

DIALOGUE

a journal of mormon thought

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CONTENTS

ARTICLES

- A People's History of Book of Mormon Archeology:
Excavating the Role of "Folk" Practitioners
in the Emergence of a Field *Christopher C. Smith* 1
- "Free Forever to Act for Themselves":
Howard Thurman and Latter-day Saint Agency *Kristen Blair* 43

ROUNDTABLE: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SEPTEMBER SIX

- A Question of Authority *Jana Riess* 67
- The September Six and the Lost Generation
of Mormon Studies *Patrick Q. Mason* 79
- The September Six and the Evolution
of Mormon Magisteria *Kristine Haglund* 89
- Mormon Dissent in the Age of Fracture *Benjamin E. Park* 101
- She Simply Wanted More: Mormon Women
and Excommunication *Amanda Hendrix-Komoto* 109

PERSONAL VOICES

- Miracles Upon Miracles for Maher *Thora Qaddumi* 123
- Eve's Choice *Erika Munson* 133
- Some Definitions of Gratitude *Elizabeth Cranford Garcia* 143
- Questioning the Immorality of Coffee *Sherrae Phelps* 147

FICTION

- No More Sister than St. Nick *Lee Robison* 153

POETRY

- Noted in the Dark *Dixie Partridge* 169
- These Are the Hours *Dixie Partridge* 170
- Vantage: Hoback Rim to Wind River *Dixie Partridge* 171

The Days Between—After Leaving Our Youngest At College	<i>Dixie Partridge</i>	172
Lithium Shuffle	<i>Reed Richards</i>	174
heavy seeds	<i>James Dewey</i>	175
flicker	<i>James Dewey</i>	176

REVIEWS

“What if . . .?” and “How so . . .?” and “I wonder . . .” Mix with LDS Doctrine and Culture to Generate Each Story in <i>The Darkest Abyss</i>	<i>Paul Williams</i>	179
William Morris, <i>The Darkest Abyss: Strange Mormon Stories</i>		
Making the Shadow Conscious	<i>Mel Henderson</i>	184
Rachel Rueckert, <i>East Winds: A Global Quest to Reckon with Marriage</i>		
The Great Awakening of the LDS-Mormon Art Scene	<i>Heather Belnap</i>	189
Chase Westfall, <i>Great Awakening: Vision and Synthesis in Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art</i>		

A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF BOOK
OF MORMON ARCHAEOLOGY:
EXCAVATING THE ROLE OF
"FOLK" PRACTITIONERS IN THE
EMERGENCE OF A FIELD

Christopher C. Smith

Practitioners and historians of Book of Mormon archaeology have tended to narrate the emergence and history of the field as a story of conventional scholarly investigations by Latter-day Saint professionals, professors, and ecclesiastical leaders. These narratives foreground the efforts of educated, white, upper-middle-class professionals and Church-funded institutions based in Salt Lake City and Provo, near the centers of Mormon power. The historiography ignores charismatic figures from the social periphery who spurned formal training and excavated artifacts with the help of revelation and religious texts. In contrast to the "official" history of the formal field, their efforts are relegated to the informal domain of "folklore."

Historian Stan Larson titled his history of Book of Mormon archaeology *Quest for the Gold Plates*, but the academics he studied never searched for gold plates.¹ In fact, Brigham Young University anthropologist Ray Matheny once said that if he dug up gold plates, he would

1. Stan Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates: Thomas Stuart Ferguson's Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Freethinker Press, 1996).

put them back in the ground.² In contrast, charismatic figures like José Dávila, Jesus Padilla, and John Brewer not only searched for but actually claimed to discover ancient metal and stone records of Book of Mormon peoples. Archival documents and interviews with their associates help unearth the stories of their extraordinary archeological and religious claims.

Such figures are important to the history of Book of Mormon archaeology in part because they served as the foil against which the field defined itself. When the search for physical evidence of Book of Mormon historicity first got underway in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, no clear boundaries separated what folklorists call the “official culture” (which is created, filtered, and broadcasted by influential publications and institutions) and the “folk culture” (which arises and spreads more organically, person-to-person, with fewer quality controls). Academics with formal training worked alongside charismatics who claimed special spiritual knowledge of Book of Mormon geography and who presented artifacts of uncertain provenance. Even as the official field worked to define itself by pushing away the folk practitioners, the boundaries between folk and official often blurred. Folk practitioners used scientific techniques and presented their findings to experts and high-ranking LDS Church leaders, some of whom endorsed their work. Official culture (which here includes both the Church and the academy, in that both are elite institutions with cultural cache) completed the folk practitioners’ marginalization only as their establishment allies deceased.

The spiritual archaeologists’ vivid and colorful stories are also important in their own right—not just as an adjunct to the history of an academic field. Their experiences present a case study of religious

2. Jerry Ainsworth, “Response to Brant Gardner’s Article Regarding *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni*,” *The Reading Room: Book of Mormon Geography*, Aug. 2006, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071004165330/http://mormonsites.org/page4.html#padilla>.

revitalization and the sect-church process by which new religious movements spin off from older traditions. As the official Latter-day Saint culture pushed charismatic archaeologists—and their charismatic artifacts—to its margins, an array of Mormon revitalizers and splinter groups laid claim to them. Though repulsive to the gatekeepers of official culture, folk practitioners' stories appealed to some rank-and-file Latter-day Saints who longed for a more literal and charismatic faith.

A Short History of Book of Mormon Archaeology

Latter-day Saints have long hoped to prove the historicity of the Book of Mormon through the excavation and study of ancient American artifacts. Joseph Smith himself looked to unearthed bones, ruins, and metal records as evidence of the veracity of the narrative he had translated from the gold plates.³ Reflecting on the 1834 Zion's Camp expedition, he wrote fondly of “wandering over the plains of the Nephites, . . . picking up their skulls & their bones, as proof of its [the Book of Mormon's] divine authenticity.”⁴

After Smith's 1844 martyrdom, others also looked for physical relics of ancient Book of Mormon civilizations. Many followed spiritual cues, as when succession claimant James J. Strang in 1845 dug up a set of brass plates from a Wisconsin hill he had seen in vision, or when Bishop

3. Kenneth W. Godfrey, “What Is the Significance of Zelph in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 70–79; Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 243; Don Bradley and Mark Ashurst-McGee, “President Joseph Has Translated a Portion’: Joseph Smith and the Mistranslation of the Kinderhook Plates,” chapter 17 in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith's Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, edited by Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 452–523.

4. Joseph Smith, Letter to Emma Smith, June 4, 1834, in Letter Book 2, 56–59, Joseph Smith Collection, MS 155, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

John Koyle opened a “Dream Mine” near Salem, Utah, to dig for gold records that the angel Moroni had shown him in vision in 1894.⁵ Others scoured the secular scientific literature for clues, as when John E. Page in 1848 identified the Book of Mormon city of Zarahemla with the Maya ruins at Palenque, or when educator George M. Ottinger in 1879 compared the Book of Mormon to the sacred K’iche’ Maya manuscript known as the *Popol Vuh*.⁶ In the last year of the nineteenth century, Brigham Young Academy president Benjamin Cluff Jr. led an expedition to Colombia, where he hoped “to discover the ancient Nephite capital of Zarahemla” on the Magdalena River and “to establish the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.”⁷

In the twentieth century, other Mormon academics followed in Cluff’s footsteps. In 1909, Deseret Museum director James E. Talmage investigated clay, copper, and slate tablets discovered two decades earlier in Michigan. Perhaps reflecting a cultural shift toward a more secular scientific sensibility, Talmage debunked the artifacts as frauds despite

5. Roger Van Noord, *The King of Beaver Island: The Life and Assassination of James Jesse Strang* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 33–35, 102; Ian Barber, “Dream Mines and Religious Identity in Twentieth-Century Utah: Insights from the Norman C. Pierce Papers,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 70, no. 3 (2009): 433–69; Kevin Cantera, “A Currency of Faith: Taking Stock in Utah County’s Dream Mine,” in *Between Pulpit and Pew: The Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore*, edited by Paul W. Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 125–58.

6. John E. Page, “Collateral Testimony of the Book of Mormon,” *Gospel Herald* (Voree, Wisc.) 3, no. 26, Sept. 14, 1848, 123, available at <https://archive.org/details/GospelHerald18471850/page/n473>; G. M. Ottinger, “Votan, the Culture-Hero of the Mayas,” *Juvenile Instructor* 14, no. 5, Mar. 1, 1879, 57–58, available at <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/votan-culture-hero-mayas>.

7. Ernest L. Wilkinson and W. Cleon Skousen, *Brigham Young University: A School of Destiny* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 151, available at <https://archive.org/details/brighamyounguniv00wilk/page/150/mode/2up>.

their faith-promoting potential.⁸ And in contrast to traditional interpretations of the Book of Mormon that saw its narrative encompassing the whole of North and South America, many early twentieth-century writers proposed “limited geography” interpretations that set the narrative mostly within a small region of Central America.⁹

Building on these early efforts, Mormon researchers in the 1940s and 1950s developed Book of Mormon archaeology into a formal scientific subfield. In 1952, amateur anthropologist Thomas Stuart Ferguson founded the New World Archaeological Foundation, a nonprofit with a mandate to carry out archaeological excavations of Preclassic Maya sites in Central America with an eye to scientifically confirming the Book of Mormon. Milton R. Hunter, a president of the Seventy and amateur archaeologist, served as a vice president of the organization, and Max Wells Jakeman, Brigham Young University Department of Archaeology chair, served prominently on the foundation’s archaeological committee. In partnership with BYU anthropologists like Jakeman, Ross T. Christensen, and Bruce W. Warren, Ferguson led numerous Central American expeditions and excavations in the 1950s. These efforts caught the interest of Church authorities, who extended Church funding to the NWAFF in 1955 and folded it into BYU in 1961.¹⁰

The establishment of a formal academic subfield by no means marked the end of excavations by spiritual methods in the style of Strang and Koyle. The mid-century Book of Mormon archaeology boom inspired spiritual as well as scientific artifact-seeking, with considerable overlap between the two. In the 1950s, a Mexican Mormon tour guide named José Dávila guided NWAFF archaeologists on some of their expeditions to southern Mexico and Guatemala. Dávila seamlessly blended

8. Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Mormonism’s Encounter with the Michigan Relics,” *BYU Studies* 40, no. 3 (2001): 174–209.

9. Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon,” 260–65.

10. Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, 45–70.

scientific and spiritual methods, drawing on archaeological scholarship and personal revelation to find Book of Mormon sites. Presented with a set of inscribed gold plates, he translated them with the help of scholarly lexicons of Egyptian hieroglyphics, which he used in combination with a nineteenth-century Egyptian grammar book apparently dictated through revelation by Joseph Smith. Similarly, in the 1960s, an arrowhead hunter named Earl John Brewer excavated many inscribed stone tablets and metal plates from a cave near Manti, Utah, where he professed to have encountered the angel Ether. Both Dávila and Brewer understood themselves to be engaged in archaeology, and both received support from BYU anthropology professor Paul R. Cheesman and from Church authorities such as apostle Mark E. Petersen and Milton R. Hunter, a president of the Seventy.

Thus, while the NWAF's founding was a triumph, historians should resist the temptation to narrate it as a story of progress from "folk" to "scientific" methods. Not only does this imply a one-sided moral judgment, but it's also somewhat anachronistic because folk and scientific efforts were not clearly distinguishable from each other in the early days of Book of Mormon archaeology. Arguably, academic archaeologists at BYU defined the folk in the process of defining their scientific discipline. They professionalized Book of Mormon archaeology partly through the gradual marginalization and exclusion of spiritual practitioners like Dávila and Brewer. While a few BYU scholars, like Cheesman, received Dávila's and Brewer's claims with sympathy, others dismissed them. In particular, Ray Matheny became BYU's go-to artifact authenticator (and debunker) and Dávila's and Brewer's principal antagonist. A former student of Matheny recalls that he used to "regale us with stories about the crazy things people would bring . . . for evaluation and potential authentication. He once told me he sometimes felt like a modern Charles Anthon."¹¹ (Charles Anthon was the nineteenth-century New

11. Chris Watkins, email to Christopher Smith, Nov. 2, 2020.

York linguist who had thumbed his nose at Martin Harris's transcript of characters from the Book of Mormon plates.)¹²

While Matheny and others succeeded in marginalizing spiritual approaches to Book of Mormon archaeology and relegating them to the domain of the "folk," they won no total victory. Certainly, the academic debunkers found good reasons to doubt the purity of Dávila's and Brewer's motives and the authenticity of artifacts they championed. In addition to saving souls, the purveyors of these artifacts stood to gain money, notoriety, and spiritual authority by offering proof of the Book of Mormon's historicity. But the folk archaeologists got in their own licks against the establishment scholars, whom they saw behaving more like critics than believers, in pursuit of secular academic respectability and advancement in secular careers. They organized themselves into a kind of alternative establishment—a network of nonprofits and fundamentalist sects—that still thrives today, doing cultural work worthy of study. What follows is a first attempt to tell the origin story of that alternative establishment and to understand the work its practitioners are doing.

José Dávila and the Padilla Gold Plates

In the first few years after the NWAFA's 1952 founding—as Book of Mormon archaeology struggled to find its scientific footing—BYU scholars went on several exploratory expeditions to Central America to find potential excavation sites. To help them navigate the unfamiliar landscape, they employed Mexican guides at a salary of \$225 per month.¹³

12. See Richard E. Bennett, "Read This I Pray Thee': Martin Harris and the Three Wise Men of the East," *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 190–94.

13. John F. Forber & Company to Thomas S. Ferguson, Jan. 12, 1953, MSS 1549, Thomas S. Ferguson Papers, 1936–1975, box 9, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

One of those guides was José Octavio Dávila Morales, a Spanish-English bilingual *mestizo* (mixed-blood) Huastec-Maya Indian born in Tampico, Mexico in 1925.¹⁴ By his twenties, Dávila worked as a licensed Mexican federal tour guide for archaeological sites.¹⁵ He also served as a Latter-day Saint branch president in Puebla, Mexico, having married a widow from Bountiful, Utah, and converted to her Mormon faith in 1946.¹⁶ The semi-nomadic couple flitted back and forth between Mexico and Utah, where Dávila joined the University Archaeological Society (UAS) at BYU.¹⁷

By 1951, Dávila owned a small business, the Puebla Travel Service.¹⁸ Coiffed hair, a winning smile, and earnest intensity accounted for only part of Dávila's tour business success. He also read voraciously and possessed an uncanny power to retain what he read.¹⁹ Although he had

14. José O. Dávila to John A. Wilson, Oct. 15, 1965, in Veryl R. Todd Notebook, circa 1965–1975, MS 9263, LDS Church History Library.

15. "Archaeologist to Lecture in Pl. Grove," *The [Provo, Utah] Daily Herald* 91, no. 165 (Mar. 19, 1964): 13A.

16. "Personal History of Claudious Bowman, Jr. and His Wife Nelle," chap. 6, available at http://www.dublan.net/History/Personal/Bowman/Claudious_Jr_and_Nelle/Claudious_Chapter_6.html; "Mexico Guide Dated by Society at Y.," *Deseret News and Salt Lake [City, Utah] Telegram* 354, no. 158 (Dec. 31, 1960): A7; "Hazel Argyle Stocks," Family Search, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KWC6-FT1> (accessed March 5, 2020).

17. Max Wells Jakeman, "Recent Explorations in the Proposed, Region of Zarahemla," *UAS Newsletter* 22 (Aug. 23, 1954).

18. "Archaeologist to Lecture in Pl. Grove"; "Join December Tour of Book of Mormon Lands in Mexico" (advertisement), *The [Provo, Utah] Sunday Herald* 33, no. 23 (Nov. 6, 1955): 2B.

19. Jerry L. Ainsworth, *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni* (n.p.: Peace-Makers Publishing, 2000), 5, 15; Terry L. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates," June 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20220305181501/http://www.mysteryglyphs.com/pages/Articles/20090626_0003C.pdf; "Mexican Travel Guide Presents New Ideas on Book of Mormon Sites," *Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 84, no. 241 (September 10, 1955): 3.

no formal archaeological training, Maya history held him in the grip of a lifelong passion matched only by his newfound enthusiasm for the Book of Mormon, which he felt might unlock the ancient Maya's secrets.²⁰ (Maya script would not be fully deciphered until the late 1970s.)

At BYU, Dávila met Max Wells Jakeman and fully embraced his "limited geography" interpretation of the Book of Mormon. In 1953 and 1954, Dávila guided Jakeman and an NWAFF team on exploratory expeditions to southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. In Guatemala, they found ruins they identified with the Book of Mormon city Zarahemla. Dávila helped excavate the ruins in 1956.²¹

In 1954 and 1955, Dávila also guided NWAFF vice president Elder Milton R. Hunter of the Seventy on three "archaeological trips" to Mexico and Guatemala, during which the two men documented skin-color differences among Central American Indigenous populations and similarities between Hebrew and Indigenous cultures. Hunter published an extensive chronicle of his adventures with Dávila in search of Book of Mormon evidences.²²

Except for a lecture that Dávila delivered before the UAS in January 1961, Dávila's association with the NWAFF largely ended after 1956.²³ Perhaps the BYU archaeologists no longer wanted his services. Clark S. Knowlton, who was actively seeking a job in the BYU archaeology

20. "Book of Mormon Attracts Guide to LDS Religion," *Deseret News and Salt Lake [City, Utah] Telegram* 354, no. 104 (Oct. 29, 1960): 6.

21. "Mexican Travel Guide Presents New Ideas." The NWAFF's official papers and expedition reports omitted any mention of Dávila, but Max Wells Jakeman noted his participation in an article published in the newsletter of the UAS. Jakeman, "Recent Explorations."

22. Milton R. Hunter, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956).

23. "Mexico Guide Dated by Society at Y.," "Guide Lectures at BYU Society," *Deseret News and [Salt Lake City, Utah] Telegram* 355, no. 2 (Jan. 3, 1961): 2B/.

department, wrote to BYU professor Ross T. Christensen in 1955 that he was “ironically amused” by a newspaper account of Hunter’s expeditions with Dávila. Knowlton felt that Hunter was “the type that can and has done considerable harm to Book of Mormon archaeological studies,” and he even expressed a desire to “vote against him sometime in Church.”²⁴ This candid assessment of a General Authority illustrates how quickly academic Mormon archaeologists had soured on amateur involvement in their field.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the entrepreneurial Dávila struck out on his own. He crafted his own map correlating archaeological sites with Book of Mormon cities. He conducted his own not-entirely-legal excavations in search of Lehi’s ship, Nephi’s temple, and King Benjamin’s tower. And he presented his findings in lectures and tours directed to audiences of Utah Mormon laypeople. By 1960, he counted Church president David O. McKay and apostle Harold B. Lee among those who had taken his tours.²⁵ In these endeavors he drew on a combination of archaeological science and divine guidance in the form of visions and dreams.²⁶

24. Clark S. Knowlton to Ross T. Christensen, February 7, 1955, MSS 1716, Ross T. Christensen Collection, 1891–1992, box 5, folder 5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

25. “Mexican Guide to Tell Book of Mormon Theory,” *Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 84, no. 225 (Aug. 25, 1955): 16B; “Mexican Travel Guide Presents New Ideas”; Merle Shupe, “Guide Plans Map on Book of Mormon,” *The Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 89, no. 257 (Oct. 3, 1959): 3; “Mexico Guide Dated by Society at Y.”; José O. Dávila, “An Account of Our Book of Mormon Lands Tour, Jan. 27th to Feb. 16th, 1961,” Americana Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; José O. Dávila, “Physical Evidences of the Book of Mormon,” December 1965, MSS 2049, box 63, folder 2c, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; José O. Dávila, “The Geography of the Nephites,” December 1965, MSS 2049, box 63, folder 2c, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

26. Dávila, “An Account of Our Book of Mormon Lands Tour,” 36–37, 43.

Meanwhile, in February 1961, a Mexican physician named Jesus Padilla Orozco took the missionary discussions in Cuautla, Mexico. The missionaries gave Padilla a Spanish-language tract containing a facsimile of the first four (out of seven) lines of Book of Mormon “Characters” that Martin Harris had shown to Columbia College professor Charles Anthon in 1828.²⁷

Padilla carefully studied the tract and then told the missionaries that he owned a set of gold plates inscribed with similar characters. He had found them while working for the government on an aerial mineral survey in 1959. The surveyors’ plane had set down in Oaxaca, Mexico, and Padilla and several other men had hiked into the jungle. In the jungle they stumbled upon the ruins of an ancient city inhabited by naked, white-skinned Indians.²⁸ Inside the ruins they found a coffin that contained some gold plates. Padilla claimed to be the only survivor of the expedition, the other four having died of drowning, falling, accidental gunshot, and snakebite, respectively.²⁹

The missionaries doubted the story, having previously heard Padilla tell colorful stories that didn’t add up. They asked to see the plates, but Padilla said he had left them with a linguist in Mexico City.

27. Ray T. Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Plates,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 33–40.

28. When paraphrasing primary sources, especially where they draw upon racial myths and stereotypes, I generally preserve their racial terminology (e.g., “Indian”) rather than substitute an alternative label.

29. Richard Averett, letter to Ross T. Christensen, May 7, 1961, quoted in Paul R. Cheesman, Ray Matheny, and Bruce Louthan, “A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico,” January 1973, 4–5, 8–9, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Gerald C. Kammerman, letter to Diane E. Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; “Padilla Follow-Up,” n.d. [ca. 1978], in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

He promised to bring them back and show them to the missionaries, but “week after week as we visited them [the Padillas] or stopped by, he claimed that he had forgott[e]n.” One day Padilla produced from a safe a handwritten copy of some characters from the plates. The missionaries remarked upon their similarity to the Book of Mormon characters on the pamphlet they had shown him, and Padilla agreed with their assessment. Finally, after about a two-month delay, Padilla presented three postage stamp-sized hinged gold plates, which he had strung onto a charm bracelet for his wife. He asked the missionaries “if anyone in the Church would be interested in buying” the three plates at an \$80,000 price. The missionaries met with their mission president and apostle Marion G. Romney to discuss the proposal. Fearing that the plates might be a hoax, Romney advised the missionaries to mail photographs of the plates to BYU for authentication. They did so, and BYU archaeologist Ross T. Christensen replied that the plates were probably fraudulent and not worth pursuing.³⁰

José Dávila did not share the BYU scholar’s skepticism. He heard about the plates and visited Padilla, who showed him five plates, including the three with hinges that he had previously shown the missionaries. Dávila “immediately recognized the writing as . . . Nephite reformed Egyptian” and offered to buy the plates. Padilla asked for too much money, so Dávila left without making a deal. But later that year, Padilla’s wife contacted Dávila and, pleading financial difficulty, offered to sell or lease the plates for \$2,000. (The parties later disagreed as to whether the

30. Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; Wayne Hamby, “Padilla Plates,” Apr. 29, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; “Padilla Follow-Up”; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 18; J. Golden Barton, “A Rebuttle Written by J. Golden Barton to ‘A Report on the Gold Plates in Mexico’ by Paul R. Cheesman, Ray Matheny and Bruce Louthan January, 1973,” 2, 9, 15, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

transaction was a lease or sale.) Dávila raised the money from a backer in Utah and exchanged it for the plates.³¹

Dávila tried to donate the plates to the LDS Church, but apostle Marion G. Romney declined the donation on the grounds that it would be illegal to take them out of Mexico. That didn't stop Dávila, who arranged for his wife to take the plates to Utah. Church authorities there again declined to take custody of the plates and referred the matter to the department of archaeology at BYU. BYU archaeologists Max Wells Jakeman and Ross T. Christensen examined the plates and in 1962 published an article in the UAS newsletter expressing their opinion that the plates were fake and that the Dávilas had committed a crime by bringing them to the United States.³²

This offended Dávila, who continued to insist on the plates' authenticity. The metallurgist hired by BYU had noted that the plates looked freshly polished and lacked the wear that comes with age. To Dávila, this evoked the Book of Mormon's promise in Alma 37:5 that plates containing sacred records "must retain their brightness." Thus, his scriptural literalism led him to different conclusions than the BYU academics drew from the same data point.³³

Dávila spent the next two years translating the Padilla plates. Donations from Utah Church members funded the work, and apostle Joseph Fielding Smith helped by providing Dávila a copy of an Egyptian grammar book supposed to have been composed by revelation by

31. Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 18–19; Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 8; José O. Dávila, "Moroni's Petroglyphs in Utah," Dec. 23, 1964, MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 63, folder 2c, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

32. Kammerman to Wirth, Nov. 20, 1978; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 9–10; "Gold Plates from Mexico," *U.A.S. Newsletter* 78 (Jan. 17, 1962): 4, available at <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/uas-newsletter-no-78-january-17-1962>.

33. José O. Dávila, "Laboratory Analysis of the Amuzgus Front Plate," in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

the Church's founder, Joseph Smith.³⁴ Using a pair of early twentieth-century hieroglyphic dictionaries in combination with the methods outlined in Smith's grammar book, Dávila managed to place an interpretation upon the Padilla plates' script. The full translation portrayed Jesus Christ as a "Sky God" whose "celestial boat was wrecked upon the cross," neatly blending Mormon and Egyptian motifs.³⁵

In 1963, a farmer named Del Allgood heard rumors of Dávila's translation work and invited him to come examine some petroglyphs in Chalk Creek Canyon near Fillmore, Utah. Allgood and a business partner named Harold Huntsman believed that the petroglyphs marked the location of an old Spanish or Indian mine. The pair had filed several mining claims on the site in 1950 and had scoured the area for evidence of mineral wealth, but they had come up empty so far. They turned to Dávila in the hope that this half-Maya translator might be able to interpret the glyphs and reveal the location of the mine.³⁶

Using the same method he had employed with the Padilla plates, Dávila teased a message from the mysterious glyphs. Amazingly, they gave instructions for how to locate a "natural stone chamber"

34. Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 10; "Join Our December Tour to the Book of Mormon Lands in Mexico, December 10 to 30" (advertisement), *Ogden [Utah] Standard-Examiner* 34, no. 291 (Oct. 30, 1955): 6B.

35. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; José Dávila, "The Full Translation," n.d., in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

36. Memorandum of Jose Octavio Davila, in Harold Huntsman and Flora Huntsman v. Jose Octavio Davila, Mrs. Jose Octavio Davila, E. Del Allgood, and Mrs. E. Del Allgood, case no. 5634, District Court of the Fifth Judicial District in and for Millard County, Utah, Oct. 1966, Millard County Clerk's Office.

containing “metal tablets” or “garlanded everlasting mineral records.”³⁷ Still more stunning, one pair of esoteric glyphs—the Jewish *hamsa* and the Taoist *yin yang*—comprised the signature of the angel Moroni. Dávila hypothesized that after the Lamanites destroyed the Nephites in a final apocalyptic battle in Mexico, Moroni had fled north with the Nephite records and buried them in New York to be discovered by Joseph Smith. En route, Moroni had passed through Utah and buried a portion of the Nephite library in Chalk Creek Canyon. Dávila concluded that “it would not be far fetched to estimate we are considering here the resting place of the twenty[-]four plates of Ether” mentioned in the Book of Mormon.³⁸

In 1964 and 1965, Dávila gave a series of public lectures about this discovery. Through these lectures he recruited a hundred volunteers and a smattering of financial backers to excavate the site. Dávila explained to them that the excavation’s objective was to promote salvation and “to deliver these records to the LDS Church.” In the summer of 1965, the excavators spent over \$4,000 drilling six hundred feet of exploratory holes. Frustrated by his lack of success, Dávila revisited his

37. Recall that Jesus Padilla had “garlanded” his gold plates by stringing them together on a necklace for his wife. José O. Dávila, “The Translation of the Large Texts,” n.d., in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 63, folder 2c, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; José O. Dávila, “Translation of Fillmore Symbols,” n.d., https://web.archive.org/web/20220305181601/mysteryglyphs.com/pages/Articles/20090629_0005A.pdf; José O. Dávila, “The Chalk Creek Canyon Texts from Fillmore, Utah, Translated by J. O. Dávila,” Nov. 1965, MS 2105, LDS Church History Library.

38. José O. Dávila, “Moronai in Utah, or, Hidden Treasures in Your Backyard,” Dec. 24, 1965, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 63, folder 2c, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. See also Jerry L. Ainsworth, “Is There Evidence That Mormon and Moroni Visited the American West?” *Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum*, 2015, <http://bmaf.org/node/576>; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 201–03.

translation and discovered an error: “All the Summer and Fall of 1965 has been employed in work done over 100 f[ee]t off the true spot.”³⁹

Meanwhile, a breach opened between Dávila and Harold Huntsman, the majority owner of the mining claims on which Dávila was excavating. Dávila examined the paperwork for the Huntsman-Allgood claims and concluded that Huntsman and Allgood had failed to meet the legal requirements to maintain the claims. In February 1966, Dávila challenged the prior claims and filed his own mining claims on the site. Huntsman ordered Dávila off the claims and signed an agreement with filmmaker DeVon Stanfield to excavate the gold plates and make a documentary film about the excavation. Dávila, who felt the discovery was too sacred for television, came to blows with Stanfield when he found him on the property.

In October 1966, Huntsman sued Dávila. Dávila’s lawyer admitted in court that Dávila had made “open, notorious, hostile adverse use of the property” without Huntsman’s permission, but he argued that none of that mattered because Huntsman’s mining claims were invalid. The court ultimately disagreed and ruled against Dávila, barring him from the site and awarding Huntsman \$10,000 in damages.⁴⁰

The lawsuit precipitated a tragedy. On November 5, 1966, Harold Huntsman showed up at the property and informed two of Dávila’s volunteers that the court had ordered them to halt excavation. The two men refused to leave, so Huntsman left and told them he would be back

39. Dávila, “Moroni’s Petroglyphs in Utah”; Dávila, “Moronai in Utah”; Stephen B. Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients* (Springville, Utah: Plain Sight Publishing, 2013), 155; Dávila, “The Chalk Creek Canyon Texts”; Dávila to Wilson, Oct. 15, 1965.

40. Complaint, Harold Huntsman and Flora Huntsman v. Jose Octavio Davila, Mrs. Jose Octavio Davila, E. Del Allgood, and Mrs. E. Del Allgood, case no. 5634, District Court of the Fifth Judicial District in and for Millard County, Utah, Oct. 1966; photocopies provided by Millard County Clerk’s Office; Memorandum of Davila, Oct. 1966; Carter, “Jose Davila & the Gold Plates”; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 155.

with the sheriff. Realizing their time was short, the volunteers made one last big push to find the plates. They stuffed the bottom of a twenty-foot shaft with ninety-one sticks of dynamite and detonated the lot. They waited two hours for the carbon monoxide gas to clear and then went down the shaft. They hadn't waited long enough, and both men died of carbon monoxide poisoning. If only they hadn't worked on the Sabbath, lamented their friends.⁴¹

Adding tragedy upon tragedy, Huntsman had the thirty-six-year-old documentary filmmaker DeVon Stanfield continue the excavation where Dávila left off. Stanfield took more care than his predecessors, but on August 10, 1967, he too succumbed to carbon monoxide gas.⁴²

A bankrupted Dávila returned to Mexico by 1970.⁴³ Meanwhile, in 1970, Jesus Padilla wrote to the anthropology department at BYU claiming to be in possession of seven more gold plates from the same tomb as the five that he had leased or sold to Dávila. In 1971, Dr. Paul Cheesman visited Padilla to examine the additional plates.

Several discrepancies quickly emerged in Padilla's story. In speaking years earlier with the missionaries who first contacted him, he had claimed to have found the plates during a survey trip to Oaxaca in 1959. Now he said he had found them while camping with some friends in Guerrero in 1955. The new plates didn't have hinges like three of the originals had, which seemed to embarrass Padilla. He claimed that José

41. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 154–55; "2 S.L. Men Killed in Mine," *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, Utah) 366, no. 111 (Nov. 7, 1966): 1B, available at <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=cMIOAAAIBAJ&sjid=aUkDAAAIBAJ&pg=2260%2C1602095>; "Carbon Monoxide Cause of Shaft Deaths," *Deseret News*, Nov. 8, 1966, B1; "Search to Continue for Metal Tablet Cache Despite Deaths," *Idaho State Journal* (Pocatello, Idaho) 65, no. 203 (Nov. 8, 1966): 1; "Gas Is Fatal for Pair in Mine Shaft," *The [Twin Falls, Idaho] Times-News* 63, no. 206 (Nov. 8, 1966): 9.

42. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; "Blast Gas Fatal to Miner in Hunt for Silver," *The Salt Lake [City, Utah] Tribune* 195, no. 119 (Aug. 11, 1967): 1B.

43. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates."

Dávila had added the hinges to the originals, but photographs taken prior to Dávila's acquisition of the plates proved that the hinges had been present all along.⁴⁴

José Dávila heard a rumor that BYU might buy the seven plates from Padilla for \$35,000. Fearing that this would make the seven new plates inaccessible to him, he contacted Mexican authorities and alerted them of a pending illegal artifact sale. Then he called Padilla, told him what he had done, and warned him to hide the plates. This enraged Padilla, but he took Dávila's advice. By the time police raided Padilla's home a few days later, he had hidden his collection of artifacts. Before the police let him go, Padilla suggested to them "that Mr. Davila might well bear investigation on similar charges."⁴⁵

Dávila was arrested on July 6, 1971 and charged with crimes related to looting and illegal artifact smuggling. Most charges were eventually dropped for lack of evidence, but Dávila spent a few years in prison for driving unregistered vehicles.⁴⁶ During the investigation, Utah collector J. Golden Barton visited Dávila in jail, coaxed him to tell where he had hidden his five Padilla plates, sneaked the plates out of Dávila's

44. Paul R. Cheesman, Report, n.d. [1971–1972], in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 11; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; Matheny, "An Analysis of the Padilla Plates," 21n4; Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, "A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico," 9; Kammerman to Wirth, November 20, 1978; "Padilla Follow-Up"; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 18; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 2, 9, 15.

45. Barton, "A Rebuttle," 12–13.

46. Carter, "Jose Davila & the Gold Plates"; Dale Van Atta, "The Angel, the Gold—and Jose Davila M.," *Deseret News* 383, no. 283 (Nov. 26, 1975): B10, available at <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=mTMpAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=7n0DAAAIAIBAJ&pg=5490%2C6117962>; Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*, 19; Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, "A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico," 9; Barton, "A Rebuttle," 13–14; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 116.

home under the noses of watching police officers, and then smuggled the plates out of Mexico under his toupee.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, Padilla provided his seven new plates to BYU professor Paul R. Cheesman for study and authentication. He refused to tell exactly where in the Mexican state of Guerrero he had found them, “but if there were some way to obtain a subsidy,” he promised to arrange for scientific dating of the site.⁴⁸ Cheesman showed the plates to various experts. Anthropologists Frederick Dockstader and Gordon Ekholm pronounced them fakes engraved with a modern steel tool. Diffusionist epigrapher Cyrus Gordon and BYU Egyptologist Hugh Nibley thought the plates might be genuine. Cheesman agreed with Gordon and Nibley.⁴⁹

Cheesman's BYU colleague Ray Matheny made a comprehensive study of the plates and pronounced them fraudulent. He noted pictographs on the plates apparently copied from famous Maya and Aztec artifacts, and he argued that the plates' perfectly square corners and “very straight edges” suggested they had been cut with modern tools. Matheny also found that the plates contained a majority of the symbols from the first four lines of the Book of Mormon “Caractors”

47. In telling this story, Stephen Shaffer refers to Barton only as “Jake.” I infer Barton's identity from other sources that allude to this escapade. According to Barton's obituary, “Jake” was his nickname. Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 116–19; “J. Golden (Jake) Barton,” <https://www.russonmortuary.com/obituaries/j-golden-jake-barton> (accessed April 5, 2020); Linda Karen Petty, comp., *Linda Karen Petty's Personal History*, vol. 4 (New Harmony, Utah: Petty Family Records Center, 2016), available at <https://www.familysearch.org/service/records/storage/das-mem/patron/v2/TH-904-67010-319-35/dist.txt?ctx=ArtCtxPublic>; Christopher C. Smith, interview with Gail Porritt, St. George, Utah, Jan. 19, 2013.

48. Jesús Padilla Orozco, letter to Paul R. Cheesman, June 26, 1971, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 66, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, “A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico.”

49. Cheesman, Report, n.d. [1971–1972].

document that Martin Harris had shown to Charles Anthon, whereas they contained almost no characters from the bottom three lines of that document. Recall that the missionaries who had first contacted Padilla had shown him a missionary tract that reproduced the first four lines of the “Caractors” document but not the bottom three. Matheny concluded that Padilla had borrowed from the missionary pamphlet to fabricate the plates.⁵⁰

J. Golden Barton—a private collector and friend of Paul Cheesman—read an early draft of Matheny’s report and penned a rebuttal. Matheny had drawn these conclusions from incomplete information, Barton protested. Matheny had had access to the seven new Padilla plates but not to the five originals. Barton’s “naked eye” examination of Dávila’s five plates revealed rounded corners cut at oblique angles. Moreover, apparent contradictions in Padilla’s narratives of discovering the plates could be harmonized. Oaxaca and Guerrero were adjacent states, and the camping trip that Padilla had described to Paul Cheesman might have occurred during the survey mission that he had described to the missionaries.⁵¹

Barton provided Dávila’s five plates to Cheesman in the hope that this additional evidence might help prove the plates’ authenticity. Matheny only grew more confident in his conclusions after examining them, however. The hinges attached to the plates had “been made with modern tubing dies” and attached with modern solder, and the edges of the plates bore marks from a jeweler’s saw and metal file. He pronounced the case against the plates’ authenticity “closed once and for all.”⁵²

The Church-owned *Deseret News* newspaper piled on with an editorial about Dávila in 1975. The article recounted a story from two

50. Cheesman, Matheny, and Louthan, “A Report on the Gold Plates Found in Mexico,” 8–18; Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Plates,” 21–40.

51. Barton, “A Rebuttle,” 4–7.

52. Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Plates,” 22–30, 40.

Mormon missionaries who had gone “on a one-day expedition with Dávila while on their Mexican mission. Dávila led them to a mountain where he claimed to have found a cave filled with gold, lowered himself over a ledge by rope, and disappeared into an opening in the cliff face. A few minutes later, the two heard a shot and pulled Dávila up. One foot was bleeding. He said an angel had shot him for trying to touch the sacred gold.”⁵³ In an acid letter to the editor, Barton complained that the editorial sounded like “the Palmyra ‘Reflector’ [of] New York state, [in] the year 1831, in which Obadiah Dogberry was describing the character of Joseph Smith in his Book of Mormon find.”⁵⁴

After Dávila’s release from prison, he returned to work giving tours of Mexican archaeological sites. In 1978, he befriended Connecticut Mormon public health professor Jerry L. Ainsworth, who became a sort of Dávila disciple. Ainsworth once accompanied Dávila on an expedition to Cerro del Bernal—which Dávila identified as the Hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon—in search of a “Nephite library” of metal plates. Uncanny storms and snakes drove them off the hill, which Ainsworth concluded “remains taboo [i.e., supernaturally protected] at this time.” Ainsworth also befriended Jesus Padilla, who supplied him with a steady stream of new artifacts from the same tomb as the Padilla plates.⁵⁵

Eventually Ainsworth wrote a book and a series of online posts to popularize Dávila’s ideas. In one post, Ainsworth described a conversation he had once had with BYU skeptic Ray Matheny. Ainsworth had asked what Matheny would do if he discovered authentic gold plates inscribed with reformed Egyptian characters. Matheny had replied that he would put them back in the ground and never tell anyone because

53. Van Atta, “The Angel, the Gold—and Jose Davila M.”

54. J. Golden Barton, “Archaeological Fraud?” n.d. [ca. 1975], in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

55. Ainsworth, *Lives and Travels*.

such a discovery would end his career.⁵⁶ This anecdote illustrates the gap that had opened between the official and the folk, with neither able to countenance the other's perspective on gold plates.

John Brewer and the Manti Plates

José Dávila never met Earl John Brewer, as far as I know, but the two men ran in similar circles and had similar experiences. Like Dávila, Brewer offered metal records to confirm the Book of Mormon. Like Dávila, he combined amateur archaeology with the supernatural. And like Dávila, he found himself pushed to the edges of official Mormon culture and into the arms of the Mormon folk.

Born in Moroni, Utah, on February 11, 1933, Brewer worked as a turkey farmer and sanitation worker at different times in his life. Although he had a testimony of Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, he stayed home Sundays and smoked, cursed, and drank coffee.⁵⁷ He was a loving father and husband and loved by his kids.⁵⁸

In 1963, Brewer and his friend Carl Paulsen brought some limestone tablets to a collector named Leona Wintch. She contacted her nephew, Utah State Archaeological Society president George Tripp, and he contacted Dr. Jesse Jennings of the University of Utah Department of Anthropology. Jennings examined the stones and pronounced them a hoax, noting that they appeared stained with fresh topsoil and

56. Ainsworth, "Response to Brant Gardner's Article."

57. "Earl John Brewer," Family Search, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/KWZS-VX7> (accessed Feb. 8, 2020); Christopher C. Smith, Interview with John Heinerman, April 15, 2017; [J. Golden Barton], "Manti Enigma," 1974–1990, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, Box 7, fd. 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

58. Jed Brewer to Christopher Smith, April 4, 2021.

freshly engraved.⁵⁹ According to an affidavit made out by Carl Paulsen, he grew suspicious after hearing Jennings's findings and ransacked Brewer's room. Beneath the mattress he found several pieces of partially inscribed stone. He confronted Brewer and accused him of forging the stones. "He, John Earl Brewer, had no comment and shrugged off the accusation."⁶⁰

It's unclear what story Brewer told Wintch and Jennings about the discovery of these tablets, but his later narrations fitted the incident into a grand narrative of Jaredite treasure caves. A "diary" in Brewer's voice misdates the Wintch incident to 1960 rather than 1963 and turns the stone tablets into metal plates. According to Brewer's one-time friend John Heinerman, Brewer wrote the diary years after the fact to make sure he had his story straight. The diary represents an evolved version of a story that by then Brewer had told many times.⁶¹

Tellings of Brewer's story differ in their details but agree in their shape. The story begins with Brewer arrowhead hunting for an art display for the Sanpete County Fair about 1955. His friend George Keller, an African American ranch hand who claimed to know secret Indian places, agreed to tell Brewer where to find arrowheads in exchange for some wine. Brewer supplied the wine, and Keller took him to an

59. George Tripp, "Manti Mystery," *Utah Archaeology* 9, no. 4, (Dec. 1963): 1; Jesse Jennings to Mrs. J. Wallace Wintch, Nov. 27, 1963, Anthropology Departmental Records, University of Utah Archives; Jesse Jennings to Lambrose D. Callinagos, Jan. 28, 1969, Anthropology Departmental Records, University of Utah Archives. Special thanks to archivist Kirk Baddley for finding and providing the Jesse Jennings correspondence.

60. Carl and Louise A. Paulsen affidavit, Apr. 13, 1973, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

61. John Brewer journal typescript, June 17, 1960, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

overhang on the hill behind the Manti Temple and told him to dig beneath.

Brewer dug, and his shovel unearthed a stairwell that led down into a large chamber. The chamber contained two ten-foot-long stone coffins, each containing an eight-foot-tall mummy in full metal armor. One mummy had red hair, and the other had blonde. In addition to the coffins, the chamber also contained stone boxes wrapped in juniper bark and pitch. Brewer broke some of them open and found inscribed metal plates.

In some versions of the story, Brewer also encountered a glowing angel who identified himself as the Jaredite prophet Ether and warned him not to sell anything from the cave for gain. He also found stone tablets, which he assembled like a jigsaw puzzle to reveal a map to the locations of additional caves. Like Joseph Smith before him, he carefully guarded the secret of his cave's location and struggled prayerfully through feelings of personal unworthiness and greed.

Indeed, in Brewer's journal he explicitly wondered "if maybe this was anything like [Joseph Smith] went through." He thought perhaps not, because Smith "was a better man than I am. But the thought wouldn't leave me all day," so he followed Smith's example by asking God for help to understand the artifacts he'd found. No answers came right away. He felt that the Lord would guide him in the search for other caves but that God also wanted him to work to find answers on his own. "I know that he is [guiding me,] for I am not a very smart person and some of these things that come to me are not mine," he wrote.⁶²

62. Jared G. Barton, "Secret Chambers in the Rockies," *The Ancient American* 4, no. 28 (June/July 1998): 3–4, 6; "John Brewer Has a Cave, but He's Not Giving Tours," *Deseret News*, Nov. 26, 1975, B10; Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017; [Barton], "Manti Enigma"; John Heinerman, *Hidden Treasures of Ancient American Cultures* (Springville, Utah: Bonneville Books, 2001), 147–48; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 31–32; John Brewer journal typescript.

Word of Brewer's discovery reached BYU by 1965, when University of Utah anthropologist Melvin Aikens showed the limestone tablets to BYU's Ray Matheny. Matheny wrote to Aikens, "As you may know, many of these kinds of finds have been made in the past to exploit Mormons and we, at B. Y. U., would like to carefully record each of these, in order to expose the people involved for what they are."⁶³

Paul R. Cheesman shared Matheny's enthusiasm for investigating Brewer's find, though not to expose it as a fraud. Cheesman put one of Brewer's tablets on display in BYU's Joseph Smith Building, and in 1971 he convinced Church president Spencer W. Kimball and apostle Mark E. Petersen to supply \$1,000 to fund research into Brewer's find.⁶⁴ Several BYU anthropologists visited Brewer in Sanpete County on the Church's dime. Cheesman came away a believer, while his colleagues Ray Matheny, William J. Adams Jr., and Hugh Nibley came away convinced that Brewer's artifacts were fake.⁶⁵

Like Jennings, Matheny found the inscriptions and the pitch that coated them too fresh to be ancient, and he also found evidence that Brewer's metal plates had been cut with scissors and inscribed with a modern chisel. Adams, a linguist, examined the inscriptions and found fewer clusterings of symbols than you'd expect from a meaningful script. Later, he ate at an area restaurant and found a napkin decorated with local cattle brands that closely resembled the symbols from the plates. In 1972, Matheny and Adams coauthored a report debunking the

63. Ray T. Matheny to Melvin Aikens, Mar. 17, 1965, Anthropology Departmental Records, University of Utah Archives. Special thanks to archivist Kirk Baddley for finding and providing this document.

64. Letter from Paul R. Cheesman to Gary B. Doxey, May 3, 1971, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 1, folder 5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

65. Barton, "Secret Chambers in the Rockies," 6.

plates.⁶⁶ As for Nibley, “Brewer’s wife told somebody he [Nibley] knew that Brewer had made the plates himself.”⁶⁷

Undeterred, Cheesman organized another trip to Sanpete County with apostle Mark E. Petersen on March 5, 1974. Cheesman’s wife Millie, his student aide Wayne Hamby, and his friend J. Golden Barton accompanied him on the trip. The group met with Brewer at his bishop’s home in Moroni, Utah. Brewer told the visitors the tale of his discovery and withdrew from a briefcase about sixty inscribed plates made from various metals, including some gold plates he had framed under glass. “He told us he generally kept these plates in a safe deposit box at the local bank,” Barton wrote. “He also told us he had used the plates a[s] security for a loan with a private party.” Brewer also presented a sealed set of copper plates that he had never shown anyone before and which he proposed to open in Elder Petersen’s presence. The apostle demurred, saying the seal should only be broken in the presence of archaeological experts.

The visitors pressed Brewer to reveal the location of his cave for scientific study. Brewer “seemed reluctant to commit himself to an immediate excursion,” but he promised that once the snow had cleared, he would enlarge the cave entrance and show the cave first to Cheesman, and then to a team of archaeologists from BYU.

66. “John Brewer Has a Cave, but He’s Not Giving Tours”; Ray T. Matheny and William James Adams, Jr., “An Archaeological and Linguistic Analysis of the Manti Tablets,” typescript of a paper presented at the Symposium on the Archaeology of the Scriptures, Provo, Utah, Oct. 28, 1972, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. The napkin is preserved in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 4a, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

67. Post by bobhenstra, Apr. 3, 2011, in “We’re surely in it now: Hel/3 Nephi, Revelation D&C 29, 45,” LDS Freedom Forum, <http://www.ldsfreedomforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=6041&start=540>; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

During the drive home, each member of the party that had come to meet with Brewer shared their opinion on the meeting. Elder Petersen chimed in first with his view that Brewer “was telling the truth and most likely did not have the capacity to perpetuate such an elaborate hoax.” The rest of the group agreed.

After dropping Cheesman off in Provo, Barton accompanied Elder Petersen back to Salt Lake City. During the drive, Barton showed Petersen José Dávila’s Padilla plates and shared his opinion that Dávila was sincere and “worthy of Church confidence.” Barton then “talked about some of the difficulties Dr. Cheesman and also myself had experienced when seeking help from the New World Archaeological Foundation in regards to both the Mexican plates and Cheesman’s work with Brewer.” The apostle “appeared somewhat distressed with the attitude of the Foundation toward archaeology of the scriptures.” According to Barton,

He clearly stated that he did not believe we had any reason to hide our views from intellectual circles in regards to these matters. He strongly advocated that L.D.S. students do their homework and not be hindered or harassed in the presentation of Book of Mormon archaeology. He further stated that in his opinion the Church had no reason to be embarrassed by the discovery or recovery of Gold Plates. After all the very foundation of the Joseph Smith story was based on such knowledge. He said that angels and gold plates were a very real part of Mormon history and that the Church witnessed the same to all the world.⁶⁸

The two men also favorably discussed a cache of Ecuadorian gold plates described in a book by ufologist Erich von Däniken, who in 1968 had famously proposed that aliens had built the Great Pyramid of Giza.⁶⁹

In the months following this meeting, Petersen eagerly pressed Cheesman for news. “We are very interested in this, as you know,” he

68. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

69. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

wrote. “President Kimball has inquired of Brother [Milton R.] Hunter [of the First Council of the Seventy] and myself on two different occasions as to what the status of the matter is.”⁷⁰ He also mentioned that “Our brethren here are very interested and it will not surprise me at all if they should authorize purchase of the land involved so that we may get full control.”⁷¹ Barton, hearing a rumor of the Church’s intent to buy the land on which Brewer’s cave was located, visited the Sanpete County recorder’s office and learned “that the Corporation of the L.D.S. Church had in fact been deeded a parcel of ground directly east of the [Temple].”⁷²

Unfortunately, Brewer did not make good on his promises. “Spring came and went in the Manti valley and John Brewer [m]ade no effort to contact Dr. Cheesman and fulfill the agreement that he had made in early March,” Barton wrote. “We received information that Brewer was experiencing some marital difficulties and so we chose not to pressure this man as he sought to solve his personal problems.”⁷³ In a letter to Petersen that summer, Cheesman reported that “John Brewer’s wife left him with all the children to care for, therefore a delay in our plans,” and “Brewer lost his job and is in the midst of changing to another job—further delay.”⁷⁴

70. Mark E. Petersen to Paul R. Cheesman, June 27, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 1, folder 6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

71. Mark E. Petersen to Paul R. Cheesman, Apr. 10, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 65, folder 5j, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

72. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

73. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

74. Paul R. Cheesman to Mark E. Petersen, June 24, 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 1, folder 6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

Alongside its scathing 1975 exposé of José Dávila, the Church-owned *Deseret News* published an exposé of Brewer.⁷⁵ Brewer frankly told the *Deseret News* reporter that “Whenever I don’t understand anything, I stall.” He told the reporter that concerns about privacy, credit for the discovery, and his children’s inheritance had caused him to keep the secret close.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Brewer’s bishop reported back to Cheesman that Brewer had discovered a second treasure cave containing additional boxes of plates.⁷⁷

Even as he stalled his friends in high places, Brewer made a smattering of folksier friends. In 1974, an anonymous “Canadian Indian” translated some of the plates, revealing that a group of Jaredites led by a man named Piron had settled in the American Southwest in 2500 BCE. The group had buried more than five million inscribed gold plates throughout the Americas, the translation said, and had known the secret of making electric batteries.⁷⁸

Around the same time, Brewer met Gail Porritt, a kindly eccentric who considered himself to be the “one mighty and strong” prophesied in Doctrine and Covenants section 85. Porritt heard rumors of Brewer’s discovery and visited him to learn more. “He showed me some round lead plates with inscriptions on them with a hole in the middle,” Porritt remembers. Porritt befriended Brewer, and Brewer gave him some artifacts and showed him a hill where “the largest and most important repository of records” was buried, according to the map he had found

75. “John Brewer Has a Cave, but He’s Not Giving Tours.”

76. “John Brewer Has a Cave, but He’s Not Giving Tours.”

77. [Barton], “Manti Enigma.”

78. Gail Porritt, “Report and Interpretation by a Canadian Man on Very Ancient Inhabitants of Utah,” n.d., in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University; miscellaneous translations, June–December 1974, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

in his cave. “They’re up there; good luck to you if you can find them,” Brewer invited.⁷⁹

A man named Dave Tomlinson also befriended Brewer. Brewer took Tomlinson on mountain hikes to search for sites marked on his Jaredite map. According to Brewer, the map marked Jaredite burials spanning from Colorado to Idaho, “with little footprints going from one to the other.” The “main” site on the map, however, seemed to be west of Manti, Utah. Brewer and Tomlinson searched the mountains for a “trail marker” depicted on the map, but they couldn’t find it.⁸⁰

In the 1970s, Brewer fell in with a man named John Heinerman. Like Porritt, Heinerman heard rumors of Brewer’s discovery and sought him out. Heinerman claims that Brewer showed him his cave, a claim that Brewer denied. The wonders Heinerman witnessed in the cave included a Jaredite battery and a unicorn head. He and Brewer also tried their hand at translating the plates.

Brewer and Heinerman somehow became entangled with a group of polygamist fundamentalists led by Ervil LeBaron. At minimum, Ervil’s nephew Ross LeBaron Jr. stole some photographs of Brewer’s artifacts from a photographer’s office.⁸¹ To hear Heinerman tell the story, the LeBarons also demanded to know the location of Brewer’s cave and tortured and killed Brewer’s son. Police concluded that Johnnie Brewer Jr. died

79. Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013. Diarist Linda Petty’s notes on Porritt’s stories from the 1990s add evocative details. To get to the cave whose general location Brewer had pointed out to Porritt, “there is a 200 foot drop. At the 30 foot level it [is] necessary to swing onto a ledge and take steps down from there.” Petty, *Linda Karen Petty’s Personal History*.

80. Carter and Tomlinson, “Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb”; David L. Tomlinson to Paul R. Cheesman and Millie Cheesman, Nov. 25, 1987, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 30, folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

81. Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013. Terry Carter identifies the photographer as Lucian Bound. Carter and Tomlinson, “Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb.”

of an accidental drug overdose, but Heinerman believes it was staged.⁸² Another source implies that Heinerman and Brewer conspired with the LeBarons to sell fraudulent artifacts to wealthy Latter-day Saints.⁸³

By 1990, Brewer and Heinerman had a spectacular falling-out. Their dispute concerned a Canadian woman named Louise to whom Heinerman had been engaged. Louise complained to Brewer that Heinerman had deceived her and defrauded her out of \$34,000. Brewer helped her move out of Heinerman's home, and he also testified against Heinerman before a Church court. According to a thirdhand account of Brewer's testimony, he confessed at the hearing that he and Heinerman had conspired to sell fake copper plates to members of the Church.⁸⁴ Heinerman retaliated with a priesthood curse consigning Brewer and his progeny to hell.⁸⁵

In 2001, Heinerman published a book to popularize Brewer's story.⁸⁶ Brewer complained about the book in an interview with Gail Porritt. According to Brewer, many claims in the book were fabricated, and the book's publication had complicated the resolution of a lawsuit over ownership of the land where the cave was located. "I've tried to let it cool off, more or less. Tried to say, well, no, you know, forget it, it's not true, whatever. Tried to cool it down. And I thought it was until he brought that dang book out."⁸⁷

82. Heinerman, *Hidden Treasures*, 203–08; Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

83. [Barton], "Manti Enigma."

84. [Barton], "Manti Enigma"; Smith, interview with Porritt, Jan. 19, 2013; Carter and Tomlinson, "Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb." I did not ask John Heinerman about Brewer's confession, but he volunteered an anecdote in which Brewer's brother-in-law Jerry Mower enticed Brewer to manufacture and sell fake plates, and "they had to go and repay." Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

85. Smith, interview with Heinerman, Apr. 15, 2017.

86. Heinerman, *Hidden Treasures*.

87. Porritt, interview with Brewer, n.d. [ca. 2001].

When Porritt asked how soon Brewer expected to go public with the location of the cave, Brewer said it would be sometime within the next two years. In addition to needing to resolve the lawsuit over ownership of the land, he also expected the Lord to bring forth a couple of archaeologists to assist with the work. Porritt then asked if Brewer would mind recording his story on video for posterity. Brewer replied, “Well . . . I’m not too . . . not ready for that. I don’t want to be like John Heinerman. Okay?”⁸⁸ Brewer did *not* reveal his secrets sometime within the next two years. Instead, he kept them until 2007, when he took them to his grave.⁸⁹

According to Brewer’s friend Terry Carter, near the end of his life Brewer “blew the entrance to the cave up” and vowed never to reveal its location while he was alive. Carter wrote in 2006 that Brewer “has become a recluse, is starting to go senile and denies that his cave ever existed and will not talk to anyone about it. His wife is much more abrasive and will threaten to shoot anyone who tries to talk to John, or steps foot on their property.” Carter, a believer in the cave, explained away Brewer’s denial. Brewer “was given an ultimatum by his wife to deny that his cave, mummies and artifacts ever existed in order to re-store harmony to the family.”⁹⁰ Senile or no, Brewer had decided that being a father and husband made him happier than being a finder of plates.⁹¹

88. Porritt, interview with Brewer, n.d. [ca. 2001].

89. “Earl John Brewer.”

90. Post by Terry L. Carter, Oct. 5, 2006, in “9’ tall mummies . . . cool!” on the Ancient Lost Treasures Message Board, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20100329140143/http://ancientlosttreasures.yuku.com/topic/4744>.

91. According to John Brewer’s son Jed Brewer, his father “paid my rent for 2 years so I could get my college degree.” Jed sent his father checks to repay the money, but when he visited, he found the uncashed checks in a stack. John “was always positive to what I was doing. He was never manipulative with any of my family,” says Jed. Brewer, instant message to author, Apr. 4, 2021.

Dávila's and Brewer's Legacies

Rejected by the Mormon establishment, Dávila's and Brewer's projects have been taken up by an array of fundamentalist prophets and non-profit organizations. One of the first to make use of Brewer's story was Gerald Peterson Sr., who in 1978 founded a polygamous sect called the Righteous Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Peterson claimed that Brewer had taken him inside his cave in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Peterson also borrowed some of the plates, which he translated. His followers are forbidden to read the translation until the appointed time. For four decades they have kept the translation under a sacred seal.⁹²

In 1990, Manti, Utah resident Jim Harmston led a group of locals to search the hills near the Manti Temple for Brewer's cave. They found esoteric petroglyphs much like those in Fillmore that José Dávila had identified as the angel Moroni's signature glyphs. In short order "there was an excavation going on the West side of the Manti valley," and rumors circulated that someone had found Brewer's treasure cave. Harmston's bishop in Manti objected to the illegal dig and worried that his ward members might embarrass the Church. Four years later, Harmston founded his own polygamous sect.⁹³

Another Manti polygamist, Jerry Mower, married John Brewer's sister and claims to have learned the secret of Brewer's cave. In 2001, Mower showed historians H. Michael Marquardt and Gerald Kloss "many artifacts he claims he found in the valley of Manti," including stone boxes and gold plates. Mower told the historians that he had "found many caves in the Valley of Manti and mummies, including he claims, the mummies of Adam and Eve—since he believes this was the

92. Christopher C. Smith, interview with Michael Peterson, Nov. 5, 2018. Brewer told Gail Porritt that no one had ever been inside the cave save himself and his son. Porritt, interview with Brewer, n.d. [ca. 2001].

93. [Barton], "Manti Enigma."

Garden of Eden site and the site where Noah built the Ark. He feels the second coming will take place in The Valley of Manti. He also showed us [a] translation of the gold plates with symbols for God the Father, Jesus the son, and The Holy Spirit, who is Joseph Smith.”⁹⁴

Mower added colorful science-fiction flourishes to Brewer’s stories. Among his artifacts is a disc-shaped rock that he says is an ancient CD. He also claims to know of a hidden temple in the mountains with three altars—telestial, terrestrial, and celestial. The celestial altar is booby-trapped, and to reach it requires taking a literal “leap of faith” by walking off a cliff onto an invisible ledge. The ancient Nephite general Moroni, Mower says, teleported between Mexico, Utah, and New York with the help of a network of portals.⁹⁵

Fundamentalist prophet Ross LeBaron Jr. owes more to José Dávila than to Brewer. LeBaron has provided his own translation of Dávila’s Fillmore petroglyphs, declaring that the yin-yang symbol represents the location in southern Utah where the ark of the covenant was deposited by the priests of David and Solomon. The ark was buried there and then guarded by the direct descendants of David until the last of the guardians died out a hundred years ago. The last guardian carved the petroglyphs so that the hiding place would not be lost. From the Jewish *hamsa* symbol, LeBaron learned that Adam, Jacob, and other important biblical figures are buried in Zion National Park.⁹⁶

94. Gerald John Kloss, “My Visit to Utah: A Personal Reflection,” in *Latter Day Saint History* 13 (2001): 18–19; additional details provided by H. Michael Marquardt on Aug. 8, 2011. See also May, “Utah’s City in the Clouds,” *Ancient American* 27 (April/May 1999): 3–4, 37–39. For more on the history of this idea, see Cristina Rosetti, “Praise to the Man: The Development of Joseph Smith Deification in Woolleyite Mormonism, 1929–1977,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 54, no. 3 (2021): 41–65.

95. Smith, interview with Rodgers, Mar. 14, 2017.

96. Gail Porritt, “Ross LeBaron’s Interpretation of Characters,” 1–4, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

Like Dávila, LeBaron treated the petroglyph symbols as composites of multiple sub-symbols. Unlike Dávila, however, he did not use either Joseph Smith's "Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar" or scholarly Egyptian lexicons. Instead, he combined direct revelation with bits of lore derived from ostensibly ancient texts such as the *Forgotten Books of Eden*. LeBaron claimed that virtually every important event in gospel history took place in Utah. After being kicked out of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in a Utah "treasure cave." After the Flood, Noah landed on a mountain in present-day Utah. Utah was the location not only of the Tower of Babel, but also the original lands of Israel and Egypt. "Anyone who believes in that copy-cat area over there [in the Middle East] is part of the Babylonian confusion. It's all right here in Southern Utah."⁹⁷

In contrast to the fundamentalists, the Ancient Historical Research Foundation (AHRF) investigates Brewer's and Dávila's stories from an orthodox Latter-day Saint perspective. Terry Carter cofounded the organization in the 1990s to study "mystery glyphs" such as those translated by José Dávila. Dávila's friend J. Golden Barton and Brewer's friend David Tomlinson served as trustees for the organization until their deaths. Other trustees include marginal or controversial Latter-day Saint scholars such as Rodney Meldrum, Wayne May, and Steven E. Jones.⁹⁸

97. Gail Porritt, report on an interview with Ross LeBaron, n.d., 3–4, 11, in MSS 2049, Paul R. Cheesman (1921–1991) Papers, box 24, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

98. Terry Carter and Shawn Davies, "Mysterious Petroglyphs in the Western US," <https://web.archive.org/web/20200111002346/http://www.mysteryglyphs.com/pages/Articles/20061029-002A.pdf>; Terry Carter, "About my youtube channel, Treasure Hunting, Nephilim Giants, out of place archaeology, etc.," YouTube, Dec. 8, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaLTleZHCWs>; "AHRF Bios," available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130221045836/http://www.ancienthistoricalresearchfoundation.com/Pages/Bios/BioMain.htm>.

In 2005, the AHRF carbon-dated a piece of bark from Brewer's cave and found it to be approximately 2,161 years old.⁹⁹ AHRF founder Terry Carter allows that aspects of the Brewer story are fishy, but he insists that the carbon-dated tree bark "couldn't have been forged." Members of the AHRF continue the search for Brewer's cave, although they feel that guardian spirits and booby traps may prevent it from being found until God's appointed time.¹⁰⁰ They also continue the quest for the Fillmore, Utah metal records sought by José Dávila. In the 1980s, David Tomlinson went so far as to purchase "the placer [i.e., mining] claims" to Dávila's Chalk Creek Canyon mine.¹⁰¹

Members of the AHRF see Mormon academics as their rivals. They accuse professional academics like Ray Matheny of bullying amateur explorers and stealing or covering up their finds. To these faithful Mormon folk, the establishment's rejection of Dávila's and Brewer's charismatic artifacts is a symptom at least of incompetence, if not of apostasy or malign intent.¹⁰²

99. Steven E. Jones, "Radiocarbon Dating of Bark Sample from Brewer's Cave, Manti Area," *Ancient American* 15, no. 90 (Mar. 2011): 8.

100. Terry Carter, "Nephilim Giants found in Utah, Brewers Cave the untold story," YouTube, Jan. 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ab2jZYFeGY>; Carter and Tomlinson, "Ancient Nephilim Giants Tomb."

101. Paul R. Cheesman and David L. Tomlinson, "Egyptian and Hmong Clues to a Western American Petroglyph Group," *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications* 18 (1989): 303–10; Shaffer, *Treasures of the Ancients*, 161–63.

102. Post by DrJones, Feb. 26, 2011, in "We're surely in it now: Hel/3 Nephi, Revelation D&C 29, 45," LDS Freedom Forum, <http://www.ldsfreedomforum.com/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=6041&start=540>; Robert Shrewsbury, "An Open Letter to the President of the United States," *Terra Firma Assayers*, Oct. 23, 2004, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20120729023110/http://www.terrafirmaassayers.com/bush.htm>.

Folk and Official Culture and the Routinization of Charisma

Academic folklorists define “folk culture” as culture that is “shared person to person” and that varies or changes each time it’s transmitted. This contrasts with “official culture,” which is broadcast in a single version by an authority or intellectual property owner.¹⁰³ While this definition foregrounds the process of transmission, it also references the social position of the message’s purveyors. Most Mormon folklore scholarship has emphasized the transmission process, perhaps to the neglect of social position.¹⁰⁴ To quote folklore studies professor Stephen Olbrys Gencarella’s summary of the critical theories of Antonio Gramsci, “the official exists in no small measure because it defines folklore,” and “folklore exists . . . in part because it officiates as the Other for the official.”¹⁰⁵

This dynamic is well illustrated in the history of Book of Mormon archaeology. Charismatic or spiritual practitioners have favored person-to-person storytelling, whether orally at firesides and “pow-wows” or on the internet in message boards and YouTube channels. Characteristically for folklore, their stories have transformed and taken on new proportions with repeated retelling. However, they tend to favor

103. Lynne S. McNeill, *Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2013), 1–13.

104. See, for instance, W. Paul Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen, “Between Pulpit and Pew: When History and Lore Intersect,” in *Between Pulpit and Pew: The Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore*, edited by W. Paul Reeve and Michael Scott Van Wagenen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 4; and Tom Mould and Eric A. Eliason, “Introduction: The Three Nephites and the History of Mormon Folklore Studies,” in *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, edited by Eric A. Eliason and Tom Mould (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013).

105. Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, “Folk Criticism and the Art of Critical Folklore Studies,” *Journal of American Folklore* 124, no. 494 (Fall 2011): 259.

this mode of transmission not because they lack the ambition to broadcast their message through authoritative channels but because they are denied access to those channels. They are denied access because of their social position—their poverty and lack of Church or academic credentials—and because they have made useful foils for official Church and academic culture. BYU archaeologists like Ray Matheny established their scientific bona fides in part by distancing themselves from archaeological claims they viewed as fraudulent or fantastical. As a result, “folk” and “scientific” Book of Mormon archaeologies arose together symbiotically.

Folklorists emphasize that “folk culture is no more or less important than official culture. It doesn’t exist above or beneath the official culture but right next to it.”¹⁰⁶ That, however, is not the attitude of most guardians and gatekeepers of official culture. Official culture actively *enforces* its single version, drawing and maintaining strict boundaries between itself and the folk, and it tends to look down on anything that doesn’t meet its standards for inclusion within its scope. So when a recent edited volume on Mormon folklore began its discussion of folklore by invoking Carl Sagan’s contrast between the folkloric “superstitious mind” and the scientific “critical mind,” it perhaps uncritically adopted the stance and language of official culture rather than the stance and language of folkloristics.¹⁰⁷ Academics engaged in the study of folklore may personally agree with academic critiques of folk culture, but as scholars we must also recognize that we occupy a privileged social position and have a vested interest in the struggle to distinguish folk from official, so we are not disinterested observers. Also noteworthy is that while folklore studies have historically focused on non-elite “folk,” the discipline increasingly recognizes that “elites will have, inasmuch as

106. McNeill, *Folklore Rules*, 66.

107. Reeve and Van Wagenen, “Between Pulpit and Pew,” 1–2.

they adhere in groups, a lore as well.”¹⁰⁸ We find good examples in the stories that Ray Matheny told his students about the “crazy” artifacts that people brought to him for authentication and in the story that William J. Adams Jr. told about his discovery of symbols from Brewer’s plates on a restaurant napkin.

Moving to a different disciplinary frame borrowed from the sociology of religion may help elucidate what cultural work the folk and official archaeologists were doing in their contests over Dávila’s and Brewer’s discoveries. According to the German sociologists Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, something like the tension between folk and official culture plays out in every religion and intensifies as the religion gets older. They called this the “sect-church cycle” or “routinization of charisma.” According to this theory, a religious sect begins with a “charismatic” event—a breaking-in to history of something thrilling but uncontainable, like miraculous divine power or invisible gold plates. But as the sect matures into a full-fledged church, it builds systems, institutions, and routines around its founding charisma to contain the charisma and make it safe. It returns its gold plates to their stone box to prevent them from endangering the stability or quality of faith.¹⁰⁹

Charisma is thrilling, but routine is not. Inevitably, some adherents seek to “revitalize” their faith by liberating charisma from its

108. Roger D. Abrahams, “Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore: Performing Services,” *Western Folklore* 37, no. 3 (July 1978): 161.

109. The concept of “routinization of charisma” was pioneered by German sociologist Max Weber, whose fullest treatment of the subject has been translated into English as *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*, translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 358–92. German theologian Ernst Troeltsch elaborated Weber’s theory into the idea of the sect-church cycle in Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1931). The concept has been treated in a Mormon context by Armand L. Mauss and Philip L. Barlow, “Church, Sect, and Scripture: The Protestant Bible and Mormon Sectarian Retrenchment,” *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 397–414.

containment—by removing the plates from their box. Religion’s official gatekeepers may tolerate these folk revitalization movements if they find them nonthreatening enough. Or they may sanction and exclude them, at which point the revitalization movements fizzle out, go independent, or go underground. Many failed revitalization movements give rise to new religious movements, beginning the sect-church cycle all over again.¹¹⁰

Thomas Ferguson’s NWAFF began with an ambition to revitalize the LDS faith by finding concrete evidence of the Book of Mormon and its glittering gold plates.¹¹¹ But from the beginning, conservative forces in Mormonism’s official culture resisted Ferguson’s quest. Apostles Joseph Fielding Smith and Marion G. Romney worried that Book of Mormon archaeologists promoted heterodox interpretations of the Book of Mormon that limited its geographical scope in direct contradiction to statements made by the Church’s founder Joseph Smith.¹¹² Other General Authorities and Mormon academics felt “considerable embarrassment over the various unscholarly postures assumed” by Book of Mormon archaeologists and feared that their work would damage the academic reputation of BYU. This, in no small part, is why the Church folded NWAFF into BYU in 1961 and placed its administration and finances under the control of the Church Archaeological Committee. By 1963, the committee decreed that the foundation should do its archaeological work in a secular way and that “any attempt at

110. Anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace popularized the phrase “revitalization movement” in “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (Apr. 1956): 264–81.

111. See, for instance, Thomas S. Ferguson to David O. McKay, Jan. 25, 1954, MSS 1549, Thomas S. Ferguson Papers, 1936–1975, box 2, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

112. See, for example, Milton R. Hunter to Thomas S. Ferguson, Aug. 12, 1954, MSS 1549, Thomas S. Ferguson Papers, 1936–1975, box 2, folder 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

correlation or interpretation involving the Book of Mormon should be eschewed.”¹¹³

In an illustrative exchange, apostle Marion G. Romney accosted BYU archaeologists in Mexico City. According to Max Wells Jakeman,

[Apostle Romney] immediately asked me, <in an important manner,> if I was expecting to find ‘Lehi’s Tomb’ on this expedition. I assured him that I was leaving this up to the missionaries. Yesterday he called Carl, Ray, Harvey, and Larry into a room by themselves, and there—according [to] the report they gave me—he gave them ‘serious instructions’; namely, that they must send back only sound scientific reports of their findings, and must leave all conclusion, with respect to the Book of M., to others—i.e. the ‘committee?’—back home. They said they were interested only in doing scientific work at Aguacatal, as the Department had done in the past, but he didn’t have <the> time to hear them out.¹¹⁴

While the archaeologists resented this interference in their work, they also took the lesson to heart. Despite the title of Stan Larson’s history of the NWAf, *Quest for the Gold Plates*, theirs was a quest for conventional archaeological evidence, not for sensational artifacts like gold plates. They increasingly functioned as an arm of official culture, helping keep the lid on the stone box. By 1969, BYU archaeology grad Dee F. Green—who had personally participated in NWAf excavations—could write that “the first myth we need to eliminate is that Book of Mormon archaeology exists.”¹¹⁵

113. Dee F. Green, “Book of Mormon Archaeology: The Myths and the Alternatives,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1969): 76.

114. Max Wells Jakeman to Ross T. Christensen, Feb. 28, 1961, MSS 1716, Ross T. Christensen Collection, 1891–1992, box 13, folder 6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. Angle brackets indicate a supralinear insertion.

115. Green, “Book of Mormon Archaeology,” 76. For Green’s participation in BYU-NWAf expeditions, see Ross T. Christensen, Expedition Journal, 1962, MSS 1716, Ross T. Christensen Collection, 1891–1992, box 13, folder 7, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

The official culture did not speak with one voice on this subject. BYU academics like John Sorenson continued to work and publish on Book of Mormon archaeology, though more quietly and informally than before. And BYU archaeologist Paul R. Cheesman and General Authorities Mark E. Petersen and Milton R. Hunter each kept up a sympathetic correspondence and relationship with amateur archaeologists like José Dávila and John Brewer who continued the search for ancient Nephite and Jaredite artifacts and records. The charismatic quest for sensational artifacts like gold plates was pushed to the folk periphery of Mormon culture, but Cheesman, Petersen, and Hunter prevented it from being pushed out of Mormon culture altogether while they were alive.

After their deaths, gold plates became chiefly the domain of Mormon-inspired new religious movements and breakaway fundamentalist sects. And so the sect-church process began anew, with new charisma spilling forth from unearthed metal plates, luminous and uncontainable.

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“FREE FOREVER TO ACT FOR THEMSELVES”: HOWARD THURMAN AND LATTER-DAY SAINT AGENCY

Kristen Blair

There is in every person an inward sea, and in that sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar and standing guard before that altar is the “angel with the flaming sword.” Nothing can get by that angel to be placed upon that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority. Nothing passes “the angel with the flaming sword” to be placed upon your altar unless it be a part of “the fluid area of your consent.” This is your crucial link with the Eternal.¹

Christian mystic, theologian, and preacher Howard Thurman wrote through the tumultuous American civil rights era. His attention to the anatomy of the interior being and the locus of life’s meaning influenced key figures in the movement, including Martin Luther King Jr., who is said to have always traveled with a copy of Thurman’s well-known *Jesus and the Disinherited*.² Among Thurman’s key insights is his concept of the inward sea, or soul. As a Black man growing up in the segregated American South, Thurman is no stranger to oppression and race-based violence. He well understands and writes of the creation of social identities, the energy of hate, and the formation of personhood—all things influenced if not created by external factors. His idea of the soul, however, is that it is a thing immutable, untouchable, and unchanged. Within every person is an inward sea, a soul, upon which a person can

1. Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), 15.

2. Carl McColman, “Howard Thurman,” *Anamchara* (blog), June 23, 2021, <https://anamchara.com/howard-thurman/>.

find refuge if they school their mind and body to seek and dwell in it. This is his understanding of mysticism, a democratic vision wherein every being has the capacity to be in communion with God insofar as they can know the landscape of their own soul. When a person knows the landscape of their own interior being, they are enabled to take refuge in the island of peace within their inward sea.³ Though a person's actions and very body may be controlled and policed, that island of peace cannot be trespassed. This is the foundation of Thurman's perspective on human agency.

Within the umbrella of Christianity considered generally, "agency" is a term with a varied usage and even more varied associated meanings. Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, agency is the heartbeat of the religion's reimagining of the Christian story. The Book of Mormon, central to Latter-day Saint thought, begins with the tale of a mystical encounter and a prophetic construal of agency in which agency is a protected feature of the human spirit. The prophet Lehi teaches that "[humans] are free according to the flesh. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil."⁴ This prophetic vision appears to place salvation or damnation wholly within a person's agential power to choose.

Howard Thurman, I argue, prioritizes agency in similar ways to Latter-day Saints but with a nuanced understanding that illuminates the areas where the LDS cosmic drama has grown murky. For Thurman, the importance of agency is less about capacity for moral action toward a determined end (i.e., control over salvation versus damnation) and more about awareness of one's internal landscape and the immutable language of one's eternal soul, wherein one finds spiritual power

3. Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 15.

4. 2 Nephi 2:27.

and peace. I will argue that this perspective tracks with the Latter-day Saint framework in theory but not in rhetorical practice.

I. "Free Forever to Act for Themselves": Latter-day Saint Understandings of Moral Agency

A number of terms find synonymous expression under the blanket term "agency," including moral agency, free will, and freedom to choose. All of these terms, though often used interchangeably, mean different things, and the nuance between them is important for understanding the ways the theological framing has become confused. Theologically, agency refers to the capacity of consciously making consequential choices. Moral agency concerns the human ability of individuals to make choices based on ethical and moral feelings. Free will enters the philosophical debate surrounding determinism, positing that choice is possible over predetermination. Freedom of choice, similarly, describes an unfettered ability to make consequential choices.

In Latter-day Saint theology, "free agency" is a central concept. It is often cited in official Church addresses and teachings, but what Church members mean by it frequently draws on all of the above terms in unclear ways. Elder Bruce R. McConkie, for example, defined free agency this way in 1973:

When we dwelt in the presence of God . . . we were endowed with agency. This gave us the opportunity, the privilege, to choose what we would do—to make a free, untrammelled choice. . . . We're expected to use the gifts and talents and abilities, the sense and judgment and agency with which we are endowed.⁵

5. Bruce R. McConkie, "Agency or Inspiration—Which?" devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Feb. 27, 1973, available at <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/agency-inspiration/>. McConkie also teaches this in the book *Mormon Doctrine*.

McConkie's statement demonstrates principles of agency that have become ubiquitous in Latter-day Saint discourse: moral agency was endowed on us as a gift; freedom of choice is moral agency; and agency is associated with judgement and, ultimately, salvation. Later in the address he states,

God grant us the courage and the ability to stand on our own feet and use our agency and the abilities and capacities we possess; then let's be sufficiently humble and amenable to the Spirit to bow our will to his will, to get his ratifying, confirming seal of approval. . . . And if we so do, there's no question about the result: it's peace in this life; it's glory and honor and dignity in the life to come.⁶

The exercise of free agency, he is saying, is God's gift to humankind but it must be used in a particular way if one is to expect peace and salvation.

McConkie's statement represents a common understanding within the Latter-day Saint tradition. According to a published Church manual, "Agency is the ability and privilege God gives us to choose and to act for ourselves. . . . Without agency, we would not be able to learn or progress or follow the Savior." The manual goes on to state: "one purpose of earth life is to show what choices we will make."⁷ The text is holding to a particular theological orientation in which life is a test; individual actions—the exercise of agency—are features of this test and can be answered or performed incorrectly. In short, this model assumes absolute freedom of choice and so complete responsibility for correct choices in order to ensure salvation.

The prophet Lehi's teachings have become corollary to this idea. In a sermon on the fall of Adam and Eve, Lehi teaches: "[Humans] have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great

6. McConkie, "Agency or Inspiration—Which?"

7. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Agency and Accountability," Gospel Topics, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/agency-and-accountability?lang=eng>.

and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given."⁸ As McConkie and others have shown, Lehi's message has been taken to suggest that the freedom of our choices will be answered upon our own heads, sealing the theological significance of human agency to the unyielding heartbeat of justice. The use of this great gift of agency, Latter-day Saints have concluded, is therefore the ultimate test of mortal life. Use it correctly and one is ensured salvation. Use it incorrectly, Lehi assures, and one is subject to the "punishment of the law . . . according to the commandments." Correct and incorrect choices are clearly delineated according to this theological model.⁹ The commandments of God are understood to be guidelines demonstrating correct action, and anything outside of obedience to this law is accordingly incorrect. Yes, we can use our freedom to choose, but (when considering the ultimate) we must choose correctly.

Latter-day Saint scholars like Terry Warner resist this kind of simplification of the model, however, arguing that the dichotomy between right and wrong is an essential condition of mortality: "[we] cannot avoid being both free and responsible for [our] choices." Choices, Warner argues, have natural consequences. Sinful choices bring about a captivity of the spirit. "As this happens, the individual still possesses agency in name, but his capacity to exercise it is abridged. In this sense, to misuse one's agency is to lose that agency." Warner concludes that "thus, in the LDS concept of agency, obedience and agency are not antithetical."¹⁰ Obedience, or submission to God's law, is the ultimate

8. 2 Nephi 2:26.

9. For example, Church authority Wolfgang H. Paul taught, "Instead of saying, 'I do what I want,' our motto should be 'I do what the Father wants me to do.' . . . If we make the right choice, the Lord will take care of us in His own way, which at that time is not yet known to us." "The Gift of Agency," Apr. 2006, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2006/04/the-gift-of-agency?lang=eng>.

10. Terry Warner, "Agency," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:26.

freedom because it floods the human spirit with Christ's salvific light. Sin, or non-submission to God's law, actually limits one's freedom because it allows the spirit to be tempted and persuaded by evil and thus lose agential capacity. Warner's defense enters into metaphysical territory, relying on a particular (Christian) understanding of the universe in which moral law rules over even physical law.

Not all Latter-day Saints have accepted the idea that submission to God is agency. Terryl Givens argues that within Latter-day Saint doctrine we must make the distinction between agency and freedom. Agency is an endowment of God to humans and is "the power to make a choice between alternatives," while freedom is "the power to put into execution that choice." He emphasizes that freedom is always circumscribed in the mortal condition, but agency is an innate capacity of the human spirit.¹¹ According to Givens, the framework suggested by McConkie and others in which freedom and agency appear to be conflated is a misreading of core Latter-day Saint doctrine.

These discussions drawing out fine distinctions in conceptual theological understandings, however, are generally far removed from a lay audience. For many Latter-day Saints, the McConkie view in which agency and free will are considered one is the operational model. This understanding has significant repercussions. Consider, for example, how Latter-day Saint women's roles are circumscribed according to an understanding of divine command. Aimee Evans Hickman writes that the "unresolved tension between what it means to exercise free will, while simultaneously aligning one's individual desires with the will of God, is often at the crux of one's personal relationship to God within the LDS Church."¹² Latter-day Saint teachings suggesting divinely

11. Terryl L. Givens, "Agency and Atonement," *Meridian Magazine*, Mar. 9, 2011, <https://latterdaysaintmag.com/article-1-7616/>.

12. Aimee Evans Hickman, "Narrating Agency," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 302.

designed roles for women combined with teachings about the importance of choosing correctly for salvation necessarily circumscribe the power of unfettered choice. How is a woman to exercise her will authentically when the “right” choice is laid before her and the consequence for a “wrong” choice is clearly taught? Does she, in such a circumstance, genuinely have agency? Or, to return to the story of Lehi, what of his wife, Sariah, uprooted by her husband’s dictation of God’s will? To give a contemporary example, Hickman, the former editor of a magazine for Latter-day Saint women, recounts a submission she received detailing the circumstances of the author’s pregnancy with her seventh child. Following the birth of her sixth child, the author “Jane” experienced crippling depression. Concurrently, she felt an impression to conceive another child. Hickman writes:

Jane didn’t understand how God could ask this of her when she felt she was at her psychological and physiological limit. In desperation she turned to her bishop for counsel. The bishop assured her that if she followed the prompting, she would be blessed. With a husband in full agreement, their seventh child was soon on the way. “Thy will, not mine be done,” were the final words of her essay. In essence, the choice she faced was one of obedience to a divinely dictated order—a managed choice to fulfill God’s plan and “the measure of [her] creation”—or not, which was not really an option for Jane.¹³

To restate my earlier questions: can Jane freely choose if her options are between pleasing God (linked to salvation) and pleasing self (linked to sin)? Do not the threats of punishment or reward for obedience to another constrain the free choice?

From a soteriological perspective, theologian Marilyn Adams argues that a link between agency and salvation is flawed. She argues that “a realistic picture of human agency” must recognize that humans begin life incapable of choice, construct a picture of reality and of ourselves over the course of time and from the flawed influence of other

13. Hickman, “Narrating Agency,” 305.

humans, form habits based on our influences, develop a psyche based on a particular (usually inherited) view of the world, and act out these habits for many years.¹⁴ Psychological scholarship regarding agency mainly aligns with Adams, affirming that our choices are determined by factors that we are largely not free to choose.¹⁵ Following Adams, a Latter-day Saint woman like Jane was never free to choose given the constraints on her freedom from the earliest time of nurture.

Scholar Catherine Brekus might argue, however, that these conclusions dismiss the lived reality of choice for Latter-day Saint women, insisting that surveying agency within the context of systems is imperative. She argues that scholars often associate human agency with those who operate against the grain, or in resistance to oppressive systems. “Because historians have implicitly defined agency against structure,” she writes, “they have found it hard to imagine women who accepted religious structures as agents. This is why there are so few Mormon women in American religious history textbooks.”¹⁶ Yet Latter-day Saint women did historically and continue to make choices within structures that are considered oppressive. For Brekus, it is accordingly essential to remember that “agency takes place within structures as well as against them.”¹⁷ To dismiss the choices of Latter-day Saint women, even if these

14. Marilyn Adams, “The Problem of Hell: A Problem of Evil for Christians,” in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, edited by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 313.

15. David Bentley Hart, for example, argues for a metaphysical determinism of the will, noting that the conditions of the material world disallow free will in the sense of absolute ability to rationally elect consequences. *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2019).

16. Catherine Brekus, “Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency,” in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Kate Holbrook and Matthew Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 24.

17. Brekus, “Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency,” 34.

choices are seen as limited from an outside perspective, is to ignore the motivations that precipitate such choices for many women.

Considering these things together, one is left with a convoluted puzzle. On one hand, it is clear that agency is crucially important to the Christian faith and to Latter-day Saints in particular. On the other, it is unclear what agency really means, and popular definitions have contributed to troubling misunderstandings. It is commonplace to hear Latter-day Saints define agency as the freedom to choose, a simplistic understanding that fails to take into account the ways in which choices are curtailed by social, environmental, and genetic conditions outside our control. But, if the power of choice is necessarily and totally limited by conditions of the social and material world, is determinism the only answer? Thinkers like Warner, Givens, and Brekus argue that no, agency can exist within even oppressive structures—evoking a phenomenological approach that centers lived experience. What, then, are the differences between agency and free will? Is literal free will a myth and agency an important illusion? In particular, how are Latter-day Saints to make sense of the myriad limitations on individual freedom while preserving the theological significance of agency? I argue that Howard Thurman provides a mediating response, resonant with the Latter-day Saint view of the human spirit, that could illuminate this confused picture of human agency and approach some of these questions.

II. Howard Thurman's Mystical Encounter and Human Agency

For Thurman, human agency has less to do with the power to act in particular ways and more to do with the acknowledgment and dialogue with one's internal world. This is a subtle but profoundly significant shift. The former is focused on future ends—especially soteriological ends. The latter is focused in the present and on internal meaning. Thurman does not write about agency directly. He writes in the language of the spirit, the internal and external, the interior being. To understand

his vision of human agency, then, it is important to locate his theology surrounding and creating these ideas. I will discuss his concepts of God, self, interior self, and self-communion with God before moving toward his central vision of consent, which I read as the core of agency.

God is vitality in Thurman's vision, the spirit of life. Less a figure (and certainly not an anthropomorphic figure) reigning above us than a wellspring deep within all living things, God is the source and movement of all life. The plant reaching toward the sun reaches with the vitality of God. The family of otters playing peaceably in the ocean play with the peace of God. Luther Smith summarizes Thurman's views: "God is the very ground of being, which means God is the creator of all existence and the source of all meaning."¹⁸ God is the ultimate source and therefore ultimate truth, life, vitality, and good.¹⁹ God is knowable and immanent but is not a prisoner to the world of our understanding. God transcends as well as fills the world.²⁰

That God is knowable, immanent yet also transcendent,²¹ is an important facet of Thurman's mysticism. God is not out of reach of the average person. One does not require theological training or academic qualifications to know God. God communicates God's self through the world and within the honest seeker after God. The encounter with God need not be mediated by any outside force, it is not limited to a particular religion, and it requires no creed or dogma. It is, however, creative. In other words, it does not usually occur by happenstance but rather through meditation and earnest seeking. To creatively seek after God is the quest of the mystic, a quest that is open to any faith seeker.

18. Luther E. Smith, "Intimate Mystery: Howard Thurman's Search for Ultimate Meaning (1900–1981)," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 11, no. 2 (1988): 87.

19. Anthony Sean Neal, "Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic: Creatively Encountering Oneness—A Logical Analysis of Thurman's Theology," *Black Theology* 15, no. 3 (2017): 224–44.

20. Neal, "Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic."

21. Neal, "Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic."

For Thurman, the self is always the vehicle for encounter with God. The body is essential, not compartmentalized or devalued. All that one experiences is through the body; the spiritual and the temporal are not separate realms. When Thurman writes of the internal world, the inward sea, he is not separating this from the body a person inhabits. Bodies are schooled by social experience; America's racial caste system devalues Black bodies and teaches those with white bodies that their whiteness renders them superior. Thurman recognizes that race, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of our beings are shaped by the environment into which we are born. Indeed, in his book *Luminous Darkness* addressing American segregation he writes, "The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and in Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black."²² Mysticism, encounter with God, is not an escape from these things or a shying away from their significance. It is something deeper. It is an insistence that all life is divinely endowed with a connecting link to the eternal and divine. Though we are limited in our social conditioning and ability to make wholly "free" choices, we are all able to know God. This is a bit of a paradox, so let me dwell here a moment longer. When Thurman talks about the inner sea and contrasts it with the outer self, he is not advocating a two-world view in which spirit and body are separate things. Instead, he is suggesting that our very beings, the source of our life force, is immutably connected to God. Attuning ourselves to our inner workings can open us up to a deepened sense of being and knowing. It is in that knowing that Thurman believes individuals will find true freedom, peace, and liberation.²³ Put another way, the encounter between God and human beings fosters agency. The goal of the spiritual

22. Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), x.

23. Howard Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*.

life for Thurman, then, has everything to do with agency. But this is an agency in different clothes, focused not on action but on inner peace. What, then, is the inner life (or sea), and how does one chart it?

Charting the Inner Sea

The immutable link to the eternal, possessed by all living things, is within each being. It is the soul, or spirit—an internal world often existing without our notice. Thurman’s writings recommend dialogue with one’s internal world (which he believes to be deeper than our socialized external front) to cultivate the creative encounter with God, listening inward. For example, he writes:

There is in every person an inward sea. And in that sea there is an island. And on that island is an altar. And there stands guard over that altar the angel with the flaming sword. And nothing can get by that angel to be placed on that altar unless it has the mark of your inner authority upon its brow. And what gets by the angel with the flaming sword and is placed on your altar on your island in your sea becomes a part of . . . “the fluid area of your consent,” the center of your consent. And what becomes the center of your consent is your connecting link with the eternal.²⁴

The internal world, the inward sea, contains each individual’s “connecting link with the eternal.” Charting the inward sea, then, is crucial to developing awareness and awakening to the divine. This is also the heart of Thurman’s conceptualization of human agency. So, he asks, “How does one chart that sea?” He answers with poignant insight:

I must do a very difficult thing: I must accept myself. . . . What am I after? . . . What is my point, anyway? . . . And then there comes stirring in your mind the fact that you are as you are because your mother was as she was, or your father was as he was, or you had a brother that bullied you. And as soon as you begin engaging in such thoughts, you

24. Howard Thurman, “The Inner Life #2: Charting the Inward Sea,” Boston University, Jan. 25, 1952, accessed via <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=341911> on November 30, 2021.

get sidetracked. And it's wonderful because you don't have to bother anymore. But don't get sidetracked, come back. I must deal with myself. Whatever it is that I shall grow into, whatever it is that I shall become, whatever it is that I am going to do, whatever may be the ends of life, whatever may be the purposes of life, whatever may be the design and the order and the will of God. As far as I am concerned the only equipment that [God] has is what I have.²⁵

I will return to this passage later but let me pause on one detail: for Thurman to sideline formative childhood experiences to distractions is, to some, a challenge to the Western psychoanalytic tradition. I am zeroing in here because I believe it to be a core insight to his conception of agency. He is not wholly dismissing this influence. Certainly, he says, I act in certain ways because my mother acted in certain ways. I am afraid of certain things, or wounded in a particular way, because of things I have experienced. But there is something more to the "dealing with yourself" that he is after.

Freedom of choice and action is not guaranteed. Thurman knows this firsthand from painful experience. And yet he insists that agency remains a potent, living thing within the human spirit, present in the spirituals sung by enslaved peoples; present in the rising of African American youth against the systems of segregation and oppression; and present in the older generations of African Americans living and acting within segregation.²⁶ He is not dismissing the physical and psychological effects a system of racism has had—and continues to have—on bodies. He is getting at something else: "as far as I am concerned," he writes, "the only equipment that [God] has is what I have." The inner sea is not somewhere devoid of limitations, it is not external to the body, it is not somewhere where freedom flourishes unfettered. Rather, it is within the

25. Howard Thurman, "The Inner Life #2: Charting the Inward Sea," January 25, 1952, audio recording available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2j6bB0XRh6o>.

26. Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 75.

bodies of individuals whose freedom is essentially limited. Thurman's objective is not unfettered choice or power to act unrestrained but rather an unobstructed, internal encounter with the divine. This encounter has the power to liberate a person, something of great concern to a Black man living in the United States. This encounter comes from the fluid, somatic area of the spirit he calls the nerve center of consent.

Agency and the Nerve Center of Consent

Thurman qualifies his picture of agency with an embodied, visceral understanding of human life. The nerve center of consent is a spiritual concept, but he understands it to be located somatically and biologically—it is embodied. He writes: “the built-in characteristic of all forms of life is to seek always to keep free and easy access to the source of vitality or aliveness in which all life finds its abiding security.”²⁷ He traces the impossibility of defining the quality of life through the impersonal definitions of biological science and characterizing an essential aspect of life: its effort at continuation. The biological center of life, the imperative toward self-preservation and continuation, is a core facet of human experience, and this he casts as the fecund fluidity of the individual's nerve center. In short, the nerve center of consent is the “conscious intent”²⁸ of life to continue on, to realize itself in fullness. It is our will toward life, our most fragile and yet most constantly human aspect.

To realize the nerve center of one's consent is thus not synonymous with typical dualistic thinking so common in Christian history, wherein the spiritual can only be accessed by isolating or subverting the physical. As discussed earlier, Thurman is not separating the inner spiritual life from the body itself. He is suggesting, instead, that the vitality of life is itself a spiritual wellspring. The nerve center of consent in its throbbing consciousness is inherently embodied. The power

27. Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1977), 15.

28. Neal, “Howard Thurman's Mystical Logic,” 240–41.

of human agency comes in relationship to this somatic center, as this allows relationship with God. It is paradoxically through submission that it occurs. Dealing with oneself, accepting oneself, thus allows one to become aware of her inward sea. In becoming aware of that sea, she becomes aware of the nerve center of her consent—her own fragile life and what she is *for*. This “fluid” area, this immutable heartbeat of the human spirit in concert with the body, is her connection to the divine. What am I after? What is my point, anyway? What am I for? What do I want?²⁹ These are a few of the many questions Thurman poses to his audiences. Really dwelling on these questions probes the core of one’s being, resisting easy answers. As Thurman says, our first impulse is to explain ourselves through our relationship to others or to things that have happened to us. To this he says: no, go deeper.

An example may illustrate what Thurman means. Desiring to chart my own inner sea, I may ask myself one of Thurman’s questions: what am I for? Well, I may begin, I am for a certain political candidate. I am for ice cream. I am for animal rights, and environmental reconciliation, and good food. To these Thurman says yes, but these are merely symptoms of what I am really for; these are objects of which I am a subject, things I can relate myself to.³⁰ Way down inside, what is my internal stance? What am I—not my money or my gifts or my mind or my body—but what am I for? So, I think, I am for these things because I care deeply about the quality of the world. I am afraid of being bad, of being unhappy, of being unworthy. I do things, I care about things, as a result of some of these fears and hopes. So now I know a bit more about myself and my motivations, but I am still not sure how to answer what I am really for. Perhaps I am for hope, perhaps the hope of my own salvation. Perhaps I am against suffering, and this motivates much of what I do and allly myself with. And so, my thinking and self-investigation

29. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

30. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

goes on, leading me deeper and deeper. As Thurman says, “I must have great discipline to have the courage to look.”³¹ I must, he says, see both the good and the bad in myself in order to understand who I really am and to accept all of myself. And, significantly, it is this process itself that brings spiritual power into life: “As I begin to do this, I become very quiet. Light begins to emerge over [my] landscape. . . . I begin to feel, in some wonderful way, whole. Whole. Whole.”³²

Freedom: Submitting the Nerve Center of Consent

As I come to investigate myself, to ponder what I am for, what I am against, who I am, I become acquainted with the nerve center of my consent. I am charting my inward sea, mapping out the architecture of my own being, that vitality within that was shaped by my environment and that was issued with the stardust of my very life. In knowing my nerve center, I can communicate with my nerve center. For Thurman, this is encounter with God. This is where the spiritual life happens. As one moves on the path of this spiritual life, one is moving toward liberation, peace, and love. The goal of the spiritual life is not salvation in an ultimate sense, nor is it repentance, self-denial, or preparation for another world. The goal of the spiritual life is liberation, peace, and love.³³ Toward that end, and not any other, Thurman believes one must yield the nerve center of consent to God. The spiritual being is paradoxically liberated in yielding.³⁴ To yield the nerve center of consent is to entrust one’s entire being—physically and spiritually—to God. It is not to forget oneself or deny oneself, but to *become* oneself most fully, to align the self with vitality at its highest level.³⁵

31. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

32. Thurman, “Inner Life #2.”

33. Thurman, *Luminous Darkness*, 75.

34. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 19.

35. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 15.

Interestingly, Thurman believes that the individual is acutely able to know herself in this ultimate submission. He writes, "[The individual] yields [their] heart to God and in so doing experiences for the first time a sense of coming home and of being at home."³⁶ To yield the nerve center of consent is not to submit one's sense of autonomy and self-realization. It is instead to acknowledge one's interconnectedness, one's multifariousness, one's fragmentations, one's goodness, one's ego. In yielding, Thurman writes of a great paradox: there is a great finding, a locating of the self within something larger-than. The hunger for God, which is God, is opened and also fed with the yielding. There is thus a movement toward fulfillment, growth, and deepening in the embodied practice of yielding the nerve of consent.

Returning to my example, as I ponder questions such as "what am I for?" and come to know my own core being, I hunger more and more deeply for greater understanding and connection. The yielding is the yearning, the fulfillment and answer to the hunger. How does one yield? Thurman writes: "God is immediately available to us if the door is opened to [God]. The door is opened by yielding to [God] that nerve center where we feel consent of the withholding of it most centrally. Thus, if a [person] makes [their] deliberate self-conscious intention the offering to God of [their] central consent and obedience, then [they] become energized by the living Spirit of the living God."³⁷ The door is opened to God, by which energy and life fill the human spirit, by the practice of opening that which is most tightly sealed off from investigation, the places we least want others to look, the hurts and pains and embarrassments we hope we can hide.

It is in opening our whole selves, even that which we are ashamed to bring before the source of all vitality, that we open the door to God. Anthony Sean Neal writes that this opening begins the journey toward

36. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 20.

37. Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, 21.

wholeness or oneness in God, which is to “quite literally be free.”³⁸ This is an important paradox. Thurman is not advocating self-denial or asceticism in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, he is suggesting that the phenomenological experience of yielding is “where we feel consent of the withholding of it most centrally.” Opening the door to life—which for Thurman is God—comes through spiritual discipline and the yielding of the nerve center of consent to that practice of discipline. The discipline is necessary for Thurman’s mystical freedom because, as Neal notes, “there are obstacles found within the species of life, which dull the intensity or block the reception of the feeling of interconnectedness, thus hindering community development and personal transformation.”³⁹ Freeing oneself from obstacles that dull the relationship to life’s call is the practice of spiritual discipline and submission.

Agency, for Thurman, is thus central to the liberation of the human spirit. Agency is not the unfettered ability to act in wholly uninfluenced ways, something that Thurman knows to be impossible. It is rather the awareness of one’s core being, the nerve center of consent. It is the pursuit of the *spirit’s* freedom.

III. Thurman and the Latter-day Saint Conception of Agency

I have argued that mainstream Latter-day Saint construal of agency is inexorably linked to action and salvation. Agency is about correct choice and submitting your will to God through perfect obedience (submission). This association—between agency, action, and salvation—is fundamentally flawed, and it leads us as a people toward limiting systems, habits, and rhetorical practices.

Thurman’s mystical interpretation of agency from the locus of the agent provides a helpful corrective. For Thurman, agency is not

38. Neal, “Howard Thurman’s Mystical Logic,” 241.

39. Neal, “Howard Thurman’s Mystical Logic,” 232.

(at its core) about choices. Born of his own social location of oppression, he well understands that perfect freedom is never a guarantee. We are such as we are because of our mothers, and our fathers, and the bully in elementary school, and the systems that shape and inform our value systems, and so on. But to stop here and dismiss the question of agency *prima facie*, he believes, is a mistake. We must deal with ourselves, with our internal world—the inward sea. *This* is the bedrock of human agency, the immutable spirit within that existed for the enslaved African singing spirituals despite the severest limitations on freedom of action.⁴⁰ Doing the work to ask, “what am I for?” and to listen deeply for the real, often surprising, answer is the work toward freedom.

Being able to listen requires spiritual discipline and practice of tuning the spirit, but the goal of the work is not submission to something external and predetermined. Rather, the goal is yielding one’s being to something one is fully, completely, wholly *for* in a way such that life itself becomes swallowed up. The agent’s self-knowing allows a self-giving that is wholly liberative, for it answers the call of life with life. This is the difference between self-sacrifice and self-realization, a distinction that I believe the Latter-day Saint vision has sadly blundered. A self-sacrificial understanding of agency puts God’s predetermined will as the ultimate judge and dictate, subsuming personal desire. Personal and divine will are set at odds, one to be subsumed by the other in the model of submission and obedience. Moreover, God’s will is often understood to be inflexible and dogmatic, with a one-size-fits-all sort of mentality. To return to the example of Latter-day Saint women, many culturally understand the will of God for women to be motherhood in an all-consuming way. Personal desire is subsumed in favor of this will, and the resulting self-sacrifice is understood as the highest submissive act of agency.

40. Howard Thurman, *Deep River; and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1990).

Self-realization, on the other hand, is ultimately about freedom. For Thurman, the internal work of really seeking and hearing what one's spirit is *for* most authentically must precede the active work of spiritual discipline and submission. A Latter-day Saint woman who does this internal listening, this charting of her inward sea, may find that she is wholly for honesty and that her deepest desires are to care for those who are most vulnerable. She may have the opportunity to be a mother and choose to dedicate herself to this relationship. She may find that she is wholly for honesty and that this has different implications for her personally than she previously thought. The key is that *she finds*, herself, without the external constraint of authority or dogmatism dictating the proper and necessary injunctions. That she can give her own answer, say yes to what she chooses after listening within, submit the nerve center of her consent, in an act of agency wholly—phenomenologically, somatically—her own. Importantly, this shifts the locus of concern from salvation and righteousness, which agency determines, to peace and happiness, which agency aligns within. The goal is not the ultimate action or resulting framework *per se*, the goal is the charting of the inward sea. That is the work of agency, that is the endowment of the human spirit, that is the immutable core of the being.

The implications of reconceptualizing human agency in this way within Latter-day Saint thought are broad. Focusing less on action and the controlling and manicuring of behavior toward a specific, preconceived model and more on the internal work of knowing oneself shifts the structure of authority. The ultimate authority is the individual nerve center of consent, guarded by the archangel herself. This is a disruptive framework. Additionally, this shift changes our notions of freedom. We are not all equally free to choose, to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and create the lives we want. That is a total misreading of the doctrine of agency as it pertains to the human spirit. Rather, human beings are free to discern *what we are for*. We are free to be agents of spiritual discernment and power.

IV. Conclusion

Let us again consider the prophet Lehi. His story is the backdrop to the entire drama of the Book of Mormon, and it is at its core a story of mystical encounter between God and humans. Through my eyes, it is a story of a prophet asking what he is for and answering with his whole life. It is a story of his children asking and answering in the affirmative and the negative to his invitations. It is a story of a woman moving from self-sacrifice to self-realization, sacrificing her place in society and following her dreamer of a husband into the wilderness before coming to assent for herself.⁴¹ It is a story of human agency. Blessing his children before his death, Lehi taught, "[Humans] have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given. . . . [Humans] are free according to the flesh. . . . And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil."⁴² Latter-day Saint authority has wrested this teaching to its grave, understanding it to weld a link between obedience (predetermined action) and salvation. But with the help of Thurman's work, I am suggesting that we invite the mystical back into the story.

The soteriological lens justifies a fear-based reading of this scripture. A punitive, satisfaction theory of atonement sets up a paradigm wherein humans are inherently wicked and must prove their worthiness through obedience to divine law (and even that is not enough!). But what if, instead, we read with a lens of abundance and hope? Humans have the power to look at the world and to discern good from evil. They themselves are endowed with God's own source of being—the vitality of life. They have the ability to connect to that essence, to encounter

41. 1 Nephi 5:8.

42. 2 Nephi 2:2–4.

and commune with God, and to align their beings with the source of all life and liberate their spirits from the woundedness of the mortal condition. Through that lens, I rethink Lehi's words for myself and for my children: you have always been connected to God. You are not far away, even though you are wounded and afraid. You may not always have the choices or circumstances you would like, but you can always be free. There is a way to experience liberty and eternal life as you live, to distance yourself from all that holds you captive and afraid. Open yourself up, show God that which you are most ashamed of, and let God love you all the same. Linger there, wholly known, wholly loved, and be free.

The gift of human agency, Thurman probes us to see, is not that our choices must submit to an external authority, but rather that humans are free to discern what they are for and to answer and live consequentially. May we continue speaking to Lehi and to Sariah, discontent with hasty conclusions. May we be dissatisfied with pithy statements and contradictions. May we greet the sea before us, and within us, and become acquainted with that nerve center guarded by the angel wielding a sword of fire. May we ask what she is guarding, and why. May we listen, may we respond, may we thus pray.

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SEPTEMBER SIX

In September 1993, six people were excommunicated or disfellowshipped from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The events were widely covered in news media. Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, Avraham Gileadi, Paul Toscano, Maxine Hanks, D. Michael Quinn, and Lavina Fielding Anderson were the main figures. Others were summoned to disciplinary councils around the same time, but their excommunications were delayed, including David P. Wright in 1994, Janice Merrill Allred in 1995, and Margaret Merrill Toscano in 2000. Gileadi and Hanks returned to the Church over time. Anderson's request to rejoin was denied by the First Presidency in 2019.

The publications and media attention these individuals generated played a key role in their disciplinary hearings. Some of them were founders or officers of the Mormon Alliance, an organization that gathered reports of LDS ecclesiastical and spiritual abuse. Others had written on controversial topics relating to LDS history, feminism, theology, and scripture. Many of the scholars had published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* over the years, including a Spring 1993 article by Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology." The article cited several examples accusing Church leaders of abusing their authority to silence LDS intellectuals.

In the last thirty years, this story has been told many times, often as a cautionary tale, or remembered as an act of great injustice. *Dialogue*

has asked a group of scholars who were in formative stages of their lives and careers in the wake of the September Six to reflect on the significance of the story today and its ongoing impacts.

Taylor Petrey, Editor in Chief

A QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Jana Riess

I was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on September 25, 1993, almost immediately after Lavina Fielding Anderson was forced out of it.¹ Her stake disciplinary council had convened on September 23 to determine her fate, and she learned of the council's decision on the morning of September 24 via a letter from her stake president. "You are outside of the principles of the gospel and are leading others with you," he wrote. And then the icing on the cake: the excommunication, he insisted, "has been done out of love and concern for you."²

The good Lord must have a sense of humor, or perhaps there is a subtle Principle of the Conservation of Feminists at work in the Church, because the date of my own baptism is almost too bizarre for me to think of it as a mere coincidence. It had taken me more than two years of studying what Mormons call the restored gospel before I was ready to join the Church. At the time, I was living far from Utah in Princeton, New Jersey, but I was aware of the unsettling purge that was unfolding in the Church since it made the *New York Times*.³ I did

1. Portions of this essay were previously published as the foreword to Lavina Fielding Anderson's memoir *Mercy without End: Toward a More Inclusive Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2020). I'm grateful to Matt Bowman, Amanda Hendrix-Komoto, Benjamin Knoll, David Howlett, Melissa Inouye, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, and Patrick Mason for their valuable feedback in expanding this essay.

2. Anderson, *Mercy without End*, 53.

3. "Mormons Penalize Dissident Members," *New York Times*, Sept. 19, 1993, Section 1, 31, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/09/19/us/mormons-penalize-dissident-members.html>.

not know Lavina Fielding Anderson at the time, but I understood that the church I was about to join was in the process of excommunicating individuals who sounded a lot like me, and I was afraid. This is, I think, part of the point of any excommunication: to strike fear in the heart of anyone who questions, doubts, or dares to be different.

Anderson's excommunication was the last of the six disciplinary actions that occurred in the LDS Church in September 1993, but in many ways, hers was the most revealing. While others among the September Six were disciplined for supporting feminism (Maxine Hanks, D. Michael Quinn, Lynne Kanavel Whitesides, Paul Toscano), Anderson was excommunicated for that *and* for striking a blow at the heart of the Church's hierarchical leadership structure. In her *Dialogue* article "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," she documented the "accelerating tensions" between the institutional Church and scholars.⁴

Her chronology gave dates and names. It dared to use the word "abuse" to describe how some Church leaders had treated members who dissented openly. And it clearly showed a push-comes-to-shove relationship between the public actions of dissident members and the public reactions of Church authorities: for example, ERA activist Sonia Johnson was excommunicated in December 1979, and just over two months later, Elder Ezra Taft Benson gave his infamous talk "Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet."⁵ Although Benson did not mention the ERA by name, he affirmed that the LDS prophet had a right to "be involved in civic matters," including political issues, and that any Church members who rejected the teachings of the prophet

4. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 7–64.

5. Anderson, "LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership," 13.

and his counselors would pay a price: “Follow them and be blessed; reject them and suffer.”⁶

In 1980, when Benson gave this speech, there seemed to be no end to the optimism about the Church’s future. Membership growth was brisk in the late 1970s and early 1980s, averaging 5 or 6 percent a year. This prompted one sociologist to predict that Mormonism would be the world’s next major religion, with “a worldwide following comparable to that of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, [and] Hinduism.”⁷ By 1993, when the September Six were on their way out of the Church and I was on the way in, growth had cooled slightly but was still vigorous at 3 to 4 percent. The Church was looking to its past as it celebrated the centennial of the Salt Lake Temple and to its future as it opened new missions in once-undreamt-of regions that had been off-limits for decades under Soviet rule.⁸

In short, from the perspective of Church leaders, things were going according to plan. To them, the excommunications of the September Six were not even the most important news item that month. The biggest highlight was the warm welcome the Church had received at the 1993 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, where it

6. Ezra Taft Benson, “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet,” devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Feb. 26, 1980, available at <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson/fourteen-fundamentals-following-prophet/>.

7. Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (Sept. 1984): 18–27.

8. R. Scott Lloyd, “1993: The Year in Review: Temples Were Focus of Church Events,” *Church News*, Dec. 25, 1993, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/1993/12/25/23257625/1993-the-year-in-review-temples-were-focus-of-church-events/>. The year 1993 saw the Church donating more than sixteen tons of clothing and shoes to Saint Petersburg, Russia; dedicating former Soviet-bloc countries like Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia for the preaching of the gospel; and opening new missions in Romania, Latvia, and Ukraine, among other areas.

distributed hundreds of copies of the Book of Mormon. At the Parliament a century before in 1893, the Church had been deliberately excluded from the list of invited religions and was not permitted to have an official exhibit—a snub it did not soon forget.⁹ In 1993, by contrast, Elder Russell M. Nelson was invited to be one of approximately 170 featured speakers from religions around the world.¹⁰ So whatever issues Mormonism was having internally with challenges from those whom apostle Dallin Oaks had labeled “alternate voices,” they did not appear to be slowing the church down at all in its mission.¹¹

In the intervening thirty years, that has changed. Authority issues are now central to the way Latter-day Saints are viewed by the rest of the world, and not generally in a positive way. Examining the news stories about Mormonism over the last several years, many observers and Church members are critical of actions by high-ranking LDS leaders, as the institution of the Church is called into account for its vast wealth, its lack of support for victims of sexual abuse, its centralized and inscrutable hierarchy, and its treatment of women, the LGBTQ community, and people of color. The question of authority lies at the heart of all of these conflicts, just as it did in 1993. But two things have changed in the decades since.

The first is simply that the Church no longer has any hope of fully controlling its own narrative. It seems almost quaint now to read Elder Oaks’s 1989 talk on “alternate voices” and see him noting that such

9. Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

10. Gerry Avant, “Event Is ‘Greatest Gathering of Religious Leaders in History,’” *Church News*, Sept. 11, 1993, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/1993/9/11/23258001/event-is-greatest-gathering-of-religious-leaders-in-history>.

11. Dallin H. Oaks, “Alternate Voices,” Apr. 1989, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1989/04/alternate-voices?lang=eng>. Significantly, Oaks called “alternate voices” the ones that spoke out on various subjects “without calling or authority.”

voices might be heard in magazines, newspapers, and lectures. Today, every member of the Church is a potential content creator, to say nothing of every outsider who has an opinion about the institution's doings. There are Reddit pages devoted to how, when, and whether to wear temple garments and Pinterest boards on "how to look cute" while wearing them. Temple endowment rituals are available for viewing on YouTube, thanks to hidden cameras various members have smuggled in. There are countless blogs, vlogs, podcasts, Twitter accounts, TikTok creators, and Instagram accounts that deal with aspects of Mormon and post-Mormon life. As cultural critic Chuck Klosterman has noted, the 1990s were the last decade in American history "when we controlled technology more than technology controlled us. People played by the old rules, despite a growing recognition that those rules were flawed."¹²

All of this makes me wonder about the timing of the September Six members' discipline. In literary works of tragedy, timing is always critical: Romeo, for example, doesn't get the memo in time that Juliet's seemingly fatal poison was just a sleeping potion, so he kills himself moments before she wakes up. I think historians of the future will see the timing of the September Six's discipline as tragic. Anderson was punished in 1993 for raising a flag, for blowing a whistle, for being a harbinger. Documenting events that the Church wanted buried was enough of a sin to be worthy of excommunication for either "apostasy" or "conduct unbecoming a member" (Anderson's stake president claimed both as reasons). Calling out ecclesiastical wrongdoing in a public way was simply not done in 1993. In fact, even its handling in the Church's judicial system had recently become more draconian. In the Church's 1985 *General Handbook of Instructions*, "apostasy" was briefly listed as a condition in which a Church court "may be convened," though apostasy went largely undefined except for the problem of

12. Chuck Klosterman, *The Nineties: A Book* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), 4.

“associating with apostate cults and advocating their doctrines.”¹³ In the 1989 version of the handbook, however, apostasy had been upgraded to the category of transgressions for which “a disciplinary council *must* be held,” being listed just under murder and incest as an excommunicable crime. The 1989 version included a three-part definition to eliminate the previous edition’s ambiguity about what might constitute apostasy: apostates were defined as people who “1) repeatedly act in clear, open, and deliberate public opposition to the Church or its leaders; 2) persist in teaching as Church doctrine information that is not Church doctrine after being corrected by their bishops or higher authority; or 3) continue to follow the teachings of apostate cults (such as those that advocate for plural marriage) after being corrected by their bishops or higher authority.”¹⁴ Historically, the 1989 handbook set the stage for the September Six to receive the maximum penalty in a way they likely would not have only a few years earlier.

So the September Six were too late, but they were also too early. I wonder how differently their story would have played out if the conflict had occurred just ten years later, when the internet was a reality, personal blogs had begun to proliferate that sometimes criticized the Church or its leaders, and it was no longer possible for the centralized institution to control the flow of information. The September Six suffered from a perfect storm of bad timing, being called in shortly after the Church had stiffened its disciplinary response to “apostasy” but just before it lost the ability to quell the tide of people speaking out.

As an opinion columnist for a national outlet, I am keenly aware that I’m able to persist as a progressive Mormon because Anderson and other pioneers made it possible for me to do so. Yes, I get hate mail from total strangers, but I have never been excommunicated or disfellowshipped for anything I have written in my Religion News Service

13. “The Church Judicial System,” *General Handbook of Instructions*, Oct. 1985, 8–1.

14. “Church Discipline,” *General Handbook of Instructions*, Mar. 1989, 10–3.

column or said on a podcast. That's not due to any virtue on my part but simply because the times have changed, and the September Six were among those whose precedent helped to bring about that change. The tragedy is that their Church membership was needlessly, senselessly, accepted as collateral damage in that process.

It's noteworthy that the three highest-profile excommunications that have occurred in the last decade have all been of LDS Church members who started organizations. Denver Snuffer, excommunicated in 2013, started the Remnant Fellowship, with dozens of house churches and claims to prophetic authority. Kate Kelly, excommunicated in 2014, founded Ordain Women and organized peaceful protests in Temple Square, attracting media attention to the limited roles women were permitted to play in Church leadership. And John Dehlin, excommunicated in 2015, not only criticized the Church but founded Mormon Stories, an organization that has produced podcasts, held conferences, and offered support and resources to members undergoing a faith crisis. What ties these excommunications together is that all three members began movements or rival institutions that the Church regarded as a threat. Meanwhile, many other Latter-day Saints have publicly criticized the Church in language more pointed and strident than what was said by the September Six, and the vast majority have not been disciplined at all. Crushing these members' faultfinding in any kind of systematic way would be exceptionally difficult since it would require keeping tabs on thousands of people.¹⁵

15. The LDS Church is not alone in this approach. Political scientists who analyzed more than one hundred thousand randomly selected social media posts from citizens of the People's Republic of China discovered that criticism alone was not enough to trigger the government's robust censorship program. It was posts with "collective action potential"—such as organized protests, riots, or meetings—that were swiftly removed or shut down. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (May 2013): 1–18.

This leads to my second point, which is that younger generations of Church members appear to have a different sense of authority than older members do, at least in the United States. The 2016 Next Mormons Survey (NMS), a nationally representative survey of current and former members, found that among Latter-day Saints in the United States, younger members did not possess the same levels of default obedience that older ones did. Among all respondents, millennials had the lowest rate of affirming that organized religion was a “great force for good,” believing that obeying leaders was essential to being a good Mormon, or thinking that “having a prophet on the earth today” was one of the most positive aspects of belonging to the Church. They also demonstrated the lowest percentage of any generation to agree with the statement “Good Latter-day Saints should obey the counsel of priesthood leaders even if they don’t necessarily know or understand why.”¹⁶

In the 2022 version of the survey (NMS2), the sample as a whole showed some of the tendencies that had in 2016 characterized younger respondents. This shift is likely a combination of cohort replacement (older respondents becoming less dominant in the sample population, giving greater prominence to younger adults) and attitudinal changes among all respondents, including older ones, who have changed their minds.¹⁷ In the 2016 NMS, 63 percent of LDS respondents of all generations said that obeying the prophet and other general authorities was “essential” to being a good Latter-day Saint, while in the 2022

16. Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 11.

17. Social change is caused by a combination of factors, but cohort replacement is one of the most important. In a 2008 study of Californians’ growing support for same-sex marriage, cohort replacement explained slightly more than half of the growth in support. Gregory B. Lewis and Charles W. Gossett, “Changing Public Opinion on Same-Sex Marriage: The Case of California,” *Politics and Policy* 36 (Jan. 2008): 4–30.

NMS2 that declined to 54 percent.¹⁸ As well, slightly higher numbers of respondents said they were troubled by “the Church’s emphasis on conformity and obedience” (50 percent) than had indicated that concern in 2016 (47 percent), though that difference of three points is within both surveys’ margin of error.

Significantly for considering the fallout of the September Six, Mormons also seem to be liberalizing on gender issues, albeit belatedly compared to the general population. Slightly greater numbers of Latter-day Saints in 2022 reported being troubled by the fact that the priesthood was reserved only for men, with 51 percent saying it was at least “a little troubling.” In 2016, that was 47 percent. Also, the Church’s gold standard of traditional marriage seems to have lost some of its appeal. In 2016, 61 percent of respondents preferred a marital arrangement “where the husband provides for the family and the wife takes care of the house and children,” while just 39 percent viewed the ideal marriage as “one where the husband and wife both have jobs and both take care of the house and children.” In 2022, the egalitarian model was nearly equal in popularity to the traditional one, with 49 percent of US Mormons upholding it as their preference compared to 51 percent who preferred the traditional division of labor. That is a ten-point drop in US Church members saying that the ideal marriage is one in which women stay home. (The 2022 data did not, however, indicate a mad rush of LDS women into the workplace; just 34 percent of them reported being employed full-time in 2022, compared to 36 percent in 2016.)

In many ways, the unforgivable crime of the September Six was to be out of sync with their time—“getting in front of the Brethren,” as the saying goes. In 1993, for example, Maxine Hanks and D. Michael Quinn aimed to recover the history of women giving priesthood blessings, which was simply not countenanced in the most orthodox circles of the Church. In 2019, prints of the oil painting *Relief Society Healing*,

18. NMS topline data analyzed by Benjamin Knoll, Jan. 2023.

which depicts Nauvoo-era women praying for a sick sister and anointing her head with oil, became available for sale at Deseret Book, the Church's official publishing house.¹⁹ In explaining his artistic choices in creating the painting, Brigham Young University professor Anthony Sweat explained that "something is stirring in the collective consciousness of the Church about women's divine role and influence," citing both general conference talks and a recent flowering of scholarship on women and priesthood power.²⁰ "To be clear, I am not advocating any particular position regarding women and priesthood ordination with this painting, nor a return to women performing healing blessings," he wrote.²¹ And yet the image itself testified to a power that in 1993 had been taboo even to discuss.

On the other hand, a colleague who read an early version of this essay pointed out to me that as of January 2023, that image is no longer for sale on the Deseret Book website, even though there is still a listing for it that is accompanied by the message "Sorry, we no longer sell this product." It would seem that a historical representation of women anointing one another with oil and giving blessings for healing remains controversial.

It's unclear what will happen next as the Church continues to develop. On the one hand, small concessions to women (e.g., that they can be witnesses at baptisms and that the temple ceremony was overhauled to remove language about women hearkening to their husbands or needing men as intermediaries between them and God) may suggest a less reactive environment when it comes to the gender issues that were important in several of the September Six disciplinary cases.

19. See product listing for Anthony Sweat, Relief Society Healing at Deseret Book, <https://deseretbook.com/p/17x23-relief-society-healing-framed-textured-paper>.

20. Anthony Sweat, *Repicturing the Restoration: New Art to Expand Our Understanding* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2020), 183.

21. Sweat, *Repicturing the Restoration*.

On the other hand, recent clampdowns at Brigham Young University's campuses have highlighted a new area of strain: LGBTQ issues. As of 2022, BYU employees' annual ecclesiastical endorsement must affirm that they "have a testimony of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and of its doctrine, including its teachings on marriage, family, and gender."²² Another change is that new hires no longer have a right to ecclesiastical confidentiality; if they mention to a bishop that they support LGBTQ equality, even if they never discuss that support at BYU in the context of their jobs, that information will not be granted the privilege of clergy confidentiality. Also in 2022, two BYU-Idaho faculty members reported that their employment contracts had not been renewed even though their bishops had signed their ecclesiastical endorsements; in both cases, the professors believed they had lost their jobs because of their LGBTQ advocacy.²³

What relevance does this have to understanding the September Six? It's notable because events at BYU prior to 1993 were the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Tensions at BYU over women's roles and academic freedom, including several high-profile faculty dismissals, had erupted in 1991. In 1992, historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the recent recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for her book *A Midwife's Tale*, found herself caught in the crossfire. She discovered after the fact that her name had been considered when selecting a keynote speaker for the BYU Women's Conference and then rejected, presumably because of feminist pieces she had written for *Exponent II*. She learned about this blocklisting through the grapevine and then learned that her bishop

22. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Ecclesiastical Leader Questions for New CES Hires," Newsroom, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/ecclesiastical-leader-questions-new-ces-hires>. Note that these are for use beginning Mar. 23, 2022.

23. Colleen Flaherty, "A Chill at BYU," *Inside Higher Ed*, Nov. 30, 2022, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/12/01/new-church-office-cutting-faculty-members-brigham-young>.

had indeed received a call from someone in Salt Lake asking if she was “a member in good standing” because she was being considered to speak at BYU.

At no point did a General Authority or BYU administrator directly tell Ulrich what had happened and why. “I’m quite sure that I was caught up in the middle of a situation at BYU, but I’m [also] quite sure my name is on those lists,” she said in a 1993 interview conducted just two months after the September Six disciplinary actions.²⁴ At the close of the interview, Ulrich was asked to reflect on what she thought would happen next and what effect the September Six would have on those who wrote about the Church. “I don’t know,” she said. “What I *hope* is going to happen is that Mormon feminists and intellectuals will do what they have said they will do . . . which is to continue to speak, and write. . . . I think the worst possible fallout of this is that people will run for cover and be afraid.”²⁵ Thirty years later, that still seems like excellent counsel.

24. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich interview with Jana Riess, Nov. 12, 1993, Burlington, Mass. Transcript in Jana Riess, “September’s Significance: Contemporary Mormon Feminists and the Redefinition of Authority in the LDS Church” (MDiv thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1994), Appendix 1, 106–107.

25. Ulrich interview.

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THE SEPTEMBER SIX AND THE LOST GENERATION OF MORMON STUDIES

Patrick Q. Mason

I was a high school senior in September 1993, when Lavina Fielding Anderson, Avraham Gileadi, Maxine Hanks, D. Michael Quinn, Paul Toscano, and Lynne Kanavel Whitesides were disfellowshipped or excommunicated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While these six people's lives were being upturned via Church discipline, the great drama in my life was spending too much money on the homecoming dance and then sulking that I didn't get asked to the next girls' choice dance. My daily journal from the time, in which I painstakingly documented what I was learning in history, English, or calculus class on any given Tuesday, gives no intimation that I even heard about the excommunications. I was serving on seminary council and faithfully reading B. H. Roberts's *History of the Church* while some of the people whose works about Latter-day Saint history and theology I would read and admire only a few years later were being expelled from the LDS Church, if not necessarily the Mormon community. Despite my ignorance at the time, these events ended up having a profound effect on the trajectory of my life.

I enrolled at Brigham Young University the following year, in fall 1994. No one in my social circles was talking about Mormon history, at least not in any academic sense. I don't recall any of my professors mentioning the September Six during my freshman year. The excommunications didn't really register for me until four years later, during my final year at BYU, when I took a course on Mormon history from David Whittaker, who was the curator of Mormon and Western Americana in the BYU library's special collections. It was my first exposure to

scholarly Mormon history. Professor Whittaker talked about the September Six as the latest chapter in the long and complex relationship between the LDS Church and its intellectuals.

That was the same year I applied to graduate school. I sought advice from several professors about my plan to pursue a PhD in American religious history. No one explicitly encouraged me to become a Mormon historian. Not Professor Whittaker—for whom I worked in special collections, who was one of my mentors, and who clearly thought highly of my abilities and potential. Not Richard Bushman, who was very gracious when I audaciously cold-called him. Maybe it was because they could tell I was interested in the broader American religious experience, not just Mormonism. Maybe it was because they believed—as I do—that it's important for students of Mormon history to also study other things. Or maybe it was because it was 1998, they had lived through 1993, and they were still nervous.

From the perspective of institutional boundary maintenance, the September Six excommunications were a resounding success. The tactic worked, at least in the short to medium term. The show of force did exactly what it was supposed to. It made clear that Church leaders would not tolerate intellectual exploration that they perceived as challenging Church doctrine and what they deemed to be apostolic prerogatives. This wasn't about Church leadership feeling threatened by one individual or drawing the line on one issue, as we later saw in the high-profile excommunications of the 2010s (Kate Kelly and John Dehlin being the most prominent cases). It was a broadside, a frontal assault on the entire independent Mormon intellectual community. The fact that the six recipients of Church discipline were writing about different issues and occupied different positions across the ideological spectrum is precisely what made the excommunications so effective. The not-so-subtle message to the rest of the LDS scholarly community was clear: it could happen to you too.

Part of the mythical power of Church discipline—the way that it intimidates those who are not directly affected by it—is the way that

the decisions of Church leaders, working individually and together, are shrouded behind the veil of bureaucracy. Even three decades later, we don't know all the details about who directed these six cases to go forward all at the same time, or the degree of communication and coordination between General Authorities (which ones exactly?) and the various bishops and stake presidents on the ground. Boyd K. Packer's name frequently comes up, but the cast of characters was no doubt much larger. Their names and roles are largely anonymous, however, because they were acting in institutional roles that left no paper trail (or at least not a publicly available one). It's not really accurate to say that "the Church" excommunicated or disfellowshipped any of these six individuals; most Church members had no knowledge of these disciplinary actions. Though we frequently speak of it as such, "the Church" is not a historical agent. Collectivities (like "the Church") neutralize the individual responsibility of any one person acting on behalf of the whole. Accountability is anonymized and diffused to the point that there is no longer any real accountability to speak of. And that allows collectivities—whether mobs, corporations, governments, or churches—to act with at least a certain amount of impunity.

With all of this in the background, it makes sense that no one encouraged me to pursue a career in Mormon history. They didn't want to cheerlead me into a professional dead end or an antagonistic relationship with Church leadership. In the late 1990s, the prospect of ushering me, an eager and faithful young LDS undergraduate, to a doctoral program to study Mormon history would have seemed tantamount to pushing me out of the trenches and sending me across the demilitarized zone to a doomed fate on the other side. My professors had learned well the lessons of September 1993.

But I hadn't. When I eventually learned about the excommunications, it seemed like ancient history—something that happened, like that homecoming dance, way back when I was in high school. Besides, the late 1990s were halcyon years for Mormons and Mormonism. The Church was the "fastest growing religion in the world"—at least, that's

what we told ourselves, aided by sociologist Rodney Stark's grandiose projections.¹ Anything that happened in 1993 was not just one but two Church presidents ago. The Church was in full Gordon B. Hinckley mode. No dour anti-communist, he. Instead, there he was smiling on national TV, matching Mike Wallace and Larry King stride for stride. What's more, the prophet was encouraging Church members to get all the education we could. Anti-intellectualism was a thing of the past!

As I started graduate school, I had imbibed all of President Hinckley's ebullient optimism. I was living proof of Mormons' newfound standing in the world. The Department of History at the University of Notre Dame was one of the best doctoral programs in the country for religious history, and it had admitted two—*two!*—Latter-day Saints. Yes, we were occasionally objectified, even exoticized; in almost every class session of a seminar we took with a distinguished Catholic historian, he gruffly asked, "What's the Mormon take on that?" But there we were, at the table! If any of my Catholic, evangelical, or secular colleagues and professors ever mentioned the September Six during those heady days, I don't recall.

It was in the mid-2000s that it began to occur to me that perhaps 1993 was not so distant after all. I published my first article in *Dialogue* in the Spring 2004 issue. Two years later, I was invited to join the Dialogue Foundation's board of directors. I wanted to keep all my employment options open, so when I received the board's invitation, I called several people at BYU to ask if adding my name to the *Dialogue* masthead would be a problem were I to apply for a job in Provo. Most of them said that it was a new era—my board affiliation might get raised in an interview, but any concerns could easily be allayed once the interviewer heard me express my heartfelt commitment to the Church. Only one of my former professors cautioned me against joining the board, warning that any formal association with *Dialogue* would undermine

1. See Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (Sept. 1984): 18–27.

an otherwise strong application to teach at BYU. I learned firsthand on two different occasions over the next few years that she was right.

Fortunately, BYU wasn't my only professional option, as I found other good jobs to begin my academic career. Right as I was publishing my first book, *The Mormon Menace*, Claremont Graduate University opened a search for the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies. A chaired professorship in Mormon studies at a secular university was still a novelty. I decided, almost on a lark, to throw my hat in the ring. I knew I had no chance: I was thirty-four years old and had (barely) published one book. Endowed professorships are supposed to go to accomplished mid-career or senior scholars, people in their forties or fifties or sixties who have a long publication record and are recognized as leaders in their respective fields.

The establishment of the Hunter Chair represented an opportunity to pass the torch to the next generation of Mormon studies scholars. But the handoff was a stretch. There was a pool of qualified candidates, but it was much smaller and more academically junior than it should have been. What explains the gap between Mormon history's founding generation and mine? No doubt there are multiple factors, but the fallout from 1993 must rank high on the list. The September Six excommunications resulted in a lost generation of Mormon intellectuals—smart, talented people who should have written books, led scholarly organizations like the Mormon History Association, and shaped both the academic field of Mormon studies and the broader public understanding of the religion.² Latter-day Saints were primarily affected, but non-Latter-day Saint scholars also picked up on the cue that the Church wasn't enthusiastic about open inquiry into its

2. There are many other "lost generations," both in Mormon history (referring to a group of mid-twentieth-century literary authors) and more broadly (most famously, those Europeans who as early adults became disenchanting in the aftermath of World War I). My use of the term is meant to be generic, not necessarily to suggest a connection between this "lost generation" and any other.

past. A few Latter-day Saint intellectuals stuck with it, foremost among them Terry Givens (interestingly, a literary scholar, not a historian). But there should have been an entire generation of Terry Givenses.

The Hunter Chair should have gone to a senior scholar. In fact, it had originally, with Richard Bushman coming out of retirement at Columbia University (where he held another endowed professorship) to get the endeavor off the ground. But when Bushman stepped down from the Hunter Chair in 2011, most members of the founding generation of New Mormon History were either at or near retirement age. Furthermore, many of that generation had spent their careers teaching at BYU or working in the Church History Department—neither of which was an especially attractive career profile for a secular university like Claremont. Philip Barlow would have been an excellent choice, but he had recently been hired as the inaugural holder of the Leonard J. Arrington Chair of Mormon History and Culture at Utah State University. There was another younger member of that generation who had published enough influential scholarship to be a potentially competitive candidate for the job. His name was D. Michael Quinn. Yet the principal donors to the Hunter Chair, who did not control the search but whose generous gifts creating the position afforded them some degree of influence with university administrators, made it clear that they did not consider an excommunicant to be an acceptable candidate for a position named after a Church president.³ September 1993 loomed

3. Of course, Michael Quinn had also worked for the Church Historical Division and taught at Brigham Young University prior to his excommunication. Furthermore, he had not held a full-time faculty position for many years before the Hunter Chair search. Even without taking donors' concerns in mind, then, it is not clear how favorably the search committee would have looked upon his candidacy on purely academic grounds. The fact that all the candidates seriously considered for the Hunter Chair in 2010 were devout Latter-day Saints also underscores the religious insularity of the field at the time. At that point, relatively few non-Latter-day Saints were actively publishing in Mormon history. For more detail about the complex politics behind the establishment of

large over Mormon studies, even at a secular university. The fact that a thirty-four-year-old with one book was hired for an endowed professorship at a highly regarded university can only be regarded as a fluke. The stars aligned in an unpredictable way that worked out splendidly for me, but only after many others had paid the price.

Times change. Things did get better in the early 2000s. The archives started to open up again. The Church History Department started producing and supporting first-rate historical scholarship, most notably the Joseph Smith Papers and the research that culminated in Ronald Walker, Richard Turley, and Glen Leonard's masterpiece *Masacre at Mountain Meadows*. Latter-day Saint intellectuals found new confidence, and more non-Latter-day Saint scholars gravitated to the field. Mormon history has blossomed and expanded into the multidisciplinary field of Mormon studies. Social scientists, theologians, philosophers, literary scholars, scripture scholars, and others are all producing pathbreaking work. We are living in a golden age of Mormon studies. Tellingly, most of the work is being done by people who were either young enough, or started graduate school late enough, to have not been scared away by the events of September 1993.

There are still whispers. Fear remains, even if we try to push it to the back of our minds. I am frequently asked, "Have you ever been called in by a General Authority for something you wrote or said?" The answer is yes, once. We spent a little over an hour together, enjoying a wonderful conversation that I genuinely cherish. He revealed himself to be a deep thinker and compassionate minister of the gospel. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't think of the September Six when I opened the letter and read this leader's "invitation" to meet with him in his office. When friends and colleagues publish or say things that push the envelope, I

the Hunter Chair (and my eventual hiring), see Armand L. Mauss, *Shifting Borders and a Tattered Passport: Intellectual Journeys of a Mormon Academic* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012), chap. 8.

actively pray they will be met with the same generosity and understanding I experienced.⁴ There are no guarantees.



Some of Joseph Smith's most poignant insights into the human condition came when he languished in Liberty Jail during the winter of 1838–39.⁵ In his masterful prison letter to the Saints, excerpted in Doctrine and Covenants section 121, he reflected on the nature of power in a fallen world. Power may be exercised in various ways. Too often it is used “to exercise control of dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men.” When this is the case, “the Spirit of the Lord is grieved.” In heaven's eyes, the unrepentant wielder of that kind of dominative, manipulative, compulsory power is in a posture of hostility or enmity not only toward other humans but also toward God. Alas, “sad experience” reveals that “almost all men” will “exercise unrighteous dominion” at some point.⁶ They may get what they want—God offers no promise to intervene in such cases—but this is not the order of heaven.

The prophet's key insight comes next. “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained” unless it is predicated on the divine qualities of persuasion, longsuffering, gentleness, meekness, kindness, pure

4. I'm fully aware that my positive encounters with Church leaders, including the one I related here, are conditioned at least in part by the various forms of privilege that I enjoy as a white, Melchizedek Priesthood–holding man with an advanced degree and a certain amount of prominence connected to my professional position and public voice. The power imbalance between Church leaders and myself is thus smaller than it is for most Church members.

5. This section draws from the insights developed more fully in Patrick Q. Mason and J. David Pulsipher, *Proclaim Peace: The Restoration's Answer to an Age of Conflict* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2021), chap. 1.

6. Doctrine and Covenants 121:37–39.

knowledge, and most of all “love unfeigned.”⁷ This oft-quoted scripture is usually interpreted with an emphasis on the *ought*. That is to say, we *ought* to be kind and gentle and loving in our relationships with one another. But the statement is more radical than that. This passage is not simply about the way the universe *should* work; it tells us the way the universe *does* work. It is descriptive, in other words, not merely normative. The key words are *can*, *only*, and *maintained*. Certainly, it’s nice when people are nice. But in a world of agentive souls, power and influence can only be maintained over the long term when assent is granted freely. Compulsion, dominion, and manipulation can and do work in the short term. People can be controlled or subdued with the use of intimidation, fear, and violence. But the human soul yearns for freedom and fulfillment. Any form of power based on compulsion rather than persuasion, intimidation rather than invitation, fear rather than love is therefore inherently limited—not just in its ethical value but in its efficacy.

The September 1993 excommunications effectively and tragically cowed a generation of Latter-day Saint intellectuals. When institutions and individuals are threatened by new ideas, there is always a temptation to retrench. The blunt force of Church discipline worked in the short term. Even within a few years, however, its effect had diminished. Why? Because ideas cannot be quelched by fiat. And, more fundamentally, because “no power or influence can or ought to be maintained” by fear, dominion, intimidation, and compulsion. A new generation of intellectuals arose and carried the torch of inquiry forward.

Churches thrive when they count their intellectuals as assets not liabilities, partners not villains. Will intellectuals think unruly thoughts? Yes, because it is the divine nature of the human mind to inquire, to explore, to expand. The pursuit of knowledge resists institutional correlation. If members or leaders of a group encounter thinking they deem

7. Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–42.

to be dangerous, they are generally served best not by attempting to prevent or squelch that thinking but rather by providing better, more persuasive thinking. Numerous historical examples suggest that the compulsory silencing of ideas deemed “bad” is ultimately more dangerous than the ideas themselves. Churches, like governments, lose their authority precisely when they have no recourse other than mere authority. If Church leaders want to promote or discourage certain ideas, they have ample opportunity to use their power as teachers to persuade the Church membership of their position. Even in a digital age, it is the rare intellectual who can even approach the reach of the general conference pulpit and other modes of official Church communication.

Thirty years later, we can be grateful that the collective excommunications of September 1993 proved to be an exception rather than the rule in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’s ongoing relationship with its intellectuals. We cannot change the past. But hopefully we can learn from and avoid the unnecessary tragedy of future lost generations.

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THE SEPTEMBER SIX AND THE EVOLUTION OF MORMON MAGISTERIA

Kristine Haglund

In 1997, Stephen Jay Gould published a short essay aimed at limning the conflict between science and religion, particularly with respect to the question of evolution as the mechanism of generating life on Earth. In it, he borrows the Catholic term *magisterium* from papal encyclicals on the topic and asserts that both science and religion have legitimate magisteria:

Whatever my private beliefs about souls, science cannot touch such a subject and therefore cannot be threatened by any theological position on such a legitimately and intrinsically religious issue. . . . We may, I think, adopt the word [magisterium] and the concept [teaching authority] to express the central point of this essay and the principled resolution of supposed “conflict” or “warfare” between science and religion. No such conflict should exist because each subject has a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority—and these magisteria do not overlap (the principle that I would like to designate as NOMA, or “nonoverlapping magisteria”).¹

“Science” and “religion” map imperfectly onto the problems of scholarship and religious authority that were at issue in the events of September 1993, but Gould’s essay provides a heuristic framework for thinking through the questions raised by the excommunications and disfellowshipping of the September Six and the subsequent

1. Stephen Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Natural History* 106, no. 2 (1997): 16–22, reprinted in *Filozoficzne Aspekty Genezy* 11 (2014): 11–12.

excommunications of Margaret Toscano in 2000 and Janice Allred in 1995, as well as the related disquiet at BYU throughout the 1990s. The larger questions underlying Gould's discussion of scholarly and religious method—organic evolution and divine creation—are implicated in the ways that the Church and its members arrive at doctrinal truth. Both the similarities and the differences between the Catholic example Gould considers and the way that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints responds to similar difficulties are instructive.

As the Latter-day Saint intellectual community responded to the tensions surrounding the discipline of the September Six, an approximate delineation of nonoverlapping magisteria was tacitly worked out: the Church would define policy and prescribe behavior, and scholars who refrained from explicit personal criticism of Church authorities or overt calls for policy change could write quite freely about Church history, scripture, and sociological trends. The field of Mormon studies enjoyed a new flowering beginning about a decade after the 1993 crisis. By the mid-2000s, professorships and degree-granting programs in Mormon studies were established; *Dialogue* continued publishing robustly and the *Journal of Mormon History* expanded to quarterly publications; excellent papers on Mormon topics appeared in prestigious national journals of history, sociology, and literature; and major national presses published both academic and popular monographs on Mormonism. Scholarly societies and conferences for scholars devoted to Mormon varieties of everything from literature and humanities to social science and transhumanism were inaugurated. A generation of scholars, for whom the troubles of the 1990s seemed more a matter of historical curiosity than lived experience, came of age. This new generation largely pursued their interests without fear. Church discipline seemed generally reserved for activists who sought press attention or directly challenged Church policies rather than scholars and academics. By 2013, at around the twentieth anniversary of the September Six, the Church even began publishing "Gospel Topics" essays on its official

website—the carefully edited work of prominent scholars on difficult issues in Church history and doctrine like polygamy, the priesthood and temple ban, women and priesthood, and the divine feminine. The essays went so far as to recognize the work of unnamed scholars: “The Church acknowledges the contribution of scholars to the historical content presented in this article; their work is used with permission.” The insertion of “historical content” as the contribution of the scholars delimits the realm in which scholarship is permissible, implicitly reserving the category of “doctrine” for the pronouncements of Church authorities. This seems like it could almost be a workable solution along the lines of Gould’s “NOMA”—scholars could investigate the realms illuminated by an epistemology based on empirical investigation and logical analysis, while Church leaders would continue to work in a magisterium where knowledge is acquired by authoritative revelation and disseminated after being vetted by committee.

Latter-day Saints have generally had wide latitude for personal belief, as illustrated by the famous incident with Pelatiah Brown, when Joseph Smith is reported to have said “I did not like the old man being called up before the High Council for erring in doctrine.—I want the liberty of believing as I please.”² Mormonism still bears faint traces of its roots in the New England soil of the primitive gospel movement, eschewing creeds and insisting that the revelation of doctrine is an ongoing process. This can be liberating; it means that Latter-day Saints who can assent to a small core set of beliefs can (theoretically) differ wildly over other points of doctrine or about contemporary issues in broader society and still enjoy the fellowship of the Saints.

2. Joseph Smith, “8 April 1843 (Saturday Morning),” in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, compiled and edited by Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), available at <https://rsc.byu.edu/words-joseph-smith/8-april-1843-saturday-morning/>.

But the lack of a mechanism for declaring official doctrine also creates trouble. While Stephen Jay Gould could examine and compare two encyclicals of Pope Pius and Pope John Paul and discover what Catholics were expected to believe at various moments, no such *ex cathedra* pronouncements exist to define the acceptable range of belief for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The anarchic tendencies of an “ongoing restoration” of a Church that allows and encourages its members to seek “personal revelation” have always been in tension with the need to maintain doctrinal and organizational coherence. The Correlation Department works to create standardized curricula that mitigate this problem, but there is still no clear standard for “official” doctrine—Latter-day Saints differ in their beliefs about what level of authority should be ascribed to manuals, magazines, general conference talks, and the Church’s website and Newsroom. Ambiguity about the bounds of the magisterium of official Church doctrine also increases anxiety for leaders and requires them to police members’ public statements about doctrine. Where no official doctrine is available to be consulted, it is riskier to have members speaking freely about their opinions or their scholarship, since their words might be accorded undue authority.

Gould’s essay anticipates these sorts of tensions: “This resolution might remain all neat and clean if the nonoverlapping magisteria (NOMA) of science and religion [or, in the Latter-day Saint case, scholarship and authority] were separated by an extensive no man’s land. But, in fact, the two magisteria bump right up against each other, interdigitating in wondrously complex ways along their joint border. Many of our deepest questions call upon aspects of both for different parts of a full answer—and the sorting of legitimate domains can become quite complex and difficult.”³ The complexity and difficulty are perhaps exceptionally great in the Latter-day Saint example, in part because our

3. Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” 12.

theology is so loose and our reliance on history and practice as faith-affirming evidence so great. That is, “doctrine” and “history” are not so distinct after all. Gould, who was not himself religious and perhaps misunderstood what is really at stake for religions with strong authority claims, rather naively defined the magisteria of science and religion by the content and methods of their inquiry, as though priesthood or prophecy were just professions: “The lack of conflict between science and religion arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise—science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives.”⁴ It is important to note, however, that this lack of conflict between the Catholic scientists whose perspective Gould presents in his essay and the official pronouncements of their ecclesiastical leader is the result of centuries of negotiation between Catholic scholars and clerics. No such process has occurred among the Latter-day Saints, and the illusion that we have arrived at something like a similar equilibrium is belied by the twentieth-century history of conflict between Latter-day Saint scholars and church hierarchs.

An observer of the BYU “modernism controversy” of 1911 articulated a view strikingly similar to Gould’s schema of nonoverlapping magisteria. In describing the conflict between BYU administrators and two professors who had been trying to reconcile Darwin’s theory of evolution with Mormon doctrine about creation, University of Utah philosophy professor Milton Bennion wrote: “the teachers have proceeded on the assumption that there is no contradiction [*sic*] between science and religion, and that they might teach science freely without detriment to the interests of religion. On this point the school authorities have taken issue with the teachers.”⁵ The administrators, who had

4. Gould, 9.

5. Utah Education Association, *Utah Educational Review* 7, no. 4 (Dec. 1913): 9. Milton Bennion is not listed in the byline, but he is named as the author within the body of the editorial.

ecclesiastical authority on their side, prevailed in that conflict, and the professors lost their jobs, as did two other professors who had been teaching new theories of biblical criticism. Two decades later, in 1931, the First Presidency seemed to have come around to the view that reconciliation was possible when they published a statement on the “Mormon View of Evolution,” which concluded, “Upon the fundamental doctrines of the Church we are all agreed. Our mission is to bear the message of the restored gospel to the people of the world. Leave Geology, Biology, Archaeology and Anthropology, no one of which has to do with the salvation of the souls of mankind, to scientific research, while we magnify our calling in the realm of the Church.”⁶

With some variations, this seems to be the pattern for dealing with unpleasant “interdigitation” of the magisteria of scholarship and religious authority in the Church: individual Latter-day Saints publicly address cultural problems through the lens of faith. They are a little too public, or seem to have too much influence, or are wrong in ways that offend particular General Authorities. Some form of Church discipline is administered, but the Church does not comment on the reasons for the discipline or clarify the doctrine in question. The issue recedes and the “official” doctrine gradually shifts to some more comfortable reconciliation or middle ground.

This pattern unfolded regularly throughout the twentieth century, with the most obvious and consistent examples relating to the problem of plural marriage. Reluctant to repudiate a practice instituted by revelation, the Church eschewed doctrinal modification and managed the practice through individual excommunications. Notable disciplinary actions also occurred over critical assessments of Joseph Smith (the

6. First Presidency (Heber J. Grant, Anthony W. Ivins, Charles W. Nibley), “Memo from the First Presidency to the Council of the Twelve, the First Council of Seventy, and the Presiding Bishopric,” April 5, 1931, reprinted in William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery, *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2005), 54–67.

excommunication of Fawn Brodie and the prohibition of Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery from speaking about their 1984 biography of Emma Smith, *Mormon Enigma*), protesting the priesthood and temple ban (the excommunications of John Fitzgerald and Byron Marchant), advocating for the ERA and publicizing the Church's oppositional tactics (the excommunication of Sonia Johnson), scriptural scholarship (the excommunication of David P. Wright), and the varied and well-known issues at stake in the cases of the September Six.

Even when the stated grounds for discipline include "apostasy," it is rare for these conflicts between members and hierarchs to involve sustained discussion of doctrine. Instead, these confrontations either begin as or rapidly become disputes about authority. It is clear that the cases of the September Six were not about the method or content of inquiry but rather about who is allowed to determine the boundaries within which intellectual inquiry is legitimate and what one may publicly say about it. While the press often described the excommunications as consequences for "scholarship" or even punishment for the publication of particular articles, correcting the ideas or beliefs of those being disciplined was not the point. There was no formal public discussion by Church authorities of whatever mistaken ideas constituted these individuals' "apostasy," and no official correction of belief was offered. Because the Church has no process for officially incorporating new or reaffirmed doctrinal understandings in a durable form, these conflicts are personalized and recur as new generations confront unresolved doctrinal tensions.

Although we might read these individual episodes as exercises in defining the proper magisteria for scholarship and authority, or periodic reassertions of the right of the authoritative magisterium to be extended by fiat, the accumulation of these events over time looks less like the academic/religious disputes over evolution and more like the process of evolution through natural selection: doctrines that are well-adapted for the Church's survival endure, and individuals who don't

accept these doctrines do not. It is only over a lengthy time horizon that change can be observed and reasons for these doctrinal shifts hypothesized. The failure of the process to fully articulate an orthodoxy preserves notional freedom of conscience and holds open the possibility of change at the same time as it creates anxiety on both sides of the divide between scholars and priesthood officers.

For scholars, or would-be scholars, the message of the September Six was vague—it wasn't clear what one was supposed to believe about Mother in Heaven or the history of women's relationship to priesthood, only that it might be dangerous to talk about those subjects. There was no clear statement of which historical and cultural issues one had to take an approved position on, only the implication that disagreeing with Church leaders about some issues could cause trouble. In this regard, Avraham Gileadi's excommunication was perhaps the most puzzling—because he did not speak publicly about the content of the discipline he experienced, some concluded that publishing *anything* about the book of Isaiah could be perceived as risky.

Perhaps this ambiguity has some benefits—a general reminder to be teachable and humble in one's opinions can be salutary. But leaving people to draw their own conclusions with limited information has costs, too: many of my friends drew the not-unreasonable conclusion that any kind of feminism was incompatible with Church membership. And while I did not come to that conclusion, I felt obliquely wounded by the excommunications and the sparse official explanations. In 1993, I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, one of just a handful of graduate students in the tiny university branch. In that largely pre-internet period, I really didn't have anyone to talk to about what the excommunications might mean. I wasn't really a scholar of Mormonism and didn't plan to be. Still, I felt implicated when Elder Boyd K. Packer said, in his talk to the All-Church Coordinating Council, "There are three areas where members of the Church, influenced by social and political unrest, are being caught up and led away. . . . The

dangers I speak of come from the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement (both of which are relatively new), and the ever-present challenge from the so-called scholars or intellectuals.”⁷

I had been a feminist from the time I was a little girl, and I grew up in a devout Latter-day Saint home where being “intellectual” was like breathing. I was a (still tentative) ally of the LGBTQ+ community in the Church. I *also* had three callings in the branch, attended institute weekly, loved and admired the branch president, and often scribbled scriptural references in my class notes. It was impossible to imagine myself as someone who had been “caught up and led away,” let alone as someone who would try to lead others away. For me, being intellectual had always meant first of all studying the scriptures and trying to understand them more deeply; being a feminist came from my study of Mormon women; caring about my queer brothers and sisters seemed to me to be mandated for followers of a God who was “no respecter of persons” and told parables about relentlessly seeking the lost or marginalized. I had known, in a nine-year-old’s way, about the excommunication of Sonia Johnson, so it was not a complete shock to hear views about cultural issues described as inimical to Church membership, but it was a new sort of pain to feel myself so tidily categorized and dismissed by a leader whose views I knew and worked to respect, knowing that he would never be interested in how I had arrived at my own views. It was hard not to take it personally, and I don’t think I have ever quite recovered the confident sense of belonging in a faith that had formed my deepest identity since childhood. And I was not alone in that feeling. Allowing doctrinal evolution to occur in this random (or at least inscrutable) way whereby individuals are tossed out as cautionary examples is extraordinarily costly, in much the same way that organic evolution by natural selection is costly.

7. Boyd K. Packer, “All-Church Coordinating Council Meeting,” May 18, 1993, available at https://archive.org/details/coordinating_council_1993_boyd_k_packer/.

Thus, perhaps the most important reason to invoke Gould's essay in this context is his quotation from a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in response to Pope John Paul II's encyclical on evolution:

Pope John Paul II's acceptance of evolution touches the doubt in my heart. The problem of pain and suffering in a world created by a God who is all love and light is hard enough to bear, even if one is a creationist. But at least a creationist can say that the original creation, coming from the hand of God was good, harmonious, innocent and gentle. What can one say about evolution, even a spiritual theory of evolution? Pain and suffering, mindless cruelty and terror are its means of creation. Evolution's engine is the grinding of predatory teeth upon the screaming, living flesh and bones of prey. . . . If evolution be true, my faith has rougher seas to sail.⁸

It may really be the case that the way the Church has historically dealt with challenges from its "so-called scholars or intellectuals" is the best we can do. I do not particularly want a more extensively defined orthodoxy. But I also think that a model of respectful disagreement in love and faith is a critical need for members of the Church in a world increasingly fractured along ideological lines. Gould expresses this hope for his proposed NOMA: "we would both be enlightened and filled with better understanding of these deep and ultimately unanswerable issues. Here, I believe, lies the greatest strength and necessity of NOMA, the nonoverlapping magisteria of science and religion. NOMA permits—indeed enjoins—the prospect of respectful discourse, of constant input from both magisteria toward the common goal of wisdom. If human beings are anything special, we are the creatures that must ponder and talk."⁹

Unlike Gould, I *am* religious. I am a Latter-day Saint convinced that "there is no truth but what belongs to the gospel."¹⁰ I accept the

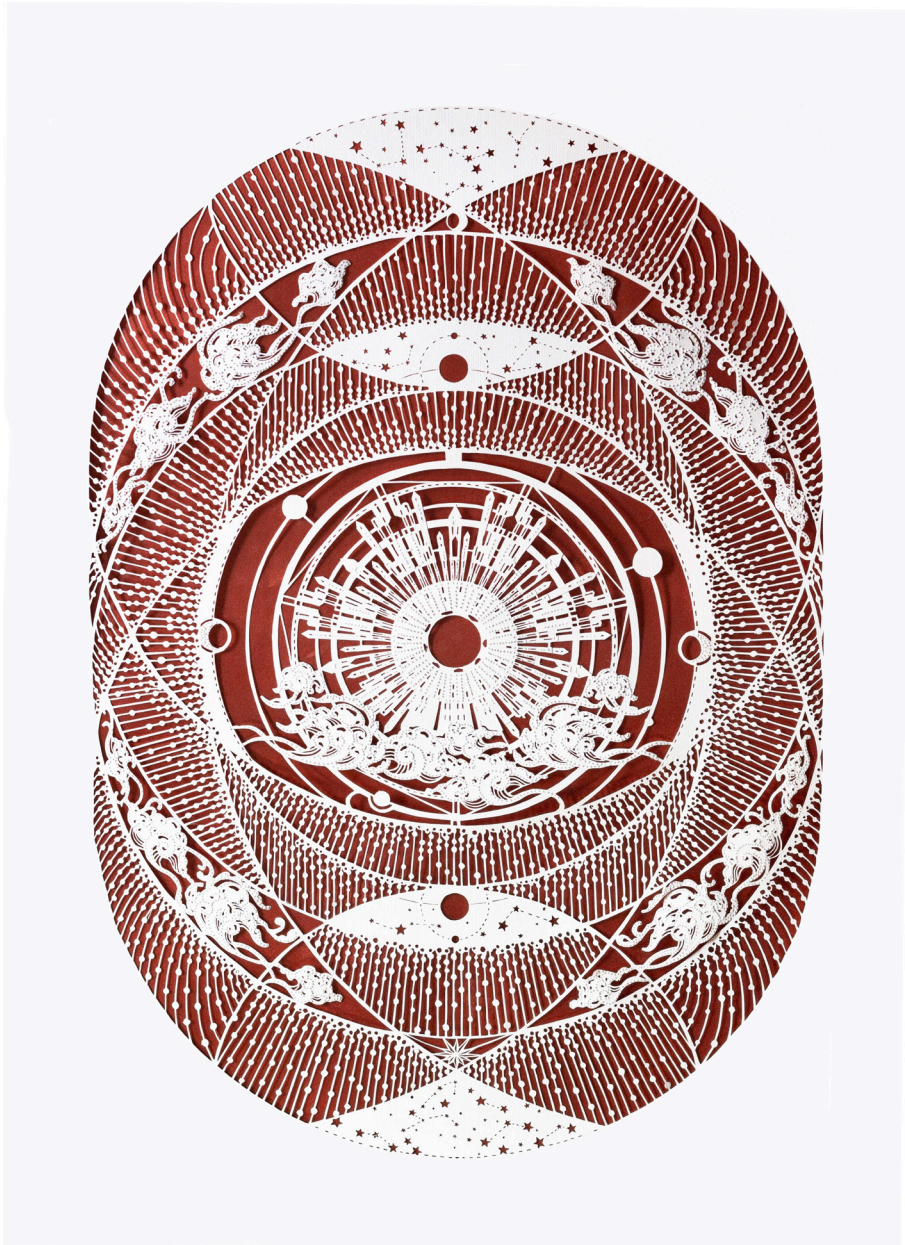
8. Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," 19.

9. Gould, 22.

10. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, compiled by John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 3.

idea that the magisteria of learning and authority do overlap and that the authoritative is ineluctably primary. That is the cost of salvation, as I understand it. And since I manage to accept the theory of organic evolution as a possible mechanism of God's creation of the world, perhaps I ought to be able to accept that authority and scholarship can only ever attain a fragile and unstable equilibrium, that periodic spasms of extinction are an unfortunate but unavoidable feature of a Church dedicated to preserving maximum freedom of individual conscience and agency while still needing to create enough shared belief to cohere. But if this be true, "my faith has rougher seas to sail."

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Susana Silva, *The Rolls Upon Its Wings*, 2021,
hand-cut Fabriano paper, 39" x 31.5"

MORMON DISSENT IN THE AGE OF FRACTURE

Benjamin E. Park

When fifteen hundred progressive Mormons attended Sunstone Symposium in August 1992, they did so in protest. The symposium had become a center point in the growing battle between Latter-day Saint leaders and activists, especially as Church authorities grew increasingly outspoken in denouncing what Dallin Oaks called “alternative voices.” Ecclesiastical officials had issued a “Statement on Symposia” after Sunstone’s 1991 conference that condemned gatherings in which speakers explicitly criticized the faith. Members were warned by local leaders not to present at future Sunstone events, and Brigham Young University professors were forbidden to even attend. But instead of dampening participation, the statement escalated the activists’ resolve.¹

This year-long tension climaxed with a presentation by Lavina Fielding Anderson. A literary scholar who had previously edited Church magazines, Anderson had recently co-founded the Mormon Alliance, an organization dedicated to documenting ecclesiastical and spiritual abuse within the institution. Her presentation, which balanced faithful devotion with unflinching calls for justice, meticulously detailed dozens of actions taken by local and general leaders intended to suppress free thought and critical scholarship. The accusations

1. Dallin H. Oaks, “Alternate Voices,” Apr. 1989, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1989/04/alternate-voices?lang=eng>; Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Despite Church Warnings, 1,500 Attended Sunstone Symposium,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Aug. 15, 1992; “Statement on Symposia,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1991.

consummated with a bombshell: Anderson alleged the existence of a secretive committee that constituted “an internal espionage system that creates and maintains secret files on members of the church.”²

Eugene England, a prominent BYU professor who defied university administrators’ orders by attending the Sunstone meeting, stood up and declared, with his finger violently stabbing the air, “I accuse that committee of undermining our Church.” An Associated Press reporter who witnessed the spectacle ran the story, prompting an immediate and uproarious media firestorm.³

The crisis, of course, eventually led to six disciplinary hearings in September 1993. Much has been written on the many contentious, and often tragic, steps that resulted in the excommunications and disfellowships of around a dozen activists during the 1990s. What often gets overlooked, however, is the broader historical context that in many ways served as the launching pad for the crisis. America, just like her homegrown religion, was engulfed in division over culture wars that were birthed in the 1970s, heightened in the 1980s, and then meted out various judgements in the 1990s, often about the issue of gender. As is often the case, Mormonism’s most crucial moments held up a mirror to what was happening in society around them.

The post–World War II economic boom that catapulted many white Americans to material success inaugurated a brief era of national progress and solidarity. In the political realm, most leaders from both parties embraced what is now referred to as the “liberal consensus,” a general agreement that the federal government should be strong enough to support a country of like-minded citizens united in a common cause.

2. Lavina Fielding Anderson, “The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 1 (1993): 62.

3. Terryl Givens, *Stretching the Heavens: The Life of Eugene England and the Crisis of Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 227–29; Peter Steinfels, “Religion Notes,” *New York Times*, Aug. 22, 1992.

Few groups experienced as much benefit during these mid-century decades as the Latter-day Saints, who witnessed immense growth both in the United States and abroad. The “fog” that had been “hanging over” the nation for generations, remarked President David O. McKay when he attended President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s inauguration in 1953, had now vanished, dispersed by the “sunshine” of the new era. The country seemed destined to finally reach its potential as a harmonious Christian nation.⁴

That tenuous boon proved fragile and short-lived. The civil rights movement in the 1960s drove the first wedges into the homogenous façade, but the 1970s proved the real beginning for the nation’s culture wars. Debates over abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and homosexuality divided Americans into opposing factions, which gave rise to a new generation of unending social conflict. Paul Weyrich, founder of the conservative Heritage Foundation, captured the meaning of this new battle. “It is a war of ideology, it’s a war of ideas, and it’s a war about our way of life,” Weyrich explained. “And it has to be fought with the same intensity, I think, and dedication as you would fight in a shooting war.” The newly formed religious right quickly became a dominant movement for conservative retrenchment. The era’s chasm became so clear that historians have come to describe it as an Age of Fracture.⁵

It was during this period that the field of history also became a battleground. Bicentennial celebrations of American independence in 1976 sparked numerous debates over the nation’s identity, particularly how the past related to the present. Evangelicals were especially

4. David O. McKay diary, Jan. 19, 1953, in *Confidence Amid Change: The Presidential Diaries of David O. McKay, 1951–1970*, edited by Harvard Heath (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2019), 50–51. For this era in general, see Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate American Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

5. Richard A. Viguerie, *The New Right: We’re Ready to Lead* (Falls Church, Va.: Viguerie, 1981), 55; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

keen on rejecting secular stories that did not prioritize God's guiding hand throughout the country's two centuries. Peter Marshall and David Manuel's *The Light and the Glory*, published in 1977, dismissed secular scholarship in favor of spiritual hagiography and became a national bestseller. When Latter-day Saint apostle Boyd K. Packer instructed teachers a few years later to demonstrate God's hand "in every hour and in every moment of the existence of the Church, from its beginning until now," he was echoing a broader trend.⁶

The timing of this new battle was particularly ironic for the Mormon tradition, as it revolved around a concept that became central to the faith: the "traditional" family. Saints were first pulled into the fight through their opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, through which they earned their credibility as reliable cultural warriors. But earning a place with the religious right required strong coordination on two fronts. First, the Church had to prove its ability to deliver on key social issues, including political topics crucial to the moral majority. Second, Church leaders had to shore up the theological and historical disputes that threatened their correlated message and exaggerated their ideological distance from contemporary evangelicals. Both initiatives, which were tethered to contested notions of gender, involved choosing a side in the partisan battle then fracturing America.⁷

The ensuing history wars between Mormon academics and Latter-day Saint leaders must be understood in this context. From the perspective of Salt Lake City, scholars were undercutting the narratives

6. Boyd Packer, "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *Brigham Young University Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 259–69. For the evangelical context, see Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 74–83.

7. See Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Daniel Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 167–78.

necessary for social assimilation amid the culture wars. D. Michael Quinn's 1985 article on post-manifesto polygamy, for instance, demolished the traditional tale that the Church forfeited polygamy in 1890 with a clean swipe. That the essay appeared during a time of growing fundamentalist conversions, and concomitant media attention, only emphasized the challenge for publicity-conscious leaders. But the real threat came from Mormon women whose feminist scholarship raised questions concerning ordination, healing blessings, and Heavenly Mother. Though disputes over historical narratives had been plentiful since the beginnings of Leonard Arrington's "Camelot" in the early 1970s, threats of actual discipline became much more earnest once the scholarly discourse focused on the family.⁸

The culmination of this new feminist scholarship was Maxine Hanks's edited volume *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, which appeared in late 1992, mere months after the contentious Sunstone symposium. The edited book included chapters on a broad range of topics that critiqued the Church's patriarchal traditions and beliefs. "Feminism has always existed in Mormonism," Hanks declared, arguing that the faith's future depended on restoring fundamental doctrines of gender equality. A few months later, in early 1993, Lavina Fielding Anderson published her extensive article on ecclesiastical abuse in *Dialogue*. "We must speak up," she insisted, because "if we silence ourselves or allow others to silence us, we will deny the

8. D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 9–105; Nadine Hansen, "Women and Priesthood," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1981): 48–57; Linda King Newell, "A Gift Given, a Gift Taken: Washing, Anointing, and Blessing the Sick among Mormon Women," *Sunstone* 6, no. 4 (1981): 16–25; Margaret Toscano, "The Missing Rib: The Forgotten Place of Queens and Priestesses in the Establishment of Zion," *Sunstone* 10, no. 7 (1985): 16–22.

validity of our experience.” Mormonism’s patriarchal structure was under siege.⁹

The gendered and cultural context of these developments shed meaning on the next steps. After a decade of fighting the battle over gender, Church leaders, led by Packer, were no longer willing to exhibit patience. It was time to root out the three “major invasion[s]” that had infiltrated the Church, Packer declared in May 1993: “the gay-lesbian movement, the feminist movement[, and] the so-called scholars or intellectuals.” That these issues of gender and scholarship, threats to the faith’s now-central doctrine of “traditional family,” were now intertwined was a blueprint borrowed from contemporary America. These were the prominent stakes for the culture wars. Packer then met with local ecclesiastical leaders to orchestrate an intellectual purge. Several of those disciplined that fateful September, as well as several punished in the following years, had contributed to Hanks’s volume; nearly all of them had written on topics related to gender.¹⁰

The scars of September Six continued to fester. In the wake of 1993, Church leaders shifted almost immediately to their next battleground: homosexuality. The family proclamation, issued in 1995, served as a bridge from the era of conflict over women’s rights to the fight against same-sex unions. It both mentions traditional gender roles and defines marriage as between a man and a woman. Yet once Gordon B. Hinckley became prophet that same year, the Church adapted to the new reality concerning media relations and softened their stance on coordinated disciplines. Leaders did not want a repeat of the national headlines that swept the United States in September 1993.

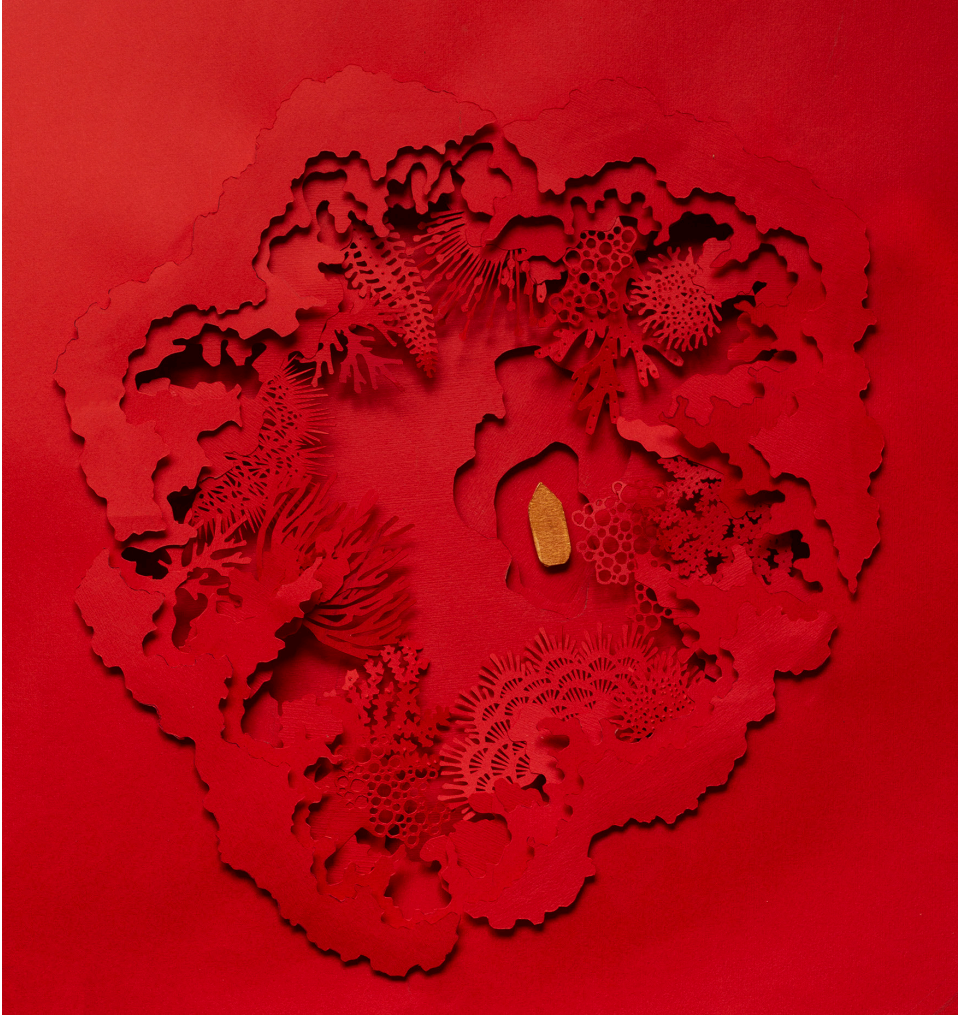
9. Maxine Hanks, “Introduction,” in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xi; Anderson, “LDS Intellectual Community,” 61.

10. Boyd K. Packer, “All-Church Coordinating Council Meeting,” May 18, 1993; Claudia L. Bushman, *Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), 160.

That does not mean that the boundaries are any less defined, however. Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland's recent admonition to Brigham Young University faculty to expend more "musket fire" in defense of the Church's position on gay marriage, as well as the general retrenchment taking place in the Church's education system, is a reminder of the perils that still exist when Saints choose to write about gender and sexuality. The Latter-day Saint Church still has a firm coalition of allies. The groups who make up the modern religious right are similarly fighting against LGBTQ acceptance, women's equality, social reform, racial justice, and secular truths. The same cultural forces that led to the September Six have become so entrenched that we are still living in the world that the Age of Fracture created, and likely will be for some time.¹¹

11. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University" (university conference address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, Aug. 23, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/the-second-half-second-century-brigham-young-university/>); Tamarra Kemsley, "BYU-I Instructors Fired for Failing 'Ecclesiastical Clearance,'" *Salt Lake Tribune*, Nov. 28, 2022.

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Susana Silva,
Jaredite Journey: Buried in the Abyss, 2020,
hand-cut Fabriano paper, 19.5" x 23.5"

SHE SIMPLY WANTED MORE: MORMON WOMEN AND EXCOMMUNICATION

Amanda Hendrix-Komoto

In September 1993, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints excommunicated several scholars who had challenged the Church's positions on gender, sexuality, and the family. In her 1992 book *Women and Authority*, for example, Maxine Hanks had argued that the refusal to grant authority to Mormon women created a church that denied female spiritual power and expected women to find meaning in a male god with a "male body." She believed that women would experience the recognition of female spiritual power not as "something new" but as "a loosening of bonds" that would allow them "to use something they had always had." It would be "a spiritual liberation."¹ D. Michael Quinn, another excommunicated member, had written an article demonstrating that the practice of polygamy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had not ended with the Second Manifesto.² Lavina Fielding Anderson had spent hundreds of hours compiling examples of Latter-day Saint leaders using their ecclesiastical power to intimidate intellectuals into silence.³

1. Maxine Hanks, "Introduction," in *Women and Authority: Re-emerging Mormon Feminism*, edited by Maxine Hanks (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), xxvii–xxviii.

2. D. Michael Quinn, "LDS Church Authority and New Plural Marriages, 1890–1904," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 9–105.

3. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology (1992)," in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 189–92.

Like many scholars of my generation, I had no idea that these excommunications happened or how important they would become. My mother had just decided that I was old enough to stay home alone, and I reveled in my freedom. I spent much of my time after school watching *Murphy Brown* and *Ghostwriter*. I was obsessed with Jonathan Taylor Thomas and Rufio from *Hook*. My life, of course, was not perfect. The year 1993 was also a time of mourning for my family. My uncle Christopher died in November of that year at the age of seventeen. My great-grandfather died less than a week later. Although he was ninety-four, his death hurt just as much as Christopher's. My great-grandfather was one of the few people who seemed to understand me. He complimented my drawing skills, told me that I had a beautiful singing voice, and encouraged my love of reading.

As an adult, I learned that 1993 represented a kind of death for members of the Mormon studies community. Since the 1970s, Latter-day Saint women had been challenging the limited role the Church provided for female spirituality. The excommunication of Sonia Johnson, an outspoken ERA supporter, was the Church's response to the challenges the feminist movement offered the Church in the 1970s and 1980s. According to poet and former *Dialogue* editor Mary Bradford, Johnson became "a folk figure of sorts"—"a litmus test of loyalty on the one hand and a symbol of revolution on the other." She claimed that Johnson was "almost as ubiquitous as the Three Nephites."⁴ In 1995, the Church responded to the expansive theology of feminists like Maxine Hanks and Margaret Toscano with "The Family: A Proclamation to the World." It reiterated the Church's fundamental belief that "marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God" and that gender roles are eternal.⁵

4. Mary L. Bradford, "The Odyssey of Sonia Johnson," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 23.

5. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>.

As time passed, the September Six became a symbol of the numerous ways in which the Church disciplines Latter-day Saint intellectuals. Kristine Haglund has written that “the ugliness of the 1990s” meant it was “never again . . . possible for an earnest Mormon with academic ambitions and liberal political inclinations to believe that her religion, her scholarship, and her activism belong integrally to Mormonism.”⁶ Although Haglund was writing specifically about the literary scholar Eugene England, many people regarded the September Six with a similar sense of loss. Their disciplining caused an entire generation of Latter-day Saint scholars to pause before writing. Although I was only a child when they occurred, the disciplinary hearings shaped my own experience as a Mormon historian. This essay is my attempt to reckon with the legacy of the Church’s decision—both in my own life and for the field of Mormon studies as a whole.

As with many scholars of Mormonism, for me, Mormon history is family history. I was born into an interfaith family. My father was a seventh-generation Latter-day Saint whose ancestors had converted in upstate New York before moving with the Saints to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally, Utah and Idaho. My mother’s family, on the other hand, combined Catholicism with folk belief in the *fae*. Her grandmother held meetings of the Portneuf Community Club in her home. Members read tea leaves and performed “spiritual work.”

According to my mother, my father left the Church long before it instigated disciplinary measures against the September Six. He had served as president of his high school seminary in the late 1970s but lost his faith after the death of his newborn child in 1981. Family members describe him flitting between atheism, a kind of reconstructed Mormonism, and general Protestantism for much of their marriage. By the time I was born in 1983, he no longer felt the need to bless his children in an LDS ceremony or raise them within the Church. He and

6. Kristine L. Haglund, *Eugene England: A Mormon Liberal* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 23.

my mother divorced four years after I was born. My mother's family distrusted the Church after experiencing years of discrimination as one of the very few non-Mormon families in the area. My father was largely absent. As a result, I learned about the Church as a child through the writings of people like Sandra and Jerald Tanner. The Christian bookstore in the heavily LDS town of Pocatello, Idaho, had an entire section devoted to anti-Mormon pamphlets. As teenagers, my friends and I giddily perused its shelves. It felt like a transgressive act against a Church that controlled our lives even though none of us were members or believed its truth claims.

It wasn't until graduate school that I became interested in a more nuanced version of Mormon history. I first started attending the annual meeting of the Mormon History Association (MHA) in 2009. The consequences of the Church's decision to discipline the September Six shaped my perception of Mormon studies. The University of Michigan immersed its graduate students in a culture that valued women's studies. At the Mormon History Association, however, I discovered that the aftermath of the September Six had decimated the study of Mormon women's history. Although there were important women scholars present, including Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, and Sarah Barringer Gordon, men far outnumbered women at the meeting.⁷

7. For their works, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Hometown: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630–1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp and Reid L. Neilson, eds., *Proclamation to the People: Nineteenth-Century Mormonism and the Pacific Basin Frontier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008); Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, ed., *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010); Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and*

By the 1970s, Latter-day Saint women had begun to question the Church's privileging of male careers and spiritual power. Claudia Bushman has described the trepidation and excitement with which Latter-day Saint women greeted the wider feminist movement. She gathered with a group of educated women in Boston, Massachusetts, in the 1970s. In her introduction to the 1971 "pink issue" of *Dialogue*, Bushman wrote that they had "no officers, no rules and no set meeting time." They rejected many of the claims of the nascent feminist movement but "read their literature with interest."⁸ The women who produced the pink issue of *Dialogue* insisted that they were not radicals and claimed to be "shocked by [the] antics" of their more "militant" sisters.⁹ Their rejection of extreme "antics" distanced them from controversial figures like Sonia Johnson. Over time, however, the discussions the group had about women's lives radicalized some of the participants. Bushman described the excitement of being part of a group of women who were "working together, engaged in frontline enterprises, researching, thinking, and writing for ourselves." She wrote just a sentence or two later that they "felt invincible."¹⁰

Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); and Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

8. Claudia Bushman, "Women in Dialogue: An Introduction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 5. I have a copy of the pink *Dialogue* and have reflected on this quotation before. I was reminded of it, however, while preparing for this essay by reading Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 49.

9. Bushman, "Women in Dialogue," 5.

10. Claudia Bushman, "My Short Happy Life with *Exponent II*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 186, quoted in Ulrich, "Mormon Women in the History of Second-Wave Feminism," 52.

While Latter-day Saint women were meeting in Boston, a similar group coalesced in Utah County. Feminists from Orem, Provo, and the surrounding areas met at Brigham Young University before being banished to the public meetings spaces in Provo in 1979 for their support of the Equal Rights Amendment. Like their Boston sisters, the women did not see themselves as “radicals.” According to historian Amy L. Bentley, the women “identified strongly with the LDS Church and concerned themselves with ‘family’ issues.” Their meetings covered a wide range of topics—“sex discrimination, depression among Mormon women, political lobbying, the rhetoric of polygamy, female bonding and networking, a history of sexual equality in Utah, growing up black in Utah, suicide, rape, planned parenthood, historian Juanita Brooks, the legitimacy of responsible dissent, the John Birch Society, and the pamphlet ‘Another Mormon View of the ERA.’”¹¹ Together, the women who met in Boston and Provo created a definition of faithful Mormon feminism. Faithful feminists argued for change and sought to improve women’s lives. They did not, however, challenge the legitimacy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or its emphasis on traditional family values.

The growth of feminist consciousness among Latter-day Saints led to a flowering of women’s history. A coterie of Latter-day Saint scholars combed the archives of the *Woman’s Exponent* to understand the place of Mormon women within the first wave of feminism. In 1982, Kenneth Godfrey, Audrey Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr published *Women’s Voices*, a collection of excerpts from women’s diaries that allowed Latter-day Saints to see the contributions that their grandmothers and great-grandmothers had made to the Church.¹² In time, the flowering

11. Amy L. Bentley, “Comforting the Motherless Children: The Alice Louise Reynolds Women’s Forum,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 47.

12. Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, eds., *Women’s Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992).

of Mormon women's history provided evidence that Latter-day Saint women had once spoken in tongues, healed each other's bodies, and even prophesied. Inherent in many of these women's scholarly writings in the 1980s was an acceptance of Church hierarchy—they weren't "radicals," they insisted. Although these Mormon feminists believed that Church had previously minimized women's experiences in its history, they reaffirmed the authority of male leaders. Individual Mormon feminists could publish about their own lives and research early Mormon women's history. They did not, however, explicitly challenge the Church's authority.

In the 1990s, some feminists began to pull on the more radical threads of Mormon feminism. In 1992, for example, Margaret Toscano called for the "transformation of the entire Mormon priesthood" so that it recognized both male and female spiritual power. She believed that the resulting Church would be a better reflection of the kingdom of God, a place she believed was populated with "priestesses and priests, with equal right to know and speak in the name of the Godhead."¹³ Although she was not excommunicated until 2000, she too faced a disciplinary council in 1993. The Church's distrust of feminists extended to some of the women who had been involved in the groups formed in Boston and Provo in previous decades. The same year that the Church excommunicated the September Six, Brigham Young University denied a proposal to have the historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich present at its Women's Conference. Ulrich had been a prominent part of the Mormon feminist movement in Boston and received a PhD from the University of New Hampshire. Her work on colonial New England marked her as

13. Margaret Toscano, "Put on Your Strength, O Daughters of Zion': Claiming Priesthood and Knowing the Mother (1992)," in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, edited by Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 188.

an important scholar of early American material culture and women's lives.¹⁴

In choosing to discipline feminists like Margaret Toscano and Maxine Hanks, Church authorities demarcated the boundaries of acceptable Mormon thought. They suggested that scholars could not directly challenge the Church hierarchy or its emphasis on the traditional heterosexual family. Sara Patterson has written that excommunication allowed Mormon scholars to reject the association of adulthood with heterosexual timelines marked by marriage and reproduction.¹⁵ The non-Mormon scholar Sara Jaffe has argued that the milestones white Americans associate with adulthood are “based on outdated assumptions about class and gender.”¹⁶ Both authors use the term “queer time,” theorized by Jack Halberstam in the early 2000s, to represent a future in which heterosexual timelines no longer define individual lives.¹⁷ Toscano and others called for a radical reimagining of the Church that undid hierarchies so that men and women could flourish. They imagined a future in which marriage and family would not be the only meaningful demarcations of people's lives. In September 1993, however, the Church reasserted the importance of the family and submission to the Church hierarchy. The publication of the family proclamation two years later underscored this point.

The lack of women scholars that I saw at MHA in the 2010s seems to me directly related to these excommunications. Mormon studies already

14. “Brigham Young Rejects Pulitzer Prize Winner as Speaker,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* Feb. 24, 1993, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/brigham-young-rejects-pulitzer-prize-winner-as-speaker/>

15. Sara M. Patterson, “The *Straightjacket* of Times: Narrating D. Michael Quinn,” in *DNA Mormon: Perspectives on the Legacy of Historian D. Michael Quinn*, edited by Benjamin E. Park (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2022), 40.

16. Sara Jaffe, “Queer Time: The Alternative to ‘Adulthood,’” *JSTOR Daily*, Jan. 10, 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/queer-time-the-alternative-to-adulthood/>.

17. J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

offered few rewards to women. Although there were women faculty at BYU and within the Church History Department, hiring committees often preferred to give positions to men, whom they assumed were primary breadwinners and thus needed income to support their families. Women also faced limited opportunities for advancement within BYU and the Church History Department. The threat of excommunication made Mormon history even less attractive as an area of study. By the 2000s, it was apparent that there was a second “lost generation” within Mormon studies. This time it was made up not of novelists from the period following World War II but of the scholars who might have been if the Church had not excommunicated the September Six.¹⁸

The arrested development of Mormon feminism has been deeply painful for Mormon women. In preparation for this reflection, I spent several days reading the memoirs and blogs of Mormon feminists. So many of their stories are about the difficulty of fitting their lives into the narratives that the Church has written for them. In *East Winds*, for example, Rachel Rueckert describes the painful disjuncture that she felt between her desires for her life—which included traveling to India, walking the Camino de Santiago, and ultimately becoming a writer—and the expectation that she marry young.¹⁹ In some ways, Rueckert’s writing is a plea that she be allowed to play in “queer time”—to develop herself even if it comes at the expense of a traditional Mormon life. Likewise, a blogger at Feminist Mormon Housewives lamented in an essay on being a stay-at-home mother that she had never been encouraged to “[consider] anything else.” She found that the Church’s insistence that being a stay-at-home mother was the “best thing” for her children was a hollow promise. Although she wanted to fulfill the expectations others

18. For an article on the original “lost generation,” see Edward A. Geary, “Mormondom’s Lost Generation: The Novelists of the 1940s,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Jan. 1978): 89–98.

19. Rachel Rueckert, *East Winds: A Global Quest to Reckon with Marriage* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2022).

had for her, she found the thought that being a mother to small children was the “best thing” that would ever happen to her “depressing.”²⁰ She simply wanted more.

In addition to reading published narratives, I also asked Mormon women on Twitter what they felt was the biggest tension between their faith and their feminism. The people who answered expressed frustration with the limited vision that the Church offered them—a vision that they did not believe was in accordance with Mormon theology or scripture. One woman wrote that the Church’s theology offered women an opportunity to be “co-creators and co-equal gods” but was unable to fulfill the grandeur of those promises in everyday life. Instead of honoring the creative nature of female spirituality, the Church often “siloes” women and limited their power.²¹ Another woman saw the “logical conclusion” of Mormon doctrine as “full partnership and equality” for men and women. Instead of being offered a breathtaking vision of female potential, however, she found herself mired in a “sexist, patriarchal structure that defies both [Mormon] doctrines and the teachings of Christ.”²² I came to see these women as petitioners asking the Church to allow them to experience the fullness of the gospel. Latter-day Saint feminists have found themselves in an awkward position. Although they believe that the LDS gospel offers an expansive

20. Thunderchicken, “The Imbalance of Stay-at-Home Motherhood,” *Feminist Mormon Housewives* (blog), Mar. 23, 2015, <https://www.feministmormonhousewives.org/2015/03/the-imbalance-of-stay-at-home-motherhood/>.

21. Kristine A. (@_Kristine_A), “Our potential versus our reality. Co creators and co equal gods working together to plan form and create without false hierarchies imposed,” Twitter, Dec. 29, 2022, https://twitter.com/_Kristine_A/status/1608571589221814272.

22. Joy Grows (@thrifty_joy), “the biggest tension for me is that we don’t actually follow our doctrines to their logical conclusion—full partnership and equality,” Twitter, Dec. 28, 2022, https://twitter.com/thrifty_joy/status/1608302137468981248.

view of the eternities in which women have equal power to men, they find the current reality of the Church restrictive.

As an outsider to Mormonism, I hope that feminist scholarship continues to flourish—for personal as well as academic reasons. Because I cannot be excommunicated, I often comment on women's reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ issues in the LDS Church. But insiders need to be able to do this work as well. Of course, the excommunication of the September Six did not fully arrest the development of Mormon feminism or the study of Mormon women's history. The current generation of Mormon scholars has built upon their work. Scholars like Christine Talbot, Andrea Radke-Moss, and Rachel Cope have continued to write interesting books about Mormon history, even though they are some of just a few women doing so.²³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A House Full of Females* has shown scholars outside of Mormon studies what a close, careful analysis of polygamous family structures can tell us about nineteenth-century America.²⁴ Hannah Jung has examined how the federal government disciplined Mormon families using birth certificates, gossip, and formal legal structures.²⁵ Blaire Ostler and Taylor

23. Christine Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Political Culture, 1852–1890* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Andrea Radke-Moss, "We Also Marched: The Women and Children of Zion's Camp, 1834," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Jan. 2000): 147–65; Andrea Radke-Moss, "Silent Memories of Missouri: Mormon Women and Men and Sexual Assault in Group Memory and Religious Identity," in *Mormon Women's History: Beyond Biography*, edited by Rachel Cope, Amy Easton-Flake, Keith A. Erikson, and Lisa Olsen Tait (Lanham, Md.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017), 49–82; Rachel Cope and Zachary McLeod Hutchins, eds., *The Writings of Elizabeth Webb: A Quaker Missionary in America, 1697–1726* (State College: Penn State University Press, 2019).

24. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).

25. Hannah Jung is currently a PhD candidate at Brandeis University, where she is finishing a dissertation on secrecy within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Petrey have applied queer theory to the study of Mormonism.²⁶ Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Kristine Wright write beautifully about feminist theology and ritual practice.²⁷ Recently, the work of Elise Boxer, Farina King, Sujey Vega, and Janan Graham-Russell has challenged Mormon scholars to take a more intersectional approach to their studies and recognize the inflection of race in Mormon women's experiences.²⁸ Joanna Brooks, whose 2012 memoir *The Book of Mormon Girl* made her the face of Mormon feminism, has published extensively on the Church's role in promoting white supremacy and settler colonialism.²⁹ Kate Holbrook's work integrates material culture and food into the history of

26. Blaire Ostler, *Queer Mormon Theology: An Introduction* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2021); Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

27. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2017); Rachel Hunt Steenblik and Ashley Mae Hoiland, *I Gave Her a Name* (Newburgh, Ind.: By Common Consent Press, 2019); Jonathan A. Stapley and Kristine Wright, "Female Ritual Healing in Mormonism," *Journal of Mormon History* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1–85.

28. Elise Boxer, "'The Lamanites Shall Blossom as the Rose': The Indian Student Placement Program, Mormon Whiteness, and Indigenous Identity," *Journal of Mormon History* 41, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 132–76; Farina King, "Diné Doctor: A Latter-day Saint Story of Healing," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 81–85; Sujey Vega, "Intersectional Hermanas: LDS Latinas Navigate Faith, Leadership, and Sisterhood," *Latino Studies* 17, no. 1 (Mar. 2019): 27–47, and Janan Graham-Russell, "Roundtable: A Balm in Gilead: Reconciling Black Bodies within a Mormon Imagination," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (2018): 185–92.

29. Joanna Brooks, *The Book of Mormon Girl: A Memoir of An American Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Gina Colvin and Joanna Brooks, eds., *Decolonizing Mormonism: Approaching a Postcolonial Zion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018).

Mormon women, while others like Amy Hoyt and Melissa Inouye have expanded their studies beyond the United States.³⁰

When I first began studying Mormon history in the late 2000s, it seemed as though the Church was opening up its history. Other scholars frequently asked how the Church had responded to my scholarship. They assumed that the Church hierarchy would try to deny me access to the archives and limit my ability to ask important questions about race and sexuality. I told anyone who asked that I found the Church to be open and welcoming. Recently, however, I feel like the Church hierarchy is retrenching. Discussions of scholars being asked to make their research conform with LDS doctrine and calls for “musket fire” make me pause when I answer that question now.³¹ In the past, I felt as though the Church was completely open to discussing difficult questions, and the specter of the 1993 excommunications was receding. I’m not so sure anymore. It’s possible the September Six represent both the past and future of Mormon studies.

This saddens me. I want my Mormon sisters to have access to a fulfilling theology. While I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, my own

30. Kate Holbrook, “Radical Food: Nation of Islam and Latter-day Saint Culinary Ideals” (PhD diss., Boston University, 2014); Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye and Kate Holbrook, eds., *Every Needful Thing: Essays on the Life of the Mind and the Heart* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2023); Caroline Kline, *Mormon Women at the Crossroads: Global Narratives and the Power of Connectedness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2022); Amy Hoyt, “Maternal Practices as Religious Piety: The Pedagogical Practices of American Mormon Women” in *Women and Christianity*, edited by Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Karen Jo Torjesen (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2009).

31. Tamarra Kemsley, “BYU Faculty Members Urged to Align Their Teaching, Research Better with LDS Tenets,” *Salt Lake City Tribune*, Jan. 29, 2023, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2023/01/29/byu-faculty-urged-align-their/>; Haley Swenson, “Crushingly Cruel,” *Slate*, Sept. 3, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/09/mormon-lds-church-gay-rights-controversy-byu-speech.html>.

church congregation called a divorced single mother as our pastor. Because I had grown up in conservative southeastern Idaho, I had few examples of female spirituality or leadership as a child. As a child of divorced parents, I believed my family was broken. In my new pastor's sermons, she spoke about the pain of her husband's rejection and the peace that she found in a gospel that promised she was loved in her imperfection. She talked about the challenges of being a single mother and the difficulty she had in seeing herself as beautiful. She saw me in my uncertainty and assured me that I was loved as I was. Her words were gospel for me in a way that no man's could have been.

Mormon theology offers a similarly empowering vision to its women members. For some women, Rachel Hunt Steenblik's poetry has captured their experience of hungering after God. She describes women as searching for God "the way a baby roots for her mother's breast."³² This vision is somewhat limited. It does not necessarily capture the experiences of childless, queer, or trans women, or even women who find breastfeeding to be an awkward, cumbersome experience. For many women, however, reading Steenblik's poetry is an experience in being "seen." The threat of Church discipline, however, is always present. As I read the memoirs, poetry, and tweets of Mormon feminists, what I want most for them is a church that recognizes their prayers and their activism as a fundamental part of the kingdom of God rather than a challenge to the Church hierarchy and potential disciplinary council.

32. Steenblik, *Mother's Milk*, 148.

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MIRACLES UPON MIRACLES FOR MAHER

Thora Qaddumi

Many years ago, my husband was saved by a series of remarkable events. Or miracles? Our international Muslim and Mormon family, which now includes four adult children, their spouses, and a growing number of grandchildren, continues to celebrate life while still being amazed by what took place in 1978.

That summer, my husband Maher (a Palestinian Muslim I'd met in college) and I decided to take our son Anan, eleven, and daughter Halla, eight, on a vacation to Guatemala.

We drove from our home in Houston to take a flight from New Orleans. From our hotel in Guatemala City, we set out in a rented car to Chichicastenango, where we explored the bustling crafts market with colorfully dressed vendors.

The next day (Friday), we drove to Panajachel on Lake Atitlan, which some have called the most beautiful lake in the world, ringed by volcanos and Mayan villages. We thought of taking a boat tour the next day to some of the villages, which are named for Jesus' twelve disciples.

Looking from our hotel room window out across the lake, we got the idea instead to drive around the lake and watch the sunset from the top of a small volcanic mound named Cerro de Oro.

The road we took got increasingly rough. Eventually, it was more of a trail than a road. There were no other cars. At one point, the bottom of the car was scraping the ground, so Anan, Halla, and I got out and walked alongside.

The sun was about to set when we parked and began our climb up the volcanic mound. From a distance, probably less than a mile down the “road,” we could hear faint sounds of life in a Mayan village.

Maher and Anan hurried up the mountain. Halla and I, wearing sandals, trailed behind. It became apparent that there wasn’t much of a path. Maher and Anan started climbing over big rocks.

I shouted to Maher, who was far ahead: “It’s getting dark. Halla and I are going back to the car.”

Maher yelled back, “We’re almost to the top. We’re going to make it.”

Then I heard a yell and a crash. Maher had fallen.

It was clear that we were in serious trouble. Maher was out of sight but within shouting distance. He could not walk at all. I instructed Anan to stay with his father and told him that Halla and I would run to the village for help. The car keys were with Maher.

Anan shouted that Maher was not bleeding badly but would need to be carried down the mountain. If I could bring rescuers, he could direct them to his injured father.

It got dark very quickly. I started running toward the village and, almost immediately, stumbled and fell. I felt my ankle twist and was shocked to realize that I couldn’t put any weight on it. It was badly sprained.

My only alternative, it seemed, was to send my sweet, timid little eight-year-old daughter alone, down the dark path to the village to get help.

Halla started out, but it quickly became clear that this was too much to ask of her. She started to cry, and I told her to come back—I’d go with her, leaning on her and hopping on one foot.

I’d hopped only a few yards when I saw the lights of a car approaching our parked car. I was thrilled when the driver stopped and I discovered that he was a pharmacist from Guatemala City. He was on his way to meet relatives at their vacation home a short distance away. And he could speak English!

“I was hours and hours late. I kept having delays,” he said later. “Now I know why. I believe God caused me to arrive when I did so I could be there to help you.”

We had been traveling on the rough road to Cerro de Oro for hours, and this was the only other car to come down it.

Our rescuer drove to his cabin and got his brother. They went to the village and returned with about eight Indigenous men ready to carry Maher off the mountain—three or four men on each side. One walked in front, clearing vegetation with a machete.

They put Maher and Anan in the back of our rescuer’s car. Maher was alert and seemed to be in good condition except for his foot, which flopped unnaturally. It wasn’t bleeding much. Our rescuer said he would drive his car to get medical help and his brother would follow, driving our rental car, with Halla and me.

At the first village we reached, we found a person who bandaged Maher’s ankle.

At the second village, we found someone who gave him a shot of antibiotics.

In the third village, we found an ambulance. Maher would not reach a hospital in Guatemala City until about ten hours after he fell.

As we drove to each village, we found ourselves farther and farther away from our hotel in Panajachel, where we’d left everything we’d brought to Guatemala, including our passports. I’d have to take Anan and Halla and drive the car I thought I couldn’t drive to the hotel in the middle of the night, on dark, narrow, winding mountain roads, with a sprained ankle. At daybreak Saturday I’d have to drive to Guatemala City and find Maher in the hospital.

At the hotel in Guatemala City, I showed the desk clerk a note with the name and address of the hospital where Maher had been sent. I was surprised when he had no knowledge of the hospital. I got more concerned when our taxi driver had trouble finding it. Why hadn’t Maher been sent to the country’s largest, best-known hospital?

The hospital listed on the note I'd been given in the village the night before looked like a big, old house that had been converted for medical use. When I entered, leaning on my children due to my sprained ankle, attendants thought I'd come for treatment for myself. I said "esposo" (husband) and what I thought was a Spanish version of "ambulance" to no effect. There was a book that appeared to list admittances behind the reception desk. I grabbed it and pointed to Maher's name.

We were relieved to find him in bed, looking comfortable, with his foot in a cast. He said that, upon arrival, he was taken into surgery, where the doctor removed a piece of bone, and that he was fine. The doctor had told Maher (whose Spanish is better than mine) that the wound was very dirty but that he had cleaned it up the best that he could.

"Maybe this is like when a skier breaks a bone, spends a couple of days sitting in the lodge, and returns home wearing a cast," I thought.

I started to worry after Maher asked me to bring a pan of hot water to him so that he could shave and I realized I'd have to get the water from the kitchen, where it was being heated on the stove. Then, when we were discussing whether we should continue with our plan to take an airplane tour to Mayan ruins in a couple of days, someone walked into the room carrying a glass jar with a large, angular bone in it, suspended in liquid. I took one look and felt ill.

"That's not a piece of bone," I said. "That looks like an entire ankle bone."

Why was Maher in this hospital? What had happened to him? Should we stay in Guatemala so that he could recuperate before traveling or should I change our tickets and get him home as soon as possible?

I couldn't communicate with the doctors. We didn't know anyone in Guatemala. I said to Maher, "We need help. Would it be okay if I contact the Mormon Church?"

There was a telephone book in the room, and, using my knowledge of the Spanish words for "church," "Jesus Christ," and "Saints," I found

several listings for “La Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Últimos Días” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).

Additionally, Maher knew the phone number of one of his best friends in Houston, Dr. Abdel-Kader Fustok, who is a plastic surgeon, and told me to call him. I could explain what I knew about Maher’s accident and have Dr. Fustok make arrangements for medical treatment in Houston.

The children and I returned to the hotel so that I could make these phone calls. I reached Dr. Fustok first. There was no answer at any of the numbers listed for the Church, so I decided to take a taxi to all of the addresses and leave notes on the doors, asking for help.

Before leaving, I also tried phoning the American embassy. I was relieved when I heard the person on the other end speaking English with an American accent. He said the embassy would be able to help us—but now, on Saturday, they were closed. I should call first thing Monday morning.

“I just came in to clean my desk,” he said. “The phone rang, so I answered it.”

He asked if we knew anyone in Guatemala.

“I’m trying to contact someone from my church, but I haven’t been able to reach anyone,” I said.

I told him it was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

“Your mission president was here a couple of days ago. He’s a retired doctor,” the embassy worker said. “He left his card with me. It’s right here on my desk. I can give you his home address and phone number.”

There was no answer when I called the mission president’s home, so I brought the children and took a taxi there, planning to leave a note on his door.

When we arrived, we found that the mission president was at a conference but that his wife had returned home. She said she would send two missionaries with me to the hospital and that her husband would visit Maher in the hospital the next day.

The missionaries—Americans who spoke Spanish—provided comforting news about the hospital. They understood why Maher had been sent there. It was a hospital of specialists, including an orthopedic surgeon.

The next day (Sunday), the mission president, Dr. Willard I. Skousen, came to the hospital and reviewed the X-rays of Maher's injury. He said that the ankle bone had essentially been "amputated" by the accident itself. The Guatemalan doctor had finished removing the bone, cleaned up the wound, reattached the foot, and put on the cast.

The mission president's only question to me was, "What do you need?" I believe the steps he took next saved Maher's life.

After conferring with Dr. Skousen, I realized it would be best to do whatever I could to get Maher back to Houston as soon as possible, but, due in part to his comforting words, I didn't feel the situation was urgent.

This conviction came after Maher's brother, Hisham, started calling me every few minutes. I felt that, regardless of whether it was vital to get Maher back to Houston, I simply had to get him on the first available flight to satisfy Hisham. He is a man who won't take "no" for an answer.

When Maher had his accident, Hisham, who lived in Qatar and worked as a technical advisor for the emir, happened to be traveling in the United States with Middle Eastern government dignitaries. He learned that his brother was in danger from their cousin, Saud Abu Kishk, who also lived in Qatar but was visiting with his family in Houston at the time. And Saud learned about the accident from Dr. Fustok. This happened through a series of amazing coincidences.

Shortly after I'd called Dr. Fustok about the accident, Saud happened to take his son in to seek medical advice about a strange growth on his tongue.

"How is Maher doing?" Dr. Fustok asked Saud.

"He's having a great time in Guatemala," Saud replied.

“No, he isn’t,” Dr. Fustok said and told Saud about the accident. The fact that the doctor in Guatemala had said that the wound was very dirty was alarming, he explained. It was vital that Mike receive treatment in the States, and there was no time to spare.

Saud immediately decided to contact Maher’s brother, who he knew was in San Francisco with the delegation. He got on the phone and called every first-class hotel in San Francisco until he found him. Hisham went into action, trying to get a visa so he could fly to Guatemala immediately (not possible), attempting to get a private plane to bring Maher back (very difficult to arrange on short notice), and calling me repeatedly to insist that I get Maher home immediately.

I slept little Sunday night. Very early Monday—about 5:30 a.m.—I left the children asleep in our hotel and took a taxi to the mission president’s home, planning to ask for help in getting Maher on the first direct flight to Houston.

Dr. Skousen came to the door, wide awake and dressed. He had investigated the possibility of a private flight and had, like Hisham, given up on the idea. He said the best alternative was to get Maher on the only commercial direct flight to Houston, a Pan American flight leaving at 9:00 a.m. that morning.

There were several problems: The flight was full. The only person who could authorize “bumping” passengers was the president of Pan American for Central America. He was out of the country and couldn’t be reached. Emergency arrangements could be made for only the patient and one attendant, not the whole family. The banks wouldn’t open until 10:00 a.m. The plane would leave before I could get \$1,500 in cash to pay the hospital and secure Maher’s release.

Dr. Skousen had answers for all of these problems. He said, “The mission will pay your hospital bill. The hospital will take our check. You can give me a check.” He said, “I’ve sent missionaries to the airport to intercept the president of Pan Am. He’ll be flying in and we’ll get him to sign the authorization to bump the passengers before the flight

to Houston leaves. You and your husband can go to the airport in an ambulance. My wife will be at the hospital with her car and will drive you if there's any problem getting an ambulance." He had stationed missionaries at the airport to receive Anan and Halla and arranged for me to go with Maher in the ambulance. We'd all meet at the airport.

There wasn't much time. I called my eleven-year-old son at the hotel, woke him up, and told him, "You and Halla need to get dressed quickly. Bring your and Daddy's passports but leave everything else at the hotel. Go to the front of the hotel, get a taxi, and tell the driver to take you to the airport. Two missionaries wearing white shirts and name tags are waiting to meet you and pay the taxi driver. You will be flying to Houston as Daddy's attendant. In Houston, there will be an ambulance for Daddy and people to meet you. Halla will stay in Guatemala with me until we can get home."

The arrangements made by the mission president went like clockwork. Dr. Skousen dealt with the hospital. I hurried to Maher's room and told him, "You're going home right now."

At the airport, we literally ran through the terminal, pushing Maher in a wheelchair, and he and Anan made the flight.

I breathed a big sigh of relief. I felt that Maher would be fine if I could just get him home. Halla's and my flight, leaving the next day, would go through El Salvador to New Orleans, where we had left our car.

I wasn't told officially until I finally reached the hospital in Houston that Maher's leg had been amputated. But I had figured it out when I reached his cousin Abed on the phone from New Orleans and asked how Maher was.

"He has had the best doctors and they've done everything they could," Abed said.

I later learned that, by the time Maher and Anan reached Houston, Maher had a high fever. He was transported to the hospital by ambulance and seen by specialists. However, as Dr. Fustok had feared, gangrene had set in under the cast.

It was necessary to amputate his leg below the knee. If he had arrived the next day, he would have lost his entire leg. If we'd delayed two days, he would have been too ill to fly. He would have had to undergo the amputation in Guatemala.

We've been told that Maher irreparably damaged his foot when he had the accident. With such an injury, the only way to save it is to get to a good hospital immediately. There is a very good chance that were it not for the combination of blessings and miracles or amazing coincidences that took place after Maher's accident, he would have died.

We were thankful he had survived. His hospital room was filled with flowers and visitors. And he was a model patient.

After waiting for the wound to heal, Maher got his artificial leg and immediately booked a flight to Palestine, where his father was hospitalized with terminal cancer. Remarkably, Maher was able to walk so naturally that there was no sign of his disability. He never told his father about the accident.

Many people who have known Maher for years are surprised to learn he has an artificial leg. He has continued with the same spirit—not complaining and quietly adjusting to limitations such as difficulty walking long distances. He enjoys life to the fullest. We all feel blessed.

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Susana Silva,
Jaredite Journey: 344 Days, 2020,
hand-cut paper, 25.5" x 27.5"

EVE'S CHOICE

Erika Munson

We understand the controversial nature of the problem. Millions of Americans believe that life begins at conception and consequently that an abortion is akin to causing the death of an innocent child; they recoil at the thought of a law that would permit it. Other millions fear that a law that forbids abortion would condemn many American women to lives that lack dignity, depriving them of equal liberty and leading those with least resources to undergo illegal abortions with the attendant risks of death and suffering.

—From Justice Stephen Breyer's majority opinion in Stenberg v. Carhart in 2000. The ruling struck down a Nebraska law that made performing a "partial-birth abortion" illegal.

When a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the prejudices, the limitations, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker.

—Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

All the cousins knew Aunt Marla's story. Her doctors in Salt Lake City said it was unlikely she could survive a pregnancy. So she and Uncle Bill adopted two beautiful children. Then, several years later, Marla had an unplanned pregnancy. Her obstetrician refused to consider an abortion, even though keeping the baby to term might result in her preventable death and two motherless kids. Bed rest. Lots of worry. Plenty of anger directed at our very own LDS Church.

But Betsy was born. She was dangerously premature—especially so for those days. Everyone said that at birth she could have fit on a dinner plate (an image that haunted my young imagination). She wasn't expected to survive. But she did. Perfect, whole, healthy.



Figure 1: Michelangelo, Eve, detail from *The Creation of Adam*, 1508–1512. Public domain.

This story isn't going where you think it is. It would be understandable if Betsy herself had become an argument, an important family story, that challenged abortion. But somehow it never did. The grown-ups we kids looked up to—our parents and grandparents—were New Deal Democrats. Some had broken with the Church. Some, like my parents, were weaving their LDS faith with progressive politics in an unconventional way. We felt the gratitude they all had for the miracle that was Betsy, but we also sensed their sorrow and anger for the horrible trap Marla and Bill were in before their daughter's birth. Hypocritical? It didn't feel like that to us. Several years later, my family moved to the East Coast, where my father, a physician by training, had left his practice to become dean of admissions at Harvard College. On a car trip home from summer vacation, I remember my parents discussing the recent *Roe v. Wade* decision. As my mother drove, my father turned to us kids in the back of the station wagon (wriggling around as usual in those pre-seat belt days). Suddenly somber, he looked us in the eyes and his features sharpened. "An abortion is a very sad thing." He paused, bracing himself. "But a child coming into this world unwanted is tragic."

It is in this context that I grew up a faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Despite being at odds with the

Church's mostly male leadership who considered abortion "one of the most revolting and sinful practices in this day,"¹ my parents found deep satisfaction and belonging in our faith community. They taught by example how to walk with my coreligionists, especially when I disagreed with them. They encouraged me to turn to my own spiritual experiences and the fundamentals of LDS doctrine when I had questions, when I felt alone in my interpretation of God's will. Our religion has not historically been a very big tent, but a small and hardy band of politically progressive Latter-day Saints (who frequently quarrel with one another) continue to hold some space inside that tent like our hero Senator Harry Reid did. And now, as a powerful alliance of my fellow citizens, elected officials, and Supreme Court justices have begun returning us to the circumstances my aunt faced in the 1960s, I have been thinking about why I persist in the conviction, based upon my faith, that a woman's right to control her reproductive destiny is a sacred thing.

In LDS doctrine, Eve is the hero of the Eden story. The way we tell it, she and Adam were given conflicting commandments: multiply and replenish the earth, yet stay away from the tree of knowledge. They couldn't do both. So Eve sacrificed the static peace of the garden for the messy growth that only mortality—including the bearing of children—could provide. Ironically, we believe that Satan's attempt to corrupt humanity actually put us on a path toward salvation. We fell forward. Latter-day Saints give Eve full credit for making the right choice, even though this was God's plan all along. The current president of the LDS Church, Russell M. Nelson (who, like his predecessors, teaches that most abortions are sinful), put it this way: "We and all mankind are forever blessed because of Eve's great courage and wisdom. By partaking of

1. Spencer W. Kimball, "Guidelines to Carry Forth the Work of God in Cleanliness," Apr. 1974, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1974/04/guidelines-to-carry-forth-the-work-of-god-in-cleanliness?lang=eng>.

the fruit first, she did what needed to be done. Adam was wise enough to do likewise.”²

The first reproductive choice I made was deeply informed by my spiritual life.

My adolescence was blessed by the example of women in our congregation who joyfully raised large families while skillfully attending to their personal growth. True to my comfort with juxtaposition, I married my boyfriend (he converted to Mormonism) while still an undergraduate at Harvard. Our friends just shook their heads. This was the eighties: *no one* was getting married. But Shipley and I were all in: living an off-campus *Love Story* plot without the tragic ending. Also unlike most others in my cohort, I wanted babies—lots of them—ASAP, even though I didn’t have a clue as to what my career goals were.

But motivated procreators though we were, my husband and I were realistic; we couldn’t afford a child right away. I’d get my BA, support him through graduate school, and then we’d start a family.

A few months into graduate school, my husband reported a vivid dream. He was sitting in an assembly of some kind in the upper room of the iconic LDS temple in Salt Lake City, the holiest of places where we make covenants with God and honor our ancestors. In the dream, everyone was dressed in white. It gradually dawned on my husband that the man sitting next to him was the president of our church at the time—our prophet, seer, and revelator Spencer W. Kimball. The old man turned to my husband, put his hand on his knee, and in his trademark gravelly voice said, “You know, I think it’s time you and Erika start a family.”

That was all it took. We stopped the birth control and figured the Lord would provide. What we didn’t know was that it would take us almost two years to get pregnant. Our first child arrived six months

2. Russell M. Nelson, “Constancy amid Change,” Oct. 1993, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1993/10/constancy-amid-change?lang=eng>.

after my husband's graduation, at which point we had a good salary and health insurance.

The irony that I was completely receptive to a man's dream about a man's instructions concerning what my man-God thought best is not lost on me. But more important to me than the gender of the messengers was the experience of God speaking to me about my unique situation, a basic tenet of Latter-day Saint doctrine. The good news that "the heavens were not closed" is an essential part of our religion's origin story. Farm boy Joseph Smith took to heart a scripture from the Book of James and went to the woods to ask God a question about which church he should join.

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.³

When Joseph Smith walked out of those woods, he later reported a vision: God had a glorified body of flesh and bones. Like the heretical Christian mystics of centuries ago, Latter-day Saints embrace *imago Dei*, humans in the image of God, as an all-encompassing principle. Not only are our intellect and spirits divine, but we believe our bodies are as well and have the potential to be glorified in the hereafter. We go so far as to believe that ultimately, in the world beyond this one, we have the capacity to become gods. This doctrine, while understandably troubling to many Christian faiths, abides deeply in me. "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be," proclaimed church President Lorenzo Snow in the 1880s.⁴ So what we learn from God about the bearing and raising of children in this life, we consider a prelude to becoming godlike creators in the hereafter.

3. James 1:5.

4. Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884), 46. See also *The Teachings of Lorenzo Snow*, edited by Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 1–9.

Human agency, access to divine inspiration, and the holy responsibility of bringing children into this world: these are core LDS beliefs that, when it comes to abortion, result in my struggle with the institutional LDS Church.

On a balmy September evening in 2020, a text popped up from my neighbor Anne: *I need to talk about abortion*. She suggested a walk with me and our friend Katherine. My husband and I had just tuned in to the first US presidential debate of that election and the shouting had begun. I was happy to leave.

We three women are in the same congregation. I'm an old mom with adult kids and grandkids; Katherine has four school-age children. She leans left politically, and as we started talking, she expressed her frustration with pro-life stances that don't include government support for low-income, single parents. Anne is younger, a doting mother to three-year-old Jacob. He was now thriving, but this little boy had spent six scary weeks in the hospital close to death with a respiratory condition. Anne and her husband dearly hoped for a second child but were unsure if that would ever happen. She was torn. She wanted to support women in the awful place of an unwanted pregnancy; her Christian principles informed her reluctance to shame or blame. But those same principles celebrated the magnificence of God's creation—even his potential creation. It was very hard for her to feel okay about easy access to abortion. She was a careful consumer of social media but couldn't ignore the horror stories she'd read online about late-term procedures.

As Katherine and I listened to Anne, we all felt gratitude for that moment. In contrast to the campaign vitriol that was being broadcast, streamed, memed, and tweeted in real time, we could show up in real life for each other. As the sky darkened and the stars emerged, I talked about my miscarriages: sad, early-week interludes during my childbearing years. I remember my private panic at a Christmas party when I discovered I was bleeding. Once home, I lay in bed with the quilt my mother had bought for her anticipated grandchild. When I closed my eyes, I saw a female spirit leave my presence and return to some cosmic



Figure 2: Our family, Christmas Day, 2021. Photo by Sadie Dolbin Brower, with permission.

waiting room—a cartoonish yet comforting vision. I was spared the deep sorrow that others endure; at that time, I had two little boys who were keeping our family humming. It took another year for my daughter to arrive, then our third son, then another miscarriage (this time on Thanksgiving), and at the end of a sixteen-year reproductive run, our second daughter, baby number five.

We stopped in the dark at a playground, and the lights blinked on. I remembered another story, one unique to my faith tradition. In the Book of Mormon (LDS scripture as opposed to the Broadway musical) there is a scene where Christ speaks to a prophet named Nephi on the American continent. Nephi has been praying for his people, who are under death threat for believing the prophecies of Jesus' imminent birth on the other side of the world. Nephi is comforted when he hears the voice of the Lord saying, "be of good cheer . . . on the morrow come I into the world."⁵ Jesus the spirit speaks to Nephi, while Jesus the unborn

5. 3 Nephi 1:13.

awaits birth in Bethlehem. I explained to my friends that this story resonates with my own experience of bringing children into the world. Mortal incarnation is a process, not a moment. It belongs to me and my God.

When we three parted that night, we hadn't convinced each other of anything except that this time together was precious.

Last December, as I was preparing our empty nest for the Christmastime return of children and grandchildren, I found myself in need of something heavy to flatten out the curving edge of a basement rug. I turned to a shelf of neglected college books and found *Michelangelo, the Painter* by Valerio Mariani. It is a comprehensive tome, much of its attention given to the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The book gave a satisfying thump as I dropped it onto the carpet, the perfect tool for the job. It lay there, weighing down the carpet for a week until, prompted by my recent search for understanding around creation, I lugged the book upstairs.

Curling up in my reading chair, I opened the book on my lap. Carefully turning the pages, I made my way through colorplate after colorplate to *The Creation of Adam*, an image that has become iconic in Western culture. The Lord is on the move through the cosmos to bring life to Adam. The wind blows back God's hair and beard. His celestial

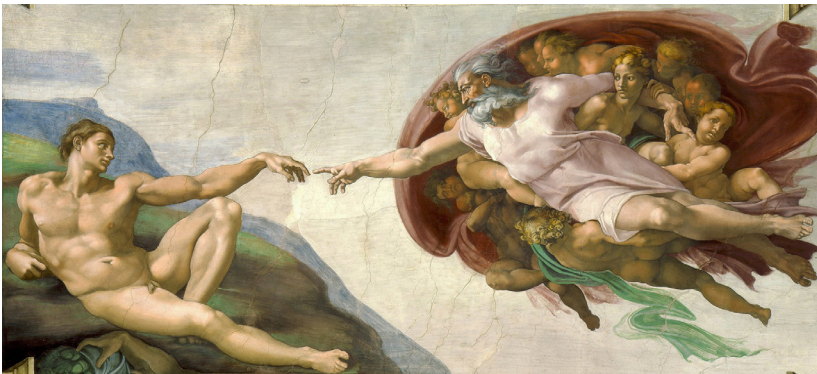


Figure 3: Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508–1512. Public domain.

clothing ripples. Bearing him up and attending to his royal drapery, seraphim and cherubim play entourage.

I have always loved this painting for its contrast: God's overflowing force of creation approaches Adam's lifeless body. Adam's delicate, downturned hand awaits quickening. But this time around, I saw more. Adam's body lies in beautiful Renaissance repose, yes, but lifeless? No. His muscles are defined; his flesh is the same golden chiaroscuro tones as the Lord's. Adam's eyes do not stare blankly; he's looking straight at God. Certainly his heart is beating. Yet just as certainly, something is still missing. Although Adam's body looks youthful and strong, he has no soul.

I look back at God and his crew. Tucked under his arm is a figure different from the angels. A mature woman. It's Eve, and she's playing close attention to God's outstretched hand. It is as if he has told her, "Watch how I do this; it's going to be your job from now on." Her eyes are fixed on the most famous detail of this fresco: the fingers that almost touch. Tonight, I am drawn to the space between the fingers: the space between God and the fully incarnate human. I believe that space belongs to women. It is heartbreaking when the state lays claim to it.

I am grateful for the early training I received in managing the tension between my personal spiritual experiences and whatever the current policies of my church may be. I've been at this way too long to abandon either my politics or my church. And at this polarized time in American history, people like me—pro-choice members of conservative faith communities—have a special role to play. We can bear witness



Figure 4:
Michelangelo,
detail from *The
Creation of Adam*.
Public domain.



Figure 5: Giovanni Bellini, *Sacra Conversazione*, from the San Zaccaria Altarpiece, 1505. Public domain.

to the sanctity of female reproductive agency, not in spite of but because of our religion. We can march, fund, and vote in the public square. But it is crucial that we do all these things while staying in relationship with our pro-life brothers, sisters, and siblings within and without our churches. We do this best the way we always have: by serving, praying, and caring together. Like saints in a Renaissance painting who gather round an altar, we must engage in holy conversation, pondering God's will for a mother and a child.

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SOME DEFINITIONS OF GRATITUDE

Elizabeth Cranford Garcia

On our ride home from my brother's house last Easter Sunday, having spent a few hours basking in our blessings of atonement and progeny, we pass an accident on the interstate. I say *accident*, though what we distinguish through the blur of cars and parked fire trucks is no fender bender, but a barely recognizable clump of metal embracing a tree like some sparkly trash blown to the roadside. There is a sudden awareness of fact like a sucker punch—*surely someone has died here*—that triggers the memory of our own close call almost eight years ago now: the moment I hung sideways, still buckled in the passenger seat of our crumpled car, listening for my children's screams that would let me know they were okay—still hungry, still terrified from floating into the median in a deluge, hitting a tree and careening sideways, an apocalypse their little bodies could only perceive but not comprehend—*Yes, they are crying! They are fine! We are both fine, we are all alive and fine—there is something protruding from my leg, but I am fine, I hear their voices praise heaven and all the possible names of God and every feathered angel!*

There is something about merit in that moment your mind wants to unravel—*why didn't we die?*—but the moments carry you forward into tasks: *call an ambulance, grab what you can from the car—please, my baby, you have to push the red button to release the car seat harness, please—thank you, no, I can't put weight on my foot—we'll need to call the insurance company, to call my mother, to cancel the vacation rental—let me try to nurse him before the ambulance comes, he's so hungry and scared!* There is a current to your life, carrying you through the temporary living arrangements and the gathering of things. It murmurs to you like the stream in a primary song—*of course*. It says *no other outcome*,

even if possible, is probable; it is a law of nature that carries you forward the way water buoys your blessed raft, swiftly toward a rock, and will inevitably skirt you at the last moment around it.

So when you talk back to this voice, when you tell yourself repeatedly that *God owes me nothing, I don't deserve this, survival surely isn't something that is earned*—you ponder whose hands have spared you— young and old, black and white, male and female, the swarm of people who stopped in the rain, in the dark, to gather you all up—God-sent people, no doubt, now departed for their various random destinations, whom you will now never have the chance to adequately thank. Is it enough, then, to quietly acknowledge God's hand? Still, a thought troubles you, like a sock bunched in your shoe, saying *This is woefully inadequate. What you ought to feel should be as vast as the space of your own vulnerability.*

Your mind nags you to go back, to return to the place in the woods where two paths diverged, to travel along that other road, notice all the side tracks, imagine every scenario that could have happened—*What if there was another car involved, another family's death? What if there were no other cars, no witnesses? What if this had occurred thirty miles sooner in the middle of the empty coastal Georgia plain where the radio stations amount to hiss and sputter?* It wants to name all the ways one or more of you could now be dead; surely this will summon the requisite feeling at which you have not yet fully arrived, the state of gratitude you believe is expected of you.

So in the months of recovery that follow—caring for your two small children in your parents' tiny house with the use of one good leg, your infant cycling through yet another round of sleep regression, his cries echoing through every chamber of that 1970s prefab home, so that your only hope for anyone's rest is to let him suckle to sleep in your arms every night, undoing all the previous months of effort to get him to sleep in his own crib—if some ecstasy isn't summoned, some daily sublime prostration does not occur before God, but merely

the knowledge of yet another debt you could never attempt to repay, does your knowledge of this chasm of indebtedness qualify as gratitude, when you know, had any other outcome occurred, you would have lost yourself in another chasm of loss? Is it even possible to feel a joy as profound as the grief and utter despair you would have felt if you had lost one of them, knowing that its bottom would have been far deeper, the pit of bodily torment exponentially darker than any puny relief you now feel that you are trying to label gratitude? Does standing at its edge and looking down into it, feeling its vertigo and infinite buckling—could this be called gratitude?

And if you could find the missing ingredient, could satisfy this need you feel to identify it—would this stave off the threat you feel, the fear that not having it would somehow ensure the hammer of God's justice the next time you came this close? This is what eats at you: that despite your awareness of this current of momentum of the living you know you are taking for granted, all your imagined prostrations still occur before a God who holds a hammer, a gavel, not one who, like the stranger whose face you can't remember, held out his hand to lift you, broken, from the car, carried you in his arms out of the downpour to safety.

So which is the face of God you want to believe in? What does it take to let go of this small obsession with surviving it the right way, this need for insurance, like the right papers in your pocket for the next checkpoint on the straight and narrow? Is it enough to settle into the daily joys and frustrations of nursing and napping and cleaning your children, knowing what could have been, rather than requiring yourself to place your soul on some other imagined altar of penitence for the feeling you think you lack? Would that lack not be covered by the mercy that stayed Abraham's knife?

As I watch my now seven-year-old boy move through his daily habits—leaving his afternoon cereal bowl on the table, milk pooled under the spoon that will surely gel into a sticky mess later, the bag

of cereal loose from the box, the milk jug's cap missing—aware of the rising tide in me that will not allow these small crimes to go unnoticed or unaccounted for, I am aware of the expanse of difference between my petty knee-jerk reactions to his sins and the infinite love I know defines our God, grateful—yes, I will choose to call it that—that He is something more than I could create from my own pitiful projections of fear and justice. That whatever capacity I have—or lack—to conjure up the awareness of His love, it can (I pray) be swallowed up completely by that love.

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QUESTIONING THE IMMORALITY OF COFFEE

Sherrae Phelps

In 1967, Kathrine Switzer became the first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon. Before that, women weren't allowed to enter marathons. There's an iconic photo of Switzer just a few miles into the race when a race official realized that she's a woman. He physically tried to remove her from the course, running after her in his sports jacket, buttoned-up shirt, and slacks, reaching out with his hands to grab her. The photo freezes the look of disgust and determination on his face. People today look at that photo and immediately see the absurdity of banning women from participating in a marathon. But the closer you get to the time period when that photo was taken, the more likely you are to find people who didn't think it was so absurd. It's highly probable that there were men *and* women at the time who were appalled not at the man trying to pull her off the course but at Switzer for running the marathon in the first place. It's not that people today are more enlightened and open-minded, it's simply that people today are so far removed from that cultural and societal norm that its blinding effect has no power over them.

Challenging the social, cultural, and religious norms of your time is far more difficult than challenging the norms of the past. This is in part because the norms of your time are readily accepted as correct, superior, and honorable. Our norms have a way of distorting our ability to accurately judge what is and isn't morally good.

Similarly, defensively sheltering religious practices from scrutiny and criticism limits one's ability to see things as they really are. Making room to listen to and understand scrutiny and criticism does not

contaminate truth—it reveals truth. Even religious views at their best have the possibility of being flawed and imperfect. If we are unwilling to wade into the discomfort of an honest examination of religious ideas, then we are confining ourselves to a limited understanding of truth.

Religious practices can play a significant role in one's moral development, but tragically, they are often used to outwardly measure one's devotion and loyalty to their religious organization rather than to foster moral and spiritual development. Focusing on organizational loyalty corrupts and dilutes the power of the religious practices and diminishes their ability to augment development. When Christ taught that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27), he was reminding the people that the role of religious practices is to contribute to one's moral and spiritual development, not to measure one's loyalty to religion. Too often, religions are given diplomatic immunity freeing them from having their practices questioned and evaluated, even by devout practitioners. One of religion's most effective tools to eliminate scrutiny is to identify the scrutinizer as being influenced by the devil.

Looking at the religious practice of abstaining from drinking coffee under a moral microscope can be very distressing and disorienting for someone whose religious norms incorporate the Word of Wisdom. Sometimes our cultural and religious norms have become such an integral part of who we are that closely examining those norms is much like trying to look out a windshield that has become frosted over. It takes some scraping before you can see more clearly, and even then, a residual fog can still obstruct your view. This is not to discredit religious norms and suggest that they all lack goodness. It is simply acknowledging the difficulty in examining our religious norms. In part, it is challenging because it requires that we confront our egos and biases that can skew the truth.

Within the Church, we say that by drinking coffee, you are rebelling against the words of the prophet and therefore against God. If you are

a member of the Church and you choose to drink coffee, then you do not qualify to receive a temple recommend. Are you really going to let a cup of coffee keep you out of the celestial kingdom?¹

But what is it about drinking coffee that makes it so harmful and threatening to our spiritual and moral development? Is drinking coffee immoral? Is it bad? Is it wrong? Is it a sin? Or is it just unacceptable? Can abstaining from coffee contribute to our moral and spiritual development?

The overarching principle of the Word of Wisdom wakes us up to our responsibility to care for our bodies through making wise choices about what we eat and drink, acknowledging that the way we treat our bodies plays a significant role in our emotional and spiritual development. We can get so focused on minute details like coffee that we completely downplay the value that the Word of Wisdom is offering us. Ironically, we might pride ourselves on being vigilant in abstaining from coffee while turning a blind eye to our indulgence with other food and drink, even when that indulgence is having a noticeable negative impact on our health. In my view, the Word of Wisdom isn't about abstaining from coffee, it's about being wise stewards of our bodies.

From my perspective, there isn't anything special about coffee that makes it immoral to drink, but rather it is our relationship with coffee, and with everything we consume, that can make food or drink spiritually destructive. Coffee creates a harmful impact on our emotional and spiritual development in the same way that any food can be harmful when it is used to manage emotions rather than confronting them. Coffee and all other food and drinks that are consumed out of unbridled indulgence will have a negative impact on your health and your emotional well-being.

1. See Julie B. Beck, "Remembering, Repenting, and Changing," Apr. 2007, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2007/04/remembering-repenting-and-changing?lang=eng>.

Today, within the Church, I think that the focus of the Word of Wisdom often misses the mark. Our laser focus on coffee, tea, tobacco, and alcohol, can distract from a more valuable wisdom of being mindful and taking responsibility for the food and drink you put into your body. Because of this fallible focus, there are an endless number of arguments against the Word of Wisdom. Is it caffeine that makes coffee unacceptable to drink? Then why is it okay to drink caffeinated soda and energy drinks? Are we only supposed to avoid hot drinks, so is iced coffee okay? What about meat? Why can we eat all the meat we want and still get a temple recommend but if we drink one cup of coffee we can't? Why did the Saints get decades to adjust to the revelation before it became a law while today we expect converts to give up those same things overnight? Why was coffee on the packing list for the Saints when they were crossing the plains? Why was it that Brigham Young built and owned a distillery and a saloon? So because I like coffee and not Diet Coke, I can't have a temple recommend?

These are compelling questions, but they don't expose the fallacies of the Word of Wisdom—they expose the fallacy of the way in which we are approaching the Word of Wisdom. There are not a lot of arguments that challenge how the Word of Wisdom encourages individuals to eat and drink in a way that contributes to their health; most of the criticism questions whether coffee is really the best thing to focus on when teaching about good health practices. We often lose sight of the principle of the Word of Wisdom by hyper-focusing on coffee. It's too simplistic to suggest that by not drinking coffee you are keeping your body and mind healthy.

Asking whether drinking coffee is immoral can raise some red flags within the LDS community. Rather than being seen as a valuable question to explore, it is seen as the sign of a doubting heart and weakened faith by whoever dares to ask. As Latter-day Saints, we can be defensively quick to shut down someone trying to come to a greater understanding of truth, morality, and virtue if they at any point

challenge any of the Church's positions. Someone who does not fully align with all the positions of the Church is seen as someone whose hubris is getting in the way of seeing or hearing God's voice through his prophet. They are seen as hard-hearted and stiff-necked. They are seen as someone who is putting themselves above God's prophets. They are seen as someone who is rebellious. Within the LDS community, we claim to invite and encourage natural questions and critical thinking, but our actions often show that we are more comfortable encouraging our members to instead just do what they're told.

Is avoiding coffee about participating in something that the Church says is morally wrong or is it just a practice to test and measure one's willingness to align with the words of the prophet? If abstaining from drinking coffee does not contribute to our moral development, is there a place for it? Is it virtuous to have an arbitrary law or practice that only measures our obedience and loyalty to an organization?

There is value in looking more deeply at our religious practices and our personal relationship with those practices. But what if you evaluate your religious practice and you come to a position that is in conflict with the Church's position on that practice? It will stir up some uncomfortable tension. But this tension creates the kinetic energy that can powerfully contribute to spiritual development. Sometimes *what* you choose is not nearly as important as *why* and *how* you make that choice. There is greater value in aligning our choices and actions with our integrity rather than performing automaton-like compliance.

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Susana Silva, *Reunidas*, 2019,
hand-cut paper, 28" x 28"

NO MORE SISTER THAN SAINT NICK

Lee Robison

The new young Bishop Fredning had not asked Vernie to prepare and narrate the Christmas program. For the first time in twenty-seven years, the bishop of the West Bench Ward had not called on him, with his BYU Speech and Drama Department-trained voice, to read the verses of Luke and introduce the various sub-readers and choirs (the elders, the Relief Society ladies, the Primary children, the whole ward) each in their turn.

On the Sunday morning before the scheduled Christmas program, Vernie stood in front of his bathroom mirror. He grinned, combed his fingers through his fine, white, wavy pompadour, straightened his tie, shrugged his shoulders, and recited a few lines from one of his poems. It was a poem in which Vernie imagined a Montana cowboy as one of the angels watching over Jesus's crib. His grandson Eph would be reading it at the Bennings School winter pageant, and Vernie was very proud.

As shepherds, sheep, and wise men came,
Sentinel the Old Boy stood
Shielding holy babe and dame
Pistols ready under Stetson hood.

It always got applause, especially from the women, when he intoned its iambs and rhymes at local cowboy poetry open mics. This is something Vernie had always noticed but had become especially aware of after Marcia deserted him. Marcia was the woman who had sworn to be his soulmate, wife, and companion for Time and All Eternity. For-Time-and-All-Eternity turned out to be just under thirty-eight years. Marcia had forsaken her covenants, taken half his bank account, the cat, and the dog, and hauled off for Utah.

Vernie shrugged and grinned into the mirror again. Sixty-two was not that old, really. Cash Dunders was seventy-three when he hitched

his fourth and latest wife. And Cash, with his sad jokester face, was nothing to write home about in the looks department.

He turned to the important issue of performing at the West Bench Ward's Christmas program. "Well," he thought. "I'll just have to remind that young Fredning about it."

"Get with the program," he said into the mirror, rehearsing how he would approach the young bishop. Vernie grinned again. Obviously, the Kid Bishop, with all he had to do, had let slip the important task of asking Vernie to narrate. Every Sunday since Thanksgiving, Vernie had been expecting him to ask.

Vernie shrugged away from the mirror and headed for church.

During sacrament meeting, he scribbled notes on a draft of a new poem about a shepherd lost in a barroom haze who was found and returned to the redeeming wilderness by his sheep. Vernie even found himself thinking about it during the sacred passing of the bread and water, but it was a spiritual poem so he let his mind wander on it. After the boys passed the sacrament, Fredning introduced Cash Dunders and his fourth For-Time-and-All-Eternity as the speakers. Cash was a great guy. He was a fellow writer. But he was also a genealogist. Vernie had never crossed paths with a genealogist who wouldn't bore you with their great-grandfather's third wife's fourth cousin's second child's trials and tribulations during some distant war or handcart emigration disaster. And Cash's wife wasn't much better: she was a weeper whose every fourth word was a gasping sob, her makeup smearing like black clown tears down her face.

Vernie concentrated on his poem. "Sheeple" wasn't a word, so he was having a hard time finding a rhyme for "people." And sacrament meeting was well over before he finally gave up, pocketed his notes, and stood to find Bishop Fredning to discuss the important issue of a script for the Christmas program.

Fredning was squatting down near the podium listening to a kid.

Vernie put a fatherly hand on his shoulder.

"About the Christmas program next week," he said.

The kid Fredning was listening to was one of the White brats. The girl was lisping on and on through two missing front teeth about something totally irrelevant. Vernie knew he should not hold the sins of the parents against a kid, but as far as he was concerned, like mother, like daughter. And this kid's mother, Lillian White, had been the lawyer who assisted in Marcia's Desertion.

Fredning half turned to look up at Vernie and half didn't. He blinked but went on listening to the kid's nonsense.

"I need a script, so I know when everybody else comes in," Vernie said. He almost added, "get with the program." But it occurred to him this was not the right rhetorical thing to do at the moment. It wouldn't help. One thing he had learned during his speech-major days at BYU is that you assessed your audience and the context before you elocuted.

"Oh, well say, Vern, just a sec," Fredning said. He blinked again and turned to listen to more nonsense.

Vernie waited. He could be patient. To keep his mind off the Lillian White's yattering kid, he concentrated on his poem. The last thing he needed when he spoke to Fredning was to be fuming about a Lillian White. The last thing he needed to have on his mind was how "Sister" Lillian White helped Marcia take the dog, the cat, and more than half his bank account.

So Vernie concentrated on the poem and tried to ignore the nonsense that the White pup was wasting Fredning's time with. Finding a rhyme for "people" had some challenges. "Steeple" reminded him of a nonsense nursery rhyme. It was trite and wouldn't fit anyway. He might have to change "people" to something else, "men" or "mankind," maybe. But "mankind" was a feminine rhyme, and they tended to be weak, so . . .

Finally, Fredning stood up, shaking out his pant legs.

"What's up, Vern," he said.

"The Christmas program. Maybe we should get with the program." Vernie chuckled. (There were two other things Vernie learned in speech classes. The first was the rhetorical stance of associating with the audience by implying mutual need. Hence the "we." The second was using

humor to disarm, hence the chuckle.) “We need a script to rehearse and know when to introduce the other acts.”

“Oh,” Fredning said. “Oh, well, say, Sister White was asked to narrate this year. We thought it might be nice to hear a woman read the scripture.”

Vernie felt himself flush. Lillian White was no more a “Sister” than Saint Nick. She was a skinny, opinionated woman with a sharp, hard face. She had helped Marcia moved back to Utah without him. The cat and the dog didn’t matter. Vernie didn’t like them anyway. But the bank account and Marcia were his. And rent-a-lawyer Lillian White had weaseled the law to deprive him of what was rightfully his hard-earned money and his God-covenanted wife. It was a travesty.

It wasn’t just Vernie’s face that turned red when he heard that Lillian White usurped his place in the Christmas program. His whole body, even the pale pate under his white pompadour, suddenly fired up bright red, until he looked like a beardless, not-so-cheerful Santa Claus.

Sweat began to trickle under his arm pits. Lillian White had a squeaky lawyer voice that irritated just about everybody. If she narrated Luke, it would be a three-ring circus. The narration of Luke needed a man’s voice, his voice. “Hail Mary thou art highly favored” needed Vernie’s good bass voice to say it properly. It certainly did not need the squeaky, not-even-decent-soprano, conspirator voice of Lillian White.

But he didn’t say anything. He had his pride, and anything he said would not be something he wanted the bishop to hear. Anything on his mind at that point, if it got past his lips, would probably require a serious apology, confession, and repentance. He’d be damned if he’d give young Fredning the pleasure.

Twenty-seven years of doing the Christmas program, and this is what he gets! For that matter, a whole lifetime of being there almost every Sunday. A whole lifetime of saying yes to almost every calling—except Primary, of course. If they asked him to teach kids, he demurred.

Kids with their noisy, noisome, babble of confusion did not appreciate his trained voice and rhetorical approach to the gospel. And missionary work, too, was just not his style. But he was always there when they needed somebody to talk for sacrament meeting or instruct Gospel Doctrine class or read the high priests through their lesson.

He stewed about this all the way home. Twenty-seven years of keeping his temple recommend up to date, even after the Desertion, twenty-seven years, and here he was, expected to sit in the congregation for the Christmas program—expected to listen to Luke being read by some squeaky-voiced twit. Maybe he'd just sit home and wrap the grandkid's crayons and coloring books. Eph got the big box of crayons because he was reading the poem at the school pageant. Maybe he'd get a six-pack and watch the Broncos and Patriots game. He hadn't had a beer in a long time, not since the Desertion.

Then on Monday, after a night and most of a day of Vernie's stewing and considering apostasy, his cell phone burbled. It was Bishop Fredning.

"Say, listen, Vern," he said. "I understand you write poems."

"Yeah?" Vernie said. He tried hard to remain civil. It was difficult, but the implied recognition that he was, in all but actual nomination, the Cowboy Poet Laureate of Last Lost Valley County helped keep him from launching into the offensive.

"Well, say. Listen. Sister White says you have a nice Christmas Eve poem."

This surprised Vernie. How could a hag Conspirator of Broken Covenants appreciate good poetry? The poem in question, "Calving Shed on Christmas Eve," was one of his best: well-articulated, iambic meter, rhyme scheme perfect. It had been published several years ago in *Cattle Call Monthly*, along with his "Cowboy and Jesus." Vernie was pretty proud of that publication. But he was puzzled how a pettifogger who prostituted herself to break covenants would ever admit to appreciating his "Calving Shed on Christmas Eve."

He said, "Yeah?" cautiously.

“Well, say. Listen. Would you mind if that poem was read before the Christmas program? Sort of bring Christmas into local focus before we get started?”

This is not exactly what Vernie had been hoping for. But it was almost good enough.

“Well, I’d be happy . . .”

But Fredning interrupted him. “Well, say! Vern, thanks. We’ve asked DelIna Ferguston to read it.”

DelIna Ferguston was a twit of a teenager with blue hair, blue lips, and a ring through her left eye brow whose usual church costume was either ripped-at-the-knees jeans or a mid-thigh dress with leather and rag fringes dangling to her ankles.

“I’m not sure . . .”

“She is pretty excited to read it,” Fredning said. “Besides, we thought it would be good for her.”

“Well . . .” Vernie said. He was not pleased that somebody else would read his poem. He was particularly not pleased that it would be DelIna Ferguston with her harlequin getup. But in spite of his hesitancy, he was feeling a modicum of harmony beginning to restore itself in his life. It would be good to have his poem read as part of the program. It would be great if he was the one reading it. He felt a welling of pride that the powers that be decided to put his poem in the Christmas program alongside Luke and “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

And so, in what he later considered a moment of weakness, he said, “Sure, I guess it can be part of the program. Sure, if she gives it proper attribution. I guess she can read it.”

The harmony he almost felt almost went far enough to almost include warm feelings for the Conspirator of Broken Covenants because she seemed to appreciate his poetry.

Tuesday afternoon, at the Last Lost Valley Writers’ Workshop, he mentioned to Cash Dunders that he wouldn’t be narrating the Christmas program. He didn’t say anything about the Desertion Attorney leading the Christmas program instead of him. He was not up to talking about something so humiliating, even with Cash.

“Small favors,” Cash said. Vernie saw this as a weak attempt at humor. But this was Cash, so Vernie ignored it.

“But Fredning is having my ‘Calving Shed’ poem read. By that Ferguson kid, not me. The one with the painted lips and eyebrow jewelry.”

“Great!” Cash said.

“It’s kind of weird they don’t want me to read my poem.”

“Maybe it’s not about you not reading it, maybe it’s about the program,” Cash said.

“I mean she’s just a clowny kid, Cash.”

“Spread the wealth,” Cash said.

“Yeah, well. But you never know about these kids today. She could really screw it up.”

“Not much to screw up, really.”

“I know. It’s a real simple poem. Straightforward. Straight to the heart. But how can a kid with blue hair read a poem?”

“Is she literate?”

“Huh?”

“Can she read?”

“I guess so. I donno.”

“If she can read, she’ll do good enough for church, blue hair and all,” Cash said.

“Yeah, maybe.” But Vernie thought, “Good enough for church isn’t always best.”

During the workshop discussion, Cash complimented the perfect versification of the draft of Vernie’s lost shepherd poem. “It’s sweet,” he said, “But it might be interesting to see you play around with the noise of words a bit.”

That was the thing about Cash: he was more into words than he was into making them into sensible poems. He claimed to have been published in the U of M Commie journal and a Mormon hippie magazine. But he’d never made *Cattle Call*, which paid \$50 a poem. Still, Vernie told him that the poem he brought to the workshop was “pretty darned good.” He did not say anything about its lack of rhyme, rhythm, or sense. Cash was a pal.

By Wednesday morning, Vernie was beginning to regret giving in to the Kid Bishop. Leaving his poem's elocution to the mouth of a blue-haired, eyebrow-piercing kid would be an embarrassing parody. Vernie had his pride. By Thursday afternoon, he had worked himself into a righteous fury. If they kept taking things away from him, pretty soon they'd have everything people knew him by. If this kept up, they'd have his suit and tie and probably even his nose. He'd be the laughingstock. He had to salvage something, and that salvage had to start somewhere.

So, Vernie decided to take the bishop by the horns and tell him how things were going to be, politely but firmly, of course. How and where he would do this was a problem. This wasn't something that could be handled over the phone. This was *mano a mano*.

But he couldn't just drive out to the Fredning house, knock on the door, and ask the bishop to step outside and have it out. Fredning's wife would have a spoofed-up version of the whole thing all over the county by Sunday. He thought of calling and asking the bishop to meet at the church for a little chat. But a person did not ask the bishop for a personal meeting unless he had serious offenses to confess. The wife would probably have the whole state of Montana gabbing about him being on the road to excommunication and perdition.

Probably the best chance to educate the young bishop would be at the Bennings School winter pageant. The Kid Bishop never passed up a chance to mingle with the larger community, and his kids were always in one of the school choirs. So, he was certain to be at the winter pageant, which was to be Thursday, tonight. Vernie was thinking of attending it anyway because Eph was reading his poem.

By the time Vernie, still in a fume, made it to the pageant, the old high school gym/auditorium was packed. Even before he opened the door, he could hear a muffled but joyful gabble from the crowd inside. He peered through the window. His breath fogged it, so he had to wipe it. He looked for the Kid Bishop. But the foyer between the outside door and the double door to the auditorium narrowed his view, and what

little he could see of the crowd was hazed by the breath-fogged window. He did not like crowds unless there was a microphone between him and them. As long as he had his hand on a mic, it was okay; the crowd became a vague haze of sighs and applause.

The misted window in the foyer door cast the warped and shadowy shape of Vernie's face back at him. He saw a glum Vernie that did not want to be seen. *Well, might as well get this over with*, he thought. He made a grin at his reflection, and the distorting glass grimaced back at him. His pompadour wavered in the stiff winter breeze. Vernie swept his hand over it to flatten it, make it presentable, and then, grinning, pulled open the heavy door.

The cavernous room was a cacophony of people chattering, chairs scraping, booms of laughter. It was like a carnival. The basketball hoop at the far end of the gym had been hoisted up to give a clear and open view of the stage. The stage was empty except for a microphone and the music director's podium facing the choral risers. The bleacher bench seats along the walls were practically fanny to fanny. Vernie would rather stand than park his boney butt on those planks anyway. The basketball court was filled with metal folding chairs, which were also mostly filled.

Vernie couldn't see the bishop or his family, but they could be anywhere in the crowd. He looked for a seat to wait out the concert but could not see any empty chairs on the aisles. He could leave, but his poem was being performed and it was his grandson performing it, and he had the Sunday performance to get straightened out. He sighed, and then saw his son Arron, Eph's dad, standing near the front. Arron waved and pointed at an empty chair in the row beside him. It was probably vacant as a statement about the absence of Katie, Arron's ex. Vernie could understand that little gesture. Katie was probably somewhere else in the crowd, sitting next to her current mash. She wouldn't be needing the seat.

It was a no-escape seat, near the middle of the second row. But if he had to sit through the farce of off-key kids singing "Joy to the World," he might as well do it commiserating with his son.

“Well, he’ll get over it,” Vernie thought. “I sure did.”

He was nearly to the empty seat, “excuse-me”-ing, and “pardon”-ing his fanny past already seated noses and knees, when he noticed his next fanny-to-nose-and-knee encounter would be the sharp nose of Lillian White, the Desertion Attorney. And the seat after that was the empty folding chair beside Arron.

It was too late to excuse-me his way back to the aisle. He was trapped.

He tightened his butt cheeks, shuffled past the Desertion Attorney without saying “excuse me,” and finally sank into the empty folding chair.

“Hey, Dad.” Arron sat down in his chair and bumped his fist on Vernie’s shoulder with wary affection. “Saved the chair for you.”

The Desertion Attorney smiled a grimace. “Good to see you, Vernie.”

Vernie answered Arron’s fist bump by leaning toward him and fist bumping his shoulder.

“Thanks for the thought,” he said. He took in Lillian White’s grimace but ignored it.

“Well, here we all are,” Vernie said to no one in particular. He focused what was left of his smile on the still empty choir risers.

There wasn’t much else to say. Of course, there was nothing to say to White. So he sat, trapped, silent, and remote amid the humming joy of the pre-show sociability. He thought about trying to puzzle out the rhyme for his new poem to revive his good humor. But, sitting there with his humiliation, he just could not find the energy.

Then, the lights in the gym dimmed, and the crowd silenced with an expectation that vibrated through even Vernie’s gloom. Still, he considered an escape in the dark. But just as he shifted to stand, his hand on the cold metal of the chair in front of him, a spot brightened on the microphone, and there was Eph, blonde hair slicked flat, frowning seriously over his white shirt and tie. Vernie settled back in his chair.

Eph coughed and shifted uncomfortably, glanced off toward the school music director, who grinned and nodded encouragingly from

the edge of the shadows. Eph coughed again and said, "This is my Granddad's favorite Christmas poem. So, this is for him. So . . ."

He coughed again.

"'Twas the Night Before Christmas,' by Clement Clark Moore."

He began. "Twas the . . ."

It hit Vernie like a blow below the belt. He had expected his "Cowboy and Jesus" poem. Sure, he had recited the "'Twas the Night" poem to the boy, many times. But he had also recited and read "Cowboy and Jesus." You would think the boy would have sense enough to know which was the most appropriate for the evening.

And there in the dark, the faces of those around him glowing in the dim light from the stage, their rapt attention on the boy, he felt suddenly old, deserted, and trapped, a chump. He sagged in his seat, closed his eyes, and waited for the whole misery to be over. He wanted nothing more, at this moment, than to be home watching reruns of *All in the Family* or *I Love Lucy*. For the first time that he could remember, he actually felt thirsty for a beer. He was in the abysmal pits, as close to falling into the terrestrial kingdom as he had ever been.

The boy recited the poem, his preadolescent voice sometimes breaking almost bass, then cracking into boyish alto. Even in his nadir, Vernie thought that, despite the problems with voice control, Eph did an admirable job reciting the nonsense poem.

Arron nudged him, shout-whispering and applauding. "That's our boy," he said. He also heard the Desertion Attorney say cheerily, as if in his ear, "Gonna be a chip off the old Vernie block."

"Yeah, pretty good," he said to Arron. His frown deepened, irritated.

After Eph's pretty decent performance—even if wasted on a sap poem—Vernie expected the rest of the program to descend into pitiful amateur hour. He was not disappointed.

Three teens played "We Three Kings" on saxophone, trumpet, and trombone. The sax squawked, the trumpet blatted and flatted, the trombone slid with bluesy enthusiasm. But they were loud and confident, and they roused applause. Vernie sat impatiently. The sooner this farce

was over, the sooner he could get to Fredning and clear up the problem with next Sunday's Christmas program.

The Bennings Elementary School choir sang for a while, then the White kid, the one who had been bothering Bishop Fredning on Sunday, came out and monotoned through a lisp, "All I want for Chrithmas . . ." It was about what he expected. Her mother's applause was fulsome and beaming. It was about what he expected.

The high school choir sang. And finally, just before they sang Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus, which usually ended the program, DelIna Ferguston was introduced. She worked her way down from the choir. Her costume, a patchwork of blue, orange, green, and yellow rags, contrasted with the somber black skirt/pants and white blouse blur of most of the rest of the choir.

She untwined the microphone from its stand, fiddled with the "on" switch, and then, holding the microphone close enough to her blue lips to stain it with her lip gloss, recited "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." She also recited but did not sing a church hymn, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." The readings were full of breathy teen drama and female angst. Her loose-fitting, ragged sleeves swept dramatically, like varicolored wings.

She also seemed to have added verses about war and earthquakes. Vernie wasn't certain, but he couldn't remember anything about war and earthquakes in the "Christmas Bells" hymn.

She whispered the last lines into the mic: "Peace on earth, good will to men." It rang through the gymnasium, and there was a stilled silence. The Desertion Attorney heaved a deep satisfied sigh. The auditorium crescendoed into ovation.

Vernie cringed. If the kid read his poem for the church Christmas program like that, in that kind of costume, it would be a mockery. His poem did not need blue-lipped angst. It certainly did not need more verses about apocalypse.

The rest of the show could not end too soon. Vernie had to find Fredning and end this travesty against his poem, against him. The

winter pageant closed with the rousing shout of the “Hallelujah” chorus by the Bennings High School choir. It seemed perpetual in its length.

Finally, it was over. The lights came up in the auditorium, and it filled with the rattle and bang of the audience rising, shoving chairs, stretching, and with the shuffle and bluster of the teenage choir filing off the risers. People turned to each other and rumbled into gossip and critique mode.

Vernie looked around to find his objective and do the little he could to correct the Christmas program disaster. But there wasn't a Fredning to be seen. Not the Kid Bishop, not the Wife, not one of the five or six Fredninglings.

And the Desertion Attorney was standing facing him, blocking his exit to the aisle.

He turned to follow Arron, but Lillian White said, “Vernie?”

“I know you blame me for what Marcia did,” she said.

Vernie stopped, his back to her. He did not turn around. He glared at nothing and waited.

“I tried to talk her out of it. I did try.”

Vernie's glare at nothing took on an inquisitive aspect.

“Marriage is eternal. Forever. I told her. I told her you aren't the worst person in the world. A divorce is meaningless, I said. When she wouldn't take ‘no,’ I tried to turn her situation over to Jim Michaels. But she kept coming to me at Relief Society, at the grocery store. She even stopped me in the dollar store parking lot.”

Vernie shrugged. But he reduced his glare to a frown. “Excuse me,” he said over his shoulder. “I got to see Fredning about the Christmas program.”

“Oh,” Lillian White said. “They couldn't make it tonight. The whole crew except little Effy is down with the flu.”

On a normal day, such a pronouncement would not have had much of an impact on Vernie's good humor and general cheerfulness. But nothing puts the bottom on misery better than a final frustration. And the frustration's bottom was made even deeper and more sinister

because it was delivered by Lillian White, who had usurped his place in the Christmas program and who had assisted in the theft of his bank account and the desertion of his For-Time-And-All-Eternity and who had just now also tried to rob him of the certainty that Marcia would never desert him without feminist lawyerly provocation.

“Well, see you in church,” Lillian White said cheerfully as she turned to gather her brood from the crowd of whelps flooding from the stage.

Vernie leaned, both hands gripping the cool metal of the folding chair rail. He leaned like that for quite a while, trying to come to terms with a world gone topsy-turvy. He tried to revive his anger at the Desertion Attorney, but it was a no-go. It wasn't Sister White's fault that Fredning asked her to narrate. If she were to be believed, she had tried to stop Marcia's desertion.

So, it seemed the whole Great Desertion came down to Marcia. Vernie could not understand living in a world where that was possible. He shuddered. He realized his grip on the chair rail was becoming painful. His knuckles were white. He stepped back and rubbed his hands and worked them to get the stiffness out. He looked around to see if anyone had observed him standing in the darkness. Then he straightened, shrugged, and grimmed a smile to fortify himself. He began to work his way toward the exit through the joyous chaos of the festive mob.

The cheerfulness of the crowd was so contrary to his own mood, and it shifted into merry little cliques, claques, and gossips, until Vernie was quite alone.

Then he heard a small, hesitant voice.

“Mr. Sheldin?” the voice said. “Like, Mr. Sheldin?”

Vernie turned and was accosted by DelIna Ferguston with her blue hair and eyebrow ring, her blue lips and ragged harlequin costume.

“Mr. Sheldin,” the blue lips said. “I've been looking for the bishop, but I guess you'll have to do.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I mean thanks. Like, it was great to be asked to read a poem for the church Christmas program. But, like, I just can’t wrap my head around it.”

Vernie blinked. He blinked twice. He wanted to believe that the painted lips were telling him they wouldn’t be able to read his poem for the Christmas program.

“Yeah?” he said, hope springing from the eternities.

“Well, I mean, like, really?” the blue lips said. And then the breathless voice behind the lips recited the last two lines from his poem:

“It is said that as the loving Angels sang

“You could hear one Angel’s cowboy twang.”

“Like, really. . . ?” The blue lips and ringed eyebrow winced with distaste.

“It took me a long time to finally find the end of that poem,” Vernie said. He smiled benignly, very proud that the kid could recite part of his poem, even if with comic breathy delivery and facial commentary.

“Yeah,” Blue Lips said. “Well, like obviously. Anyway, I thought I’d let you know, like I just can’t do it.”

“Oh,” Vernie said. “That’s too bad.” The dark fog that hovered round his soul suddenly did not seem so foggy.

“Well, uh, no need to bother Fredning about it,” he said. “I’ll let him know I’ll do it.”

“Yeah, well, like no offense or anything, but I just can’t do something that doesn’t interest me.” Her eyebrow ring glinted and winked above her brown eyes.

“Anyway, bye,” she said and trounced off, her blue hair flouncing.

It seemed that even when they gave you something, they had to darken it with criticism.

But what did an eyebrow-ringed kid’s opinion about poetry matter anyway? A waster clown who made up earthquakes and hurricanes

when she recited a sacred hymn probably thought she knew more about poetry than she really did. Well, she wouldn't have his poem to mock. He had salvaged that.

Vernie worked his way to the exit. He saw Cash in the crowd. Cash waved. He was laughing. Vernie got the paranoid impression that he was the subject of the laughter. And as he bumped and jostled his way to the exit, it seemed every exultant chortle or cackling giggle in that cavernous room was in some way directed at him.

Then he was at the door in the foyer. The crowd cackled behind him. His hand rested on the cold metal bar, and he saw his face distorted in the night-muddled glass. His eyes seemed to glint from the clouded shadows of his face, and the distortion in the window glass warped his lips, thickened them. He mumbled his lips into a tight smile, but it didn't help what he saw in the reflection.

Even so, what he saw was the same old Vernie. He raked his fingers through his white pompadour to reform its unruliness and made a grin at his image in the glass. The grin that came back to him from the dark window was skewed, less cheerful, a bit more world-worn than he would have liked. But it was the same old Vernie.

He saluted the muddled reflection, and then he shoved the door bar and stepped, with his poem, into the dark, windy winter night.

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Noted in the Dark

Dixie Partridge

Some nights here there've been singings
the children out into twilight . . . their countings,
their hidings, their
ally ally oxen frees.

And sometimes the crickets were not sounding bereft
but offered impressions you needed to hear.

Now in the stillness you feel the heart as a bell
after all the years, sounding through liquid
in the wrist and the ear
though many the sundowns
when veins turn to faint smoldering . . .
against regrets?
the constant shortening of time?
the way fluid horizons can burn
without flame as day slips out.

The night sky seems a sieve:
wavelengths and light years . . . the absences
we reach for, like too muted music we need to take in
hoping the finally discernible notes,
accidentals, clusters, and cues
will become one harmony, the *sigh*
soothing losses into the word *rest*

These Are the Hours

Dixie Partridge

when birds disappear taking strips of light
 folded in feathers
night insects ready themselves
 for meals from leaves of rose and raspberry
the hollow by the lane
 pools with evening like water
no moonrise cool radiance
 but night itself complete
the old barns slumped in the dusk
 can straighten and mend
motes of dust through slats
 awaiting new light

the past trailing footnotes
 has a life of its own
not left behind but present day
 alongside all those undones
breathing toward futures
 the collapsed or unmades with regrets
but huge as the presence of mountains
 unseen in the dark
where trees line the ridge
 a procession
like dark gentled cattle
 knowing toward the salt lick
again and again . . .
 some with bells
that will mellow the morning
 and any harsh news

Vantage: Hoback Rim to Wind River

Dixie Partridge

Closed to drift most of the year,
trails descend through short lives of wildflowers
bright in colonies, August air verging on frost,
its thin metallic edge:
snow squalls visible ahead
where a continent divides.
Life stays steep.

Nothing in the view seems changed
since child years, though you reason lodgepole
and aspen have passed on to other levels of lore;
grasses and lichens shifted
with shapes of mountains
in their shale slides, avalanche, and storm.

Movement nearby: a sleek,
small animal you can't identify, a watcher,
its look so familiar . . . that visage
of fascination and wary regard—your own
and owned in the small face
that slips into rock and is gone.

Haze of smoke above the Hoback
to the south, the route you came.
Haze of smoke northwest,
where you are going.
A wide-spanned hawk
vanishes with such ease into the next scene.

These Days Between
—*After Leaving Our Youngest at College*

Dixie Partridge

It's turning fall in this long alley of young trees,
poplar leaves still and golding in deep shade.
You see no one and hear not even birds.

But the pale trunks together seem to hum
like choir rows, the performance
of their true colors imminent.
Chlorophyl diminished as if by some faint
baton signal, so begins a movement toward
what they are deeply: it begins to shine through.
Finally left to their own devices,
they are creating their own light—
bright yellows to copper edged tawny.
How easy it looks.

A flutter, and like slow
wings, branch to branch,
one leaf then another. A great relaxation
is coming—widening pools will color the ground.
How brief the days seem.
What's changeable, what's not.

Photos of these tree rows hang on our wall,
near windows, where a slowed process of light
works its way: they receive openly
and over time give up
their paper color by faint degrees . . .

Better to walk with the upright
trunks and feel each part
of the falling—the infusion toward boldness
in frescoed light . . . the tremor . . .
the rift . . . the letting go.

DIXIE PARTRIDGE {pearantree@gmail.com} grew up in Wyoming and spent most of her adult life living along the Columbia River in Washington State. Her poetry has appeared in several anthologies and many journals, including *Poetry*, the *Georgia Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Ploughshares*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. Her first book, *Deer in the Haystacks*, is part of the book series *Poetry of the West* from Ahsahta Press. Her second, *Watermark*, won the national Eileen W. Barnes Award. She has served as poetry editor or reviewer for two poetry journals and coedited regional anthologies in the Northwest. Personal impact of landscape is most often at the root of her writing.

Lithium Shuffle

Reed Richards

Down the street
trusties from the state hospital
following the horizon of their noon shadows,
their feet scooping up the sidewalk,
the fastest as slow as the slowest.
The sun is on them and pitiless.
If we, shaded neighbors
on the other side of fences,
notice, we frown
and hope they are making their way
back down their crazy tangents
to the clear still waters of truth.
In truth,
these hunched dancers with the sun on them
are crawling up the world's left thumb,
whose peak is farther from heaven
than they would hope
if they could think of hope.

REED RICHARDS {evanrichards62@gmail.com} attended BYU and Vanderbilt University. He studies organ with Ken Udy and is organist for the Meadows Ward of the Murray Utah South Stake. He has previously published poetry and fiction in *Dialogue*, *Nashville Scene*, and his broadside *Radio Beds*.

heavy seeds

*James Dewey**... they buried the weapons of war, for peace.**—Alma 24:19*

bury seeds these

with covenant grit
shrill songs on our lips
as we circle the pit

clank seeds clanging

as we cry-file by
beg, plant-praying: *I will not—*
nor I—nor will I—

plead seeds these

to finally sleep bright
crush-hushing their anger
with lullaby rites

sprinkle loam with tears

raise muddy berms
months molder into years
as the new crop germs

until one day

from black soil this
heavy seeds these
become a sapling wish

an orchard, a forest

ripe green-golden shade
to bud-blossom-bear
one fruit: these saved

flicker

James Dewey

with gratitude to Adam S. Miller and Ryan W. Quinn

in the beginning, God
gave grace away
fast and free to all

this is what we call creation
which was actually continuation
and still continues

every day, every hour, every minute
timelessly tick-tick-ticking away: grace, grace,
grace!

the fall? that's on us
that's us
stepping away from grace
which is Him

like flickers in the field
hunting for ants
we dance, looking from one meal to the next
and we pause to say grace

He whispers, *Real grace*
is the tree in which the ants are hiding
the seed from which the tree sprouted
the egg the flicker was in when its mother
lived in the egg of its mother
long before flickers learned to fly

before flickers and ants and trees and all this
we swam in a dark lake of grace
we wandered in ancient forests of grace
we gazed at grace-ridden stars
all of them suns in the skies
of other grace-made worlds

their light is reaching us now
 when we need it most
the tree has fallen and sprouted ants
 just as the flicker lands
the egg is cracking just as it should
 and His grace is already given
like a mother's hand reaching out to help us stand
 before we ever fall
the grace of our Savior is always
in the beginning

JAMES DEWEY has had his poetry appear in *Inscape*, *Integrated Catholic Life*, *Irreantum*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Off the Coast*, *Perspectives*, *Radix*, *Reformed Journal*, *Sojourners*, and *Time of Singing* and is forthcoming in *Dappled Things*, *Rock & Sling*, and *St. Katherine Review*. Together with Robbie Taggart, James manages @ComeFollowMePoetry (Instagram), where they publish weekly poems in dialogue with sacred texts. Originally from Boise, Idaho, James currently lives in Bogotá, Colombia.



Susana Silva,
Jaredite Journey: The Rescue, 2022,
hand-cut paper, 22" x 28"

“What if . . .?” and “How so . . .?” and
 “I wonder . . .” Mix with LDS Doctrine
 and Culture to Generate Each Story in
The Darkest Abyss

William Morris. *The Darkest Abyss: Strange Mormon Stories*.
 By Common Consent Press, 2022. 226 pp. Paper: \$12.95.
 ISBN: 978-1948218689.

Reviewed by Paul Williams

“Mormon speculative fiction” must surely be one of the most niche genres available, and William Morris’s new story collection, *The Darkest Abyss: Strange Mormon Stories*, published by BCC Press, is a standout and quirky addition to that small body. Comprised of eighteen stories, all ranging from five to twenty pages (plus one outlier at thirty pages), the book offers something for anyone with an interest in Mormon fiction. The stories are wildly diverse in theme, concept, style, structure, and general argument.

Speculative fiction (a catchall term for fantasy, science fiction, horror, alternate history, and other reality-defying modes) is at its best when it turns toward its subject matter and interrogates the basic premises thereof. Brian Attebery has shrewdly argued that these genres are particularly apt at this because they openly confess their fictionality, a rhetorical trade that allows the text to comment upon its subject matter in a safe but exacting manner.¹ This perfectly explains Morris’s project, as he takes bits of Mormon scripture, culture, and folklore as starting points to spin inventively strange stories that attempt to articulate and explore Mormon lore by combining it with lived experience.

Each story is based upon a question such as “What if . . .?” or “How could . . .?” which then provides its central conceit. As a result, these

1. Brian Attebery, *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2014.

stories are much more idea-driven than character-driven; readers who enjoy the stories of Borges or Kafka will feel at home, while fans of the Chekhov style might feel a bit alienated. These are thought experiments that take beliefs and suppositions and literalize them on the level of plot. The end result is a freewheeling ride that includes accusations of witchcraft, an elite (even magical?) group of Mormon *shinobi*, a fusion of the United Order with the teachings of Karl Marx, members of the Church blessing ordinary household tools as holy weapons, and more. Morris takes a bit of belief, fully manifests it within the story, and reshapes the world to accommodate the miraculous elements. Once a reader taps into the ways Morris plays with narrative and symbols, there is much to enjoy.

Readers should understand that the stories are shot through with a narrative logic informed by Mormon beliefs, not only folkloric but also scriptural and prophetic. The title story, “The Darkest Abyss in America,” is an alternate history in which the Church was driven out of Salt Lake City and North America entirely in the 1870s, eventually settling in Japan. This plays upon the mythology of the westward exodus taken to the extreme. Midway through, a character reflects that “This land [the United States] had long ago become full of slippery treasures” (13). Such commentary is not a shibboleth for Morris to prove his credentials to fellow believers but a clever problematization of certain assumptions found in the Book of Mormon and Latter-day commentary about the United States as a land cordoned off by God as the singular land of promise. The story reminds the reader that the Church is comprised of its people and is not tied to any specific location. This comes out when the story makes references to warnings in the Book of Mormon about the Gadianton robbers nullifying the blessings for the Nephites. Similar to Orson Scott Card’s speculative Mormon tale “America,”² “The Darkest Abyss in America” interrogates assumptions about American

2. Orson Scott Card, “America,” in *The Folk of the Fringe* (New York: Orb Books, 2010), 216–44.

exceptionalism and how certain Book of Mormon promises might work out differently than expected.

Other entries are more playful, and the most playful and ironic stories offer riffs on Mormon folklore. One of the best is “Last Tuesday,” which is framed as an oral story the narrator shares in bearing their testimony. It discusses some relatives of the narrator (compounding the folkloric aspect) who, while traveling in the Arizona Strip, found something they first thought was a child Sasquatch and then called the “fuzzy cherub.” The family adopts the creature, and hijinks ensue. The story plays with a number of speculations popular in LDS circles, such as angelology, as well as lore about a possible connection between Cain and Bigfoot. On the surface, the story is merely a short comedy that comments on the tendency for some testimonies to venture into the tangential and speculative. At the same time, it also hints that the storyworld has undergone some changes that have wrenched it away from our own world of experience, with ominous hints at a recent but unspecified cataclysm.

A more subtle and grounded story in the same vein of Mormon folklore is “The Joys of Onsite Apartment Management,” about a young couple who oversee an apartment complex while attending graduate school. They start to notice a peculiar paint stain that moves from one apartment to the next, and it comes to haunt the couple. In time, Maria (the wife) uses this mobile stain to locate someone to serve, though all she does is offer the person her BYU hoodie. The story ends with a deliberately contradictory observation: “Maria grew cold as she walked home. Cold, confused, and oddly joyful” (82). The cold is a physical consequence for Maria’s inexplicable act of charity, but the joy she feels is coded as a spiritual reward for having heeded what she accepts as a spiritual prompting. The story echoes the sentiments of the Mormon hymn “A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief,” in which spontaneous acts of altruism result in profound happiness and eventual salvation for the narrator.

Other stories are more openly fantastical. In “Uncle Porter’s Revolver,” Caleb, a single adult in the big city, inherits a revolver his deceased uncle wielded during World War II. At the same time, Caleb begins to experience a powerful and vengeful impulse toward violence. The story is filled with references to complicated issues: the Church’s teachings about peace and cooperation that are at odds with warfare in the Book of Mormon; questions about the morality of violence as a response to certain actions; the emotional struggles of living alone, especially in a big city; and more. While the story could present these struggles merely as a metaphor, the conclusion affirms a supernatural dimension, though one firmly rooted in the doctrines of the priesthood and the spirit world. It is an especially haunting but also hopeful tale.

Perhaps my favorite story is also one of the longer ones, “A Ring Set Not with Garnet but Sardius,” which appears near the end of the book. The story is overt in its strangeness: a BYU student volunteer at an orphanage in Romania is commissioned to smuggle one of the children off to a new life with his grandpa. The contradiction is obvious: the heroine, Michelle, is presented as lawfully good, but she must do something that, by all accounts, is illegal and potentially sinister, using a skill set foreign to a child development major. When divine aid comes, it does so in a manner opposite to what we might normally expect such assistance to take.

More interesting (to me, at least) is how the story bounces around in time. Or, rather, the story stays focused in the narrative present, but the narrator constantly mentions events in the protagonist’s future and past and suggests that all events are interconnected. Collectively, this creates a cohesive whole vision of Michelle. I suspect the story is supposed to act as a Urim and Thummim, meaning it beholds all facets of Michelle’s life simultaneously, creating a coherent sense of how the totality of a person’s life makes them who they are. Moreover, it’s hinted that this adventure in Michelle’s life is an important stepping stone toward other miraculous adventures she undertakes, but only

when seen as part of the panorama of her full life can we see the interconnectedness of her experiences. I recommend readers pay special attention to the story's comments about Michelle's future and look into the biblical significance of the sardius stone.

Still, the collection has its weaknesses. Some are cosmetic, such as a number of grammatical and typographical errors. Some challenges will be a matter of audience. As I've already said, readers who specifically want plot and character may struggle to enjoy these. And the stories require both a familiarity with Mormon lore and a willingness to accept this lore as cultural material open to playful commentary, even through heterodox speculations. Also, of course, even for the mindful reader, not every story can work—I felt "Ghosts of Salt and Spirit" tried too hard to be provocative at the cost of emotional impact, and I found the penultimate story, "Certain Places," puzzling and opaque.

Granted, how we read greatly informs the experience we have with a story. It's possible that I just need to find the right way into the stories that challenged me, which will come with reflection and rereading. These are stories that require that sort of trust and effort because they're too loaded with references, commentaries, and narrative sleights of hand to be fully apprehended on an initial reading. Furthermore, I recommend reading these stories in isolation from each other, taking time to let the questions and subversions of one story settle within you before starting another. What the collection does offer in terms of explorations and intellectual/spiritual probing is a fine treasure indeed.

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Making the Shadow Conscious

Rachel Rueckert. *East Winds: A Global Quest to Reckon with Marriage*. By Common Consent Press, 2022. 344 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1948218634.

Reviewed by Mel Henderson

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious.
—Carl Jung

I'll start with both a declaration and a disclaimer: *East Winds: A Global Quest to Reckon with Marriage* was a delight to read, in storytelling, content, and craft. In fact, I found myself slowing my pace as I neared the end of the book because I didn't want it to end.

And the disclaimer: I am precisely the sort of person this book appeals to. I've long been fascinated with marriage as a universal tradition, social construct, joyful gift, and ineluctable struggle; I love to travel and I fancy myself an amateur anthropologist; and perhaps less relevant but similarly fun to discover: Like the author, I too left home for the first time at age fifteen.

That said, Rueckert gently plucks up and studies some guarded pebbles and gems that may hide in all human hearts, and her account records these explorations skillfully and with unusual honesty. I admit I thoroughly enjoyed the book, but I can objectively say that this memoir will reach and interest a diverse band of readers.

I loved that her story takes us to several continents to interact with many different people and that much of the narrative covers her pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, "The Way," a trip I've never taken but often thought about. (It would round out the trifecta of essential pilgrimages for Christians, according to the Vatican: I've traveled to both Jerusalem and Rome, but not yet The Way.) After Rueckert's firsthand

account of the rigor of walking the Camino, I'm not sure I'm still up to it. But her book allowed me to walk it by proxy.

Rueckert wastes no time setting up the problem and project of the narrative. After bringing us into a midnight scene where stranded travelers and newlyweds found themselves in a sketchy quarter of Bogotá—she and her new husband standing in the dark—she recalls the interfaith discussion group in Boston where they met. A Quaker woman in the circle had asked a difficult and uncomfortable question: “I heard [Mormon] women can’t get to heaven unless they have a husband. Can people get divorced?” Rueckert dodged the first part by addressing only the last. She assured the woman that divorce happens, it’s no more stigmatized than in other faiths, and her own parents, in fact, are divorced.

It was the handsome young man sitting across from her that offered the Quaker woman a more orthodox reply. Rueckert writes, “I avoided him after that.” She’d later marry him, and they’d walk The Way together.

The secret ingredient in any good piece of personal history—whether a memoir, essay, or just a friend sharing a story over a plate of tacos—is the beautifully executed double perspective. When a writer can bring their most wise and experienced narrator to the telling of the past, readers get the gift of a guide to help them experience the event as it was, along with the gift of a guide who interprets the past with an informed, mature lens. A reader can better understand and appreciate the distance between *this is what it meant then* and *this is what it means now*. (The topic of double perspective requires me to happily credit Phillip Lopate, one of Rueckert’s mentors at Columbia, who articulates this so well and from whom Rueckert was fortunate enough to secure an impressive blurb for her back cover.)

Rueckert approaches the whole narrative as an experiment in this dual perspective. She allows us to share in her youthful worry that she’s not good enough at being a “Mormon girl” when she just needed

someone to tell her that being amazing at being herself is what matters. She describes herself, her husband, and the cast of characters they collect along the way with frankness and love, and she shares the lessons she has learned from them in a way that makes us happy to adopt the lessons, too.

I appreciate that Rueckert never apologizes for the truth, and never tries to strong-arm the reader into accepting it. She simply places the truth gently on the table and tells you how she found it. There is no sense of anxiety around convincing you.

East Winds explores a tapestry of themes, so I must be selective here in the interest of space, but I cannot skip the concept of suffering as currency. Volumes have been written on the complexity of the human tendency to revere personal (or even inflicted) suffering as holy, redemptive, cleansing, or sacred. Most adults, if we're honest, hold dear at least one painful experience somewhere in our past—a trial or experience of suffering we didn't ask for—and today we wouldn't trade it for the world if trading meant losing the lessons it brought. This is what makes the idea of suffering so complicated. Trial and error is how we learn; the pain of failure is therefore both welcomed and avoided. But "pain" and "suffering" aren't perfect synonyms. Pain is inevitable, but *suffering*, it's been said, is optional. Reading Rueckert's personal evolution, I revisited the question of whether suffering actually makes us more like the Savior, as I was often told growing up. Or does suffering just generate imaginary "morality points," a contrived license to tell others they don't deserve to avoid suffering either?

I love a short passage near the end where Rueckert explores this paradoxical safety in suffering, questioning what she really worships, as revealed by her own behavior:

Who was this murky god of suffering, and what did that god grant me in exchange for my constant loyalty? Certainly not the end of pain. Certainly not relief from anxiety. . . . Perhaps that god's name was Failure. . . . Who would I be without fearing the wrath of Failure?

If I wasn't afraid, who was I? If I wasn't sad, where was life's meaning? If I wasn't the accumulation of all the hard things I had faced and overcome, how would I measure the value of my life? I feared that if I stopped suffering or if I reexamined my narrative of struggle, I'd be left with something worse: Grief. Real grief. Grief without any meaning. . . . I worried that accepting grief, even for a moment, would risk me never getting back up again.

But she accepts it, and she does get back up again, because her whole global quest is perhaps most centrally a journey from self-doubt to sovereignty. Even in failure, which is never permanent, personal sovereignty can remain intact once we are well enough acquainted with it. Though this can be an easier thing to conceptualize than to practically enact, perhaps, especially for women in conservative faith communities. Self-governance, as Jesus Christ taught it, can be at odds with implicit community codes, where "good women" are the agreeable ones with few personal ambitions and an inexhaustible desire to keep sacrificing them. Rueckert's recognition that her spiritual spine must be self-defined is one of the treats offered in her book.

An idea that runs like a golden thread from start to finish is the beauty of "the shadow" as both starting place and vital passage. It was not lost on me that the first lines of the book position the couple standing uncomfortably in the dark, and the last lines recall the couple walking together, quite comfortably, *into* the dark.

I remember as a Mormon girl growing up in (mostly) Utah too, I was peculiarly rooted in the idea that darkness of any kind was the *opposite* of God. I could not appreciate the phenomenon as innate to the cosmic beauty of creation. All darkness was sinister and meant to be overcome, like a sunrise overcomes night, like Christ conquered death. I loved going camping in the Uinta Mountains and seeing the stars precisely because they were points of light. Today, I love the night sky because I know I only see trillions of miles into the distance when the sun is tucked away, allowing the beautiful moon to cool to earth. And I

know the life-giving sun will always come back. It is my knowledge of the whole that makes it so beautiful.

Rueckert's narrative begins with a healthy curiosity about the darkness, about the shadow side of all her cares, including a seeming resentment that the shadow has to exist at all. But all the flights and hikes and train rides and passages along the Camino begin to reveal that the shadow is not a substance that comes and stays and accumulates, the way sand keeps migrating to the corners of a beach house floor until it is swept up. Darkness can't be swept away. It is meant to be transformed.

It's another truth she gently puts on the table: that darkness is not necessarily a dungeon. (Although by now, she could trust herself to find her way out of a dungeon, too). New things begin in a shadow, in a cave, in a cloistered darkness—a seed in the earth, a life in a womb, even a star in a galaxy.

Uncertainty and darkness reveal countless specks of light filling the sky. Darkness may be the place where the seed cracks open. Darkness may simply be the inside of a chrysalis.

You get to choose, once you trust yourself to handle whatever finds you along The Way.

MEL HENDERSON's {dynamomel@gmail.com} work has appeared in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Literature and Belief*, *Bloom for Women*, *The Writing Disorder*, and a handful of small journals. She recently left teaching at Brigham Young University to become a lead writer and content creator at a local company and to focus on her research interests, which include the history of Christianity, women in religious history, yoga, and Hebraic cosmology.



The Great Awakening of the LDS-Mormon Art Scene

Chase Westfall. *Great Awakening: Vision and Synthesis in Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art*. New York: Center for Latter-day Saint Arts, 2021. Exhibition catalog. 133 pp. Paper: \$29.95. ISBN: 9780578917917.

Reviewed by Heather Belnap

The summer of 2021 brought a greatly anticipated event to the LDS-Mormon art community: the opening of the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts's gallery in Manhattan. Its inaugural exhibition, *Great Awakening: Vision and Synthesis in Latter-day Saint Contemporary Art*, was organized by Chase Westfall and made possible by a generous donation from Allyson and Daniel Chard, who wanted to honor Center cofounders Richard Bushman and Glen Nelson. Justly hailed in the show's documentation as "visionaries in the arts," these two remarkable people have done more for the advancement of the LDS-Mormon art scene since the Center's founding in 2016 than any other individuals or institutions have for decades. This exhibition and its accompanying catalog are a fitting tribute to Bushman and Nelson—and is aptly named, for we are indeed amid an unparalleled cultural flourishing in the LDS-Mormon art world.

Occasioned by the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith's First Vision, a key religious event in the Western world that took place during the Second Great Awakening, this exhibition brought together artists who identify as Latter-day Saints and/or Mormons and whose work engages with the themes of vision, synthesis, and renewal. Curator and catalog author Chase Westfall argues that just as the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was a "harmonizing project aimed at producing a more unified field of knowledge and

action . . . [and] a compounding and infinitely extensible program of redemption, encompassing center and margin alike,” so too are the aims of its adherents. Thus, Westfall maintains, “the lived project of the gospel (i.e. discipleship) will be revealed in the disciple’s true art just as it is in their authentic behavior” (23). And so he pursues how this quest for reconciliation and renewal undergird the art of eleven contemporary LDS-Mormon artists, including Georgina Bringas, Jared Lindsay Clark, Maddison Colvin, Daniel Everett, Jonathan Frioux and Armando Castro Hernández, Ron Linn, Jason Metcalf, Rachel Thom-ander, Darlene Young, and an unrecorded Guna artist. Wide-ranging in terms of aesthetics, cultural contexts, philosophical frameworks, professional positionalities, and media, the artists and artworks featured in the Center Gallery’s *Great Awakening* exhibition and accompanying catalog attest to the claim that the visual arts not only provide a critical site in the production and articulation of LDS-Mormon beliefs, values, and aspirations but also for the exploration and discussion of issues, challenges, and opportunities confronting the Church and its communities in the present day.

The challenges to translating the power of artworks in all their material, spatial, and spectatorial dimensions to the written page are many, as Westfall readily concedes. Words and printed images can only provide intimations or approximations of how visual representations or material objects are experienced by viewers in person. This is particularly true when the audience of an exhibition is as disparate as that of the Center, which has long been mindful of the need to make its events and productions cogent and compelling to those who can only experience them through perusing its exceptionally good website or attractive catalogs. To be sure, Westfall’s *Great Awakening* exhibition and its accompanying texts are successful in contributing to the sponsoring organization’s ambitious goals, which are “to display and perform art by Latter-day Saints in New York City and elsewhere; to publish scholarship and criticism about our art to reach a wider public;

and to establish a comprehensive archive of Latter-day Saint arts, 1830 to the present” (11).

The author and the Center Gallery are intent upon showing viewer-readers, Church members and nonmembers alike, that our contemporary artists are smart and sophisticated professionals whose works cannot be dismissed as provincial and driven primarily by extra-aesthetic issues. Westfall does a masterful job of weaving key aesthetic and philosophical traditions in the Western world to Mormon artistic and theological tenets. What is perhaps less successful is the lack of a more comprehensive overview of how this art relates to our own unique histories (art and otherwise) and contemporary realities as LDS-Mormons. Yes, Daniel Everett’s gorgeous sky paintings can be placed within the lineage of European and American Romantic artists (Constable, Turner, Turrell), but I’m willing to bet that most LDS-Mormon viewers see its connections to the cloudscape of Harry Anderson’s oft-reproduced *Second Coming* rather than in the art of these venerated masters. And while connections between the art and the LDS Church are acknowledged (e.g., Georgina Bringas’s striking 2018 installation *La vibración del tiempo* or Jared Lindsay Clark’s 2010 whimsical *Learning to Fly Prayer Circle*), the author and/or the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts ultimately shy away from exploring how such works invoke pressing issues within our faith communities vis-à-vis ethnicity, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.

In the closing pages of this catalog, Westfall states that this exhibition is meant to encourage growth. He writes: “While, by design, it will challenge audiences (including the frequently alluded to LDS audience) who may find its forms, content, and aesthetic strategies unfamiliar, that challenge is intended within the spirit of fellowship. It is an invitation to open your eyes and consider something new” (126). While one might wonder if the catalog’s cerebral discourse might be a bit overwhelming to the lay reader, there is nothing wrong with trying to raise the level of discourse. And there is no doubt about it: LDS-Mormon

folk are by and large sorely lacking in visual literacy. As a culture, we have long harbored suspicion about the place of images and objects in our individual and collective devotional practices, spaces, and histories, preferring the written and spoken word and viewing these as more authoritative or meaningful modes of communicating the spiritual and communing with the divine. Artwork displayed in contemporary LDS meetinghouses and temples, as well as visual material used in Church publications and instructional materials, is largely representational and stylistically banal. While the Church now sponsors an International Art Competition encouraging more global approaches to LDS art, it remains reticent to embrace works that are aesthetically challenging or to view art as a viable space to engage with the complexities of history, theology, and spirituality.

Chase Westfall and the Center are to be commended for this intelligent, thought-provoking, and faith-inspiring exhibition and for encouraging increased valuation of the visual arts in the LDS Church and among its peoples. This exhibition and its accompanying catalog of contemporary LDS-Mormon art not only demonstrates that our faith communities have produced artists worthy of attention but that we need to put greater effort into knowing our LDS-Mormon art history and developing our visual art tradition. Sadly, the Church did not renew its lease of the Center Gallery's space, and so it will be incumbent upon this organization and others in the LDS-Mormon art community to find creative means to ensure the continuance of this great artistic awakening.

HEATHER BELNAP {heather_belnap@byu.edu} is a professor of art history and curatorial studies at Brigham Young University. Belnap served as a juror for the Church's 12th International Art Competition and is currently working on a retrospective on LDS-Mormon art for the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts. She is a coauthor of *Marianne Meets the Mormons: Representations of Mormonism in Nineteenth-Century France* (University of Illinois Press, 2022).

ARTISTS

ESTHER HI'ILANI CANDARI is primarily a figurative artist who explores concepts such as multiracial identity; gender and the female gaze in the context of religion; and the connections between ecology, culture, and sense of place. Much of her work draws upon her experiences growing up in Hawai'i in an Asian American mixed-race household. She holds a BFA from BYU-H and an MFA from Liberty University and has studied at the New York Academy of Art.

SUSANA SILVA {suisslo@hotmail.com} was born in 1976 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She began her art studies in 1995 and obtained the degree of Teacher and Professor of Visual Arts specializing in painting. She continued her research with materials until she was finally able to develop herself in the technique of hand-cut paper that works better with the demands that her image imposes. She served as an LDS missionary in Rosario, Argentina. She is married and a mother of two children.



Susana Silva,
Above the Brightness of the Sun, 2023,
hand-cut Fabriano paper, 28" x 28"

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Journal of Mormon History

Official Journal of the Mormon History Association

The *Journal of Mormon History* examines the Mormon past through a variety of perspectives, including but not limited to Mormon studies/religious studies, cultural history, social history, intellectual history, reception history, sociology, economics, geography, political science, women's studies, material culture, race studies, and folklore.

Importantly, Mormonism is interpreted to encompass all traditions that trace their origins to Joseph Smith Jr.

Edited by:

Christopher James Blythe
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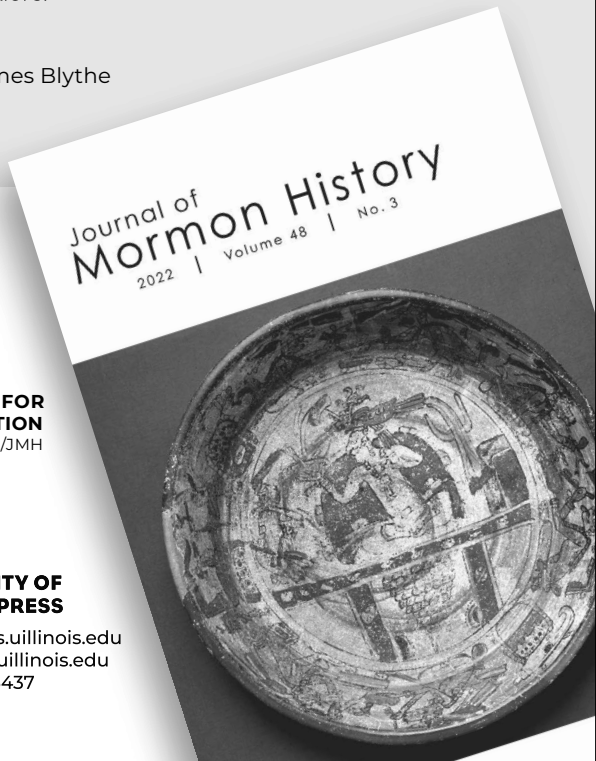


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