DIALOGUE

56.1 spring 2023

DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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DIALOGUE
a journal of mormon thought

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

Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought is published quarterly by the University of Illinois Press for the Dialogue Foundation. *Dialogue* has no official connection with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Contents copyrighted by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Print ISSN 0012–2157; electronic ISSN 1554–9399. *Dialogue* is available in full text in electronic form at www.dialoguejournal.com and JSTOR.org and is archived by the University of Utah Marriott Library Special Collections, available online at www.lib.utah.edu /portal/site/marriottlibrary. *Dialogue* is also available on microforms through University Microfilms International, www.umi.com.

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THE CORRECT [DOMAIN] NAME OF THE CHURCH: TECHNOLOGY, NAMING, AND LEGITIMACY IN THE LATTER-DAY SAINT TRADITION

Spencer P. Greenhalgh

Of all the changes made in response to the 2018 decision to emphasize the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, those made to the official Latter-day Saint web and digital presence stand out in particular. If the *depth* of the Latter-day Saint leadership's commitment to this emphasis is evident in changes to names of well-known institutions such as the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (now The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square), the scope of Latter-day Saint presence on the internet and in other digital spheres required a *breadth* of commitment after the 2018 decision that is worthy of attention. For example, by February 2020,[1] Latter-day Saint officials had reported renaming hundreds of web and mobile apps, making iterative changes to its social media presence, changing the name of the wireless network in Latter-day Saint church buildings, and rolling out new versions of long-existing websites.

Although Latter-day Saint authorities have insisted that these changes are not an issue of rebranding,[2] it seems clear that *legitimacy*

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ," *Newsroom*, Mar. 5, 2019, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-name-alignment/.

2. Russell M. Nelson, "The Correct Name of the Church," Oct. 2018, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/the-correct-name-of-the-church?lang=eng/.

has played a role in this increased attention to names and naming. Heidi Campbell has observed that "the legitimation of authority for specific religions . . . may rely at least partially on recognizing the fact that a particular divine source plays a role in offering external validation";[3] it is perhaps in this spirit that President Russell Nelson has emphasized his belief that the name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is of divine origin.[4] Similarly, apostle Neil Andersen's (re)telling the story of a Latter-day Saint who was accepted as a Christian after emphasizing his church's full name[5] corresponds with an understanding of legitimacy as "widespread social approval."[6]

However, there is an undeniable tension between this bid for increased legitimacy and the necessity of realizing that bid in digital spaces. Even relatively straightforward changes (such as replacing the "LDSAccess" wireless network name with "Liahona") are mediated by technical constraints and standards outside of Latter-day Saint leaders' control. More dramatically, the process of replacing lds.org with churchofjesuschrist.org necessarily "invokes a hugely complex system of technical and contractual coordination."[7] In short, while *names* have long been associated with legitimacy in Mormon contexts,[8] *domain names* illustrate sociotechnical complications of these associations.

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3. Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 20.

4. Nelson, "Correct Name of the Church."

5. Neil L. Andersen, "The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable," Oct. 2021, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2021/10/58andersen?lang=eng/.

6. Ryan T. Cragun and Michael Nielsen, "Fighting over 'Mormon': Media Coverage of the FLDS and LDS Churches," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 65.

7. Daniel Hancock, "You Can Have It, But Can You Hold It?: Treating Domain Names as Tangible Property," *Kentucky Law Journal* 99, no. 1 (2010): 187.

8. Cragun and Nielsen, "Fighting over 'Mormon.'"

In this article, I will examine how changes to (Anglophone-aimed) domain names of the official websites of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints extend, continue, and complicate the existing relationship between naming and legitimacy in the Latter-day Saint tradition. In doing so, I will illustrate two key points concerning the relationship between Mormonism and technology. First, as Latter-day Saint institutions use digital technologies to make claims to authority and legitimacy, they are also subject to independent processes of legitimation that exist within complex sociotechnical systems. Second, other parties that successfully navigate these same complex sociotechnical systems have an increased ability to challenge Latter-day Saint legitimacy.

Background

Conceptual Background

Drawing on sociology literature and inspired by disputes over use of the word "Mormon" in the late 2000s, Ryan Cragun and Michael Nielsen have suggested that Latter-day Saint concerns over naming are tied to legitimacy, which can be understood as an "organization's cultural acceptance or 'taken-for-granted' status."[9] I use this understanding of legitimacy as a conceptual framework throughout this article, arguing that shifts in Latter-day Saint institutions' use of domain names are responses to specific concerns about being accepted in particular ways. Two conceptions of legitimacy are particularly important for this article: Latter-day Saints' acceptance as (and by) Christians and their perceived acceptability compared to other religious expressions descended from Joseph Smith Jr.

Latter-day Saint leaders' emphasis on naming over the past several decades has largely been an effort to establish their faith's Christian

9. Cragun and Nielsen, "Fighting over 'Mormon.'"

credentials. Modern debates about Latter-day Saints' Christianity began in the late twentieth century and were particularly pronounced during Mitt Romney's 2008 and 2012 campaigns for president of the United States.[10] In this context, the appeal of "the Church of Jesus Christ" as opposed to "the Mormon church" is clear; the first takes for granted Latter-day Saints' belief in Jesus Christ whereas the second does not. Furthermore, the word "Mormon" often invokes a range of other meanings that are unrelated to or distant from Christian credentials. Indeed, Weber describes Mormonism as a meme conveying "rich symbolic meaning," a "code word" with a variety of interpretations.[11]

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is one of hundreds of religious expressions that make up what Steven Shields (citing other concerns about naming) has argued should be called the Smith-Rigdon movement.[12] Although Latter-day Saints make up by far the largest of these expressions, there are many others that "claim to be the 'only true church' or the 'only true way of faith,'" challenging Latter-day Saints' legitimacy as heirs to the 1830 church founded by Joseph Smith (and strongly influenced by Sidney Rigdon).[13] Naming becomes salient here, too: In describing Mormonism as a meme, Weber noted that the term "Mormon" is often applied to other expressions of the Smith-Rigdon movement, providing specific examples related to Community of Christ and the Apostolic United Brethren.[14] While Community of Christ

10. Sherry Baker and Joel Campbell, "Mitt Romney's Religion: A Five Factor Model for Analysis of Media Representation of Mormon Identity," *Journal of Media and Religion* 9, no. 2 (2010): 99–121.

11. Brenda R. Weber, *Latter-day Screens: Gender, Sexuality, and Mediated Mormonism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019), 15.

12. Steven L. Shields, "Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon: Co-Founders of a Movement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 1–18.

13. Steven L. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration: An Encyclopedia of the Smith–Rigdon Movement, 5th ed.* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2021), 28.

14. Weber, *Latter-day Screens*, 9–10.

rejects this name, simplifying things for their cousins in Salt Lake City, many fundamentalist groups actively claim the label "Mormon,"[15] complicating things for Latter-day Saints trying to escape their polygamist past and its implications for present acceptability. Thus, even if the contemporary Latter-day Saint leadership focuses more on Christian legitimacy than legitimacy within the Smith-Rigdon movement, establishing the latter is sometimes part of ensuring the former.

Technical Background

Fundamentally, a website is a collection of files hosted on a computer and made accessible to other computers through the internet. Because billions of computers are connected to the internet, users must be able to identify the computer hosting the website they wish to visit. A numeric IP address serves as the authoritative identifier for each computer connected to the internet, including those hosting websites; for example, as of this writing, the official English-language website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints can be accessed by entering 216.49.176.20 into the address bar of a web browser. However, because IP addresses are difficult to memorize, the Domain Name System (DNS) was developed in the early 1980s to establish easier-to-remember domain names.[16] Latter-day Saints are much more likely to access their faith's website through the domain name churchofjesuschrist.org than through the corresponding IP address. By way of analogy, IP addresses are like precise-but-unintuitive longitude and latitude coordinates (e.g., 41.625278, –81.362222), with domain names comparable to either corresponding street addresses (e.g., 9020 Chillicothe Rd., Kirtland, OH

15. Anne Wilde, "Fundamentalist Mormonism: Its History, Diversity, and Stereotypes, 1886–Present," in *Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism,* edited by Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2007), 258–89.

16. National Research Council (US), *Signposts in Cyberspace: The Domain Name System and Internet Navigation* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005).

44094, USA) or distinct names given to locations (e.g., the Kirtland Temple).[17]

The developers of the DNS could not have anticipated the massive growth that the internet would experience over the next four decades—or the value that specific domain names would acquire because of that growth. Domain names have unexpectedly become a means of recognition and identification[18] that hold considerable "economic, social, cultural, and political value."[19] Continuing the street address metaphor introduced above, the market for domain names is like the real estate market; while the same building (or website) could be constructed at any number of different locations (or domain names), some locations are more desirable—and valuable—than others.[20]

Organizations therefore benefit from putting considerable thought into which domain name(s) to use. For example, as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was becoming Community of Christ, President Grant McMurray reported that church employees had secured several potential domain names but were still deciding which to use.[21] This approach is related to a common strategy of picking a primary domain name but also acquiring auxiliary domain names that web users might associate with the organization. However,

17. Hancock, "Treating Domain Names as Tangible Property," 188; Thies Lindenthal, "Valuable Words: The Price Dynamics of Internet Domain Names," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 65, no. 5 (May 2014): 869; National Research Council, *Signposts in Cyberspace*, 19.

18. David Lindsay, *International Domain Name Law: ICANN and the UDRP* (Oxford and Portland, Ore.: Hart Publishing, 2007), 95.

19. National Research Council, *Signposts in Cyberspace*, vii.

20. Lindenthal, "Valuable Words"; Tristan Halvorson, "Registration Intent in the Domain Name Market" (PhD diss., UC San Diego, 2015).

21. Community of Christ, "Questions and Answers on Church Name Change: An Interview with President W. Grant McMurray," archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20010422055040/http://cofchrist.org:80/news/q_and_a-churchname.asp/.

a desired (primary or auxiliary) domain name may be difficult to come by: Multiple parties may have legitimate claim to a given domain name, bad actors may purchase domain names associated with trademarks, or investors may purchase potentially valuable domain names to resell them later at a profit.[22] Although resolution mechanisms exist for some disputes, the first-come, first-served market remains the primary means of determining the legitimate owner of a given domain name.[23] Domains may trade hands for hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars; one company recently reported selling a domain name for $30 million USD, and LasVegas.com was purchased in 2005 for up to $90 million USD, to be paid in installments through 2040.[24]

Data Sources

In this paper, I rely on digital methods, "the use of online and digital technologies to collect and analyze research data."[25] More specifically, I consider digital data that were 1) created as a byproduct of activity within the online sphere and 2) archived by parties recognizing the value of this data. This methodological approach is necessarily

22. Lindsay, *International Domain Name Law*; National Research Council, *Signposts in Cyberspace*, 67; Halvorson, "Registration Intent in the Domain Name Market," 15.

23. Lindsay, *International Domain Name Law*; Lindenthal, "Valuable Words."

24. MicroStrategy, "MicroStrategy Sells Voice.com Domain Name for $30 Million," *Business Wire*, June 18, 2019, https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190618005248/en/MicroStrategy-Sells-Voice.com-Domain-30-Million/; Michael Berkens, "Report: Vegas.com Bought LasVegas.com in 2005 For Up to $90 Million Dollars," *The Domains*, Nov. 6, 2015, https://www.thedomains.com/2015/11/06/report-vegas-com-bought-lasvegas-com-in-2005-for-up-to-90-million-dollars/.

25. Helene Snee, Christine Hine, Yvette Morey, Steven Roberts, and Haley Watson, "Digital Methods as Mainstream Methodology: An Introduction," in *Digital Methods for Social Science: An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation*, edited by Helene Snee, Christine Hine, Yvette Morey, Steven Roberts, and Hayley Watson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.

incomplete; scholarly or journalistic interviews with parties involved in this process could offer insights and answer questions I am unable to address here. However, this approach remains detailed and exact where it is complete; more importantly, it also offers details into this history that associated parties have so far not made public and may not be forthcoming about. This study is therefore meant as an initial exploration of an important event in contemporary Mormon history through a sociotechnical lens—not as an ultimate and authoritative account of its details and importance.

In describing changes to the (Anglophone-aimed) domain names employed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I rely on two key sources of data. I first accessed historical versions of associated websites through the Wayback Machine (web.archive.org), a service operated by the Internet Archive that captures historical versions of web pages. However, sometime in early 2021, archived versions of another website previously found at churchofjesuschrist.org (i.e., before this domain name became publicly associated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on March 5, 2019) disappeared from the Wayback Machine. In response to my queries, an Internet Archive employee explained to me that they could not comment on any particular cases but that owners of a domain name can request that associated archives be removed from the Wayback Machine. This raises (but does not confirm) the possibility that this part of Mormon digital history was removed at the request of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Although I had already taken screenshots of key Wayback Machine captures (which I also use as reference material), I nonetheless replaced now-missing data with archived WHOIS data. WHOIS ("who is?") is a name given to contact information provided by domain name owners to companies that manage registration of those domain names; WHOIS data can be made private, but in other cases it serves as a contact directory for website owners. Although WHOIS data are updated as changes

are made to domain names, there are services that regularly retrieve and archive these data, thereby providing an indirect record of internet history. In April 2021, I purchased from the Domain Tools service (https://whois.domaintools.com) a history of WHOIS data for churchofjesuschrist.org going back to January 5, 2001. I use those records to lend further insight into the history of that domain name.

Latter-day Saint Domain Names Through 2018

The relationship between domain names, names, and legitimacy in the Latter-day Saint context extends back to the early history of the World Wide Web. In this section, I show how the development of lds.org and mormon.org illustrate this relationship.

Development of lds.org

The first record of lds.org in the Internet Archive dates to November 9, 1996.[26] This first version of the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doesn't reveal much. Two short sentences explain that the website is still under construction but that it will eventually contain information of interest to Latter-day Saints and others.

Nonetheless, it is already clear that lds.org was intended to help establish Latter-day Saints' Christian legitimacy. The banner image at the top of the page featured a then-new logo for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that placed the name "Jesus Christ" in a more prominent position. Just a month earlier, an article in the *Ensign* had introduced this logo to Latter-day Saints with explanations that would be familiar twenty-two years later: Jesus Christ is at the center of Latter-day Saint beliefs, the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a product of revelation, and the name "Mormon"

26. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Official Internet Site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," Nov. 9, 1996, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/19961109080544/http://www.lds.org/.

distracts from the first two points.[27] The banner image also featured the *Christus* statue, a Danish work of art that Latter-day Saints have long employed to suggest Christian legitimacy—and that would be added in April 2020 to an updated version of the previously mentioned logo.[28]

The juxtaposition of these developments suggests that the relationship between names, domain names, and legitimacy has been present since the very beginning of official Latter-day Saint online presence. Indeed, the introduction of the 1996 logo in the *Ensign* not only noted its emphasis on Jesus Christ but also suggested that its new design made it "easier to read and to identify in the electronic media."[29] Such a statement illustrates not only Latter-day Saint leaders' early adoption of the internet as a means of establishing Christian legitimacy but also their recognition that the systems of legitimacy inherent to this medium must be navigated as part of that adoption.

Development of mormon.org

In December of 1996, as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continued to update lds.org, the Wayback Machine made its first captures of mormon.org and mormon.net. While Latter-day Saint leaders had clearly embraced the World Wide Web, the importance of managing one's web presence by acquiring a range of domain names was not yet the established advice that it is today. Thus, in late 1996, both

27. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "New Church Logo Announced," *Ensign,* Oct. 1996, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1996/10/news-of-the-church/new-church-logo-announced/.

28. Florence Smith Jacobsen, "Christus Statue," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 1:273–74; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Church's New Symbol Emphasizes the Centrality of the Savior," *Newsroom*, Apr. 4, 2020, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-symbol-church-of-jesus-christ/.

29. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "New Church Logo Announced."

domains were being operated privately by the same Latter-day Saint individual, the first as a host of web pages for mission alumni, wards, and other Mormon affinity groups and the second as a "'Pro-Mormon' site for both Latter-day Saints and others."[30] Of course, from the Latter-day Saint leadership's perspective, this is not the worst possible outcome for a Mormon-related domain name. Indeed, mormon.com was operated for a time in the late 1990s as a pornography website that trolled any Latter-day Saints who made their way there by accident.[31] However, as of a December 1998 Wayback Machine capture, mormon.com was being operated as a sympathetic but unofficial website in the same vein as mormon.net and mormon.org.[32] The new owner of the website made it clear that he had purchased the domain name with the express purpose of improving Latter-day Saints' online image—and that the purchase had been rather expensive.[33]

In 2001, Latter-day Saint officials took steps to bring all three of these domain names under their control. Sometime between March and June, mormon.com began redirecting to the official Latter-day Saint website at lds.org; mormon.net began to do the same between April and May of the same year. However, by the time the Wayback Machine captured mormon.com in November 2001 and mormon.net

30. John D. Hays, "Mormon.ORG Site," Dec. 28, 1996, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/19961228131851/http://mormon.org/; John D. Hays, "Mormon.NET," Dec. 21, 1996, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/19961225141401/http://mormon.net:80/.

31. "www.mormon.com," Dec. 21, 1997, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/19971221121500/http://mormon.com/.

32. "Mormon.com—An Internet Resource for Latter-day Saints," Dec. 5, 1998, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/19981205035658/http://www.mormon.com/.

33. JoAnn Jacobsen-Wells, "LDS Businessman Cleans Up Web Site; Mormon.com Was Filled with Pornography, So Bishop Decided to Buy and Sanitize It," *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 16, 1998, https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?itype=storyID&id=100F37CE6689D1D4.

in May 2002, both were redirecting to a now-official mormon.org, which the Wayback Machine first captured in October 2001. Although lds.org had initially been presented as a resource for both internal and external audiences, the Latter-day Saint acquisition of mormon.org signaled a change in strategy, with the new website introducing itself as "for anyone interested in learning more about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."[34]

Like lds.org, the establishment of an official Latter-day Saint mormon.org was driven by a concern for legitimacy. The seeming impetus for these online presence changes in 2001 was the upcoming 2002 Winter Olympics, hosted in Salt Lake City and therefore perceived by Latter-day Saint leadership as an important opportunity to build acceptance. And yet, the choice to use "Mormon"-themed domain names to put Latter-day Saints' best foot forward stood in tension with other efforts Church leaders were making at the time. Indeed, in an interview with Dallin Oaks published in the *New York Times* in early 2001, the reporter noted that Latter-day Saint leaders would "step up efforts to discourage use of the term Mormon Church and instead emphasize the name Jesus Christ in references to the church" (though Oaks did not express the same broad resistance to the term "Mormon" that would later become characteristic of Latter-day Saint leadership).[35]

In this same interview, Oaks also sanctioned the abbreviated name "Church of Jesus Christ." This abbreviation has since become increasingly prominent in Latter-day Saint approaches to naming, including increased visual prominence in the faith's current logo and forming the

34. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Official Information about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)," Oct. 9, 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20011009233416/http://www.mormon.org/.

35. Gustav Niebuhr, "Adapting 'Mormon' to Emphasize Christianity," *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/19/us/adapting-mormon-to-emphasize-christianity.html.

new official Latter-day Saint domain name.[36] This abbreviated name has obvious appeal in terms of the quest for Christian legitimacy; however, by claiming this name for themselves, Latter-day Saint leaders also make an implicit argument about their church's legitimacy within the Smith-Rigdon movement. In his 2001 interview, the reporter described Oaks as arguing that it was appropriate to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the Church of Jesus Christ "because no other major Christian body in the United States had laid claim to it."[37] This line of thinking is noteworthy for how it concedes that there may be other Christian bodies that lay claim to this name but both dismisses them as serious ("major") contenders and conceals that denominations within the Smith-Rigdon movement are prominent among these dismissed churches, including The Church of Jesus Christ based in Monongahela, Pennsylvania.[38] By laying claim to legitimate use of the name, Oaks implicitly argued that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the sole rightful heir to the religious movement begun by Joseph Smith Jr.—but in a way that obscured even the existence of any dispute over rightful heirs to names and traditions.

The need for legitimacy within the Smith-Rigdon movement would also inform the most prominent redesign to mormon.org over its lifetime. In July 2010, the site received a major overhaul that put individual Latter-day Saints in the spotlight.[39] Some of these "I'm a Mormon" profiles were produced and curated at the institutional level (in conjunction with YouTube videos and other social media outreach), but most were created by individual members eager to contribute to their

36. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Church's New Symbol Emphasizes the Centrality of the Savior."

37. Niebuhr, "Adapting 'Mormon' to Emphasize Christianity."

38. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*.

39. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Mormon.org," Jul. 21, 2010, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20100721233356/http://www.mormon.org/.

faith's online missionary efforts. In a striking departure from previous campaigns emphasizing the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the official announcement of this redesign leaned into the name "Mormon," celebrating that "2,000 Mormons have completed profiles . . . explaining why they live their faith and why they are a Mormon."[40] This reclaiming of "Mormon" was part of a broader effort within Latter-day Saint public affairs that responded to increased attention in the media and in pop culture during the late 2000s to polygamous groups also claiming the name "Mormon."[41] Whereas the name had previously been downplayed in order to shore up Christian legitimacy, it was now being revived in response to more urgent needs to paint perceived competitors within the Smith-Rigdon movement as unacceptable alternatives—and therefore unworthy of their shared name.

This overhaul also corresponded with the rise of so-called Web 2.0—a perhaps exaggerated shift from static web pages to interactive web platforms in the mid-to-late 2000s. That is, it is noteworthy that mormon.org shifted focus from institutional characteristics to individuals' lived experiences at the same time that "the value and usefulness of web activity" was becoming "contingent on the number of participating users."[42] Just as the creation of lds.org suggested Latter-day Saint leaders' attention to the need for legitimate web presence, this redesign of

40. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "New Mormon.org Brings Mormons to the Forefront," *Newsroom*, Jul. 15, 2010, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/new-mormon-org-brings-mormons-to-the-forefront/.

41. Cragun and Nielsen, "Fighting over 'Mormon'"; Tanya D. Zuk, "'Proud Mormon Polygamist': Assimilation, Popular Memory, and the Mormon Churches in *Big Love*," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, no. 1 (2014): 93–106.

42. Neil Selwyn, "Web 2.0 Applications as Alternative Environments for Informal Learning—A Critical Review" (paper presented at the OECD CERI-KERIS International Expert Meeting on ICT and Educational Performance, Cheju Island, South Korea, Oct. 17, 2007).

mormon.org suggests continued attention to what confers legitimacy in the online sphere. However, mormon.org's life as an interactive platform also raises questions about content moderation and legitimacy. In short, the legitimacy of an interactive platform depends in great part on the perceived authenticity of individual activity on the platform; yet, this stands in tension with Latter-day Saint leaders' preference for correlation as a means of legitimation. As Tarleton Gillespie writes, no interactive platform wants to moderate content, but all must ultimately do so.[43] Thus, the official announcement of the mormon.org redesign noted that "profiles are reviewed, but not edited or modified;"[44] however, when an alt-right Mormon blogger began drawing attention in 2017, her profile was "quietly removed" from mormon.org.[45]

Latter-day Saint Domain Names After 2018

Although Latter-day Saint officials discouraged terms like "L.D.S." and "Mormon"[46] before 2018, this clearly did not prevent them from continuing to use the domain names lds.org and mormon.org. In contrast, the renewed emphasis of the late 2010s and early 2020s signaled not only a reversal of the recent leaning into the term "Mormon" but also a willingness to go further than before in changing names—including domain names.

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43. Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018), 5–9.

44. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "New Mormon.org Brings Mormons to the Forefront."

45. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Mormon Blogger Trumpets Alt-Right Racial Views, But is Out of Tune with Her Religion," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 2, 2017, https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=5116879&itype=CMSID.

46. Niebuhr, "Adapting 'Mormon' to Emphasize Christianity."

Replacing lds.org

In March 2019, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced that it would be replacing lds.org with churchofjesuschrist.org (styled as ChurchofJesusChrist.org, though domain names are not case-sensitive). This began as a simple redirect, with the official website continuing to exist at lds.org; however, by June of that same year, churchofjesuschrist.org had become the primary domain name, with lds.org now redirecting to it.[47] The choice of this domain name was an obvious one given Latter-day Saint leaders' long-standing preference for this abbreviated name and their current priorities; however, their ability to acquire the domain name was not so straightforward.

Indeed, in 2018, churchofjesuschrist.org was operated by another Smith-Rigdon church that contested the legitimacy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion was established in 1984 by later-excommunicated Latter-day Saint Kenneth Asay, who claimed to be the reincarnation of Joseph Smith Jr.; after Asay's death the next year, fellow former Latter-day Saint Roger Billings assumed leadership of the church, which he incorporated in Missouri in 1989. Wayback Machine captures of churchofjesuschrist.org in late 1999 suggest that the organization was using the name "The Church of Jesus Christ" for a time (hence the choice of domain name); however, WHOIS records describe the "Church of Jesus Christ in Zion" as the owner of the domain as far back as January 1999, and Steven Shields suggests that this full name played an important role in Asay's founding of the church and his claims to legitimacy over The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some sources record Billings as advocating polygamy, though he has also distanced himself from or denied such statements on other occasions.[48]

47. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ."

48. Shields, *Divergent Paths of the Restoration*, 359–64.

As an offshoot expression with fundamentalist characteristics, The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion is likely seen by its Salt Lake cousins as a liability to their own bids for acceptability; however, this was clearly not enough to prevent Latter-day Saint leaders from purchasing a domain name from the other church. Apostle Neil Andersen explained in an October 2021 general conference talk that his church's Intellectual Property Office had been interested in churchofjesuschrist.org since 2006;[49] it is unclear how this interest manifested, but even if the Intellectual Property Office was actively offering to buy the domain name at this time, the offer did not convince The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion. Indeed, the latter denomination did not abandon or sell the domain even after it began redirecting it to a new main domain name—churchofjesuschristinzion.org—in 2013.[50]

Nevertheless, things began to change in 2018. WHOIS data suggest that the denomination renewed their ownership of churchofjesuschrist.org in January 2018, giving them legitimate ownership over the domain through January 2022. However, sometime after August 15 and before August 23, 2018 (that is, likely after Nelson's August 16 announcement on naming), churchofjesuschrist.org was disconnected from churchofjesuschristinzion.org and connected with GoDaddy's CashParking service, which displays ads on legitimately owned but unused domain names. These data complicate Neil Andersen's description of Latter-day Saint acquisition of the domain name, which gives the impression that the previous owner publicly and coincidentally communicated an independent decision to sell churchofjesuschrist.org in August 2018.[51] In contrast, The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion's renewal of the domain through 2022 before a sudden willingness to sell in August 2018

49. Andersen, "The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable."

50. The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion, "Church of Jesus Christ," Mar. 13, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20130313055339/http://www.churchofjesuschristinzion.org/.

51. Andersen, "The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable."

suggests that their decision to sell was more strategic and responsive. One might speculate that renewed Latter-day Saint commitment to names could have translated to higher offers for this domain name, leading The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion to reconsider their ownership. Whatever the details of the transaction, churchofjesuschrist.org became associated with servers owned by Intellectual Reserve (a legal entity that manages Latter-day Saint intellectual property) between October 10 and October 12, 2018, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced in March 2019 that it would be using the domain name.[52]

Even after Latter-day Saint leadership had obtained ownership of churchofjesuschrist.org, the history of its transaction with The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion created potential threats to Latter-day Saint legitimacy by association. In addition to his religious leadership, Billings is the founder of the Institute of Science and Technology; references to the Institute under an earlier name appear in early WHOIS data for churchofjesuschrist.org, underlining close ties between it and The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion. The Institute is an unaccredited educational body in Kansas City from which Billings claims a doctoral degree.[53] Acellus Learning, an online learning platform associated with the Institute, attracted controversy during the COVID-19 pandemic: Benjamin Herold reported that schools "in at least two states have cut ties . . . over concerns about offensive curricular material."[54] Bill-

52. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ."

53. Sarah Emerson and Matthew Giles, "A Popular Online Learning Platform Was Actually Created by an Underground Religious 'Cult,'" *OneZero,* Oct. 9, 2020, https://onezero.medium.com/a-major-online-learning-platform-was-created-by-a-subterranean-religious-cult-whose-leader-has-cec99e7adcaf/.

54. Benjamin Herold, "Complaints Over Offensive Content Lead Schools to Drop Online Learning Provider," *Education Week*, Aug. 31, 2020, https://www.edweek.org/technology/complaints-over-offensive-content-lead-schools-to-drop-online-learning-provider/2020/08/.

ings dismissed the criticism as unfounded and at least once suggested that Latter-day Saint officials and Brigham Young University–Hawaii employees were engaged in a smear campaign against him.[55] Further reporting on the controversy included allegations of "physical and mental violence, the sexualization of minors, and the deliberate separation of families under Billings' leadership" of The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion as well as accusations of the coercion of church members into unpaid labor.[56]

In repeating these allegations, my intent is not to validate them but rather to further illustrate the tensions between naming, domain names, and legitimacy that are the focus of this paper. Indeed, based on my accessing of the Wayback Machine to explore churchofjesuschrist.org, I estimate that its Billings-era history was removed sometime between September 2020 and March 2021—that is, sometime after Billings began to receive this negative attention. If this history was indeed removed at the request of Latter-day Saint leaders—which remains the most obvious but far from conclusive explanation—this could suggest an eagerness to distance themselves from Billings and the controversy surrounding him. To be clear, the present data do not allow for such a conclusion; however, this paper's focus on disputes over names and legitimacy as enacted in and through sociotechnical systems necessarily raises the question.

Purchasing Other Domains

Like lds.org, mormon.org was judged in late 2018 to be an inappropriate domain name in view of contemporary Latter-day Saint priorities. In March 2019, it was replaced with comeuntochrist.org until it could

55. Gina Mangieri, "Acellus Online Content Flagged as Petitions Ask DOE to Cut or Keep It," KHON2, Aug. 24, 2020, https://www.khon2.com/always-investigating/acellus-online-content-flagged-as-petitions-ask-doe-to-cut-or-keep-it/.

56. Emerson and Giles, "Popular Online Learning Platform."

be integrated into the new churchofjesuschrist.org domain.[57] The first Wayback Machine capture of comeuntochrist.org dates back to September 2006, when it was being run as yet another unofficial, pro-Mormon missionary site; it continued in this capacity until at least 2016.[58] Captures of the website during 2017 and 2018 are incomplete or inconclusive, lending some ambiguity to its history. However, the domain was obviously acquired by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sometime before March 2019, when it began redirecting to mormon.org. In late April 2019, comeuntochrist.org became the main domain name[59] until early February 2021, when it began redirecting to a specific subsite on churchofjesuschrist.org.[60]

Apostle Neil Andersen also reported that churchofjesuschrist.com was purchased around the same time as churchofjesuschrist.org.[61] Although this domain does not seem to have been associated with the Smith-Rigdon movement prior to the Latter-day Saint purchase of it, it was used off-and-on by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community between 2010 and at least 2016.[62] Around this same time period, the

57. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Changes to Emphasize the Correct Name of the Church of Jesus Christ."

58. ComeUntoChrist.org, "Come Unto Christ," Sept. 2, 2006, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20060902202930/http://www.comeuntochrist.org/.

59. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "All Are Invited to Come Unto Christ," Apr. 25, 2019, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20190425205413/https://www.comeuntochrist.org/site/home/.

60. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Home | ComeUnto-Christ," Feb. 11, 2021, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20210211040255/https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/comeuntochrist/.

61. Andersen, "The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable."

62. Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, "Al Islam: The Official Website of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community," Apr. 2, 2010, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20100402224946/http://churchofjesuschrist.com/; Internet Archive, Oct. 10, 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20161021102655/http://www

Wayback Machine captured the domain being offered for sale on the secondary market for asking prices of $20,000 USD in 2017 and $10,000 GBP in 2015.[63] These captures do not, of course, demonstrate that this much money ever actually changed hands, but they do suggest perceptions that the domain name was potentially valuable. By early 2018, churchofjesuschrist.com was being used to redirect to the website for a piracy-based streaming service,[64] and in late August 2018, it was used to redirect to a seemingly nonfunctioning site at the primary domain bibleonline.org.[65] However, by December 2018, the domain was clearly under the Church's control, first as a stand-alone website and eventually as a redirect to its main domain.[66]

Discussion and Conclusion

Digital technologies present The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with new ways to argue for its legitimacy as a Christian institution and as the legitimate heir to the nineteenth-century church

.churchofjesuschrist.com/. Note that this URL redirects to an archived version of a post at themuslimtimes.info, demonstrating how the domain name was being used by a Muslim community at the time of the Internet Archive capture.

63. Sedo, "churchofjesuschrist.com," Sept. 13, 2017, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20170913192240/http://churchofjesuschrist.com/; Sedo, "churchofjesuschrist.com," Aug. 1, 2015, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20150801093613/http://churchofjesuschrist.com/.

64. TVizion, "Welcome to TVizion," May 31, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180531215342/http://www.tvizion.com/member/24477/; BehindMLM, "247 SmartLife & TVizion sued by Dish Network," May 27, 2018, https://behindmlm.com/mlm-reviews/247-smartlife-tvizion-sued-by-dish-network/.

65. Internet Archive, Aug. 22, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180822101409/http://www.churchofjesuschrist.com/. Note that this URL redirects to an archived copy of a nonfunctioning site at bibleonline.org.

66. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Beliefs," Dec. 1, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20181201161556/https://churchofjesuschrist.com/.

founded by Joseph Smith Jr. Indeed, the history of official Latter-day Saint domain names demonstrates that leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been eager to embrace the internet as a means for increasing their acceptability: lds.org was established in the early years of the World Wide Web, the 2010 redesign of mormon.org demonstrated continued attention to trends in web use, and the breadth of changes made to Latter-day Saint accounts and applications after 2018 indicated the extent of leaders' commitment to an official Latter-day Saint presence on the internet.

Yet, in making this commitment, the Latter-day Saint leadership must defer to the ways that legitimacy is determined within the sociotechnical systems that govern the use of these technologies. Furthermore, individuals or organizations that can navigate those systems better or more quickly also have opportunities to challenge Latter-day Saint legitimacy—or shore up their own at Latter-day Saints' expense. Although the Latter-day Saint leadership's purchase of lds.org in the mid-1990s allowed it to argue for its Christian legitimacy and lay claim to a particular name, few—if any—people or organizations then understood the social importance of the web or the value that domain names would eventually hold. Thus, because the sociotechnical mechanics of the Domain Name System defined a liberal market where the first to come was the first served, other entities were able to easily lay claim to names that would later be of interest to Latter-day Saint leaders. In the case of mormon.org and mormon.net, these leaders were lucky that these other parties were sympathetic to and interested in shoring up Latter-day Saint legitimacy; however, the brief operation of mormon.com as a pornography site—an implicit challenging of Mormon legitimacy—illustrates the threats of failing to correctly navigate this sociotechnical system.

More recent history lends further insight into these tensions. Latter-day Saint officials' present reemphasis on their church's full name is often framed as a quest for Christian legitimacy in particular; however, this paper's focus on domain names illustrates the way in which

Latter-day Saint institutions still struggle with other Smith-Rigdon churches over the legitimacy of their claims to be Joseph Smith Jr.'s true successors. Acquiring churchofjesuschrist.org required that Latter-day Saint officials interact with an offshoot movement. Furthermore, while The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has significantly more members, deeper coffers, and greater legitimacy in the public eye, The Church of Jesus Christ in Zion effectively nullified those advantages in an online context by being the first to establish its naming claims and associated legitimacy within the constraints of the Domain Name System. While the latter church ultimately renounced its legitimate claim to the contested domain name, it may have been in a position to demand a considerable price in exchange. Neil Andersen has assured Latter-day Saints that "the Church purchased the domain name at a very modest amount,"[67] but considering both Latter-day Saint institutional wealth and reported sales of domain names for millions of US dollars, even a modest amount relative to this context could be significant in real terms.

Furthermore, there is at least one other party implicated in questions about names, domain names, and legitimacy. The Church of Jesus Christ—founded by William Bickerton, based in Pennsylvania, and representing the third-largest Smith-Rigdon denomination—has used the domain names thechurchofjesuschrist.com and thechurchofjesuschrist.org since the early 2000s.[68] Given the importance that then-apostle Russell Nelson once placed on "The" in the full name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—as well as the Latter-day Saint style guide's capitalizing "The" even when this church's name appears in the middle of a sentence—it is likely that Latter-day Saint officials have

67. Andersen, "The Name of the Church Is Not Negotiable."

68. The Church of Jesus Christ, "The Church of Jesus Christ," Oct. 22, 2003, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20031022175213/http://thechurchofjesuschrist.org/; The Church of Jesus Christ, "The Church of Jesus Christ," Mar. 12, 2001, archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20010312005513/http://thechurchofjesuschrist.com/.

also been monitoring these domain names.[69] Yet, no matter the level of Latter-day Saint interest in these domain names, the Domain Name System understands legitimacy in a way that will consistently favor the smaller church over the larger one so long as the former acts to maintain its ownership of the domain.

Of course, the influence of sociotechnical systems on Latter-day Saints' efforts to establish their legitimacy is not limited to the Domain Name System. Consider, for example, the official Latter-day Saint presence on several popular social media platforms. Such a presence is dependent on several layers of technical infrastructure, collectively referred to as a "stack," and at "every level of the tech stack, corporations are placed in positions to make value judgements regarding the legitimacy of content."[70] That official Latter-day Saint content published to these platforms has not—and may never—become illegitimate in the sight of these corporations does not remove its dependence on their implicit blessing to pursue legitimacy in its own way. Furthermore, to the extent that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is dependent on other digital platforms to spread its messages, it is subject to the fact that platforms shape "the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them;"[71] how, for example, does tweeting support for

69. Russell M. Nelson, "Thus Shall My Church Be Called," Apr. 1990, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1990/04/thus-shall-my-church-be-called?lang=eng (I am indebted to Kristine Haglund for calling my attention to this); The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Style Guide—The Name of the Church," *Newsroom*, https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/style-guide/.

70. Joan Donovan, "Navigating the Tech Stack: When, Where and How Should We Moderate Content?," Oct. 28, 2019, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/navigating-tech-stack-when-where-and-how-should-we-moderate-content/.

71. José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

a Latter-day Saint leader (as opposed to raising one's hand) change the act of sustaining?[72]

Likewise, these same sociotechnical systems may also be advantageous to those who wish to challenge Latter-day Saint leadership—or who do so unintentionally. While the recent switch from a crowdsourced mormon.org to a correlated subsite of churchofjesuschrist.org reduces the possibility of a controversial Latter-day Saint embarrassing the broader institution on its own website, "the complex intersection of top-down (LDS Church authorities) and bottom-up (LDS member generated) processes" continues to exist elsewhere on the internet.[73] For example, social media platforms allow Latter-day Saints "to present Mormon identities and approach Mormon practice in ways other than those that are typically seen (or approved of) in formal Church settings," serve as a "tool for the expression of dissatisfaction" for former or heterodox Latter-day Saints, and can allow state actors to promote self-serving narratives about Mormonism.[74] For all the obstacles posed by the Domain Name System, the sheer scale of voices empowered by social media makes enforcing naming and promoting legitimacy even more complicated.

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72. Spencer P. Greenhalgh, K. Bret Staudt Willet, and Matthew J. Koehler, "Approaches to Mormon Identity and Practice in the #ldsconf Twitter Hashtag," *Journal of Media and Religion* 18, no. 4 (2019): 131.

73. Benjamin Burroughs and Gavin Feller, "Religious Memetics: Institutional Authority in Digital/Lived Religion," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2015): 357–77.

74. Greenhalgh, Staudt Willet, and Koehler, "Approaches to Mormon Identity and Practice"; Mark D. Johns and Shelby Nelson, "Analyzing Main Channel and Back-Channel Tweets During the October Church of Latter Day Saints General Conference" (paper presented at the 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers, Phoenix, Ariz., Oct. 21–24, 2015), 2; Spencer P. Greenhalgh, "Mormonism as Meme in Government-Sponsored Information Operations on Twitter," *Tropos: Comunicação, Sociedade E Cultura* 10, no. 1 (July 2021).

These additional examples demonstrate the continued need for understanding how Latter-day Saint conceptions of legitimacy and authority interact with developments in digital technologies. Indeed, while this article has focused on Anglophone-aimed domain names, other post-2018 changes to the Latter-day Saint online presence are worthy of scholarly attention. A number of official sources have referenced the "consolidation" of Latter-day Saint web pages and social media accounts, which apostle Ronald Rasband described as aligning "well with the First Presidency's desire to simplify the tools that we use."[75] This suggests that Latter-day Saint leaders have priorities for their church's online presence that go beyond naming—but likely still touch on questions of legitimacy, opening further avenues for fruitful research. Furthermore, Rasband's comments were in the context of Latter-day Saint web presence in languages other than English, a glaring omission from this study. An explicitly multilingual, global investigation would lend further insight into how online presence connects with other aspects of naming and legitimacy in a worldwide church.

75. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Official Social Media Accounts for Church Leaders and Groups," https://www.churchofjesus christ.org/learn/social-media-accounts?lang=eng; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Eighteen Spanish-Language Global Newsroom Sites Consolidate into One," *Newsroom*, Sept 18., 2020, https://newsroom .churchofjesuschrist.org/article/spanish-language-global-newsroom.

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TRANSCENDING MORMONISM: TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCES IN THE LDS CHURCH

Keith Burns and Linwood J. Lewis

In 1980, LDS authorities used the term "transsexual" for the first time publicly when they prohibited "transsexual operations" in their official *General Handbook of Instructions.* They made clear that "members who have undergone transsexual operations must be excommunicated" and that "after excommunication such a person is not eligible for baptism."[1] Such harsh policies were rooted in a broader ambience of strict boundary enforcement of a male–female gender binary and patriarchal hierarchy. This gender-based power structure relied (and still relies) on biologically and theologically essential claims of sexual difference while paradoxically asserting the perpetual malleability and fluidity of gender performance and behavior.[2] In other words, LDS leaders have simultaneously framed gender as biologically immutable *and* a contingent product of culture, practice, and environment.[3] However, because the LDS Church among broader conservative movements was focused on the more culturally and politically salient issue of homosexuality, their mentions of trans issues remained scarce for many decades.

1. "Transsexual Operations," *General Handbook of Instructions* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980).

2. Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 1–15.

3. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 173–90.

In the 2020 General Handbook, LDS authorities added more detail than ever before regarding trans issues.[4] Some additions seemed to show increased compassion and inclusion for trans individuals, while others doubled down on long-standing discriminatory policies that punish transitional surgeries.[5] In addition, they made clear that "social transitioning" would be grounds for membership restrictions[6] (i.e., Church discipline), a new policy that has raised questions about how boundaries of gender nonconformity will be policed in the Church. To make legible an identity (or identities) that currently has little to no semantic or symbolic space in LDS theology, many trans Mormons conscientiously negotiate the relationship between their religious and gender identities, a process that often involves conflict, pain, and despair.[7]

Desiring to better understand how people are navigating these complex identity negotiations, I interviewed seven trans and/or gender nonconforming Mormons between eighteen and forty-four years old living in various regions of the United States as part of my graduate studies at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. All participants identified as white, politically liberal, and were either current or former

4. "Transgender Individuals," section 38.6.23 in *General Handbook of Instructions: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020), www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number118.

5. Jana Riess, "New LDS Handbook Softens Stance on Sexuality, Doubles Down on Transgender Rules," *Religion News Service*, Feb. 19, 2020, https://religionnews.com/2020/02/19/new-lds-handbook-softens-some-stances-on-sexuality-doubles-down-on-transgender-members/.

6. "Transgender Individuals," *General Handbook of Instructions*, 2020.

7. J. Sumerau and Ryan Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism: Transgender Perspectives on Gender and Priesthood Ordination," in *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 123.

college students.[8] They will be referred to with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Six of the seven interviews were one-time hour-long conversations via Zoom, and one interview with an individual I will refer to as Juliana (age forty-four) was a written exchange that consisted of several emails. Analyses from the interviews are intermingled throughout with the purpose of highlighting some of the nuances, complexities, and differences that exist across trans Mormon experiences.

In order to present sufficient contextual background, I will first provide a brief history of gender and homosexuality in the post–World War II LDS Church. Next, I will discuss in depth the specific ways in which interviewees were negotiating and making meaning of their trans and Mormon identities in the context of broader trans experiences. I will then describe important evolution on Church policies affecting trans individuals and propose institutional and theological suggestions for creating a more inclusive and affirming space for all sexual and gender identities within the Church. Ultimately, the beauty and diversity of trans Mormon experiences calls for a restructuring of current cissexist and heterosexist Church policies and a reimagining of LDS theology such that moral character and eternal glory are not dependent on one's gender identity and romantic relationships.

LDS Frameworks on Homosexuality and Gender—An Overview

Before delving into the specific experiences of those I interviewed, I will provide an overview of the ways in which LDS elites have constructed sexual and gender classification schemes that perpetually position nonheteronormative individuals as deficient, oppositional, and/or sinful, a

8. The racial, political, and class similarities of those I interviewed certainly pose limitations on my research, as trans Mormons of color or trans Mormons who have different political views or educational backgrounds most likely have different ways of relating to their gender and religious identities.

sociological phenomenon referred to by Michael Schwalbe as "oppressive othering."[9] As gay and lesbian sexual liberation movements gained increased social and political momentum in the late 1950s and 60s, LDS authorities began harshly and publicly condemning homosexuality (and then later transgender experiences) on the grounds that it confuses gender roles and fundamentally defies God's universal plan.[10]

Homosexuality

Because experiences around what we now call "transgender" identity did not have linguistic space until the latter part of the twentieth century, the first mentions of sexual and gender minorities by LDS authorities focused on people they referred to as "homosexuals." In fact, the first time the words "homosexual" and "homosexuality" appeared in a public speech from an LDS authority was in 1952.[11] Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Church leaders had begun punishing alleged "sodomites," excommunicating members found guilty of "the crime against nature." They even organized "witch hunts," where Church officials hunted down and interrogated allegedly homosexual men, enacting harsh disciplinary action upon guilty individuals.[12]

9. Michael Schwalbe, Sandra Godwin, Daphne Holden, Douglas Schrock, Shealy Thompson, and Michele Wolkomir, "Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis," *Social Forces* 79, no. 2 (Dec. 2000): 419–52. See also J. Edward Sumerau and Ryan T. Cragun, "'Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do That to Anyone': Oppressive Othering through Sexual Classification Schemes in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints," *Symbolic Interaction* 37, no. 3 (2014): 331–52.

10. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 1–18.

11. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 63.

12. Connell O'Donovan, "'The Abominable and Detestable Crime Against Nature': A Revised History of Homosexuality and Mormonism, 1840–1980," last revised 2004, http://www.connellodonovan.com/abom.html.

Rhetoric from Church elites around homosexuality became increasingly harsh and public during the 1950s and 60s.[13] Spencer W. Kimball, a prominent mid-twentieth century figure in Mormon leadership, after discovering that several Christian groups had started reaching out in compassion to homosexuals, stated: "Voices must cry out against them. Ours cannot remain silent. To the great Moses, these perversions were an abomination and a defilement worthy of death. To Paul, it was unnatural, unmanly, ungodly, and a dishonorable passion of an adulterous nature and would close all doors to the kingdom."[14] His stern condemnations were part of a top-down campaign in which LDS leaders framed homosexuality as a viral contagion and serious threat to individual, familial, and societal well-being, one that required urgent treatment and forceful eradication.[15] In line with white, middle-class notions of respectability, Mormon leaders frequently positioned homosexuality as part of the decaying moral fabric of American society and antithetical to happy, successful family life. In doing so, they leveraged a host of "homosexuality causes" that often had to do with poor parenting, sexual abuse, masturbation, pornography, and a confusion of gender roles, among other things.[16]

Exposure to pornography was an especially prevalent explanation. For example, LDS authority Victor Brown once said to a worldwide church audience: "A normal twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy or girl exposed to pornographic literature could develop into a homosexual. You can take healthy boys or girls and by exposing them to abnormalities

13. Ryan T. Cragun, J. E. Sumerau, and Emily Williams, "From Sodomy to Sympathy: LDS Elites' Discursive Construction of Homosexuality Over Time," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (May 2015): 291–310.

14. Spencer W. Kimball, "Voices of the Past, of the Present, of the Future," *Ensign*, June 1971, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1971/06/voices-of-the-past-of-the-present-of-the-future?lang=eng.

15. Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, "From Sodomy to Sympathy," 296.

16. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 53–103.

virtually crystallize and settle their habits."[17] Echoing traditional Christian fears concerning pornography, as well as middle-class fears about sexual knowledge and experimentation,[18] LDS elites argued that moral transgressions like pornography could literally cause homosexuality. These oppressive frameworks, grounded in psychodynamic theories of sexual malleability and fluidity, paved the way for the widespread practice of aversion therapy and reparative therapy (reparative therapy is sometimes referred to as conversion therapy).

The general assumption of Church leaders at the time was that sexual malleability explained "how someone could . . . become homosexual to begin with" and offered "a plan for that person to embrace heterosexuality."[19] Aversion therapy, most notably practiced at Brigham Young University at least until the late 1970s, may have consisted of electroshock therapy programs, nausea-inducing chemical treatments, and a host of other dehumanizing methods in an attempt to change the sexual orientation of homosexual people.[20] Reparative therapy and other less aggressive forms of sexual orientation change efforts have persisted for many more decades and are even still practiced today.[21] Under the guise of healing and helping homosexual individuals

17. Victor Brown Jr. "Two Views of Sexuality," *Ensign*, July 1975, https://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1975/07/two-views-of-sexuality?lang=eng.

18. Sumerau and Cragun. "Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do That to Anyone," 344.

19. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 91.

20. Latter Gay Stories, "BYU Electroshock Documentary | Gay Conversion Therapy Program," originally produced by Gentile Pictures in 1996, YouTube video, Mar. 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biGQs20JhW0.

21. Gregory A. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church: Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019), 89–101; Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 192–94.

"overcome their disease"[22] through a variety of treatment methods, the LDS Church justified decades of inhumane and sometimes torturous methods in an attempt to obliterate homosexuality from the Church and American society as a whole.

Gender

Central to LDS theology is the idea that gender is an essential and divine characteristic assigned by God in the premortal life. In a semi-canonical 1995 document called "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," top LDS leaders declare that "gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose."[23] They also explicitly outline what they believe to be God-given male and female roles: "By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children."[24] Within this patriarchal framework, LDS leaders have grounded female domestic labor and male economic opportunity in appeals to a "divine order."

This institutional structure is an example of what Raewyn Connell refers to as a "gender regime," or a particular configuration of power relations based on gendered divisions. She further explains that the construction and maintenance of patriarchal regimes often utilizes "strategic essentialism," or explanations of origin regarding supposedly

22. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*, 33. Spencer W. Kimball lumped together "the homosexual" with "peeping toms," exhibitionists, and perverts, employing the disease–cure paradigm.

23. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," Sept. 1995, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng.

24. "The Family: A Proclamation to the World."

innate sexual differences.[25] She concludes that "most origin stories are not history but mythmaking, which serves to justify some political view in the present."[26]

Although modern LDS leaders on the surface have presented gender as an immutable characteristic that begins in premortal existence, they have also devoted tremendous effort and resources to regulating male and female gender roles through political, legal, and cultural norms.[27] On the one hand, they have claimed that male and female sexual differences are natural and self-evident, but on the other hand, they have provided tireless cautions regarding the perpetual malleability and contingency of gender performance.[28] In other words, if not policed through institutional and cultural norms, gender identity and performativity is always at risk of failure, confusion, or alteration—a phenomenon that has at times been implicated as a cause (and a result) of homosexuality.[29]

Notwithstanding such contradictions, LDS gender schemes have long supported patriarchal frameworks that domesticate and subordinate women while empowering and enriching men.[30] More egalitarian notions of marriage have entered into LDS teachings in recent decades, something Taylor Petrey refers to as "soft egalitarianism," because men still "preside" over the home and the Church.[31] And since there is such a strong emphasis on conformity and obedience in the LDS Church, many male and female members who internalize these notions of sexual

25. Raewyn Connell, *Gender: In World Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 72–93.

26. Connell, *Gender: In World Perspective*, 88.

27. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 10–15.

28. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 182.

29. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 97–102.

30. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 123.

31. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 104–37.

difference and mid-twentieth-century gendered divisions of labor tend to feel close to God and fortified in their faith.[32]

Along with the emergence of rhetoric targeting homosexuality in the 1950s, Church leaders began describing gender as completely interchangeable with biological sex. LDS authorities (perhaps until very recently[33]) have collapsed gender and biological sex into one concept, an ideology that defies well-accepted feminist and anthropological arguments that have distinguished biological sex (meaning male and female bodies) from socially constructed "gender" (meaning social roles and norms that vary dramatically across culture and time).[34] As a result, LDS leaders tend to view gender (including gender identity, expression, and roles) as an immutable and natural outgrowth of biological sex. Similarly, heterosexual attraction/desire is assumed to be a predetermined, innate characteristic of one's gender or biological sex.[35] Within this scheme of biological essentialism, one that indistinguishably entangles gender and sex, Church leaders have conceptualized homosexuality as a direct result (and a cause) of gender confusion, or a concept nineteenth-century psychologists referred to as "gender inversion." Spencer W. Kimball put it this way:

> Every form of homosexuality is sin . . . Some people are ignorant or vicious and apparently attempting to destroy the concept of masculinity and femininity. More and more girls dress, groom, and act like men. More and more men dress, groom, and act like women. The high purposes of life are damaged and destroyed by the growing unisex theory. God made man in his own image, male and female made he them.

32. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 115.

33. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Transgender: Understanding Yourself," https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/transgender/understanding?lang=eng.

34. Taylor G. Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 4 (2011): 120–21.

35. Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," 121.

> With relatively few accidents of nature, we are born male or female. The Lord knew best. Certainly, men and women who would change their sex status will answer to their Maker.[36]

These arguments, which persist in the Church today, rely upon stereotypical depictions of atypically gendered homosexuality and reinforce cultural notions conflating sex, gender, and sexualities.[37] They also rely on assumptions that homosexuality both leads to and results from an "attack" on gender roles, and this rhetoric is part of a broader effort to enforce gender norms and punish gender deviance. Interestingly, Kimball's language equates homosexual experiences with what we would now call transgender experiences when he refers to homosexuals as people who "change their sex status." As a result, trans and gay experiences have often been rendered in LDS teachings as "the same" because they both involve a rejection of "divine gender norms."[38] Not only does this ignore the multitude of gender identities that span gay/lesbian experiences, and the fact that many trans people do not identify as gay/lesbian, it also serves a broader goal of reducing and making illegible sexual minority experiences in LDS contexts.

The Complexities of Trans and Gender Nonconforming Experiences

Throughout my interviews, I quickly noticed that individuals construct what it means to be "trans" very differently. For trans people more broadly, ideas about gender identity, gender expression, coming out (and being out), and the concept of gender itself vary dramatically and

36. Spencer W. Kimball, "God Will Not Be Mocked," Oct. 1974, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1974/11/god-will-not-be-mocked?lang=eng.

37. Sumerau and Cragun, "Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do That to Anyone," 343.

38. Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," 123.

sometimes contradict one another.[39] As I portray the personal ways in which interviewees negotiate (and renegotiate) their religious and gender identities, I will simultaneously emphasize the vast diversity contained in the space we call "trans Mormon."

Juliana's "Tinted Phone Booth" Analogy

> Have you ever had an opportunity to go inside of a tinted phone booth? I remember going inside one of these, and when the door was closed, how small and confining it felt to be inside there. I think of this as something like what it's like as I try to live inside my body. Being inside my body feels like my skin is like an outside wall of a phone booth and yet the "phone booth" is tinted such that not very many people can see that anyone is inside it. This is how I feel in my body. This is how I feel about my body. My female spirit inside my body yearns to be free. She pushes up against my skin and calls/pleads for help. A few people can hear her calling for help . . . and many cannot.[40]

The tinted phone booth analogy was one of the first descriptions Juliana provided about what her life was like as a "female spirit" trapped inside of a male body. This analogy seemed to capture her experiences so powerfully. She does not consider herself "out" and goes by "Julian" at work, at home, at church, and with her friends. She can count on one hand the people in her life who know about her internal sense of femaleness. Like many other trans Mormons, Juliana must navigate a series of complex, sensitive, and often painful decisions around who she is and who she wishes to be.

Gender Binary Versus Gender-free

Out of the individuals I interviewed, Juliana's description of being a woman trapped in a male body is perhaps the most familiar and conventional when discussing trans experiences. It is important to note that

39. David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 1–104.

40. Juliana (pseudonym), email correspondence with Keith Burns, July 2020.

she was the only middle-aged individual (age forty-four) with whom I spoke, as all others were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. While a significant percentage of people from younger generations do in fact experience their transness in the context of the male–female gender binary, when compared to older generations, it is more common for millennial and Gen Z trans individuals to construct gender identities that subvert or exist outside of the gender binary. Similarly, those of younger generations statistically have an easier time being out about their trans identity, while those of older generations like Juliana are more likely to remain stealth (i.e., hidden) about their trans identity.[41] These generational differences are understandable considering the substantively different cultural and political climates of current and past generations regarding acceptance of non-cisgender identities.

The individuals I spoke with revealed intricate and thoughtful ways in which they were constructing a sense of what it means to be trans and Mormon, and particularly, how they felt about gender itself as a concept. Several conceptualized their trans identity as existing within the male–female gender binary, while others described their gender identity as existing outside of or in between the gender binary. For instance, in explaining her fervent wish to allow her female spirit to be free, Juliana said:

> While my name is Julian, my heart wishes so acutely it were Juliana. I try hard to attend and participate in elders quorum [church group designated for men]. My heart wishes, however, that I could be in Relief Society [church group designated for women]. I try to bear numbing internal frustration, in part from a feeling like I need to wear a white, button-up shirt and necktie, by wearing mainly ties that have some pink in them; though my heart yearns to be wearing, instead, a cute dress and a necklace. But it's so much more than clothes. It's also sisterly connection.[42]

41. Kristen Schilt, *Just One of the Guys?: Transgender Men and the Persistence of Gender Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 70–100.

42. Juliana, email correspondence, July 2020.

As demonstrated by this moving excerpt, a sense of being trans for Juliana is inextricably linked to the male–female gender binary. Her sense of self is not only built on the feeling of "being female" but also on deeply yearning to "do female things," such as attending Relief Society meetings, having pink in her ties, and wearing "a cute dress and necklace." However, she explains that it is more than simply outward expression and clothing choice. She longs for a "sisterly connection" that would come from surrounding herself with other women.

Sarah (age twenty-three) was assigned male at birth and also experiences her trans identity within the gender binary. She underwent a gender confirmation surgery, transitioning to a woman in 2019. Interestingly, when asked about the concept of gender, she affirmed the LDS Church's conservative stance that God created two eternal genders—male and female. Thus, she simply believes that God gave her the wrong body: "While I don't have all the answers about gender, I at least know that God created male and female in his image. As for me and my situation, I don't exactly know what happened, although I do believe that God made me female and for some reason put me in a male body."[43] Sarah's belief that God mistakenly clothed her female spirit in a male body does not disrupt the firmness of her convictions in Mormon theology—in fact, it harmoniously fits within her beliefs about the eternal and essential nature of gender.

Kevin (age twenty-two) identities as a member of the trans community and more specifically as bigender. They described the complexity of their gender identity in this way:

> As I got older, I would talk to women, and I wished I was them. And in my sexual fantasies, I found myself, like, desiring to be a woman sometimes. And so recently, I've realized, like, that there's some aspects of being male that I feel I identify with and desire. And then there's also some aspects of being female that I empathize with and desire. I know a lot of trans people who kind of feel sort of in the middle where

43. Sarah (pseudonym), video call interview with Keith Burns, July 2020.

> they just don't really feel like they fit in with either. I've heard people describe themselves as, like, genderless blobs, and things like that. But that's never how I've felt. I've felt more like both genders and like strong pulls to either, instead of, like, being pushed towards the middle. So that's kind of why I've stuck with the bigender label, because it seems to fit that the best.[44]

Unlike Juliana, Kevin feels pulled toward both male and female genders, and their desire to be masculine and/or feminine varies across context and space. In this way, the term "bigender" provides clarity for their experiences and stands in contrast to what Kevin calls a "genderless blob."

Emily (age twenty-two) describes their gender identity as existing outside of, or perhaps in between, male and female concepts. They explained:

> The more that I kind of read about different connections to, like, gender and gender identity, I just kind of realized that I don't strongly identify or, like, feel really tied to being a girl or boy. Like, sometimes I used to have my hair all pulled up. I used to pull it up a lot, just like in a hat and hide it. And I would get, like, mistaken for a boy. And that, like, didn't bug me. But it didn't particularly make me feel, like, super awesome either. It was just like, okay, like, it just didn't matter. And so I've been having a lot more friends that are trans or nonbinary. And I kind of was just like, "Oh, I mean, yeah, that's how I feel. I didn't know that." So, I'm still trying to put words to it. And it's weird because it doesn't feel like I necessarily need to change how I look or how people refer to me. Um, but inside myself, I feel like I identify as nonbinary, like, not as strictly a boy or girl.[45]

Emily describes more of a neutrality or even apathy about their gender expression. Being "mistaken for a boy" was neither good nor bad for their self-image. In fact, they further explained that they "don't feel much of a need to label" themselves at all.

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44. Kevin (pseudonym), video call interview with Keith Burns, June 2020.

45. Emily (pseudonym), video call interview with Keith Burns, July 2020.

Beth (age eighteen) believes that God is not limited by a gender binary and encompasses a broad spectrum of gender identities.

> I absolutely know that nothing about me is a mistake. I absolutely know that people can change and people are capable of love. And I absolutely know that the divine, however you want to see that, however you want to see that divinity, cannot be limited and should not be limited when it comes to gender identity. God is not limited to male or female. Because the divine is all-encompassing. It's an all-encompassing love and an all-encompassing power that you can sit with and you can adapt to yourself however you want and that you can find strength in.[46]

Many trans Mormons like Beth validate their gender identity with appeals to a benevolent God who "doesn't make mistakes."[47] As someone whose gender identity falls outside of the traditional binary, Beth articulately affirms that God is the author and creator of all types of gender identities and experiences. Embedded in this position is a view that God's concept of gender (or lack thereof) has been tainted by sociohistorical and political constructions that have been organized into limiting male–female gender schemas.[48] Thus, some trans Mormons subvert altogether the Church's teachings regarding gender, while others explain their experiences within an "eternal gender" framework.[49] This reflects broader attitudes within United States trans communities, where there are some who advocate for an abolition of gender altogether, and yet others who call for an assimilation of nonconforming gender identities into previously existing gender structures.[50] As with Beth and Kevin, many individuals who resist or avoid

46. Beth (pseudonym), video call interview with Keith Burns, June 2020.

47. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 127.

48. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 115–32.

49. Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Transgender Mormons Struggle to Feel At Home in Their Bodies and Their Religion," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Apr. 7, 2015, https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=2318274&itype=CMSID.

50. Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 29–66.

the male–female binary still use the umbrella term "trans" to describe their identity while also using terms like genderqueer, gender nonbinary, bigender, gender-free, and/or agender to provide added or more specific meaning.[51] However, some gender-variant individuals prefer not to use the term "trans" at all, a phenomenon that further complexifies the usage of these terms and the symbolic and semantic spaces they occupy (or do not occupy).

Sexual Identity

Several individuals were in committed romantic relationships at the time of interview, including Sarah, who described the difficulty of articulating her sexual identity several times during our exchange. At one point, she explained that her relationship to her trans boyfriend puts her in an ambiguous space when it comes to sexual identity: "To be honest, I am not really sure about what my sexual identity is. Most of the time, I just identify as straight because I'm dating a trans guy, but I sometimes ask myself, am I pan? Or maybe bi?"[52] While Sarah's curiosity and uncertainty regarding her sexual identity was notable, she did not appear concerned about her difficulty describing it.

Like Sarah, Theresa (age twenty-five), who identities as nonbinary, also finds themselves in a space of ambiguity when it comes to sexual identity. They explained: "And then there have been brief phases where I was like, do I like guys? Do I not like guys? Am I just a lesbian who's confused? And especially in a society like ours—and I don't mean just LDS culture, I mean just heteronormative culture in general—it can be very confusing to be sure of what your identity is."[53] Acknowledging the difficulty of defining their sexual identity, Theresa points out heteronormative cultural pressures that influence the process of

51. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 116–18.

52. Sarah, interview, July 2020.

53. Theresa (pseudonym), video call interview with Keith Burns, April 2020.

identity development and the labels they decide to adopt. It is particularly interesting that they wonder if they are a "lesbian who's confused," a common cultural and theological notion that has framed transgender experiences as a hyperextension, an extremized version, or "the final result" of homosexuality.[54] Indeed, both Sarah's and Theresa's difficulties in expressing their sexual identities reveal the complex conceptual interplay between gender and sexuality. Their descriptions demonstrate that experiences of sexual desire and identity are dependent upon an ongoing appraisal of one's own and one's partner's gender identity, a phenomenon that reveals the overlapping fluidity and contingency embedded in such categories.[55]

Coming Out Versus Being Out

The individuals I interviewed characterized the concepts of coming out and being out with complexity and variation. For Juliana, who is not public about her trans identity, coming out has been a deeply private process involving careful decisions about when, and with whom, to disclose identity. To bring in again her tinted phone booth analogy, she yearns to remove the tint on the windows or restructure the windows altogether, although she feels she has no choice but to remain "trapped" inside. She explained: "I am nervous to share this secret. What would I do if people no longer accepted me in my current job, or if my children got hurt or shamed? These things worry me terribly. I'm not ready to share this with everyone yet, though sometimes I think many might already know or maybe have put two and two together."[56] Juliana feels that her familial, social, and professional life would crumble if her gender identity were made public. Interestingly, she presents herself

54. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 99.

55. Elizabeth M. Morgan, "Contemporary Issues in Sexual Orientation and Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood," *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 1 (Mar. 2013): 60.

56. Juliana, email correspondence, July 2020.

in normatively masculine ways (i.e., wears men's clothes, uses typical masculine mannerisms), but she still fears that others may be suspicious about her "secret." I imagine that this hypersensitivity is common among trans Mormons who are not out, an indication of the immense fear and anxiety people like Juliana experience at the thought of others finding out about their identity.

For others, a physical and/or social transition is in and of itself a type of coming-out, or as many trans individuals put it, "being out."[57] When several individuals I interviewed explained the concept of "being out," they emphasized that they are not necessarily out by choice. Their altered physical appearances, either because of surgery, hormonal treatment, and/or gender expression, create a constant state of "outness," one in which their personal decisions around when and with whom to disclose their gender identity become less relevant. Beth described her sense of being out in this way:

> I was just out running errands for somebody one time, and I was standing at a tech store, and my back was facing the door and somebody came in. And one of the sales associates was like, "Oh, I'll be right with you." And the guy was like, "Oh no worries, *he* was there first." And I was like, *whoa*. I couldn't stop smiling. I was like, I can't believe that I was perceived as slightly androgynous. So, I don't experience gender dysphoria, as much as I do experience gender euphoria, you know, able to present and be perceived as, you know, androgynous, even though nonbinary and androgynous aren't necessarily equal, but you know, it just makes me feel very happy.[58]

Even though Beth identifies as nonbinary, they frequently explained a desire to be "perceived as androgynous." This experience of being read as a "he" in the store shows that Beth's sense of being out is less about verbalizing or declaring their gender identity and more about being perceived in certain ways by others. They describe a feeling of "gender

57. Schilt, *Just One of the Guys?*, 61–83.

58. Beth, interview, June 2020.

euphoria" as opposed to dysphoria when others are able to correctly perceive their expression of gender in a particular context.

Identity Salience

For some, identifying as trans is a crucial and all-encompassing part of their sense of self, while for others, it takes up a small or nonexistent identity space.[59] Several of the trans Mormons I spoke with reflected this broader phenomenon, as they articulated the salience of their transness (or lack of transness) in significantly different and complex ways. To provide a few examples, Emily, who identifies as nonbinary, explained their gender identity in this way:

> About a year ago is when I kind of started to question my gender. And it's kind of weird, because, like, I feel comfortable kind of presenting pretty feminine sometimes, like I have my nails done and, like, long hair and I still go by Emily. But sometimes, I feel comfortable presenting more masculine, like with my hair rolled up. Sometimes people will, like, automatically think that I am trans because I prefer to use they/them pronouns and present in, like, ambiguous ways, but I don't think of myself as trans because I don't really have a desire to transition to any specific gender identity.[60]

For Emily, a nonbinary identity is not connected to a trans label. They do not consider themselves to be trans because they lack the desire to "transition" to a specific gender identity, a notion that links trans identity to the traditional gender binary.

Kevin, on the other hand, uses the term "trans" as a way to explain their bigender identity:

> I'm still kind of figuring out my gender. But the one [term] that has stuck with me the most right now is bigender. It's a label that's under the trans umbrella. And I definitely feel comfortable in the trans community. But yeah, I, like, found that a lot of the people I was closest to and had the

59. Schilt, *Just One of the Guys?*, 67–83.

60. Emily, interview, July 2020.

> most similar case to in my online friends community were often trans. And I found that a lot of the music I liked was the same frequently as people who are trans and I felt connected to the emotions and identity of the music and the themes it was exploring.[61]

Although Kevin describes their identity in tentative terms, they express a comfortability and resonance with the "trans community." Interestingly, their sense of transness is also connected to the particular emotions and identity of their music preferences, which they have found to be shared by other trans people. It seems that a significant aspect of Kevin's trans identity is the social comradery and connection that comes from their intimate social circles consisting of other trans individuals. Kevin's and Emily's intricate articulations of their gender identities demonstrate the varying levels of salience that gender nonconforming individuals may or may not assign to the term "trans" when making sense of their identities.

Gender Dysphoria

It is commonly assumed that trans identity is inseparably connected to an experience of gender dysphoria. However, several individuals I spoke with did not report any feelings of gender dysphoria. Recall that Beth describes a feeling of "gender euphoria" as opposed to gender dysphoria. They elaborated on that concept in this way:

> I had this dream one time that I was performing in, like, a drag king sort of setting. And I was perceived as super butch and masculine and that sort of stuff. And then as the song progressed, I transformed into a more and more feminine version of myself. And when I woke up from that dream, I was like, that's the most whole I've felt in my entire life, is when I can accept both of those ends of the spectrum in myself, and I can see all of those complexities and nuances in myself. So, once I started to be a little more aware about that, when people use gender-neutral pronouns for me, or anything like that, it's just this sense of like, yes, that is who I am![62]

61. Kevin, interview, June 2020.

62. Beth, interview, June 2020.

Beth's gender identity involves an embracing and harmonizing of masculine and feminine concepts. Rather than experiencing a sense of dysphoria or conflict, Beth feels affirmed and "whole" when they embrace "both ends of the spectrum" in themselves. They went on to explain that their experience of feeling more masculine or feminine depends on the time and context and can often feel unpredictable.

Unlike Beth, Juliana has been diagnosed with gender dysphoria by a previous mental health clinician. She explained:

> Looking in mirrors is painful for me because a reflection looking back at me doesn't match who I see myself as on the inside. Not a day goes by that I'm not reminded of this. Thirteen years ago, when my depression reached a point where I was struggling to sleep, I decided to go see a therapist. I explained to this therapist that I'd been waking up in the middle of the night (my sleep would just thin out and I would find myself staring at the ceiling at two o'clock in the morning), just wishing/yearning that I could put on a dress. Often my pillow was wet with tears. After a few months, the therapist diagnosed me with gender identity disorder—a designation that was eventually changed to gender dysphoria.[63]

Juliana experiences immense distress over the painful and incessant dissonance between her assigned biological sex and her internal sense of gender. However, because of social and ecclesiastical fears, she does not feel that transitioning is a reasonable possibility at this point in her life.

From a clinical perspective, gender dysphoria is diagnosed when one experiences significant levels of distress and/or dysfunction, such as Juliana's experiences described above. Furthermore, having a gender dysphoria diagnosis is often a prerequisite for receiving insurance coverage for gender confirmation surgery and/or hormonal treatment, a structural reality that often leads clinicians to overdiagnose gender

63. Juliana, email correspondence, July 2020.

dysphoria.[64] Clinicians and researchers continue to discuss complex questions regarding the so-called "etiology" of gender dysphoria. Is one's sense of dysphoria caused by an inherent physiological-psychological disconnect between assigned biological sex and internal sense of gender, or rather by a culturally constructed system that discriminates against and ostracizes gender-nonconforming individuals? Or a combination of both?[65] Examining these challenging questions helps researchers and clinicians to better appreciate the complex, mutually constitutive interplay that occurs between individual experiences and cultural scripts regarding gender.

Battles over Labels

The specific language gender-nonconforming Mormons use to describe themselves intersects with complex sociocultural and religious factors, including the fact that LDS leaders have for decades sought to regulate the ways in which others conceptualize their experience of gender.[66] They have often discouraged the use of what they view as "permanent" or "fixed" labels in favor of descriptors that signify a temporary and resolvable condition or trial.[67] For example, the label "same-sex attracted" was for decades preferred over gay, lesbian, or queer.[68] Only recently has this begun to shift, as the majority of current leaders have become increasingly accepting of the term "transgender" as an identity label.[68]

64. Elijah C. Nealy, *Transgender Children and Youth: Cultivating Pride and Joy with Families in Transition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 106–10.

65. Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, 71–104.

66. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 120–28.

67. Boyd K. Packer, "To the One," address given to the Twelve Stake Fireside, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Mar. 5, 1978, p. 8, available at https://blakeclan.org/jon/to-the-one/; Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 175–208.

68. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 197–200.

Another powerful rhetorical technique has been the framing of gender-nonconforming experiences as the result of confusion caused by Satan. Boyd K. Packer said in 1978: "If an individual becomes trapped somewhere between masculinity and femininity, he can be captive of the adversary and under the threat of losing his potential godhood."[69] For Packer, Satan's traps lay deceptively between the rigid boundaries of a Victorian gender binary, and if an individual was failing to perform gender "correctly," they were at risk of losing salvation and godhood. In a more recent speech addressing the worldwide Church, Dallin H. Oaks said: "Our knowledge of God's revealed plan of salvation requires us to oppose current social and legal pressures to retreat from traditional marriage and to make changes that confuse or alter gender or homogenize the differences between men and women. . . . [Satan] seeks to confuse gender, to distort marriage, and to discourage childbearing—especially by parents who will raise children in truth."[70]

Both outspoken and prominent voices on issues of gender and sexuality, Packer (who passed away in 2015) and Oaks have frequently invoked God's authority to shore up heteronormative cisgender claims, a tactic that simultaneously adds credibility and force to their assertions while also deflecting responsibility from themselves and other Church leaders, the very individuals who have the power to change policies and teachings regarding sexual and gender minorities.[71] In addition, describing Satan as the author of "confusion" around sexual and gender variation is a weaponizing technique that can exacerbate internal shame, depression, and suicidality among LGBTQ+

69. Boyd K. Packer, "To the One," address given to the Twelve Stake Fireside, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Mar. 5, 1978, p. 8, available at https://blakeclan.org/jon/to-the-one/.

70. Dallin H. Oaks, "Truth and the Plan," Oct. 2018, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/10/truth-and-the-plan?lang=eng.

71. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 152.

Mormons.[72] The employment of the figure "Satan" has also contributed to the long-standing framework that cisgender heterosexual identities and relationships are "real" while non-heteronormative identities and relationships are "counterfeit."[73] In 2015, senior leader L. Tom Perry explained: "We want our voice to be heard against all of the counterfeit and alternative lifestyles that try to replace the family organization that God Himself established."[74]

These types of top-down messages and battles over language can sometimes discourage Church members from adopting an identity label under the trans umbrella by framing heteronormative cisgender experience as the only possibility allowed by God. Among those influenced by this rhetoric is Mary (age twenty).

> And then in terms of gender, this is something I haven't talked about much with my parents, but I have a friend whose boyfriend is transgender. And my parents have equated it to kind of like, sometimes there's people who will have a ghost limb, even though their arm is still there, they'll feel like, *Oh, my arm isn't supposed to be there* or something. And my dad would say like, "Oh, even though they have this feeling that this part of their body is wrong, like, a doctor is not going to just cut off their arm because that would harm the person." And they kind of equate that to, like, gender reassignment surgery, it's kind of like, even though you feel this way, like, that's just not the way that things are. So yeah, I think in terms of my family, it's kind of just like, oh, here are the standard norms set by our family and our religion. And like I said before, how my dad compared it to his friend who cheated on his wife, or also in previous letters he has said, like, he doesn't want me to

72. Trudy Ring, "Mormon Leader: LGBTQ Advocacy Comes from Satan," *The Advocate*, Oct. 8, 2018, https://www.advocate.com/religion/2018/10/08/mormon-leader-lgbtq-advocacy-comes-satan.

73. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 169.

74. L. Tom Perry, "Why Marriage and Family Matter—Everywhere in the World," Apr. 2015, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2015/04/why-marriage-and-family-matter-everywhere-in-the-world?lang=eng.

> use trans as a label, that he would prefer that I use labels like, oh, I'm a child of God, like that's my primary label.[75]

Having grown up in an environment where transgender experiences were equated to having a phantom limb or cheating on a spouse (a disorder and an immoral behavior), Mary finds it difficult to label their current experiences pertaining to gender. They point out the powerful influence family and religious norms have had on their identity formation, especially their dad's discouragement of the use of "trans" as a label. Recently, Mary has been "experimenting with [their] pronouns" and considering a "nonbinary" identity label. However, "child of God" as the "most important label" is an idea that has been deployed by LDS leaders who have sought to minimize or erase non-heteronormative identities.[76] Thus, it is crucial that gender-nonconforming Mormons critically analyze top-down messaging regarding labels as they construct a sense of identity in ways that feel most meaningful to them.

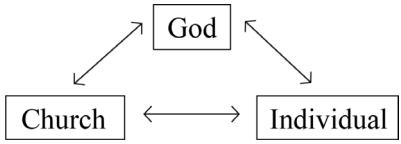
A Crucial Ternary for Trans Mormons

LDS gender minorities often navigate complex paths of identity negotiation and formation. While many feel they must make an "either-or" choice between their religious and gender identities, others find (or place) themselves in more ambiguous territory, negotiating a working

75. Mary (pseudonym), video call interview with Keith Burns, April 2020.

76. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 169; David Bednar, "There are no homosexual members of the Church —David A Bednar, February 23, 2016," YouTube video, Feb. 29, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQ4_wTGv8Ao. At a young adult Face to Face event, Bednar was asked by a member of the audience how homosexual members can stay faithful in the Church. He began his response with the premise that "there are no homosexual members of the Church" because of the inappropriateness of using homosexual as a label. Note that at the time this contradicted MormonAndGay.org, which used the terms "lesbian, gay, and bisexual" to refer to current members of the Church.

relationship between these identities.[77] In a 2015 survey of 114 trans Mormons (or former Mormons), 38 percent of respondents said they were on LDS membership rolls and identified as LDS, 43 percent thought their names remained on the rolls although they themselves no longer identified as LDS, and 19 percent said they were no longer members of record.[78] As these results depict, a vast diversity of trans Mormon experience exists, as individuals conceptualize (and reconceptualize) a dynamic and ongoing relationship with God, the Church, and themselves. Below is an illustration of this three-part relationship, or what I refer to as "a crucial ternary for trans Mormons."[79]



As part of this ternary, the trans Mormons I interviewed were each uniquely negotiating a relationship between their personal experiences, their religious convictions, and their institutional loyalties to the Church. For Sarah, remaining faithful to the Church is pivotal to her sense of self and does not detract from her trans identity. She explained:

> I've been reading a lot of stuff online from other trans Mormons—or I guess I should say ex-Mormons. A lot of people say something along the lines of "you're rejecting your trans identity if you stay in the LDS Church." I really don't agree with that. I feel like I am a trans woman through and through. While I do have very real fears about even the thought of transitioning, I don't feel like that detracts from my overall sense of identity. I don't think people should be so judgmental about

77. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 117–21.

78. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 120.

79. Jan Drucker, personal communication, April 2021. This phrase was created in a collaboration with Dr. Drucker, who at the time was one of my graduate professors.

> what people *should* or *shouldn't* do. Decisions around transgender identity should be left up to the individual.[80]

This sentiment that only by leaving the Church can one fully embrace their gender identity is commonly expressed among trans former members of the Church.[81] However, Sarah, who is deeply connected to her LDS identity, feels that this type of advice fails to acknowledge the personal complexities and individual nature of trans Mormon experiences. Furthermore, such notions create classification schemes that label people as "more" or "less" trans, a framework that often leads to judgment, divisiveness, and misunderstanding.

While several individuals I spoke with had completely disaffiliated from the Church, others were critical about some Church teachings while still describing themselves as faithful members. For example, Emily explained their relationship with the LDS Church in this way:

> It's okay if I don't go to church one week. And it's okay to not believe every single thing. Once I decided that, I felt a lot more free to, like, figure out what I actually liked about the Church or how I actually felt and who I was. Because I think that the Church's structure, as presented to me at least, was very rigid. And so, those problems that came up, I didn't know what to do with. And so once I was like, *oh, that's okay, I can just choose the things that I like*, I felt a lot more like I started discovering my identity, if that makes sense.[82]

Emily grew up in an environment where they felt they needed to accept every teaching and claim of the Church. In recent years, they have embraced a more selective approach, choosing to accept or reject Church teachings according to their personal judgment and experiences. They emphasize what they see as the "beauties" of "the Church" and "the gospel," while simultaneously expressing skepticism toward

80. Sarah, interview, July 2020.

81. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 115–32.

82. Emily, interview, July 2020.

teachings they deem as more a product of "human imperfections." This approach is captured by a long-standing label found in LDS culture (and other faith traditions): "cafeteria Mormon," i.e., a Church member who accepts teachings they agree with and rejects teachings they do not agree with.[83] Several individuals I interviewed described their relationship to the Church in this way. Kevin, for example, wished they would have adopted a "cafeteria Mormon" approach earlier in life. They explained:

> And it's kind of sad, because I have a lot of friends that are still in the Church but are dating somebody of the same gender. And they're like, "Oh, well, I just feel like I have a really close relationship with God, and so I know that this is fine for me." And they're like, "You can have that too." And it just feels too late, if that makes sense. Which makes me sad, because I feel like if I grew up feeling like I could have part of it, and I don't have to believe in every single rigid thing, then I would have been able to stay and have that church community. And have the comfort of going to church and feeling like I have heavenly parents who love me and Jesus to be on my side. But now it kind of feels like it's too late.[84]

Kevin finds great value in the sense of community facilitated by the Church as well as the core teaching that heavenly parents love and want to help their children, although they feel that it is "too late" to repair the years of damage and trauma caused by their Church membership. Kevin certainly feels like such harm could have been alleviated by a more nuanced and less "rigid" approach to faith, one in which it was okay to accept some teachings and reject others. This type of "pick and choose" mindset that Kevin is describing seems to provide a safer space whereby some trans members can find a home in the Church.

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83. Keith Burns, "Follow the Prophet—But Only When What He Says Aligns with Your Political Views," *Daily Herald*, Nov. 6, 2021, https://www.heraldextra.com/news/opinion/2021/nov/06/guest-follow-the-prophet-but-only-when-what-he-says-aligns-with-your-political-views/.

84. Kevin, interview, June 2020.

Another idea expressed by several interviewees is that their personal relationship with God transcends or supersedes their relationship with the Church. In the same survey of 114 trans Mormons that I referenced previously, 86 percent of respondents placed more importance on personal revelation than on obedience to Church authority in their religious lives.[85] A theological foundation of Mormonism is that God hears and answers prayers and will give personalized revelation and inspiration to those who seek it.[86] However, the idea that God answers individual prayers and gives specific direction accordingly poses an uncomfortable tension and paradox in LDS theology. On the one hand, individuals are encouraged and even expected to seek answers from God regarding important decisions in their life; on the other hand, conformity and obedience to leaders is paramount to LDS constructions of faithfulness and devotion.[87] So, what happens when one's personal revelations from God do not align with what Church leaders are teaching to be God's word? Several trans Mormons I spoke with were asking (or answering) some version of this question. Here is Beth's thoughtful perspective:

> Another thing that is preached so heavily in the LDS Church is that once you leave, you will never find happiness. And that is so untrue. You can find the same spirituality and divinity and happiness in other places because that is inside of you, and not anything that an organization or an institution gives to you. And that was a real turning point for me recognizing that I could still hold to my faith and stand up for equality, and stand up against the institution of the Church. And that's really I think the phase we're in right now of understanding that institutions don't always have all the answers, and that doesn't make your faith or answers to prayer any less valid or any less sacred.[88]

85. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 120.

86. Blaire Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2021), 16–27.

87. Sumerau and Cragun, "Trans-forming Mormonism," 115.

88. Beth, interview, June 2020.

Prior to this turning point in thinking, Beth grew up in an environment where LDS leaders were given final authority to determine the decisions and behaviors that constitute "true happiness." They no longer grant that authority to religious institutions and organizations (especially the LDS Church) and instead place moral authority on their own sense of judgment. As they point out, divinity and spirituality are internally discovered and personally governed pursuits, not absolute truths dictated and regulated by religious authorities. In short, Beth privileges their personal judgment and inclinations over the moral and theological assertions of Church leaders.

Institutional Evolution on Trans Issues

LDS leaders periodically revise what is now called the General Handbook, a manual that contains detailed instructions about Church procedure, policy, and doctrine.[89] The first ever mention of the word "transsexual" appeared in the 1980 version of the handbook, where there was a small and somewhat vague section regarding "transsexual operations": "The Church counsels against transsexual operations, and members who undergo such procedures require disciplinary action. . . . Investigators [prospective members learning about the Church] who have already undergone transsexual operations may be baptized if otherwise worthy on condition that an appropriate notation be made on the membership record so as to preclude such individuals from either receiving the priesthood or temple recommends. . . . Members who have undergone transsexual operations must be excommunicated. After excommunication such a person is not eligible for baptism."[90] The addition of this section in the general Church handbook was possibly in response to a specific and unusual case involving a Church member who had undergone a male-to-female surgery and desired a temple

89. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*, 269–70.

90. "Transsexual Operations," *General Handbook of Instructions*, 1980.

marriage with a cisgender male. Uncertain about how to proceed, her stake president contacted the presiding General Authority, Hugh Pinnock, who authorized the individual to receive her temple endowment and get sealed to her husband as a woman (their temple wedding was performed in February of 1980). Shocked and surprised by Pinnock's authorization, the stake president contacted another General Authority, Robert Simpson, who emphatically repudiated what had been authorized by Pinnock.[91]

Five years later, Church leaders slightly softened their hard-line policy about "transsexual operations." Instead of condemning a person who underwent a transsexual operation to a non-negotiable and final excommunication, there was a subtle change in policy: "After excommunication, such a person is not eligible for baptism unless approved by the First Presidency."[92] This caveat, while still harsh, allowed for exceptions to be made and individual circumstances to be considered by the highest governing body of the Church. In 1989, language in the general handbook was again softened and revised: "Church leaders counsel against elective transsexual operations. A bishop [leader of a local congregation] should inform a member contemplating such an operation of this counsel and should advise the member that the operation may be cause for formal Church discipline. In questionable cases, a bishop should obtain the counsel of the First Presidency."[93] It is noteworthy that Church leaders introduced the term "elective" to qualify the description of an operation, although it is still not exactly clear what they meant by it. Also, they downgraded the severity and certainty of punishment by stating that "the operation *may be cause* for formal Church discipline."[94]

91. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*, 270–74.

92. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*, 273.

93. "Elective Transsexual Operations," *General Handbook of Instructions*, 1989.

94. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*, 273–74.

For the next several decades, the Church did not make substantive changes or revisions to this wording. The 2010 handbook used quite similar language with a few minor modifications: "The Church counsels against elective transsexual operations. If a member is contemplating such an operation, a presiding officer informs him of this counsel and advises him that the operation may be cause for formal Church discipline. Bishops refer questions on specific cases to the stake president. The stake president may direct questions to the Office of the First Presidency if necessary."[95] It is interesting that the pronoun used in this section is "him," suggesting that LDS leaders were either more concerned with transwomen (i.e., biologically assigned males who become women) or subscribing to an incorrect assumption that gender confirmation surgeries were disproportionately being performed on biological males. The former seems more plausible than the latter because violations of masculinity pose greater social and institutional threats to the Church than violations of femininity.[96] In other words, because men occupy most leadership and administrative positions in the Church, and are generally perceived as more consequential than women, "losing a man" is worse than "losing a woman." However, it is worth noting that trans men who attend elders quorum instead of Relief Society may also threaten the ecclesiastical and social order because of their "unholy" ambitions to receive and exercise the priesthood.

One reason that this was the only statement in the 2010 handbook addressing trans issues might be that Church leaders were exhausting more efforts and resources on addressing lesbian/gay issues, especially considering their political and legal efforts to fight against same-sex marriage.[97] However, they did reaffirm in explicit terms that any form

95. "Elective Transsexual Operations," *General Handbook of Instructions*, 2010.

96. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*, 119–25.

97. Prince, *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*, 126–59.

of transitional surgery would be grounds for Church discipline, a punishment that bars access to LDS temples (considered the highest and holiest form of worship) and prohibits serving in leadership positions. The fact that a surgical transition (or even considering a surgical transition) compromises one's institutional standing and access to spiritual opportunities reflects long-standing classification schemes that punish individuals who deviate from cisgender heteronormativity.

In 2020, LDS authorities added more detail regarding the experiences of trans individuals to the handbook. In a section titled "Transgender Individuals," they began by expressing sympathy and compassion for people who experience "incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity": "Transgender individuals face complex challenges. Members and nonmembers who identify as transgender—and their family and friends—should be treated with sensitivity, kindness, compassion, and an abundance of Christlike love. All are welcome to attend sacrament meeting, other Sunday meetings, and social events of the Church."[98] This beginning section reflects a clear effort to appear more tolerant of trans individuals, especially considering that the Church has attracted negative publicity in recent years regarding their treatment of sexual and gender minorities.[99] While there arguably has been increased acceptance of trans Mormons, statements like this seem to be part of a broader effort to put a kinder and gentler brand on traditional frameworks that maintain the inferiority of gender-nonconforming members.[100] This section is also found in the most recent handbook: "Church leaders counsel against elective medical or surgical intervention for the purpose of attempting to transition to the opposite gender of a person's biological sex at birth ('sex

98. "General Handbook of Instructions: Transgender Individuals," 2020.

99. Riess, "New LDS Handbook Softens Stance on Sexuality, Doubles Down on Transgender Rules."

100. Sumerau and Cragun, "Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do That to Anyone," 338.

reassignment'). Leaders advise that taking these actions will be cause for Church membership restrictions. Leaders also counsel against social transitioning. A social transition includes changing dress or grooming, or changing a name or pronouns, to present oneself as other than his or her biological sex at birth. Leaders advise that those who socially transition will experience some Church membership restrictions for the duration of this transition."[101]

As in the 2010 handbook, physical transition (which they refer to as "sex reassignment," a term that many trans individuals feel withholds affirmation of one's gender identity) is grounds for membership restrictions, including loss of temple privileges and inability to serve in leadership positions. Beth had thoughts about the handbook's ecclesiastical sanctions:

> You know, I was thinking about their recent handbook changes that came out that said individuals that had gender-affirming surgery were no longer worthy for temple recommends and stuff. And I was just laughing a little bit because, like, it's so arrogant to think that God really did make our bodies cisgender, you know . . . God made my body the way that I am. And so, who is anybody to say that, you know, that God didn't?[102]

Beth's frustrations and critiques center on the arbitrary and power-based nature of LDS theological assertions concerning gender. They question why it is acceptable for LDS leaders to tell trans individuals that decisions around their bodies and/or identities are "not of God." The use of God as an authority figure to bolster certain theological assertions has been leveraged by LDS leaders (and other religious leaders) against sexual and gender minorities for decades.[103]

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101. "General Handbook of Instructions: Transgender Individuals," 2020.

102. Beth, interview, June 2020.

103. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 16–38.

Interestingly, Church leaders added that "social transitioning" and the use of hormones for the purpose of transitioning are both grounds for membership restrictions, but only "for the duration of this transition." Several trans Mormons with whom I spoke found these statements to be vague and arbitrary, especially the concept of social transitioning. Among those was Sarah, who shared her reactions in this way:

> I don't really get what they mean by "social transitioning." It seems kind of arbitrary and hard to measure. I mean, I sometimes enjoy wearing pink and more feminine-looking clothing. I occasionally let my hair grow out long. Does that mean I'm socially transitioning? I feel like there are many feminine men and masculine women in the Church, and it is too difficult to regulate the blurry lines between social transitioning and just wanting to present a little more like the other gender.[104]

Sarah points out how difficult it is to police one's performance of masculinity or femininity. After all, at what point does a biologically assigned male stop presenting male? And when does a biologically assigned female no longer appear female? Does it have to do with hair length, earrings, makeup, clothing style, mannerisms, all the above? As Taylor Petrey astutely put it, "If biology was so immutable, it wouldn't need to be ecclesiastically enforced. In spite of themselves, these new guidelines show that for Latter-day Saints, gender is what one does, not what one is or has."[105] This keen insight exposes the ongoing contradiction in LDS thinking that gender is a biologically immutable characteristic *and* a social category that requires constant regulation through cultural, theological, and legal norms. In other words, "supposedly essential differences depend on cultural production."[106]

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104. Sarah, interview, July 2020.

105. Taylor G. Petrey, "If Biology Was Immutable, It Wouldn't Need to Be Enforced," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Feb. 21, 2020, https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2020/02/21/taylor-g-petrey-if/.

106. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 174.

Such arbitrary sanctions for any kind of transitioning also exacerbate what many trans Mormons call "bishop roulette," the idea that different bishops have drastically different ways of interpreting Church policies and teachings, interpretations that are often influenced by geographic area, age, and/or political orientation.[107] What may appear as "social transitioning" to an older, more conservative bishop from rural Utah may be deemed a perfectly appropriate presentation by a younger, more progressive bishop from New York City. Due to the unpredictability of local leaders' perspectives and approaches, many sexual and gender minority members find themselves jumping across congregations until they find a bishop that is friendlier toward them. Theresa described a telling personal example of "bishop roulette":

> And so, I ended up dating my friend who is trans. And I told my bishop that I was dating someone. And he lights up. And I say, "Just so you know, he's trans," and his face drops. And I basically didn't go to the ward after that because I just, I couldn't deal with it. I was so frustrated. Like, you're so excited that I'm dating someone until you find out that.[108]

Understandably frustrated and hurt, Theresa tried a different congregation and found a bishop "who was much more supportive" and "happy to hear" that they were in this new relationship. Theresa pointed out that the second bishop was considerably younger than the first, highlighting what they saw as a clear generational effect. Like Theresa, many trans Mormons encounter drastically different and sometimes opposing viewpoints on Church policy and teachings from local leaders, a phenomenon that can often feel confusing, disorienting, and painful.

Although Church leaders doubled down on policies and teachings that encourage individuals to conform to their assigned biological sex, there were segments of the 2020 handbook that offered glimmers of hope for trans Mormons. While any form of transitioning is still

107. Riess, "New LDS Handbook Softens Stance on Sexuality, Doubles Down on Transgender Rules."

108. Theresa, interview, April 2020.

grounds for Church discipline, a small note was added about the use of preferred pronouns: "If a member decides to change his or her preferred name or pronouns of address, the name preference may be noted in the preferred name field on the membership record. The person may be addressed by the preferred name in the ward."[109] Many trans Mormons and advocates were pleasantly surprised after finding this apparent concession in the updated handbook.[110] However, it is important to note that the key term here is "preferred name." While local leaders will allow individuals to be addressed by their preferred name and pronouns, they will *not* allow individuals to change their *actual* name on membership records, a distinction that continues to make clear that any form of transition away from one's biologically assigned sex is not accepted.

Another policy addition that has been cause for hope among trans Mormons has to do with baptism and confirmation (rituals necessary for entrance into the Church) as well as temple and priesthood ordinances (sacred rituals/steps made available to "worthy" members of the Church): "Transgender persons may be baptized and confirmed as outlined in 38.2.3.14. They may also partake of the sacrament and receive priesthood blessings. However, priesthood ordination and temple ordinances are received according to biological sex at birth."[111] Before 2020, the question of whether trans individuals could be baptized and confirmed was a thorny issue for local leaders.[112] Some felt it was acceptable while others did not. Perhaps implementing a blanket policy allowing trans people to join the Church through baptism is a step in the right direction. However, it is important to note that section 38.2.3.14 of the

109. "General Handbook of Instructions: Transgender Individuals," 2020.

110. Riess, "New LDS Handbook Softens Stance on Sexuality, Doubles Down on Transgender Rules."

111. "General Handbook of Instructions: Transgender Individuals," 2020.

112. Riess, "New LDS Handbook Softens Stance on Sexuality, Doubles Down on Transgender Rules."

handbook clarifies that a trans individual who is "considering elective medical or surgical intervention for the purpose of attempting to transition to the opposite gender of his or her biological sex at birth ('sex reassignment') may not be baptized or confirmed."[113] Therefore, people who have transitioned *before* desiring to join the Church are permitted to be baptized and confirmed, but only if they have turned away from their past "transgression," i.e., their decision to transition.

For a trans person who is considered "worthy," Church leaders make clear that priesthood ordination and temple ordinances are permitted, but only "according to biological sex at birth."[114] This statement raises intriguing questions about women and the priesthood, a topic that has been controversial within Mormonism for decades. Hypothetically, if a biologically assigned male physically transitioned to female but demonstrated ecclesiastical worthiness to their local leaders, would they technically be allowed to pursue the ranks of Church leadership due to their biologically male assignment at birth? Conversely, if a biologically assigned female physically transitioned to male but was not "visibly trans" in their outward appearance, could they serve in priesthood leadership positions? If either of these scenarios were to ever happen (or have already happened), it would certainly complicate gender roles in the Church and disrupt deeply rooted power dynamics that have long favored cisgender men.

The section on "transgender individuals" in the 2020 handbook has sparked a mix of hope, confusion, and frustration among trans Mormons. Perhaps the most encouraging part of the section is the caveat tacked on to the very end: "Note: Some content in this section may undergo further revision." As well-known Mormon sociologist Jana Riess put it, "You can bet on it."[115]

113. "General Handbook of Instructions: Transgender Individuals," 2020.

114. "General Handbook of Instructions: Transgender Individuals," 2020.

115. Riess, "New LDS Handbook Softens Stance on Sexuality, Doubles Down on Transgender Rules."

A More Pragmatic and Optimistic Direction for the Church

The fact that Church policies and doctrines are always subject to further clarification and revision can sometimes provide hope for sexual- and gender-minority Mormons. In fact, a core tenet of Mormonism is that God is always revealing *new* information and direction to the top governing body of Church leaders, also referred to as "prophets, seers, and revelators."[116] This phenomenon is referred to as "continuing revelation," which queer LDS writer Blaire Ostler defines as "the percolation of powerful ideas through a robust network of individuals and influences."[117] Substantive and even fundamental shifts in Church teachings have occurred frequently throughout history, such as when Church leaders in 1978 lifted the long-standing policy that prohibited people of African descent from holding the priesthood and entering the temple. Because that policy was taught by prominent leaders as an unchanging and eternal mandate from God, Church members who desire changes to policies and teachings regarding LGBTQ+ issues see this decision to remove the priesthood and temple ban as a foreshadowing to comparable changes that lie ahead for sexual and gender minorities.

Nevertheless, considering that Church hierarchy is structured around top-down policy-making and ideological regulation, it is important that trans activists and advocates understand the practical realities they face.[118] LDS authorities have for decades asserted the illusion that they do not respond to outside sociocultural pressures and only make changes when God directs (though a critical analysis of Church history quickly reveals that this is untrue).[119] Such a notion that leaders

116. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 211–24.

117. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 91.

118. Sumerau and Cragun, "Why Would Our Heavenly Father Do That to Anyone," 332–34.

119. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 211–24.

make decisions in a God-inspired vacuum protects them from internal scrutiny and creates attitudes of credulity in the minds of members.[120] In addition, changes to policies and teachings occur at the discretion of male senior leaders, an undemocratic structure of governance that makes advocacy and activism especially difficult.

Pragmatic Changes

Understanding these limitations, I believe there are tangible and realistic changes that Church leaders can be expected to implement regarding policies and teachings that affect trans members. Leaders often express that altering Church teachings concerning sexuality and/or gender would contradict or even destroy "God's eternal truths."[121] However, recall the ways in which Juliana and Sarah explain their trans identities—i.e., they believe that their "female spirit" *is* their eternal, God-given gender identity. Many trans Mormons (particularly those whose experiences fall within the gender binary) feel similarly about their gender identities.[122] Because these concepts of gender fit into current LDS constructs of eternal progression, Church leaders could easily and swiftly begin to affirm binary transgender experiences. Blaire Ostler articulated this suggestion in her book *Queer Mormon Theology*:

> The simplest explanation is that trans people do have a fixed, eternal gender which simply does not align with their body and/or gender assignment. Their spirit is "female," but they were misassigned as "male." A transgender person can claim to have an unchanged, eternal gender that is not in line with their assignment and still be consistent with the idea that "gender is eternal." . . . However, while I can appreciate the argument for a fixed eternal gender, it does not address the needs of gender variant and gender-fluid folk. Of course, I do not blame

120. Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams, "From Sodomy to Sympathy," 291–308.

121. Oaks, "Truth and the Plan."

122. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 53.

> transgender people who use this argument to legitimize their own experiences within the Mormon theological framework.[123]

As Ostler points out, a drawback of the "eternal gender binary" argument is that individuals who identify as gender-free, gender-fluid, genderqueer, bigender, or agender would still be viewed as contrary to or unaccounted for in God's plan. Nevertheless, while far from ideal, this ideological shift would at least widen the tent of acceptance and affirmation for many trans members of the Church.

Another reasonable change that General Authorities and local leaders might implement is more resources and community support for trans members. Ostler suggests fifteen "ways to be more inclusive," and one is to "hold special workshops addressing the needs of queer youth."[124] Currently, there are very few support groups for trans Mormons within the Church—many people must look elsewhere to find them. Given that LDS leaders often express their desire to make the Church a more compassionate and welcoming place for sexual and gender minorities, implementing internal support groups and resources for trans people would be an excellent way to practice what they preach. Similarly, if leaders are truly striving to cultivate a sense of kindness and love for all, they must stop connecting transgender or gender nonconforming experiences to Satan or use any kind of pathologizing or "othering" rhetoric.[125] Instead, leaders and members alike can frame gender nonconforming experiences as *different*, not *deficient*. This would fit nicely with the popular LDS teaching that God is the author of diversity.

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123. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 54.

124. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 97.

125. Ring, "Mormon Leader: LGBTQ Advocacy Comes from Satan"; Stack, "Transgender Mormons Struggle to Feel At Home in Their Bodies and Their Religion."

Optimistic Changes

Advocates who embrace more optimistic thinking for LDS gender minorities call upon Church leaders to reimagine and restructure the theological foundations upon which their religion stands. For trans Mormons, untethering theological frameworks from existing gender classification schemes is ultimately what is necessary for full liberation.[126] However, this push for liberation and equality is currently limited by theological assertions of who is eligible for participation in temple marriages (sealings), the capstone ordinance in LDS ritual and cosmology. Leaders continue to hold to the claim that only a biologically assigned male and biologically assigned female(s) can be efficaciously sealed for eternity in God's plan. Female is plural because polygamous sealing rituals between a man and multiple women were performed in the nineteenth-century Church and are still performed today if a man's first wife has died. (The current president of the Church, Russell Nelson, is a good example of this—he is sealed to his first wife, Dantzel, who passed away in 2005, and his current wife, Wendy Watson.)[127]

One reason LDS leaders cling to a heteronormative framework (even though LDS polygamous arrangements are arguably not heteronormative at all)[128] is that heterosexual biological procreation is considered to be an indispensable component of celestial relationships.[129] However, this emphasis on heterosexual procreation is rife with contradictions, as infertile cisgender heterosexual couples who do not have children, as well as cisgender heterosexual parents who adopt, are considered to be in harmony with Church teachings. In fact, when adopted children are sealed to their cisgender heterosexual parents, it

126. Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," 106–30.

127. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 71–73.

128. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 73–79.

129. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 60–70.

is considered just as efficacious and binding as when biological children are sealed to their cisgender heterosexual parents. Conversely, if same-sex couples have children through artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, or a surrogate, their family is not worthy of the LDS sealing ritual. Similarly, if a trans individual and a cisgender individual have a child through copulation, their family also lacks legitimacy in current LDS thinking. Indeed, this is perhaps the most egregious contradiction: a cisgender heterosexual couple who cannot have children is considered more legitimate than a cisgender-transgender couple who actually can have children.[130] Thus, the argument is not really about who can and cannot have children and more about a system of marking queer bodies and relationships as inferior to cisgender heterosexual bodies and relationships.[131] Ostler eloquently brings this inequity to light when she says: "The Church does not bar infertile cisgender heterosexual couples from being sealed because they are unable to reproduce. We seal them together and promise them eternal increase even when we don't know what that will look like. It makes no more sense to prohibit homosexual [and trans] couples from being sealed to each other for the same reason it makes no sense to deny infertile, cisgender, heterosexual couples."[132] She ultimately argues that "the ability or inability to biologically reproduce with our partner is not what makes a family a celestial family" but rather "our ability to rear children in love and charity,"[133] capacities that are independent of genitalia or sexual and/or gender identity.

Further challenging the notion that heterosexual procreation is superior to all else, Ostler points out that some of the most monumental

130. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 69.

131. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay*, 169–73.

132. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 69.

133. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 63–64.

births of Christianity did not involve heterosexual copulation. For example, according to biblical and LDS temple accounts, Adam was created by two males (Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ), and Eve was produced by three males (Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and from the rib of Adam).[134] Similarly, many Christian and LDS theologians and authorities teach that Jesus Christ himself was born from a virgin mother Mary without heterosexual procreation. In each of these milestone events, there is no account of heterosexual intercourse being a necessary means of reproduction or creation. (Some Latter-day Saints point out that Heavenly Mother may have taken part in the creative process, but there is no mentioning of her in scripture or LDS temple rituals.)[135] In any case, the fact that these divine creations occurred in non-heterosexual ways invites Latter-day Saints to expand their views of divine creation in ways that foster inclusivity and affirmation for non-heteronormative relationships.

For the Church to be a safe, welcoming, and embracing space for trans individuals, leaders need to reconstruct God's divine plan either without the concept of a fixed eternal gender, or at least with the acknowledgment that all gender identities/experiences are equally valid in God's eyes. While many mainstream members find this proposal radical and oppositional to divine teachings, such modifications harmonize with the most precious of LDS teachings—love, joy, and equity. Becoming like Jesus Christ (i.e., developing kind, loving attributes and helping those in need) is at the heart of LDS theology, a process that is independent of and transcends human classification systems like gender.[136] An often-echoed statement in the Church is "Christ is at the center," an idea found in this commonly quoted New Testament

134. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 64–66.

135. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 64–66.

136. Petrey, "Toward a Post-Heterosexual Mormon Theology," 129.

scripture: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[137]

The implications of this scripture serve as an effective starting point for reconceptualizing LDS theological aspirations without appealing to gender-based classifications. Allowing its essence to permeate the institutional and theological structures of Mormonism would be to allow all individuals, regardless of characteristics like sexual or gender identity, equal access to Church rituals, ordinances, and leadership positions. Instead of organizing a concept of faithfulness based on one's identity or romantic relationship, Church leaders could construct faithfulness around one's daily commitment to being a kinder, more compassionate person. Ostler refers to this shift in emphasis as "morality beyond gender," a better model for "determining whether a relationship" (and I would add identity) "is moral or not." Here are several important questions she poses: "Does this relationship [or identity] promote love? Does this relationship [or identity] promote joy? Does this relationship [or identity] promote life? Does this relationship [or identity] respect agency and meaningful consent?" She continues by pointing out that "neither queerness nor straightness is what determines morality. All genders and sexual orientations can engage in moral or immoral behaviors."[138]

Thus, far from destroying long-standing theological foundations, such a shift in emphasis would sit at the very heart of LDS teachings, which Ostler convincingly argues are "inherently queer."[139] Ultimately, LDS theology portrays God as all-loving and compassionate, desiring the happiness and salvation of all human beings. Paramount to such theological frameworks is the imperative to *become like God* by developing divine attributes of benevolence and compassion. For Church

137. Galatians 3:28.

138. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 94–95.

139. Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology*, 13.

members and leaders to truly live out the splendor of this endeavor, theological and institutional constructions (or reconstructions) must ensure that all gender identities and sexual orientations are given equal legitimacy and value in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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HOW A MORMON ENDED UP AT UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY: A STEP TOWARD RACIAL JUSTICE AND A BETTER CHURCH

James C. Jones

Four years ago, I was living my best life as a touring a cappella singer. The sum of my ambition was to make great and meaningful art and create the first a cappella group to play the Superbowl halftime show. For years, a photo of the colorfully lit MetLife stadium was my lock screen as a gentle and constant reminder of that goal. Today, I have just finished my first year of graduate school studying Black liberation theology in hopes to create a more complete and enriching Mormon theology that validates marginalized folks and, by extension, creates a space that is more in line with the integrated and diversified New Testament church that Christ intended. As much as I love the restored gospel and the Church, this is the last place I saw myself.

I used to clown returned missionaries who couldn't seem to let go of their missions. They would continue to dress like missionaries weeks after their return, talk endlessly about their missions, and pursue academic tracks that led to working in Church education. In retrospect, I see that loving the Church, the gospel, and the scriptures so much that you want that to be your vocation isn't the worst thing, but, at the time, it read like fanaticism to me. I loved the scriptures and the gospel too, but I felt my ministry lay in a different academic path and aggressively acted accordingly.

Time would tell me, however, that my ministry wasn't in the academy at all—at least for this season of my life. I wasn't a great student, and school stressed me out. As I prepared for graduation, I got rejected by every program I had hoped would improve my odds of advancing my academic and professional career, including the only grad school to which I applied. When Teach For America rejected me a second time, my ego had had enough and I forsook academia for the arts with no intention to return.

In the decade since I made that decision, a lot has happened that ultimately reoriented me back to the academy and to theological studies in particular. First, the job I took after graduating from Brigham Young University took me to Boston, Massachusetts. I immediately noticed a refreshing difference between the congregations I attended in Utah and congregations in Boston. These were the most educated people I had ever worshiped with in my adult life, and it was the safest I had ever felt being my authentic self at church. Some of the Saints had also organized local events to have Latter-day Saint scholars, thinkers, influencers, and leaders share their expertise, experience, and testimonies. The first event I attended like this featured a discussion on womanist theology by a Harvard- and Howard-educated Black Latter-day Saint scholar. I could not have gotten that anywhere else in the world.

Second, the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown happened. They weren't the first unarmed Black men to be gunned down by the police or white vigilantes, but they were the first high-profile cases in the age of social media. They were for millennials what Rodney King was for Gen Xers. Their deaths were catalysts to what would become the rallying affirmation and organization #BlackLivesMatter, in addition to other civil rights organizations. Everyone had an opinion. The most troubling ones to me were, regrettably, from members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—people I had considered friends, people I've prayed and preached the gospel with. The callous response to Black pain—my pain, my family's pain, my community's pain—was

inexcusable for any of the Saints. To make matters worse, going to church was not the balm of Gilead it should've been for Black members. Most of the time our pain was ignored, and if it was mentioned at all, it was straight up minimized. There was no mourning with those who mourn or comforting those who stand in need of comfort. When I went to interfaith vigils to mourn properly, I was almost always the only Latter-day Saint present. I would not accept that this was the best the Church could do in the face of racism and Black pain—not the restored Church of the same Christ who was literally lynched by the state for threatening corrupt political systems that oppressed the marginalized.

Third, the exclusion policy of November 2015 happened. For many of the Saints, including myself, this was something of a crisis. Somewhere at the intersection of my close associations with queer people, my inability to theologically and rationally justify such a policy, and my disdain for bullying and discriminatory behavior, I had to confront queer pain and my faith and figure out how to reconcile the two. Ultimately, the question wasn't how to reconcile my faith and queer pain—our theology already validated queer life when I honestly looked at it. What I needed to come to terms with was what that knowledge requires of me as a person of faith. Peace would not come if I didn't hold our institutions accountable to the Christ we read about in the scriptures, and that meant challenging policy that denied the imago dei in our queer siblings, that denied all were alike unto God, and that denied God was no respecter of persons. Anything less would be cowardice and dishonesty on my part. I wasn't alone in my feelings, and this would become palpable in the coming years.

Fourth, in 2019, during the second annual Black LDS Legacy Conference, I felt prompted to create a space to keep conversations going similar to those at the conference. Black folk were able to talk about the gospel in a way that centered Blackness—a way that honored our pain while seeing our strength and, wherever possible, using the restored gospel as a tool to do as much. The conference was a liberating

experience. As a Black Latter-day Saint, I'm used to at least one of those identities constantly being scrutinized anywhere I go. But at that event, my body is able to release much of the tension it holds. I don't have to explain my existence to anyone in that space. I am not a guest. I am home. I wanted to create something close to that for myself and others who struggle to fit in because they look different, love differently, think differently, or otherwise have different needs. They too deserve to be in a space where they feel home.

This desire ultimately gave birth to what is now *Beyond the Block*, a podcast I've been running for a few years with the goal of centering the marginalized in Mormonism. The podcast discusses the *Come, Follow Me* lesson each week while prioritizing a reading for the marginalized. My co-host, Derek Knox, a queer theologian and friend, seemed the perfect conversation partner as pretty much every time we got together, our conversations would turn into a *Beyond the Block* episode. The show has a modest but loyal following. As of this writing, there hasn't been a congregation I've visited in the United States where there wasn't someone familiar with the show. The day after my records were transferred to my ward in New York, I was tapped to substitute teach seminary because of the work I had done on *Beyond the Block*. It is validating to know that something that heals my soul also helps others too, gives them voice, empowers them to affirm the least of these, and helps them be more enriched by our faith.

The show's popularity gave me opportunity to speak at several events and to several publications. People thought our ideas were equal parts life-giving and provocative, though we didn't feel we were saying anything particularly radical in terms of the scope of our sacred texts. That was the point, though. We already have the tools to affirm people on the margins and we don't have to read too closely or too much to find them. All we need is a different lens, and that can be difficult to find when our institution is overwhelmingly white and we're all taught the same scriptures the same ways by the same presumably straight cis white dudes born in the Jim Crow era.

Bear in mind: though I knew I was doing important work, it's work I was doing on the side. I had and still have no professional ambitions where theology and religion are concerned. But the Church and the United States' political climate demands more of the Church. People my age and younger were becoming increasingly disaffected with it, feeling it had nothing relevant to contribute to our lives or to the most urgent and important matters we faced. The Church was troublingly silent on issues of race, despite having a rich theology from which to create solutions, and it still refuses to engage any real interrogation of policies that alienate queer people or keep women, who represent close to three times the active membership of men, relegated to marginal positions of power and leadership. I believe all of this is a stumbling block to our retention and missionary efforts among the least of these, those with the most to teach us about Christ, and that frustrated me. Side hustle or not, I wanted to put myself in the best position I could to address these problems. With my new influence and opportunities, it quickly occurred to me that I'm still a relative amateur in the world of theology, yet when people want to talk race, theology, and Mormonism, I'm one of the folks consistently getting called and, frankly, I feel underqualified. I regularly studied and prepared as thoroughly as I could for every engagement I did, but I felt keenly that something was missing from my learning experiences.

As a final point, a week after the same 2019 Black LDS Legacy Conference that inspired the podcast, I was invited to give a talk on racism at church (now published in the Fall 2019 issue of *Dialogue*). Perhaps because I sourced the scriptures liberally, multiple members of the congregation suggested looking at divinity schools. I received the compliment but heartily laughed at the suggestion. I had a job. I hated school. I didn't think I was suited for the academy (and still don't). And what was a degree in theology going to do for me professionally? It was bad enough my undergrad degree was pretty useless; I didn't want an advanced degree that was also useless. As time went on, however, the need for better theological education, especially in our church, became

more apparent. With rising racial tensions in the United States, I was getting busier. At church and on my own, I didn't feel I was gaining the tools needed to study scriptures more intelligently and imaginatively, nor did I feel I was gaining the tools to more critically engage my faith in the public square. My education likely wouldn't progress if I didn't intentionally create more time for it and use the best tools available, including academic institutions.

By summer 2020, I was at least open enough to the idea of divinity school that I decided to apply to some just to see what would happen. Around that same time, my elders quorum president led me through a discernment process that helped clarify my goals and the role the divine had in them. The November night I sent off my first three applications, I knew I was getting in, and I felt good about that. Sure enough, I got my first acceptance letters a few months later and was not just relieved but energized. The news felt good, and it felt right. Whatever I was to do with my future, the Spirit seemed to confirm that divinity school was going to better prepare me for it.

I applied to another institution primarily for its prestige. I didn't feel anything pushing me toward the school, but it was a stone's throw from my home, somewhat familiar, I potentially had a connection there, and it is pretty popular for Latter-day Saints who do venture into theological studies. It also housed Cornel West, one of the most provocative and brilliant thinkers in philosophy, politics, and theology, and I didn't want to pass on the opportunity to work with such an influential Black figure. I even gave him a whole paragraph in one of my application essays. I was rejected. In a twist of fate, though, he had a very public falling-out with the university and was taking his talents to Union Theological Seminary, the school where he had begun his teaching career. At this point, I hadn't yet considered Union, but it actually made perfect sense. The most frequently referenced school in the biographies of the theologians I read was Union. My theological idol and the creator of Black liberation theology, James Cone, had spent most of his career there,

and one of his most notable students, The Very Reverend Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, one of the founders of womanist theology known for her trailblazing work addressing sexuality and homophobia in the Black church, is a professor and dean there. Further, social justice isn't just an elective subject there but baked into the school's culture and curriculum itself. In short, Union Theological Seminary seemed to be the institutional expression of my Black Christian prophetic identity. Gaining access to all the resources of Columbia's various schools as well as getting to live in New York wasn't a bad benefit either. I accepted their scholarship offer the following month. Serendipitously, Dr. West isn't just my teacher but my advisor as well.

Since being here, my faith hasn't come up much—at least not as something to be scrutinized. In my first meeting with Dr. West, he told me of one of his first encounters with Mormonism was being part of the first expanded crop of Black Harvard recruits in 1970. The relatively new dean of admissions who facilitated the influx was Chase N. Peterson, a Latter-day Saint. In that light, the idea that I wanted to create a more inclusive and liberating theology didn't seem all that foreign to him. The other Black seminarians have been curious about my membership as I'm the only Black Mormon most of them know, but they seem to care less about my religious affiliation and more about how that affiliation moves me to show up for others. How does our theology liberate Black people? What does it offer those without an address? What does it say to us about our responsibility to the poor and the exploited? How does it help us break generational curses? How committed is it to the resistance of oppression? These are all great questions that I hope to refine our answers to during my time here.

I'm the only Latter-day Saint at this school and, to my knowledge, the only one ever to pursue a degree from here. That's not an accident. Besides Latter-day Saint leaders not being required to obtain a theological education, places like Union that prioritize affirming theologies (Black liberation theology, queer theology, womanist theology, et al.)

don't attract members of a church that doesn't do the same. We're not really conditioned to, and that's tragic. The Church's decision to adopt American standards of respectability has moved us away from our radical, groundbreaking, and affirming roots. Specifically, the infections of white supremacy and patriarchy have compromised our movement and blurred the lens through which we view our text and our theology. It's not a coincidence that the majority of our significant revelations came in the early days of the Church and that we haven't had one since the lifting of the priesthood and temple restrictions in 1978. It's not an accident that we're consistently one of the later churches to condemn racism nor is it an accident that Black, queer, and other marginalized groups are consistently underrepresented in Latter-day Saint congregations, let alone Church leadership. I live in Harlem, a famously Black neighborhood, yet it's not an accident that the Harlem congregation is only about 20 percent Black on its best Sundays. Only hours ago, I returned home from a Sunday School lesson in my mother's ward on Official Declaration 2 with no Black people present but my mother and me. In my estimation, these realities are unacceptable for the restored Church of the same Christ who lived and operated in the margins.

If I am to help change these realities, I have to know what I'm talking about and what I'm doing. I have to know the scriptures and our history better than those who would use the same to discriminate or cause harm. I also have to venture outside of Sunday School, elders quorum, the Church Educational System, and other Mormon-centric spaces to learn other ways to read sacred text and perhaps, most importantly, to understand the role of theology in the world today and how to practically implement that in justice efforts in and out of the Church.

There will be and already has been resistance to these efforts. Ever since *Beyond the Block* gained steam, many have taken offense that I would suggest bigotry exists in the Church, that some of our policies are scripturally unjustifiable, or that the brethren don't know everything and can act in ways that do active harm. I was slated to be the creator

of the Church's first anti-racist online course via their publishing company. My public criticism of a living Church leader's prejudice, however, kept them from publishing it, even though my course, they said, was likely to be the most popular one they ran. The irony of being hired to teach others to fight prejudice and then being fired for calling out prejudice was not lost on me. I've made peace with the idea that operating strictly within the Church's institutional parameters—an institution where there is no real way for members to seek redress for policies that harm others and where there is punishment for simply being critical of leaders—is likely not going to be the way the necessary changes come about.

However, something I'm still making peace with is the fact that I even need to be here. This work is primarily a labor of love; I'm grateful to be in a position to do it, and I feel closer to the divine than I've ever been when I use God's words to affirm the least of these, even when there is a social and emotional cost to it. There is, however, a tinge of resentment at being in this position. Activism, let alone theologically informed activism, was not my Plan A. I don't believe it's anyone's. I had a whole career that brought me immense joy prior to entering grad school. This is exhausting work. I don't feel the academy suits me, and learning disability, processing disorders, inexperience, and neurodivergence aggravate this experience. I don't particularly enjoy the study of theology, though I recognize its importance and how life-giving it can be. What I resent is that I feel that my entire existence in this space—a space that I neither love nor feel equipped to be in—is a response to bigoted idolatry within my faith community, who should know better as disciples of Christ. I should not be here. No one should be. No one should spend any part of their existence defending it because of their race, gender, orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, or other identities. I'd like to believe, however, that that resentment is an appropriate tribute to and evidence of my love for and commitment to the marginalized. I'm still learning to navigate this tension with love.

At the end of the day, all I want to be is a sharper instrument of the Lord's peace, and I have come to the conclusion that I can't do that if all my education comes from the same people teaching the same things, none of which seem to be adequate to address many of the world's and my own most urgent and important issues. One of the reasons I started *Beyond the Block* was to create a space to facilitate the discussions I feel we need to have as a church but aren't having. With a graduate education in theological studies, I'm hoping to be better at that work so that others in and out of the Church may see what those like me see in our theology and, eventually, build and mobilize a culture that shifts us more in line with the New Testament church of Christ and away from the idols of patriarchy and white supremacy. Further, if I actually manage to create a new field of study, I'll be able to help ensure that this work, which stands on the shoulders of the great Black individuals like Cathy Stokes, Darius Gray, and many others, will be further legitimized, grow, and continue long after I'm gone. My decision to go to school, in short, is simply my best effort to help build Zion.

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ON TRADITION AND A NONBINARY REVOLUTION

Ray Nielson

You probably have an idea of what a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is like. Whether your exposure to missionaries comes from being a member of the Church, meeting them on the street, or seeing the unflattering depiction of them on a Broadway stage, it probably looks a little something like this: clean-cut young men wearing white shirts and ties, with little black placards on their chests and almost unreal smiles splashed across their faces, exuding confidence and absolute faith in the message they are sharing.

You wouldn't expect a five-foot, frumpy twenty-one-year-old huddled on the floor of their closet in Miami, Florida, holding a small blue pin as though it were the detonator that could trigger the destruction of their whole world. "They/them." Just pronouns. Just simple words in the language I'd spoken my whole life to indicate a plural or unknown-gendered noun. They shouldn't have held so much power over me, but they did.

I had known I was queer for a long time by that point and accepted my attraction to women as a trial. (Deep down I suspected God knew it was a trial I would fail, that he had made me queer to ensure I never achieved celestial glory, although now I reject such notions.) But questions of gender identity were much more foreign to me, something I had avoided for years. I had always tried to find other reasons for how out of place I felt among girls. For the discomfort that I felt in spaces that were supposed to be for me. I'd avoided them, as far as I can remember at least; pulling up these memories at all is difficult. I have had many moments of questioning, which I would later push down

and forget about until the question resurfaced. I only realized later that it wasn't the first time when I stumbled across old emails or journal entries, things that are not susceptible to the malleability of memory.

That's what this moment was. A couple months earlier, I had written to a friend back in Utah. It was June and she was celebrating Pride. I asked her to send me something. I'd been feeling terribly lonely in the missionary culture and wanted a physical reminder that there were others like me out in the world. She mentioned pronoun pins, and in a moment of rash decision I asked for "they/them" as well as "she/her." *Why not?* I guess I thought, *what harm could it do?*

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One of my missionary companions was a strong proponent of astrology. At her insistence, as we waited for someone who we knew wasn't going to show, we had the ward mission leader use his phone to look up my star chart so that my companion could explain to me how the planets and stars affect me. It turns out that although I am born in the middle of Capricorn season, many of the other planets on my chart fall under Aquarius.

I can't tell you exactly what this means; in the years since, I've delved more into astrology, but I am still very new to it. However, I did find it an interesting explanation for a personality quirk of mine that has often vexed me: my contentious relationship with tradition. You see, Capricorns are said to highly value tradition and to hold to it as often as possible. However, an Aquarian is more likely to peel back the wallpaper of tradition, covering the walls with crayon scribbles or splattered paint. My whole life I have found myself stuck between two extremes, holding fast to things that my parents have taught me while desperately dissecting those same values and beliefs in the hopes of discovering something more or simply out of morbid curiosity.

"Tradition" is a very broad term: it can refer to something as localized as eating salmon for Friendsgiving dinner because that's what

was done one year before, or family holiday traditions passed through generations, or culturally accepted traditions like wearing white on one's wedding day. All of these, to some extent, affect the way we see ourselves and the world around us, and for many of us, the most impactful tradition of all is the religious tradition we find ourselves surrounded by.

Growing up in Utah, I was influenced by the wider, generically Christian, culture of the United States, as well as the Mormon culture that permeated my hometown. There are a number of intriguing, comforting, and entertaining traditions within these ideologies as well as many difficult ones. Among them is the way we view and understand gender—as two separate, binary groups, each with biological and psychological generalizations that help us organize our society. It is quite convenient to be able to look at someone, observe the length of their hair, the broadness of their shoulders, the style of their clothing, and make a few quick assumptions about what they are interested in, what they are good at, and how you should treat them. We just want to know what box people fit in, not necessarily with intentions to restrict or enforce but because we simply want to understand. It makes life easier, and it makes us feel like life makes sense.

Additionally, I have to recognize that at least some of what the feminist movement has accomplished has come from insisting that society stop valuing masculine traits—both physical and mental—over feminine. Clearly defining the boundaries between genders has mattered to so many people, not just to understand others but to understand themselves.

This is one of the reasons that I push back against the oft-said phrase "gender is just a social construct." Certainly, the ways that we perform and understand gender have been informed by cultures (one only need look at the typical masculine dress across different countries to know that wearing skirts is not an inherently feminine trait). But if gender was something completely made up by society, I do not believe

so many people would feel intense dysphoria when assigned a gender that does not truly fit them. I believe that gender is somehow tied to our immortal soul and that our relationship with gender is eternal. That is to say, I believe I was neither fully female nor male when I existed as a spirit before this life, and I believe that after this life I will continue with my nebulous and flowing gender identity. That being said, I know many trans people feel differently, and I suppose it's one of the mysteries of the world for which we will have to wait until the next life to find an answer—if there is indeed a next life.

~

Two months after I asked my friend for Pride paraphernalia, the package finally arrived—not due to a delay in the postal service but rather because of my friend's busy schedule and occasional forgetfulness. I had, at this point, pushed all thoughts of being nonbinary out of my mind, and when I found the pin among the rainbow beads and small flag, my heart stopped. In the superstitious spirituality of a missionary—we have a tendency to give God the credit for every small thing that happens around us—I couldn't help but take it as a sign.

I put the pin secretly inside the pocket of my scripture case. I looked at it during my studies, feeling a warmth of security that was hard to come by in a strange city, far away from my family and friends. I could never tell my fellow missionaries about it. They were kind enough when I told them I was bisexual—as long as I promptly assured them that I still planned on marrying a man—but I wasn't sure how they would react to this betrayal of the tradition of our faith.

In the LDS Church, at least in the generations that have most impacted my understanding, gender is viewed as essential. Among the doctrine there are whisperings of a Heavenly Mother, the spouse to our Heavenly Father who helped create us and awaits our homecoming at the end of our earthly trial. She has become more and more discussed

in recent years, and as interesting as the concept of a feminine divine is, she is often used as an argument against homosexuality—a way to defend the tradition of straight marriage. For if God is a man who is married to a woman, and we are all supposed to follow God's example, all men must marry women. She is also an example of the binary nature of gender. For if there are only two heavenly parents—a man and woman—then there is no divine precedent for genders outside of that, at least in the Mormon conception of deity. It is difficult to make an argument for nonbinary or gender-fluid individuals within the way that Mormons understand gender today.

But I have no interest in abandoning the traditions of my heritage, and so I must try.

My traditions are deeply rooted in the faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the center is a faith in Christ and belief in a just afterlife, but I also feel a closeness to my pioneer ancestors who fled from the persecution they faced in the eastern United States, coming to Utah and building up a community where they could all be safe. They were traitors of tradition themselves, chased out because they chose to believe differently than Christians of their day. Even now, many who join our ranks are rejected by friends and family for adopting a new tradition, having found that the one they were handed down at birth no longer fit them. History, just like the present, is fraught with the cruel and violent reactions that have emerged as a response to change.

I understand a fear of change. After all, the systems we have created to describe, sort, and understand the world around us are incredibly useful, and to see them break apart leads many to fear the loss of meaning all together. It is this same fear that led Edmund Burke to write his "Reflections on the Revolution in France." The caste system gave meaning to the world he saw around him, and the notion of French commoners deciding that not only was the king's life no more important theirs but occasionally the slaying of a king could bring great social

good—well, he couldn't comprehend it. He argues that "in order to subvert ancient institutions, [they have] destroyed ancient principles," and he feared the complete degradation of society as a result.[1] It is a similar fear that many of my loved ones are feeling. It is a similar fear that leads religious leaders to single out an innocent valedictorian for sharing personal experiences and call for metaphorical "musket fire" to defend a university from students who are only trying to live our lives and find happiness for ourselves.

Did Europe lose its moral heart in the years following the uprisings and deconstruction of societal stratification that followed the French Revolution? (With all the colonization before and after that point, it's hard to know if they had a heart to begin with.) Was Burke right to fear the changes he saw? Europe certainly went through major changes in the following decades, and though many poets would mourn the loss of some romantic simplicity that no longer could be found in the metal- and smoke-filled world of the Industrial Revolution, it led to many working- and lower-class individuals demanding to be heard, demanding rights, and demanding to be treated as proper citizens. For all our nostalgic views of the past, I think most people would agree that valuing each human life as equal, regardless of the station in which they are born, has been an improvement to our society—not a detriment. Not that our society has fully reached that point—there is still great inequity in the world—but there have been great strides taken since Burke wrote his essay.

I don't want to draw too close a parallel between the fight for queer rights and the French Revolution. I am not advocating for chaos and

1. Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France," in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (Project Gutenberg, 2005), 3:334, available at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15679/15679-h/15679-h.htm #REFLECTIONS. I came across this passage in Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, "The Revolution Controversy and the 'Spirit of the Age,'" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 10th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 202.

blood, but I do find Thomas Paine's reaction to Burke quite interesting. He insists that "it is the living, and not the dead that are to be accommodated."[2] As important as tradition is, and as much meaning as it may have offered in the past, does it not benefit society more to accommodate those currently participating in it?

2. Thomas Paine, "Rights of Man" in *The Political Works of Thomas Paine*, vol. 2 (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 1817), 3. See also Greenblatt and Abrams, 210.

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Hayley Labrum Morrison, “Wanton Eyes.”
36” × 18”. Oil on panel. 2022.

ONE BODY, MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES: A PAULINE APPROACH TO DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER

Jennifer Cornelius

Dissociative Identity Disorder.[1]

The words stung more than I thought they would.

Dissociative Identity Disorder.

The diagnosis did not come as a surprise. I had specifically sought out psychological assessment to evaluate my theory as to what had happened to my mind fourteen months prior when, while studying for my doctorate in clinical psychology, I "cracked" under the weight of unresolved trauma and suddenly became a person that I did not recognize in the slightest. When my downfall reached the rock bottom of on-the-streets homelessness, it finally occurred to me that what I had been experiencing might meet criteria for the one diagnosis that we didn't touch on in school and had been instructed to simply "refer out."

No, the diagnosis was not a surprise. But it did feel like a pronouncement of doom.

Dissociative Identity Disorder is the current name for what had been previously termed "Multiple Personality Disorder," a mental illness in which an individual possesses more than one discrete personality identity, each with its own worldview, personal history, and characteristics. The classic model of this phenomenon's etiology is that chronic interpersonal trauma during a person's early childhood years causes

1. Though this and other medical terms typically appear lowercased in most sources, I feel it is important to capitalize such terms as a way of emphasizing their legitimacy as clinical diagnoses.

such intense inner turmoil that the psyche must splinter itself into various parts for the person to be able to cope with the ongoing trauma.

While I was lucky to retain a relatively congruous personality for twenty-seven years, I also retained the psychosocial factors that made me to vulnerable to the illness. I was a ticking time bomb of complex trauma, a disorganized attachment style, and deep self-loathing for my pattern of repeatedly falling into the hands of abusers. The inner turmoil shattered my psyche and created an unwillingness of the normative sides of myself to allow each other to play the roles for which they are meant.

As an illustration of how this might happen, consider the part of yourself that entertains babies. It more than likely thinks, speaks, and acts differently than the part of you that shows up to boardroom meetings. But if inner strife were to become so intense that each part believes that its priorities are always the most important, you might end up baby-talking in a power suit . . . and losing your job. This then would foster further self-loathing and lead to suppression of the part of yourself that brings joy to your infant child, creating dysfunction in your parenting life. When the relationship with your child flounders and you realize that you haven't been parenting well, you will likely then reciprocate your business part's resentment and strive to suppress its tendencies as you carefully attend to changing your attitude and behavior as a parent. Lather, rinse, repeat.

This type of perpetual disdain and division within myself became so intense that each of my various parts began to shut the others out from conscious awareness, which causes me "blackout" memory loss when I have a "switch" in personality. The result: inner-world chaos, outer-world disability, and intense suicidal ideation.

One body with many parts—each competing for control. This is Dissociative Identity Disorder.

My diagnosis became official during an inpatient psychiatric stay at an institute that specializes in complex trauma and the dissociative disorders that sometimes result. Over the prior six months, I had spent nearly as much time in psych wards as I had outside of them. Active

suicidality was an unshakable companion. I experienced memory loss from hour to hour and, at one point, woke up with the calendar indicating that it was eleven weeks later than I expected. My body somaticized psychological distress as tics, seizures, and chronic pain. I was in constant fight-or-flight mode and had frequent periods of dissociative solipsism in which I was convinced that nothing existed outside of my consciousness.

I was also newly in relationship with God after having had a remarkable encounter with grace when my soul was in such a wretched state that even the staunchest atheist might have described it as "total depravity." This "mighty change of heart" effected immediate change and wholehearted discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth, but I puzzled over how to make theological and existential sense of what was happening to my brain and body. Moreover, I struggled to understand how I might be able to help myself and pursue some semblance of stability and wellness.

I had grown up with the story of Joseph Smith receiving his First Vision after following the counsel of James 1:5 to ask God for wisdom, and I continued to carry the belief that God would also enable me to receive the insight I lacked. My prayer for help was a constant whisper and frequent cry, and I tried to put myself in positions to receive his guidance.

During this search for wisdom, a dear friend and spiritual mentor brought me to a retired psychiatrist who was known among Protestants in our area for also being a powerful "prayer warrior" with the gift of intercession for those under spiritual attack. I was new to the culture of biblical Christianity and wasn't sure what to expect from the visit, but I anticipated that she would treat me as somebody possessed by demons.

Over lunch, the dreaded question came as she asked me if I knew where Dissociative Identity Disorder was in the Bible.

"Yeah," I mumbled. "*My name is Legion, for we are many*."[2] The synoptic accounts of the unrestrainable man with an evil spirit had always

2. Mark 5:9.

disturbed me, and I had heard more than one Christian counselor slap my diagnosis on the story far too casually for my comfort. While I don't wholly dismiss the possibility of demonic involvement in my case, the broad equation of Dissociative Identity Disorder with possession feels like the same unhelpful disdain and devaluation that caused my parts to split in the first place.

Yet there I was, in the kitchen of a firm believer in spiritual warfare. I silently pleaded with God that whether I was about to be healed or traumatized by the surely impending exorcism, I would know that he was with me.

"Oh!" she remarked, "No, I wasn't thinking about that. I meant more along the lines of how to navigate your multiplicity."

Navigate?

Oh. Perhaps these parts inside of me who wanted so desperately to be seen and valued weren't demons that needed to be cast into filthy swine after all. I exhaled the stale breath that I didn't realize I was holding. Then, I inhaled a fresh perspective.

I left that day with deepened resolve to keep diving into the word and to continue engaging with the Word who would indeed offer me the wisdom I was asking him so earnestly for.

But it wasn't until that inpatient treatment experience with my newly confirmed diagnosis that I found my answer. My therapist there had been encouraging me to come up with a common goal that the various parts of myself could unite around, but I could not find one to literally save my life. I had nothing in common with myself; there was too much internal polarity. Part of me was incredibly social, and part of me was very fearful of humans. Part of me had its identity in being a victim, and another part would do anything to avoid acknowledging my past victimization. My self-loathing only continued to fester, and I was forced to rely on God's moment-to-moment grace like I never had before.

Seeking solace, I spent every free moment in my Bible. I found comfort in the Jewish discipline of mourning in Lamentations. I related

to Paul's struggle in prison—"to live is Christ, and to die is gain."[3] I tried to take heart in reading 1 Peter, hoping that I was being "refined by fire." Other patients caught on to my coping mechanism and read Psalms to me when I was gripped by panic attacks or psychogenic seizures.

Eventually I turned to the familiar comfort of what had long been my favorite chapter: Romans 6. And there it was in verse 13—instruction that I'd read dozens of times but never while searching for how to cope with Dissociative Identity Disorder:

Offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.

Every part of myself.

A common goal.

Oh yes, I think we could all get on board with this.

I paged forward to chapter 12 where Paul fleshes out the metaphor of part-unity more fully:

Each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function. . . .

Each member belongs to all the others. . . .

Be devoted to one another in love.

If there was anyone who needed a "renewing of the mind," it was me, and here I now had a particularly apt roadmap for how the individualistic shards of that shattered mind might find unity as one body.

Could it be that simple?

As it turns out, it is about as simple as asking Latter-day Saints and Evangelicals to view the other as being within the body of Christ. But it was possible, and not wholly bunk in its hermeneutic—Paul was exhorting the Romans to devote their whole selves to the cause of God's army. The word translated as the singular "instrument" is actually plural in the Greek, which alters its Hellenistic connotation from being a generic tool or implement to being a collective set of weapons or heavy armor. The same root word is used in Ephesians 6 for the "whole armor" of God.

3. Philippians 1:21.

While in treatment I learned that each member of my Dissociative Identity Disorder "internal family system" exists for a specific reason. Each carries a portion of the weight of my difficult life history, and each plays a protective role for me as a whole. The six-year-old part of me, who I call "Bobby," comes out when I feel threatened. He holds the pain of times when I was largely powerless in my trauma. While other members of my system get frustrated with Bobby's paralyzing sense of helplessness, he actually has a very protective role—his pitiful crying pushes away people who will be impatient or triggering, and he draws in nurturers who are more likely to meet my needs and help me escape harm. Similarly, I've very critically disparaged thirteen-year-old "Jenni," who reads too deeply into the intentions of kind people and often hurts them in her panic about what those intentions could mean. She carries trauma that was inflicted by a partner, and she raises her preemptive red flags out of a protective desire to prevent future abuse.

One body. Many clunky, heavily armored parts that are just doing what they can to help me survive.

Treatment opened my eyes to the possibility of complete recovery. As it turns out, Dissociative Identity Disorder does not have to be a life sentence, but recovery requires, on average, seven years of intensive therapy with counselors who specialize in complex trauma and dissociative disorders. The goals of therapy look a bit like what one would expect to see when a family seeks counseling to heal deep divides: open, honest, and thoughtful communication must be fostered between each member of the system, each member must do their own work to heal their personal baggage, and a commitment to the good of each member and to the system as a whole must be reestablished. Through the integration of my discrete parts, I can become whole.

The work is slow and arduous, but the progress has been undeniable. I have been remarkably blessed to find a phenomenal trauma therapist who also brings God into our sessions. Jesus Christ acts as a healer, a wise arbiter, and a model of loving commitment to the good

of the "other." He is the common ground out of which inner unity can grow.

My dissociative parts abide in Christ, finding safety with his help as we process traumatic memories in therapy. When ready, each has the opportunity to symbolically hand over the weight of their trauma and grief to Jesus. To me, this "unburdening" ritual has looked like each part offering him their ineffective, self-made armor. In turn, he offers us the pieces of his full, unfailing armor—armor that finally meets our needs.

In Christ, I receive a belt of truth to gird my loins. This belt calms the part of me that believes that I am defined by sexual trauma.

In Christ, I have shoes that ground me in the gospel of peace—a gospel I can proclaim. This quells the part of me that runs from others when I become fearful of conversation.

In Christ, I have a chance to be whole.

There is one piece of God's armor that we have had from the beginning—the sword of the Spirit in the word of God. And as each part of me holds this sword, we discover that it offers us unity. It enables us with strength far beyond our own, and together we wield this tool with inner fortitude. In greater wholeness, I find I am extended an answer to my James 1:5 prayer—wisdom to walk the path of recovery in Jesus' way.

One body. Many parts. Yes, my name is Legion, for we are many. But we are learning to see ourselves for who we are—valuable members within the body of Christ. We belong to him. We have been brought from death to life through him. And with his help we are learning to be devoted to one another in love. We work together—individually and collectively—as instruments of his righteousness.

JENNIFER CORNELIUS focuses her life full-time on active recovery from Dissociative Identity Disorder and other post-traumatic maladies. She hopes to someday create meaning of her experiences and illness by pursuing studies at the intersection of philosophical theology and cognitive science.

Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"Vain Imaginations." 12" × 18".
Watercolor, spray paint, and
oil paint on paper mounted
on cradled panel. 2022.

JUDGING ISRAEL

Justin Goodson

We sat around a long rectangular table in the local church building. It was tapered at one end, almost trapezoidal. Five men lined each of the long sides, four more flanked the wide end, and I sat alone at the narrow end. The room was just big enough to encompass the table and chairs. The cinder-block walls were painted an off-white. They were bare except for a few paintings of Jesus and photos of the then-prophet, his two counselors, and the twelve apostles. We dressed in suits with white shirts and ties, just like Mormon missionaries. The demographic of the group reflected that of our suburban locale: white and middle-class. The room was air-conditioned, but the air had a heaviness to it typical of mid-August.

We had gathered at the local stake center for a disciplinary council to decide whether a person's sins merited excommunication from the LDS Church or some other form of membership restriction. I was one of twelve high councilmen who, along with the three members of the stake presidency, would function as an ecclesiastical court. Our job was to penalize the offender, protect the innocent, and shield the Church's reputation. I had participated in a disciplinary council a decade prior at the ward level. It was small in comparison, consisting only of the bishop and his two counselors. I attended as a clerk to record the proceedings. That experience was uncomfortable, and I wasn't looking forward to this, but I'd been asked to come, and I felt obligated, so I was there.

The stake president began the proceedings by describing the offense. The man whose membership hung in the balance that day faced charges of repeated adultery and homosexual activity. Across a decade and while in a heterosexual marriage, the man had been sexually active with at least a hundred other men.

My heart sank. When I agreed to serve on the disciplinary council, I had not realized I'd be weighing in on a gay man's standing with the Church. I was no stranger to unease, but anxiety hit me like the wave of humidity that greets every Midwesterner when they move from inside to outside in the summertime. It was thick, my breathing felt labored, and I started to sweat.

The last six weeks had created a perfect storm in my world. At the end of June, the US Supreme Court unexpectedly legalized gay marriage, sending the global Mormon community, as well as my local congregation, into a state of moral alarm. Shortly afterward, fuel was added to the fire when the Boy Scouts of America, the organization leading activities for LDS male youth, dropped their ban on gay Scout leaders. I had accepted LGBT folks as equals for several years. But my efforts to encourage better treatment of gay people in my ward had received substantial pushback from congregants and leadership. On the home front, these efforts stoked marital tensions, as my wife and I held differing viewpoints. The disciplinary council was the confluence of these things. It put personal conviction on a collision course with religious belief.

A prayer was offered, and the man was introduced to the council. He looked like the rest of us, with his shirt, tie, coat, and a modest haircut. He confessed to the charges and then council members asked questions.

"How did you meet these men?" asked one member of the council.

"On the internet, usually Tinder or similar apps," said the man. "I've had hookups and late-night meetups in all sorts of places."

"Did you put your wife at risk?" asked another council member. "Did you use protection?"

"We didn't usually use condoms," said the man.

"When did this begin?" asked another. "When did you first feel attracted to men?"

"In my late teens," he said. "Especially as a missionary, when I was nineteen and twenty, spending all of my time with my male companions.

I tried to suppress my feelings, hoping they would go away. I was told they would when I married my wife. But even then, I couldn't stop thinking about men."

There weren't many questions. The man was dismissed to a separate room, and then the council deliberated.

By way of Mormon scripture, a stake president leading a disciplinary council is tasked to be a "judge in Israel" and members of the council function as a jury (D&C 107:72–74). Deliberations are meant to explore the case from the perspective of the Church and that of the accused, similar to legal proceedings but without the same training, formality, or expertise because all Mormon clergy are unpaid volunteers who spend their professional lives doing other things. Six of the council members were randomly assigned to advocate for the Church's position, and six others to stand up on behalf of the accused. I drew the former. Each of the twelve spoke in turn. The general sentiment from those who spoke for the Church was that we have an obligation to look out for the innocent, which in this case meant the man's wife and children. The sentiment from those representing the man was that God loves him and wants the best for him despite what he's done.

My personal feelings at that moment were scattered. On the surface, I wondered if this was about monogamy or homosexuality or both. The man wasn't dating other men, and he wasn't seeking relationships. It was clear he enjoyed sex, anywhere and with anyone, and had no concern for his wife's sexual safety. Gay or straight, having sexual relations with so many partners is a major violation of LDS moral standards, and of most people's, including my own. This would be the overwhelming position of the council and sufficient reason to excommunicate.

But there was another angle to the situation that wasn't being discussed, one that poked at my own wounds. The church this man grew up with not only pushed him toward traditional family, it pressured him to marry young and have children right away, possibly before he'd acquired the maturity and experience necessary to make those

decisions. I knew this firsthand. In my late teens and early twenties, addresses from Church leaders often included an admonition to marry now and start a family immediately, no matter what. In my LDS circles, it was not unusual to find couples my age engaged after only a few weeks or months of dating, married shortly afterwards, and then with their first child nine months later. The cultural stigma was so strong that to delay marriage was to be labeled as an outsider. Literally, there are separate congregations designated solely for single Mormons. Membership in these congregations is voluntary, but the family-oriented focus of the conventional LDS congregation often excludes single people.

I jumped into marriage with a woman I didn't really know, and before I had enough life experience to really consider that decision. My marriage wasn't arranged. No one forced me into it. It was entirely my choice, even if naive. This worked splendidly for some, but not for me. Resentment is too strong a word, but I often wondered if my mismatched marriage and long-standing marital tensions could have been avoided if my faith leaders had pushed me toward healthy relationships first, rather than as an afterthought to marriage and family.

I think it's impossible for me to walk a mile entirely in another man's shoes. Not because empathy is unattainable but because my own shoes are stuck to my own two feet. I couldn't wrap my head around this man's choices without projecting my own experiences and biases. Perhaps this man's loyalty to his faith not only pushed him to marry at a young age but simultaneously discouraged a healthy reckoning with his sexual orientation. And if so, to what extent was his Mormon upbringing responsible for his current position? If his religion had encouraged a thorough courtship, would that have slowed things down enough for the man to come to terms with his homosexuality before marrying a woman? If the Church had said to have children only when you're good and ready, would this have spared his kids the difficulty of an inevitable divorce? Should the faith at large share any accountability for the man's actions?

All of this was coming to me in raw emotional form and across a matter of minutes, an impossible amount of time to process such deep-seated feelings, much less transform them into cogent statements. Though I'm not sure this would have mattered. The council had gained momentum. Like an avalanche tumbling down a mountainside, the result seemed inevitable. I knew I was unlikely to sell other council members on my perspective, so I spoke not with the hope of convincing but with the aim of assuaging my conscience. "Just like you and I feel a God-given attraction toward women, this man feels the same for men. It's disingenuous to expect him to ignore that. Can the church that pushed him so far in one direction acknowledge its role? Is there room for an element of grace in the council's decision?"

The ensuing silence answered my questions. Eventually, the stake president responded. "Our prophets and leaders are not disingenuous. Their direction is inspired." His tone was firm.

None of us condoned what the man did, but we were about to pass judgement without really considering the circumstances that led to his actions. When we judge someone's choices with the benefit of hindsight, as the council would do that evening, we tend to discount the difficulty of real-time challenges and decisions. Think of a televised sporting event with aerial cameras and instant replay. It's easy for the at-home spectator to spot a hole in the defensive line or a player who was open, all while sitting on a sofa with food and beverage within arm's reach. But put yourself in the arena, and all the sudden you're facing a six-foot-four, 280-pound lineman or a full-court press, and things are much harder. We idolize professional athletes who can barely hit a ball three out of ten at bats, but for some reason when we see a regular guy fumble around in the middle of a personal mess, our inclination is to be critical.

What did the council members expect this man to have done differently? Should he have made a clean break by divorcing his wife before embracing his sexual orientation? Did they expect him to fully

recognize and understand his identity earlier in life and avoid marriage to a woman in the first place? It might have been more orderly to wrap things up nice and neat, but he'd probably have been excommunicated for homosexual relations. Most likely they expected him to suppress his feelings to the point where he could live in disguise as a heterosexual, or else commit to lifelong celibacy. But this isn't sustainable for everyone, and it's entirely possible he'd find himself back in the same situation. They expected this ordinary man to throw a Hail Mary pass, from the opposing team's thirty-yard line, with no time left on the clock. Anything less would come up short. There was no clear path for this man to be both gay and Mormon.

It was time for the council to vote. Each of us would indicate whether we supported excommunication. My insides were in turmoil. Humidity was still the right analogy for my anxiety, but it had gone from Midwest- to jungle-level. I felt sick. To vote in favor was to ignore my divided conscience. To object was to formally withdraw support for my local Church leaders, an action that would be frowned upon. So I balked.

"All those in favor of excommunication?" said the stake president. Fourteen hands went up.

"All those opposed?" No hands.

"I abstain," I said, with a lump in my throat. All heads turned toward me. From my solitary seat at the end of the table, I felt like I had been staring down a gauntlet the entire evening. Now the gauntlet was staring back. I took a deep breath. "Respectfully, I don't want to formally object to the action, but I'm not comfortable condoning it."

The silence that followed was unnerving. Heads turned 180 degrees to the stake president. Had this ever happened before? There was a procedure for what to do in the case of divided votes, but clearly no one was familiar with it.

Eventually a member of the stake presidency asked, "Would you feel differently if the man was heterosexual? If he cheated with women instead of men?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes, it would make all the difference. In that case it's easier to pin actions to the individual. The institution doesn't play as much of a role."

He furrowed his brow and looked away.

"You can't abstain," said the clerk recording the meeting. "The options are in favor or opposed."

I wouldn't be pushed to one corner or the other. "Count my vote however you see fit," I said, "but I choose to abstain."

The stake president indicated he would proceed with excommunication. The man was brought in and informed of the decision. He wasn't surprised. Separation from the LDS Church was almost a formality at this point. But he was saying goodbye to what had been a significant part of his life. Though he would not be barred from attending church services, he would not be allowed to participate: no comments during Sunday School, no public prayers, no opportunities for church service. Even donations would be turned away. His baptism was void.

"Is it possible to get a copy of the letter I received from the prophet calling me to missionary service?" asked the man. "I've lost it and I'd really like to have it." I can't know what he was thinking or feeling, but this came across as more than a request for a souvenir. He seemed to value his former membership, and with only limited prospects of ever recovering it, I think he wanted to hold on to the memory of it.

"We'll make a request to Salt Lake City," said the stake president. "We wish you the best."

The council concluded with the man going around the oblong table and shaking the hand of each council member. I wished him well and left. It was late when I pulled my car into the garage. I didn't speak to my wife but instead went straight to bed. My gift in life is an ability to fall asleep without much effort and be dead to the world until morning. Sleep was my escape that night, a short reprieve before sunrise.

Some describe disciplinary councils as deeply spiritual, for both council members and the person on trial, with feelings of love, sorrow, and hope prevalent throughout the proceedings. This was not my

experience. Something inside me that was not me—the part that is somehow connected to other people—broke. If I had known what was in store that evening, I would have opted out despite the obligation I felt to serve. It would be months before I could think about the experience without my stomach rising into my chest.

I might have felt better about the outcome if there had been some consideration given to my concerns. Something like, "Yes, it's complicated and there's enough blame to go around, but we can't ignore the choices he's made." Whether the council couldn't or wouldn't go down that road, I don't know. Were we so defined by our religion and experiences that we couldn't imagine such a perspective? Was the group so loyal to the faith that we didn't dare suggest accountability for the institution? Or perhaps I'm so glued to my own views that I pursue persuasion to the point of manipulation.

In any case, it wasn't just the offender's relationship with the Church that changed that night. I'd made good to my conscience, even if the execution was lacking, but my relationship with my congregation and local leadership would never be the same. If my pro-LGBT position over the past few years had branded me as someone who might not be loyal to the faith, then my display during the disciplinary council decidedly tipped the scales. A few weeks later, the stake president thanked me for my service in various leadership roles and formally released me from those responsibilities. It's been years, and I've not been asked to serve in any leadership capacity since, despite a long history of such. I hadn't committed adultery or homosexual acts, and my membership status was unchanged, but judgement was passed all the same.

Half a dozen humid summers have come and gone since the night I sat at one end of a table, surrounded by my peers, with a gay man on the other side. We judged a man who sat only a few feet away but whose circumstances couldn't have been further from our own. It was like playing a game of connect-the-dots, but with half the dots hidden. At best we were able to assemble only a distorted picture of his reality.

The actions of the council, whether right or wrong, ignored the thing so many of us need from one another: understanding. Not a grasp of what pushes us to do this or that, but an acknowledgement that our lives are complex. So many of us struggle to know how even our own choices are influenced by our own experiences and emotions. The understanding we need is recognition that others face the same challenge.

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Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"Is There No Other Way?"
24" × 18". Oil on panel. 2022.

O MAGNUM MYSTERIUM

Lorren Richelle Lemmons

I've heard many women say that the day their child was born was the best day of their life, but it was the worst day of mine. After laboring for nearly forty hours, my body was cut open and my son pried from my flesh. Earlier in the day, his heartbeat had slowed to a dangerous rate while I was pushing, and my body still shook with the epinephrine that had burned through my veins and the recognition of how fragile we both were, how thin the curtain between life and death.

His heartbeat had rebounded with the emergency medication, but after four more hours of pushing, an impatient doctor informed me that I was done and needed a C-section. She left me writhing on a stretcher, unmedicated, for nearly an hour while she performed a scheduled C-section on a mother who had priority over me. I felt as though she were punishing me for failing to give birth. Once I was finally brought into the sterile operating room, vomiting as the anesthesiologist tried to numb my pain, I had a panic attack and was sedated for nearly an hour after my son came earthside. When he was finally placed in my arms in a curtained recovery room where I could hear another baby crying on the other side of the cloth, my mind was already in free fall.

The weeks that followed heralded failure after failure—my breasts refused to produce milk, and I visibly watched my son's body shrink until a lactation consultant gently but firmly told me I needed to consider formula as medicine for my son's survival. Then, at only five weeks old, he developed a respiratory infection that landed him in the hospital for five days. I laid on the plastic-covered sofa bed, watching my son's oxygen monitor until my eyes blurred and I fell into restless sleep. His first smile came from a hospital bed, nasal cannula taped to

his face. My postpartum follow-up appointment happened during his stay, and the chipper doctor, one I hadn't seen during my pregnancy, said, "Everything's fine! Your son's illness isn't serious!" and sent me off with a smile, ignoring the clear signs that my mental health was deteriorating.

Once we were home, I walked the halls with my recovering son, afraid I'd lose him if I let him out of my sight and convinced every terrible thing that had happened to him was my fault—my fault I hadn't pushed hard enough to give birth to him the "normal" way, my fault I hadn't produced enough breastmilk to give him antibodies against the virus that had put him in the hospital, my fault I was so exhausted and anxious that he cried in my arms and was only soothed when my husband came home and let him sleep on his chest. I stared at the wooden knife block in our kitchen and wondered what it would be like to pull a blade down my wrist. Would I feel the same sighing release of pressure I felt when I picked at my arms, a habit started as a ten-year-old that I'd never been able to quit? Would my head empty of all the demons, digging with tooth and claw at my brain and letting me drift quietly into oblivion?

I put the baby down and called my doctor.

~

In those early weeks of my son's life, I begged God to heal me, but where I sought relief, he sent only another wave of struggle. That first month, I couldn't see even a glimmer of light—I was groping in a dark sea, gasping for air between the waves battering my body. I still don't know why he left me like that, in my own prolonged dark night of the soul—why it took so long before I could feel his love and understanding begin to lift me.

I've read again and again, in scripture and general conference talks, that Jesus needed a body not only to enact the Resurrection but to truly

understand us, his broken, imperfect, mortal siblings. After my son's baby blessing, only days before he entered the hospital, I gave a bleary, loopy testimony, saying I felt an inkling of what God must feel for us because my heart felt like it was ripped in two when my son was fussy due to gas. (My father-in-law smirked and said, "Are you saying Jesus has gas?") The thought of my son experiencing even minor pain was gutting.

I knew the Savior felt the pains of the world in Gethsemane, but I wondered if there was a difference between the things he experienced on his own behalf in mortality and the rush of world-heaviness he experienced the night before his crucifixion. Surely Jesus cried as a newborn, shocked by the transition from warmth and darkness to open, blaring light. Did he lie sick in bed as a toddler, struggling for breath? Did his mind ever slip below reason, the struggles of the chemical animal dragging the spirit away from joy?

If you ask me if I believe that he felt all of my pains and sins, I will say yes without hesitation. I can stand in front of my ward and cry into a microphone that I believe he knows what I'm feeling, just like I testified of his love after my son was blessed, when I couldn't feel his love but still believed it was there. I believe during that heavy, infinite night in the garden, he must have learned what a woman's body experiences, even though he lived his life in a male one. That's part of the *magnum mysterium*, the mystery of his godhood enveloped in mortality. My finite mind can't make all the pieces fit, but my spirit trusts in the faith I've cultivated throughout my life.

And yet, I still find myself questioning. Could he truly know how warring hormones can make a woman forget who she is? Can he possibly understand the fear of holding a life in your womb and knowing that whether by the knife or the impossible stretching and tearing of your secret parts, you have to deliver it? Does he comprehend the monthly dive into darkness, relieved only by blood spilling from inside you?

I believe he does. I believe in the Atonement. But in my mortal limitation, I wish I *knew* that he could understand in his own body the havoc wreaked by mine.

~

I started picking my skin in the fifth grade. Small, pustulant bumps reddened what must have once been smooth and soft, and one evening, sitting outside on the faded patio furniture, I began to dig at them. My nails were short and blunt, meant to keep me from clicking against the piano keys when I practiced, but I only dug more viciously, a tiny puff of relief hitting my brain whenever a bead of blood appeared. Sometimes my fingers still seek those little bumps, camouflaged now among hundreds of freckles and dozens of scars.

My parents caught me sobbing in the shower the same year the bumps appeared and my breasts budded. Dripping tears mingling with the shower spray turned into heaving sobs, and my mom hammered at the door, alarmed. Later, my dad sat next to me on my bed and told me he had cried in the shower on his mission in Australia, overwhelmed by stress and thousands of miles from anyone he knew. I was unmoved, one part disbelieving that my dad was capable of falling apart, and one part caught up in my own preteen cocoon of selfishness, unable to care about his past problems while mine were still clouding my vision.

I didn't know how to describe what I was experiencing, but I knew that it was present, malignant, and other from myself. I started crying in class regularly, feeling friendless and worrying that my teacher didn't like me. My teacher called my parents, exasperated with my outbursts, and they threatened to take me to therapy with jagged voices. I'd always been the good girl and being sent to therapy felt like being sent to some adult principal's office, deeper and more serious than any school administrator. Now as a parent, I think my dad was worried about his unstable child, not sure how to help me as I trembled and broke. At the

time, I thought he was mad at me for my flaws, for not knowing how to be happy when everything in my life was privileged and good.

When I search my memories for when I started feeling better, I can't find the answer. I had a best friend whom I was close to, even though she also hung out with the "cool girls" who wanted nothing to do with me because of my public crying outbursts. I have good memories of that first year of depression despite the unshakable poison fog that settled like dust on my fingers and mouth, smearing everything I touched and said. Ever since that year, even times of stable mental health, that malignant cloud has hovered in my periphery, threatening to wilt the flowers I grew in its absence.

Looking back over the crests and troughs of my depression, hormones have always been the electrical charge driving the storm. From the early rumblings of puberty to the ravages of postpartum depression, all punctuated by a monthly mini-descent into hell where I hate everyone and am convinced the feeling is mutual, my fight with mental illness has been woven with my femininity. Is this what God meant when he told Eve, "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"?[1] Am I cursed to carry this extra, other pain because my mother tasted the fruit necessary to enact the plan of salvation?

~

As a teen, I strained my eyes to read the fine print of my scriptures, looking for comfort. In the midst of another bout with my now well-known shadowy beast, phrases slip into my mind, phrases I read at twelve or fourteen, underlining with my rainbow scripture highlighter—"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."[2] "I am filled with comfort."[3] "I will not leave you

1. Genesis 3:16.

2. Psalm 30:5.

3. 2 Corinthians 7:4.

comfortless."[4] I resonated with Paul's desperate plea for the "thorn in [his] flesh"[5] to be removed before I could drive a car, although I'm still striving to be comforted by the Lord's response: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."[6] I can't say that I "glory in my infirmities,"[7] but before I could even verbalize what the Atonement was, I could feel its support, printed on my heart like it was on the whisper-thin pages of my scriptures. I trusted Jesus implicitly, childlike in my need for him.

Sometimes when I look back now, in my thirties, I feel like my faith has gone backward, a sort of spiritual Benjamin Button as my skepticism and questions grow. I once believed the balm of Gilead could heal that thorn pricking at my skin, but as the years have gone by, the wound has deepened and festered. When I hear people speak of miraculous healing, my cynical inner voice reminds me, "But not for you. You're supposed to be *learning something,* and clearly you're not there yet."

My spirit thrills to the scripture, "He will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities,"[8] even as my mind questions it. I've heard some say that Jesus could have chosen a more hypothetical passage, experiencing our woes on a spiritual plane, but that statement feels repellently false. A God of mercy and love would succor us through his senses, albeit accelerated and magnified through godly power. And I believe he knows how to succor me, even though he doesn't have a uterus or a monthly war dance of estrogen and progesterone surging through his cells.

4. John 14:18.

5. 2 Corinthians 12:7.

6. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

7. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

8. Alma 7:12.

But I still keep asking, like pushing a bruise: Do you know me? Do you know this too? Are you truly experiencing my anguish by my side?

My childlike heart hears the answer my overly analytical mind cannot: yes. Somehow, yes. Skeptics would tell me it's intellectual laziness on my part to accept the broad-stroke answer that ignores the details needling my mind, but for me, this is where I must accept that God's ways are not my ways, and that I do not yet have a perfect knowledge of things. I do not know how a man, even the holy Son of Man, can understand viscerally the things my body has wrought, but I believe him still and so embrace the mystery.

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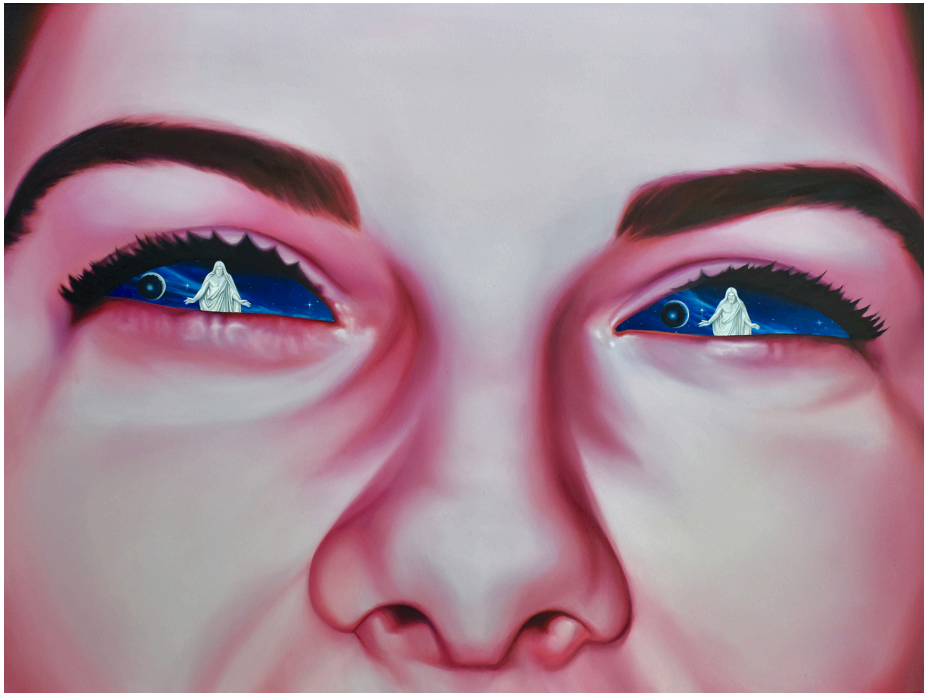

Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"The Light That Is In Their Eyes."
24" × 18". Oil on Panel. 2022.

MODEL CARS ARE NOT CARS (AND THEORIES OF ATONEMENT ARE NOT ATONEMENT)

Eric Chalmers

If you mistake a model car for a real car, you're going to have problems. I spent much of my life making that mistake in my thinking about atonement. I had read that "God's justice requires that a penalty be paid for every sin"[1] and that "to atone is to suffer the penalty for sins, thereby removing the effects of sin from the repentant sinner and allowing him or her to be reconciled to God."[2] I was in my mid-thirties when I discovered that this penal substitution idea is one of many different theories of what atonement is all about. Furthermore, there were well-developed criticisms of penal substitution theory—and they were good ones. I became desperate to find out what atonement really meant.

I'd like to write about what, for me, was a major step forward in this struggle: realizing that I'd been conflating models of atonement with atonement itself. Many readers may have separated those two things much earlier in life than I did, or even take that separation for granted, but for me it was a difficult paradigm to break out of. Even after I started studying theories of atonement, I treated them like competing descriptions of some historical event—like conflicting eyewitness accounts of

1. Church Educational System, *Doctrines of the Gospel: Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986).

2. "Atonement of Jesus Christ," accessed Apr. 19, 2022, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/atonement-of-jesus-christ?lang=eng.

a crime—when in fact they serve an entirely different purpose. Now I think of them as being something like scientific models of gravity.

Why Does a Dropped Stone Fall?

Aristotle proposed one of the first theories of what we now call gravity. He proposed that rocks fall downward when dropped because of their *nature*. After all, everything in the world was made up of four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. A rock, made of earth, is naturally attracted downward to the earth. Smoke, on the other hand, is attracted upward toward the celestial sphere because it is made of fire. This described people's day-to-day experiences and was a perfectly good model for many years.

Many other models of gravity were proposed over subsequent millennia. In 1728, Sir Isaac Newton published the *Principia*, which envisioned gravity as an invisible force. His "law of universal gravitation" can be stated mathematically as follows:

$$F = \frac{G \times m_1 \times m_2}{r^2}$$

In this equation, F is the force of gravitational attraction between two objects, m1 and m2 are the masses of those objects, r is the distance between them, and G is the "gravitational constant"—a multiplier that causes the units of measurement to work out nicely. This model explained why all kinds of objects move the way they do—including the six then-known planets, whose orbits had been charted by Kepler about seventy years earlier.

Let's pause for a moment to notice something important: Newton's model describes (mathematically) how gravity *behaves*. What its *effects* are. But it doesn't really tell us what gravity *is* or why it exists in the first place. Models like this are useful because they state more or less simply how some aspect of the universe behaves and even predict its behavior in new situations. For example, Newton's model was used to predict the existence and location of Neptune after astronomers noticed

irregularities in Uranus's orbit. However, these models don't necessarily reveal any deeper truth about the phenomena they describe.

Newton's laws were (and are) highly influential. But eventually, scientists started noticing things that Newtonian physics couldn't explain, like the peculiar orbit of the newly discovered planet Mercury. Physicists searched for new models to explain these phenomena, and Albert Einstein finally succeeded with his theories of relativity. There have been additional developments since Einstein, and there will certainly be more in the future.

Models as Abstractions of, and Substitutes For, Reality

So . . . seriously, why does a dropped stone fall? Which of the various gravitational theories is correct? The answer is probably "none of them." Models are simplifications of reality that abstract away detail and complexity in order to highlight a particular feature. We may choose to use particular models depending on what feature interests us, but we should never expect the model to correspond to reality otherwise. Statistician George Box put it succinctly: "All models are wrong, but some are useful."[3] A model car is not a car, but is useful because it gives a sense of the car's design and style. Newton's gravitational model is not gravity, but we can use it to put satellites into orbit. And theories of atonement highlight various features of our relationship to Christ—but they are not atonement.

So the interesting question is not "Which model is correct?" but rather "Which model is useful to me?" For example, I didn't learn relativity when I went through engineering school. I learned the older Newtonian physics. Einstein's models more accurately describe the

3. G. E. P. Box, "Robustness in the Strategy of Scientific Model Building," in *Robustness in Statistics*, edited by Robert L. Launer and Graham N. Wilkinson (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 201–36.

world, but Newton's models are close enough for engineering situations and are much easier to learn and use. The simpler model is more practically useful for my work.

A useful model becomes a substitute, a stand-in, for reality itself. I might define gravity by saying, "Gravity is a force that attracts two objects together. Larger or closer objects incur stronger gravitational force." But I'm really describing Newton's *model* of gravity. I have no idea what gravity really is. So, we understand reality through our models—they mediate reality for us. This is a normal part of the human experience, and it works great if you and I both realize that the model we're discussing is not reality itself.

Problems can arise, however, if we start to confuse the model with reality. If you try to believe that a model car is actually a car, you're going to have problems.

Models of Atonement

Like gravity, atonement has been understood through an evolution of different models. The one that seems to be in official use by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is penal substitution theory. The Church's *Preach My Gospel* manual describes this model by stating, "Justice is [an] unchanging law that brings . . . penalties for disobedience," and that Jesus "stood in our place and suffered the penalty for our sins. This act is called the Atonement of Jesus Christ."[4] Because of that last sentence and many other statements like it, I thought for many years that penal substitution *was* atonement. But this is only one model of many.

4. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019), available at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/eng/manual/preach-my-gospel-a-guide-to-missionary-service/_manifest (accessed Apr. 19, 2022).

Critics of the penal substitution model find it easy to create caricatures, like this one from J. Clair Batty:

> Children sent to the hen house gather eggs and accidently, carelessly, or deliberately drop the basket and break the eggs. These children have been conditioned to expect a terrible beating for their transgression. An older brother comes along and seeing the plight of the poor trembling egg-breakers says something like this: Although I have never broken an egg or spilt a drop of milk in my entire life, I, the strongest, will take the beating you so richly deserve. I will take upon my shoulders the responsibility for your broken eggs. I will suffer for you, after which you will be in my debt forever and ever.
>
> This scenario presupposes an authority figure who could be deceived into believing that big brother actually broke the eggs or who was so befuddled, frustrated, drunken, or angry that it didn't really matter who broke the eggs just so long as he could vent his rage by inflicting pain and seeing someone suffer.[5]

Of course, the point of this caricature is to illustrate the inconsistency of trying to satisfy justice with an injustice—namely, punishing the innocent Jesus in place of the guilty. Alma 34:11–12 seems to speak directly to this point by stating that a just law wouldn't be satisfied with penal substitution, and therefore only "an infinite atonement will suffice for the sins of the world." A pro–penal substitution interpretation of this verse might put the emphasis on the word "infinite," submitting that human justice can't accept penal substitution, but God's *infinite* justice transcends humans' and makes penal substitution work in a way we can't understand (the "incomprehensibility" claim, which I will revisit shortly). A critic's interpretation, on the other hand, might put the emphasis on the word "atonement": penal substitution can't satisfy justice—period—and therefore atonement is needed *instead*. The critic's reading of Alma 34 separates penal substitution from atonement, while the adherent's reading merges them.

5. J. Clair Batty, "The Atonement: Do Traditional Explanations Make Sense?," *Sunstone* 8 (1983): 11–16.

I was surprised to learn that the penal substitution model is largely a product of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and an adaptation of a more generic eleventh-century model called satisfaction theory, which claims that our sins have offended God's sense of righteousness and honor. In this model, Jesus' suffering makes restitution for our offense—not by suffering an incurred penalty per se but by paying an honor debt in a way characteristic of medieval feudal societies. Satisfaction theory is still a substitutionary model and is just as easy to caricature (see J. Clair Batty's *Sunstone* article for a great example).[6]

I then wondered: if penal substitution is a Reformation-era improvement on an eleventh-century satisfaction model, what model did people use before that? To be fair, some supporters of penal substitution try to trace its origins backward from the reformers to Augustine in the fifth century, Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth, and Clement of Rome in the first, thus attributing it to some of the early church fathers.[7] But there seems to be more general agreement that substitutionary ideas were unknown in the early church and that the ransom theory of atonement was used instead. According to ransom theory, our sins give Satan a claim on our souls. This claim is legitimate (i.e., God recognizes it too), and so God, in the form of Jesus, offers to trade his soul for ours. Satan accepts and waives his claim on us, but after seeing that death cannot hold Jesus, realizes he has been tricked and left with no prize at all. This is the model portrayed in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Critics tend to object to the amount of power Satan seems to have in this scenario, or to the idea of Christ tricking and deceiving in this way.

There are many more models out there, but by now I was in crisis mode. Voltaire famously said that no problem can withstand the assault

6. Batty, "The Atonement."

7. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Academic, 2008).

of sustained thinking; it seemed that no theory of atonement can either. After much searching, I finally found the conclusion: *they're all just models*. They're all wrong. Or, to say the same thing in a more generous way, they're all perfectly good models.

Penal Substitution in the Doctrine and Covenants?

Many of the biblical passages we associate with atonement do not explicitly describe penal substitution. We tend to impose a substitutionary interpretation on them. Interestingly, it takes much less effort to see penal substitution in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. One of the strongest passages is Doctrine and Covenants 19:13–20, in which Christ tells Joseph Smith that he (Christ) has "suffered for all, that they might not suffer if they repent."

However, in the passage immediately preceding this one, something very interesting has happened. The text says, "It is not written that there shall be no end to torment, but it is written 'endless torment.' Again, it is written 'eternal damnation.' . . . I am endless, and the punishment which is given from my hand is endless punishment, for Endless is my name. Wherefore—Eternal punishment is God's punishment. Endless punishment is God's punishment" (D&C 19:6–12). So, according to these verses, the term "endless punishment" actually means God's punishment, not (as literally every English speaker would have thought) punishment that goes on forever. In this case, God doesn't mind the misinterpretation because, "it is more express . . . that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men, altogether for my name's glory" (D&C 19:7).

So inaccurate models are perfectly acceptable to God if they *work*—if they achieve a desired effect "upon the hearts of the children of men." This makes perfect sense: the usefulness of a model—its fitness for a particular purpose—always matters more than its correctness. In Doctrine and Covenants 1:24, God acknowledges that he is happy to communicate using models himself: "these commandments . . . were

given unto my servants in their weakness, *after the manner of their language*, that they might come to understanding." What is "the manner of our language" if not the set of symbols, metaphors, and models that we use to communicate and mediate spiritual concepts? In other words, God uses rhetoric. Immediately after sharing this "mystery" with Joseph Smith, Christ employs the substitutionary language in verses 13–20, with which Joseph Smith would have been very familiar.

Separating Model from Modeled

There is something to be said for keeping models of things separate from the things themselves. Consider the Aristotelian model of the cosmos. This model put Earth at the center of the universe, with the sun, moon, and all other heavenly bodies revolving around it. And why not? This model explained people's day-to-day experience. In fact, it matches our day-to-day experience so well that we still use this model whenever we talk about the sun "rising" and "setting." However, the Aristotelian model wasn't always acknowledged to *be* a model. In Galileo's time, it was seen as objective fact. This caused serious problems for Galileo, who supported Copernicus's heliocentric model of Earth revolving around the sun. A 1616 Roman Inquisition found heliocentrism to be "formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture,"[8] and Galileo was later sentenced to life under house arrest. Keeping models separate from reality is important because it allows us to adjust and improve the model when we encounter its limitations, like astronomical observations giving rise to heliocentrism, or Mercury's orbit prompting a change to Newtonian physics.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seems to completely identify penal substitution with atonement. We have a unique gift for

8. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, ed. and trans., *The Galileo Affair: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 146.

making "the transcendent literal and the mundane heavenly," as Richard Bushman puts it,[9] and so we find it easy to think about atonement in terms of prison sentences, cash transactions, or other images from the mundane, objective world. But once we bring atonement into the mundane, objective world, it needs to be *explained*. And when the (substitutionary) explanation fails under the assault of sustained thinking, our only recourse is to claim that atonement cannot really be explained after all. Take for example James E. Talmage's statement that, "in some manner . . . to man incomprehensible, the Savior took upon Himself the burden of the sins of [hu]mankind,"[10] which simultaneously asserts substitutionary atonement and (thanks to the adjective "incomprehensible") also preemptively rejects any requests for explanation.

So, to sum up, we conflate the penal substitution model with atonement, we then conclude that atonement is incomprehensible because penal substitution is, and the believer is left to accept a substitutionary atonement while being told they can't understand it. To be clear, I have no problem with calling atonement incomprehensible, or with accepting things I don't currently understand. It's just the feeling that we claim incomprehensibility simply to avoid thinking things through, when some good reflection might lead to new models that can "work upon the hearts of the children of men" in new ways.

In the meantime, accepting penal substitution saddles us with penal substitution's limitations, illustrated previously by J. Clair Batty. If penal substitution were accepted as merely a model, these problems could be easily dismissed as shortcomings of the model. We could simply admit, "Yes, the model breaks down there. The substitutionary model beautifully illustrates Christ's willingness to suffer the pain of this human world we've created in order to improve it. But to say that God literally

9. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 477.

10. James Talmage, *Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915; repr. 2018), 558.

demands violent suffering for every sin is to take the analogy too far." However, if penal substitution is not a model—if it's identified with atonement itself—we're stuck with its limitations.

In the end, I'm not sure atonement belongs in the objective world at all. It might instead belong in the world of love, forgiveness, redemption, symbol, myth, and adventure. We can let atonement live in that world. If we acknowledge that atonement theories are just mediating models but let them affect us anyway, then the whole thing works. Then ransom theory is a moving story about Christ's daring rescue mission to save the world from sin. Then penal substitution theory is a moving story that illustrates Christ's willingness to accept and understand the evil of our world in order to transform it. And both are effective. To see oneself as the hero of these stories—like we do when we watch a good movie—is now to see oneself as Christ. The whole experience becomes meaningful and essential.

Atonement is about being reconciled with the divine—including the divine in each person. It's about being at peace (at-one) with life. Life is great and terrible. It's the coexistence of opposites: light and darkness, health and sickness, pleasure and pain. Atonement is knowing all this and choosing life anyway. What symbols or models do you adopt to help you redeem life and humanity in this way?

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GENETICS AND GATHERING THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL

Brian H. Shirts

Questions from My Past

My patriarchal blessing indicates that I am a literal descendant of Ephraim and heir to specific blessings and promises. But what does this statement mean? How could someone like me, whose genealogy, 23andMe, and AncestryDNA results all show 100 percent European, be a literal descendant of someone who lived thousands of years ago in the Middle East? And how does this relate to the doctrine of the gathering of Israel?

Growing up I heard many statements about the "lost tribes," the mysterious story of the disappearance of the ten northern tribes of Israel after the kingdom was sacked by the Assyrians around 720 BCE. Over time, legends developed that one day they would be rediscovered and rejoin the Jews.[1] My Sunday School and seminary teachers seemed to suggest that there would be some isolated ethnic group that missionaries would discover, and they told anecdotes about different cultures, highlighting similarities to Hebrew culture and symbolism. Some millennialist Christians have even identified groups they claim to be lost Israel. Although such claims are unlikely, this kind of teaching gave me the impression that the lost tribes would be identified as groups—someone would proclaim, "This is clearly the lost tribe of Issachar (or Zebulon, or Gad). Check another one off the list." To my naïve

1. Andrew Tobolowsky, *The Myth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel: New Identities Across Time and Space* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

understanding, a meaningful gathering would require clear historical, scriptural, or other evidence that specific tribes had been identified.

I began to ponder the doctrine of the gathering of Israel when I realized that the "lost tribe" stories I'd heard reflected the fact that many traditions are common to all humanity. It seemed to me that one can find parallels between almost any two cultures by chance. Furthermore, missionaries now teach in much of the world, and knowledge of different cultures has grown dramatically, but any credible "found tribe" story has yet to materialize. Although I regularly hear secondhand stories of individuals in far-off countries being identified through their patriarchal blessings as members of a lost tribe, no group of people that has joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been officially recognized as a lost tribe.

Recent teachings about the gathering of Israel from Church leaders have focused less on identifying connections with Israel and more on the acceptance of the gospel by those who are the heirs to Abraham's promises.[2] The principle of adoption has also been proposed as a way for all to receive the blessings of Abraham.[3]

2. Russell M. Nelson, "The Gathering of Scattered Israel," Oct. 2006, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/10/the-gathering-of-scattered-israel?lang=eng; Quentin L. Cook, "Lamentations of Jeremiah: Beware of Bondage," Oct. 2013, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/lamentations-of-jeremiah-beware-of-bondage?lang=eng; Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, "Hope of Israel," talk given at Worldwide Youth Devotional, Conference Center, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 3, 2018, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2018/06/hope-of-israel?lang=eng; Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," Oct. 2020, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/46nelson?lang=eng.

3. Russell M. Nelson, "Covenants," Oct. 2011, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2011/10/covenants?lang=eng; Boyd K. Packer, "The Stake Patriarch," Oct. 2002, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2002/10/the-stake-patriarch?lang=eng.

Even as leaders have emphasized covenant connections and de-emphasized the rediscovery of the ten tribes, the lost tribes doctrine has remained part of Church curriculum. It can be found in lesson materials on the Old Testament, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants; enshrined as an article of faith; and discussed regularly, mostly prominently by President Russell M. Nelson.[4] More personally, as noted above, my patriarchal blessing says that I am a literal descendant of Ephraim. I wondered how to make sense of such a claim.

Seeking Better Scientific Understanding

In my professional work as a molecular pathologist, I have the privilege of looking at human DNA sequences and investigating the medical

4. "Prophecies of a Latter-day Gathering," *Old Testament Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), available at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/old-testament-student-manual-kings-malachi/chapter-25?lang=eng, accessed July 23, 2022; "Then I Will Gather Them In," *Book of Mormon: Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), available at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/book-of-mormon-gospel-doctrine-teachers-manual/lesson-40?lang=eng, accessed July 23, 2022; "Lesson 12: 'The Gathering of My People,'" *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History: Gospel Doctrine Teacher's Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 63–68, available at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-and-church-history-gospel-doctrine-teachers-manual/lesson-12-the-gathering-of-my-people?lang=eng, accessed July 23, 2022; "Chapter 53: Doctrine and Covenants 133," *Doctrine and Covenants Student Manuel* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2017), available at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-student-manual-2017/chapter-53-doctrine-and-covenants-133?lang=eng, accessed July 23, 2022. Nelson, "The Gathering of Scattered Israel;" Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, "Hope of Israel." Nelson talks about both adoption and rediscovery. These are not mutually exclusive. See also Russell M. Nelson, "The Everlasting Covenant," *Liahona*, Oct. 2022, https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/10/04-the-everlasting-covenant?lang=eng.

implications of human population genetics. As I gathered data to gain insight into human inherited disease mechanisms, the implications of population genetics for the search for the lost tribes of Israel became more and more clear to me.

A "tribe" is a cultural entity associated with some common genetic or ancestral heritage. During and after the Assyrian captivity, when the tribes of Israel were "lost," it was really their identity as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that was lost. This specific Israelite cultural heritage disappeared quickly, possibly within a few generations. Without cultural heritage, only ancestral and genetic heritage are left. I asked myself, "Is any ancestral or genetic remnant discoverable through modern science?"

As I sought answers, I found scientific literature on population modeling showing that ancestors from 2500 to 3000 years ago (from the time of the reign of King David to the captivity of the tribes) can have descendants that span large populations of entire continents today.[5] Population geneticists have looked at migration patterns, inbreeding coefficients, and family size, and calculated that it is likely that the most recent common ancestor of the entire human race was alive approximately 2300 to 3000 years ago.[6] The farther back in history you go from there, the more people become common ancestors, i.e., ancestors of everyone alive now.

There are two ways to understand the principle of historical common ancestors. One is to note that an individual's ancestors double

5. Gideon S. Bradburd, Peter L. Ralph, and Graham M. Coop, "Disentangling the Effects of Geographic and Ecological Isolation on Genetic Differentiation," *Evolution: International Journal of Organic Evolution* 67, no. 11 (Nov. 2013): 3258–73.

6. Douglas L. T. Rohde, Steve Olson, and Joseph T. Chang, "Modelling the Recent Common Ancestry of All Living Humans," *Nature* 431, no. 7008 (Sept. 2004): 562–66; Joseph Lachance, "Inbreeding, Pedigree Size, and the Most Recent Common Ancestor of Humanity," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 261, no. 2 (Nov. 2009): 238–47.

each generation. However, having twice as many unique ancestors, each generation becomes impossible after a few dozen generations—2^{30} is over one billion, more than the entire world population thirty generations, or about 750 years, ago. Common ancestors necessarily appear on multiple ancestral lines after a few hundred years. Every person alive today has many millions of ancestors that were on earth when the tribes of Israel formed, but estimates are that only fifty to 100 million people were alive at that time. The other way to think about this is to realize that the number of descendants of a reproductively successful ancestor will just keep growing. One or two individuals migrating to a new continent and having children will eventually cause that entire continent's population to be connected to all of the migrating individual's past ancestors.

It is not just possible but statistically very likely that billions of people alive today are descendants of ancestors from not just one but *many* of the tribes of Israel. This is particularly likely if the tribes were scattered, intermingled, and had many descendants—a definite historical possibility. So, when it comes to *ancestral* ties to scattered Israel, I expect that most individuals, if not *everyone* alive today, qualify as a literal descendant of the tribes of Israel. At the same time, we all have similar ties to many ancient civilizations.

Discovering the literature on population modeling, I realized that I should not be surprised at being declared a literal descendant of Ephraim—I am probably a descendant of many people who were alive three thousand years ago. If this is true, why should I be surprised that Ephraim was one of them? These ancestral ties are just a factor of time, population growth, population admixture, and most importantly a doubling of the number of possible ancestors every generation. Remote and faint ancestral ties to a specific person or group of people who were alive thousands of years ago could not be considered anything special because *everyone* alive today is extremely likely to have ancestors scattered across entire continents from many ethnic groups when you go that far back in human history.

Is it possible to discover a single common ancestor in DNA? The short answer is no—it is unlikely that any two individuals carry traceable genetic information from any specific common ancestor if they are more than about eleventh-degree relatives (fifth cousins).[7] As years pass, making common ancestors farther and farther remote in time, the probability of identifiable shared genetic ancestry drops dramatically. The human genetic code contains three billion base pairs, which are separated into about a hundred new segments each generation. By the time you get five or six generations back, there will probably be ancestors from whom you have not inherited any DNA. It is likely that you do not have a single DNA base pair attributable to most of your direct ancestors ten or more generations back.

Proving that an individual has a special genetic link with a specific individual or group that lived thousands of years and over one hundred generations ago would be impossible without correlating genetics with a continuous cultural heritage (such as that which exists among modern Ashkenazi Jews). Therefore, even with the best genetics possible, we are unlikely to find any genetic confirmation of "lost" Israelite connections in any group living today.

Accepting Scientific Reality

As I studied these genetics principles, I came to the conclusion that the lost tribes of Israel are not just lost and scattered, but that anything that can be called a "tribe" is completely gone. They are clearly culturally extinct and certainly genetically obsolete as a definable entity. To be sure, ancestral ties are probable, but they are nothing special. Why should chance ancestral ties be meaningful if the ancestral connections are unidentifiable?

7. Catherine A. Ball, et al., "AncestryDNA Matching White Paper," Ancestry.com, last updated July 15, 2020, https://www.ancestrycdn.com/support/us/2020/08/matchingwhitepaper.pdf.

Even though I became less concerned about a patriarch saying I was a literal descendant of Ephraim, I became more and more troubled by the doctrine of the gathering of Israel ingrained in the history, scripture, and culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. How can a tribe really be restored after it has disappeared?

During the time I studied population genetics as it relates to tribal identity, my daughter had been using Primary songs to memorize the Articles of Faith. Her singing the first line of the tenth article of faith stuck in my head, "We believe in the literal gathering of Israel and in the restoration of the ten tribes." I began asking myself: is this "literal gathering of Israel" and "restoration of the ten tribes" something that I can really believe? Joseph Smith could not have known, like I know, that the lost tribes are not lost like a set of keys is lost, waiting to be found when someone looks in the right place; instead, they are lost in the sense that they have forgotten who they are, and the physical evidence of their birthright is gone.

Spiritual Answers to Scientific Questions

Because of these concerns, I began to pray to know how to understand gospel principles surrounding the gathering of Israel. Concurrent with my prayers, I had been planning to begin serious scripture study of this topic for several weeks. The thought of studying something that was so troubling to me was daunting, so I procrastinated, focusing my scripture study on preparation for the youth class I taught on Sundays.

One night, I finally decided to initiate a focused scripture study on the gathering of lost Israel. After a prayer, I determined to look up each scripture listed in the Topical Guide to see if I could find some insight to address my concerns. I had not finished the first reference when my wife, Brooke, who was not aware that I had started this line of inquiry, turned to me and said, "Have you heard this scripture? It has some really interesting imagery." She proceeded to read Ezekiel 37:1–14.

In this passage, the Lord shows Ezekiel a valley of dry bones. The Lord asks the prophet, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel responds, "O Lord God, thou knowest,"[8] as if to say, "they are so far beyond dead that they are dry and disjointed! You know that it is absurd that these bones should live."

As my wife read this scripture, I immediately saw that over several months the Lord had been teaching me to understand Ezekiel's prophecy. He had been showing me the same thing he showed Ezekiel, only he had been showing it to me in a language I understood—the language of population genetics. The lost tribes of Israel are like a valley of dried bones, the genetic heritage meaningless and the cultural heritage gone; they have been completely lacking in life for thousands of years. Rationally, there is no possible way that these tribes could come to life. There can be no gathering of a tribe that is culturally and genetically gone, just as it would be impossible to bring dried bones back to life. "Can these bones live?"

Brooke read on. After showing Ezekiel the valley of dry bones, the Lord commands Ezekiel to "prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."[9] Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded and "the bones came together, bone to his bone . . . the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them."[10] As Brooke read this, I noticed that the Lord did not directly command the bones to come to life, but he told his prophet to prophesy to the bones, and they joined together and were restored. I saw in my mind's eye an army of patriarchs, commanded to prophetically declare tribal lineage to all they bless. Through prophecy, patriarchs restore ancient identities, joining the dry bones together and covering them with the sinews of

8. Ezekiel 37:3.

9. Ezekiel 37:4.

10. Ezekiel 37:7–8.

gospel promises and the flesh of assured spiritual gifts. Patriarchs prophetically declaring lineage restore a cultural identity, which is the first step to a shared cultural heritage.

After Ezekiel prophesies for the dry bones to come together, the Lord commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the four winds to "breathe upon these slain, that they may live."[11] Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded, "and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army."[12] As my wife read this, I saw Saints, with knowledge of their tribe revealed to them by their patriarchs, seeking out the blessings promised to their ancestors in temples built across the four corners of the earth. I saw prophets and apostles declaring blessings and duties to these Saints who have been joined to their covenant identity, thus restoring a mission and culture, completing the restoration of a tribal identity and breathing life into the house of Israel. Ezekiel's vision concludes with the Lord declaring:

> these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts . . . Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves. . . . And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it.[13]

My vision of Ezekiel's prophecy ended as my wife finished this passage. I may have never found this scripture on my own, since it was not listed in the Topical Guide under "Gathering of Israel." The subsequent section of Ezekiel 37 describes joining the sticks of Judah and Ephraim, another important part of the gathering. Prophecy and revelation on multiple levels (patriarchal, apostolic, and individual) is the only way

11. Ezekiel 37:9.

12. Ezekiel 37:10.

13. Ezekiel 37:11–14.

"dry bones" can become "the whole house of Israel." Missionaries play a part by telling the dry bones, wherever they are in the world, "Hear the word of the Lord!"[14] Without knowing it, I had been shown that it was impossibly unlikely that there would ever be a group definitively identified as a "lost tribe" through genealogy, history, or genetics, just as Ezekiel could see that the Israelite tribes held captive in Assyria were becoming obsolete during his lifetime. The "bones" of the kingdom of Israel would become very, very dry before Israel was to be restored; the Lord showed this to Ezekiel over 2500 years ago and taught me the same principle through the language of population genetics. I have found that a solid understanding of science can prepare us to ask the right questions, but only through continuing revelation can we understand the meaning of ancient prophecies today.

An Expansive View of the Gathering of Israel

Since my experience with Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, my eyes have been gradually opened to the possibility of the biblical Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Rachel being among the common ancestors of all of humanity. Some might say that this is just a fact of mathematics; after all, many people alive on earth at that time are ancestors of billions alive today.

For me, the thought that *everyone* today is likely descended from Abraham brings hope. Abraham did not just want many descendants; he wanted "all the nations of the earth [to] be blessed" by his posterity.[15] It is remarkable to me that it was probably only in the last two or three centuries that these biblical patriarchs and matriarchs could have become common ancestors of everyone. Perhaps this was necessary before the priesthood keys related to gathering Israel could be restored in the last days. Malachi prophesied that acknowledging our common

14. Ezekiel 37:4.

15. Genesis 12:1–3, 22:18.

ancestry would be critical for us to survive the last days.[16] Joseph Smith saw temple work as a great welding link that would connect all the people of the world, past and present.[17] The whisperings of the Holy Spirit have taught me that lost Israel is not a *few* people among the many; it is a connection that is unacknowledged within in *each and every* person I see. Through the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and the keys of prophecy, *everyone* in the world can be blessed with the inheritance that is rightfully theirs by hearing and heeding the word of the Lord.

16. Malachi 4:5–6.

17. Doctrine and Covenants 128:18.

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Hayley Labrum Morrison, "Hearken."
16" × 20". Oil, marbled paper,
watercolor, and spray paint on paper
mounted on cradled panel. 2020.

Portrait of Agnes

Sarah Emmett

Stern little lady,
ancestor in an oval frame,
I like the way your shoulders slope
and your fingers dangle
over the book and the carpetbag skirt.
I like the way your widow's peak disrupts
your white forehead,
your pink cheeks through the black and white.
I like the way your braids loop
above your collar and your necklace.
Tell me, what color was your hair?

They told me stories about how you walked,
how you skipped through a rattlesnake path,
how you sprinted through the snowy autumn prairie
and kept all of your toes.
But, my pretty pioneer,
I'd rather know what book you are holding,
and how your thin frown looks when you laugh.

Cemetery Walk

Sarah Emmett

It was somewhere around here, I think.
Where they buried that baby,
yeah, the one I told you about.
No, not by the pioneer obelisks
a wife for each side
fresh flower at its feet.
No, not by the veterans' memorial—
What even was the Black Hawk War?
Oh that.
No, not by the new grandparent grave
ten kids
clean-cut and temple-topped.
Not mine but close.
No, not by the flat slabs of a family plot.
Once upon a time
I jumped across them like stepping-stones
and held my grandma's hand.
She searched out neglected relatives
an aunt, a cousin, would it have been?
But anyways, now where's that baby?
He was somewhere around here, I think.

The Garden I Know

Sarah Emmett

In his artistic agony,
diamond drops of blood
covered Christ's chiseled body,
sacred sweat shimmered
in the light of the Passover moon.
The Son of God, an altarpiece,
in serene pain and glory.

But in the garden I know,
his hair fell out
and his period stopped
and he vomited in fitful groans,
all over the ancient olive tree.
He was constipated and hungry
and he wept with revulsion
at the feel of himself.
I weep
with revulsion at the feel of myself.
Yet when I loathe,
he loves,
in sick and ugly sacrifice.

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Like a Prayer—
Phormium tenax

Tyler Chadwick

How that late sabbath afternoon you sat cross-legged on their lawn, Elder S at your side, the couple just across, their backs to her late summer garden— How conversation meandered like your two months in that town—you and S rambling metal roads along the harbor, through coastal bush, seeking strangers seeking God— How their words now hush behind memory but her giving lingers— How mid-story she turned and plucked a flax leaf from the garden— How, still telling, she folded the leaf at the spine, pinched with her nails just in from the column, stripped it from the blade— How she pinched then stripped the blade's tapered edge, then pinched and stripped again to yield thinner straps— How the straps flexed away from her touch as she curled them between her fingers to soften the weave— How she unfolded episodes from their story while folding the strips upon themselves—and again—and again—and again—until she held out two small plaits— How you and S *kia ora*-ed her giving— How your piqued forefinger and thumb kept telling the weave, kept telling the thin strands she left feathered off one end— How you carried the plait in your scriptures even long after your return— How you displayed it on a bookshelf— How you boxed it away in a move with other relics of your past— How you've pulled it from the closet— How you turn it in hand— How your forefinger and thumb had forgotten the flex of her grace—

Previously published in Tyler Chadwick, *Litany With Wings* (Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2022).

Collect for a Family Friend Killed in a Sabbath Morning House Fire

Tyler Chadwick

O, preening angels, voyeurs
of bright and burning things,

of underbuilding flare-ups and
flaming caved-in tinder, whose

breathing—plumed, infernal,
unforgiving—sweltered her last

daybreak with unholy invocation—
Please, if mercy be, if prayers

hurled—frenzied—Godward in
the heat of grieving

grace what's passed, please
have taken her before she fell

from sleep, please, while
fever-dreams beatified

her mind's cathedral, dousing it
with overtonal eager aching psalms,

best-known language of her flesh
billowing one last time from her

congregation choir, their notes
astray and breaking and, yet,

soaring beyond her organ, her awe,
please, that her leaving might have been

more requiem than torment—
For you are delirium and ecstasy,

the scald of endorphins
praising rapture and release—

Amen

Previously published in Tyler Chadwick, *Litany With Wings* (Salt Lake City: BCC Press, 2022).

TYLER CHADWICK {tawhiao@gmail.com}, an award-winning writer, editor, and teacher, received his PhD in English and the Teaching of English from Idaho State University. He teaches writing at Utah Valley University and has four books to his name: two anthologies, *Fire in the Pasture: 21st Century Mormon Poets* (Peculiar Pages, 2011) and *Dove Song: Heavenly Mother in Mormon Poetry* (Peculiar Pages, 2018); a collection of poetry and essays, *Field Notes on Language and Kinship* (Mormon Artists Group, 2013); and a poetry collection, *Litany with Wings* (By Common Consent Press, 2022). He lives in Ogden, Utah, with his wife, Jess, and their four daughters.

anamnesis:
confronting God in the flesh

Anita Tanner

1. a patient's account
of medical history,
a reiteration of conditions
contracted by mortality,
a form of proud flesh's
granulation over a wound,
a raised tissue mass
delineating impact to say
here is pain, here
I'm wounded, here
I cannot heal . . .

2. a remembering
of Eucharist,
import of Christ's passion
on humanity, a yearning
that resurrection
and ascension will apply
to protected boundaries
of woundwood to say healing
to the callus that forms in me,
my cells lignifying
with habitual rigidity . . .

3. a remembering from
previous existence
as an equine reaction

to pain or irritation
when head and neck
torque to investigate
sudden disquiet, to say
how, why, and can we
re-member what happens
in the flesh when
God and we come to be . . .

Osmond Ward Chapel, Now Demolished

Anita Tanner

Sometimes from the threshold
of these doors
we are greeted

by another self,
another world
we wish to worship,

incarnation
the tithe we offer
for such a crossing:

we, seeking the divine,
the divine leaning toward us,
fading coal of memory

igniting into color,
presence and invisibility
becoming one,

Christ choosing fishers-of-men
on a heightened mural wall
behind the rostrum.

Here, our woes
know no hierarchy,
all grief being equal.

Outside, the wasteland
sloughs off,
inner life aflame.

What hymns ring from here
open our veins
and capillaries,

bread and wine like arteries
throbbing through our temples.
Whatever message or mystery

is crucial here
will be elusive, mythical,
a shadow of what's yet to be.

What we intuit here
from flesh and blood,
body to body,

our lives will depend upon,
the Word made flesh,
all the doors

and windows
of this edifice
flying open.

ANITA TANNER {anitatanner6@gmail.com} was raised on a small family farm in Star Valley, Wyoming, where she learned the value of hard work and a love of the land, nature, and animals. Tanner began writing a few months before the birth of her fifth child. She, her husband, and six children made their home in Utah, later moving to Colorado. After her husband's death in 2002, Tanner moved to Boise, Idaho. Writing and reading for her is akin to breathing.

My Body in the Temple

Darlene Young

Halfway through the session, I become aware
of a full bladder and nothing else.
All that is holy is eclipsed
by flesh. I pant in claustrophobia
between the lady who snores
and the gum-chomper, suddenly surrounded
by bodies. I remember how,
during my last pregnancy, the gurgle of stomachs,
the smell of the chicken-à-la-king breath around me,
the man clearing his nose into his throat,
sickened me to such devilish and frantic irritation
I had to go on temple hiatus.
Sometimes the body is too heavy.

Like now—my bladder, an overripe melon,
makes it hard to stand and suck in to allow
the matron to pass me in the aisle.
Counting minutes, counting stages
in the ceremony, I pray an apology
to the woman whose name is folded
in my pocket. An ordinance requires a body,
I tell her. This is what you get.

When it's over—when I've changed clothes
with sloppy rush and found the bathroom,
I emerge so much lighter that this place
feels suddenly airy and bright. I love
this liminal circus, this foyer of glory
smelling of polyester, so earnest,

so strange. On my way out,
I take my time, stepping tenderly around
a bright spirit in an awkward old body
kneeling to tie her sister's shoes.

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SODOM AND GOMORRAH

Wes Turner

A man stands naked on the rubber of a checkout counter's conveyer belt, face smeared with something red. I'm checking the expiration date on the back of a suspicious-looking soup can; down the aisle, a woman haggles with the butcher over a pound of lamb.

"Adam didn't see the difference between their loins until he tasted the sour of Eden's trees," the man says.

Oh, I whisper to the soup can. *We have ourselves a prophet*. The fluorescent lights of the supermarket exaggerate the deep creases of his jowls.

He speaks as though we weren't all like him once; as if we didn't all arrive here grim-faced pilgrims, wet feet charting our fall from grace. We worship in new churches now, libraries and mirrors and midnight raves, our holy water sometimes oil sponged into bread, other times shot glasses twinkling with cheap tequila and broken glowsticks. But we never forget the stories our mothers taught us; their scriptures follow us like shadows.

"Why did God want Eve to eat the fruit?" someone shouts a few aisles over. It is meant as a joke, but the prophet doesn't notice and no one laughs.

"God is the great divider," the prophet says. "Dividing light from darkness, Eve from Adam, the righteous from the wicked."

"I thought dichotomy was the devil's game," the same heckler says. This time someone chuckles.

The prophet sighs and looks behind him toward the storefront windows. His ribs strain against the skin of his torso as it twists and tightens.

"We lived there once," he says. But for the dark hair on his chest, he resembles a Bernini. There is longing in his posture.

"What the fuck does that mean?" a new voice says, and a whirr of murmurs begins to build. I put my soup can back on the metal shelf and walk toward the *whoosh* of the sliding glass doors.

I know his meaning: that out beyond this supermarket, beyond the crooked teeth of our cemetery and our crumbling walls and burnt-out street lights, there is Zion, the City of Lightning. I remember the marble skyscrapers, the gilded streetcars and neatly trimmed hedges. Tulips lining avenues.

I remember the days we Zionians gathered together to dance, our movements beginning like a shared secret in the subtle sway of our fire-lit hips. Then, twisting and swelling until the seismic rhythm crested like a wave, our backs arching and shoulders rolling and arms flitting like falling manna, our drumming toes so powerful they could have split the world in two. There were no strangers at our supermarkets then.

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Joseph Smith and the Possibility of Comics

Andrew Knaupp and Sal Velluto. *Pillar of Light: Joseph Smith's First Vision*. Latter-day Saint Ideas, 2020. 36 pp. Paper: $29.00. ISBN: 979-8624658783.

Mark Elwood. *The Glass Looker: Collected Tales of Joseph Smith*, vol 1. Luman Books, 2021. 150 pp. Paper: $35.00. ISBN: 978-1-7378392-0-0.

Noah Van Sciver. *Joseph Smith and the Mormons: A Graphic Novel*. New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2022. 456 pp. Hardcover: $29.99. ISBN: 978-1419749650.

Reviewed by Theric Jepson

Renaissance scholar Ada Palmer estimates we know 1 percent of what happened five hundred years ago and that two-thirds of what we know is wrong. I have no reason to doubt her expertise—and every reason to suppose that the numbers aren't *that* much better when we consider two hundred years ago.

All the scuttlebutt the last couple decades over the "real" details surrounding Joseph Smith—whether his polygamy, treasure-hunting, translating with a stone, whatever—has weakened Church members' collective confidence in a once solid-seeming story. But while new information may lead to bewilderment or even crises of testimony, realizing how little we know also opens room for new narrative possibilities.

Since 2020, three significant new approaches to the Joseph Smith story have been undertaken in comics, each successfully breaking a path through the gnarled forest of known history. In short, *Pillar of Light*, written by Andrew Knaupp and drawn by Sal Velluto, takes varied versions of one event and correlates them into one clear whole. In *The Glass Looker*, Mark Elwood does not attempt to smooth together the prophet's early life but presents each version of the boy Joseph as

a series of sometimes contradictory vignettes. And Noah Van Sciver's long-awaited *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* builds the epic story of the man's prime years to a coherent but complicated wholeness. All three of these graphic novels engage in the task of turning Joseph Smith's complex history into a "true" story. They use diverse tools and present conclusions of varying ambiguity with distinct amounts of the personal, but they all are addressing who this man was and what he means now.

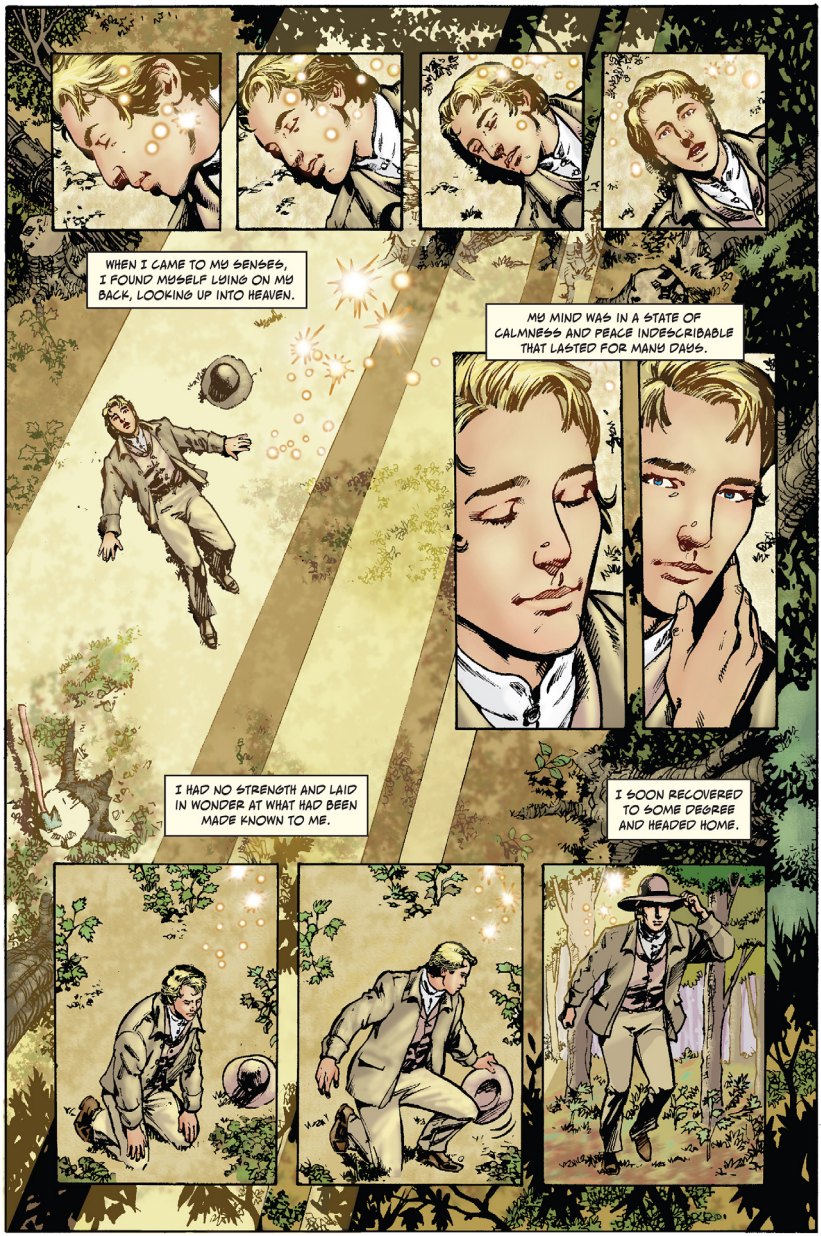
Let's take them in publication order.

Arriving in time for the Church's two-hundred-year anniversary celebration of the First Vision, *Pillar of Light* is the most traditional of the three volumes in several respects. Artist Sal Velluto is perhaps best known for his work on Marvel's *Black Panther*, and the various gigs he has taken over the years largely showcase his knack with superheroes. For years, he made a comic for the *Friend* magazine about early Church history, and perhaps some readers of *Pillar of Light* will recognize that work and appreciate the familiarity.

Knaupp has labored to bring together each known telling of the First Vision credibly tied to Joseph Smith (he counts four) and combine their seeming contradictions into a straightforward narration. Why? Well, as Knaupp and Velluto state in their introduction,

> Critics . . . have claimed that the differences . . . amount to contradictions and are evidence Joseph fabricated the story. We wanted to demonstrate that when you combine all the accounts, the result is a rich, consistent and synergistic narrative.
>
> *Pillar of Light* has been carefully researched and includes details not previously shown in films and art, as well as accurate historical depictions, beautiful symbolism, and creative representations. We hope it is inspiring. . . .
>
> We believe our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ have a message they want to give to the world. We are grateful to be a part of helping to deliver that message.

To summarize, their goal is akin to the goals of midcentury correlation in the Church. The mess we're in now is often blamed on correlation, but when you start from the standpoint of faith, there *must*



As part of the promotion for *Pillar of Light*, this image was reproduced in its stages of creation. This is not one of the most daring pages in the book, but it does highlight Velluto's skill at combining various perspectives within a single composition.

be a way to correlate the different views of history. Somehow this garden hose and this curtain must make an elephant! Frankly, it's a noble goal and executed with professional competence in *Pillars of Light*. The only "negative" thing I have to say[1] is that this goal is not comics-first. As the BYU professor–penned foreword begins, "I don't usually read graphic novels." Exactly. This book's audience is not first for those who love the medium but for those who are looking for a message delivered.

Commercially, this approach has plenty of upside. Most children's picture books, for instance, are purchased by well-meaning adults trying to improve a child—not the child themself. And the creators' intentions are pure—you can download the e-book for free. They really are trying to make the world a better place. And *Pillar of Light* is a step above much so-called correlated work we've seen in the past.

The risk, of course, is the risk that always follows correlation. By lauding their work's value because of its "accurate historical depictions," it can be easy for its audience—especially children—to not realize that Joseph's "many angels" might not have included Moses and a Nephite record-keeper. I'm reminded of the stories common among Gen X and millennial Latter-day Saints about telling a Primary teacher "That's not what happened" because, say, it was different in a *Living Scriptures* video. This sort of thing shouldn't shake one's testimony, but you can find people on Reddit who say it has.

This is not me trying to persuade you not to pick up *Pillar of Light*. Have it around your house! I'm just reminding you that you can't exactly "Train up a child in the way he should go" with a comic book for Christmas. But the creators recognize this, and their sources are quoted in the endnotes so no one is stopping you (or your child) from judging the quality of the adaptation's choices for yourself.

No one will confuse *The Glass Looker* with something out of the Church Office Building. This is as much an anthology of tales as a graphic novel, each story a facet of Joseph Smith lore. In one he is a

1. Scare quotes 90 percent intentional.

This chapter-introducing image of Sally Chase holding her seer stone immediately signifies her as a powerful character and is some of Elwood's best visual work in the book.

mighty lad and in another a weak cripple. He may be a hard worker or a lazy bum, a spiritual giant or a cheap charlatan. These are the stories history provides, and Elwood gives each its telling. Perhaps ironically, this book also follows the Gerald Lund tradition; each story is followed by notes—and not just notes but direct quotations from period documents. The effect of these piled-up stories is both striking and humbling. I'm no historian, but I do fancy myself more aware of these stories than the average Latter-day Saint—and yet Elwood, by translating them into comics, has brought them to life. I've never given Sally Chase a lick of thought, but now I find her stone-seeing riveting. And nothing reminds a body that the past is an alien world like watching

normal New England townsfolk out sacrificing a rooster in the hunt for treasure. The fiction of D. J. Butler has never seemed so close to reality.

Elwood's art style is of the sort that leaves the pencils visible. I don't always love that choice, and I don't love it here as it gives his art a slightly amateur vibe, but by the end of volume one, the art had won me over. For a comic to work, the art must work—it can't be all words and research. The marriage of art and word makes comics comics. I look forward to watching Elwood's art refine in coming volumes.

Noah Van Sciver's *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* is just as heavily researched as the other two books, but the research is not this comics' raison d'être—it is a tool, not the goal. Van Sciver has been exploring Joseph Smith for well over a decade; early takes appeared in his *BLAMMO!* comic and *Sunstone*. When he portrayed the First Vision—almost as a horror story—in *BLAMMO!* no. 7 (2011), he included this near-apology:

> While preparing to publish . . . I thought a lot about not including all the Joseph Smith stuff. In a way I feel embarrassed about it. I was indeed raised in the Church of the Latter day Saints [*sic*] until my parents divorced and I went with my mother who had had enough of the Mormon housewife role she had been playing. I was then taught that everything I had been brought up with in the religion was a lie. . . . I'm just too jaded about everything now. . . . It would only embarrass me. I get embarrassed a lot!

A year earlier, on his blog, he had addressed his Joseph Smith work like so:

> Growing up in a Mormon family, I understand that Joseph's life has played a part in who I am at least indirectly. My home was eventually split in half over the believe [*sic*] in his church. . . . Being told two different things about the church from two different people who I loved equally, left me unsure of what to believe. Who was lying? Which one of my parents was going to go to hell? Ultimately I've learned to never fully trust or side with any two extremes. So now, in perhaps a misguided attempt to understand more about myself, I am researching and looking for the truth.

The funeral of Joseph Smith Sr. is not often treated as a highlight of his son's story, but in Van Sciver's hands it is deeply felt. His use of multiple media and styles within a single image is typic of the story itself.

It's been a long time since that (now-deleted) post was published in 2010, and the stuff Van Sciver produced those first few years may have been published here and there, but they didn't make it into his final (massive) version of the Joseph Smith story. But there's something fitting about that early First Vision beginning by quoting James 1:5 over a quarter-page and then subjecting a kid to the terrors of God. It's a little dangerous to ask a God who gives liberally.

Incidentally, at the end of his new book, Van Sciver states that after "years immersed in an independent study on the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . travel[ing] to historic sites all over the country and read[ing] books, [going] to church, listen[ing] to hymns, and [writing] like the Devil was chasing me. . . . my study is finished. And I have the answers I was searching for, too." I'm happy for him.

And I'm happy for us that his journey ended with this novel, which makes a strong claim as the greatest novel to date about Joseph Smith, graphic or not. To understand this, you need to know that in the past decade-plus, Van Sciver hasn't just been researching Church history. He has also researched and published an excellent novel about Abraham Lincoln's early-adulthood depression.[2] His work has been nominated for the Ignatz Award nine times and shortlisted for two Association for Mormon Letters Awards, winning one of each.[3] He has become a widely respected force in independent comics on the strength of his work, and *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* is his magnum opus.[4]

As a work of literature, as a work of comics, as a 456-page piece of art, *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* never stops being impressive. And

2. Noah Van Sciver, *The Hypo: The Melancholic Young Lincoln* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012).

3. The Ignatz was for *My Hot Date*, a story from his adolescence, also nominated for an Association for Mormon Letters Award. His AML Award-winner was *One Dirty Tree*, another memoir, this one about the breakup of his family. *One Dirty Tree* explores the role religion played during those years for the Van Scivers, as discussed above.

4. At least so far!

it never shies away from the ambiguities of the prophet's life. Great men make the greatest blunders, and Van Sciver finds much to explore in both the enormous highs (preaching to great crowds, falling in love with Emma) and the enormous lows (the Kirtland Safety Society, seducing younger women). But his goal is never hagiography or tabloid shockers—Van Sciver is trying to understand a complicated man.

One way to understand his result is to imagine the coherent single tale of Knaupp and Velluto and the fractured vision of Elwood combined into one actual human being—someone who lives one version of his life, yet that version is filled with both leaps and stumbles. Van Sciver's Joseph Smith is a human being you can believe existed. He is not reduced to symbol or totem—he is a man.

And its breadth of represented moments and aspects makes for an incredible read. Four hundred fifty-six pages have never felt so short or so deep. *Joseph Smith and the Mormons* is the most deeply felt graphic novel of my experience since Jeff Lemire's *Essex County*—or maybe I need to reach even further back for a suitable comparison. Expect to have your heart twisted in and out of shape, chapter by chapter. While *Pillar of Light* and *The Glass Looker* are both excellent, neither of them is reaching for literary accomplishment as a primary goal. Van Sciver reaches and grasps hold.

One last note on *Joseph Smith and the Mormons*: Van Sciver states in his author's note that his "approach . . . was to tell the story . . . as straightforwardly as I could and to let readers draw their own conclusions. To this end, I decided not to portray any of the more extraordinary events as they were happening and instead chose to portray them as accounts being told to others. These miracles and visions are portrayed in blue line and without color." This is not strictly true. The blue-line plan is a reasonable artistic decision and it does work well throughout the text, but there are exceptions—the angel's appearance to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer; the Kirtland Temple dedication; an angel at Joseph's moment of death. I will leave it to the next round of criticism to explore the meaning of these exceptions, but for

now I will only say that whatever journey Noah Van Sciver undertook to create this masterpiece, the resulting comic is potent evidence that it mattered—and will continue to matter to us as readers for a long time.

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Elongated Time

Phyllis Barber. *The Precarious Walk: Essays from Sand and Sky*. Salt Lake City: Torrey House Press, 2022. 240 pp. Paper: $18.95. ISBN: 978-1-948814-59-1.

Reviewed by Michael William Palmer

Phyllis Barber's new work, *The Precarious Walk: Essays from Sand and Sky*, spans immense time. The book carries the reader from Barber's childhood in post–World War II Nevada through adolescence, multiple marriages, children, relocation, ecological change, alterations in faith, unfathomable loss, and return. The ambitious scope of the book works in part because the essays are less narrative memoir than they are reflections on ideas and sensations. Over the duration of the book, the reader can piece together core events in Barber's life—and the writing is very vulnerable at times. However, the book is more a meditation than it is a chronological story. Within an essay, Barber is as likely to introduce a narrative conflict and immediately jump fifteen years forward in order to explore an idea as she is to dive into the conflict itself, the way she might in her fiction. Her essays are focused on finding and exploring moments of "elongated quiet" (85) where time can "slow and bend and twist" (123).

The quiet reflection on place and faith harnessed in the book is distinct to Barber, who grew up in in Boulder City, Nevada, a town created

by the Department of the Interior—her grandmother sang at the opening of the Hoover Dam—after descending from a line of pioneers who moved to the western United States for their faith. Barber is able to view and depict even the time preceding her life through genealogical awareness and the previous research and imagining she has done for books such as her novel *And the Desert Shall Blossom*. And *The Precarious Walk* is in many ways about time itself—how to measure it, how to draw it out, what it adds up to. What lasts despite shifting winds—core faith, scars, love, shame.

In one essay, the narrator visits the Nevada town of St. Thomas, once entirely swallowed up by water, now visible again. Her visit to the town is a solid example of the immensity that Barber grapples with routinely in these essays. She reflects on the pioneer residents of the vanished town, the remnants (or lack thereof) left by any given person after a long stretch of time, ecological transformation, ideas and fallacies of permanence, and more, all while rendering the landscape vividly. St. Thomas was flooded by a dam meant to be eternal. As she writes: "The engineers and the politicians built the dam to last forever. They created a colossal lake. But now, even though the dam will probably last into infinity, what about the water?" (49). As she observes what's left of St. Thomas, Barber is able to feel both the initial desire to make the town flourish as part of a larger purpose and the simultaneous desire to see the Colorado River flowing without harness, the way it was before Lake Mead was created.

The book is at its strongest when Barber is able to maintain this reflective distance while simultaneously presenting the stark immediacy of narrative and sensory detail. When the reflection lacks this distance, the questions don't resonate quite as fiercely. In the essay "Mt. Charleston on My Mind," for example, Barber reflects on a near-death experience from her childhood when a massive boulder just missed flattening her family's vehicle as part of a rockslide. Here, the reflective voice seems caught in-between the girl-then and the present speaker, which leads to less specificity and clarity in her questions. Similarly, the

stretches back into the distant past are more effective when anchored to a known relative—her great-great-grandfather, the mail carrier in St. Thomas, for example—as opposed to imagining someone more abstract, such as a general basket-maker hundreds of years ago.

But other times, Barber manages it all remarkably, accomplishing what she aspires to when she writes: "I can lift my experiences from their limited boundaries and transform them into a unique bloom of perception" (188). It's difficult to imagine someone without Barber's experience—both as a person and a writer—being able to orchestrate and perceive as much as she does quite as deftly.

The book starts in the desert and ends there, and for good reason. Even if a return to her childhood is impossible, the desert is where Barber's writing is most alive. In one essay, she describes the aftermath of a bicycle accident this way: "Blood and gravel tangled together until I couldn't tell what was my leg and what was the desert" (214). Indeed, her story is embedded with the desert landscape just that way. And the images she shares from her desert experience linger: immense rain so loud as to be confused for F-15 jets flying overhead, watching a mushroom cloud like a movie, children gathering around to hear the story of their uncle who was "struck clean-through by lightning, his boots blown out at the soles" (71). *The Precarious Walk* leaves a mark and is a strong addition to Barber's impressive body of work.

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Earthen Lavers

Tyler Chadwick. *Litany with Wings*. By Common Consent Press, 2022. 158 pp. Paper: $9.95. ISBN: 978-1948218566.

Scott Hales. *Hemingway in Paradise and Other Mormon Poems*. Mormon Lit Lab, 2022. 93 pp. Paper: $9.99. ISBN: 979-8797250760.

Elizabeth Pinborough. *The Brain's Lectionary: Psalms and Observations*. By Common Consent Press, 2022. 180 pp. Paper: $11.95. ISBN: 978-1948218474.

Reviewed by J. S. Absher

A few years ago, William Logan wrote, "Poetry has long been a major art with a minor audience."[1] We could more accurately call it a major art with many minor audiences grouped, like the poets, around region, identity, ideology, and artistic affiliations—a fragmentation that makes generalizations difficult. It is not easy to place in a larger context the three books I am reviewing here—Tyler Chadwick's *Litany with Wings*, Scott Hales's *Hemingway in Paradise and Other Poems*, and Elizabeth Pinborough's *The Brain's Lectionary*. The collection most explicitly tied to Mormon culture is *Hemingway in Paradise*. But suppose "Afterlives" were called "The Modern Purgatorio"? Or "Primary Activity" became "Vacation Bible School"? They would work about as well. *Litany with Wings* and *The Brain's Lectionary* have affiliations with feminism's goddess poetry, and both borrow heavily from the liturgical language of Catholicism, though probably in ways that suggest their non-Catholic origin. Poetry by neurodivergent poets has recently received increased attention; *The Brain's Lectionary* is a brilliant example and deserves to find an audience beyond LDS circles.

1. William Logan, "Poetry: Who Needs It?," *New York Times*, June 14, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/sunday-review/poetry-who-needs-it.html.

Each book reviewed here is well worth the reader's time. I enjoyed them and as a practicing poet learned much from them.

Litany with Wings

Tyler Chadwick's *Litany with Wings* has five sections of thirteen poems, with an introductory and concluding poem. The publisher's designers, D. Christian Harrison and Andrew Heiss, have designed a beautiful volume. Many of the poems are ekphrastic, based on artworks by J. Kirk Richards and others; Chadwick's debt to these works is acknowledged in unobtrusive marginal notes, a fine design feature. The poet's biography, as depicted in the poems, suggests he aspired to be a plastic artist until his twenty-third year ("Triptych for My Twenty-Third Year . . ."); his artist's eye is evident is his exploration of the works that have inspired him as well as his renderings of landscape.

The language of *Litany* is often demanding and dense, drawing heavily on the language of the senses and of traditional Christian worship and liturgy. To see how Chadwick mixes the liturgical and the sensuous, consider the beginning lines of "Litany (in Forty Short Stanzas)":

> Ah! to tongue, snakelike,
> your subtle psaltery. To
>
> taste your staves profane
> as the *Ave Marias*
>
> tonguing my cheek. . . . (69)

The most noticeable use of language peculiar to LDS history is the evocations of the peep stone / seer stone as object and metaphor. But the density and heightening of the language are a product of the poet's attempt to express the unique LDS understanding that spirit and body constitute the soul. The emphasis is often on the corporeal. For instance, in depicting speech, the poems often resort to the organs of speech production also used in eating, especially the tongue, lips, and palate. Breath mingles with the flesh we consume. The poet is acutely aware of longing, appetite, and hunger in their many forms, spiritual as

well as bodily. In the section devoted to recollections of his mission in New Zealand, Chadwick explores the hungers his younger self did not know how to recognize.

Perhaps the most direct statement of this theme occurs at the end of "Big Bang, with Sternutation and Seer Stones," where the Creation and the Fall are a single event. Heavenly Father and Mother carry on a conversation that

> seared the drupe-stone
>
> seared the open palm of the adamah's
> peeping. The seed cracked wide, sighed
>
> flaming tongues of quanta through
> the holy book of appetence and consciousness. (134)

"Big Bang" is the final poem in the concluding section, "Goddess in Repose: Psalter for the Eternal Mother." Her presence is felt throughout the book in sensuous language that draws on traditional imagery of the nursing Mother of God as well as Greek descriptions of their goddesses. But Chadwick's goddess can be more accessible and human than the Greek pantheon, as in the delightful unrhymed sonnet beginning "Goddess stirring something up, folding light."

Hemingway in Paradise

Scott Hales's *Hemingway in Paradise and Other Mormon Poems* is accessible and entertaining, effectively mixing comedy, pathos, nostalgia, and satire. The poems invite the reader to turn the page—and to turn back, too, to savor the insights and emotions. After an introductory poem, *Hemingway* has two sections—seventeen poems in "Afterlives," twenty-one in "Lives."

That *Hemingway* is entertaining does not mean it is not also serious. I found the poems in "Afterlives" helpful in understanding a spiritual question: in the spirit world, why would one choose to remain in a fallen state rather than accept rescue? The poems on several of the dead figures Hales writes about—Hemingway ("Hemingway in Paradise"),

Clyde Barrow ("Immaterial Matter"), and Dale Carnegie ("Self Help"), for example—show how attachment to earthly habits and ideas, especially one's self-image and worldly thriving, can block conversion. Of particular interest in this regard is the poem on Columbus, "A Man Among the Gentiles"; though in life he sometimes acted under divine inspiration, he committed grave crimes and in spirit prison cannot understand his punishment. The poem on Nathan Bedford Forrest ("Nathan") imagines how hard repentance and forgiveness can be for those whose lives were hateful in thought and deed; the imagery faintly recalls that of the unredeemable beasts in the introductory poem, "Babylon." Most surprising and comical to me is the state of Jonathan Edwards, the Calvinist preacher and theologian, who discovers in ping-pong the joys of exercising human agency:

> Rather than look
> in the sky or the dust beneath his feet, he cast
> his eyes across the net, unafraid of the moment. (11)

The variety of characters and situations in "Afterlives" is impressive, but not far behind is the variety in "Lives." This section begins with a poem on W. W. Phelps's observations on the comet Donati ("When W. W. Phelps Observed Donati"), then proceeds to the poet's impromptu and hilariously rendered moonwalk while he was attending a Primary activity night ("Primary Activity, 1984"):

> I shimmy once and spin
> on my heel. And though I know
> I shouldn't, I spring to my tippy-toes,
>
> knees bending at the tight right
> angles, and grab my tiny crotch
> with the green-mittened hand. (37)

The next poem imaginatively recasts the relationship of King Noah and Abinadi as beginning with boyhood friendship and ending in their fiery deaths ("As King Noah Burned").

Reading *Hemingway in Paradise* brought to mind a saying of Nietzsche: "Everything that is good is light. All that is divine runs on

delicate feet."[2] These poems are light on their feet and divinely full of understanding, wit, and love.

The Brain's Lectionary

Elizabeth Pinborough's *The Brain's Lectionary: Psalms and Observations* is another beautifully designed book from By Common Consent Press. Drawn from the poet's experience with traumatic brain injury, it is addressed especially to "anyone in extremity," including "those living with the long-term consequences of brain injury, chronic health concerns, or any trauma that shatters the body and the relationship with the self" ("Introduction," xvii). But its appeal is broader. The experience of losing so much—the grasp on language, one's relationships to God and to ordinary life, and so much else constitutive of the self—is movingly and imaginatively told. Unlike many who undergo such experiences, Pinborough has returned to tell us all.

Lectionary is a hybrid volume with shape poems, prose poems, a short verse play, psalms, typographic experiments, and linocuts by the author and others. Each form has a purpose. For example, "shape poems serve as strange devotions for inexpressibly hard times" (xv). The typographical experiments mimic "the way eighty billion individual neurons in the brain communicate across synapses to become functional networks."

A lectionary is a collection of scripture readings appointed for a given day, often in a two- or three-year cycle. *The Brain's Lectionary* has fifty-two poems, presumably one for each week of the year, weeks described in "The Psalmist Inquires, *Under what moon?*" as "the / rimrock round of lunar / canyons (fifty-two / cycles complete)" (111). As in *Litany with Wings*, many of the poems are ekphrastic, but *Lectionary*

2. Original German: "Das Gute ist leicht. Alles Göttliche läuft auf zarten Füßen." This aphorism appears on the first page of *Der Fall Wagner*, translated as *The Case of Wagner* in English. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner / Twilight of the Idols / The Antichrist / Ecce Homo / Dionysus Dithyrambs / Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, edited by Alan D. Schrift (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2021).

includes the images for our consideration—twenty graphic works in all, some repeated and some spread over two pages.

In expressing the experience of brain injury and recovery, *Lectionary* encompasses a vast range of existence, from undersea life to galaxies, with the brain's cells and electrochemistry at the center. The slipperiness of language and imbedded metaphor as well as visual resemblances between unlike life-forms enables the poet to yoke these heterogeneous levels of existence. "Big Bang Neurogenesis" describes how "astrocytes died"—astrocytes are star-shaped brain cells—and how their "remains . . . emerged as new matter—a kind I cannot see but know // to name since stars spin alike at center and circumference in galaxies" (42). "Purkinje ekphrasis" is a meditation on an image of Purkinje cells:

> Purkinje looks like
> a little heart,
> leafing
>
> from aorta into
> seaweed
> fronds. (73)

Some of the poems that resonate most deeply depict the injured self as lost at sea—"I drifted in quarter consciousness like a raft on the sea" ("Threshing with God," 128)—or deep in the ocean; in "*Pseudoliparis swirei*," the traumatized mind is a ghostlike snailfish deep in the Mariana Trench. Perhaps my favorite is "Jared's Answers"; in response to the Lord's question, "What will ye that I should do that ye may have light?" (Ether 2:23), Jared requests the light and signals found in sea life:

> Give me blue paths, bioluminescence
> across the waters. Give me constellations
> dotting firefly squid. . . .
> Give me . . .
> dinoflagellates flashing on,
> off. (63)

In reading and pondering these books, I have been impressed by their worlds of "earthy spheres, invisible lives, miraculous / micro-architectures"

("Klaus the Diatomist . . .," *The Brain's Lectionary*, 83) that will move, challenge, and inspire the careful reader. The publishers, By Common Consent and Mormon Lit Lab, deserve praise and support for nurturing these writers and publishing their works in such well-designed, affordable editions.

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A Very Bad Dog

Steven L. Peck. *Heike's Void*. By Common Consent Press, 2022. 352 pp. Paper: $12.95. ISBN: 978-1948218559.

Reviewed by Jennifer Quist

Among the benefits to reading authors with large, proven oeuvres is trust. We can trust Steven L. Peck. Remember that through the provocations of the opening of his astonishing new release from BCC Press, a novel called *Heike's Void*. Its unsettling opening has two parts, beginning with an epigram from title character Dr. Heike Marquardt's *Theology of Nothingness*. Here, she attempts to define "the void." It is an attempt to use ontological reasoning to range outside ontology, like an apocryphal sixth verse, an anti-verse scrawled upside down in the margin at the end of "If You Could Hie to Kolob," composed during W. W. Phelps's angry years. It could have happened . . .

In her book, which we see only in short, digestible excerpts, Heike says, "The void is an unimaginable place, unimaginable because to

imagine it is to negate its possible non-existence by creating a reference to it" (2). So it continues in a series of impossible statements, made in spite of themselves. The second part of the opening is the introduction of a character far more familiar in Mormon fiction, an elderly straight anglophone Euro-American man, looking out over a Utah canyon feeling nostalgic, a little disenchanted and regretful of something he can't quite name. This is Elder Holmberg, a contemporary apostle.

Stay with us. Trust Peck and keep reading. Though his Holmberg character is familiar, his introduction of him is not. "One person God hates is Elder Holmberg" (4). This position is insisted upon with scriptural precedents and references, ones that may have made us personally uncomfortable from time to time. From them, the narrator concludes that "No flighty changeable being is [God]. If God hates you, you are stuck with it. This doesn't mean you can't go to heaven? No, no, no. God is not a monster" (3). Here arises another bit of first philosophy in the opening of what is about to become a literary page-turner of a novel. If a God like this is not a monster, then what is he? And what would it mean to be saved by him?

Heike's Void is a radical experiment with whether or not the atonement of Christ, as preached in the Church, is truly infinite and eternal, without limits, or whether it is something else. And *if* it is something else, then how can any of us hope for it to ever be enough? There is no arithmetic of salvation in this novel, no neat economies or equations, not even any variables or functions with which to express them. There is no bicycle to be paid for with piggy bank pennies. Instead, there are urgent but impossible questions about whether the mercy of God indeed, as the Book of Mormon says, "overpowereth justice" (Alma 34:15), and if it does, do any of us actually believe it. If God hated someone, would it keep them from his infinite grace? Could their suicide? How about accidental homicide? Planned and deliberate homicide? Mass planned and deliberate homicide then? Is not this endless?

At the heart of the story, adding warmth to its urgency, is in the character of Arrow Beamon, a man with terrible judgment led by his

appetites and aversions, making ridiculous miscalculations, noble and ignoble gestures, and yet holding my wholehearted support every moment he is on the page. When faced with a hard question, he comforts his wife with assurances that "When we get into the Celestial Kingdom we'll watch the movie and figure it out" (202). It's a pat answer we may have heard before, trivial, a "cringe" answer especially in the context of the exacting reason and thoughtfulness of the rest of the novel. Yet in Arrow's meek and hapless voice, it is somehow poignant, one of the most subtle ways the novel considers what could possibly contain all the knowledge and power and mercy of a being who is actually God.

Heike herself is terrifying, driven by appetites of a different sort than Arrow's. She answers the violence and terror of the tragedy in her life with violence and terror of her own making. She courts, grieves, and subverts "envoidment" (43). In the end, the most pressing and obvious questions about her remain unanswered. Does she choose to stay where she is for love, or for more and more brutal revenge?

The least satisfying of the novel's characters is a pair of guardian angels who interact and interfere without the mortal characters knowing anything about it, like a writer's workshop tool that would have been better left unseen in the workshop. Perhaps we should count Peck himself among the people who ought to trust him to be able to tell this story without this heavenly pair acting as a narratively disruptive and unnecessary chorus. This novel is the second I've read from BCC Press where Book of Mormon Nephi is cut down to size, a character who beat them to it by already confessing himself "in canon" (as they say in fanfiction studies) to be "wretched" and droopy. Maybe that's why neither recutting has been satisfying for me. We're ready for Arrow's story now.

What is satisfying for me, especially after years of reading fiction for *Dialogue*, is finding a charmingly written and characterized, gripping story about what is, ostensibly, the thing that makes the Church different from other backwater conservative religious American subcultures. It goes beyond the same kinds of accounts of prejudice and oppression we could find following the #churchtrauma #exfundie tags on TikTok.

The novel addresses contemporary and timeless social and spiritual grievances to Christianity itself, not to some pasty American simulacrum of Christianity. Through Peck's literary artistic experimentation come questions about God and grace for which we have no vocabulary, no syllogisms, only stories. Such as this tiny story about Heike and her dog in the park, which may be the whole story after all.

> [The dog] would not come, and she spent fifteen minutes chasing him around the dog park before she could snatch him by the collar. She sat down on the ground crossing her legs and pulling the dog's nose into her own as she rubbed the back of his head. "You are a bad dog." She said, rubbing his back vigorously with her hand. "A very bad dog." (154)

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Experience with Religion, Experience with the Spirit

Matthew Wickman. *Life to the Whole Being: The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor*. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University, 2022. 227 pp. Paper: $19.95. ISBN: 978-0-8425-0061-6.

Reviewed by Madison U. Sowell

Frankly, I am not sure why I was invited to review Matthew Wickman's *Life to the Whole Being*. It is not an opportunity that I sought or for which I volunteered. I have written very little on Mormon topics. My traditional area of scholarship has long been the Italian epic tradition and, more recently, the iconography of pre-twentieth-century ballet performers.

Notwithstanding these facts, what I do know is that I very much needed to read Professor Wickman's book, subtitled *The Spiritual Memoir of a Literature Professor*. And it was not simply because I was a literature professor myself for over forty years. Rather, I needed to ponder this self-proclaimed "spiritual memoir" because as a former young single adult ward bishop, mission president, missionary training center branch president, Young Men president, and current senior service missionary over addiction recovery programs in multiple stakes, I regularly counsel a host of surrogate sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, who are struggling spiritually, who have questions about Church policies and practices, not to mention Church history, and concerns about certain statements or (in)actions of this or that General Authority.

While searching for something practical, I did not want an authoritative guide with specific black-and-white answers to such thorny issues as (1) what to tell a beloved returned missionary who has been diagnosed with gender dysphoria; (2) what to say to a young father of five talented children who has chosen to separate himself and his family from the Church, which, from his viewpoint, discriminates against the LGBTQIA+ community; or (3) how to counsel the daughters of a friend who have reported to law enforcement their father's long-standing sexual abuse. Nevertheless, I have been longing for examples from articulate laypersons who could reveal through personal accounts how they have grappled with these or similar concerns while maintaining their own spiritual equilibrium and offering meaningful succor to those who carry heavy burdens as well as "those that mourn" (Mosiah 18:9).

In the soul-revealing memoir under review, I found an instructive and helpful example of why those of us who profess to be Saints would be wise to cultivate the Spirit more actively in our lives no matter where we stand vis-à-vis the above-mentioned issues. The answer to how we can help to ease our own or others' burdens relates directly to how much we instill the Spirit into *daily* (not just *occasional*) life and practice. To drive home this point, Wickman starts off by citing a favorite quotation from Parley P. Pratt regarding what the gift of the Holy Ghost

can mean metaphorically and emotionally, if not literally, to one who consistently makes use of it. In Pratt's estimation, the Spirit can prove "marrow to the bone, joy to the heart, light to the eyes, music to the ears, and *life to the whole being*" (19, my emphasis and the book's title).

The author pulls few punches when detailing his own arduous spiritual journey from reluctant missionary to angry young single adult (wondering, *inter alia*, when he would get married and worrying about his gay friends' place in the Church) and from excited new husband to middle-aged parent of a teenage daughter with chronic health challenges who has chosen an alternative lifestyle. In reflecting on his personal two-decade-long pilgrimage and "the breadth of spiritual experience and what it means to pursue a spiritual life" (14), the professor-cum-memoirist addresses the interrelationship of four topics: "spiritual experience, literature, religion, and memoir" (21) and offers a personal playbook for how to respond to challenging questions by relying on the Spirit. Not since reading Chieko Okazaki's books, in which she juxtaposed poignant scenes from her childhood and adolescence to citations of *Dialogue* alongside quotations of scriptures and General Authorities, have I found such a compelling mélange of personal stories, critiques of literary passages, and scriptural insights.

For Wickman, literature has long proven to be "the instrument of a spiritual odyssey" (25), and in this book he explores an impressive and diverse range of literary texts (from novelists Daniel Defoe, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Virginia Woolf to poets such as William Wordsworth, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Anya Krugovoy Silver). He eloquently argues that literature can "cultivate our sensitivity to spiritual things, opening us to new ways of thinking and feeling" (62). Great literary works bridge what the author calls "the gaps" that are a natural part of every life, such as the disparity "between the greatness of the gospel message and the mass indifference to it" (63). For Wickman, literature is "all about gaps—opening them, bridging them, learning to live with them" (105). Regarding these chasms, he argues, "A life of faith . . . involves recognizing, straddling, and sometime leaping across gaps that riddle our existence" (93).

While we acquire "small islands of understanding," we are nevertheless "surrounded by oceans of unknown details and unimagined possibilities"; it is "the feelings of fullness we associate with spiritual experience [that] create virtual bridges across these expanses" (94). In brief, Wickman believes that "gaps" will remain part of our mortal existence and that we would do well, while earnestly striving and praying specifically for answers, to accept the fact that holes in our understanding will persist. Like Nephi, we shall never, at least in this life, "know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:17). That does not mean, however, that we should stop asking questions, even when God engages in "divine silence" (98). Rather, we should rely on the Spirit to carry us "across the deep of struggles great and small and of questions answered or still open" (212).

How, then, does organized religion fit into one's quest for spiritual experience and enlightenment? The Church, Wickman readily acknowledges, "is an organizational marvel—a complex weave of ordinances, offices, doctrines, practices, activities, and responsibilities that knit together people from across the globe" (50). But he also admits, "Weekly church lessons are often led by amateur teachers with allergies to ambiguity . . . even when the topics of discussion invite nuance and uncertainty"; "Leaders of congregations are typically dedicated souls" but often lack the "professional training that might provide members with more adequate counseling, whether practical, psychological, or theological" (51). And yet, despite what he calls "the clunkiness of [his] religion," he finds that "the ritual facets of [his] religion—those awkward sacrament meeting talks, those occasionally uncouth lessons, those callings and assignments nobody wants—seem to be the only constant things that bring the Spirit into [his] life". He finds in "the repetitive force of religious observance . . . glimmering traces of the divine" (52). He adduces that the Spirit, if we are doing all we can to cultivate it, can touch us in any circumstance, even in a mundane sacrament meeting or an unnuanced Sunday School lesson. Another of Wickman's main points is that it is crucial, especially when dealing with life's incomprehensible ironies, not to give up but to rely even more on the Spirit.

Furthermore, when an answer to prayerful petitions is not immediately forthcoming, one may need to accept the possibility, per R. S. Thomas's poem "Kneeling," that "The meaning is in the waiting" (111).

Waiting, of course, requires an exercise of faith. It is often worrisome "to sit with contradiction and complexity" (187); we invariably prefer quick answers in place of perpetual silence, unless the answer is one we do not want. Wickman cites a moving example of waiting while praying for inspiration to respond to an older gentleman's despondent question about whether he was doing the right thing in attempting to return to Church activity after a fifty-year hiatus. When a specific parable of Jesus "burst into [his] mind" (170), Wickman shared it, even though he hardly knew the brother in question. A week later, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland expounded on the same parable in general conference. Through these two events, the older man realized he had found the answer to his query; he soon became a vital member of his ward and a great blessing to many who lived on the margins. Likewise, in Wickman's professional life, he prayed for years without an answer to know whether he should leave Brigham Young University for an ostensibly more prestigious appointment in Scotland. He records, "it would become clear to me later why I had needed to wait for an answer: there was still a missing piece of the puzzle I could not have foreseen, and I also needed time to reflect on my priorities so that when I had to make a difficult decision, I could do so with greater self-understanding" (173).

So why does a professing believer in Christ even need religion (meaning, in this case, a body of fellow believers)? In response, Wickman initially cites Dostoevsky: "religion [is needed] in part because of the saints we might encounter there" (187). Furthermore, if we look searchingly, every person reflects God's glory, "even those who are conflicted and confused and anguished and hurtful" (188), and yes, even those who are naïve (or unnuanced). In addition to providing key ordinances, religion, in short, "is the foundation of a spiritual life; it is the set of practices through which we pose—repeatedly, ritualistically—those

questions that are too big to answer. . . . Religion is the medium . . . through which I explore who I am and what I am becoming, what all people and things are becoming" (197). Moving, acting on spiritual promptings, changing direction, ameliorating ourselves, blessing others—these are the natural fruits of a lived religion.

And the specific role of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? While it fosters "spiritual and religious experiences" and "teachings and practices [that can] open minds and change hearts," the gift of the Holy Spirit, conferred through a priesthood ordinance, is ultimately what "brings life to the whole being" (199). Over decades of spiritual struggles, emotional ups and downs, Wickman has concluded that "Church doctrines, ritual practices, and covenants lend shape, meaning, and purpose to . . . pulsations of spiritual experience" (204). But to receive answers to prayers more quickly, he has found that changing the questions can make a significant difference. Rather than asking "Is the Church true?" one might ask "In what ways will the Church bring me to Christ?" (207). Instead of angrily pleading "Why me?" or "Why this situation?" we might humbly substitute "What am I to learn from this challenge?" or "How can I use this test to bless someone else?"

I started this review by stating that I have been seeking something practical to help me respond to or ease the burdens of friends and mentees who are experiencing various crises of faith. In Wickman's memoir I discovered not so much a manual with explicit instructions for how to deal with specific religious problems; instead, I found an inspirational example of someone who has wrestled—and in some cases continues to wrestle—with questions that many believers are pondering. While reading his account, I was struck by its honesty, by its refusal to shy away from challenging concerns in and out of the Church. I discovered someone who through poignant spiritual experiences has arrived not only at answers but also at peace in ambiguity. What is more important, I found someone who through inculcating the Spirit into his everyday life has remained deeply committed and engaged, both in the Church and in

his professional life as a humanist. I commend the Maxwell Institute for publishing a book that moves beyond apologetics to authentic memoir.

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ABSTRACTION IN LATTER-DAY SAINT ART: AN INTERVIEW WITH CHASE WESTFALL

Margaret Olsen Hemming

MOH: In official LDS Church materials, from magazines to manuals to temple walls, there's a lack of abstract art, in favor of highly representational, literal art. What is the role of abstraction in religious art, in your opinion? And is there a place for it in the Mormon discourse?

CW: Abstraction has been employed within many religious traditions to represent things that are otherwise unrepresentable, or things that are held to be great mysteries. A central action of the LDS Restoration is filling in the gaps, completing the picture, providing clarity and knowledge. This may be why we've been so inclined toward clarity of representation in our visual art—showing things fully and directly. That notwithstanding, I think there's a lot of room for abstraction in Mormon discourse. In fact, I would make the case that there's already a rich vein of it—but it's not necessarily happening in our visual art.

Here I'm not thinking principally about abstraction in a traditional art history sense. I'm thinking of it as a critical action, as something that is done in support of semiotics, as a way of layering understanding, of introducing lenses of understanding and of mediating between an individual experience and a larger reality.

Abstraction is the first kind of analysis in symbology; it begins with the belief that realities can be signified. So whether you're talking about

verbal language or visual representation, abstraction is the first step in meaning-making.

Within that logic, theology is itself an abstraction. Religion is, at its foundation, a meaning-making structure. It's a scaffolding of semiotics and symbology, misrepresentations, shorthand, distillations that allow us to establish value and meaning within our existence and our relationship to the eternal. It's doing a lot of heavy lifting. To have modes of visual representation within our cultural discourse that are consistent with that nature of theology could be really helpful and important.

Another point to establish early is that abstraction happens on a spectrum. There's nonrepresentational abstract expressionism, as one extreme, and then there are all sorts of languages of representation where the artist takes greater or lesser liberty in how something is depicted, with all kinds of different intentions and motivations. Abstraction can be a way of limiting and controlling the subject. But abstraction can also be a way of giving up control. Within modern Western art history, abstraction has sometimes been about leaning away from certainty and authority. It can be a rejection of the rationalist Enlightenment legacies that drove the development of representational realism in Europe. Instead of ordered, scientific observation, it leans into a zone of uncertainty, embracing a kind of openness and rawness. In that development, it is more honest to the way we live our lives as people of faith.

MOH: So you're saying abstract art is more capable of helping us do that heavy lifting in understanding the mortal experience and our journey with God.

CW: It can definitely give us additional ways—language and tools—to do that heavy lifting. And in some ways its openness and uncertainty provide a more faithful analog to that journey. Philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben have argued that really meaningful art, art that speaks most profoundly to our human experience, always

carries within it a kind of resistance.[1] There are a lot of ways this resistance can make itself present in an artwork, but one way that it shows up in painting, for example, is in what painters call facture—the way the artist handles or executes the painting. It is how the paint is employed. One of the ways in which tidy, representational images can be misleading is that their depictive logic presents a closed system. They're self-sufficient: they're telling you a truth and they're giving you—at least pictorially—the answer. If the painting is totally clear and precise and controlled, then in addition to whatever the image is depicting, embedded in the language of its making is this idea of control, clarity, certainty, understanding, and Truth with a capital T. It essentially becomes an illustration of a limited kind of fact. Whereas a masterful artwork, in addition to whatever it is or isn't depicting, always carries within itself a kind of contradiction and the potential for its own undoing. There is a tension between what is being enacted and what we know is being left out of the image. When we can see each mark, we are able to appreciate that as each mark was being made, it could have just as easily not been made. It wasn't a kind of effortless, automatic fulfillment of its own interior logic. There is a struggle embedded in the process, and that's the resistance that I'm talking about. Although the artist stacked those marks to make something meaningful, the marks might have just as easily slid apart. They don't convey this certainty that verisimilitude can falsely claim.

There's a lot of interest now, in contemporary art, in thinking about the political and spiritual importance of abstraction because of what it withholds. In the current Whitney Biennial, we see an abundance of abstract works made by BIPOC and queer artists, coming from

1. See thinkingaloud7189, "Gilles Deleuze on Cinema: What is the Creative Act 1987," YouTube video, Jan. 8, 2015, 46:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hifamdISs; European Graduate School Video Lectures, "Giorgio Agamben. Resistance in Art. 2014," YouTube video, Mar. 3, 2015, 43:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=one7mE-8y9c.

populations that have been repressed and exploited.[2] For these groups and individuals, abstraction becomes a strategy of resistance: it's a way of holding something in reserve, apart and sacred, outside of that zone of exploitation. The opacity of abstraction creates a place into which the oppressor cannot see, and so where cultural, spiritual, and emotional resources can be safely stored up. Withholding means that you (the outsider) don't get it—literally or figuratively. But withholding can also be an act of empathy and solidarity—the artist's way of acknowledging the uncertainty with which most of us are living and choosing not to indulge their own (or our) desire for something easy and comfortable. In withholding, rather than creating a semblance of reality, abstraction creates an experience like reality. On the other hand, when we use art to simply shore up convenient narratives, it's always going to have a fractured, severed, and incomplete relationship to the real experience of trying to live a life of faith.

MOH: Maybe that "zone of uncertainty" you're describing about abstract art is precisely what makes people uncomfortable with abstraction in a religious context. After all, it is one thing to accept that the unknown exists. But purchasing and displaying a piece of art implies an embrace of uncertainty.

CW: Definitely, because people don't want to be confronted with what they don't know. Often they are going to church for comfort, which I understand. They don't want something that is going to hold them in a place of tension, they want something that can help relieve the tension they're already experiencing. Yet Christ was a man of sorrows. People

2. Speaking of the works of abstraction in the Whitney Biennial exhibition, curator Adrienne Edwards writes, "These works . . . remind us of the impossibility of order in the world and ask us to get right with that uncertainty." Adrienne Edwards, "The Alchemy of Issues," *Quiet as It's Kept*, edited by Jennifer MacNair Stitt and Beth Turk. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2022. Exhibition catalog.

in scripture are consistently living hard lives of misfortune, struggle, violence, and disappointment. We have to have a mature discourse of faith that acknowledges and embraces that. Welcoming more abstraction, with its uncertainty and ambiguity, in our visual art can be part of that embrace.

At the same time, however, we have to be careful, as people of faith, that abstraction is employed in ways that are complementary to discipleship. Abstraction's "resistance" and "withholding" can be used for exclusionary purposes, to obscure or conceal. It can become hegemonic and authoritarian. The key is to use abstraction to open things up. Comparing representation in artmaking to representation in government, verisimilitude relies on a single perspective, suggesting a singular, fixed locus of representative authority, like a monarch. On the other hand, used properly, abstraction can be about a distribution of representative and interpretive agency, which is more egalitarian and democratic. Managing that aspect of representation in abstraction so that it aligns with the gospel's spirit of inclusive generosity requires intentionality and self-reflection.

MOH: You mentioned that abstraction is used to make meaning within religious traditions. Where do you see abstraction already happening within LDS culture and doctrine?

CW: Ritual and scriptural language are two important places. The temple encompasses a great deal of abstraction, especially as symbolism, in the ordinances and observances and the architecture. A lot of people bemoaned the old Provo temple over the years, but I always loved it as an instance of the symbolism of temple architecture being taken to another level. If you're not familiar with it, the building was designed, as I understand, to represent a cloud with a pillar of fire coming out of it, a reference to God's guidance of the children of Israel through the wilderness. Rather than focusing on "Is this temple beautiful?" the question in building it seems to have been "Can the structure be charged with

the same kind of symbolic significance as the ordinances that happen inside?" It was less about being attractive or pleasant and more about being meaningful.

My family just went to the Washington DC Temple open house a few weeks ago, and while I was there I noticed the gorgeous medallions on the front gates and doors of the temple. Obviously, they're not abstract expressionist, but they are radically geometric, very stylized distillations of the incredible cosmological theology we learn about in the temple. I thought they were very powerful. During the same visit, I sat in the celestial room and looked at the new chandelier, which is a stack of repeating, gradually increasing (or diminishing) eight-pointed stars. That chandelier is a place where we have something like abstraction—an essentialized rather than mimetic representation—operating in a profound way in the temple, making present a body of light. And, of course, all the Masonic symbolism of the compass and the square, etc., ties in with notions of abstraction and languages of meaning-making. So I think the temple is potentially fruitful ground for abstract art because so much abstraction is already there—you're just walking through it and participating in it rather than seeing it hung on the walls.

I've also been thinking about abstraction in relation to Christ as a figure, his role as a mediator and in the Atonement. If we think about language as abstraction and Christ as "the Word"—which I always find a really generative way of thinking about Christ—just as language aids me in mediating between myself the world, Christ is a point of mediation, a fulcrum for a relationship between my local, sinful experience and something I'm not currently capable of fully conceptualizing or understanding, i.e., a complete expression of God. Christ is the operative point of abstraction and semiotics between my consciousness and the bigger truth that is divine reality.

In the LDS Church, and really in most of contemporary Christianity, there's also an interesting tension between our doctrines of Christ and our mainstream representations of Christ—both how we talk about

him and how we depict him in our arts. We have popularized an image of Christ that is relatable and legible, probably because that feels comfortable and convenient. And, of course, in the most profound sense, he is a source of comfort and he does relate to us. But if you look at the New Testament narrative, Christ is a constant source of frustration and vexation, even to his own disciples, and his message is often misunderstood and opaque. He speaks abstractly and in parables. Within the Restoration, we know that Christ looks and acts like Heavenly Father, so in that sense it's tempting to think of him in terms of naturalistic representation and realism. But in the time and place of his earthly ministry, he scandalized his community by his *failure* to represent—his failure to reflect back their observational values and what they perceived as their political, spiritual, and social realities. He didn't look like the God they knew or the Messiah they expected. In many ways, he was illegible and inscrutable. And he remains, insofar as we really try to take up the cross, a scandal and inconvenience to us today.[3] All the uncertainty and occlusion we experience in trying to move through him toward our heavenly parents and our larger divine destiny offer incredible models of abstraction. Languages of representation in our visual culture or music that could be patterned after that same kind of intensive abstraction could be a really important part of truth-telling. Not just telling the truth, but of telling truthfully.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, there was this feeling that visual languages should be adding clarity rather than acting as an extension of the profound abstraction that is already happening within our theology and our lived praxis of religion. So we looked to our visual

3. As the Reverend Katherine Sonderegger has said, "[Christ was] a teacher, yes, but one who filled his disciples with fear and silenced his opponents, so that none dared to ask him anything more. This Emmanuel offended us; offends us still. He is inconvenient to us. And his ways are strange." Henry Center, "Katherine Sonderegger—Karl Barth on Human Dignity in a Natural World," YouTube video, Aug. 6, 2018, 1:00:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9TBm8OSGmY.

culture to sort of buttress against the potential for chaos rather than looking for systems of visual representation that could speak to the complexities of faith.

MOH: So if you're staying with the Jesus art, what you'd like to see is maybe art that is figurative but hints at the unknowability of God or the effort to understand? Rather than a series of paintings in which his hair is consistently the same length, he's consistently the same height, and with the same facial features and complexion. The story we tell when our paintings of Jesus all look the same is that we have essentially captured his essence, as if the mainstream art we have now can say, "We've got him."

CW: I think we do ourselves a disservice whenever we put out that "we've got him" energy. It's hard because culturally, as Mormons, we have developed a conventional language of certainty: like the "I know that . . ." when we share our testimonies. We seem to take that same approach in artistic work, where we want it to create a zone of clarity and certainty. I understand why that can be helpful and reassuring. But I think art can also be reassuring by acknowledging, and in that sense validating, the perplexing nature of what we're actually experiencing. The "we've got it all figured out" narrative can be gratifying in a short-term setting, but it doesn't offer a real counterpart to what we're experiencing in this mortal journey. I don't think we have to totally flip the script, just open up to artwork that is a little more nuanced, a little more reflective of the complexity of real life. There is visual work that is earnest in its intent to support and promote faith but within that intention maintains the freedom to acknowledge these other things we've been talking about.

For myself, I don't know exactly what that would look like. It's hard to imagine walking in and seeing a nonrepresentational image above a floral couch in one of our existing foyers. I like to think that's achievable, but it would start with grassroots efforts that we make to

prepare the cultural landscape for that move. And it would probably also require some redecorating.

MOH: What do those efforts from members look like?

CW: In terms of preparing the cultural landscape, as a people it means being more omnivorous in our cultural consumption and being less anxious and guarded in meeting the world. It means being more open to the future of the gospel as a pluralistic space. I think we are seeing a shift in that direction. We need to be more thoughtful and proactive about education in our own cultural spaces. I find that there is a tendency among Church members who are educated in the arts, who are a little more "in the world," to kind of wag their fingers and be disappointed with their fellow members—and to sometimes frame themselves in oppositional terms to the general Church culture. Rather than taking a condescending attitude with ward members who are not interested in your life in the arts, find ways of making it relatable and interesting to them. You can do that without dumbing it down. In the art world, we talk about nurturing and supporting emerging artists; we need to assume the same nurturing attitude toward emerging audiences and be willing to take on a greater stewardship in relationship to those audiences.

The art economy is driven by elitism. It's a prestige economy, particularly at the top. That mindset, of the sanctified connoisseurs of art standing in opposition to the ignorant masses, of the washed versus the unwashed, ends up trickling down through the entire art ecosystem. It grows out of an unfortunate economic reality, but then it ends up toxifying the general culture of art because people farther down the food chain parrot the kind of relationship to mass culture they see modeled at the top. We have to be self-aware and root that out in ourselves. We can be committed to our educated, "elevated" values in art—the things we've been trained to appreciate—without being disdainful toward the people and cultural products that don't subscribe to that standard.

MOH: I had a great experience with this after I curated an exhibit about art depicting Heavenly Mother for the Center Gallery in New York City in early 2022. The Young Women leader in my ward heard about the exhibit and asked me to lead an activity with the young women in which I showed them some of the art and we discussed it. I deliberately chose some abstract, nonrepresentational art that would be outside of their comfort zone, but with some explanation about the artist's background and intent, they were able to at least appreciate the value of it, even if they didn't fully understand or embrace it.

CW: That's such a wonderful example of audience stewardship. You provided a safe space where those young women could ask questions and explore art that was new to them. Those are the kind of conversations that cumulatively can make incremental change. Art exhibits give space for discussions that require more time and lateral room than a ten-minute sacrament meeting talk affords. Not everyone is going to be in love with the same kind of intensely wacky art that I'm in love with. I'm okay with that. But I do think there's much to be gained by opening up the discourse, especially within that model of ministering—meeting people wherever they are and sharing and teaching and encouraging and listening.

MOH: If you were designing a chapel or a *Come, Follow Me* manual and could choose any Mormon artists to include, who would you choose? What would your ideal look like?

CW: As far as a chapel, I don't know if I can answer that in a way that would be helpful because my ideal chapel would probably look like an early Anselm Kiefer—those austere, mythic, rough-plank interiors he was painting back in the 1970s, like his piece *Nothung* (1973). I think we probably need different chapels before we can have really different art.

I don't really have expectations other than didactic content for settings like *Come, Follow Me*. If I were designing the manual, I would still

lean more heavily on artwork that is depictive, still representational but probably a little more stylized and expressive. I'd look for images that are faithful but that also have layers of emotional uncertainty. I'd want them to perform a grounding, comforting function, but grounding in something rigorous and honest—in the contest of faith.

My ideal doesn't start out in *Come, Follow Me* or in our chapel decor—I'm not sure where, how, or to what extent it would come into those spaces. It exists principally in other spheres of discourse and in other kinds of supporting structures. I would love to see a small museum or gallery with a serious commitment to contemporary work, curated by someone with real sensitivity and discernment in both aesthetic and spiritual concerns, doing that heavy lifting to build bridges between excellent art and the broader Mormon population. It's hard for me to imagine what kind of tectonic moves would have to happen in the corporate space of the Church to change its official artistic choices. I think it's more about the individual moves that happen in supplemental spaces. Moves made by people who want to bridge the gap and expand the cultural arena of the Church rather than challenge or supplant it.

The ability to engage in abstract thought is considered a measure or indicator of intelligence. Intelligence is the glory of God, and, along with discernment, judgment, and education, something toward which we aspire and strive as members of the Church. Abstraction in art is an acquired taste, but so is the book of Isaiah—acquired in the sense that it requires training, guidance from experts, effort, and investment before it's really going to open up to you and be a delight. LDS theology includes a provision that the degree of understanding we reach in this life will be to our advantage in the next. Grappling with abstract thought and imagery is a way to elevate our thinking and to compound and extend meaning. Not all principles of development and progression we experience on earth are scalable to the way we will continue to develop eternally, but if there's a connection for *us* between intelligence,

education, and the ability to think abstractly, we have to imagine that God has a capacity—and appreciation—for a fullness of abstraction that is unknowable to us here and now. So perhaps a more rigorous engagement with abstract concepts in theology and art may introduce us to thinking on an eternal order.

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RETHINKING REVELATION

Joni Newman

When I was about twelve, yet another retelling of the Cinderella story was released into theatres in a magic-free but nonetheless magical version called *Ever After*. One of my favorite scenes in this film involves the prince pacing along a riverbank, bemoaning the challenge of finding his true love to Leonardo da Vinci. He asks the great Renaissance man,

> How can you be certain to find [the right person]? And if you find them, are they really the one for you, or do you only think they are? What if the person you're meant to be with never appears? Or she does but you're too distracted to notice? You learn to pay attention. Then, let's say God puts two people on earth, and they are lucky enough to find one another. But one of them gets hit by lightning. Well, then, what? Is that it? Or perchance you meet someone new and marry again. Is that the lady you should be with, or was it the first? When the two of them are side by side, were they both the one for you and you just met the first one first? Or is the second one supposed to be first?[1]

An understandably exasperated da Vinci tells the prince that he needs to learn to pay attention and not leave everything to fate. In other words, he needs to quit worrying about making the *one right choice* and just *choose*.

Knowing how to make good decisions can be rather overwhelming and perhaps lead us to the petrified paranoia of indecision, too afraid of getting it wrong to move forward with faith. In seeking out answers on how to understand and recognize the voice of God, the scriptures and

1. Andy Tennant, Susannah Grant, Rick Parks, Mireille Soria, Tracey Trench, Drew Barrymore, Anjelica Huston, Dougray Scott, and Jeanne Moreau, *Ever After: A Cinderella Story*. (Beverly Hills, Calif.: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1998).

the prophets have offered plenty of advice. For instance, many prophets have suggested the pattern of searching the scriptures, meditating upon the answer, and praying for clarification. Simple. But how do we know that we have received an answer? In section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith reveals to Oliver Cowdery that he will be told "in [his] mind *and* in [his] heart" what to do (D&C 8:2, emphasis added). Another revelation refers to Oliver as being enlightened in his mind alone (D&C 6:15). To complicate matters, President Harold B. Lee once said, "When your heart begins to tell you things that your mind does not, then you are getting the Spirit of the Lord," in direct contrast to additional counsel that Oliver was given.[2] Should we wait to feel peace of mind? Of heart? Of both?

Other scriptures speak of hearing an internal voice—sometimes a loud one, more often still or small—or of finding insight through the written word of God. We might listen to music, experience feelings of peace, or a more intense "burning of the bosom." Answers may come through time alone or in the company of others. In other words: there are so many possible avenues through which we can receive divine counsel that we may find that, like Prince Henry in *Ever After*, we end up stuck pacing along a riverbank trying desperately to know whether or not we have received the answer we sought for, too anxious about making the wrong decision to act at all.

We are not alone in feeling at times unsure about the promptings we receive. Consider the story of Nephi. Nephi, raised as a Jew in the same household as his father, the prophet Lehi, would have known that God had commanded his people not to kill. And yet he found himself at the feet of a drunken Laban being prompted to kill the man who stood between him and access to the records of his ancestry. Three

2. Harold B. Lee, "When Your Heart Tells You Things Your Mind Does Not Know," *New Era*, Feb. 1971, reprinted in June 2002 and available at https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2002/06/when-your-heart-tells-you-things-your-mind-does-not-know?lang=eng.

times the Spirit "constrains" Nephi with the instruction to kill Laban, leaving Nephi literally shaking at the thought. The word "constrain" is not "still" or "small." It suggests *boldness* and urgency. Its Latin root refers to being shackled. The later French definition defines "constraining" as exerting force, physical or moral, upon another being. This is no subtle voice of instruction but a powerful and immediate contradiction to what Nephi had previously understood as immutable truth. Nephi listens to this counsel and must reconcile two conflicting instructions. The first was the commandment not to kill. The second was the immediate instruction to retrieve the record in order to perpetuate the gospel among his descendants. He follows the counsel of the Spirit in that moment and slays Laban, thus preserving important information for his family.

Another example comes from Mother Eve, also presented with conflicting instructions. She and Adam are told to multiply and replenish the earth, to take care of the garden, and to enjoy every benefit the garden had for them *except* for the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve eventually recognizes that in order to fulfill God's plan, she and Adam need to leave their temporary paradise and sacrifice ignorance for knowledge and ease for labor. They cannot follow both instructions: she is able to study out these choices in her mind and make a decision, accepting the consequences of that choice, both good and bad.

We can also look to the story of Abraham and the near sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Although often portrayed as a young boy in art, religious scholars suggest instead that Isaac was a grown man by this time and as much a participant as Abraham was in climbing Mount Moriah and onto the alter that his father had built. This instruction must have been not only confusing to Abraham and Isaac but utterly devastating to both Abraham and Sarah, after so many years of living without children. Yet even when inspired to do the unthinkable, Abraham and Isaac move forward with full intent to follow through on the instruction

they receive. Abraham's knife is literally in the air above Isaac before the Spirit "called unto him out of heaven" (Genesis 22:11) to spare Isaac's life.

From these stories and others, we learn that while a spirit of peace or joy or comfort *may* come from following the promptings of the Spirit, that does not necessarily mean that the action we feel inspired to take will always be inherently comfortable or uncomplicated. The instruction may not even make immediate sense or could seem contradictory to what we have previously felt to be true. To follow the Spirit, we may have to be as my landlord Brother Duffin said so eloquently to me this week, a bit "crazy, cuckoo bonkers." We must do what is right and let the consequence follow, even if that consequence may be murky or unfathomable. We may not be called to mountain heights or stormy seas—but we *might* be. We must be prepared to travel waters and paths both familiar to us and unfamiliar to seemingly anyone.

How do we know, then, that we act in good faith with the Spirit when we make decisions that may seem firmly in the land of the crazy, cuckoo, and bonkers? I believe that one of the most important first steps we can take is to free ourselves of the belief that we will *ever* make a decision in our lives that is free of consequences that are both good and bad. This is part of the fabric of the human experience. We will never make decisions that do not ripple outward into the universe positively and negatively. Part of both receiving and acting upon personal revelation requires us to abandon the notion that we are in control of either the answers we receive from the divine or the consequences of following those promptings.

The great philosopher Aristotle once said that that which is created cannot be free. This means, as Fiona and Terryl Givens explain, "that agency could not exist, let alone flourish, if we were created beings. (The creator is responsible for the nature [and failures] of the created, whether cookies, a bridge, or a human soul.)" Because agency is so essential to every piece of God's plan, this suggests that we are not

simply "willing subjects of the Father's plan but collaborators in its very inception."[3]

As collaborators in this plan, we can take comfort in expecting that God will continue to collaborate along with us as we stumble along with the tasks of continuing the restoration of the gospel and in gathering Zion. God's plan centers around us using our agency to be anxiously engaged in good causes and in doing many things of our own free will.[4] Parley Pratt taught that our decisions and personal preferences "are the very mainsprings of life and happiness—they are the cement of all virtuous and heavenly society. . . . Aided and directed by the light of heaven . . . every affection, attribute, power and energy or your body and mind may be cultivated, increased, enlarged, perfected . . . for the glory and happiness of yourself and all of those whose good fortune it may be to be associated with you."[5] Our particular spheres of influence and interest will directly relate to the way in which we connect with heaven. This can lead to some beautiful and individualized ways in which we draw closer to our heavenly parents and the language through which they speak to us. For instance, I find that I am just as likely to find answers to my prayers through study of the scriptures as I am in an excellent book, in a theatre, or in a symphony.

On the other hand, there are many ways in which instruction from God can become a bit lost in translation. We can overshoot the mark, misunderstand, or misapply instructions and become inadvertent pharisees, promoting what with think to be right but instead causing harm. I'm reminded of the lessons I heard when I was younger about girls who have had sex before marriage being like a chewed piece of

3. Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *All Things New: Rethinking Sin, Salvation, and Everything in Between* (Meridian, Idaho: Faith Matters Publishing, 2020), 23.

4. See Doctrine and Covenants 58:27.

5. Givens and Givens, *All Things New*, 23.

gum no one wants, for instance, or the racist and false messages from years ago about Black members of the Church not receiving the priesthood because of the mark of Cain. In our desire to apply the gospel, we may make small or much more serious errors.

We can take comfort in knowing that God has prepared to assist us in making corrections. In fact, the role of our heavenly parents is, in part, to make order from our mess. Fiona and Terryl Givens also suggest that "[God's] divine energies are spent not in precluding chaos but in reordering it, not in preventing suffering, but in alchemizing it, not in disallowing error but in transmuting it into goodness. Satan's unhindered efforts in the garden were simply assimilated into God's greater purpose. The malice of the biblical Joseph's brothers became instrumental in their entire household's salvation. . . . If God can transform cosmic entropy and malice alike into fire that purifies rather than destroys, how much more can He do with actions of well-intentioned but less-than-perfect [humans]."[6] We can do our best knowing that the Atonement is always there to sift away the tares from our wheat.

It is not reasonable to expect ourselves or anyone else to have completely mastered the art of receiving and interpreting the communication with the Spirit any more than it is for us to assume that even perfect communication would lead to results that would benefit everyone without exception every time. Instead, we rely on the atonement of our Savior to cover what we are unable to do. As students of divine, merciful heavenly parents, we can give ourselves and others the grace of knowing that everyone is trying their best. We can, and should, be anxiously engaged in good causes, like the works of anti-racism, gender parity, and creating safer spaces for members of our eternal family that are part of the LGBTQ community. We should seek to address poverty, public health, and accessibility concerns. As we consider our own areas

6. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 78–79.

of expertise and interest and counsel with heaven on how we might do good, we can expect that opportunities will arise.

It is my testimony that when we act on our impulses to do good, whether the reality of the source of that inspiration is the result of direct divine interaction or our own impulses, our heavenly parents and beloved older brother will do their part to ensure that all comes to right. Thus, we can move forward with confidence while striving to be meek and humble enough to receive correction when it comes. In doing so, we continue our work as co-creators and partners with heaven in the work of building Zion.

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Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"And the Veil Was Taken." 16" x 20".
Watercolor monoprint, spray paint, oil paint,
and acrylic paint on paper. 2019.

DAWN DAVIS-LIM migrated to Australia from England as a young adult. She worked as an intuitive artist before graduating with honors in art from Federation University. Her work has been collected across the globe, and she is the recipient of numerous awards for her Daoist-inspired, abstract work. She lives a peaceful, creative, spiritual life with her husband, Chai, in Avoca, Victoria.

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