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Photo by Christina Smith.

In October 2012, a change in age requirements for full-time missionaries was announced. In the weeks following, missionary applications increased from 700 per week to 4,000, with women making up more than half of the applicants.

Growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a Global Context

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“I beheld that the church of the Lamb, who were the saints of God, were also upon all the face of the earth; and their dominions upon the face of the earth were small, because of the wickedness of the great whore whom I saw” (1 Nephi 14:12).

In recent years, the rapid growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has caught the attention of scholars, the media, and the public.¹ The Church was formally organized in upstate New York in 1830, with only 6 members.² By the end of 1830, there were 230 members of the Church. In September 2013, Church membership reached 15 million (fig. 1). The Church has been consistently ranked among the fastest-growing religions in the United States, ahead of Catholicism,³ and since 1996, the majority of its membership has resided outside the United States.⁴ This growth has led some to speculate about the future ratio of Church members to the world population both because world growth is slowing down and because religious demographics are transforming worldwide.⁵

Several factors probably contribute to the Church’s rapid growth. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was listed as a religion with great

overall member commitment, with three-quarters attending church services at least once a week.⁶ Latter-day Saints also have strong social networks, large families, and a thriving missionary program.⁷ Political and religious climates throughout the world may also have an effect on LDS growth, although it is unknown to what extent this is the case.

Since 1964, the world's population has grown at a decreasing rate.⁸ For example, from 1963 to 1964, the world population increased by 2.2 percent, but from 1964 to 1965, the increase was 2.1 percent.⁹ In the 1970s, the average annual percent increase in the world's population was 1.9 percent, in the 1980s it was 1.7 percent, in the 1990s it was 1.5 percent, and in the first decade of the twenty-first century it was 1.2 percent. In some countries, including Germany, Italy, Spain, Russia, and China, the birthrate is lower than what is required to maintain the current population size, and many other countries are expected to follow suit within the next century.¹⁰ According to Census Bureau projections, the pace of the world's population growth will continue to decline to less than 0.5 percent by 2050.¹¹

In addition, the world's religious composition seems to be turning away from mainstream Christianity. Over the last century, Christianity in some parts of the world has begun to give way to increasing portions of agnostics, atheists, or other groups. A comprehensive demographic study conducted by the Pew Research Center identified that 34.8 percent¹² of the earth's population was Christian in 1910. This number dropped slightly to 31.7 percent¹³ in 2010. Although an increase in the percentage of Christians has occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia Pacific, an overall decrease in the percentage of the earth's population associated with Christianity may be due in part to slow Christian growth in the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East–North Africa.¹⁴

While the proportion of Christians in the world appears to be shrinking, some Christian sects have countered this trend. For example, the rate of growth among Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States currently exceeds the world growth rate.¹⁵ A small religious group, the Amish, has recently been deemed one of America's fastest-growing religious organizations, doubling every twenty-one to twenty-two years.¹⁶ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints recently received the distinction of being the fastest-growing of the ten largest churches in the United States.¹⁷ These changing dynamics have led to questions regarding

how world religious belief, especially among Christians, will shift in coming years in relation to the world population.

Given changes in the world population and differing trends in religious growth, is the growth of the Church keeping pace with the world's population growth? While Church growth has been well studied for years, little has been done to examine that growth in light of changes in the size of the population. This article will examine the current growth in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints compared with world population growth, and how current Church trends may impact that growth in the future.

Methods

This descriptive report is based on world population estimates from the US Census Bureau and Church membership data from the Church's Management Information Center. Average annual growth rate is expressed as percentage per ten-year time period. The number of Latter-day Saints is presented per 1,000 people in the world. This number is extrapolated through 2050 based on the US Census Bureau world population estimates and different possible growth rates in the Church.

Results

Figure 1 provides a comparison of the estimated number of the world's population (based on the US Census Bureau) to the membership population of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (from 2014 through 2050 based on an assumed 2 percent annual growth rate) from 1830 to 2050. As can be seen, the world's population grew from 1.2 billion in 1830 to 7.2 billion in 2014 and is projected to reach almost 9.4 billion in 2050. The Church's population grew from 0 in 1830 to 15.3 million in 2014 and is projected to reach 31.3 million by 2050.

During its first ten years, the Church grew by 67 percent annually (fig. 2). During the 1840s, that rate dropped to 12 percent, and for each decade thereafter through the 1940s, it averaged between 2 percent and 4 percent. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the average annual growth rate was near 5 percent. However, since 2000, the average annual growth rate has remained near 2 percent. For each decade since 1830, the average annual growth rate of the Church has exceeded the earth's average annual population growth rate. The world population growth rate has been fairly constant since the early 1800s at around 2 percent. The current growth rate is now closer to 1 percent.

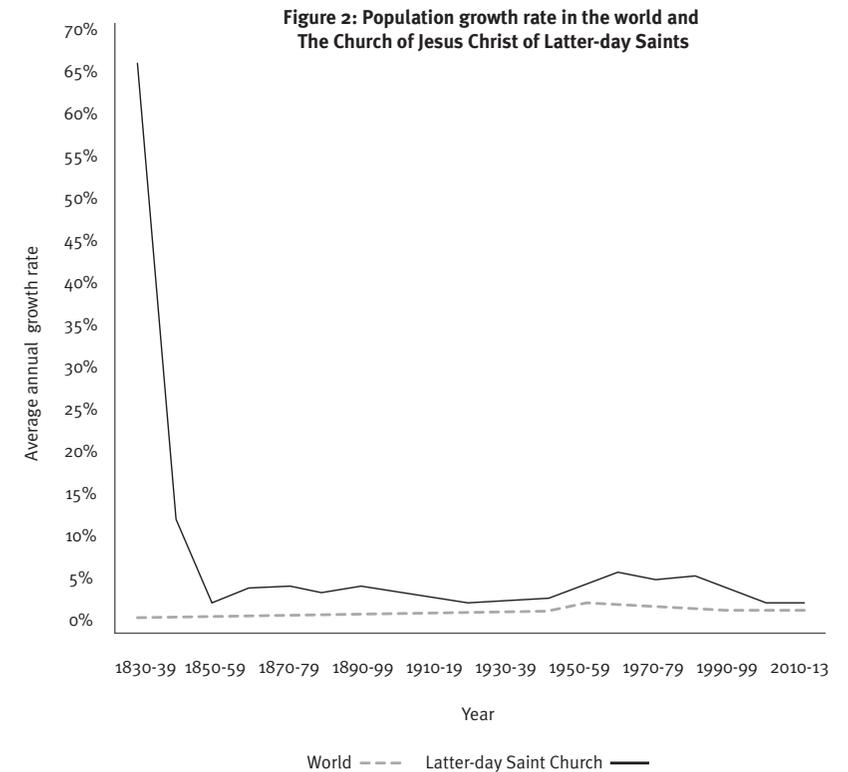
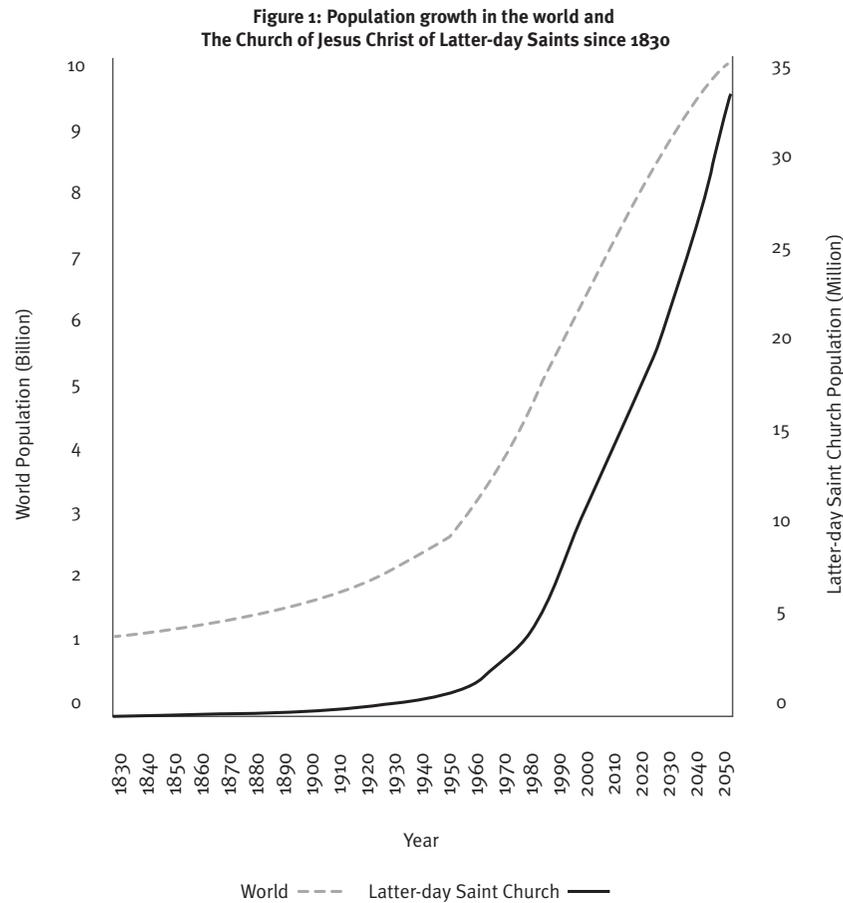
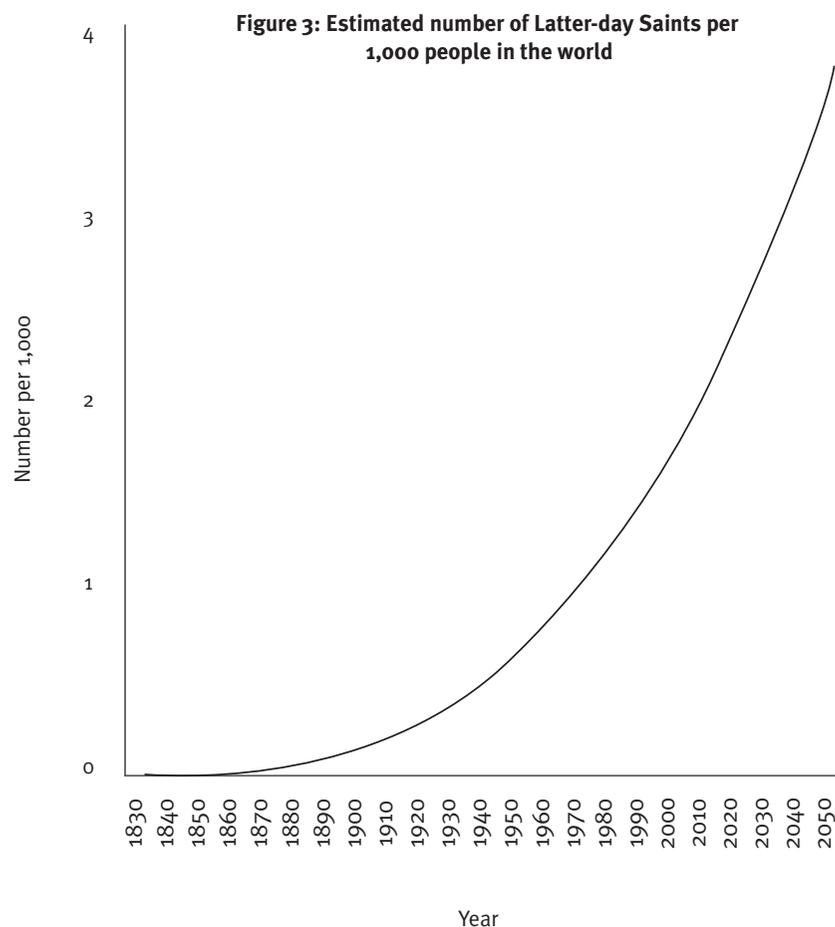


Figure 3 provides a ratio of Latter-day Saints per 1,000 people in the world. In 2014, there were 2.1 Latter-day Saints per 1,000 people in the world (fig. 3). World population growth estimates are available from the US Census Bureau through 2050. On the basis of these estimates and different assumed growth rates for the Church, the number of Latter-day Saints per 1,000 people in the world in 2050 is expected to be around 3.3 (assuming a 2 percent annual Church growth rate). If the annual Church growth rate were 3 percent it would reach 4.9 per 1,000 people in the world in 2050. If it were 5 percent, it would reach 10.3 per 1,000 people in the world in 2050.

Discussion

The results of this study show that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is growing at a faster rate than the world population. While this news is positive for Church members, there are three important considerations to make about this finding: first, the proportion of Church members as compared to the world population; second, factors that may influence the Church’s growth rate over time; and third, how well these statistics reflect active membership.

Church membership will continue to represent a small part of the world population into the future. While sociologist Rodney Stark predicted that the Church would become a “major world religion” by the middle of the twenty-first century, we predict that Church membership at an optimum realistic growth rate will remain below 1 percent of the world’s population through 2050. This is consistent with the Book of Mormon scripture where



Nephi prophesied in about 600 BC that the Church would remain proportionally small to the world population before the Second Coming of Christ but would be represented in all nations (see 1 Nephi 14:12). This prophecy is more accurate than any suppositions that the Church is becoming the largest world religion at this time.

The rate of Church growth has remained between 2 and 5 percent since the 1850s. Considering this trend, one might be tempted to continue to place Church growth within that range in the future, as one influential scholar did in the 1980s.¹⁸ Church growth rates dropped in the 1990s from 5 percent to 2 percent annually, and an increasing change in growth rate is just as possible in coming years.¹⁹ Future Church growth may be influenced by an increasing

number of missionaries that resulted by lowering the minimum age for missionaries, changes in birthrates among the Latter-day Saints, and the global population and global modernization.

In the Church's October 2012 general conference, a change in the minimum age requirements for full-time missionaries was announced (from age nineteen to eighteen for men and age twenty-one to nineteen for women). In the weeks following this announcement, the Church reported that missionary applications increased dramatically (from 700 applications per week to 4,000), with women making up more than half of the applicants.²⁰ In the Church's 2012 Statistical Report, the ratio of convert baptisms to full-time missionaries was approximately 4.5:1, and between October 2012 and October 2013, the number of missionaries serving jumped from 58,500 to 80,333.²¹ This spike in number of missionaries may plateau or decrease slightly as nineteen-year-old sister missionary applicants take over for twenty-one-year-old sister missionaries who are currently serving, but it may remain higher than previous rates, because nineteen-year-old women are less likely than twenty-one-year-old women to have marriage and other competing interests in mind. Further research on the impact of the change in missionary age would be beneficial to understanding the future growth rate of the Church.

Changing birthrates may also impact Church growth, especially as compared to changes in the world population. The current world fertility rate is 2.58, just enough to replace and expand slightly on the current population.²² David G. Stewart notes that active LDS families have 3 children on average, while non-LDS families have 2.²³ Data show that states with large Latter-day Saint populations have higher general fertility rates than the average population.²⁴ In Utah, fertility rates are greater than overall Latter-day Saint fertility rates, especially because families can be influenced by prevailing cultural norms, socioeconomic conditions, and living space available in an area. One Latin American study found that LDS fertility was lower in Mexico and Brazil than the national averages, but found that those same rates were higher after adjusting for socioeconomic circumstances.²⁵ Another study showed that Latter-day Saint fertility in Japan and England was higher than national averages.²⁶

Globalization and technological advancements will likely push Church growth more than has been previously seen. The Church has a large public relations committee, member and missionary bloggers, and Twitter and Facebook users who utilize this technology to spread religious beliefs

worldwide.²⁷ In addition, programs like familysearch.org, LDS.org, and mormon.org are increasing the Church's public visibility among target groups. The Church has recently launched a massive "I'm a Mormon" media campaign in New York, London, and Ireland, which has caught the attention of international media and local residents.²⁸ Of course, increased technological availability also increases visibility of anti-Church groups to the public, but the impact of either positive or negative technological influences is difficult to measure. Further research concerning the influence of technology on Church growth may be beneficial to the social-scientific community.

International political trends and secularization can also impact future Church growth. In February 1996, 4,720,000 members of the Church lived outside of the United States and 4,719,000 lived in the United States.²⁹ At the time, 35.0 percent of Latter-day Saints in the United States and 17.5 percent of all Latter-day Saints in the world lived in Utah. In 2010, however, only 31.1 percent of Latter-day Saints in the United States and 12.7 percent of all Latter-day Saints in the world lived in Utah.³⁰ Church growth has risen significantly in Asia, Africa, and South America, although growth has slowed in European countries. Some researchers have suggested that the growth of structured religions, such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists, occurs most in areas of the world undergoing the process of modernization.³¹ In these nations, individuals who feel the stresses of war, revolution, or societal change seek more for stability and order in life than those in modernized nations. If this is the case, the Church may experience more significant growth rates in these areas. However, in stable regions, proponents of this theory might suggest that Church growth may continue at a sluggish pace for the time being.

While the world increase in Christianity is not keeping pace with the world population growth, the annual growth rate in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has marginally exceeded world growth. Nevertheless, these statistics do not take active membership into account, and even under very optimistic projections of growth, there will likely be fewer than 10 Latter-day Saints per 1,000 people in the world by 2050.

Active membership has not been included in our analysis because this statistic, generally considered attendance at one church meeting every quarter, is not published on a global level by the Church.³² Sacrament meeting attendance has been estimated at 40–50 percent in North America, 35 percent in Europe and Africa, and 25 percent in South America and Asia.³³ Furthermore,

50–75 percent of converts worldwide fail to attend church altogether after one year.³⁴ While the children born into Latter-day Saint families remain on membership rolls, not all of these children are baptized. Seventy percent of children who are raised as Latter-day Saints consider themselves as such in adulthood,³⁵ but others may remain on record if they choose not to remove themselves from Church rolls.

While reporting methods of church activity differ, religious activity appears to be higher in the Church than in other religious denominations. Research has shown that self-reported Latter-day Saints in the United States tend to pray daily and attend weekly church services more often than those who affiliate themselves with other religious groups. Eighty-three percent of Latter-day Saints say religion is very important to them, compared with 56 percent of Catholics and 79 percent of evangelicals. These are among the findings of the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life of more than 1,000 Mormons across the country.³⁶ Many inactive members still have Latter-day Saint beliefs and share experiences that have the potential to spark religious discussion. For example, a study of returned Latter-day Saint missionaries, seventeen years postmission, found that 90 percent still paid tithing and 97 percent still followed the Word of Wisdom even though only 87 percent attended sacrament meeting weekly.³⁷

Conclusion

The annual growth rate in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has marginally exceeded the world population growth rate and will change in the future according to missionary efforts, media campaigns, and sociopolitical factors. Interactions between these factors and religious growth have not been studied in great depth and should be considered in further research. Although Church membership is greater than Church activity, religious activity is higher in the Church than is generally observed in other religious denominations.

Notes

1. See, for example, Rodney Stark, "Modernization and Mormon Growth: The Secularization Thesis Revisited," in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 13–20.

2. See "Growth of the Church," online newsroom of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

3. See Lillian Kwon, "Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons Fastest-Growing 'Churches' in U.S.," the *Christian Post*, February 20, 2008; and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, "Study Shows That Mormons Are the Fastest-Growing Religious Group in the U.S.," Public Religion Research Institute Blog, May 2, 2012.
4. See Jay M. Todd, "More Members Now outside U.S. than in U.S.," *Ensign*, March 1996, 76–77.
5. See Stark, "Modernization and Mormon Growth"; and Ryan T. Cragun and Ronald Lawson, "The Secular Transition: The Worldwide Growth of Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh-day Adventists," *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2010): 349–73.
6. See "Mormons in America—Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society," Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, January 12, 2012.
7. See Stark, "Modernization and Mormon Growth."
8. See Jeff Wise, "About That Overpopulation Problem," *Slate*, January 9, 2013; and "World Population Growth Rates: 1950–2050," United States Census Bureau, accessed March 20, 2014.
9. See "Global Population Growth," United States Census Bureau, accessed October 18, 2013.
10. See Wise, "About That Overpopulation Problem."
11. See "Global Population Growth."
12. 95.9 percent in the Americas, 94.5 percent in Europe, 9.1 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2.7 percent in Asia Pacific, and 9.5 percent in the Middle East–North Africa.
13. 86.0 percent in the Americas, 76.2 percent in Europe, 62.7 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 7.0 percent in Asia Pacific, and 3.8 percent in the Middle East–North Africa.
14. See "Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, December 19, 2011.
15. See Cragun and Lawson, "The Secular Transition."
16. See Emily Caldwell, "Estimate: A New Amish Community Is Founded Every 3½ Weeks in U.S.," Ohio State University Research and Innovation Communications, July 30, 2012.
17. See Kwon, "Fastest-Growing 'Churches' in U.S."
18. See Stark, "Modernization and Mormon Growth."
19. See David G. Stewart Jr., *The Law of the Harvest: Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work* (Henderson, NV: Cumorah Foundation, 2007).
20. See Joseph Walker, "LDS Missionary Applications Jump 471 Percent," *Deseret News*, October 22, 2012, last updated July 1, 2014.
21. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Statistical Report, 2012," *Ensign*, May 2013, 28; and Thomas S. Monson, "Welcome to Conference," *Ensign*, November 2013.
22. See "Total Fertility Rates," United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, last modified April 2011.
23. See Stewart, *Law of the Harvest*.
24. See "Query Results for Birth Query Module for Utah Counties and Local Health Districts," Utah's Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health, last modified May 27, 2013.
25. See Kiira Fox and Tim Heaton, "Mormon Fertility in Latin America," *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 2 (2013): 275–96.

26. See Tim B. Heaton, "Religious Influences on Mormon Fertility: Cross-National Comparisons," in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on The Church of Jesus Christ and Its Members*, ed. James T. Duke (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1998), 425–40.
27. See Brian Smith, "Digital Conversion: Social Media, Engagement and the 'I Am a Mormon' Campaign," *PRism* 9, no. 1 (2013).
28. See Smith, "Digital Conversion"; and Sarah Petersen, "The Church of Jesus Christ Launches 'I'm a Mormon' Campaign in UK, Ireland," *Deseret News*, April 11, 2013.
29. See John L. Hart, "Over Half LDS Now Outside U.S.," *Church News*, March 2, 1996.
30. See "2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study," Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, accessed December 28, 2012.
31. See Cragun and Lawson, "The Secular Transition."
32. See Stewart, *Law of the Harvest*.
33. Tim B. Heaton, "Vital Statistics: Demographic Considerations," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1527–28.
34. Stacy A. Willis, "Mormon Church Is Funding Its Future," *Las Vegas Sun*, May 4, 2001, as cited in Stewart, *Law of the Harvest*, 37.
35. See Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Surprises Pop Up in New Survey of US Mormons," *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 31, 2009.
36. See "Mormons in America."
37. See Richard J. McClendon and Bruce A. Chadwick, "Latter-day Saint Returned Missionaries in the United States: A Survey on Religious Activity and Postmission Adjustment," *BYU Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 131–57.