king
 The king, the king
 the city of the king
 and the ways of the king
 even the dreams of the king

I came to the forest by the waters of Mormon
 Staked my life to flee the king
 The king, the king
 the court of the king
 and the knowledge of the king
 —the searches of the king

Goldberg's religious refugee is traumatized by the outsized presence of a wicked king who permeates every thought and dominates every line of poetry, eclipsing the possibility for a rhyme scheme of any kind and shutting down any meter other than his own relentless iambs. Reading this poem in 2020, it's impossible not to see the Trump presidency in the kingship of Noah, as other commentators familiar with the Book of Mormon already have.⁴ It's a terrible irony that, a month after Goldberg published *A Book of Lamentations*, Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) publicly compared Trump not to King Noah but to Captain Moroni.⁵ Lee's spectacular misreading of the story of Captain Moroni—an anti-fascist who put down efforts to impose a king against the will of the people (see Alma 51)—should come as no surprise, given that Trump

3. All subsequent quotations from this poem appear on page 7.

4. Aaron Brickley, "Doesn't Trump remind Hatch of a wicked Book of Mormon king?" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sept. 5, 2018, <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/letters/2018/09/05/letter-doesnt-trump/>.

5. Lee Davidson, "Sen. Mike Lee says Donald Trump is like Book of Mormon hero Captain Moroni," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 29, 2020, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/politics/2020/10/29/sen-mike-lee-says-donald/>.

is, following Goldberg's description of King Noah, "the king / who twisted / everything."

But "The Waters of Mormon" is hopeful that "the shadow of the king" will not shut out all light. The poem paraphrases and then rewrites the very passage from Isaiah that the priests of Noah had distorted in their defense of an indefensible king. Noah's priests had perverted the words of Isaiah 52:7 ("How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings") to mean that anyone who spoke ill of the king was denying scripture and promoting fake news:

And how beautiful the hope
of other worlds other waters
other priests

I keep running to the wilderness
keep clinging to the memory of waters
to flee, to flee
the shadow of the king
who twisted
everything.

Goldberg's poem reclaims the distorted words of Isaiah and in their place finds a space of possibility ("other worlds") in uncorrupted nature ("other waters") with uncorrupted ritual ("other priests"). Goldberg himself is one of those "other priests," offering his *Book of Lamentations*, like Jeremiah's before him, both as a witness that Zion has been overrun by Babylon and as a prayer to "Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned" (Lamentations 5:21).

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Unpacking Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Mormonism

Taylor G. Petrey. *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 288 pp. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 9781469656229.

Reviewed by Alison Halford

Inevitably at some point, due to structural white patriarchal privilege and a central and abiding concern with discrete gendered bodies and heteronormative relations, the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will reinforce interlocking systems of oppression based on gender, race, class, culture, and sexuality. Taylor Petrey in *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* not only explores those structures of inequality within the Church discourse but also shows that for the most part gender construction is much more complex, fluid, and untidy than official Church teachings would have us believe.

The contribution this book makes to Mormon scholarship is significant. In addressing the gap in academic literature on gender, sexuality, and contemporary Mormonism, Petrey offers a comprehensive overview of the contemporary Church rhetoric on gender and sexuality that construct sexualized embodiment as both objects and agents of Mormon practices. Drawing upon queer theorists such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Thomas Laqueur, and Eve Sedgwick, Petrey convincingly shows the extent Mormon gendered identity is socially constructed by interactions shaped by historical and cultural context. By ordering the chapters into specific periods of significant change in LDS teachings on gender and sexuality, Petrey captures the ways Church leaders are both centrifugal (pushing outward from the

center) and centripetal (drawing things toward the center) in producing ideas of gender as a fixed, eternal characteristic. To demonstrate, in chapters 1 and 2, which center on interracial marriage and attitudes toward homosexuality during the 1950s and 60s, Petrey locates distinctive Mormon texts and teachings within the wider societal discourse on race and sexual relations in America. In doing so, he offers a more complex, nuanced explanation of Church teachings on gender, sexuality, and race that “even in Mormonism there is no ‘being’ to gender, only its ‘becoming’ through regulated norms” (222).

However, this book is much more than a historiography of gender and sexuality. Petrey brings together three areas of Church activity—public discourse, programs, and political campaigns—to question to what degree Church boundaries on gender and sexuality are formed and informed in a particular time, place, and context, and are not necessarily related in any clear way to doctrine. For example, in the 1970’s as feminist activism worked toward dismantling patriarchal structures in public and domestic spaces, Spencer W. Kimball began promoting “companionate patriarchy” (120), which positioned heterosexual couples as the foundation of the idealized Mormon home, where husbands and wives are to work side by side, while still maintaining male authority. The shift toward promulgating a “soft egalitarianism” (119) continued, however, to reproduce American evangelical notions of “separate but equal” or complementarianism, thereby amplifying the way conservative Mormon teachings coincide with traditional religious models of gender. Similarly, during this time when writing about the changes in how Church leaders instructed members regarding sexual relations and birth control, Petrey shows the extent to which official doctrine and policy changes can be informed by and adapted to reflect shifts in mainstream societal norms. He also adroitly links the Church’s role in the Equal Rights Amendment debate to the Church’s later engagement with legal disputes over gay marriage in America,

which he suggests continued in the elevation of the heterosexual family, rather than a patriarchal family, as a structure of gendered power.

Yet the doctrine and the teachings of Mormonism are but one aspect of religiosity. Lived religion often becomes a series of contested, unstable, and creative practices that allow new forms of religion to emerge, including negotiations of gender. Petrey himself notes that because this book focuses exclusively on Church leaders—who are overwhelmingly older, male, and white Americans—it offers only a partial explanation of how the Church frames “sexual malleability and heteronormative prescriptions for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals” (176). Notwithstanding, Petrey’s sensitive and influential insights provide a foundation for additional critical thought and research on gender and sexual embodiment that explores how Church members negotiate between official doctrine and lived religion.

With a less skillful writer, *Tabernacles of Clay* may have become a diatribe seeking to destabilize the institutional structure by introducing contested identities. Instead, by shifting the discourse from power disparities between American Mormon men and women to interrogate the intersections of gender, Mormonism, America, and sexuality, Petrey has delivered a substantive, considered, and transformative text. In a religion with seemingly standardized theology, programs, and cultural practices, documenting the tension between Church teachings on gender essentialism and narratives around sexuality challenges existing Mormon perceptions of gender as a fundamental, eternal, stable identity. Petrey offers the possibilities of resistance and transgression, as well as demonstrating compliance and conformity, to Mormon discourse on gender and sexuality, contextualizing Latter-day Saint religious beliefs within a broader societal understanding of gender roles and representation. Moreover, by showing the “ambiguity, fluidity, contradiction, and paradox” (223) around gender, Mormonism, and sexuality, Petrey makes informed and compelling arguments that illustrate the

ways Mormons are subjected to systematic structural exclusion due to gender and sexual difference and equip readers to advance religiously grounded imperatives that all are equal before God.

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The Words and Worlds of Smith and Brown

Samuel Morris Brown. *Joseph Smith's Translation: The Words and Worlds of Early Mormonism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 320 pp. Hardcover: \$34.95. ISBN: 9780190054236.

Reviewed by Jonathan A. Stapley

In 1887 Albert Michelson and Edward Morley performed what was intended to be the crowning accomplishment of physics—an experiment to determine how movement through the luminiferous ether changed the speed of light. What they found instead was the first strong evidence that there was no ether and that the speed of light was constant regardless of motion. Such an idea seemed absurd. It still does. Many physicists and engineers were content to ignore the data—skyscrapers and bridges were predictably constructed without incorporating what seemed like an outlying anomaly. Of course, it was precisely this weird bit of data that led Einstein to a radical reconceptualization of space, matter, and time itself.

The historical record is not reproducible in the way that physical experiments are. Yet Joseph Smith's Restoration left scattered anomalies in the archives for believers and scholars to use for their various purposes, or to ignore. The proverbial shelves are littered with the bits and pieces left over from their various constructions. Not everything is useful, even for historians and theologians, and bridges really do just fine with classical physics. But like the Michelson–Morley experiment performed in Cleveland, Ohio, these strange records create an opening for more. It is in this space that Samuel Brown's *Joseph Smith's Translation* (hereafter referred to as *JST*) enters. Whether or not it revolutionizes the fields that approach the Mormon past will take time to determine, but Brown's *JST* is certainly a fresh and important reconsideration of Smith and his cosmology.

JST is a volume in two parts. The first section deals with the aspects of the Restoration that Brown has been working with for over a decade: pure language, religious time, and the nature of being. These are the critical contexts that allow Brown to then turn his attention to Smith's various translations. Brown takes from the shelves words of Edenic language, animal sacrifice, teleportation, seer stones, and interpretations of hieratic characters, integrating them into a narrative that casts Smith as doing work incongruous to that demanded by a Protestant epistemic tradition bent on stripping the divine presence not only from the altars but also from the age. Here Brown engages and relies on the magisterial work of Charles Taylor and to a lesser extent Robert Orsi to good effect. His linguistics training also bubbles through. Brown details a rich and vivid world with Smith "manipulating complex conceptual structures" while aware of the danger when scholars impose their views on the past (12–13). The positivistically inclined and heirs to the Protestant secularism that Brown militates against will disagree that Brown successfully avoids the trap. Brown is clearly happy with that.

With *JST*, Brown presents a cosmos in which Smith and other early Saints wielded religious fire. This cosmos is compelling, but also sometimes disorienting. And like the wormhole that Brown describes as being Smith's scripture and ultimately translation itself, Brown also wields evidence from scattered times and places. He collapses them in ways that are effective, but that also on occasion seem forced. For example, Brown's analysis of the tension between Lockean impulses of Church members and Zion is masterful. His proposed etymology of Ahman is plausible, but only merely so.

The second section of *JST* focuses on the "texts" of Smith's translations. Here Brown convincingly argues that Joseph Smith's religious career was an extended rereading of the Bible. One key framework that Brown uses throughout this section is the idea that these rereadings are targums—a class of ancient Hebrew translations that expanded the narratives for a vernacular audience. Despite a short introduction to the concept of targums, and repeated use of the category as being descriptive of Smith's work, I was never convinced that Smith conformed to the ancient antecedent or that Brown presented a complete repurposing for the term. Still, whether or not you agree that the Book of Abraham is a targum, the work that Smith is doing is clearly and usefully described in *JST*.

Many ideas from *JST* struck me as important contributions. One such argument of *JST* is that the Book of Mormon (and subsequent translational projects) constructively "broke" the Bible. It amplified stress and exposed fault lines that Atlantic Christians had papered over for generations. The Saints and their scripture then exploited the topology in very non-Protestant fashion. The Saints' religious fire destroyed and it constructed. The idea that Smith's early Bible revision project is best understood as comprising many of his canonized revelations is significant. And Brown's use of the Egyptian grammar documents to demonstrate how elements of the cosmological/genealogical/temple

priesthood and its gendered valances are rooted in Kirtland is provocative in the best ways. Brown approaches the Nauvoo temple liturgy's intersection with Masonry and revelation in an innovative manner that opens new avenues for future work.

Brown's *JST* is also timely as popular interest in the Book of Abraham seems to be growing. Book of Abraham studies have been a quagmire for decades, with personalities and devotions twisting even the most patient attempts at dialogue into what can charitably be described as a mess. Brown productively skirts above most of this with his expansive proposed translation framework. For Brown, the act of translation throughout Smith's religious corpus, and his "Egyptian Bible" in particular, was never a robotic lexical exercise.

Just as scholars took the data produced in nineteenth-century Ohio to find a new space and a new time, Brown took data that most scholars ignore and that has often been grist for the antagonistically inclined. He outlays cohesive worlds populated by gods, queens, and priests. He finds a space and time outside of the secular age. *Joseph Smith's Translation* is creative, smart, and expansive. Read it.

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Historic Sites Holy Envy

Sara M. Patterson. *Pioneers in the Attic: Place and Memory Along the Mormon Trail*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 300 pp. Hardcover: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780190933869.

Reviewed by John G. Turner

When it comes to sacred places, I feel considerable holy envy toward the Latter-day Saints. Their sacred sites stretch across the continent, from Vermont to California. Mormons can visit their founding prophet's birthplace, the grove in which God the Father and Jesus Christ visited him, and the jail in which he was martyred. Where am I supposed to go as a Presbyterian? I can't afford to tour Geneva. Should I just stay home and read Calvin's *Institutes* for the twentieth time?

Instead, I give in to my holy envy and visit Latter-day Saint sites whenever possible. I grew up not far from Palmyra and Manchester, so I went there long before developing an academic interest in Mormon history. I even took my wife to the Hill Cumorah Pageant a month after our wedding. As our desktop computer background, we have a charming photograph of my daughter at Joseph Smith's birthplace in Royalton, Vermont. Granted, this sort of thing hasn't always worked out perfectly. My family bailed on an extended discourse on the history of the Church delivered by a senior missionary prior to a tour of the Brigham Young Winter Home in St. George. I toured that one by myself. Still, I love visiting these places. Whether I'm standing in the Sacred Grove or on Ensign Peak, I *feel* that I'm standing on sacred ground.

I understand those feelings much better after reading Sara Patterson's *Pioneers in the Attic: Place and Memory along the Mormon Trail*. The title riffs on Tony Horwitz's *Confederates in the Attic*. Unlike the latter-day rebels in Horwitz's book, Latter-day Saint reenactors don't oxidize buttons by soaking them overnight in urine. That is to say,

Patterson's book isn't as lively as Horwitz's, but it's just as searching, not to mention well researched, smart, and humane.

Patterson begins in Independence, Missouri, which Joseph Smith's revelations identified as Zion, the New Jerusalem in which Church members should take refuge prior to the imminent return of Jesus Christ. It's not exactly a symbol of Christian unity today. Three groups own parts of land purchased in the early 1830s in response to those revelations. "Each church believes it has the correct map of the world," Patterson observes (4). The Community of Christ owns the most land, including the site of its only temple. The Church of Christ, formerly known as Church of Christ (Temple Lot), owns the least land but—as its name suggests—asserts that "they own the exact spot where Smith wanted the temple built" (9). Most of the people who make spiritual pilgrimages to Independence, however, belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which maintains a visitors' center. In modern times, a film informs visitors (as of 2014), "Zion is more about a people than a place" (16). Tell that to the Temple Lot folks!

Independence is an effective introduction to one of the central themes of *Pioneers in the Attic*. Patterson reminds us that the meaning of sacred spaces is never stable and is usually contested. "Space and the interpretation of it," she observes, "are often, if not always, sites of contest and disagreement, struggles over ownership, and analysis" (18). This is certainly true of Mormon sacred spaces, as demonstrated in recent books by David Howlett (*Kirtland Temple*) and Scott Esplin (*Return to the City of Joseph*).

Although Patterson takes her readers to Nauvoo, her focus is on the vast space and many historic sites between the "City of Joseph" and Salt Lake City. She anchors many of her chapters on a monument within This Is the Place Heritage Park, where a twelve-foot-tall bronze Brigham Young stands near the mouth of Emigration Canyon, flanked by Heber C. Kimball and Wilford Woodruff. As the story goes, on July 24, 1847, an ailing Brigham Young propped himself up within

Woodruff's wagon, looked out on the valley, and declared, "This is the place!" Where exactly did Young say this? And what exactly did he say? As Patterson notes, Woodruff's journal doesn't contain the key phrase. Several decades later, Woodruff reminisced that Young had said, "This is the right place. Drive on" (41). As the years passed, Church members fixed the words and identified a precise spot and built monuments to commemorate it.

There are many other artifacts of memory at This Is the Place Heritage Park: a sculpture of seagulls saving Mormon crops from ruin; a relief of the Donner Party; a statue of the Shoshone Chief Washakie, who cultivated friendly relations with Latter-day Saint settlers; a reconstructed Native village; figures of Brigham Young and Joseph Smith together looking westward; a statue representing Bodil Mortensen, a ten-year-old member of the Willie handcart company who emigrated in advance of her parents, who had remained in Denmark; and Angels Are Near Us, a boulder and plaques commemorating not the original pioneers but the sesquicentennial reenactment of the pioneer trek.¹

Patterson uses these statues to probe the memories they construct, commemorate, and make meaningful for Latter-day Saints around the world today. The legacy of Bodil Mortensen is a striking example. As Patterson notes, Mortensen "lay buried at Rock Creek Hollow, Wyoming, for many decades without anyone remembering her name" (136). Then, members of the Riverton Wyoming Stake discovered her bones and those of other handcart pioneers. They also discovered her story. As the Willie company made its too-late, ill-fated journey west, Bodil cared for younger children. One night, she went out to search for kindling. Her frozen body was found the next day, leaning against a handcart wheel. Her parents did not learn of her death until they reached Salt Lake City the next year.

1. Photographs of many of the statues are viewable at www.thisistheplace.org/todays-fun/statuary-walk.

By the late twentieth century, Bodil Mortensen's once-forgotten death became an oft-told tale of faith and martyrdom. Stake leaders, however, were rebuffed when they attempted to buy the land on which she and others had died. In response, the stake presidency shifted course. Instead of purchasing the gravesite, Church members should do temple work for their pioneer predecessors, ritual actions that became known as the "Second Rescue." "From a distance of over 130 years," writes Patterson, "they could metaphorically help the pioneers reach their destination" (152). In this sort of memory work, Zion remained "both a historical, literal fact . . . and a future principle toward which church members in the twenty-first century could strive" (159).

If twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latter-day Saints recovered some memories, they also ignored and obscured others, namely the conquest and displacement of Native peoples during the Mormon colonization of the Great Basin. W. W. Riter, instrumental in marking the spot where Brigham Young had allegedly made his famous declaration, compared an obelisk erected on it to Plymouth Rock. "This monument here," he observed, "is the marker of a civilization that has subdued this entire country between the Missouri River and the Pacific Ocean" (52).

Subdued, indeed. Brigham Young famously commented that it was "cheaper to feed and clothe the Indians than to fight them." Young made the comment, however, after his soldiers had defeated Utes who had resisted the Mormon settlement of Utah Valley. When gazing at the statue of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young standing with "Eyes Westward," the message is that God gave this land to white Latter-day Saints, making it easy to forget that they had to take it from peoples already living on it. That is the central conundrum surrounding both This Is the Place and Plymouth Rock, monuments that celebrate the faith and sacrifices of certain people while ignoring the even greater tragedies that befell others.

Patterson's book is a landmark in the study of collective memory and sacred spaces. Particularly noteworthy is the author's graciousness

and sensitivity toward all of the many peoples and religious groups that appear within its pages. If the Latter-day Saints don't get everything right about their nineteenth century, they at least don't neglect their history, as do very nearly all other American Christians.

Brigham Young, by the way, did say something very similar to what Church members later attributed to him. After the 1847 pioneers made their way into the valley, not everyone wanted to stop there. Some wanted to push on. At a July 28 meeting, Young commented that he had recognized the correct spot for a settlement when he first saw the valley. "This is the place," he stated. When the company affirmed the decision, he chose a lot for a new temple, another sort of sacred space.

I ended *Pioneers in the Attic* with my holy envy still intact. One of my long-term academic goals is to get permission to organize a summer field course that starts in Nauvoo and ends in Salt Lake City. I've made a note to leave in June rather than August.

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“water with jean juvenet,”
48” x 66”, oil on canvas,
by Ron Richmond

RON RICHMOND received M.F.A. and B.F.A. degrees from Brigham Young University. He has worked as a professional artist for 20 years. He was born in Denver, Colorado and currently lives in a small town in central Utah.

Artist Statement: The actual layer of paint on canvas or board is the surface, which fact can never be ignored. The mere marks, lines, brushstrokes that make up the surface are also symbols. They may, if only purely abstract and formal in presentation, still symbolize to the eye, mind, or heart ideas and meanings only realized by our subconscious yearnings for archetypes. Archetypes begin as personal and reveal themselves to the collective—the individual to the common.

If those marks begin to represent something recognizable, regardless of subject, they still symbolize the object, never actually becoming it. A paradox lies in the fact that no matter how exact an object is represented, it is still an illusionistic symbol of something else.

A good work should encompass surface and symbol, the cognitive and the spiritual, freedom and restraint.

DIALOGUE

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