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The Education in Zion Gallery's anatomy exhibition, *Bodies Filled with Light*.

Photos courtesy of Roger Layton.

Human Anatomy in the LDS Standard Works

HEATHER M. SEFEROVICH

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Considering that the discipline of human anatomy was quite rudimentary when the scriptures were written and compiled, it is surprising that there are 9,123 references to the subject in the LDS standard works, which results statistically in a reference every 4.6 verses.¹ In comparison, the King James Version of the Bible alone contains 6,525 references, yielding a reference every 4.7 verses. In the standard works, the top five anatomical parts mentioned are the hand, heart, eyes, mouth, and flesh; in the King James Version they are hand, heart, eyes, mouth, and feet.²

Why are there so many references to human anatomy in holy writ? What does this number of references say about the human body? And what can we learn from these references? Here are eight reasons for the frequent anatomy references:

1. Everyone has a body, so it is an effective teaching tool to reference.

Our physical bodies are ideal teaching tools; our possession of a body remains constant, whereas language, culture, and the environment all change over

time. We are all familiar, to varying degrees, with our bodies. When we read about heads, mouths, necks, shoulders, hearts, and bowels in the scriptures, we all have these and can relate to them on at least some basic level. We know, in general terms, what they do or what they control and how they function. However, more insight and understanding about our bodies comes through time and experience coupled with rigorous intellectual study and prayer.

2. One of the primary purposes of mortality is to gain a body.

Joseph Smith revealed that God has a body of flesh and bones (see Joseph Smith—History 1:30–31) and that we are created in his image (see Moses 2:27; 6:8–9), so it is no surprise that gaining a mortal body is a necessity for exaltation (see Doctrine and Covenants 93:33–34).

In the King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith taught, “God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”³ Gaining a body ultimately leads to spiritual progression, and learning about the symbolism of our bodies through the scriptures seems to be a nice pairing spiritually speaking.

3. The physical body is the temple of our spirits.

Our physical bodies are a great gift in mortality, and they are the constant companions of our spirits. As Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote, “Through the body the spirit speaks, and through the body the experiences of earth are made the possession of the spirit. It is well that we give due care and consideration to the welfare of the body, which is the one great characteristic of this epoch in our eternal journey.”⁴

Wishing we were taller, fifteen pounds lighter, or had more defined muscles is surely a distortion of the body’s significance, encouraged by one who does not possess a miraculous physical body. A group of senior citizens who toured the *Bodies Filled with Light* exhibition commented that they were grateful for their bodies, even though all were suffering physical ailments due to old age and entropy. Their bodies had allowed them to have a wide variety of life experiences and had enabled them to learn many lessons over the years.

4. Heavenly Father invested a lot of time and effort in creating our bodies.

Through modern revelation we learn that to some extent Heavenly Father delegated the creation of the earth, but there seems to be no mention of his



Courtesy of Roger Layton, photographer.

Top, bottom: Photos of the installation.

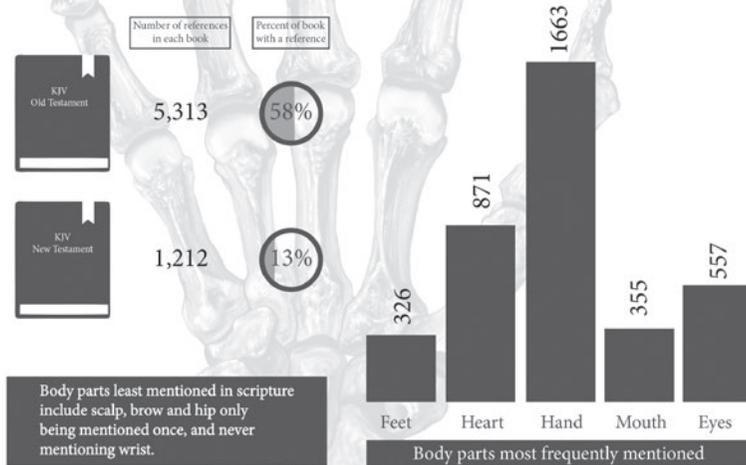
delegating the creation of our bodies (see Moses 2:27). Perhaps that was because he was the only one who actually possessed a physical body at the time and so he was teaching his children about bodies as they were created.

Still, why would so much time and energy need to be invested in our bodies? One of my students answers this question by discussing the physical senses. He believes our five senses are meant to enhance our overall joy in

6,525

references to human anatomy

There is a reference to the body every 4.7 verses in the King James Version of the Bible.



How do you feel about your body now?

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Infographic representing the analysis of the corpus of references to human anatomy in the KJV of the Bible.

mortality. Heavenly Father made something as delicate and intricate as our eyes, ears, nose, taste buds or sense of touch because these faculties contribute to our enjoyment since they enhance overall communication. Several even facilitate relationship-building and closeness with others.⁵

5. The physical body helps us learn to pace and regulate our lives in mortality.

Our physical bodies require water, food, rest, recreation, and quite a bit of maintenance in the form of washing, clipping, cutting, and shaving. Pacing ourselves and regulating our lives have many additional applications to both the temporal and the spiritual. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 88:124 counsels, “Cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.” Through present-day scientific research, we are beginning to understand not only the importance of sleep but also of maintaining a regular schedule and all the benefits that can yield for the body.⁶

Other facets of life, such as building a testimony or maintaining relationships, can also benefit from regular pacing and diligent attention. Perhaps that is why we are instructed to not “run faster” than we have strength (Mosiah 4:27).

6. Along with agency and the Atonement, our bodies are one of our three greatest gifts.

We know that agency—the gift to act for ourselves and to choose—is an eternal principle that comes with a great responsibility to exercise it properly, so it can benefit us fully. Similarly, we know that Christ’s Atonement for sins is a phenomenal gift that many of us only begin to understand in mortality. Not everyone uses their agency wisely or takes full advantage of the Atonement, yet we all experience the wondrous gift of a human body.

In speaking about this subject, Elder Russell M. Nelson explained:

Each organ of your body is a wondrous gift from God. Each eye has an autofocusing lens. Nerves and muscles control two eyes to make a single three-dimensional image. The eyes are connected to the brain, which records the sights seen. Your heart is an incredible pump. It has four delicate valves that control the direction of blood flow. These valves open and close more than 100,000 times a day—36 million times a year. Yet, unless altered by disease, they are able to withstand such stress almost indefinitely. Think of the body’s defense system. To protect it from harm, it perceives pain. In response to infection, it generates antibodies. The skin provides protection. It warns against injury that excessive heat or cold might cause. The body renews its own outdated cells and regulates the levels of its own vital ingredients. The body heals its cuts, bruises, and broken bones. Its capacity for reproduction is another sacred gift from God. . . . Anyone who studies the workings of the human body has surely ‘seen God moving in his majesty and power.’ Because the body is governed by divine law, any healing comes by obedience to the law upon which that blessing is predicated.⁷

7. Physical bodies invite us to learn self-mastery.

The scriptures tell us that “the natural man is an enemy to God . . . unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” (Mosiah 3:19). And as Elder Erastus Snow said, “It is the duty of the spirit to subdue the flesh and the lusts and desires thereof [Galatians 5:24], and to bring it into subjection to the law of the spirit. This is the warfare and the struggle of our lives.”⁸

Fortunately, we can overcome our natural human through embarking on a course of self-mastery. Some of this comes through general spiritual obedience to the commandments as well as physical and temporal obedience to the Word of Wisdom, the law of the fast, and moral cleanliness—all of which involve our bodies.

8. Physical bodies give us a measure of power over Satan.

Quoting Joseph Smith, Truman G. Madsen declared, “‘The express purpose of God in giving it (the spirit) a tabernacle was to arm it against the power of darkness.’ And elsewhere he taught that unembodied intelligences did not have power to defend themselves against those that had a tabernacle. It is a privilege to be in the body, even a crippled, handicapped, diseased body.”⁹ Of course, Satan is jealous of a human body, which leads him either to spread lies and deceptions about it or to try to enslave it with various addictions, physical indulgences, or even infirmities. Thus, our bodies are contested territory by the adversary and he tries to turn us against our bodies in varying ways—however, we simply need to remember that we ultimately have power over him *because* we possess a physical body.

Conclusion

According to Joseph Smith, “We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body. The Devil has no body, and herein is his punishment.”¹⁰ Think of all the joy you are able to experience through your body. Where do you feel love? Peace? Gratitude? Happiness? Most of us feel warmth in the torso, usually around the region of the heart. Could we ever experience these good emotions to such a spectacular degree without a physical body? Probably not. Perhaps that is at least part of the reason for there being so many references to human anatomy in the standard works.

There are a minimum of eight reasons for the high frequency of references to human anatomy in the scriptures. In summary, our bodies are divine

gifts that help us navigate our mortal journeys and give us knowledge and power—a purpose shared by the scriptures themselves. However, this is a large topic with a lot of room for research and insight.¹¹ **RE**

Notes

1. One can speculate that any future scripture we receive may have a similar ratio of references to human anatomy.
2. This difference likely has to do with the narratives recorded in the different books of scripture. Much of the Old Testament narrative is concerned with the children of Israel leaving Egypt and entering the promised land. Much of the narrative in Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants is focused on the purpose of mortality. The comprehensive reference corpus, published online at bodiesfilledwithlight.byu.edu, begins at the top of the head and moves down to the bottom of the feet, as an anatomist would. My student assistants carefully omitted references to animal or idol body parts. Special thanks goes to my research assistants: Jacob Bromley, Jordan Bromley, Leica Clayton, L. Scott Frandsen, Nathan Harris, Allyssa Jex, Chris Kinghorn, Elise Leavitt, Emily Adawi Maxfield, David McLaughlin, Sebastian Romero, Reggie Voyce, and Kaley Weight.
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 210.
4. John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, April 1926, 108.
5. Conversation with Chris Kinghorn, August 3, 2015.
6. For example, see Al Luik, La Zuurbier, A. Hofman, Eijw Van Someren, and H. Tiemeier, “Stability and Fragmentation of the Activity Rhythm Across the Sleep-Wake Cycle: The Importance of Age, Lifestyle, and Mental Health,” *Chronobiology International* 30, no. 10 (2013).
7. Russell M. Nelson, “Thanks Be to God,” *Ensign*, May 2012.
8. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 26:216.
9. Joseph Smith quote from Minute Book of William P. McIntyre, January 8, 1840–April 20, 1845, Church History Library, Salt Lake City; Truman G. Madsen, “Distinctions in the Mormon Approach to Death and Dying,” in *Deity and Death*, ed. Spencer J. Palmer (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1978), 65.
10. Joseph Smith, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1980), 60.
11. Readers are invited to browse through the corpus of scripture references to human anatomy at bodiesfilledwithlight.byu.edu and embark on their own advanced study. Please send comments and feedback to educationinzion@byu.edu with the words “human anatomy” in the subject line. And if you are on BYU campus before April 30, 2016, please visit the Education in Zion Gallery in the Joseph F. Smith Building to see the *Bodies Filled with Light* exhibition.