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Book of Mormon Stories That Steph Meyer Tells to Me

LDS Themes in the Twilight Saga and *The Host*

Jana Riess

Publishing professionals call it a phenomenon. In 2008, Little, Brown sold 27.5 million copies of Stephenie Meyer's four vampire novels; the *Twilight* movie grossed \$191 million in domestic box office sales; and Meyer's adult novel, *The Host*, sold an additional million copies. *Publishers Weekly* crowed, "A new queen has been crowned."¹ *USA Today* reported that Meyer was the bestselling author in the world for the year 2008, accounting for one in five of the books sold from Thanksgiving to Christmas.²

That's not bad for an author who, as the media incessantly reminds us, is little more than a "Mormon housewife." It seems that nearly every major article about Meyer's success has focused on this label, as though Mormon housewives constitute a group of whom little can be reasonably expected. *Time* magazine called her "a Mormon housewife turned novelist,"³ while *Entertainment Weekly* trumpeted the fact that back in 2003, Meyer had been "a 29-year-old Mormon housewife" who was mystified by the rarefied world of New York publishing and was merely a member of a "cozy, supportive" women's writing group before being plucked from obscurity by a New York agent.⁴ The *Time* profile, in fact, went out of its way to attest to Meyer's literary inexperience: "Meyer had not written anything much before then. Her main creative outlets were scrapbooking and making elaborate Halloween costumes."⁵

For the record, Meyer studied English literature at Brigham Young University, wrote some, and read widely before having her famous dream that birthed Edward Cullen, a Byronic but noble vampire. The media would prefer to have Meyer's pre-*Twilight* world intellectually limited because it makes for a better story. To that end, they have revived the term "housewife" instead of using today's far more common (and less

provincial) phrase, “stay-at-home mom.” The persistence of the housewife image says a good deal less about contemporary Mormonism than it does about what Americans believe about Mormonism.

If the media cannot get the major facts of Meyer’s own story straight, it is not surprising that journalists have missed a good deal of the theological underpinnings of her work. When Mormon themes are mentioned at all, they are explicitly tied to sexual abstinence to the exclusion of all else. That is not to say that sexuality is not a hugely important element of *Twilight*, or indeed of all vampire fiction: vampirism is nearly always a literary stand-in for eroticism, and falling in love with a vampire is the pinnacle of forbidden fruit.⁶ But the media’s focus on the steamy but restrained sexuality of the *Twilight* series, equating “Mormonism” with the fact that Bella and Edward do not have intercourse until marriage, misses the richest connections between LDS theology and Meyer’s writing. At least the *Atlantic* recognized this tendency and grieved it: in Caitlin Flanagan’s brilliant article about the *Twilight* saga’s commercial appeal, she noted that, although every reviewer had made mention of Meyer’s Mormonism, “none knows what to do with it, and certainly none can relate it to the novel.”⁷

Meyer has publicly declared the Book of Mormon to be the book that has made the most significant impact on her life. A careful reading of her fiction attests to the reality of this statement; it is not just window dressing or pious platitude. Meyer’s theology is impressionistic and not systematic, and it is always embedded within story—very much like in the Book of Mormon itself—yet it is clearly discernible.

One of the most important theological aspects of the *Twilight* series is its emphasis on what the Book of Mormon would term overcoming the “natural man” (Mosiah 3:19). This phrase crops up throughout LDS scripture as a reflection on sin and redemption. To understand this term, we have to go back to the first parents, Adam and Eve. The specific transgression that resulted in their exile and the fall of humanity stemmed from the desire to become like God. The Book of Mormon’s unique twist on traditional Judeo-Christian theology ties their proactive decision to partake of the forbidden fruit to their desire for procreation. The Book of Mormon also makes the audacious claim that the pair chose to give up mere immortality for the chance of eternal life in relationship—with God, each other, and future children. As a result of their choice, their life in the fallen world would be a struggle, and human nature would become something to transcend.

In *Twilight*, the problem of a carnal, sinful nature is embodied and symbolized by the figure of Edward. His sole purpose in life (well, death) is to feed on human blood, to be literally carnal and carnivorous. Edward,

encouraged by his foster father, Carlisle, makes the decision to reject this way of life for a better, if more difficult, one. He makes this choice on a daily basis, and the temptation is always strong, especially when a new girl shows up at high school whose blood “sings” to him.⁸

Mormonism teaches that the natural human stands in opposition to Christ. The natural person is selfish, whereas Christ is selfless; the natural person is carnal, whereas Christ is incarnational. In Mosiah 3:19, King Benjamin expresses it this way:

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.

In the Book of Mormon, the term “natural man” is not employed just to describe the wicked or the immoral but anyone prone to the human condition of alienation from God.⁹ It is a description of the absence of relationship, not a tidy pejorative statement about immorality. It is disarmingly universal.

In *Twilight*, Edward is able, through sheer willpower and a desire to do no harm, to subdue his monstrous nature and avoid preying on humans for many decades. But it is not until Bella comes into his life that he is transformed by love, and he makes efforts to become like the “children” he calls his senior high classmates.¹⁰ Saying that he becomes submissive and meek is a stretch—in fact, his behavior is often mercurial and inscrutable—but what changes fundamentally for Edward is the new desire to live wholly for another. As he tells Bella, “You are my life now.”¹¹ In *Twilight*, Edward’s self-control goes a long way toward throwing off the natural man, but it is Bella, working as a kind of Christ figure, who becomes a vehicle of grace in Edward’s transformation. Her determination that he does indeed possess a soul goes a long way toward convincing him that he does. Her trust in his nobility in turn generates in him a new confidence that he is worthy of her trust, and that he can withstand unthinkable temptation.

Choice and accountability are crucial values here, not just for Edward and Bella, but for her friend Jacob as well. When Bella and Jacob get in a heated argument about Jacob’s werewolf nature, Bella spits the retort, “It’s not what you *are*, stupid, it’s what you *do!*”¹² She is telling Jacob that he does not have to act on any natural inclinations a werewolf might have to destroy or to feed. He is free. In the Book of Mormon, right choices pave the way for receiving Christ’s Atonement, which is the “way for our escape

from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Ne. 9:10; see also verse 19). Just as important for Meyer, love saves us from the monster within.

In the Book of Mormon, Alma teaches that mortality is a “probationary state” during which humankind strives to overcome its evil nature (Alma 42:10). But in *Twilight*, such testing happens in immortality as well, calling attention to a second major Mormon theme: the basic but subtle Mormon distinction between immortality and eternal life. The vampires in *Twilight* represent some of the less savory aspects of immortality. Not being mortal means not being subject to death, and in the case of Meyer’s vampires it also means certain enhancements in the form of superhuman strength and speed, acute hearing, or clairvoyance. But immortality, with all its perks, is not a gift to be envied. There is a loneliness and restlessness to the Cullen family. They are isolated from their kind by their decision to become the vampiric equivalent of vegetarians and are doomed to roam the earth as inconspicuously as possible, which precludes close relationships with humans. There is a flatness, an eternal sameness, to this life, symbolized most prominently by the vampires’ inability to procreate. Carlisle and Esme cannot have children, and Rosalie (Edward’s adoptive sister) knows that her greatest longing in life—to have a baby—will never come to pass. This reality causes her deep bitterness, especially when she sees Bella so ready to blithely throw away her precious human life and her ability to become a mother.

But in the fourth installment of the saga, Bella gets to have it all—motherhood of a unique child, superhuman strength and immortality, and a perfect soul mate in Edward—and she can enjoy these blessings for eternity. Here the series’ love story trips over something more substantial: a rumination on the social context of eternal life. In Mormonism, eternal life includes the promise of a resurrected, perfect body, which Bella receives when she gives her life to save her child. Meyer is careful to show that Bella does not throw over her precious humanity merely to be with Edward or stay young forever; in a crisis, she gives herself up to save another, typifying Christ’s teaching that “greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Bella then enters a postresurrection world, and she brings her husband and daughter with her. Mormon beliefs about bodily resurrection do not differ markedly from those of orthodox Christianity; the distinctions are more a matter of degree. Almost all Christians affirm the resurrection of the body, but few have speculated about what we might actually be doing with those bodies in the hereafter. Mormonism nourishes the idea that those bodies will be

sources of strength and pleasure, of creation and procreation, of worship and marital sexual expression—all of which Bella experiences in her new state. Moreover, in Mormonism, resurrection occurs in the context of relationship, not aloneness. Bella enjoys her new body in the company of her immediate circle of Edward and Renesmee, but also in the bosom of her new family, the Cullens.

A third and final theme woven into Meyer's fiction is her commitment to the theological principle of agency—a theme that is central to *The Host*, her adult novel. *The Host* has some funny Mormon trappings, which even my non-Mormon friends who have read the book picked up on. At one point Wanderer, the parasitic Soul who takes over Melanie's human body, is adamant that she has “never refused a Calling,” and plenty of Latter-day Saints will recognize the archetypal frog-in-the-boiling-water analogy as an inside joke.¹³ There is even an apocalyptic Mormon survivalist ethos in the characters of Jeb and Maggie, who eccentrically stockpile food and water and live separate from the power grid in the expectation that, someday, disaster will come.

But a deeper Mormon theology undergirds *The Host*, even more explicitly than in the Twilight saga. The character of Wanderer, who has experienced full lives on seven different planets, with many diverse hosts, provides a unique perspective on the contradictions of human life. On the one hand, she is appalled by the atrocities of humanity, especially war and torture, but she is also inexplicably drawn to the richness of human emotion. As Melanie's mind competes more and more effectively with her own, Wanderer briefly contemplates skipping out on her Calling for an easier one, but she finds that other planets seem dull and unappealing after the complexity of human life, riddled with its many contradictions. “This place was truly the highest and the lowest of all worlds,” Wanderer reflects. It has “the most beautiful senses, the most exquisite emotions . . . the most malevolent desires, the darkest deeds. Perhaps it was meant to be so. Perhaps without the lows, the highs could not be reached.”¹⁴

In other words, “It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). Wanderer—who adopts the human name “Wanda” as she goes native—comes to realize that the harmonious existence she has always prized as a Soul is a fallacy masking a hidden dystopia. Because the Souls' lifestyle offers no choice, no true freedom, the surface beauty of the Souls' civilization—which has eliminated war, pain, and disease—begins to disintegrate. It is a mere illusion. In contrast, the wild gorgeousness of humanity simply refuses to be snuffed out. Melanie's tenacious self-assertion stands in for humankind's refusal to accept anything less than *all* of it: the woolly mess of light and dark, good and evil, joy and

despair. And in the end, it takes both Melanie's passion and Wanda's tranquil self-sacrifice to achieve the novel's resolution. Opposition is the key, ironically, to harmony and justice.

Meyer's use of the Mormon doctrine of agency is evidenced in the character of the Seeker, an ambitious and almost fanatical Soul who believes she is doing humans a great favor by giving them perfection, assurance, and safety in exchange for their spirits. Any Latter-day Saint reader will recognize this ideology as Satan's ill-fated plan to "save" every person by removing even the possibility that they could choose anything other than God. In the novel, the Seeker plays the Lucifer role in some fairly obvious ways: dressing in nothing but black, pursuing Wanderer at every turn, seeking opportunities for self-aggrandizement, relishing her role as the god of this world, and loathing humanity and its emotions. In the novel's contempt for the Seeker, Meyer holds up human freedom as paramount, and any system that would deny that freedom, no matter how attractive it may seem on the surface, is deeply flawed.

On a personal note, I have mixed feelings about Meyer's fiction. I find the theology intriguing and often beautiful and her plots wonderfully imaginative, but she is correct when she assesses herself as a storyteller more than a writer.¹⁵ More than with the technical problems in the writing, I find myself concerned about the retrogressive gender stereotypes in all of her novels, particularly the ineptitude of Bella. Although the novels repeatedly *tell* the reader that Bella is smart and strong, they repeatedly *show* her powerlessness. She passes out; she trips repeatedly; she is victimized three times in the first novel alone, only to be rescued by Edward. Worse than Bella's role as a damsel-in-distress is her disturbing tendency to blame herself for everything, expose herself to serious harm, take over all the homemaking chores for a father who seems incapable of the most rudimentary standards of self-care, and sacrifice everything for a man who is moody, unpredictable, and even borderline abusive. Many women readers will also be troubled by the extreme self-abasement of Wanda in *The Host*, particularly one scene where she mutilates her own flesh and another where she lies to protect the man who tried to murder her. These are themes I hope do *not* originate with Meyer's Mormonism. But while they are cause for concern, they do not mar the creative spirit and theological matrix of Meyer's work.

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Do? The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide (Wiley, 2004). She spent nine years as the Religion Book Review Editor for *Publishers Weekly* and is now an acquisitions editor at Westminster John Knox Press.

1. Diane Roback, "Bestselling Children's Books 2008: Meyer's Deep Run," *Publishers Weekly*, March 23, 2009, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6645692.html?nid=3333>.

2. Bob Minzesheimer and Anthony DeBarros, "Sellers Basked in Stephenie Meyer's 'Twilight' in 2008," *USA Today*, January 16, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2009-01-14-top-sellers-main_N.htm.

3. Lev Grossman, "Stephenie Meyer: A New J.K. Rowling?" *Time*, April 24, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1734838,00.html>.

4. Karen Valby, "Stephenie Meyer: Inside the 'Twilight' Saga," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 18, 2008, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20211938,00.html>.

5. Grossman, "Stephenie Meyer."

6. This forbidden eroticism comes into play right in the beginning of vampire lore, with the nubile Lucy so willingly falling prey to Dracula's advances, and stretches all the way to the girl-power heroine Buffy the Vampire Slayer, who falls for a vampire not once but twice. In the first instance, the sexual subtext becomes explicit when, after consummating his relationship with Buffy and experiencing a moment of perfect happiness, Angel loses his fragile soul and becomes the evil vampire Angelus. In *Buffy*, as in *Twilight*, sexual expression can lead to death and monstrous destruction.

7. Caitlin Flanagan, "What Girls Want: A Series of Vampire Novels Illuminates the Complexities of Female Adolescent Desire," *The Atlantic*, December 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200812/twilight-vampires>. Flanagan also notes the fact that Meyer's novels gently evoke the girlhood of a more innocent age, before MySpace, text messaging, and the celebutante vacuity of *Gossip Girls*.

8. Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006), 409.

9. Rodney Turner, "The Great Conversion: Mosiah 1–6," in *Studies in Scripture: 1 Nephi to Alma 29*, ed. Kent P. Jackson, 8 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 7:217.

10. Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown, 2005), 269.

11. Meyer, *Twilight*, 314.

12. Meyer, *New Moon*, 307.

13. Stephenie Meyer, *The Host* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008), 248, 240–41.

14. Meyer, *Host*, 141.

15. Grossman, "Stephenie Meyer."