Yet to Be Revealed
Open Questions in Latter-day Saint Theology

Edited by Eric A. Eliason and Terryl L. Givens

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Yet to Be Revealed: Open Questions in Latter-day Saint Theology

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Scholarship Informed by the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ
5 Introduction
   Eric A. Eliason and Terryl L. Givens

HOW AND WHAT DO WE KNOW?
13 “Oh Say, What Is Truth?” Approaches to Doctrine
   Michael Goodman

39 Is Sure Knowledge an Ideal for Everyone or
   One Spiritual Gift among Many?
   Blair Dee Hodges and Patrick Q. Mason

THE NATURE OF GOD AND HUMANITY
49 Is God Subject to or The Creator of Eternal Law?
   James McLachlan

65 What Is the Nature of God’s Progress?
   Matthew Bowman

75 Was Jesus Married?
   Christopher James Blythe

85 The King Follet Discourse: Pinnacle or Peripheral?
   James E. Faulconer with Susannah Morrison

AGENCY AND SALVATION
105 Understandings of the Relationship between Grace and Works
   Terryl L. Givens

113 Shards of Combat:
   How Did Satan Seek to Destroy the Agency of Man?
   Philip L. Barlow
How Limited Is Postmortal Progression?
Terryl L. Givens

Each Atom an Agent?
Steven L. Peck

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible:
Ancient Material Restored or Inspired Commentary?
Canonical or Optional? Finished or Unfinished?
Jared W. Ludlow

Is the Bible Reliable? A Case Study:
Were King Josiah’s Reforms a Restoration from Apostasy or a Suppression of Plain and Precious Truths?
(And What about Margaret Barker?)
Eric A. Eliason

Is the Song of Solomon Scripture?
Dana M. Pike and Eric A. Eliason

Book of Mormon Geographies
Andrew H. Hedges

The Book of Mormon Translation Process
Grant Hardy

Narrating Religious Heritage: Apostasy and Restoration
Miranda Wilcox
229  Civil Disobedience in Latter-day Saint Thought  
    Nathan B. Oman

241  What Is Women's Relationship to Priesthood?  
    Lisa Olsen Tait

273  On the Foreknowledge of God: Time, Knowledge, Reality, Agency  
    Rosalynde Welch

287  Will Things Get Better or Worse before the Second Coming?: Are the Latter-day Saints Premillenarians or Postmillenarians?  
    Jed Woodworth

REVIEW

299  In the Hands of the Lord: The Life of Dallin H. Oaks  
    by Richard E. Turley Jr.  
    Reviewed by John W. Welch
Introduction to a BYU Studies Quarterly Special Issue on Open Questions in Latter-day Saint Theology

Eric A. Eliason and Terryl L. Givens

Through revelation, our knowledge of the Lord’s creations and his plan for us is gloriously multifaceted, and ever increasing. Revealed truth continually pushes back darkness, opening our eyes to ever-more expansive vistas. Joseph Smith’s revelations often came as answers to questions that occurred to him in the context of his current state of knowledge. But as insight increases, it may seem that each answered question precipitates three more. This is the natural condition for followers of a religion of continuing revelation.

Virginia Woolf referred to the desire of audiences everywhere to find “after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever.” Indeed, one of the great contributions of the Restoration is its promise that through the power of the Holy Ghost, disciples can know “the truth of all things” (Moro. 10:5; D&C 124:97; Moses 6:61). Repeated references to the “fulness of times,” the “fulness of the scriptures,” the “fulness of the gospel,” and the “fulness of truth” hammer home the insistent theme that the doors of heaven are open wide, and Latter-day Saint chapel pulpits everywhere reverberate to the omnipresent words, “I know . . .”

In our celebration of wave upon wave of revealed truth washing over us, we may sometimes forget that eternity is wide and the ocean of truth deep. For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, birth is not the beginning and death is not the end. Those two idols of

human nature, certainty and closure, can come into conflict with the reality of ongoing progress in learning the truths of salvation. “This is a wide field for the operation of man,” said Brigham Young, “that reaches into eternity.”

“When you climb up a ladder,” Joseph Smith explained, “you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top, and so it is with the principles of the Gospel—you must begin with the first and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation; but it will be a great while after you have passed through the vail before you will have learned them. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave.”

From the beginning of this dispensation until recent times, prophets have reminded the Saints that the Restoration is an ongoing process, not an accomplished event. In 1829, the Lord apprised a generation that he was about to bring a “part of my gospel to the knowledge of my people” (D&C 10:52, emphasis added). More recently, President Russell M. Nelson taught that the Restoration is a process and we have seen just “the beginning.”

Our purpose in assembling this collection of essays is simple: we wish to celebrate the miracle of continuing revelation and the promise of more to come, in which God will “yet reveal many great and important things” (A of F 1:9). This means that included essays represent only a few of the hundreds of possible subjects, not nearly an exhaustive list of open questions.

An important part of discipleship is knowing what questions to ask—and which ones have not yet been adequately answered. Many of the topics addressed in the following pages may already be resolved in the minds of some readers. (Historical quotations strongly advocating one side or another of the topics considered in this publication can be easily found on the internet.) However, we believe that the resolution of these questions

lies outside the pale of official Church teachings as these have recently been defined.

In the past, the term “Mormon doctrine” might have been used quite expansively to refer to a vast corpus of varied ideas espoused by Latter-day Saints over many years—much of it speculative and beyond the scope of today’s official teaching. More recently, as our lead essay shows, Church leaders, acting in their divinely ordained role of defining and promoting doctrine, have made a concerted effort to more precisely reserve the term “doctrine” for the core beliefs and principles of the restored gospel. This does not necessarily mean ideas once imprecisely called “doctrine” are no longer true. It just means they are more open for discussion from various perspectives. Our contributors’ priority is not to resolve seeming paradoxes or incompatibilities between various perspectives; neither is our goal a compendium of speculative theology. Rather, ours is an effort to clarify some of the hazy borders of orthodoxy and to honor the dynamism, the richness, and the possibilities of a Restoration still very much in process of unfolding.

This publication is about how Latter-day Saints have considered some distinct ideas that flow from the restored gospel’s answered questions but that are not at this time, and may never be, official Church doctrine. As editors, we invited contributors to use the following description as a touchstone: “an anthology of essays by specialist scholars, on topics distinctive to Latter-day Saint religion, about which there have been more than one school of thought, with a significant history of discussion, that have not been authoritatively resolved.”

These parameters necessarily exclude some topics readers might expect, such as a treatment of those core doctrines officially promulgated by the unanimous voice of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. These doctrines can be defined only by those with an

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5. In turning to subject-matter experts, we follow the example of President M. Russell Ballard, who, in a speech to Brigham Young University students that addressed difficult questions, some doctrinal, advised the following: “It is important to remember that I am a General Authority, but that does not make me an authority in general! My calling and life experiences allow me to respond to certain types of questions. There are other types of questions that require an expert in a specific subject matter. This is exactly what I do when I need an answer to such questions: I seek help from others, including those with degrees and expertise in such fields.” “Questions and Answers,” Brigham Young University devotional, November 14, 2017, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/m-russell-ballard_questions-and-answers, emphasis in original.
authority and stewardship the editors and contributors to this publication do not have. Unlike the nondoctrinal concepts we consider, official doctrines are not open questions.

We also do not try to square the Genesis Creation account with biological evolution and the geological age of the Earth. This topic has greatly exercised many Christian minds and produced many proposed solutions for over a century and a half. Fascinating as this topic may be, it is not a distinctly Latter-day Saint issue. Since the focus of this publication is on theology and beliefs, it does not directly address many social issues such as when, if ever, abortion is permissible; religious freedom vs. LGBTQ rights; and which, if any, political party we should favor. These are not distinctly Latter-day Saint issues either—though their consideration in the light of the restored gospel would surely offer unique insight.

Our focus is on ideas about which mainly, or even exclusively, Latter-day Saints might entertain multiple views. This is also not a collection of Latter-day heresies. So, “the Book of Mormon is fiction that took place nowhere” versus “it recounts events that happened in the past somewhere” are not opposing views we will consider. Some may believe the first proposition, but it has not been, and is not now, what William James would call a metaphysical “live option” within the framework of restored gospel orthodoxy.

Also absent are topics that may have been open—or of pressing interest—at one time, but no longer are. In 1855, “Should we view Adam ‘as our Father and our God’ and the progenitor of our spirits or more appropriately as the initial ancestor of the human race in a physical sense only?” was a vigorous discussion concerning a distinctive Latter-day Saint open question of the time. However, this topic has been closed in favor of the latter proposition for many years. Discussions about what role premortal choices might have had in determining our mortal circumstances and lineage were once quite lively but have increasingly dried up since 1978.

The scope of this publication follows its purpose—which might be helpfully described by comparing it to what it is not. It is not prescriptive

6. For those interested in a discussion of this topic, we suggest John H. Walton, The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009).
8. See, for example, Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 1:46–53 (April 9, 1852).
but *descriptive*. It does not *promote*; it *presents*. It does not seek to say what Latter-day Saints *should* believe; it examines and considers concepts Latter-day Saints *have* believed. The publication seeks not to fuel doctrinal disputes but to defuse them. There is no ammunition here for those wishing to bring a contested doctrine into definitive resolution or to bring the spirit of contention into a Sunday School class. Our purpose is exactly the opposite—to model examples of respectful consideration of various points of view.

Presenting side by side, without resolution, a multiplicity of seemingly contrasting ideas is nothing new. Scripture is replete with this pattern. The Bible in particular often eschews smoothing over and minimizing differences. Instead, this publication will present more than one righteous viewpoint for consideration. Proverbs’ simple message that a person who pursues “righteousness . . . findeth life . . . and honour” while the wicked perish (Prov. 21:21) is quite distinct from Ecclesiastes’ and Matthew’s message that God “sendeth rain on the just and unjust” (Matt. 5:45; see also Eccl. 9:2).

The Old Testament repeatedly forbids ancient Israelites from wedding noncovenant peoples such as Egyptians, Moabites, or Persians (Deut. 7:3–4; 23:3; 1 Kgs. 11:1–8; Neh. 10:30; 13:23–27). Ezra even demanded divorce for those who had (Ezra 9:1–2, 14). Yet the same Bible presents Joseph, Boas, and Esther, without excuse or explanation, as blameless heroes who entered such marriages (Gen. 41:45; Ruth 4:10–13; Esth. 2:5–20). Many creative extrascriptural attempts to harmonize these head-scratchers have emerged over the years—including *Joseph and Asaneth*, an apocryphal book, likely from before 500 BCE, claiming that Asaneth conveniently converted before marrying Joseph.9

Some scholars suspect James’s message that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:20) was written in concerned response to Paul’s “faith alone” teaching that “man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28).10 Neither view was expunged from the Bible. Hundreds of years later, Martin Luther’s enthusiasm for Pauline *sola fide* waxed so strong that he flirted with contradicting his own belief in the Bible’s perfect completeness. He called the book of James “an epistle of straw” that had “nothing of the nature of the gospel about it,”

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In the Book of Mormon, Alma’s consideration of the possibility of one, two, or even three times for resurrection (Alma 40:5)—instead of merely asserting which option he favored—has served as an inspiration for this publication. We might also imagine a conversation between a Nephite soldier and an Anti-Nephi-Lehi about the rightness of taking up arms to defend one’s family and religion.\footnote{12. Julie M. Smith has edited a wonderfully thought-provoking book of imagined dialogues between various scriptural figures with differing viewpoints. Her book shares much the same spirit as ours. See As Iron Sharpens Iron: Listening to the Various Voices of Scripture (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016).} Book of Mormon figures model a beautiful tolerance for divergent belief and practice when Nephites self-sacrificingly gave land to those who had different convictions and then interposed themselves between the people of Ammon and those Lamanites intent on killing them. For their part, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies didn’t burn their draft cards but instead chose to provide material support to the Nephite armies (Alma 27:24). Some readers might see in these passages justification for universal pacifism or mandatory military support. We see examples of how people of different views, within the same covenant fold, might live together and serve each other.

Twentieth-century prophets, seers, and revelators have displayed a similar openness. For example, President J. Reuben Clark wrote to his missionary son, “The philosophy of the Gospel is so deep and many sided, its truths are so far reaching it is never safe to dogmatize, even about the most elemental principles, such as faith.” And referencing one of the topics in this publication, “it does not make any difference to your service nor to mine, whether God is progressing or whether He has come to a stand-still.”\footnote{13. J. Reuben Clark Jr. to J. Reuben Clark III, May 23, 1929, box 355, J. Reuben Clark Papers, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; and J. Reuben Clark to M**** R****, September 24, 1953, fd. 8, box 389, J. Reuben Clark Papers, as cited by Robert Boylan in “J. Reuben Clark vs. Naive/Fundamentalist Views of Church Leaders and Their Knowledge of Doctrine,” Scriptural Mormonism (blog), November 9, 2018, http://scripturalmormonism.blogspot.com/2018/11/j-reuben-clark-vs-naivefundamentalist.html. Boylan quotes D. Michael Quinn, J. Reuben Clark: The Church Years (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1983), 166.} This approach echoes and brings us back...
to Joseph Smith who taught, “By proving contraries truth is manifest.”\textsuperscript{14} A common nineteenth-century usage of the word “prove” meant something other than today’s “to demonstrate conclusively by evidence.” Rather, “proving” was to find out by experience, or to test quality by measurement, consideration, and allowing it to manifest.\textsuperscript{15} Bakers follow a similar sense of the word when they give dough time to “prove,” letting the yeast do its work before it enters the oven. These meanings of “prove” suggest that a fuller understanding of truth can come by keeping multiple perspectives in mind and letting them work themselves out in patience and God’s own time, like fruitful leaven.

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\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} Israel Daniel Rupp, author of a book on American churches, invited each denomination to describe its own history and doctrines in their own words. Joseph Smith provided an article describing his own life history, the Book of Mormon, the Church’s founding, and the Articles of Faith. In June 1844, the Prophet received a copy of the book. He dictated a thank-you letter to Rupp praising him for letting each church tell its own story. In doing so, Joseph argued that not all religions have equal truth, but that the truth can be found in comparing their many perspectives: “Although all is not gold that shines, any more than every religious creed is sanctioned with the so eternally sure word of prophesy, satisfying all doubt with ‘Thus saith the Lord’, yet, ‘by proving contraries truth is made manifest.’” The quotation marks suggest that Joseph Smith might have been referencing some other unknown source. Joseph’s dictated letter uses the word “contrarieties.” Subsequent quotations of this letter in Church literature often use a less archaic synonym—“contraries.” The recounting above is drawn from Jared Cook, “Book Review: As Iron Sharpens Iron,” By Common Consent (blog), August 30, 2016, https://bycommonconsent.com/2016/08/30/book-review-as-iron-sharpens-iron. See also I. Daniel Rupp, \textit{He Pasa Ekklesia: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States} (Philadelphia: J. Y. Humphreys, 1844), 404–10, https://archive.org/stream/hepasaekklesiaaoruppgog#page/n414/mode/2up. With the source author’s permission, this citation maintains and slightly adapts the source’s original wording.
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\end{quote}
“Oh Say, What Is Truth?”
Approaches to Doctrine

Michael Goodman

Yes, say, what is truth? 'Tis the brightest prize
To which mortals or Gods can aspire.
Go search in the depths where it glittering lies,
Or ascend in pursuit to the loftiest skies:
'Tis an aim for the noblest desire. . . .

Then say, what is truth? 'Tis the last and the first,
For the limits of time it steps o'er.
Tho the heavens depart and the earth's fountains burst,
Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst,
Eternal, unchanged, evermore.¹

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ, like other religious traditions, claims to be based on true doctrines.² The above hymn, included in the first edition of the Pearl of Great Price, encapsulates the deep longing for truth by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Statements by Church leaders abound extolling the virtue and power of truth, but such statements often beg the question, What is truth? Scripture states that “truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come.”³ Church curricular material

². Joseph Smith stated that “Mormonism is truth; and every man who embraced it felt himself at liberty to embrace every truth.” “Copy of a Letter from J. Smith Jr. to Mr. Galland,” Times and Seasons 1, no. 4 (February 1840): 53.
³. Doctrine and Covenants 93:24. One scholar pointed out that this definition closely aligns with the correspondence theory of truth. See Loyd Ericson, “The Challenges of
further states that “divine truth is absolute reality” and “truth is eternal.”

In the theology of the Church, truth is inextricably connected to God.

**Truth and God**

Canonized scripture portrays truth as co-eternal with God. Church theology has long held that there is a reciprocal, interdependent relationship between God and truth. The Book of Mormon teaches that if God varied from eternal law and truth, God would cease to be God. One Book of Mormon prophet exclaimed, “Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth” (Ether 3:12). Doctrine and Covenants 93 further teaches the intricate relationship between truth and God by making it another name for God. Christ himself is referred to as “the Spirit of truth” twice (D&C 93:9, 11). Truth is further identified as a synonym for light, spirit, and intelligence, each of which further connects truth to God. Not only is God referred to as “truth,” but he is also considered the source of all truth for his children: “true doctrine comes from God, the source and foundation of all truths.”

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6. Three times in Alma’s teachings recorded in Alma 42, he states that such a deviation from truth would cause God to cease to be God, even as he emphatically states, “But God ceaseth not to be God” (42:23).

7. “He [Christ] that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth; which truth shineth. This is the light of Christ. As also he is in the sun, and the light of the sun, and the power thereof by which it was made. As also he is in the moon, and is the light of the moon, and the power thereof by which it was made; as also the light of the stars, and the power thereof by which they were made; and the earth also, and the power thereof, even the earth upon which you stand. And the light which shineth, which giveth you light, is through him who enlighteneth your eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth your understandings; which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things” (D&C 88:6–13).

These scriptures and comments highlight the relational nature of truth in Latter-day Saint thought. “Truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24), but only God knows this truth perfectly, and hence he is the only sure source of truth. Accordingly, it is only in compliance with and in relationship to God that man can come to know all truth. A philosopher who is a Latter-day Saint explained that “among the main original senses of ‘truth’ was ‘troth’—a pledge or covenant of faithfulness made uprightly and without deceit. . . . It is in the spirit of these ancient etymologies that Latter-day Saints believe that to walk in truth is to keep one’s commitments to follow Christ’s way uprightly.”9 To know truth according to these statements is to know God. For this reason, Church members often believe the surest source of truth comes by way of direct communication (revelation) from God.10

Truth, Doctrine, and Revelation

Latter-day Saints are instructed to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). In the cosmology of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, though intimately connected to his mortal children, God stands outside of the mortal sphere and hence outside of man’s ability to perfectly measure and investigate using only secular means. Perhaps, for this reason, Church members have traditionally placed great emphasis on learning truth through spiritual means. Elder Bruce R. McConkie once stated, “True religion is revealed religion; it is not a creation of man’s devising; it comes from God. . . . God stands revealed or he remains forever unknown, and the things of God are and can be known only by and through the Spirit of God.”11 Though individual revelation is seen as an essential aspect of confirming true doctrine for each person, in the theology of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, only those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators are authorized to reveal or declare new doctrine.

Truth, Doctrine, and the Role of Prophets

Latter-day Saints differ from most other Christians in believing that God continues to reveal truth through living prophets. Joseph Smith stated that it is through this priesthood or prophetic channel that “all knowledge, doctrine, the plan of salvation and every important matter truth is revealed from heaven.” Thus, Latter-day Saints continue to believe that true doctrine is revealed through prophets. These prophets are accepted as the authoritative mouthpiece of God as the first section in the Doctrine and Covenants states: “Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same” (D&C 1:38).

With the belief that a perfect God reveals eternal truths directly to prophetic servants, it might seem that Church members would largely feel secure in their knowledge of most truth or doctrine. Though probably accurate on several core doctrines, this security becomes less sure as we move further away from that core. Adding to the challenge is the reality that some beliefs, and more frequently the practices associated with those beliefs, have varied over time. Though practice and belief are not synonymous, changes in either add to the complexity of interpretation. This has led some members to ask, “If our understanding of belief ‘x’ has changed, how do I know that our understanding of belief ‘y’ won’t change sometime in the future?” The concept of continuing revelation opens an interpretive door for such a reality and begs for further clarity regarding what changing beliefs mean as well as what beliefs can or cannot change.

Since the theology of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ stresses the role of prophets in declaring doctrine, prophetic reliability becomes an important consideration. Beginning with Joseph Smith, prophets have repeatedly sought to add nuance to members’ understanding of the role of a prophet. Joseph stated that “a Prophet was a Prophet only,

12. “Prophets,” in True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference, ed. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 129.
14. A national survey has found that strong majorities of those who identify as Mormons agree on such major doctrinal issues regarding Christ’s resurrection (98%), eternal families (95%), modern prophets (94%), and the Book of Mormon (91%). “Mormons in America—Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society,” Pew Research Center, January 12, 2012, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/01/12/mormons-in-america-executive-summary/.
when he was acting as such.”15 Thus, not everything a prophet says is a doctrinal declaration.16 The Lord revealed to Joseph that God gave revelation “unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, [so] that they might come to understanding” (D&C 1:24). As one Latter-day Saint scholar explained, “Revelation is communication in which God is a flawless, divine encoder, but mortals are the decoders. Various kinds of ‘noise’ prevent perfect understanding.” Even though in traditional belief, prophets are the most trustworthy of “decoders,” they both receive and share revelation in a cultural and linguistic context. The same scholar goes on to quote Joseph’s statements bemoaning the inadequacy of language to convey the revelatory truths he was receiving. “He [Joseph] considered it ‘an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord,’ as he put it, largely because he felt confined by what he called the ‘total darkness of paper pen and Ink and a crooked broken scattered and imperfect Language.’”17

Though prophets have taught from the days of Joseph Smith that they are not infallible, they and other Church leaders continue to teach that God reveals his will to his prophets and that God holds people accountable for their response to those revelations. For instance, Joseph sought to balance the reality of a fallible prophet with the ability to trust in the revelations he received when he taught, “I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught.”18 Probably the most famous of such statements came from Wilford Woodruff when he declared, “The Lord will never permit me nor any other man who stands as President of this Church, to lead you astray.”19 Perhaps more...

16. Joseph complained that “he did not enjoy the right vouchsafed to every American citizen—that of free speech. He said that when he ventured to give his private opinion, his words were often garbled and their meaning twisted. And then given out as the word of the Lord because they came from him.” Jesse W. Crosby, quoted in They Knew the Prophet: Personal Accounts from over 100 People Who Knew Joseph Smith, ed. Hyrum L. Andrus and Helen Mae Andrus (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974), 144.
19. Wilford Woodruff, “Remarks by President George Q. Cannon and President Wilford Woodruff, at the Sixty-First Semi-annual General Conference of The Church of...
now than ever, with the abundance of information and at times disinformation regarding past and current prophets accessible with a single mouse click, some Church members struggle to know where to draw the line between acknowledging prophetic fallibility while adhering to scriptural mandates to follow the prophet.

From the increasing number of talks and lessons focusing on these issues in the last few decades, it seems obvious that the Church leadership recognizes the challenge members face and that they are seeking to assist in resolving it.20 This assistance appears to take a two-pronged approach. First, Church leadership is regularly teaching that members need to support each other in their search for truth by showing more charity and acceptance as they work their way through the process of discovering truth.21 Second, General Authorities have made a concerted effort, as will be illustrated below, to help members define the parameters surrounding the Church’s doctrine to better enable members at large to differentiate between what is considered authoritative and what is considered speculative.

**Defining Doctrine**

In both ancient and Restoration scriptures, the meaning of the word *doctrine* often changes depending on whether it is in singular or plural form. In most instances, *doctrine* in the singular refers to the authoritative and authentic teachings of God.22 However, sometimes when it is used in the plural form, it is in reference to the teachings of men or even false teachings.23 From the beginning of the Restoration, the word

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23. For a few examples, see Doctrine and Covenants 46:7; 2 Nephi 3:12; 28:9; Alma 1:16; Matthew 15:9; Mark 7:7; 1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 13:9. For a more thorough


documentation has been used by Church leaders to simply connote something that is taught or religious instruction with little specificity of meaning besides the fact that it was a teaching.24

However, defining doctrine as simply any religious instruction leaves many modern members unable to differentiate between a teaching that is considered “authoritative” and a teaching that is simply the best understanding of the person speaking. Over the last several decades, Church leaders have begun to define the term doctrine more tightly with the result being greater clarity on what can be relied on as fixed doctrine.

**Defining Doctrine—The Last Three Decades—General Authorities**

In order to determine how General Authorities, especially members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles, have been using the word doctrine, a systematic review of every occurrence of the word doctrine in general conference over the last three decades (over two thousand occurrences) was made.25 By reviewing every instance of the word rather than simply looking at select, well-known statements, the hope was that it would capture patterns of usage that might best show how those tasked with establishing the doctrine of the church, meaning the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve, are using the word today.26 As has been understood for much of the Church’s history, these two bodies have a special stewardship when it comes to establishing doctrine in the Church. Elder D. Todd Christofferson explained this concept in general conference by quoting from President J. Reuben Clark Jr. of the First Presidency.

In 1954, President J. Reuben Clark Jr., then a counselor in the First Presidency, explained how doctrine is promulgated in the Church and the preeminent role of the President of the Church. Speaking of members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he

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25. The search was performed using the LDS General Conference Corpus at https://www.lds-general-conference.org/.

stated: “[We] should [bear] in mind that some of the General Authorities have had assigned to them a special calling; they possess a special gift; they are sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators, which gives them a special spiritual endowment in connection with their teaching of the people. They have the right, the power, and authority to declare the mind and will of God to his people, subject to the over-all power and authority of the President of the Church. Others of the General Authorities are not given this special spiritual endowment and authority covering their teaching; they have a resulting limitation, and the resulting limitation upon their power and authority in teaching applies to every other officer and member of the Church, for none of them is spiritually endowed as a prophet, seer, and revelator. Furthermore, as just indicated, the President of the Church has a further and special spiritual endowment in this respect, for he is the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator for the whole Church.”

Since most Church members base their understanding of Church doctrine on what the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve are teaching, those teachings would seem to be a crucial starting point to understanding how modern Church members might be defining doctrine. Most of the two-thousand-plus references to the word doctrine in the last three decades were not efforts to define the word but rather simply to use the word. However, the systematic review of every instance where efforts were made by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve to define doctrine yielded three specific criteria that were repeatedly used: the first stressed the unchanging, eternal nature of true doctrine; the second stressed the authoritative sources from which doctrine may come; and the third stressed the appropriate scope or subject matter for official doctrine (see fig. 1).

In 1841, Joseph Smith taught that “every principle proceeding from God is eternal.” This concept has been repeatedly expressed by modern prophets. Elder Boyd K. Packer stated that “procedures, programs, the administrative policies, even some patterns of organization are subject to change.


28. These three criteria are not meant to be an authoritative declaration of how to determine doctrine but rather a systematic analysis of how members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve have done so over the last several decades.

We are quite free, indeed, quite obliged to alter them from time to time. But the principles, the doctrines, never change.\textsuperscript{30} President James E. Faust explained that “one cannot successfully attack true principles or doctrine, because they are eternal.”\textsuperscript{31} President Dieter F. Uchtdorf mirrored Boyd K. Packer when he taught, “Procedures, programs, policies, and patterns of organization are helpful for our spiritual progress here on earth, but let’s not forget that they are subject to change. In contrast, the core of the gospel—the doctrine and the principles—will never change.”\textsuperscript{32} Especially in the last three decades, the eternal, unchanging nature of doctrine is the most frequently referenced criterion. In addition to talks by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve, this criterion has continually been stressed in the curricular material of the Church as well.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{32} Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Developing Christlike Attributes,” \textit{Ensign} 38, no. 10 (October 2008): 5.

\textsuperscript{33} For examples, see \textit{Teachings of the Living Prophets Student Manual} (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010); \textit{New-Teacher Training Resource:}
The second criterion that has been emphasized over the last three decades is that true doctrine is taught regularly and consistently by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve. Elder Neil L. Anderson explained that “there is an important principle that governs the doctrine of the Church. The doctrine is taught by all 15 members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. It is not hidden in an obscure paragraph of one talk. True principles are taught frequently and by many.”34 In line with the scriptural mandate that every decision made by the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve “must be by the unanimous voice of the same,”35 they have emphasized the authority that flows from the combined voice of members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve to declare doctrine. “With divine inspiration, the First Presidency (the prophet and his two counselors) and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (the second-highest governing body of the Church) counsel together to establish doctrine that is consistently proclaimed in official Church publications. This doctrine resides in the four ‘standard works’ of scripture . . . , official declarations and proclamations, and the Articles of Faith.”36 This last sentence points to the pivotal role of canonized scriptures and official proclamations and declarations as repositories for the doctrines of the Church.

Lastly, perhaps as part of the definition that doctrines are eternal in nature, some leaders have stressed that doctrine is that which pertains to eternity and specifically to salvation. In other words, doctrine is salvific in nature. Perhaps Elder David A. Bednar explained this most cogently: “A gospel doctrine is a truth—a truth of salvation revealed by a loving

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35. Doctrine and Covenants 107:27. The following statement from President Gordon B. Hinckley reinforces this principle: “But any major questions of policy, procedures, programs, or doctrine are considered deliberately and prayerfully by the First Presidency and the Twelve together. These two quorums, the Quorum of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve, meeting together, with every man having total freedom to express himself, consider every major question. And now I quote again from the word of the Lord: ‘And every decision made by either of these quorums must be by the unanimous voice of the same; that is, every member in each quorum must be agreed to its decisions.’” Gordon B. Hinckley, “God Is at the Helm,” 54.

Heavenly Father. Gospel doctrines are eternal, do not change, and pertain to the eternal progression and exaltation of Heavenly Father's sons and daughters. Doctrines such as the nature of the Godhead, the plan of happiness, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ are foundational, fundamental, and comprehensive. The core doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ are relatively few in number. General Authorities often refer to this aspect of doctrine with the words “saving doctrine” or “saving truths” or “essential to (or for) salvation.” This final criterion creates an interesting differentiation between truth and doctrine: all doctrine is true, but not all truth is doctrine. A teaching that is true but not necessary or pertaining to our salvation, such as the commonly taught reality that there are seven dispensation heads, would be a historical truth but not necessarily a salvific doctrine.

As clear as these three criteria are on the surface, there are still many ways members of the Church seek to apply them. Furthermore, though each criterion provides a positive definition of doctrine, it might be that their greater influence is in delineating that which would not be considered doctrine by using these criteria together. For example, the criterion that doctrine is eternal has frequently been used to separate doctrine (which according to this criterion does not change) from practices and

40. Loyd Ericson points to this reality: “Furthermore, just because a statement about a religious matter happens to be true, its truthfulness is likewise not a sufficient condition for being doctrine. For example, it may be the case that the mortal Jesus was actually married or that Earth was created less than 13,000 years ago. Even if those were true unbeknownst to us, that would not be sufficient for it to be doctrine. Like the location of the Potomac River, Church doctrine is silent on these matters.” Ericson, “Challenges of Defining Mormon Doctrine,” 80.
policies (which also may be authoritative in nature but are subject to change). However, this becomes more complicated for members as it becomes clear that many teachings have both “doctrinal” and “practical” aspects. Most members would agree that Christ’s Atonement is an official doctrine of the Church. It is believed to be an eternal necessity for our salvation that is taught regularly by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve. However, the Atonement also consists of an act (Christ’s suffering in Gethsemane and suffering and death at Golgotha) that happened at a specific time and place. Though the reality and necessity of the Atonement falls neatly into the category of doctrine, the specific means and mechanism by which it is brought to pass likely does not. The Atonement is also commemorated through ordinances that, though based on an eternal doctrine, have changed in nature several times.\(^{41}\) It may seem strange to say that the sacrament is not necessarily a doctrine, and yet if doctrine is eternal in nature, then the sacrament would likely be considered a practice (which had a beginning and which has changed in form several times) even as it is based on a doctrine (the Atonement, which does not change). The same could be said of such foundational teachings in the Church as the Word of Wisdom, family home evening, or even the temple endowment. According to the criterion of eternality, each is a time-bound practice that is based on eternal doctrine. The practice could therefore change without calling into question the veracity of the doctrine upon which it is based.

These realities raise the point that a teaching can be considered an authoritative, even revealed, aspect of the Church, but not necessarily a doctrine according to the three criteria the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve have emphasized over the last few decades. To say that the sacrament or the Word of Wisdom are not necessarily official doctrines is not to say that they are not official teachings, considered necessary for our standing with God, based on revelation, and true. In the theology of the Church, God is able to reveal not only eternal doctrines and principles (unchanging verities) but also time-bound commandments, practices, and policies. Determining who holds and exercises the priesthood serves as an example of this principle. Priesthood and priesthood keys are

\[^{41}\text{What began as the sacrificial ordinance with Adam was changed in its details within the law of Moses, which was changed by the Savior into his sacrament, which was further developed as Joseph Smith made modifications in its practice. See Doctrine and Covenants 27.}\]
listed as one of the basic “doctrines” of the Church. And yet the guidelines specifying who is permitted to hold or exercise priesthood authority clearly do not constitute an eternal doctrine. It has changed numerous times from the days of Adam. Accordingly, who holds or exercises priesthood authority, as well as the organization of the priesthood, are policies or practices—subject to change. As President Dallin H. Oaks explained in regard to who holds and exercises the priesthood, “The First Presidency and the Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, who preside over the Church, are empowered to make many decisions affecting Church policies and procedures—matters such as the location of Church buildings and the ages for missionary service. But even though these presiding authorities hold and exercise all of the keys delegated to men in this dispensation, they are not free to alter the divinely decreed pattern that only men will hold offices in the priesthood.”

A further example would be the plan of salvation. Most members would agree that the entire plan of salvation is doctrine. Yet the Creation, Fall, and Atonement all include events that happened in a specific time and place. Adding further nuance to using eternality as a criterion is the reality that our collective understanding of each part of the plan continues to grow. It seems obvious that what Moses understood about the creation process would differ from what Joseph Smith understood, which would differ from what today’s prophets understand. So, even though the doctrine of the Creation has not changed, the understanding of different aspects of the Creation continues to develop. Furthermore, the reality of God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are clearly doctrines of the Church, and yet Joseph Smith’s understanding and teachings regarding their nature evolved throughout his ministry. Add to this the myriad of teachings from general and local leaders of the Church and it becomes clear that even though defining doctrine as eternal differentiates it from other teachings, it does not change the fact that members’ understanding of even the most fundamental doctrines is still imperfect.

Adding a need for additional nuance in our efforts to understand doctrine is the reality that true doctrine is often mixed with man-made explanations and reasoning. Dallin H. Oaks explained, “If you read the

42. Basic Doctrines (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 5.
44. For further detail, see Bradford and Dahl, “Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine,” 1:393–97.
scriptures with this question in mind, ‘Why did the Lord command this or why did he command that,’ you find that in less than one in a hundred commands was any reason given. It’s not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We can put reasons to revelation. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do, we’re on our own. . . . Let’s don’t make the mistake that’s been made in the past, here and in other areas, trying to put reasons to revelation. The reasons turn out to be man-made to a great extent.”

The second criterion repeatedly used over the last three decades to distinguish doctrine from other teachings in the Church refers to the authoritative nature of the source of the teaching more than it does to the teaching itself. In the theology of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, only the prophet is authorized to announce or declare new doctrine. In addition, it has been regularly taught that the Council of the First Presidency has special authority over Church doctrine. And as was pointed out above, members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve have the responsibility to establish the doctrines of the Church that are “consistently proclaimed in official Church publications.” However, members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve teach many things besides eternal doctrines, such as time-bound policies and practices. So the fact that something is taught regularly by members of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve does not automatically make it a doctrine. However, any teaching not taught by them would not be considered an official doctrine by this criterion. All members, even the prophet himself, are free to hold opinions and beliefs that may or may not be official doctrine. However, by requiring multiple witnesses within the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve, only that which is agreed on and taught regularly by

45. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 68–69. In addition, two Latter-day Saint scholars also explained, “Doctrines, however, no matter how pure, do not exist in a vacuum. We encounter them through teachings, programs, manuals, personal interactions, and institutional forms and practices. And in the process, we occasionally find the pure gospel entangled with unfortunate ideas, pharisaical behavior, legalistic thinking, judgmentalism, and rules based more on tradition than inspiration.” See Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 103.

the two highest governing bodies could be considered a possible official doctrine. Though several scriptural verses and statements by Church leaders have been made that state that the President of the Church is able, by himself, to declare doctrine, the normative practice from the death of the prophet Joseph Smith through today is to get the ratification of both governing counsels before declaring what might be considered officially binding—whether that teaching is a doctrine, a policy, or a practice. As explained by Harold B. Lee, “the only one authorized to bring forth any new doctrine is the President of the Church, who, when he does, will declare it as revelation from God, and it will be so accepted by the Council of the Twelve and sustained by the body of the Church.”

This process of the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve counseling together under the leadership of the President of the Church applies to both declaring new doctrine and official church practice. An example of this would be President Spencer W. Kimball’s revelation ending the priesthood restriction. The receipt of the revelation was not pronounced to the Church until the presiding quorums of the Church received their own witness of the truthfulness of the revelation, so that the revelation could then be unanimously presented to the Church membership for sustaining, and thus it became binding on the Church.

An important caveat regarding the authoritative nature of the source of a teaching is that though the source may increase the likelihood of something taught being a doctrine, in and of itself it would be insufficient to make the determination. This is because every source—be it a person (such as a prophet, Apostle, or Seventy), a setting (such as general conference), or even the scriptures—can teach or contain teachings that are not eternal in nature or salvific (which will be discussed further below). One scholar explained that “it is not uncommon to hear someone say that anything taught in general conference is ‘official doctrine.’ Such a standard makes the place where something is said rather than what is said the standard of truth. Nor is something doctrine simply because it was said by someone who holds a particular office.

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48. Harold B. Lee, address, in The First Area General Conference for Germany, Austria, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, France, Belgium, and Spain of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, held in Munich, Germany, August 24–26, 1973, with Reports and Discourses (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974), 69.
or position.”\textsuperscript{50} This is because the source—for example, an Apostle at general conference—may teach not only eternal doctrines but current policies, practices, or other teachings of a more time-bound nature. One obvious example is the announcement of the move to a two-hour Sunday meeting schedule and the “Come, Follow Me” curriculum at the October 2018 general conference.\textsuperscript{51}

Finally, the criterion that doctrine pertains to our salvation further limits what could be considered official doctrine to those issues which are most central to our theology. However, it may be challenging for members to know what exactly salvific means. In the spirit of Doctrine and Covenants 29:34–35, if all commandments are spiritual to God, might they all be salvific? As with the other two criteria mentioned above, the power of this criterion may be in what it excludes more than in what it includes. The fact that exaltation requires a physical, eternal body would make the Creation a salvific doctrine. However, the specific method God used to create our bodies seems to lie outside of what we need to know for salvation. Interestingly, none of the three criteria currently being emphasized by the presiding authorities would be effective in isolation. But when used together, they provide a more definitive set of principles to evaluate the doctrinal status of any given issue.

**Defining Doctrine—**

**The Last Three Decades—Lay Members**

Over the past few decades, there have been several attempts by religious educators and other academics outside of the general leadership of the Church to create criteria by which to navigate doctrinal issues.\textsuperscript{52}


\textsuperscript{52} This study will focus on the last three decades. However, there have been numerous works written since the days of Joseph Smith that have sought to explain Church doctrine. The following comes from Eleanor Knowles, “Treatises on Doctrine,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:404. “Following is a list of books that have made significant contributions to the understanding of doctrine (unless otherwise noted, these works were published in Salt Lake City): Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning* (New York, 1837) and *Key to the Science of Theology* (1856); Orson Pratt, *An Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh, 1840); Orson Spencer, *Spencer’s Letters* (Liverpool and London, 1852); John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement* (1882) and *The Government of God* (1884); Franklin D. Richards and James Little, *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel* (1882);
None of these individuals have claimed authority to define doctrine or asserted that the criteria they highlighted were definitive. Rather, each has based their criteria on what the general officers of the Church have taught, listed above. This makes sense when the theology in question is based on the concept that modern prophets, seers, and revelators are the only people authorized to announce and declare official doctrine.  

From Most to Least Authoritative

Shortly after the end of the priesthood restriction, Armand Mauss, then a professor of sociology at Washington State University, proposed criteria for evaluating and categorizing Church teachings. However, rather than defining what is or what is not doctrine, Mauss categorized teachings into four separate types of “doctrine”: (1) canon doctrine (that which was received by revelation and submitted to and sustained by the Church), (2) official doctrine (official statements from the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles), (3) authoritative doctrine (teachings by authoritative sources, both ecclesiastical and scholarly), and (4) popular doctrine (basically folklore).

B. H. Roberts, The Gospel (Liverpool, 1888), Mormon Doctrine of Deity and Jesus Christ: The Revelation of God (1903), and The Seventy’s Course in Theology, 5 vols. (1907–1912); James E. Talmage, Articles of Faith (1899) and Jesus the Christ (1915); Orson F. Whitney, Gospel Themes (1914) and Saturday Night Thoughts (1921); Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine (1919); Brigham Young, Discourses of Brigham Young, ed. John A. Widtsoe (1926); John A. Widtsoe, Priesthood and Church Government (1939), A Rational Theology (1945), and Evidences and Reconciliations, 3 vols. in 1 (1960); Joseph Smith, Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, comp. by Joseph Fielding Smith (1938); Orson Pratt, Orson Pratt’s Works, ed. Parker P. Robison (1945), and Masterful Discourses of Orson Pratt, ed. N. B. Lundwall (1946); Milton R. Hunter, The Gospel Through the Ages (1945); Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., Latter-day Prophets Speak (1948); J. Reuben Clark, Jr., On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life (1949); Writings of Parley P. Pratt, ed. Parker P. Robison (1952); Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine (1958, rev. 1966); Spencer W. Kimball, The Miracle of Forgiveness (1969); and George Q. Cannon, Gospel Truth, ed. Jerreld Newquist, 2 vols. (1972, 1974).”


54. Armand L. Mauss, “Fading of the Pharaoh’s Curse: The Decline and Fall of the Priesthood Ban against Blacks in the Mormon Church,” in Neither White or Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church, ed. Lester E. Bush Jr. and Armand L. Mauss (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1984), 173–75. Note that as with each of the following sets of criteria, this paper will provide only a brief listing of the said criteria and point to the ramifications that flow from them. For a fuller picture of the rationale and basis behind each set of criteria, the reader is encouraged to thoroughly review each publication.
As can be seen, Mauss’s categorization serves to delineate Church teachings from the most to the least authoritative in nature (see fig. 2). This approach is similar to the second criterion the leadership of the Church is currently emphasizing, outlined above. Rather than focus on the nature of the teaching itself, it focuses on the source of the teaching. Mauss’s first two categories largely align with the concept that only those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators can be considered a modern source for doctrine, in addition to the standard works. This approach divides the teachings of these authorities into canonized teachings (that which has been sustained by the general membership of the Church as authoritative and binding) from other official teachings of the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve. His third category could contain a mixture of what might be defined as doctrine today with other teachings that might not. His fourth category, popular doctrine, would generally not be considered doctrine based on the three criteria of a teaching being eternal, authoritative, and salvific. Mauss himself makes it clear that “popular doctrine” lacks any authoritative source, though he still refers to it as “doctrine,” and many modern members may consider some of these teachings official doctrines.

**Sustained as Official or Canonical**

Stephen Robinson, past chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture in Religious Education at Brigham Young University, proposed one simple criterion to determine if something could be considered official Church doctrine: Has the doctrine been sustained by the Church membership as official and canonical? This would effectively limit official doctrine to what is contained in the canonically accepted scriptures (see fig. 3).

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55. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 13–18. Robinson references the source of this criterion to B. H. Roberts: “The Church has confined the sources of doctrine by which it is willing to be bound before the world
At first glance, Robinson’s definition might seem to be quite restrictive, and yet it can also be seen as one of the most expansive criteria. His criterion would restrict any statement made by prophets, seers, and revelators from being considered doctrine unless it has a parallel in the scriptures. This is not a strange concept; several authority figures have spoken similarly. However, the scriptures contain many genres of material such as history, poetry, and ancient cultural practices that would not be considered doctrine today.

In addition, the eighth article of faith qualifies our belief that scripture, especially the Bible, as it comes to us today is word perfect with the phrase “as far as it is translated correctly.” Joseph Smith himself took issue with certain parts of the Bible: “I am now going to take exceptions to the present translation of the bible in relation to these matters; our latitude and longitude can be determined in the original Hebrew with far greater accuracy than in the English version. There is a grand distinction between the actual meaning of the Prophets and the present translation.” None of this calls into question the value of scriptures in Latter-day Saint thought. Clearly, the Church believes and teaches that the scriptures contain true doctrine. These caveats to using the canonical to the things that God has revealed, and which the Church has officially accepted, and those alone. These would include the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price; these have been repeatedly accepted and endorsed by the Church in general conference assembled, and are the only sources of absolute appeal for our doctrine.” F. W. Otterstrom, “Answer Given to ‘Ten Reasons Why ‘Christians’ Can Not Fellowship with Latter-day Saints’: Discourse Delivered in Salt Lake Tabernacle July 10, 1921, by Elder Brigham H. Roberts,” Deseret News, July 23, 1921, 7.


status of a teaching as the primary or even only criterion for determining doctrine simply show that further criteria would be needed in determining what is and what is not doctrine.

**Authoritative Sources in Line with Current Prophetic Leadership**

Robert L. Millet, a former dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, has published numerous articles and book chapters on better understanding the doctrine of the Church.58 As with others who attempt this, Millet always makes it clear that only those sustained as prophets, seers, and revelators have the right to announce or declare new doctrine.59 In one of his articles, Millet started with a criterion similar to Robinson: (1) Is the teaching “found within the four standard works?” To this he added, (2) Is it contained “within official declarations or proclamations?” (3) “Is it discussed in general conference or other official gatherings by general Church leaders today?” and (4) “Is it found in the general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church today?”60 (see fig. 4).

After canonical status, Millet broadens what might be considered true doctrine by including official declarations or proclamations. This would be fairly uncontroversial to most, though not all, members of the Church. His final two criteria privilege what is currently being taught in the Church. This makes sense in a Church that emphasizes the need for modern prophets.61 As with the first two sets of criteria, Millet’s criteria

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59. “Before beginning this discussion, let me affirm that I understand implicitly that the authority to declare, interpret, and clarify doctrine rests with living apostles and prophets. This article will thus speak only about doctrine and in no way attempt to reach beyond my own stewardship.” Millet, “What Is Our Doctrine?,” 15.


61. For examples of conference addresses emphasizing the need for modern prophets, see Neil L. Andersen, “The Voice of the Lord,” *Ensign* 47, no. 11 (November 2017):
emphasize the source of the authoritative teaching more than any attribute of the teaching itself. As with most criteria we have examined, Millet’s might have more power in excluding teachings from being accepted as doctrine than including teachings. It would exclude as doctrine anything not currently being taught by or in the most authoritative sources.

**A Hermeneutic Approach**

Nathan Oman, a professor of law at the College of William & Mary, provided a unique approach to determining doctrine. Rather than coming up with a set of criteria to determine whether or not a teaching is official doctrine (a formal “rule of recognition”), he posits a theory on how members actually determine the question for themselves. Drawing from his legal background, he proposes a “Church Doctrine as integrity” hermeneutic approach throughout his article published in *Element* based on a judicial theory called “law as integrity.” In this approach, individuals seek to fit any new teaching into the context of what he refers to as “easy cases” (see fig. 5)—other doctrines that are clearly accepted as truths in the Church. Then they seek to determine the possible doctrinal parameters of the questionable teachings by looking at “the previously decided cases and construct[ing] the best possible argument that [they] can to justify them.” In other words, “when faced with a new

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question about Church Doctrine, rather than trying to determine . . .

the correct rule of recognition they can simply reason on the basis of clear cases, fitting the new question into a story that will place things in their best possible light.”

Hence, just as a legal judge uses past precedent (both past decisions and the reasoning of past decisions) to make new judgments on the law, Oman sees members doing the same thing to determine what true doctrine is for themselves.

Again, it is important to point out that this is not an attempt to come up with a specific set of official rules for recognizing doctrine, but an attempt to explain how members can decide for themselves what is and what is not doctrine. This method for determining doctrine is perhaps the least concrete of those considered in this essay. Modeled on judicial precedent, it encourages members to base their decisions on where new teachings would fit with what they already consider settled doctrine and their overall understanding of the gospel. Of course, this requires members to know what settled doctrines, or as Oman calls it, “easy cases” are. As much as this method lacks specificity, in some ways it could encourage a more conservative and maybe a more charitable approach to interpreting doctrine. All decisions on what is to be considered doctrine can only be understood in light of where that teaching fits with more central or core doctrines. In some ways, it encourages the evaluation of doctrine in relation to other doctrines, similar to

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an approach advocated by Elder Neal A. Maxwell. He explained that “orthodoxy ensures balance between the gospel’s powerful and correct principles. . . . But the gospel’s principles do require synchronization. When . . . isolated, men’s interpretations and implementations of these doctrines may be wild.”

**From Core to Esoteric Teachings**

A recent approach to defining doctrine was made by three professors in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University—Anthony Sweat, Michael MacKay, and Gerrit Dirkmaat.

In an approach reminiscent of Armand Mauss, rather than proposing a system meant to delineate whether something is Church doctrine or not, their model seeks to separate teachings into one of four categories or types in descending order from most to least authoritative (see fig. 6). Their first level is core, eternal doctrines (unchanging truths of salvation).

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64. Neal A. Maxwell, “‘Behold, the Enemy Is Combined’ (D&C 38:12),” *Ensign* 23, no. 5 (May 1993): 78.
salvation). Their second level is supporting teachings and doctrines (elaborate, descriptive, timely teachings expanding on core doctrines). Their third level is policy teachings and doctrines (timely statements related to applications of supportive and eternal teachings). Their final level is esoteric teachings and doctrines (unknown or only partially revealed or yet-to-be revealed truths).

As with most of the other models, this model focuses on the source of the teachings as much as if not more than the substance of the teaching. It mirrors Mauss’s model by dividing teachings into four decreasingly authoritative categories. The model recommends asking four questions when evaluating how authoritative or official a teaching is: (1) Is it repeatedly found in the scriptures? (2) Is it proclaimed by the united voice of the current Brethren? (3) Is it consistently taught by current general authorities and general officers acting in their official capacity? and (4) Is it found in recent Church publications or statements? The model differs from the approach the current General Authorities are using by referring to each level of teachings as “doctrine” (core doctrine, supporting doctrine, policy doctrine, and esoteric doctrine). In some ways, this might be seen as more of a semantic than substantive difference since they also emphasize that, unlike “core, eternal doctrine,” policies can and do change and esoteric doctrines are not considered authoritative in the church today.

Though each of these models have some aspects in common with the others, such as an emphasis on source or canonicity, they differ in detail. Each recognizes that in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints doctrine is officially determined by those who have been called and who have formal authority to declare doctrine, namely the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Therefore, none of the models are presented as an official means of declaring “doctrine” itself. As would be expected, the different models produce somewhat different answers to the question, What is our doctrine?

**Defining Doctrine— Utilitarianism and Revelation**

Two final means of determining doctrine that are continually emphasized by leaders and members alike are the witness of the Holy Spirit and the utilitarian concept of knowing by doing. The top three collocates (words juxtaposed or used side by side) with the word “doctrine” in the last three decades of general conference were “covenants,” “section,” and “book.”
These clearly are tied to the book of scripture the Doctrine and Covenants. The next two most common collocates of doctrine were “taught” or “teach.” This makes sense because doctrine is an authoritative teaching. But the next most frequent collocate over the entire corpus of general conference addresses was the word “whether.” This seemed strange until it became clear where it was coming from. In John 7:17, Jesus Christ gives a key for determining doctrine. “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.” Other than references to the Doctrine and Covenants and the counsel to teach doctrine, the ability to determine the veracity of doctrine by trying it was the most frequently referred-to collocate of the word “doctrine” used by General Authorities in general conference.

Finally, perhaps no counsel on how to recognize truth would be more familiar to a Church member than the instruction to pray and receive a spiritual witness.66 In the Church, it is considered not only the right but the responsibility of members to determine truth for themselves, and the promise is made that God will provide a revelatory answer to all who seek to know. Both ancient and modern scriptures are replete with similar admonitions and promises.67 Likely the most common advice a member might receive when evaluating teachings is to pray and seek an answer from God. Such an individualized and spiritual approach to truth seeking would not carry much weight in a secular society nor be binding on the Church as a whole. Yet simply asking God without purposeful investigation is even contrary to common understanding in light of the Lord’s instruction in Doctrine and Covenants 9:7–9. Members are expected to study as well as pray in order to know truth.

The founding prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, was an adamant preacher of what he believed were true principles, and he spent his life teaching those truths. And yet he was just as adamant that it was the responsibility and right of each individual to determine what they themselves would believe. He once stated, “When I have used every means in my power to exalt a man’s [sic] mind, and have taught him righteous principles to no effect [and]
he is still inclined in his darkness, yet the same principles of liberty and charity would ever be manifested by me as though he embraced it.” He further stated, “I never feel to force my doctrines upon any person [and] I rejoice to see prejudice give way to truth, and the traditions of men dispersed by the pure principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” In this spirit, each member has the right and responsibility to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

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Is Sure Knowledge an Ideal for Everyone or One Spiritual Gift among Many?

Blair Dee Hodges and Patrick Q. Mason

“I’d like to bear my testimony. I know the Church is true. I know that Heavenly Father lives and loves us. I know that Jesus Christ is our Savior. I know that Joseph Smith was a true prophet and restored the Church on the earth. I know the Book of Mormon is the word of God. I know that the Church is led by living prophets today. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

Some variation on this basic formulation is heard throughout The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its monthly “fast and testimony meetings,” where Church members are encouraged to share personal expressions of faith from the pulpit. Similar testimonies are spoken every day by full-time missionaries around the world and as part of many classes and trainings in the Church. As members do so, the spiritual gift of knowledge is simultaneously affirmed, demonstrated, and reinforced. The mantra of Latter-day Saint faithfulness is “I know.”

The sheer ubiquity of this discursive formulation raises the question of whether sure spiritual knowledge, gained via the witness of the Holy Ghost, is an ideal and even a mandate for all of God’s children seeking salvation, or whether people can be faithful and receive eternal life even when they do not feel they can testify with absolute certainty of core gospel truths. Is faith—aakin to belief, hope, or trust and differentiated in many scriptural passages from knowledge—sufficient for salvation, or is it merely a waystation on the path toward greater surety? Furthermore, is there any room in the disciple’s life for sincere doubt, or does doubt represent the antithesis of both faith and knowledge and therefore should be banished from the believer’s lexicon and experience?
Scriptural passages and teachings of modern-day prophets can be mustered to support multiple positions in answer to these questions. For instance, God seems to leave room for honest strivers along the entire belief-knowledge continuum. In a March 1831 revelation regarding the diversity of spiritual gifts, God told the restored Church, “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. . . . To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (D&C 46:13–14). In this passage, the Lord differentiates knowledge from belief yet validates each and marks them both as salvific. In this essay, we will demonstrate the great value that Latter-day Saints have assigned to the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. But the variety of human religious experience also suggests the importance of validating and embracing the faith of those who desire to believe but do not—and may never in this life—possess sure knowledge.

**Saving Knowledge**

Latter-day Saint scriptures build on the biblical witness that knowledge ranks among the principal attributes of God and that he desires his children to share his knowledge. Indeed, Adam and Eve became fully human and initiated God’s plan of salvation for his spirit children only after eating the fruit of the tree that granted them knowledge (2 Ne. 2:22–25; Moses 4:11–12; 5:11). Though as a consequence they were driven from the garden and separated from the tree of life, Jesus promised the Fall would be reversed and eternal life would be granted through the acquisition of godly knowledge (John 17:3). Three different lists of spiritual gifts provided in the Church’s canonized scripture agree that “the word of knowledge” is among the chief bequests of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:8; Moro. 10:10; D&C 46:18).

For Latter-day Saints, knowledge is life-giving and sanctifying. The Book of Mormon is bookended, and saturated, with righteous disciples’ desire to know, along with repeated promises that knowledge will be granted to those who seek it (see 1 Ne. 11:1–3; Moro. 10:3–5). Joseph Smith’s prophetic career was defined by the quest for and receipt of spiritual knowledge. This pattern stretched from his direct and unmediated knowledge of God secured in the First Vision to the ritualization of godly knowledge introduced systematically, and democratically, through the ceremonies of the temple. God has promised each faithful seeker that “if thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge” (D&C 42:61). Among its exalting functions, the Melchizedek Priesthood
restores and holds “the key of the knowledge of God” (D&C 84:19). Those who obey the Word of Wisdom are promised the “great treasures of knowledge” (D&C 89:19). In the dispensation of restoration, Joseph Smith declared that no earthly opposition can “hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints” (D&C 121:33). Teaching the Saints in Illinois, Smith underscored the role of knowledge not simply as an “advantage” in this life and the next (D&C 130:19) but as an absolute necessity for salvation and exaltation: “A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge for if he does not get knowledge he will be brought into Captivity by some evil power in the other world as evil spirits will have more knowledge & consequently more power than many men who are on the earth.”¹ In Latter-day Saint scriptural theology, ignorance is damning (D&C 131:6), and knowledge is saving.

The Latter-day Saints’ early revelations and experiences fostered a culture of spiritual confidence in which surety became not only the end but also the means of their quest for salvation. Joseph Smith taught that when a person had been “thoroughly proved,” God would say, “thou shalt be exalted,” and the person would “find his calling & Election made sure” and receive “a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God.”² As Christians had taught since biblical times, Smith affirmed that it was conceivable for a person “to obtain a promise from God for myself that I shall have Eternal life.”³

However, for most Church members who heard Smith’s sermons, their spiritual surety was of a different sort. Through the knowledge bestowed by the Spirit, they testified that God had spoken in the latter days and restored his Church, and that they had direct access to divine truth through the gift of the Holy Ghost, the words of prophets, and priesthood ordinances. This type of spiritual certainty was a crucial component in the faith that fueled the first decades of the Restoration,

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³ “Discourse, 21 May 1843, as Reported by James Burgess,” p. [8], Joseph Smith Papers, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-21-may-1843-as-reported-by-james-burgess/1. Smith was preaching on the text of 2 Peter 1:10, which exhorts the Saints in the primitive Church to “give diligence to make your calling and election sure.”
sustaining Saints as they endured persecution, crossed the plains, went or sent their loved ones on far-flung missions, settled the West, and built Zion over and over again.

The ideal of seeking spiritual certainty persists in the twenty-first-century Church. In an oft-cited talk, Boyd K. Packer, late President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, advised missionaries to take a “leap of faith,” to declare the certainty of gospel principles they were yet unsure of. “Oh, if I could teach you this one principle,” he admonished. “A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it!” The Holy Ghost would bring assurance to the testifier’s heart and mind, first in the form of faith and eventually as “great spiritual knowledge.”

General conference addresses frequently conclude with solemn affirmations of knowledge about God’s love, Jesus Christ’s divine sonship, the eternal importance of families, the truthfulness of the Church, the authority of the priesthood, and the reliability of Church prophets. Parents are invited to cultivate knowledge in their children in order to ensure righteous development. Former Primary General President Coleen K. Menlove taught, “Children need to be filled with the light of the gospel so when temptation comes they can say: ‘I know who I am. I am a child of God. I know what I am to do. . . . I know who I can become. I can become a righteous young woman,’ or, ‘I can become a righteous young man and receive the priesthood of God.’ Children filled with this knowledge and light can make the decision to reject darkness and turn to the light and peace of the gospel.”

Many of the Church’s distinctive truth claims are wrapped up in history. Specifically, most Latter-day Saints have believed that Joseph Smith literally saw God and Jesus in the Sacred Grove; that the angel Moroni literally appeared to Joseph Smith and delivered literal gold plates to him; that Book of Mormon figures like Nephi, Sariah, and Alma literally lived and prophesied on the American hemisphere and that Jesus Christ literally appeared to the Lehites after his resurrection; that the actual personages of John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John literally appeared and laid hands on the heads of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, literally restoring God’s priesthood on the earth in modern times. “In a particularly pronounced way,” Latter-day Saint scholar Terryl Givens observed with regard to the


importance of historicity, “the meaning and value of the Book of Mormon as a religious text are tied to a specific set of historical claims.” Latter-day Saints express spiritual knowledge not just of a set of abstract theological propositions but also of the particular ways that God has acted in and through history.

**Dissent and Doubt**

Church leaders’ insistence on the literal historicity of miraculous events associated with the Restoration has always provoked skepticism and ridicule from nonbelievers. But with the advent of the information age, and especially the internet’s easy access to information previously hard to come by, the complexities of Church history emerged as a stumbling block for many believers as well. Church members learned that much of what they thought they knew about Church history was incomplete or sometimes wrong and that contrary information they discovered online could not always be easily dismissed as the malicious invention of “anti-Mormons.” When they learned that Joseph Smith gave multiple and varying accounts of the First Vision, or that he translated the Book of Mormon with the use of a seer stone otherwise associated with a now-forgotten culture of folk magic, or that the DNA of the indigenous peoples of the Americas did not bear any indications of Middle Eastern ancestry, many believers began to doubt their testimonies. If Church leaders past and present—especially prophets—had been wrong about historical issues, how could they be trusted on matters of saving knowledge?

To be sure, people have doubted the truthfulness of Latter-day Saint doctrine from the beginning; dissent is a tradition as old as the religion itself. Many people have simply drifted away from Church participation, their enthusiasm waning over a period of weeks, months, or years. This recurrent atrophying only reinforced the Church’s internal message that those members who remained within the fold had to guard against even the beginnings of doubt, which could too easily cascade into apostasy. Yet many Church dissenters—ranging from the Reformed Church in Nauvoo to the Reorganization under Joseph Smith III, from nineteenth-century Godbeites to contemporary fundamentalists and “Snufferites”—have articulated their own certainties. Collectively, they have expressed

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their dissent less as a lack of spiritual knowledge than as strong assurances of rival claims to truth and authority.7

Despite the persistence of an “I know” culture in Latter-day Saint wards and in the Church at large—and partly in reaction to it—a new dynamic emerged in the late twentieth century, picking up steam in the early twenty-first. A significant number of Church members were and are leaving the faith altogether, often rejecting all of the foundational truth claims they once bore witness of as things that they knew spiritually. Their narratives of dissent and apostasy often form a nearly perfect inverse of their one-time testimonies.8 But probably an even larger number of people with doubts remain in the Church. They often struggle silently to reconcile their own destabilized convictions with the expressions of certainty they still regularly hear from the pulpits of general conference and local wards. “Doubt” and “faith crisis” have entered the popular vocabulary and experience of twenty-first-century Church members in ways that would have been virtually unthinkable in previous generations. The recent acknowledgment of the reality of doubt within the membership of the Church has created the space for many people to remain active even with their questions. The prevalence of “faith crisis” has also prompted a series of responses both from the institutional Church and lay scholars and members seeking to preserve room for faith and even spiritual knowledge in spite of aspects of the Church’s history or doctrine that trouble some members.9


Three Views

The contemporary situation, with antecedents but no direct precedents in the Church’s history, has produced new debates over the possibility and desirability of certainty as part of an individual’s spiritual journey. At least three distinctive positions, even camps, have formed. On one side are secularists, including many profoundly disaffected and alienated former Church members, who discount or deny the reliability of claims of sure spiritual knowledge. This position can range from a hardened atheism that denies the existence of God (and thus the very possibility of spiritual communication) to a more specific rejection of Latter-day Saint truth claims. Skeptics insist that believers’ supposed knowledge is built upon wishes more than facts, that the Church’s teachings are fundamentally based on falsehoods and delusions, and that various religions’ competing assertions of exclusive truth negate any single claimant’s case.¹⁰

On the other end of the spectrum are those who absolutely affirm not only the possibility but the reality of sure spiritual knowledge, not just as the limited experience of a select few but as the mark and meaning of a Christian life. Many of these defenders of (the) faith have doubled down on the Church’s truth claims and tend to doubt the legitimacy of other people’s expressed doubts. In this context, a lack of assurance is interpreted as a sign indicating a person’s lack of worthiness or more generously a temporary spiritual shortcoming that could be alleviated with sincere desire and effort. “As doubts arise,” an article in the Church’s official magazine for adults once counseled, “it may be useful to honestly ask yourself, Is there something I am doing or desiring that is contrary to the gospel? If you answer yes, seek help from your bishop. It can make all the difference! Letting your doubts justify your sins is never a successful substitute for repenting.”¹¹ For those whose souls

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burn with the fire of faith, it can be simultaneously bewildering and painful to watch the embers of spiritual conviction die out in those they love, leading them to believe that something sinister (or sinful) must have acted as an extinguishing agent. The often well-intentioned stigmatization of doubt in Church culture results in feelings of alienation and loneliness among those who deal with questions about aspects of Church doctrine or history.¹²

Between these two opposing camps—which of course can be and often are reduced to caricature—is a third position, or more accurately a cluster of closely related middle ways. In a stirring address to employees of the Church Education System, President M. Russell Ballard directly urged educators to take a more thoughtful and sympathetic approach to doubt than in times past. “Gone are the days,” he said, “when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, ‘Don’t worry about it!’ Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church.” Ballard affirmed that greater “gospel transparency and spiritual inoculation through a thoughtful study of doctrine and history, coupled with a burning testimony, is the best antidote we have to help students avoid and/or deal with questions, doubt, or faith crises they may face in this information age.”¹³

Middle-way perspectives have typically emerged from an appreciation and validation of the wide range of lived experiences present within the contemporary and historical Church. Doubt is recognized as an authentic reality for many people in the twenty-first century, but so is sure spiritual knowledge. Church leaders often make the distinction between the spiritual corrosiveness of perpetual doubt and the positive value of curiosity and questions as part of the search for spiritual knowledge.

¹². Those trying to minimize the conflict between believers (or “knowers”) and doubters have produced lists of recommendations for how those whose faith remains secure can more compassionately relate to those with doubts. See M. Sue Bergin, “Keeping the Faith,” BYU Magazine, Spring 2014, https://magazine.byu.edu/article/keeping-the-faith/; Mason, Planted, esp. 17–19.

Doubt is never upheld as a positive virtue in the scriptures, whereas questions drove Joseph Smith into the grove of trees. BYU–Idaho geology professor Julie Willis’s “three primary points about questions and questioning” among Latter-day Saints, shared during a university devotional, exemplify this trend: “1. Asking questions is part of our religious heritage. 2. Questions of different types can be sources of intellectual stimulation and light. 3. Challenging questions are not forbidden and can be embraced with faith and light.”

A growing number of Church leaders, scholars, and members acknowledge the brittle nature of an all-or-nothing approach to spiritual knowledge that leaves no room for questions and vilifies any form of doubt. They concede and even commend the fact that a person may question some aspects of Church history and doctrine while retaining and acting on a personal testimony of core principles. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland publicly acknowledged the “desperation” that nearly all Church members feel at some point as we wrestle with what we do not know or understand. His counsel was to “hold fast to what you already know and stand strong until additional knowledge comes.” For those unable to express the language of knowledge, Holland affirmed “with all the fervor of [his] soul that belief is a precious word, an even more precious act,” and that a person need not ever feel ashamed for “only believing.” Without abandoning the possibility and even ultimate desirability of spiritual knowledge, the vocabulary of this middle way is more expansive than the traditional formula of “I know.” People increasingly invoke words like believe, hope, resonate, love, insightful, compelling, and profound to describe their encounter with gospel principles and practices. While refusing to valorize doubt for its own sake or affirm it as a desirable end-point of a person’s spiritual quest, the twenty-first-century Church seems to be carving out more space for people who have not yet achieved—and may never in this life attain—absolute spiritual certainty.


Conclusion

In the end, Latter-day Saint theology makes room for people at all points of the faith spectrum. While affirming that every human being possesses innate spiritual gifts, the revelations celebrate the diversity of those gifts and that “all these gifts come from God, for the benefit of the children of God.” Some are given “the word of knowledge,” while others are “given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life” (D&C 46:14, 18, 26). For those who do not experience even a “particle” of these gifts of spiritual knowledge, the self-willed “desire to believe” is hailed as sufficient (Alma 32:27). The Church struggles to find a place for those who have categorically ruled out the very possibility of spiritual experience. But for those who are open to the search, however uncertain the path, one of the primary attractions of the Restoration is the promise of an eternal existence characterized by the pursuit and reception of ever-greater knowledge and light, which “groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

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Is God Subject to or the Creator of Eternal Law?

James McLachlan

Whether God is subject to law or whether God created all law is a question long debated in priesthood quorums, Relief Society meetings, Gospel Doctrine classes, and around Latter-day Saint dinner tables. Both sides claim the scriptures and the Prophet Joseph Smith. The divide usually lines up with, on one side, Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce McConkie teaching of God’s power over all things and, on the other, B. H. Roberts, John Widtsoe, and James Talmage seeing God as the revealer of laws that even God must follow. Not only is the question open and unsettled as a matter of doctrine, but whether these brethren line up so neatly on either side is itself a question.

An Ancient Question

Whether God is subject to eternal laws or is their creator who is free to change them is a very old question. In one of Plato’s early dialogues, his hero Socrates asks Euthyphro, an Athenian prophet who has come to the courts to charge his own father with murder, a question about the nature of piety: “Is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?” (10a). To frame this question in Christian terms, Socrates’s question asks whether something is good because it has been decreed so by God, being subject

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to God’s will, or whether God decrees it because it is good in itself. The question has been considered, avoided, and sometimes even answered in various ways in the history of Christianity. It relates both to ethics and the problem of evil and suffering, as well as to natural laws and logical rules. If one is a follower of “divine command theory” in ethics, then whatever God decrees is good because God decides what is good. For example, if one accepts that the good depends on the will of God, it makes some sense that God could command Moses and the Israelites to wipe out the Midianites, including their children, and keep the virgins as their slaves (Num. 31). God loves Israel and hates the Midianites. This is good because God has decreed it so. If one tries to explain why God would order such things—for example, the Midianites had certain diseases or were irredeemably evil; in other words, that God had reasons for destroying the Midianites—one is already sliding toward the idea that God must follow certain laws.

Disturbing stories in scripture—God hardening Pharaoh’s heart, the massacres associated with the entry into Canaan, Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter, the wager between God and Satan over Job, and some of the descriptions of the coming apocalyptic conflicts—create conflicts in the minds of even the most committed believers. The destruction of the Midianites led an uneasy nonbeliever, Mark Twain, to ask in his *Letters from the Earth*, What kind of “Father” would decree such a thing? In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov asks what idea of morality we have other than the human one, which says such actions as described in scripture are beyond justification. To answer objections like Ivan’s, some will cite Isaiah 55:9, that God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts as the heavens are higher than the earth. But this only raises the question, Are there any things we

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2. Plato seems to be on the side that claims God(s) are subject to the good. Plato’s God is a demiurge, a workman, who does the best he can with the materials he has; he creates order from chaos, but he does not create the original materials from nothing. (An already long tradition in Greek philosophy held that creation from nothing was an incoherent idea.) As a result, Plato does not face the “problem of evil” troubling the Judeo-Christian tradition; if God creates the world from nothing, then why does he create evil as part of it? Plato’s God is a creator in the way a craftsman is; he makes the product, which is an excellent one, but he is not responsible for the effects of “Necessity,” the unavoidable defects of the materials.


could begin to understand about God if all the moral and physical rules by which we understand are subject to God’s will? Certainly, the idea that God sanctions massacres of children is dangerous. The massacre and enslavement of the Midianites, and the other slaughters that accompanied the Israelite entry into Canaan, have been used to justify genocides or the enslavement of masses of God’s children.

But the question about law goes beyond ethics. Is God, in his omnipotence, subject to the rules of logic? Could God create square circles, make mountain ranges with no valleys, or microwave a burrito so hot God couldn’t eat it and then eat it? Thinkers with very strong notions of omnipotence, like William of Ockham, John Calvin, and Al-Ghazali, will say yes, but how this is so is beyond human understanding.5 Thomas Aquinas gets around the question by saying that the rules of logic are “in God’s nature” so God doesn’t do irrational things.6 God cannot violate the principle of noncontradiction. Omnipotence is not irrationality. But what about natural laws and human freedom? Process theologians, on the other hand, claim that besides the principle of noncontradiction, God is also limited by the freedom of others and the brute continual persistence of nature.7

**Latter-day Saints, God, and Eternal Laws**

Where do Latter-day Saints fall in the debate?8 Latter-day Saint scripture shows that law itself is extremely important for Latter-day Saints. In the

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8. It is interesting that many contemporary scholars think the answer is clear. Latter-day Saints follow Plato: God is a craftsman who knows the laws. The laws are eternal, and God is subject to them. See, for example, Francis Beckwith, “Moral Law, the Mormon Universe, and the Nature of the Right We Ought to Choose,” and Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, “Craftsman or Creator? An Examination of the Mormon
Book of Mormon, the prophet Lehi says without law there could be no God, no humanity, no creation.

And if ye shall say there is no law, ye shall also say there is no sin. If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. And if there be no righteousness there be no happiness. And if there be no righteousness nor happiness there be no punishment nor misery. And if these things are not there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; for there could have been no creation of things, neither to act nor to be acted upon; therefore, all things must have vanished away. (2 Ne. 2:13)

According to Lehi, law must exist for there to be anything beyond the sheer chaos of nothing or no-thing. All things would vanish away. Without order, all is chaos. But are these laws eternal themselves, or are they dependent on the will of God? Latter-day Saints have approached this question in a variety of ways. Consider the following scripture, which emphasizes the importance of law in relation to blessings, progress, and perfection: “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:18–21).


The irony here is some critics accuse the Latter-day Saints of following the Greeks and not the Bible. This is a charge that Latter-day Saints, at least since Talmage and Roberts, have argued is a source of the apostasy in early Christianity. It was part of the reason that a restoration was necessary. Greek philosophy, with its static ideal of perfection, demanded a God without body, parts, or passions, and this is one source of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo which appears to be nonbiblical. Ex nihilo creation, that God created the universe from nothing, protects the absolute omnipotence of God but is also a source of the problem of evil. If God is good, why couldn’t God have made a better world? It also creates problems about how one might think of freedom. Notice this is also the philosophical source and justification of the idea that God creates all the laws since God created everything ex nihilo. Gerhard May, Creation Ex Nihilo (London: T&K Clark, 2004); Jon Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); James McLachlan, “The Problem of Evil in Mormon Thought,” in The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism, ed. Philip Barlow and Terryl Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 276–92.
The question we need to consider here is, “What does it mean to say the law was decreed?” If we examine the verses, they are open to at least three possible readings. Each reading has a complementary question as to whether the laws are one decreed or many.

1. God decreed the law or laws that would govern the world before the creation of the world.

2. The law or laws are eternal since they are before the foundation of the world. God decreed the law or laws because they are eternal truth.

3. Laws emerge with the world and are at its foundation. In this sense, as the world emerges from the chaos of disorganized matter, laws are the descriptions of the order and limitations imposed because of the emergence of plural beings. God finds himself in the midst of other persons.

In brief, were the laws decreed by God, were they made clear by God, or did they emerge with the relation between God, other spirits, and the world? Consider the following passage drawn from three different accounts of the King Follett Discourse. I think all three interpretations are still possible here.

God himself—finding himself in the midst of spirits and glory—because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. God has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences that they may be exalted with himself. God...saw proper to institute laws for those who were in less intelligence that they might have one glory upon another in all that knowledge power & glory & so took in hand to save [them in] the world of Sp[irits].

9. In this essay, I indicate three possible readings of this text. But these are only three possible readings; there may be more.

10. Do the blessings depend on an infinite or finite number of separate laws, or do all these laws depend on obedience to one basic law, love of God and neighbor?


B. H. Roberts is usually associated with position 2, that God is subject to the eternal law or laws decreed before the foundation of the world. He argued that omnipotence must be thought of as somewhat limited. In the quote below, Roberts, as others have done, limits God's omnipotence in relation to logical necessities without which we cannot understand our world. But notice God is also placed within space and time (duration). God neither creates space nor annihilates matter. For Roberts, this would seem to place God under explanation 2 of the law(s). The laws are eternal and God is God because God embodies them perfectly.

The attribute “Omnipotence” must needs be thought upon also as somewhat limited. Even God, notwithstanding the ascription to him of all-powerfulness in such scripture phrases as “With God all things are possible,” “Nothing shall be impossible with God”—notwithstanding all this, I say, not even God may have two mountain ranges without a valley between. Not even God may place himself beyond the boundary of space: nor on the outside of duration. Nor is it conceivable to human thought that he can create space, or annihilate matter. These are things that limit even God's Omnipotence. What then, is meant by the ascription of the attribute Omnipotence to God? Simply that all that may or can be done by power conditioned by other eternal existences—duration, space, matter, truth, justice—God can do. But even he may not act out of harmony with the other eternal existences which condition or limit even him.14

The statement that God's power is limited by other eternal existences including truth and justice would seem to bring this part of Roberts's stance closer to position 3. In order for the universe that includes persons to emerge, each person has a kind of eternal power that limits the other persons, powers, and laws. These eternal existences include duration, space, and matter but also truth and justice. Other eternal existences, including other eternal intelligences, limit God's power. Latter-day Saints occasionally sing a hymn that reflects this position: “Know This, That Every Soul Is Free,” which includes the line “God will force no man to heav’n.”15 This relates to Alma 42:13 in the Book of Mormon where Alma declares that should God's mercy rob justice, “God

15. “Know This, That Every Soul Is Free,” *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 240.
would cease to be God.” This is how Brigham Young understood the passage. God seems subject to some eternal principles, whether laws or tenets arising from his relation to other persons. He explains this in a discourse from 1866.

The volition of the creature is free; this is a law of their existence and the Lord cannot violate his own law; were he to do that, he would cease to be God. He has placed life and death before his children, and it is for them to choose. If they choose life, they receive the blessing of life; if they choose death, they must abide the penalty. This is a law which has always existed from all eternity, and will continue to exist throughout all the eternities to come.16

In 1853 Young outlined what he believed were two eternal principles: increase and destruction. These were eternal.

The Lord Jesus Christ works upon a plan of eternal increase, of wisdom, intelligence, honor, excellence, power, glory, might, and dominion, and the attributes that fill eternity. What principle does the devil work upon? It is to destroy, dissolve, decompose, and tear in pieces. The principle of separation, or disorganization, is as much an eternal principle, as much a truth, as that of organization. Both always did and will exist. Can I point out to you the difference in these principles, and show clearly and satisfactorily the benefit, the propriety, and the necessity of acting upon one, any more than the other?17

These two eternal principles echo Lehi’s discussion of order and dissolution of order in 2 Nephi 2:11 and in 2:27 of choosing between liberty and eternal life or captivity and death, increase or dissolution: “Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. 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; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself” (2 Ne. 2:27).

Omnipotence, Chaos, and Creation Ex Nihilo

One way to protect God’s absolute power is to claim that he created all things ex nihilo. There is thus nothing that limits the power of God. For Augustine and most of the Christian tradition, the world exists in space

17. Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 1:116 (February 27, 1853).
and time, but God exists in eternity—not as everlasting time but as something more like an eternal now.\textsuperscript{18} God created all matter, time, and space from nothing. Thus, God created the laws by which the world is governed. This may or may not include the laws of logic. Ex nihilo creation thus defends the idea that God is not subject at least to some laws, because God, in his eternity, transcends the realm of space and time and natural law. The question for most theists is, then, Is God subject to the rules of logic, or are these created when God created the world ex nihilo? The question can also be extended to moral laws and to freedom. Does God have a duty to respect the freedom of human persons if God created them and moral laws ex nihilo? The Calvinist God is the epitome of the all-powerful ex-nihilo artist of the universe. Even more powerfully than Augustine, Calvin argued that humanity was under the predestinating power of God.\textsuperscript{19} Augustine had written, “If it were not good that evil things exist, they would certainly not be allowed to exist by the omnipotent God.”\textsuperscript{20} Calvin goes further clarifying the position. “Those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them for the inheritance which he predestines for his own children.”\textsuperscript{21} God literally decreed all events to take place. God “foresees future events only by reason of the fact that he decreed they take place.”\textsuperscript{22} “Whence does it happen that Adam’s fall irremediably involved so many peoples, together with their infant offspring in eternal death because it so pleased God?” Calvin replied, “The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess.”\textsuperscript{23} But he concludes that “God’s will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous.”\textsuperscript{24} This rejection of human independence in relation to God could be at the heart of Joseph Smith’s famous alterations to the text of the Exodus passages


\textsuperscript{22} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3:xxiii–xiv.15.

\textsuperscript{23} Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, 3:xxiii, 6.

where God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (for example, Ex. 9:12; 10:20). In Smith’s version, Pharaoh hardens his own heart (see, for example, JST Ex. 9:12; 10:20). In this case, God could either be subject to ethical principles or permit the freedom of Pharaoh as a separate person.

Joseph Smith rejected creation ex nihilo explicitly in the King Follett Discourse, where he stated that there is something uncreated about the spirit of man. “God never did have power to create the spirit of man at all. He could not create himself— Intelligence exists upon a selfexistent principle— [it] is a spirit from age to age & [there is] no creation about it.”

Even before Joseph Smith unveiled his Nauvoo theology, Parley Pratt thought that, since Joseph Smith had denied the idea of creation ex nihilo, it followed that God was subject to certain laws. It is impossible, he wrote in an 1838 essay, “for God to bring forth matter from nonentity, or to originate element from nothing,” because “these are principles of eternal truth, they are laws which cannot be broken, . . . whether the reckoning be calculated by the Almighty, or by man.”

In Key to the Science of Theology, he declared that even the Father and Son, as part of an eternal and physical universe, are “subject to the laws that govern, of necessity, even the most refined order of physical existence,” because “all physical element, however embodied, quickened, or refined, is subject to the general laws necessary to all existence.”

John A. Widtsoe agreed; God was “part of the universe”; his “conquest over the universe” was a function of his “recognition of universal laws” and “the forces lying about him.”

The Discussion Goes On

The tradition that God is subject to eternal laws that either exist eternally or that emerge in Creation in relation to other eternal existences external to God is long and often defended in Latter-day Saint thought,

25. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton [28],” 16 [28]. Joseph Smith started teaching this doctrine as early as August 1839. He then repeated it in (at least) February 1840, January 1841, March 1841, April 1842, and, of course, April 1844. This is one of the best-documented teachings of Joseph Smith. Charles Harrell quotes each of these instances in “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844,” BYU Studies 28, no. 2 (1988): 75–96.


27. Parley P. Pratt, Key to the Science of Theology (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855), 37.

28. John A. Widtsoe, A Rational Theology: As Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: General Boards of the Mutual Improvement Association, 1932), 24–25.
but the idea that God decreed the laws from eternity is also present. In
its 1929 response to B. H. Roberts’s book *The Truth, the Way, the Life*,
which, as we have seen, held positions like 2 or 3, the apostolic com-
mittee reviewing the book for publication objected that God “is the
author of law” and cited D&C 88:42: “And again, verily I say unto you,
he hath given a law unto all things, by which they move in their times
and their seasons.” The committee’s main objection was that Elder Rob-
erts claimed in relation to his position that God is subject to law; if so,
then it was the case that God, like human beings, progressed in knowl-
edge, learning all laws. The committee argued that this could not be the
case since God was the author of all law.29

Although less clear on this point of whether God is subject to eternal
laws, Elder Bruce R. McConkie thoroughly rejected the idea that God
could be progressing in knowledge and seemed to hold that all laws
were ordained by God. In his highly influential *Mormon Doctrine*, Elder
McConkie wrote that all progress relates to obedience to divine laws
that were ordained by God so that we might become like him. But Elder
McConkie did not make clear exactly what “ordained” means in this
context. Were the laws created or approved?

Obedience is the first law of heaven, the cornerstone upon which all
righteousness and progression rest. It consists in compliance with
divine law, in conformity to the mind and will of Deity, in complete
subjection to God and his commands. To obey gospel law is to yield
obedience to the Lord, to execute the commands of and be ruled by
him whose we are. Obedience is possible because of two things: 1. Laws
were ordained by Deity so that his spirit children by conformity to them
might progress and become like him; and 2. The children of God were
endowed with agency, the power and ability to either obey or disobey
the divine will.30

It seems to me that we can read Elder McConkie’s statement about law
in all three of the possible readings I mentioned above, but 1 and 3 seem
the most likely. God can be seen as omnipotent in a very strong sense,
and in this case the law is created by God, which would mean that
McConkie espouses the first position. And yet Elder McConkie also
writes that God ordained the laws that his spirit children might become
like him through obedience. This sounds more like position 3, where

God exists in relation with other beings, his children and other Gods. This is in line with Joseph Smith’s description of God and the spirits of glory in the King Follett Discourse: “God himself—find himself in the midst of spirit and glory—because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”

Latter-day Saint writers like O. Kendall White in his *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology* have claimed that positions like Elder McConkie’s reflect a retreat from traditional Mormon theology toward a type of Protestant crisis theology. This might also, perhaps unfairly, be said of the work of Robert Millet, Stephen Robinson, and others who have sought a kind of rapprochement with evangelical Christians. But as Eugene England, not a champion of anything like a Latter-day Saint crisis theology, pointed out, one could trace this more traditionally theistic view from Elder McConkie, Joseph Fielding Smith, J. Reuben Clark, and Joseph F. Smith to Hyrum Smith’s early objections to his brother Joseph’s Nauvoo theology. In any case, Latter-day Saint attitudes, at least historically, toward the question of the eternity or creation of eternal law are diverse and not always clear.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell seemed to say that God transcends space and time. “The past, present, and future are before God simultaneously. . . . Therefore God’s omniscience is not solely a function of prolonged and discerning familiarity with us—but of the stunning reality that the past, present, and future are part of an ‘eternal now’ with God.” The scriptural reference related to this is, “The angels do not reside on a planet like this earth; but they reside in the presence of God, on a globe like a sea of glass and fire, where all things for their glory are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord” (D&C 130:6–7). One could read Elder Maxwell’s statement in an Augustinian fashion, which would make it easier to argue the case that God created space and time and all the laws. But what complicates this reading, as Blake Ostler points out, is that it is difficult to read this passage to say God is beyond time since verses 4–5 say God exists in time but God’s time is different

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from earthly time. “In answer to the question—Is not the reckoning of God’s time, angel’s time, prophet’s time, and man’s time, according to the planet on which they reside? I answer, Yes. But there are no angels who minister to this earth but those who do belong or have belonged to it” (D&C 130:4–5).35

Beyond statements of the General Authorities, the discussion about issues surrounding the idea of God being the author or the creator of laws has been common among Latter-day Saint thinkers. The Latter-day Saint philosopher Sterling McMurrin claimed that Latter-day Saint theology was essentially “non-absolutistic.”36 This did not mean that in their everyday discourse Latter-day Saints didn’t talk about God using the same absolutist terms as other Christians, only that their idea of God would not let them do so consistently. McMurrin thought that an embodied God who had advanced in knowledge and understanding had to be still advancing in knowledge and power. This was what McMurrin thought was the Latter-day Saint response to the problem of evil.37

35. For a discussion of time and divine knowledge, see Blake T. Ostler, Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2001), 148–56. Earlier in an article in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, Ostler elaborated on Elder Maxwell’s statement and alluded to personal correspondence with Elder Maxwell: “The idea of God’s eternity here appears to consist not in the Hebrew notion of God’s eternal duration in time without beginning or end; but of transcendence of temporal succession. In fairness to Elder Maxwell, we must recognize that his observations are meant as rhetorical expressions to inspire worship rather than as an exacting philosophical analysis of the idea of timelessness. Furthermore, in a private conversation in January 1984, Elder Maxwell told me that he is unfamiliar with the classical idea of timelessness and the problems it entails. His intent was not to convey the idea that God transcends temporal succession, but ‘to help us trust in God’s perspectives, and not to be too constrained by our own provincial perceptions while we are in this mortal cocoon.’” Blake T. Ostler, “The Mormon Concept of God,” Dialogue 17, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 75, emphasis in original.

In a footnote, Ostler reproduces some more of his personal correspondence with Maxwell: “I refer to this private conversation and to excerpts from Elder Maxwell’s letter with his permission. He writes, ‘I would never desire to do, say, or write anything which would cause others unnecessary problems. . . . I would not have understood certain philosophical implications arising (for some) because I quoted from Purtill who, in turn, quoted from Boethius. Nor would I presume to know of God’s past, including His former relationship to time and space.’ Elder Neal A. Maxwell to Blake T. Ostler, January 24, 1984. My thanks to Elder Maxwell for his helpful and generous comments on this and numerous other subjects.” Ostler, “Mormon Concept of God,” 76 n. 30.


Douglas Davies, a non-LDS scholar who studied the Latter-day Saints, claims, “It is this presence that poses Mormonism’s strategic yet apologetic dilemma of ‘otherness,’ of wanting to be accepted as Christian by the wider Christian world while not accepting that world’s definition of Christianity; issues of heavenly and earthly apostasy, transcended by Restoration and prophecy, make this so.”38 For Davies and McMurrin, Latter-day Saints might use terms like unchanging, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and so forth, but it is hard to see, without radical redefinition of all these terms, often used to describe the transcendent deity of theism, how the Latter-day Saint God would fit any of them. Latter-day Saint theologies, even in their most conservative versions, do not see God as completely ontologically distinct from human beings. In Joseph Smith’s First Vision, God appears as an embodied human being. This is important to note at the beginning because the traditional problem of evil does not arise for Latter-day Saints in the same way it arises for other theists. Or, to be more precise, it arises only to be dismissed once Latter-day Saints pass from the language they share about God with other Christians—which Latter-day Saints (and one might argue the entire Judeo-Christian scriptural tradition) use hyperbolically as a language of praise—to discussion of the problem in philosophical terms.

Authoritative pronouncements from Latter-day Saint scriptural traditions and founding authorities use terms like omnipotence but define it in ways quite different from most of the main creedal theistic traditions. Omnipotence, for example, has been used in Latter-day Saint writings to mean almighty, or all the power that a being can possess given they exist alongside other self-existing free beings that logically limit omnipotence. The late LDS philosopher David Paulsen has explained omnipotence in this way.39 Like process theologians, Latter-day Saints can claim that most creedal Christians and traditional theists place limits on omnipotence when they define it as God only being able to do what is “logically possible.”40 If God is limited by what is logically possible, that would include being limited by the activity of other free beings. The thought seems to be if omnipotence is limited by logic by traditional theists, why not also claim that it is


just as inconsistent to say that God could force beings to act against their freedom as to say that God could create a square circle. The first statement is to misunderstand freedom, just as the second is to misunderstand geometry. Thus, God is understood as having all the power any being could have and is thus in religious terms “Almighty.” 41

Theologians and philosophers like Blake Ostler and Terryl Givens have taken positions close to Roberts or the Pratts. 42 Ostler has staked out a position close to Open Theism but denies creation ex nihilo and in this respect approaches Process Theology. 43 Others, like Robert Millet and Stephen Robinson, in dialogue with evangelical theologians like Richard J. Mouw and Craig Blomberg, emphasize the grace in Latter-day Saint teaching in a way that affirms the power and majesty of God in ways more compatible with traditional theism. 44 James Faulconer and Adam Miller take a more postmodern approach to the question. Faulconer forsakes theology altogether, referring to the restored gospel’s “atheological” character, “without an official or even semi-official philosophy that explains and gives rational support to [its] beliefs and teachings.” 45 For Faulconer, Latter-day Saint thought, like Judaism, is an orthopraxis rather than an orthodoxy. In other words, it emphasizes practice above theology. Miller does not eschew theology but follows the


French thinker Bruno Latour, arguing against Givens that laws are not ideal and eternal but are material in the sense that they are embodied in creation. The question is still an open one, and this is probably a good thing. Lively debate about the meaning of the gospel can be a form of worship.

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What Is the Nature of God’s Progress?

Matthew Bowman

In the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the question of whether or not God progresses can be separated into two more precise questions, each of which has been the topic of strenuous debate. The first has to do with whether God has always been divine or achieved that state through eons of progression, passing through a humanity much like ours along the way. The second is whether God continues to progress—and crucially, whether that progression is qualitative or simply quantitative: whether God’s progress means that God learns new things and gains new powers or whether his glory already achieved simply expands as his creation expands. Naturally, the two questions are somewhat interrelated.

Both have their roots in the rather ambiguous theology of the relationship between humanity and deity that Joseph Smith taught. Early on in the life of the Church he founded, Smith endorsed a somewhat conventionally Christian vision of deity: an eternal, unchanging spirit manifest in the world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The 1834 Lectures on Faith, for instance, which Joseph Smith approved and supervised though did not write himself, declared that “the Godhead” consisted of the Father, “a personage of spirit,” and the Son, “a personage of tabernacle.” These two, said the Lectures, “possess the same mind,” which was “the Holy Spirit.” The Lectures also taught that God “changes not, neither is there variableness with him; but that he is the same from everlasting to everlasting.”

The Lectures, though, also contained more expansive ideas. For instance, they drew on the language of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and the Gospel of John, promising that faithful Latter-day Saints would become “joint heirs with Jesus Christ; possessing the same mind”; they would be “filled with the fulness of his glory, and become one in him, even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one.” This implication of human divinization reflected a principle taught in a February 1832 vision that Joseph Smith and his associate Sidney Rigdon received. Faithful human beings, the revelation declared, would become “priests and kings, who have received of his [God’s] fulness, and of his glory . . . : wherefore, as it is written, they are gods, even the sons of God.”

This promise marked the growing clarity about the relationship between humanity and divinity that characterized the last fifteen years of Joseph Smith’s life. In April 1843, he declared that God the Father possessed “a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s.” In two sermons the next year, he offered the most radical statements about the nature of God he had to date. In a funeral sermon popularly known as the “King Follett Discourse,” Smith offered a series of statements that seemed to indicate that God had once been a man like human men and had progressed to achieve Godhood and that this was to be also the fate of his listeners. As Wilford Woodruff recorded the discourse, Smith declared that God “once was a man like us, and the Father was once on an earth like us.” And finally, Smith told his audience, “you have got to learn how to make yourselves God, king, priest, by going from a small capacity to a great capacity . . . be an heir of God & joint heir of Jesus Christ enjoying the same rise exhaltation & glory untill you arive at the station of a God.” After all, Smith asked, “What did Jesus Christ do the same thing as I se the Father do.” In both this sermon and the so-called “Sermon

5. See James E. Faulconer with Susannah Morrison, “The King Follett Discourse: Pinnacle or Peripheral?” in this publication, pp. 85–104.
in the Grove,” preached two months later, Smith extended these ideas, teaching that there were generations of gods extending backward into eternity. “If Jesus Christ was the Son of God & John discovered that God the Father of Jesus Christ had a father you may suppose that he had a Father also,” Smith said, according to the scribe Thomas Bullock.  

In the decades following the sermon, Smith’s ideas often seemed enigmatic to many of those who followed him, and the precise extent of his meaning sparked an ongoing debate among leaders and intellectuals of the Church. The question of God’s past progress has seemed less controversial, though members of the Church have interpreted what Smith said in varying ways.

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Church leaders embraced the notion that God had achieved godhood through a process of maturation, learning, and growth. For some, like Brigham Young, who succeeded Joseph Smith as President of the Church, this process was most comprehensible in terms of family and lineage. Young took Smith’s meaning at its most frank, imagining a long chain of divine parents. He said of God the Father, “He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, both body and spirit; and he is the Father of our spirits, and the Father of our flesh in the beginning. . . . Do you wish me to simplify it? Could you have a father without having a grandfather; or a grandfather without having a great grandfather?” As the Apostle Orson Hyde, a contemporary of Young and Smith, put it, “God, our heavenly Father, was perhaps once a child, and mortal like we ourselves, and rose step by step in the scale of progress, in the school of advancement.” Both Young and Hyde imagined God, scion of another God on another world, traveling the long road from childhood through an earthly life toward his inheritance of divinity and presidency over our world. For Young and Hyde, then, divinity was something gained through experience, knowledge, and patrimony.

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8. Brigham Young, sermon, October 8, 1854, MS D1234, Addresses, 1854, July–October, Brigham Young Papers, Church History Library and Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

Other nineteenth-century leaders adopted a somewhat different approach. Orson Pratt took the notion that God was not always God seriously, but he offered a more abstract version of divine progress than the lineal parentage statements of Young or Hyde, instead teaching that in some way God's divinity is eternal and self-existent. From the King Follett Discourse, Pratt posited that “the primary powers of all material substance must be intelligent” and that therefore the totality of that intelligence, which was interconnected, self-existent, and eternal, was in fact what Pratt called the “Great God.” The being humans called “God,” then, partook of the eternal divine attributes that the “Great God” had always possessed as a singular manifestation of the eternal principles of divinity. Pratt thus insisted that “God” in the form of the “Great God” had indeed always existed and always possessed all the attributes of divinity, but that any particular “God” who entered into communion with the “Great God” might indeed have had a history of growth and change. He thus saw both eternity and progress in Smith’s ideas.

Pratt’s theories persisted in some way for many members of the Church; the early-twentieth-century Apostle Anthon Lund, for instance, evinced sympathy for Pratt’s attempt to retain traditional Christian notions of God’s eternity in his famous observation, “I do not like to think of a time when there was no God.” As time went on, however, some form of Young’s ideas seemed more tempting to many Latter-day Saints than Pratt’s abstractions. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the progressive-era philosophy of thinkers like Herbert Spencer had gained much influence with thinkers in the Church. Spencer modified Darwinian ideas to emphasize that progress was achieved through refinement and struggle and that the natural tendency of humanity and the universe was toward increasing complexity and accomplishment. For the Apostles James E. Talmage and John A. Widtsoe and the Seventy B. H. Roberts, then, it made much sense that God became God the same way that species evolved, through effort and education, and for thinkers influenced by Spencerian-modified Darwinism, Young’s emphasis on inheritance and lineage seemed appropriate.

Thus, Talmage argued that God the Father “once passed through experience analogous to those which His Son, the Lord Jesus, afterward passed through,” maintaining that the trials and sacrifice of Jesus contributed to his capacity for working the divine Atonement.\(^\text{12}\) Both Roberts and Widtsoe conceived of divinity as the achievement of sufficient education to master the workings of the universe; as Roberts put it, “The Gods had attained unto that excellence of oneness that Jesus prayed his disciples might possess, and . . . the Gods have attained unto it, and all govern their worlds and systems of worlds by the same spirit and upon the same principles.”\(^\text{13}\) Widtsoe, the most scientifically minded of them all, explicitly connected God’s achievement of divinity with his development, writing, “If the law of progression be accepted, God must have been engaged from the beginning, and must now be engaged in progressive development, and infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today.” Widtsoe credited this development to God’s “will,” knowledge of “universal laws,” and “self-effort.”\(^\text{14}\)

While these ideas have not been fundamentally repudiated in the twentieth century, the subject of God’s origins has certainly been the subject of less speculation. Neither the Apostle Bruce R. McConkie nor his father-in-law, President of the Church Joseph Fielding Smith, two of the most prolific and powerful theological minds of the twentieth-century Church, dealt at great length with the issue. Indeed, Fielding Smith wrote, puzzled, if “God is infinite and eternal, . . . how does this conform to the Prophet’s teaching” that God was once a man? “This is one of the mysteries,” he concluded. “There are many things that we will not comprehend while in this mortal life.”\(^\text{15}\) Rather, both Fielding Smith and McConkie routinely used absolute language to describe God. For instance, in his encyclopedic *Mormon Doctrine*, McConkie quoted the Lectures on Faith to describe God as “the one supreme and absolute being; the ultimate source of the universe.” He insisted further that God “is not a progressive being in the sense that liberal religionists


\(^\text{13}\) B. H. Roberts, *A New Witness for God* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1895), 474.


profess,” instead paraphrasing scripture: God is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

When a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle asked Church President Gordon B. Hinckley in 1997 if he believed “that God was once a man,” Hinckley said, “That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don’t know much about.”

Far more controversial than the debate over God’s origins has been the notion only hinted at in Smith’s discourses: that God continues to progress. Woodruff recorded Joseph Smith describing Jesus’s intentions in the King Follett Discourse: “I will give to the father which will add to his glory, He will take a Higher exhaltation & I will take his place and am also exhalted.” This implied, at least, that God the Father’s divinity continues in some way to expand. For some, the idea was self-evident, and those who were most vocal in insisting that God did progress also tended to argue that God’s progress was qualitative: that God is increasing in knowledge and power, changing and developing even as human beings do the same. Brigham Young and John Widtsoe were the two most vocal, and though they expressed their sentiments somewhat differently, at the heart of both men’s ideas was the notion that progress was part and parcel of divinity itself. Young sought to refute Orson Pratt’s theory of the “Great God,” saying, “According to his theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power; but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children: they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful.” For Young, change was inevitable: “All organized existence is in progress either to an endless advancement in eternal perfections, or back to dissolution.” Wilford Woodruff specified in particular that God “is increasing and progressing in knowledge, power, and dominion, and will do so, worlds without end.”

Widtsoe felt as Young did, but he and other Latter-day Saint progressive-era theologians drew on Herbert Spencer’s theories that stasis was destructive and change was progressive to make their case. As

B. H. Roberts put it, “God’s immutability should not be so understood as to exclude the idea of advancement or progress of God. . . . An absolute immutability would require eternal immobility—which would reduce God to a condition eternally static.”22 Thus it seemed inconceivable to Widtsoe that God was not progressing. God “must now be engaged in progressive development, and, infinite as God is, he must have been less powerful in the past than he is today. Nothing in the universe is static or quiescent.”23

As the twentieth century went on, however, Widtsoe’s and Young’s ideas were increasingly marginalized. Rather, many Church leaders came to conclude that in referring to “higher exaltation,” Joseph Smith meant that God’s glory increased as Jesus worked out his mission and human beings progressed. They found the notion that God continues to gain knowledge and power incompatible with scriptural declarations that God possesses all power and wisdom. Elder Neal A. Maxwell worried that “some have wrongly assumed God’s progress is related to His acquisition of additional knowledge. . . . Mortals should not aspire to teach God that He is not omniscient by adding qualifiers that He has never used in the scriptures. Job rightly asked, ‘Shall any teach God knowledge?’”24 McConkie said, “God is not progressing in knowledge, truth, virtue, wisdom, or any of the attributes of godliness. . . . He is progressing in the sense that his creations increase, his dominions expand, his spirit offspring multiply, and more kingdoms are added to his domains.”25 Indeed, McConkie, whose mind worked in definitives, denounced as one of his “Seven Deadly Heresies” the idea that “God is progressing in knowledge and is learning new truths. This is false—utterly, totally, and completely. There is not one sliver of truth in it.”26

Other Church members were more equivocal than the lawyerly McConkie. Brigham Young University English professor and theologian Eugene England sought in 1980 to reconcile the positions of leaders like Young and Widtsoe with those of leaders like McConkie and Fielding Smith. While McConkie was influenced by his legal training, England’s

literary interest in paradox led him to attempt to find a way in which both sides might be true. He suggested that “perfection in one sphere is possible, but then so is progress in a higher sphere or realm.”  

He thus concluded that it was possible to speak of God as both perfect and progressing, both expanding in knowledge and power and possessed of maximal authority.

But after forwarding the essay to McConkie, England received a stern reply which indicated that McConkie perceived England’s position as dangerous. McConkie freely acknowledged there was a debate, noting that Brigham Young had taught at times that God was perfect and at times that God was progressing. However, the Apostle was also certain humanity must “choose between the divergent teachings of the same man and come up with those that accord with what God has set forth in his eternal plan of salvation.”  

This was essential because McConkie held that “if we believe false doctrine, we will be condemned. . . Wise people anchor their doctrine on the Standard Works.”  

Just as Widtsoe and Roberts drew upon progressive-era philosophy to frame their beliefs about divine progress, so was McConkie influenced by a twentieth-century movement that emphasized scriptural literalism and divine authority, popular among conservative Christians of many denominations.

By the late twentieth century, many members of the Church seemed comfortable with indeterminacy of the sort President Hinckley had embraced in his response to the San Francisco Chronicle reporter, rather than insisting that one position or another must be taken. Indeed, some, like the Brigham Young University theologian and professor of philosophy David Paulsen, were taking the discussion of God’s nature in different directions entirely. They were inspired by new schools in Protestant Christian theology, the related notions of “open theology” and “process theology,” both of which emphasized God’s mutability and insisted that his divinity drew not from his abstract, static perfection but from his interaction with other beings. For Paulsen, God’s perfection emerged from being “lovingly interrelated as to constitute one perfectly united community” with the Son and the Holy Spirit; as God fostered such relationships with others of God’s children, God’s glory expanded through

those relationships. Paulsen sought to set aside the old debates and instead develop a new way of thinking about God's progress that might help resolve them.

The increased comfort with ambiguity about the precise nature of God’s progress led to renewed emphasis on a practical relationship with God, and both found increased expression in the Church at the turn of the millennium. The prominent Brigham Young University professor of ancient scripture Stephen Robinson wrote in the 1992 *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, a semiofficial work, that while it was clear that “Gods and humans are the same species of being, but at different stages of development,” and “there has been speculation among some Latter-day Saints on the implications of this doctrine,” it was also clear that “nothing has been revealed to the Church about conditions before the ‘beginning’ as mortals know it.” Similarly, elsewhere in the *Encyclopedia*, author and attorney Lisa Ramsey Adams stated bluntly that while “ideas have been advanced to explain how God might progress in knowledge and still be perfect and know all things,” at the same time, “no official Church teaching attempts to specify all the ways in which God progresses in his exalted spheres.” Thus, the *Encyclopedia* fostered rather than foreclosed debate. It acknowledged that each competing idea had within it some characteristic rooted deep within the theology of the Church. For some—like John A. Widtsoe, B. H. Roberts, and Brigham Young—naturalism and optimism about human potential led them to believe in God’s progression and humanity; for others, like Joseph Fielding Smith and Bruce R. McConkie, faith in scripture and prophetic authority lent weight to more traditional notions about God. The argument, then, contains within it much that makes the Church itself distinctive.

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Was Jesus Married?

Christopher James Blythe

While the belief that Jesus was married during his lifetime has been popular among Church leaders and lay members since the nineteenth century, it has never been an essential of Latter-day Saint theology. Rather, belief in a married Christ prospered in the early decades of the Church with little controversy among members, until leaders in the early twentieth century discouraged its public discussion while never disparaging the concept. A century later, as FAIR, an independent apologetic think tank, states on its website, “Some [Latter-day Saints] believe that He was married; others believe He wasn’t. Most members are open to believe either way.”

While this essay is confined to the subject as it developed among Latter-day Saints, in recent years, the question of Jesus’s marital status has been broached by scholarly and (rarely) theological voices outside of the Latter-day Saint tradition. A series of fictional works and conspiratorial histories have claimed a secret history that Jesus was married and had offspring. Among scholars, two arguments for a married Jesus dominate the literature. First, some have argued that because it was presumed that rabbis in the mainstream Jewish culture of the time would marry, the silence on Jesus’s marriage in the Gospels should be taken as


evidence that he likely was married. Second, some turn to enigmatic references about Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of Philip and other texts.3

A Married Christ in
Nineteenth-Century Latter-day Saint Readings of the Bible

The earliest Latter-day Saint statements in favor of a married Jesus date to the 1840s. Not surprisingly, these statements correspond with the timing of new theological developments surrounding marriage. In fact, the same revelation that introduced eternal marriage and plural marriage also distinguished between angels and gods based on their marital status. In Joseph Smith’s teachings, angels, like gods, were once mortals, but only gods had obeyed the commandment—what this revelation termed “the law of [God’s] Holy Priesthood”—to be sealed in an eternal marriage.4 As Orson Hyde would explain, just as Jesus was baptized “to fulfill all righteousness,” so too would he follow his “Father’s law” to multiply and replenish the earth.5

Perhaps the earliest sermon to depict Jesus as married was preached by the Apostle William Smith, younger brother of Joseph Smith, on August 17, 1845. Then at odds with his fellow Apostles, who wished to keep their polygamous relationships secret, Smith openly defended the biblical practice of plural marriage. At the end of his remarks on that day, he declared, “The Savior loved all men, and some women too: I do not suppose he lived upon the earth more than 30 years, and not marry. I don’t know but he had as many wives as old Jacob had.”6 While William Smith’s comments were an oddity for the time, the context of his remarks—a defense of plural marriage—was representative of public defenses of Jesus as a married man in the early Latter-day Saint tradition. In subsequent years, particularly after the official announcement of

6. William Smith, discourse, August 17, 1845, CR 100 317, box 1, folder 3, Historian’s Office Reports of Speeches 1845–1885, Church History Library, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as CHL).
the practice of plural marriage in 1852, other Apostles also preached on Jesus’s marital relationships.

While the Gospels do not include any references to Jesus having a spouse or children, Latter-day Saints claimed scriptural support for a married Messiah in Jesus’s interactions with women, most prominently Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene. Specific attention was given to Mary’s anointing of Christ’s feet and his appearance to Mary Magdalene after his Resurrection. In 1847, Brigham Young presented the image of Mary Magdalene attempting to cling to Jesus’s feet as how “every woman [at the Resurrection] will come right to her husband’s feet same as Mary.” On October 6, 1854, Apostle Orson Hyde explained that Mary’s reference to Jesus as “Rabboni; which is to say, Master[,] . . . manifested the affections of a wife. These words speak the kindred ties and sympathies that are common to that relation of husband and wife.”

Elsewhere, Hyde taught that Jesus’s marriage was documented in Jesus’s enigmatic involvement at the wedding at Cana. In his address on October 6, 1854, Hyde read from the second chapter of John, pointing out that after Jesus had miraculously provided wine to the feast’s servants at Mary’s request, “the governor of the feast called the bridegroom” and praised him for saving the best wine till the end of the celebration. Hyde believed the text hinted that Jesus was the bridegroom. It was “as plain as the translators, or different councils over this Scripture, dare allow it to go to the world, but the thing is there; it is told; Jesus was the bridegroom at the marriage of Cana of Galilee, and he told them what to do.”

In 1853, Apostle Orson Pratt expounded on “intimations in scripture concerning the wives of Jesus.” Pratt added to the accumulating proof texts Psalm 45, which, based on its use in the New Testament, he understood as a prophecy about Jesus. The relevant passage reads, “Kings’ daughters were among thy honourable women: upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir” (Ps. 45:9). Pratt reasoned that these

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11. Orson Hyde, in Journal of Discourses, 2:82. This reading of John 2 was also shared by Joseph F. Smith (Wilford Woodruff, Journal, July 22, 1883, CHL).
women were the daughters of righteous men—the “kings and priests” of Revelation 1:6—and one among them would “be chosen to stand at his right hand: perhaps she may have merited that high station by her righteous acts, or by the position she had previously occupied.”

Pratt believed that the Gospel writers carefully hinted at these truths in their original manuscripts so as to not expose the secret of Christ’s children, and that later King James translators obscured even these references for nefarious ends. He also presented what most Christians would read as symbolic marital language in the New Testament as literal references to Jesus and his wives. Thus, he reviewed the parables in which Christ was characterized as the bridegroom, including the parable of the Ten Virgins and the parable of the marriage of the king’s son (see Matt. 22; 25). He pointed to the millennial wedding feast between Christ and his bride. But while at least one other Latter-day Saint theologian, Orson Spencer, also applied a literal rendering to Christ’s matrimony with the Church, the traditional reading of these passages as symbolic remained dominant.

Latter-day Saint commentators were also interested in the identity of Christ’s descendants. Orson Hyde believed that a passage in Isaiah—“When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed” (Isa. 53:10)—referred to a specific and otherwise unknown event in Jesus’s life. He envisioned a scene when, “before the Savior died, he looked upon his own natural children, as we look upon ours; he saw his seed, and immediately afterwards he was cut off from the earth.” The ancient Church ensured that knowledge of Christ’s children “passed into the shades of obscurity” to protect them from “the hand of the assassin, as the sons of many kings have done who were heirs apparent to the thrones of their fathers.” Yet Hyde believed “that seed has had its influence upon the chosen of God in the last days.”

Latter-day Saints have always had an interest in identifying sacred lineages. Since 1834, patriarchs had ceremonially revealed individuals’ ancestry through the twelve tribes of Israel. Accounts from the late nineteenth century told of Joseph Smith or another prophetic figure

14. See Orson Spencer, Patriarchal Order, or Plurality of Wives! (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 14.
Was Jesus Married?

identifying individuals as descendants of Jesus Christ. In 1888, Lorenzo
Snow told Orson F. Whitney about “the lineage of my grandparents
[Newel] K. Whitney and wife and [Heber] C. Kimball, who he said, the
Prophet Joseph told his sister Eliza, were descendants of the Savior.”

A wife of Joseph Smith’s confidant James Adams recalled that the Prophet
had told her husband that Adams too was one of Jesus’s posterity. In
1894, George Q. Cannon told his son that Heber C. Kimball had “once
told him he was a direct descendant of the Savior of the world.”

Five years before that, in a meeting in the Salt Lake Temple, Cannon declared,
“There are men in this congregation who are descendants of the ancient
Twelve Apostles, and I shall say it, of the Son of God Himself, for he had
seed, and in time they shall be known.”

These statements delving into Christ’s posterity were confined to
private settings. In fact, after the 1850s, references to a married Jesus
were almost entirely absent from Church publications and public dis-
courses. This may have been spurred by the negative reaction to the
教学。Shortly after Hyde first suggested that Christ was the groom at
the wedding at Cana, the Savannah Sentinel condemned his “construc-
tion” of John 2 as a “wicked perversion.” In 1862, an editorial in a Reor-
ganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints newspaper referred
to the idea that Jesus was wed to Mary and Martha as “so absurd” that
only “one adulterously insane” would teach it. In 1870, J. H. Beadle
characterized the Saints’ doctrines on Christ, including that “he had
five wives while upon earth,” as “most strange and blasphemous.”

17. Orson F. Whitney, journal, November 26, 1888, Special Collections, Utah State
University, Logan, Utah.
18. Oliver Boardman Huntington, History of the Life of Oliver B. Huntington (n.p.,
1878–1900), 27.
(Clearfield, Utah: Gnoaum Books, 2004), 314.
Ivins, 1875–1932 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 211.
21. Lay members occasionally referenced Jesus’s wives in publications. See, for
example, “Problems,” Ogden Herald, November 23, 1885; and Angus MacDonald, Pro-
phetic Numbers or the Rise, Progress and Future Destiny of the "Mormons" (repr. ed., Salt
Lake City: Utah Kraut’s Pioneer Press, 1885), 59–63, 75–76.
republished in Frontier Guardian, January 23, 1852.
23. Josiah Ells, “For the Herald: Polygamy,” True Latter Day Saints’ Herald 2, no. 8
(February 1862): 178.
Anti–Latter-day Saint writers did more to promote knowledge of arguments in favor of a married Christ than Latter-day Saint proponents themselves did.

**A Married Jesus in the Twentieth Century**

As time passed, Church leaders would eventually proclaim that there was no official position on the topic. In 1912, President Charles W. Penrose of the First Presidency answered the question “Do you believe that Jesus was married?” by pleading the Saints’ collective ignorance on the subject: “We do not know anything about Jesus Christ being married. The Church has no authoritative declaration on the subject.”

In a departure from early exegesis that assumed scripture had been manipulated and distorted through translators and scribes, Penrose reasoned that if there was no overt discussion of Jesus’s marriage in scripture, then there was no way to know anything on the subject.

This did not mean that Church leaders had disavowed their personal beliefs on Jesus’s marital status. While Penrose implied Latter-day Saints should not publicly speculate on things not taught in the scriptures, a later Church leader’s reasons for discouraging discussion had more to do with his reverence for the theological position. In 1963, Joseph Fielding Smith responded to a believer who asked a similar question, “Christ came here to set us the example and, therefore, we believe that he must have been married. Are we right?” Smith responded in a terse note, “Yes! But do not preach it! The Lord advised us not to cast pearls before swine!”

As public conversation on a married Jesus was becoming increasingly rare among orthodox Latter-day Saints, the idea became an essential doctrine for those at odds with the Church’s issuing of the Manifesto that ended plural marriage. It was the introduction of plural marriage that seems to have led to the initial sermons on a married Jesus, so it is not surprising that the concept would survive most clearly among those who continued to defend polygamy. One of the principal founders of Mormon Fundamentalism, Lorin C. Woolley, taught several new details about Jesus’s marriages, including the names of eight of his wives: Martha, Mary, Phoebe, Sarah, Rebecca, Josephene, Mary

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Magdalene, and Mary, Martha’s sister. According to Woolley, after Jesus died, his widows married one of his brothers as was consistent with the biblical practice of leviratic marriage. Their new husband was John the Revelator, who Woolley taught was a son of Mary and Joseph. Among Fundamentalists, Jesus’s polygamous status was an essential part of the narrative. Rhea Allred Kunz, a prominent Fundamentalist, would even report a “beautiful vision” in which she saw Jesus minister to his wife Mary Magdalene, who was struggling with jealousies over other women “who had more so-called freedoms than a plural wife, and who, in some instances were free from financial hardships.”

The vast majority of Latter-day Saints would be unaware of these developments in Mormon Fundamentalism; however, the movement published tracts and newspapers that perpetuated older Latter-day Saint ideas into the twentieth century. Most importantly, in 1969, Ogden Kraut published his first and most popular title, *Jesus Was Married.* Because Kraut did not advertise his Fundamentalist allegiance, his work was carried in stores that marketed to the LDS consumer. Kraut’s widow, Anne Wilde, recalled that a bookstore near Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, had a great deal of success selling the book after the volume was privately recommended by members of the faculty.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the idea of a married Jesus also appeared in popular scholarship and fiction. In 1970, William E. Phipps, a non–Latter-day Saint scholar, published his popular book *Was Jesus Married?,* which argued that Hebrew culture would have led Jesus to marry. In a departure from the usual silence on beliefs surrounding Jesus’s family life, a professor from the Church College of Hawaii responded to Phipps’s book in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* declaring that he “has always believed that Jesus was married. . . . Mormons easily

accept the idea that Jesus was married.” In 1972, Phipps wrote an article on reasons to believe in a married Jesus for Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought. In 1982, Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln’s Holy Blood, Holy Grail inaugurated a new genre of conspiracy-theory/history books claiming to have discovered evidence on the lives of Jesus’s posterity after the Crucifixion.

The publication of Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code in 2003 and its film adaptation in 2006 again revived among lay Latter-day Saints the question of whether Christ was married. In the novel and film, inspired by Holy Blood, Holy Grail, Brown’s protagonist stumbles upon a secret society that has preserved the truth that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had children. In the wake of the Crucifixion, a pregnant Mary Magdalene fled to Gaul, where Jesus’s descendants would eventually become the Merovingian dynasty of France. Christian leaders wrote and preached against The Da Vinci Code’s misrepresentation of the Bible and its human portrayal of Jesus. The Latter-day Saint response to The Da Vinci Code was made unusual due to the early advocacy for a married Jesus. LDS leaders and educators faced a barrage of questions about the Church’s stance on the issue of a married Jesus. The official response remained neutral. In 2006, Church spokesman Dale Bills stated, “The belief that Christ was married has never been official church doctrine. It is neither sanctioned nor taught by the church. While it is true that a few church leaders in the mid-1800s expressed their opinions on the matter, it was not then, and is not now, church doctrine.”

Three professors at Brigham Young University—Richard N. Holzapfel, Andrew C. Skinner, and Thomas A. Wayment—also weighed in on the controversy in articles, various presentations, and a full-length book. The professors challenged alternative readings of New Testament scripture that had been used to argue that Jesus was married. Skinner explained, “There is nothing in the canonical New Testament, there is nothing in restoration scripture, there is really even nothing

in non-canonical sources that you can use as evidence that Jesus was married or he wasn’t married. The sources are silent on that aspect.\textsuperscript{37} Holzapfel, Skinner, and Wayment questioned the popular view that for Christ to provide an example in all things required him to be married, since his special mission differed from others’ lives in many ways. While they conceded that Latter-day Saint theology did not oppose the concept of a married Christ, their central message was that the subject was not central to the Church’s mission and that individual members should follow the example of Church leaders in refraining from open speculation.\textsuperscript{38}

Yet, while these voices discouraged public advocacy for a married Christ, others were inspired to express their beliefs or at least their interest in the possibilities of a married Jesus. Paintings by Latter-day Saint artists James Christensen and Brian Kershisnik portrayed the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus\textsuperscript{39} and the later hiding of Christ’s children\textsuperscript{40} respectively. Both images were featured in Vern Grosvenor Swanson’s \textit{Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism’s Sacred Bloodline}. Swanson combined a study of nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint statements on Jesus’s marital relationships with the claims of \textit{Holy Blood, Holy Grail}. His ultimate thesis was that Joseph Smith was a descendant of Jesus.\textsuperscript{41} In late 2017, these ideas were repeated in a documentary called \textit{Hidden Bloodlines: The Grail and the Lost Tribes in the Land of the North}. Feminist theologian Maxine Hanks also wrote a short essay in the wake of \textit{The Da Vinci Code}, arguing that “the idea of a married Jesus is known in Mormonism, as a long-held, sacred, discreet, folk doctrine,” but the implications for Jesus’s proposed wife, Mary Magdalene, have largely gone “unexplored.”\textsuperscript{42} She noted, perhaps hopefully, that the Church’s belief in continuing revelation allowed for Mary’s role to be further fleshed out.


\textsuperscript{39} Vern Grosvenor Swanson, \textit{Dynasty of the Holy Grail: Mormonism’s Sacred Bloodline} (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2006), cover and plate 34.

\textsuperscript{40} Swanson, \textit{Dynasty of the Holy Grail}, plate 20.

\textsuperscript{41} Swanson, \textit{Dynasty of the Holy Grail}.

Conclusion

Current discussions and disagreements concerning Jesus’s marital status do not take place in a public forum. Some believe early Church leaders revealed a sacred truth that should only be shared with care. Others believe that the absence of explicit references to Jesus’s family suggests that he had either chosen to be single or had yet to marry. Some may be embarrassed by nineteenth-century statements to the contrary. After over a century without a public statement on the subject, Latter-day Saints feel free to accept or reject a married Jesus without departing from an established orthodoxy.

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The King Follett Discourse
Pinnacle or Peripheral?

James E. Faulconer with Susannah Morrison

Historical Background

On March 8, 1844, fifty-five-year-old King Follett, an early convert to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, was killed in a well-digging accident. On April 7, as part of a general conference of the Church in Nauvoo, and in response to the request of Follett’s family, Joseph Smith memorialized him with a sermon about the general subject of death and the dead. Smith said his sermon, a revelation on the origins of God and the divine potential of human beings, was about “the first principles of consolation.” Though Smith mentions Follett by name only early in the sermon, referring to him again toward the end of the sermon as “your friend,” it has come to be called the “King Follett Discourse” or “King Follett Sermon.”

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have continued to take the sermon as a source for their understanding of various teachings, though there have been questions about the accuracy of the transcription and continued changes in thinking about some of its teachings. The place of the King Follett Discourse in Latter-day Saint culture is signified by the fact that it is one of only two of Joseph Smith’s sermons that are referred to by name. The other is the “Sermon in the Grove,” often confused with the King Follett Sermon or even fused with it as if there were only one sermon. Given several weeks later, the Sermon in the Grove teaches some of the same doctrines, such as a plurality of gods. Of the two, however, the King Follett Discourse is, by far, the better known. Yet the King Follett Sermon’s status in the Church of Jesus Christ is far from clear. How do Latter-day Saints understand the sermon? Is it authoritative? If so,
to what degree and concerning what topics? Is it the pinnacle of Joseph Smith's teachings? If so, why has it not been canonized? Or, instead, is the sermon peripheral to his work? If so, why do so many of its teachings continue to figure into Latter-day Saint self-understanding?

Part of the problem has been that since Joseph Smith did not speak from a written text, and no stenographer recorded his remarks, we have no transcript of the sermon to which we can refer. However, four persons who were present (Willard Richards, Wilford Woodruff, Thomas Bullock, and William Clayton) made notes as Joseph Smith spoke, and several versions of the sermon have since been created from those notes.¹

The first, which relies primarily on Bullock and Clayton, was published later that same year, shortly after Smith's death, in a Church newspaper, Times and Seasons,² as well as in two other Latter-day Saint publications the same year.³ In 1855, Jonathan Grimshaw compiled all of the extant notes and edited them to create what came to be known as the “amalgamated” version. With some edits, his version, published in the Deseret News in 1857,⁴ continues to be the version in general use today. It was, for example, partially published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its official magazine, the Ensign, in April 1971 and is still available on the Church’s website.⁵

Another version in common use is that published by Joseph Fielding Smith in Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith.⁶ That version is said to be taken from the Times and Seasons, but it closely resembles Grimshaw’s, which was published after the Times and Seasons publication. Finally, a new, scholarly edition of the sermon, “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text,” was published by Stan Larson in 1978.⁷

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Larson’s version deletes material added by Grimshaw and adds material from the notes that Grimshaw omitted, but nevertheless there are no substantial differences between it and any of the previous published versions. It is noteworthy that each of the editors who has worked with the notes of the sermon has created much the same final version. That should give considerable confidence in the text as we have it, even if it is only an amalgamation of notes made at the time.8

The Unique Teachings in the Sermon

In the order in which they appear, the King Follett Sermon’s most important teachings were the following:

1. “God himself who sits enthroned in yonder Heavens is a man like unto one of yourselves.”9

2. The Father once dwelt on an earth as Jesus Christ did and we do; Jesus Christ did what he saw the Father do before him.

3. The Father found “himself in the midst of spirit and glory—because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself”10—“you have got to learn how to make you[r]selves Gods.”11

4. The world was not created ex nihilo.

5. “The mind of man—the intelligent part is coequal with God himself”12; it “exists upon a selfexistent principle.”13

6. We have an obligation to perform proxy religious rites for those who have passed away.


7. To commit the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost, a person must “say that the Sun does not shine while he sees it he has got to deny J. C. when the heavens are open to him.”

8. Children who die young will be resurrected as they were when they died and remain that way eternally, though they will sit on thrones of glory.


Many of these things had already been taught by Joseph Smith. With perhaps one exception, the origin of God as a human being, there is nothing new in the sermon. In addition, of this list, all but the second and the next to last have been accepted as doctrine by most Latter-day Saints since at least Smith’s sermon, if not before. It might seem, then, that the King Follett Discourse is peripheral to Smith’s work as the founding prophet of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. But consider how items two, three, five, and eight have been taken up in Latter-day Saint theological discussions, perhaps most often with the King Follett Discourse as their warrant.

The Eternal Essence of Human Beings

First, items two and three. The eternal existence of the essence of human beings, “intelligence” in Latter-day Saint terms, has been taught since at least 1833 (D&C 93:29–30; compare Abr. 3:19–23), though, as we will see, there has been controversy over how to understand that teaching. That human beings may become gods was taught as early as 1832, when Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon shared a vision of the afterlife, in which they learned that those “who overcome by faith, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise . . . are gods, even the sons of God” (D&C 76:53, 58). What it means to say that intelligence is “self-existent” has been a matter of dispute, but otherwise most, though not all, of the teachings of the King Follett Sermon were and have since been widely accepted among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The doctrine that we can become like God or one with him, *theosis*, has been taught since at least the second century AD, continues to be an explicit teaching in Eastern Christianity, and is not entirely absent in


other Christian churches. But it is not clear how literally the promise of Smith and Rigdon’s 1832 vision was initially understood. The more literally, the less it would be like Eastern Christian theosis. Joseph Smith’s statement “You have got to learn how to make you[r]selves Gods,” with later nineteenth-century discussions of the topic are a good indication of its literal understanding in the early teachings of the Church. Whatever the answer to the question of how to understand theosis, though, previous to the King Follett Sermon, the teaching about becoming like God had not been publicly connected to the more theologically controversial idea that the Father was once a human being and has progressed to be the God he is.

That is the only one of Joseph Smith’s teachings in the King Follett Sermon which stands out as being made public for perhaps the first time: that the Father was once a human being on an earth like our own. We know little about how the sermon as a whole was initially received. But in June 1844, two months after the King Follett Sermon was delivered, anonymous former Latter-day Saint writers in the Nauvoo Expositor condemned the teaching: “Among the many items of false doctrine that are taught the Church, is the doctrine of many Gods. . . . It is contended that there are innumerable Gods as much above the God that presides over this universe, as he is above us.”

Even within the Church, to say nothing about outside, some found at least the teaching of the prehistory and plurality of gods blasphemous. Joseph Smith’s brother and counselor, Hyrum, appears to have had misgivings about the doctrine. At the same conference in which Smith gave the King Follett Sermon, Hyrum Smith said, “I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and all power,” but Hyrum Smith’s concern

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17. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by Willard Richards,” [67].


appears to have been that, regardless of whether God progressed to his present status as God, as God he possesses all wisdom and power; if he has progressed to his present state, he is not still progressing. Later Church authorities have continued to make that point. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie said in the late twentieth century, “There are those who say that God is progressing in knowledge and is learning new truths. This is false—utterly, totally, and completely.” But that is a caveat regarding the teachings about divine progression rather than a contradiction of it.

According to more than one source, the teaching that God had become God had been taught to some before the King Follett Sermon, at least as early as 1843 and perhaps as early as 1842. In April of that year, George Laub’s journal records that Hyrum Smith taught there is “a whole transe & leniage [sic] of gods.” Lorenzo Snow is reported to have said that in 1836, before his baptism, Hyrum Smith’s father told Snow that he would become “as great as God.” That, of course, is a repetition of the 1832 teaching, though perhaps more explicitly literal and not the same as the teaching that God has progressed to become what he is. Subsequently, while on a mission in England in 1840, Snow felt inspired to explain “Father Smith’s dark saying” about becoming as great as God with the couplet, “As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be.”

Traditional Christianity could read that couplet to mean that God was incarnate in Jesus Christ and we can become like him, a more-or-less ordinary summary of Christian teaching. Indeed, a similar couplet was familiar to the Church Fathers (first and second centuries AD): “God became man, so that man could become God.” But that was not how Snow or those who heard his couplet understood Joseph Smith’s teaching. For Latter-day Saints, to the notion that in some sense, perhaps even literally, we can become gods, Snow’s couplet adds the idea that God became God in the same way, moving from being human to being divine.

On his return to Nauvoo, Lorenzo Snow told Joseph Smith of his experience, and the latter said, “That is a true gospel doctrine, and it is a

23. Eliza R. Smith, Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), 46.
revelation from God to you.”25 Four years later, both the teaching of the second part of the couplet (doctrine since 1832) and, more significantly, the teaching of its first part (that God has become God, having once been a human being) were part of Smith’s public King Follett Sermon. Though Smith never refers to the couplet in the King Follett Discourse, for Latter-day Saints, Snow’s couplet has become the précis of what Smith teaches in the sermon.

One could understand much of the subsequent discussion of the King Follett Sermon as attempts to clarify Joseph Smith’s sermon with Lorenzo Snow’s couplet as a stand-in. With the exception of the teaching about the resurrection of those who die in infancy, discussions of the other King Follett doctrines have not usually been directly linked to the sermon, presumably because they have other, canonical, warrants. Snow’s couplet, thus, becomes the vehicle on which most discussion of the King Follett Sermon is loaded.

For Brigham Young, the teachings of the two halves of the couplet—“As man now is, God once was” and “As God now is, man may be”—were equally important and to be taken equally literally. For example, with regard to the first he said, “How many Gods there are, I do not know. But there never was a time when there were not Gods and worlds, and when men were not passing through the same ordeals that we are now passing through.”26 And with regard to the second he said, “[Eternal matter] is brought together, organized, and capacitated to receive knowledge and intelligence, to be enthroned in glory, to be made angels, Gods.”27 Brigham Young is perhaps best known (or even notorious) for taking a quite literal view of the teaching. In one address he said, “Then will they become gods, even the sons of God; then will they become eternal fathers, eternal mothers, eternal sons and eternal daughters. . . . When they receive their crowns, their dominions, they then will be prepared to frame earth’s [sic] like unto ours and to people them in the same manner as we have been brought forth by our parents, by our Father and God.”28

This and similar statements by him and some other early Church leaders are responsible for the popular view, reflected in the Book of

Mormon musical, 29 that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe they will literally become like God and create worlds as he did. But the contemporary understanding is generally more nuanced. For Young, however, the two teachings—that the Father was once a human being like ourselves and that we can become gods—go hand in hand.

There has been change in how the doctrine that God became God is taught, even if not an explicit rejection of it. God's progress to godhood is taught without reservation in James Talmage's Articles of Faith. 30 That book continues to be published by the Church's commercial press, though with a note in the "Publisher's Preface" that appears to be a caveat: the 1981 edition was last revised in 1924, "at which time it was consistent with the organization and practices of the Church as they existed in his day. It is printed here without change." 31

God's progression is also affirmed strongly in John A. Widtsoe's Rational Theology of 1915. He argues that if we accept the law of progression, God must also be progressing: "God undoubtedly exercised his will vigorously, and thus gained great experience of the forces lying about him." 32 Widtsoe's position is that while we cannot know the mysteries of the past, it is only reasonable to believe that God has not always been as powerful as he is now.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences in what these leaders teach. Unlike Brigham Young, neither Talmage nor Widtsoe explicitly says that the Father was once a human being. Talmage implies but does not say explicitly that he was when he says that humans are allowed to follow the path that the Father took to his exalted state. Widtsoe, however, shies away from making that implication of God's previous humanity explicit, and he may not even intend to imply it. Widtsoe teaches that the Father progresses as we progress and work in harmony with him.

29. The Book of Mormon, first staged in 2011, is a popular and award-winning Broadway musical by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone. It is about two Latter-day Saint missionaries in Uganda and the difficulties they have preaching the gospel. It portrays LDS belief via something commonly believed in the nineteenth century, such as that exalted beings will create their own planets.


32. John A. Widtsoe, Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: General Priesthood Committee, 1915), 23.
His glory is increased as we become like him. But he writes as if there is only one God above us, the supreme Intelligence of all intelligences, a God who has attained his godhood by experience in the universe but not necessarily one who began as we began.

Thus Young clearly affirms that God was once a human being like ourselves; Talmage implies it, but doesn't say so explicitly; Widtsoe is clear that God progresses in some sense, but he does not commit himself to the claim that God was once a human being. That is the pattern of Latter-day Saint thinking about this teaching from the King Follett Sermon, movement from clear affirmation that God was once a human being and progressed to become God to less confidence in how to interpret the teaching, even while not denying it and occasionally even embracing it.

The teaching does not disappear from Latter-day Saint discourse, nor does Snow’s couplet, which often stands in as a mnemonic for Joseph Smith’s teaching in the King Follett Sermon. But, after the nineteenth century, most often speakers and writers who repeat the couplet then go on to discuss only or primarily its second half—as we see both Talmage and Widtsoe do. They speak of God’s progression but then say little if anything more about it, focusing instead on the second part of the teaching, that human beings can become like God by partaking in the divine nature, in such things as benevolence and neighborly love.

Publications such as Young Woman’s Journal take this approach. The Laurel Manual for the 1972–73 teaching year appears to ignore the King Follett teachings almost entirely, saying only, “We are children of God not only in the preexistence and here on earth, but also in life eternal. We can return to him . . . and live forever as his cherished children.” The Melchizedek Priesthood quorum instruction manual for 1931 quotes Brigham Young but emphasizes only the part of the teaching that has to do with human potential to become divine: “Intelligent beings are organized to become Gods, even the Sons of God. . . . We are now in

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33. See Andrew L. Neff, “Man’s Existence as an Organism Antedates Earth Life,” Young Woman’s Journal 13 (1902): 350–54; “Book of Doctrine and Covenants: Lesson XXVIII, Life Hereafter,” Young Woman’s Journal 15 (1904): 185–87; LeRoi C. Snow, “Devotion to a Divine Inspiration,” Young Woman’s Journal 30 (1919): 307. The appearance of the doctrine in these journals underscores the point that, as Ileen Ann Waspe LeCheminant points out, the Latter-day Saint assumption has consistently been that women as well as men can achieve godhood (see “The Status of Woman in the Philosophy of Mormonism from 1830 to 1845” [master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1942], http://hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/etdm417).

34. Focus: Laurel Manual (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1972), 21.
the school, and must practice upon what we receive.”

In an address to Brigham Young University students in 1974, Truman G. Madsen repeated Snow’s couplet and, following this pattern, said nothing about the first half, except perhaps by implication. Snow, he said, “saw a conduit, as it were, down through which, in fact, by our very nature, by our being begotten of our eternal parents, we descend and up through which we may ascend.”

As with virtually everyone after Brigham Young, most of Madsen’s discussion is of human potential rather than divine progression.

This tack, leaving the question of God’s progression undiscussed to focus on the doctrine of theosis, is taken by Gordon B. Hinckley, fifteenth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In a 1997 newspaper interview he quotes Lorenzo Snow’s couplet, saying of it,

Now that’s more of a couplet than anything else. That gets into some pretty deep theology that we don’t know very much about.

Q: So you’re saying the church is still struggling to understand this?

A: Well, as God is, man may become. We believe in eternal progression. Very strongly. We believe that the glory of God is intelligence and whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the Resurrection. Knowledge, learning, is an eternal thing. And for that reason, we stress education. We’re trying to do all we can to make of our people the ablest, best, brightest people that we can.

He quotes the couplet but immediately shifts his attention to its second half. Several months later, Hinckley said essentially the same thing in another news interview, though he said slightly more about the first half of Snow’s couplet: “I don’t know that we teach [that God was once a human being]. I don’t know that we emphasize it. I understand the philosophical background behind it, but I don’t know a lot about it, and I don’t think others know a lot about it.”

Some members of the Church

35. In the Realm of Quorum Activity: Suggestions for Quorums of the Melchizedek Priesthood (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1931), 108.


38. David Van Biema, “Kingdom Come: Salt Lake City Was Just for Starters—the Mormons’ True Great Trek Has Been to Social Acceptance and a $30 Billion Church Empire,” Time, August 4, 1997, 56.
were bothered by what they saw as Hinckley’s repudiation of Joseph Smith’s teaching, but he was doing what Latter-day Saints had been doing for more than a century. The difference is that perhaps he was more frank.

Thus, while not denying the nineteenth-century teaching, the emphasis of more recent pronouncements concerning Latter-day Saint beliefs about the possibilities for us in the hereafter are more in line with traditional Eastern Orthodox understandings of theosis. We see this in the essay on the Church’s website “Becoming Like God,” which focuses on attaining the moral attributes of God. Without addressing Young’s teaching, the essay says that human individuals have “seeds of divinity,” attributes that “can be developed to become like their Heavenly Father’s [attributes],” a fulfillment of the fact that human beings are made in the image of God. We can sum up the essay’s position by saying that learning to be like God means learning to be godly. Thus, though one will occasionally hear a Latter-day Saint speak of “creating their own planet,” most often in a joking way, probably the most common understanding of becoming like God among contemporary Latter-day Saints is that we will take on the moral attributes of God.

Ironically, the approach we see members of the Church taking to this teaching, from just after the delivery of the King Follett Sermon into the early twentieth century and onward, is not so much a repudiation of Young’s insistence that God was once a human being as it is a decision to take his advice: “Instead of inquiring after the origin of the Gods . . . , let them seek to know the object of their present existence, and how to apply, in the most profitable manner for their mutual good and salvation, the intelligence they possess.” At least in that quotation, Brigham Young’s position is that we may not understand Joseph Smith’s teaching about God’s progression, but what is important is to recognize that we can become like God by obtaining his attributes. Since at least the turn of the twentieth century, that is the general position of most of the Church’s publications or presentations having to do with the King Follett teaching about God’s prehistory.

41. Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 7:284 (October 9, 1859).
There have been significant exceptions to that trend. For example, the Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society manuals for 1998 (the year after Gordon B. Hinckley’s interview) and for 2008 explicitly contain the teachings of both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young. Each contains their teaching that God was once a human, like ourselves and that he has had experiences like our own. It is almost certain that there was discussion of that teaching—in a variety of ways—in most adult classes in 1998 and 2008. Yet, in spite of those exceptions, over time, two things happened to the King Follett teaching captured in Snow’s couplet. First, less and less attention was paid to its first half, “As man now is, God once was.” That appears to continue to be the Church’s official attitude to the teaching: we do not know what that means. Second, as time has passed, the latter half of the couplet, “As God now is, man may be,” has for the most part been taken less literally—or at least it is left more ambiguous as to how literally it should be understood.

To a large degree, therefore, the doctrinal tensions generated by Joseph Smith’s King Follett teaching about God having been a human being and about our becoming gods were resolved for members of the Church by the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, tensions about other aspects of the sermon remained. One sign of the continuing tension is that even when only discussing the possibility of becoming like God, the sermon itself is rarely mentioned by name. Its teachings are referred to in Church publications and official talks, but the sermon itself is not. A more obvious sign is that in the early twentieth century, when B. H. Roberts attempted to publish the sermon, those in the Quorum of the Twelve appear to have suppressed it. In a 1912 letter, George Albert Smith gave the reasons for why it was left out of Roberts’s original publication of History of the Church, saying, “I have thought that the report of that sermon might not be authentic and I have feared that it contained some thing that might be contrary to the truth.” Smith was not alone in his line of thinking, continuing, “Some of the brethren felt as I did and thought that greater publicity should not be given to that

42. See Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 30; Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 40.

43. George Albert Smith to Samuel O. Bennion, January 30, 1912, George Albert Smith Family Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.
particular sermon.” The questions raised by the First Presidency led to
the omission of the sermon from History of the Church, of which Rob-
erts was editor, until 1950. Those points of conflict and the First Presi-
dency’s questions may also explain the infrequency of direct references
to the sermon by name.

The Self-Existence of Intelligence

That brings us to the fifth point of the sermon, the self-existence of intel-
ligence. The 1912 letter mentioned above does not say which points in
the published version “might be contrary to the truth,” but the problem
at the time appears to have been neither the teaching about God’s previ-
ous history nor that about the possibility of becoming like God. Rather,
the concern seems to have shifted from claims about divine and human
progress to the statements that “the mind of man—the intelligent part is
coequal with God himself”45 and “intelligence exists upon a selfexistent
principle—is a spirit from age to age & no creation about it.”46 Was that
an accurate transcription of Joseph Smith’s teaching, and if it was, what
did it mean?

Restoration scripture was already clear that intelligence, the essence
of human being, “was not created or made” (D&C 93:29). The question
was how Joseph Smith understood the term “intelligence” (sometimes
used as a synonym for “spirit,” as in Abr. 3:19, 22–23). Has it eternally
been individual, in Smith’s terms, “self-existent,” and then at some point
in time been fashioned into a spirit by the Father? Or does “intelligence”
refer to a raw material, comparable to the raw material of matter, a mass
of substance, as it were, from which the plurality of spirits/intelligences
were formed? The second was the position of Charles W. Penrose and
Anthon H. Lund47 and had been the majority opinion among Latter-day
Saints through the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth. Rob-
erts argued for the first view, that the Father created his spirit children
from already existing intelligences, making a distinction between intel-
ligence and spirit that is not clear in Smith’s prophecies and preaching.
Since Penrose and Lund began with a different understanding of Joseph
Smith’s teachings about intelligence, they questioned the accuracy of

44. Smith to Bennion.
45. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” 16 [28].
46. “Discourse, 7 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” 16 [28].
47. John P. Hatch, ed., Danish Apostle: The Diaries of Anthon H. Lund, 1890–1921
(Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006), 464–65, 559.
the document on which Roberts was basing his understanding. After all, that version of the sermon was created from the notes of those in attendance, and Penrose, Lund, and others had their own, different understanding of Smith’s teaching in the King Follett Sermon.

The concerns of Church leaders like Penrose and Lund at least reflect, and may have given rise to, the concerns of the First Presidency about the King Follett Sermon. In either case, there can be little question that in 1911 the First Presidency and other ecclesiastical leaders, specifically Lund and Penrose, were unsure of the sermon’s accuracy and unsupportive of Roberts’s interpretation of it. The second concern may have been the cause of the first.

There were, and are, those who continued to hold the Penrose-Lund position that individual persons did not exist as independent agents prior to their creation as spirits. But over the twenty-some years after the discussions between Penrose, Lund, and Roberts, the position of ecclesiastical leaders shifted away from the Penrose-Lund position toward agnosticism about the meaning of the teaching. Nevertheless, for numerous Latter-day Saint believers, Roberts’s view that intelligences have existed eternally as individuals appears to have won out over the Penrose and Lund view.

Many Latter-day Saint writers of the last half of the twentieth century took Roberts’s view.48 As an example, Sterling McMurrin, a Latter-day Saint scholar at the University of Utah, said, “Whatever is essential to at least the elementary being of the individual person in his full particularity, therefore, existing in the most ultimate and mysterious sense, is uncreated, underived, and unbegun,”49 and McMurrin appears to have said that with little if any challenge. Both he and his readers took what he said as commonsensical to Latter-day Saints by the 1960s. The Church’s 1995 “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” may also take the Roberts view of intelligence. It says, “Gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose.”50 Other readings are possible, but the most obvious one is the Roberts view that individual identity is eternal, a view taught by Elder


D. Todd Christofferson in 2015: “Prophets have revealed that we first existed as intelligences and that we were given form, or spirit bodies, by God, thus becoming His spirit children.”

**The Resurrection of Children**

The final King Follett teaching to be accounted for is the eighth, that concerning the resurrection of children. As noted, from early on there was controversy about whether Joseph Smith said everything that he is reported to have said in the way reported. In particular, there were doubts about Woodruff’s report that Smith said, “Eternity is full of thrones upon which dwell thousands of Children reigning on thrones of glory not one cubit added to their stature.” That claim is from only Woodruff’s transcription. It is not backed up by the notes of the others who reported the conference.

The first publication of the sermon, in 1844, records Joseph Smith’s teaching more ambiguously: “As the child dies, so shall it rise from the dead and be forever living in the learning of God, it shall be the child, the same as it was before it died out of your arms. Children dwell and exercise power in the same form as they laid them down.”

Published shortly after Joseph Smith’s death and without his corroboration, we can assume this reflects how the editors of the published version understood his teaching.

Yet some years later Brigham Young repeated what Joseph Smith had taught: “You will see the child of three, four, and five years old, possessing all the intelligence of the Angels of God. Could you not enjoy the society of such interesting beings? It is the intelligence in them that makes them capable of enjoyment and duration. Resurrected bodies will be as diversified as the bodies of mortal flesh, for variety, beauty, and extension.”

And others, such as Joseph E. Taylor in 1888, have had the same understanding of Joseph Smith’s teaching.

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The belief that Joseph Smith taught what Wilford Woodruff records him teaching about infant resurrection is well attested into the late nineteenth century. In spite of that, clearly some Latter-day Saints were uncomfortable with the teaching, and they appear to have been uncomfortable from the beginning. Van Hale tells us that, according to Pratt, the teaching caused “quite an anxiety.” Woodruff, the very person who recorded the part of the King Follett Discourse about resurrected children remaining the same stature, later became fourth president of the Church. While an Apostle, he said, “There has been a great deal of theory, and many views have been expressed on this subject, but there are many things connected with it which the Lord has probably never revealed to any of the Prophets or patriarchs who ever appeared on the earth.” We don’t know what Woodruff originally thought of the teaching, but thirty-one years after hearing the King Follett Sermon, he was not sure that he believed what he had recorded about the resurrection of children.

In 1918, Joseph F. Smith, nephew of Joseph Smith and sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, went even further than Wilford Woodruff, from doubt to dismissal. Noting that there are “strong opinions that some people had in regard to little children being resurrected and, everlastingly and forever after to remain as little children,” he said, “I . . . never did believe that he was correctly reported or that those who died in infancy would remain as little children after the resurrection.” Joseph F. Smith’s rejection of the teaching is symptomatic of a wider discomfort. The discomfort required coming to terms with the King Follett text, and Joseph F. Smith’s explanation gives the suggestion for how Latter-day Saints were dealing with the tension between the text of the King Follett Sermon and their belief: it was not transcribed correctly.

B. H. Roberts, however, was perhaps the first person to deal with the problem in anything like a scholarly fashion. In a note on the King Follett Discourse in History of the Church, he takes Joseph F. Smith’s position: the teaching, as reported, is mistaken. Roberts says “it is evident” that the transcription of the passage in question is inaccurate and that Joseph Smith taught instead that “little children would come forth from the dead in the same form and size in which their bodies were laid down

but that they would grow after the resurrection to the full stature of the
spirit.” At the end of his note, Roberts directs readers to a long, earlier
footnote in the *History.*

There, we find a record of the same teaching attributed to Smith on a
different occasion in a sermon preached by him on March 20, 1842, a ser-
mon also recorded by Woodruff. However, in his note Roberts explains
that the transcription is inaccurate because it was “reported in long hand
and from memory.” He continues,

The writer of this note [B. H. Roberts] distinctly remembers to have
heard the late President Wilford Woodruff . . . say, that the Prophet cor-
rected the impression that had been made by his King Follett sermon,
that children and infants would remain fixed in the stature of their
infancy and childhood in and after the resurrection. President Wood-
ruff very emphatically said . . . that the prophet taught subsequently to
his King Follett sermon that children while resurrected in the stature
at which they died would develope [sic] to the full stature of men and
women after the resurrection.60

Thus, B. H. Roberts reports that Wilford Woodruff—the source of both
the King Follett text in question and the earlier transcription, but at least
later doubtful of the doctrine—corrected the view that his transcriptions
suggest, and Roberts goes on to cite other witnesses that Joseph Smith’s
actual teaching was as this note describes it. So even during Smith’s life,
the teaching seems not to have been clear.

Over time, Joseph F. Smith and B. H. Roberts’s understanding of this
teaching about resurrection took hold: children will be resurrected as
children, but they will be raised by their mothers and grow to maturity.
As Hale says, “During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the
idea which won almost universal acceptance among the Latter-day Saints
was that one who died in infancy would be resurrected as an infant, then
nurtured to maturity by his mother from mortality.”61 That understand-
ing continued: in 1928, Charles A. Callis, then president of the Southern
States Mission and later an Apostle, said to parents “that their babies laid
away in death, their youth who have been called to the other side, shall
be restored to them in the resurrection, and that parents shall have the
joy of rearing infant children, in the resurrection, to manhood and to

womanhood.”62 In 1971, LeGrand Richards said much the same thing,63 and that part of his sermon was repeated in a post on the official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in December 2016.64 That is how most contemporary Latter-day Saints understand the doctrine, whatever the accuracy of Woodruff’s transcription. Today few members of the Church would recognize the King Follett teaching about infant resurrection as their belief.

Conclusion

The King Follett Sermon is one of the most important sermons on doctrine in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, yet most of its teachings are contained in other sources that are sometimes less ambiguous. The need to do proxy baptisms and other ordinances for the dead, for example, was not new, nor has the Church’s understanding of that need changed appreciably (though many related practices have changed). Nevertheless, the sermon retains its power among Latter-day Saints because it brings together a number of Joseph Smith’s previous teachings on humanity’s relationship to God: God has the form of a human being; he once lived in a world like our own in the same way that we do; the Father created this world and gave it its laws so that the spirits around him could become like him; and intelligence, the essential aspect of the spirits for whom he created the world, is eternal. This was a sermon of consolation, and as part of it Joseph Smith taught that those who die in childhood will be resurrected as children, exactly as their parents knew them. And along the way, he defined the sin against the Holy Ghost. That, too, might have been consolation for those who feared that their loved ones who had left the Church would be damned for having done so.

Thus, though the King Follett Sermon has remained central to Latter-day Saint belief, since 1844 the Church’s understanding of several key elements of the sermon’s teachings have changed or at least been clarified: the teaching

62. Charles A. Callis, in Ninety-Eighth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1928), 40.
about the history of God, that about human potential, that about the nature of intelligence, and that about the resurrection of infants.

With regard to the history of God, along with Joseph Smith, nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints often thought of God as having once been a human being and having become, by his experience, God. However, by the early twenty-first century (indeed by the 1950s at the latest), though the nineteenth-century teaching is not denied, the official position has tended in the direction of agnosticism toward it, with the significant exceptions mentioned earlier of the Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society manuals.

With regard to theosis, the King Follett Sermon doesn’t explicitly take a stand on what it means to become like God, but the belief has undergone a change similar to that about God’s previous history: at one point, Latter-day Saints clearly believed that to become like God means to become, like him, a creator of worlds. For a long time, though, Church officials and writers have either downplayed that claim or have taken an agnostic position with regard to its meaning. Instead, the contemporary Latter-day Saint understanding of what it means to be like God is usually weighted with terms that would be compatible with traditional Christian discussions of theosis. To become like God means to receive his attributes, to become godly. However, an openly discussed, distinctively Latter-day Saint understanding of exaltation remains the familial or relational aspect that this life can foreshadow. The Church’s website explains that members “see the seeds of godhood in the joy of bearing and nurturing children and the intense love they feel for those children.”

With regard to the self-existence of intelligence, the essence of a human being, this is a doctrine on which there appears to have clearly been not just a shift in attitude but a shift in belief. In the nineteenth century, intelligence was generally assumed to be a kind of unindividuated material out of which individual spirits were made. By the 1930s, the official position on whether intelligence is eternally individuated was that we don’t know. By the 1960s, many Latter-day Saints, perhaps most, believed that intelligences have always existed as individuals. And by the end of the twentieth century, the latter seems also to have become the predominant, though not exclusive, view.

With regard to infant resurrection, there has been a similar turn in the Church's understanding of Joseph Smith’s teaching about the resurrection of children. Until late in the nineteenth century, some important Latter-day Saint leaders taught (though not without controversy) that those who die as infants or children will be resurrected at the same stage of physical development they had when they died and that they will keep that same stature for eternity, though they would be able fully to become like God. In the late nineteenth century, however, that belief began to change, and by the middle of the twentieth century, most Latter-day Saints understood the teaching to be that children will be resurrected as children but will then mature to their full stature under the guidance of their mothers.

Speaking of the King Follett Discourse as a whole, we can say that its teachings have gradually metamorphosized over time. Some, such as the nature of intelligence and the status of resurrected children, have changed. Some, such as whether God was once a human being like us, have moved to the category of mysteries, things we do not understand. Eternal progress and the preexistence of human intelligence before spirit birth continue to be taught in general conferences of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in articles in the Church’s manuals and magazines, and in the devotional literature of Deseret Book, the Church’s commercial publishing arm. But they teach those things perhaps exclusively as part of understanding that human beings are made in God’s image and that, by living a life devoted to the divine, we can partake in godliness.

As the place where some of Joseph Smith’s most radical teachings are enunciated together—and expanded—the King Follett Discourse may be neither the pinnacle of Joseph Smith’s teaching nor peripheral to it. Perhaps, instead, we should understand it as the most important mirror of a Latter-day Saint’s theological self-understanding, both in terms of its teachings and, even more, in terms of the ongoing rethinking of doctrine that the sermon occasions.

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No debate more thoroughly sunders the Christian world into competing factions than the simple question, Are we saved by grace or by works? It needs to be stated at the outset, however, that the framing of the debate in such terms is not truly accurate. *Sola gratia*, or salvation by grace alone, is one of the pillars of Protestantism. No one, on the other hand, affirms a doctrine of salvation by works. (Pelagians might have in the fifth century, but they are no longer alive to be part of the conversation.) The debate is really over the question, Are we saved by grace alone or by some combination of grace and works?

Like Catholics, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have long been characterized by others as believing that salvation can be purchased through a life of righteousness. In recent years, recognizing that our own emphasis on obedience, to the neglect of Christ’s role as Savior, has contributed to that impression, and in an effort to find common ground with Evangelicals in particular, a number of figures have produced a stream of books and talks emphasizing the role of grace in Restoration belief—to such an extent that Evangelicals are now hopeful that we are verging toward their conception of Christian orthodoxy. Is this a healthy course correction? Does grace deserve a more prominent place in Latter-day Saint discourse about salvation? Or has the pendulum already swung too far?
Tipping toward Works

“Obedience is the first law of heaven,” proclaims an LDS Gospel Doctrine manual, citing both scripture and Elder Bruce R. McConkie.¹ And an article of faith is equally emphatic, stating that we are saved “by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel” (A of F 1:3), adding a rather imprecise “through the Atonement of Christ.” Restoration scriptures tell the same story: “that he who doeth the works of righteousness shall receive his reward, even peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come” (D&C 59:23). In the magisterial treatise on Restoration theology commissioned by the Church, Elder James E. Talmage does not even employ the term grace, let alone give it any theological weight.² Bruce McConkie, in his hugely influential Mormon Doctrine, makes obedience the pathway to salvation, which path is possible because of Christ’s “love, mercy, and condescension”: “the very opportunity to follow the course of good works which will lead to that salvation sought by the saints comes also by the grace of God.”³

Tipping toward Grace

In recent years, Latter-day Saints seem to have remembered Nephi’s words that it is “by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Ne. 25:23). LDS scholars sought to find a more meaningful synthesis of Paul’s emphasis on faith and James’s on works. A widely popular interpretation of that verse compared salvation to a bicycle in a modern parable. We try to buy it with our pathetic earnings, but they are far short. After we do all we can to secure it, a generous parent makes up the large deficit in the purchase price, and the bicycle, or salvation, is secured. As Stephen Robinson writes, “Having done all we can, it is enough. We may not be personally perfect yet, but because of our covenant with the Savior, we can rely on his perfection, and his perfection will get us through.”⁴

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². His only mentions of grace are in its colloquial or generic, not theological, sense, as in “the throne of grace,” or “full of grace and truth.” James E. Talmage, The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1899).
Other LDS authors followed suit. Book titles like *Grace Works*, *Changed through His Grace*, *Amazed by Grace*, and others now populate the Church's commercial publishing website. The evangelical leader Richard Mouw has seen the Church's renewed emphasis on grace, along with other developments, as “a sign of a sincere desire to bring a historically heterodox tradition into greater conformity with the orthodox Christian consensus.” So does the Church of Jesus Christ espouse a doctrine of grace that is conformable with the mainline (Protestant) understanding? And have recent developments corrected a historical slighting of Christ’s Atonement and its role in our salvation?

**Challenging the Premises**

In his important study of *Belief, Language, and Experience*, the ethnographer Rodney Needham makes a powerful case for the impossibility of accurately translating religious vocabularies across cultures. Concepts we translate as “belief” and “faith” meant certain things to the Hebrews, other things to early Christians writing out of a Greco-Roman culture, and something quite different again to the Nuer people of sub-Saharan Africa. Broadly speaking, of course, this is because no concept translates seamlessly across linguistic or cultural boundaries. But Needham’s observation is really a more focused critique of the ways in which religious terminology especially is given its particular cast by the underlying cosmology of its users. As he writes, “The translation of the verbal categories which an alien people employ in statements about their cultural universe, especially in the sphere conventionally denoted as that of religion, is a focus of notorious and inescapable difficulty.” Or as Evans-Pritchard reported in his famous study of the Nuer, “If I speak of ‘spear’ or ‘cow’ everybody will have pretty much the same idea of what I speak of, but this is not so when I speak of ‘Spirit,’ ‘soul,’ ‘sin,’ and so forth.”

Or, Evans-Pritchard might have said with even greater accuracy, “grace.” For grace has a very particular meaning in the Protestant tradition of which Latter-day Saints who invoke the term are often unaware. Martin Luther, an early exponent of the doctrine, defined salvation by

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grace not in terms of Christ’s Atonement making possible our growing conformity to eternal law, but as the act whereby Christ *substitutes* his righteousness for our sinfulness. When Paul said, “The just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17), Luther did not take this to mean that the righteous should live by confidence in Christ’s promises. Rather, given the fact that the object of that faith is certain and steadfast, being Jesus Christ himself, his reliability is of such perfection as to ground incontrovertibly the confidence we repose in him. Our faith can relieve us of the purgatory of uncertainty, not because our mind is firm but because our foundation is Christ’s faithfulness, not ours. His righteousness, *imputed to us*, not our personal righteousness achieved or weighed in the balance, is what wins us pardon and salvation. With him standing effectively in our stead at judgment, we are considered righteous. This idea becomes the doctrine of imputed righteousness. The closest Restoration scripture that gestures to such an idea is Doctrine and Covenants 45:3–5, where we hear Christ pleading that the Father “spare these my brethren” for whom he has suffered.

“Considered” righteous is the key. For a Protestant, Christ does not just suffer in our stead; he is judged in our stead. From one Latter-day Saint perspective, such a view appears defeatist and a denial of the human potential to become holy, pure, and sanctified beings in themselves, by a process of continual repentance and growing conformity to eternal laws, until we become like our heavenly parents in a literal *imitatio Christi*. It is this understanding of grace that led James Talmage to call justification by belief alone (*sola fide*) not just wrong, but “a pernicious doctrine.” It makes God an arbitrary sovereign, consigns man to irremediable sinfulness, and denies the inherent divinity of a mankind “whole from the foundation of the world” (Moses 6:54). Talmage may have been basing his position on the principle enunciated by Joseph Smith in section 88: Only “that which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same. That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law . . . cannot be sanctified by . . . mercy”—that is, by grace—because “he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory” (D&C 88:34–35, 22). Or as Brigham Young put the case, “its being the will and design of the Father, Son, and Holy

Ghost . . . that you should be a Saint, will not make you one, contrary to your own choice.”

In other words, predominant Protestant conceptions of grace might be incompatible with the Latter-day Saint understanding of salvation itself, which is not a rescue from depravity and condemnation but what the scripture above referred to as preservation, perfection, and sanctification under the discipline of law. What then is salvation? A major figure in the New Perspective on Paul movement—which is radically reevaluating Protestant readings of Paul—is James Dunn, who begins his book on the subject by addressing the question of what we must do to win “God’s acceptance” and cites another scholar who is also asking about the respective options of faith or works for “winning God’s favour.”

For a Latter-day Saint to enter such a debate is to already accept a highly suspect premise. We are not vassals seeking ways to placate a sovereign God. Salvation is not a reward dispensed to those who comply with a set of requirements imposed by God—of either faith or works. In the Lectures on Faith, salvation was defined in uniquely Restorationist language:

Let us ask, where shall we find a prototype into whose likeness we may be assimilated, in order that we may be made partakers of life and salvation? or in other words, where shall we find a saved being? for if we can find a saved being, we may ascertain, without much difficulty, what all others must be, in order to be saved—they must be like that individual or they cannot be saved: . . . whatever constitutes the salvation of one, will constitute the salvation of every creature which will be saved. . . . We ask, then, where is the prototype? or where is the saved being? We conclude as to the answer of this question . . . is Christ: all will agree in this that he is the prototype or standard of salvation, or in other words, that he is a saved being. And if we should continue our interrogation, and ask how it is that he is saved, the answer would be, because he is a just and holy being; and if he were anything different from what he is he would not be saved; for his salvation depends on his being precisely what he is and nothing else . . . : Thus says John, in


his first epistle, 3:2 and 3: Behold, now we are the sons of God, and it doth not appear what we shall be; but we know, that when he shall appear we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And any man that has this hope in him purifies himself, even as he is pure.—Why purify himself as he is pure? because, if they do not they cannot be like him.12

This conception of salvation is why, as Smith said, members of the Church can agree with neither position on the “once saved by grace, always saved” debate.13

The same dismissal of Protestant grace seen in Doctrine and Covenants 88 is evident in the Book of Mormon’s recurrent dismissal of the doctrine that we can be saved “in our sins,” which is effectively the case with Luther and the whole tradition of grace as imputed righteousness, wherein we are always wholly a sinner and saved because we allow Christ’s righteousness to be a surrogate before the judging eye of God for our own always insufficient righteousness. (We are justified by God’s judgment though wholly a sinner, in Luther’s famous language.)14 Or as the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the basis of most Protestant denominations, state, “We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith” (Article 11).15

If the restored gospel is so emphatically incompatible with salvation by grace or its equivalents, sola gratia, sola fide, or imputed righteousness, then what role might grace play in the Church’s scheme of things? One might consider other ways of understanding grace than those given us by the Protestant inheritance. The nineteenth-century man-of-letters Matthew Arnold begins his study of the Bible with this statement:


We have said elsewhere how much it has contributed to the misunderstanding of St. Paul, that terms like *grace,* . . . which he used in a fluid and passing way, as men use terms in common discourse or in eloquence and poetry, . . . people have blunderingly taken in a fixed and rigid manner, as if they were symbols with as definite and fully grasped a meaning as the names *line* or *angle,* and proceeded to use them on this supposition. Terms, in short, which with St. Paul are *literary* terms, theologians have employed as if they were *scientific* terms.16

Indeed, the simplest meaning of the Pauline word for “grace,” χάρις, is graciousness, or goodwill, undeserved favor or gift. In that sense, the restored gospel’s acceptance of the grace of Christ as the precondition of all human salvation is unambiguous. The Book of Mormon declares both the indispensability of Christ’s grace and the particular gesture to which it applies in its most transcendent form. “There is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh” (2 Ne. 2:8).

Job asked, “What is man, that thou shouldst . . . set thine heart upon him?” (Job 7:17). Restoration doctrine asserts that it was this act of setting his heart upon man that constituted the majesty and miracle of God’s grace. In this conception, when John said, “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19), he meant that deep in the primeval past when God found himself in the midst of numerous spirit intelligences, before the earth was formed or the first man or woman organized, grace irrupted into the universe. We might consider grace the name of his relentless, inexhaustible, and ultimately irresistible invitation.

In 1993, Elder Dallin Oaks made a remarkable criticism: “I believe that for a time and until recently our public talks and our literature were deficient in the frequency and depth with which they explained and rejoiced in those doctrinal subjects most closely related to the atonement of the Savior. A prominent gospel scholar saw this deficiency in our Church periodicals published in a 23-year period ending in 1983. I saw this same deficiency when I reviewed the subjects of general conference addresses during the decade ending in the mid-1980s.”17

Reclaiming the beauty of Christ’s supernal gift may require more frequent employment of the term “grace,” so central to evangelical discourse, however misappropriately co-opted. Whether it will be possible, in so doing, to endow it with a uniquely Restorationist set of assumptions and implications is hard to say; and whether in the effort, we will appear to have ceded inspired doctrinal ground unnecessarily in hopes of broader Christian acceptance, will be part of the risk.

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Shards of Combat
How Did Satan Seek to Destroy the Agency of Man?

Philip L. Barlow

Human beings in other guise lived before the creation of our world. This belief is at once controversial and durable, pervading the history of Western thought and bearing analogues elsewhere.1 That gods, angels, or other celestial beings rebelled against their superiors or engaged in cosmic conflict prior to earth’s creation is a related concept, widespread in the ancient world. Depictions or allusions to such contests appear in the myths, lore, art, literature, and sacred texts of Babylon, Egypt, Israel, Persia, Greece, Rome, far-flung tribal religions, and elsewhere. In certain cases, the older traditions endure even to the present, as in Sufi (Muslim) expressions of Iblis’s rebellion against Allah.

No coherent account of a war in heaven has descended to us in the biblical record, though entwined imagery and hints from Genesis, Isaiah, Luke, 2 Peter, Jude, and the book of Revelation have sustained narrative, visual, musical, theatrical, and theological presentations across the centuries. In Christianity, these traditions achieved salience, transmitted by the early Christian fathers and medieval mystery plays, among other avenues. The literary tradition culminated in Milton, informed as much by Hesiod, Homer, and Virgil as by the Bible. Paradise Lost exerted colossal influence on subsequent generations, including those in the United States.

1. Terryl L. Givens gives the most probing and only systematic history of the idea in Western thought: When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
Ancient accounts of extraterrestrial battles variously pitted light against darkness, order against chaos, pride toward one’s betters, power against power, or good against evil (not necessarily in modern terms). The notion that heavenly war hinged on the proposed creation of earth and the prospect of a deepened agency granted to its future human inhabitants was untaught until Joseph Smith’s revelations in the antebellum United States recast the war from cosmic military engagement to a clash of ideas concerning “salvation.” In this framing, expanded in the minds of disciples from scant filaments of scripture, a pre-earthly Lucifer aspired to redeem an envisioned humankind without exception and to usurp the honor and power of God, who rejected Satan’s hubris. Satan rebelled, incited war, and, before and perhaps after being cast out, “sought to destroy the agency of man” (Moses 4:3), who was to be sent to earth to experience, to learn, to choose, to be tested, and to achieve his and her divine potential. In Joseph Smith’s panorama of what existence is about, not even love, grace, intelligence, or relationships eclipse agency as prime values; their very nature and meaning depend on it. To inhibit agency is demonic.

In what sense and by what means did Satan seek to extinguish this agency? This remains an open question; no response reigns official in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Yet examining assumptions and possibilities amounts to more than elaborating the unknown. The effort and the additional questions it spawns lay bare something of the nature of agency itself, along with threats to it. Whether to believers who take the War in Heaven as actual pre-earth trauma or to skeptics sensitive to the potency of mythos, exploring the story’s contours may affect our maps of historical, existential, and spiritual reality. Hence it may condition how we choose to live.

Before turning to theories of Satan’s methods in working to negate the agency of God’s children, we note that key phrasings in Latter-day Saint scripture concerning agency and even specifically the War in Heaven have histories preceding Joseph Smith’s restoration and are independent of that war. For example, “sought to destroy the agency of man”

2. Paradise Lost seems at first glance to be an exception because liberty (compare agency) is pertinent in Milton’s account of heavenly war. However, it arises there as an issue not because Satan objected to a widened agency proposed for prospective humans, but due to Satan’s sense that his own liberty had been infringed upon by God’s choice of Christ to reign above others and his choice of humans for special honor.

V115
Satan and the Agency of Man

(Moses 4:3) and “to act . . . and not to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:26) were linguistic formulas embedded in the Arminian/Reformed debates of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Whether knowingly or unconsciously, the Prophet Joseph adopted certain phrases from Arminian critics who accused Calvinists of an exaggerated effort to protect the sovereignty of God, sacrificing human agency in the process. As New York’s prominent Calvinist (and Presbyterian) David Low Dodge characterized one such critique of his own position in 1808, “If we are totally depraved, I think it must destroy moral agency; from which it will follow, that we do not act, but are acted upon like machines.”

The language of “acting” and “being acted upon” traces further back through John Locke and well beyond to the ancient Epicurean poet, Lucretius. In translating or crafting new revelation, Joseph Smith’s words resembled known but disparate vocabulary units, frequently of biblical but also Masonic, theological, and political origins. In many cases the Prophet would not likely have known their original meanings, but in any event he frequently transposed these phrasings from their original setting to a fresh context, weaving them into new and coherent forms, as a mother or father bird integrates vagrant twigs and debris into a new nest for their young. This was not plagiarism in any modern sense but rather was intrinsic to his prophetic mode.

4. David Low Dodge, A Religious Conference, in Four Dialogues, between Lorenzo and Evander, by a Layman, to Which Is Added, Leslie’s Short Method with Deists (New York: Collins and Perkins, 1808), 15. The quotation is actually attributable to Dodge’s dialogue character “Lorenzo” (possibly referencing Lorenzo Dow), who represents the Arminian critique of Reformed theology.


6. I call this process barauification, after Joseph Smith’s spelling (barau) of the Hebrew word (ḇārāʾ) that rests behind the English “created” in Genesis 1:1. Joseph Smith learned, while studying Hebrew in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, that the word means “to fashion” or “to organize” rather than to conjure into existence ex nihilo, as per traditional Christian belief. Just as God forged the world from pre-existent, chaotic materials, so the Prophet Joseph fashioned translation or new revelation partly from scattered sources. The result created order from chaos, an order possessing independent coherence, power, and new meaning in a fresh context. In the process of verbal “barauifying” that sketched the War in Heaven, Smith intentionally or incidentally resolved a centuries-old debate about free will in Protestant circles. He also broadened the discourse on free will from causation (God) to ontology (human nature) and cosmology (the divine course of salvation) planned in the pre-earth heavens. (Thanks to Stephen Betts for the last of these insights.)

Vestiges of a similar process may be seen in hundreds of disparate phrases comprising the Doctrine and Covenants, the Book of Mormon, and the Pearl of Great Price.
History of the Predominant Understanding

Whether or not readers were attuned to such processes in the formation of Restoration scripture, two theories eventually coalesced to dominate Latter-day Saint understanding of how Satan conspired to negate agency. Each of them possesses a history—they were not evident in Joseph Smith’s lifetime—a fact that lays grounds for noticing other possibilities latent in the tradition.

Orson Pratt planted the seeds of what became the prevailing theories as early as 1853. “If Satan had been permitted to carry out his plan,” wrote Pratt, “it would either have destroyed the agency of man, so that he could not commit sin; or it would have redeemed him in his sins and wickedness without any repentance or reformation of life. If the agency of man were destroyed, he would only act as he is acted upon, and consequently he would merely be a machine.” The alternatives Pratt discerned, then, would have obliterated agency or rendered it moot. However, neither he nor his contemporaries nor Joseph Smith before them proffered much in the way of a Satanic method for either possibility. What did it mean to say Satan intended to annihilate agency? How would he attempt it?

If Church members in the twenty-first century were polled to respond to the question, an outsized majority would probably explain that Satan hoped to coerce the human will. He would force human beings to be good. If a questioner were to wonder aloud why “a third part of the hosts of heaven” (D&C 29:36) would be lured to a scheme where morally good souls were imagined as the product of coercion, some Church members might refine their thought: perhaps Satan planned to force every person to obey his commandments. This too would seem to yield conformity rather than goodness, but the presumption in this model is that this was precisely why God rejected Satan’s plan. Because scripture and Joseph Smith are silent on the matter of Satan’s mode, however, tracing how the idea of Satanic coercion rose to dominance among the Saints seems useful.

From perhaps as early as the 1830–31 reception of the book of Moses, Joseph Smith and others were aware of a pre-earthly conflict in which
Satan sought to suppress human agency. Similarly, leaders from the Church’s earliest days exuded a distaste for ideological, religious, or political coercion. Although the tether between these distinct ideas seems obvious and inevitable to many twenty-first-century disciples, it was not until 1882 that a Church leader, John Taylor, explicitly asserted that Satan’s premortal attempt to eliminate agency consisted of coercion. The context for this new linkage was the coercion leaders perceived in the increasingly harsh legal and public relations measures that federal authorities imposed upon the Saints, pressure intended to dismantle their practices of plural marriage and de facto theocracy. Said President Taylor, “Satan sought to rob man of his free agency, as many of his agents [congress, the

8. The books of Moses and Abraham were not published until 1851, after which at least some church leaders, such as Orson Pratt, treated them virtually as scripture—decades before their canonization in 1880.


10. Previous to John Taylor’s statement, leaders and the Saints more broadly did marshal traditional language concerning the devil’s capacity to deceive, tempt, and try to control humans and, if people did not take care, to overwhelm them. The devils were taken to oppose the Saints’ every effort to do good. Many felt that all illnesses of the Saints come from the devils. Satan has control over the wicked, they believed, but followers of Jesus Christ are free from his control. In a representative urging from March 1857, as tensions that would eventuate in the Utah War grew, First Presidency member Daniel H. Wells lamented the corruption that had beset generations for thousands of years, with the result that “the devil has power over us through this cause in a measure that he otherwise would not have; and were it not for the multiplicity of the blessings of the Almighty that gives us power and strength, we would most likely be overcome of the devil.” Journal of Discourses, 4:254 (March 1, 1857). Later that month, Apostle and future Church President Wilford Woodruff noted the imminent spring and cautioned, “As we turn our attention to the plough and to cultivating the earth, if we forget our prayers, the Devil will take double the advantage of us.” Journal of Discourses, 5:51 (March 22, 1857). That autumn, after the outbreak of violence, Apostle Erastus Snow declared, “There is but one alternative for this people: it is our religion, our God, our liberty, or slavery, the Devil, and death.” Journal of Discourses, 6:92 (November 29, 1857). So, in the mid-nineteenth century, Satan was perceived as a threat to liberty, but, again, it was not until the 1880s that this trait was named a cause for his premortal exile from heaven.
courts, territorial marshals] are seeking to do today; and for this cause Satan was cast out of heaven.”\footnote{11. John Taylor, in Journal of Discourses, 23:239 (August 20, 1882). Compare with John Taylor, in Journal of Discourses, 24:352–53 (December 9, 1883); 24:194 (June 18, 1883); and John Taylor, An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing Co., 1882), 93.}

Beyond the novelty of linking federal action with the cosmic origins of evil, one wonders if Taylor consciously or unconsciously implied that, as with the pre-earthly Satan, God could overthrow coercive politicians in this world. Subsequent leaders seem to allude more to the devil’s pervasive influence in human history rather than specifically to the pre-earth casting out of Satan or his this-worldly human counterparts.

Church rhetoric decrying the government’s heavy hand and linking it to the forces of evil (not yet Satan’s pre-earthly plan) had spiked before and during the Utah War of 1857–58 and rose anew after the Civil War, building through the 1870s. Once President Taylor publicly declared such compulsion akin to Satan’s rejected scheme in the pre-existent world, other Church leaders followed suit. Satan’s plan to destroy agency became his plan to destroy it by compulsion. Apostle Moses Thatcher, for one, spoke repeatedly of Lucifer’s “coercive, agency destroying plan” in the mid-1880s.\footnote{12. Moses Thatcher, in Journal of Discourses, 26:305 (August 28, 1885), 327 (October 8, 1885).}

This line of thought subsequently took a crucial though subtle turn amid a seismic shift in power relations between the United States and the Latter-day Saint Zion. The new détente was enabled in part by Church President Wilford Woodruff’s 1890 manifesto directing his followers against future plural marriages, an accommodation essential to Utah’s entrance to statehood in 1896. Three years later, soon-to-be Apostle James Talmage published The Articles of Faith, the first of his two books that during the twentieth century would attain quasi-canonical status among the tiny handful of nonscriptural works approved by Church leadership for use by full-time missionaries. Talmage wrote that, before creation, Lucifer’s “uncontrolled ambition prompted . . . [his] unjust proposition to redeem the human family by compulsion.”\footnote{13. James E. Talmage, The Articles of Faith: A Series of Lectures on the Principal Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1899), 65.} In this new era of attempted rapprochement with the United States in which Talmage...
wrote, his doctrinal work makes no mention of Satanic compulsion by the federal government. The effect of this absence was to etch Satan's coercive pre-existent plan more deeply as theological tenet than as political joust.

Reiterated in his even more influential Jesus the Christ (1915)—published a decade after a second manifesto on plural marriage gave the teeth of enforcement to the first one—Talmage’s explanation of Satan's agency-destroying mode gradually became axiomatic among widening circles of Latter-day Saints. The idea was proclaimed in general conference for the remainder of the century and into contemporary times and was reinforced in popular musical and theatrical productions. Similarly, whenever the issue of Satan’s premortal plan arises in the Church’s

14. Talmage, Articles of Faith, 57; compare James E. Talmage, Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission according to Holy Scriptures Both Ancient and Modern (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1916), 8–9. Similar instruction has occurred over the general conference pulpit in every decade from Talmage to the present. See, for example, Charles W. Nibley, in Eighty-Seventh Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1917]), 144; Rulon S. Wells, in Ninety-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1926]), 77; Joseph F. Merrill, One Hundred Nineteenth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1949]), 27; David O. McKay, One Hundred Thirty-First Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [1961]), 59; O. Leslie Stone, “Commandments to Live By,” Ensign 9, no. 11 (November 1979): 72–73; James E. Faust, “The Great Imitator,” Ensign 17, no. 11 (November 1987): 33–36; Richard G. Scott, “To Heal the Shattering Consequences of Abuse,” Ensign 38, no. 5 (May 2008): 40–43; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear,” Ensign 47, no. 4 (April 2017): 104–7.

Primary, Sunday School, seminary, institute, Relief Society, and priesthood courses, the teaching manuals published in recent decades overwhelmingly assert the coercion theory. A manual for Primary children, ages 8–11, illustrates how this understanding might be instilled across generations. The manual invites teachers to help children imagine conditions under Lucifer’s plan by, for several minutes, doing exactly and only as the teacher instructs. For instance, they might be told to remain standing perfectly still, then told where to sit, apart from their friends. Then to sit erect, feet flat to the floor, looking straight ahead, neither moving or speaking, and to hold their positions. Upon their being released from this regimen, the manual suggests students discuss how they would feel if made to do exactly what they were told to do all day, every day. Teachers are prompted to express gratitude for the blessing of agency.15

Another View

Although coercion evolved more than a century ago into the dominant gene in the Latter-day Saint theological chromosome concerning Satan’s primordial threat to agency, an enduring recessive gene presented another theory bearing a history at least as long as the first. The coercion theory tended to imply too much law and control, but Brigham Young had concerns also about too little, which might lull errant minds to conclude they could be “saved in their sins.”16 Orson Pratt’s suppositions, noted earlier, had gestured to this concern back in 1853: If Satan’s designs did not “destroy the agency of man,” it would have “redeemed him in his sins and wickedness without any repentance or reformation of life.”17 Even earlier, in 1845, W. W. Phelps asserted that Lucifer lost his heavenly station “by offering to save men in their sins.”18 Alarm at this prospect derived at least in part from the Book of Mormon, which does not mention the War in Heaven but does portray the BC prophet Amulek contesting the sophistry of one Zeezrom. Against him, Amulek emphasizes that the Lord surely will come to redeem his people not in

15. “Jesus Christ Was Chosen to Be Our Savior,” Lesson 2 in Primary 6: Old Testament (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 6–8. The 1999 Old Testament seminary manual is an exception to the pattern of privileging the coercion theory; it notes that coercion is only one possibility among others for Satan’s original plan to undo agency.
17. Pratt, Seer, 52.
their sins but from them (Alma 11:34; Hel. 5:10). Lurking antinomianism was an ancient Christian concern, but expressed in just such phrases as these (“in sins,” “from sins”), it thrived in the centuries prior to Joseph Smith, who used similar language to render the Book of Mormon translation.\(^{19}\) Phelps, Young, Pratt, and others further demonized antinomianism of any era: to argue that one could be saved “in their sins” was akin to arguing Satan’s original preexistent cause.

The occasionally unpacked logic of this concern, when linked to the War in Heaven, is that from the pre-earth era when Lucifer became Satan, his stratagem has been to buffer actors from assuming responsibility for their actions. This theme has periodically found expression in general conference and other forums across the Church’s history and, like the coercion theory, has been called on to target diverse perceived maladies. In 1982, Elder Bruce R. McConkie offered a succinct summary of this line of thought:

> When the Eternal Father announced his plan of salvation—a plan that called for a mortal probation for all his spirit children; a plan that required a Redeemer to ransom men from the coming fall; a plan that could only operate if mortal men had agency—when the Father announced his plan, when he chose Christ as the Redeemer and rejected Lucifer, then there was war in heaven. That war was a war of words; it was a conflict of ideologies; it was a rebellion against God and his laws. Lucifer sought to dethrone God, to sit himself on the divine throne, and to save all men without reference to their works. He sought to deny men their agency so they could not sin. He offered a mortal life of carnality and sensuality, of evil and crime and murder, following which all men would be saved. His offer was a philosophical impossibility. There must needs be an opposition in all things.\(^{20}\)

Using analogous reasoning in his condemnation of intimate same-sex relations, Elder Dallin H. Oaks raised the ante from traditional

\(^{19}\) The peril of antinomianism is as old as the biblical Paul, but the specific language of being redeemed “in” or “from” one’s sins seems to be post-Reformation. For example, in 1700, William Burkett wrote, “Though Christ be able to save to the uttermost, yet he is not able to save them in their sins, but only from their sins.” *Expository Notes, with Practical Observations, upon the New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Wherein the Whole of the Sacred Text Is Recited, the Sense Explained, and the Instructive Example of the Blessed Jesus and His Apostles to Our Imitation Recommended* (London: J. and G. Offor [orig. 1700]), notes, 10. Smith’s prophetic linguistic process is distinct from our modern notions of plagiarism. For an explanation of the process, see note 6.

judgments of error or sin to a charge of Satanic marketing: “Satan would like us to believe that we are not responsible in this life.” “That is the result he tried to achieve by his contest in the pre-existence. A person who insists that he is not responsible for the exercise of his free agency because he was ’born that way’ is trying to ignore the outcome of the War in Heaven. We are responsible, and if we argue otherwise, our efforts become part of the propaganda effort of the Adversary.”21

The insistence on personal responsibility for one’s actions is historically ubiquitous in Latter-day Saint theology and practice, but the diluting or obscuring of responsibility as an explanation for Satan’s pre-earth plan for humanity remains a minority report among both leaders and followers. However, when scholars or popular writers from within the tradition have considered the matter at length, arguments against the illogic of the dominant coercion theory and for the virtues and scriptural basis of the recessive theory are not rare.22 Of these writers, the scholar best equipped to weigh his arguments amid Christian, literary, and Latter-day Saint intellectual history is Terryl Givens, who notes that there are manifestly more subtle and sophisticated ways to attempt to destroy agency than through force. Principal among these is “the simple tampering with the consequences of choice.

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22. For example, Top, Life Before, 105, 113–15, especially 117 and 119ff; Gary C. Lawrence, The War in in Heaven Continues (Santa Ana, Calif.: Parameter Publishing, 2014), 7, 8, 14, 117, and 192, among others; and Greg Wright, Satan’s War on Free Agency (Lindon, Utah: Granite Publishing and Distribution, 2009), 15, 36, 47, 51, 52, 54, 62, and passim. Joseph Fielding McConkie gives a particularly clear argument in this current: “In the telling of the story of the Grand Council, it is sometimes said that Lucifer sought to force all men to do good or to live right. Such a notion finds justification neither in the scriptural text nor in logic. The only text that bears on the matter quotes Satan saying, ‘Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that one soul shall not be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor’ (Moses 4:1).” In that expression we find Lucifer promising to redeem, or save, all mankind, but there is no mention of any need to have them live in any particular way. Indeed, if people are forced to do something, the very fact that they have been forced to do it robs the action of any meaning. What meaning could there be in an expression of love given under duress? What meaning is there in the reelection of a tyrant when he runs unopposed on a ballot that has no place for a negative vote and everyone of voting age are forced to vote? What purpose would be served in making a covenant to live a particular standard when there was no choice to do otherwise?” Joseph Fielding McConkie, Understanding the Power God Gives Us: What Agency Really Means (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 54–55.
If every choice a person made resulted in totally unforeseen and unpredictable consequences, one would be inhabiting a realm of chaos. Agency would be meaningless and freedom effectively nonexistent if no reliable principles existed by which to make choices that were attached to the particular ends desired. . . . By this logic, an undeserved punishment or an unqualified reward is an equal threat to the idea of moral agency.”

For Givens, the lure behind this forfeiture of agency among the pre-earth heavenly hosts would have been escape from the high perils of mortality, a mortality that would require the discipline of suffering.

**Other Options**

Comprehending that both of the predominant theories accounting for Satan’s assault on agency are reasoned and expanded from cryptic strands of scripture, as well as historical (shown to emerge and evolve over time), makes room for one to notice other possible explanations, historical or imagined, that have gained less public traction. Awareness of these alternate conceptions may in turn broaden how believing Latter-day Saints or their observers choose to conceive and protect their agency.

Might the core of the Satanic challenge to agency, for instance, lie in valuing security more than freedom, as with Dostoevsky’s famous Grand Inquisitor? Or might the challenge be grounded in fear, ignorance, deceit, or manipulation more than in force (Moses 4:4)? Might such deceit take the form not only of delusion about responsibility, but of confusion over sheer facts—a profound problem reflected in the modern world’s discounting of a free, independent, and competent press, for example, and of professional expertise generally? “What better way has history taught us to control the actions of men and women than to limit the information available to them so that the need to choose never enters their minds, or in the event that it does, [proceeds] so as to obscure all but the desired option?”

Might well-meaning people in either secular or religious contexts be complicit in eroding agency when their efforts toward coordination devolve into micromanagement and censorship? Or when a culture

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spawns gratuitous complexity and an ongoing multiplication of rules and laws rather than, as Joseph Smith preferred, a people who govern themselves after embracing correct principles?\textsuperscript{25}

Might the Satanic reach to destroy agency have included a design to preempt full evolutionary development of life on earth—thereby purchasing freedom from higher-order suffering, deliberate evil, and existential angst at the expense of constricting to prehuman levels the dimensions of intelligence, self-consciousness, reason, imagination, agency, and growth?

Or might Lucifer have agitated for a world where the “veil” over human consciousness and memory, to which Joseph Smith alluded, was rendered indefinitely transparent?\textsuperscript{26} Perhaps with God and the divine realm irrefutably before us, such a world would allow a constricted “agency” analogous merely to that of a teenager out on the town with friends and a date—with his or her parents in tow.\textsuperscript{27}

### Implications

This historicizing of the two dominant understandings of Satan’s attempt to destroy agency, coupled with a sampling of alternatives to them, suggests that a constellation of historical or potential strategies might be proposed as candidates for the erosion of human agency. This matters because the ways in which believers conceive the mode of Satanic opposition dictate the threats they envision for purposes of defense and prevention. The popular Latter-day Saint deductive models of Satan’s pre-existent plan often lack historical context, are scarcely aware of being speculative, and may bring unintended consequences. This is particularly true of the overwhelming focus on perceived coercion that intensified in Western countries and among Church members during the Second World War and the anticommunist rage that followed.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} John Taylor cited Joseph Smith to this effect. See Taylor, “The Organization of the Church,” \textit{Millennial Star}, November 15, 1851, 339.

\textsuperscript{26} For example, see Doctrine and Covenants 101:23–24; Larry E. Dahl and Donald Q. Cannon, eds., \textit{The Teachings of Joseph Smith} (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 644.

\textsuperscript{27} First Presidency member George Q. Cannon put the problem more loftily in 1873: “If, when [God] sends forth his Prophets, he were to manifest his power, so that all the earth would be compelled to receive their words, there would be no room then for men to exercise their agency.” George Q. Cannon, in \textit{Journal of Discourses}, 15:369 (March 23, 1873).

\textsuperscript{28} Within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Elder Ezra Taft Benson was the most influential voice preoccupied with the very real threat of Communism.
In the twenty-first century, this legacy has evolved, prompting some citizen-Saints, especially in the American West, to equate communism with evil, to equate evil communism with socialism, and to construe any governmental initiative for the public good as socialism—therefore as coercive (Satanic). Many American Church members selectively retain this mindset even as they cash their social security checks or send their children to public schools. Resistance to some forms of compulsion may be reasonable, necessary, and even noble in certain circumstances. But exaggerating and demonizing one sort of threat (as did McCarthyism and the John Birch Society, to choose examples at a safe historical remove) risks transmogrifying right into wrong, while ignoring more immediate and plausible threats. As the embodiment of evil, a Satan imagined as obvious and hell-bent solely on tyranny presents a naïve and dangerous image. It is wise to understand one’s enemies.

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during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Like others, he linked this preoccupation with Satan’s original designs in the pre-existence. His university-wide devotional address at Brigham Young University (September 16, 1986) typified his perspective: “The central issue in that pre-mortal council was: Shall the children of God have untrammeled agency to choose the course they should follow, whether good or evil, or shall they be coerced and forced to be obedient? Christ and all who followed him stood for the former proposition—freedom of choice; Satan stood for the latter—coercion and force. The war that began in heaven over this issue is not yet over. The conflict continues on the battlefield of mortality. And one of Lucifer’s primary strategies has been to restrict our agency through the power of earthly governments.” Ezra Taft Benson, “The Constitution—a Heavenly Banner,” BYU Devotional, September 16, 1986, 1, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/ezra-taft-benson/constitution-heavenly-banner/.
One way of making sense of Latter-day Saint heterodoxy—its location outside the spectrum of mainstream, historic Christianity—is to envision it as the culmination of early Christian trends that were suppressed or reconfigured in the early centuries of the new faith. In other words, one could see the Restoration as a road of Christian development not taken. After all, holds the great historian Walter Bauer, heresy is merely the orthodoxy that lost out. One scholar of early Christianity observes that the condemnation of Origen, church father of the third century, ensured the supremacy in the Christian tradition of a “theology whose central concerns were human sinfulness, not human potentiality; divine determination, not human freedom and responsibility.”

Few theologians would do more to celebrate human possibilities and inherent worth than Origen. In significant ways, he espoused core principles that would fall by the wayside along the highway of Christian development, only to be restored by Joseph Smith more than a thousand years later. Born in the late second century, this scholar from Alexandria authored the very first treatise of Christian theology—*On First Principles*. Several of his teachings have a familiar ring for Latter-day Saints. In contrast to the God of the creeds, having neither body, parts, nor

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passions, Origen proclaimed, “The Father himself is not impassible. If he is besought he shows pity and compassion; he feels . . . the passion of love, . . . and for us men he endures the passions of mankind.” Pondering the origin of the human soul, Origen held that we all existed as spirit beings in a premortal world. He erred, from a Latter-day Saint perspective, in assuming that premortal error was the cause of our expulsion from heaven, but he correctly ascertained our habitation in those celestial spheres long before birth. Seeing a destiny of endless progress in store, he referred to the “souls of men [who] in consequence of their progress, we see taken up into the order of angels.” He also taught a doctrine of apokatastasis, or full restoration. By this he meant that God would find a way to redeem and exalt the entire human family, bringing them back into the presence of God. He saw mortality as the crucial second stage in an ongoing saga of eternal progression.

The saints as they depart from this life will remain in some place situated on this earth which the divine scripture calls “paradise.” This will be a place of instruction, and so to speak, a lecture room or school of souls, in which they may be taught . . . and may also receive some indications of what is to follow in the future, . . . which are revealed more clearly and brightly to the saints in their proper times and places. If anyone is “pure in heart,” and of unpolluted mind, . . . he will make swifter progress and quickly ascend . . . until he reaches the kingdom of the heavens. . . . And thus he will proceed in order through each stage, following “him who has entered into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” and who has said, “I will that, where I am, they also may be with me.”

Gregory of Nyssa taught the same doctrine: “[God’s] end is one, and one only; it is this: when the complete whole of our race shall have been perfected from the first man to the last . . . to offer to every one of us participation in the blessings which are in Him.”

Indeed, Morwenna Ludlow has written that “in the early Christian Church there were two important streams of eschatological thought: a universalist stream, which asserted that all people would be saved,

5. Origen on First Principles, 72, 152.
and a dualistic stream, which stressed the two parallel fates of eternal heaven and eternal hell.”7 The first tradition was represented by, besides Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory’s sister Macrina, Maximus the Confessor, and others.

By the advent of the Church of Jesus Christ in the nineteenth century, a plan of salvation that encompassed the entirety of humanity was barely a dim memory of the Christian past—except for a few small circles of a burgeoning movement called Universalism. Meanwhile, as Joseph Smith labored at his retranslation of the New Testament, he paused to ponder John’s words about two resurrections only, one to life and one to death. “It appeared self-evident from what truths were left,” he recorded, “that if God rewarded every one according to the deeds done in the body, the term ‘Heaven,’ as intended for the Saints’ eternal home, must include more kingdoms than one. Accordingly, . . . while translating St. John’s Gospel, myself and Elder Rigdon saw the following vision.”8

The resulting section 76 turned Christian models upside down by proposing a three-tiered heaven that accommodated virtually every inhabitant of the planet, past and present. Two reactions registered among Latter-day Saints. Some responded Jonah-like, resentful that they would not enjoy the prestige of a salvation reserved for a few elect. As Brigham Young’s shocked brother characterized the vision, “Why the Lord was going to save everybody.”9 Some rebelled to the point that Parley Pratt disfellowshipped a protesting member.10 Others, however, rejoiced in a heaven far more commodious than contemporary versions.

The three-tiered heaven functioned effectively like the old system, with only the uppermost kingdom constituting genuine salvation. Rather like the Catholic soteriology, the restored gospel now had a hell (outer darkness), a middle realm of the almost-saved (the telestial and terrestrial kingdoms), and exaltation with God (the celestial kingdom). Latter-day Saints have come to conceive of salvation in two distinct ways: following a final judgment (though the term “final judgment” nowhere appears in scripture), resurrected souls are assigned to one of three kingdoms, where they will dwell eternally with no further

7. Ludlow, Universal Salvation, 1.
8. Doctrine and Covenants, section 76, introduction.
change in their inheritance. Or following a postmortal judgment, they will inherit a kingdom of glory; those in the telestial and terrestrial will have the opportunity of further progression both within and between the kingdoms.

It may simplify matters to state at the outset the official Church position: progression through the kingdoms is not a matter of settled doctrine.

As the First Presidency told an inquiring member in the 1950s:

Dear Brother,

The brethren direct me to say that the Church has never announced a definite doctrine upon this point. Some of the brethren have held that it was possible in the course of progression to advance from one glory to another, invoking the principle of eternal progression; others of the brethren have taken the opposite view. But as stated, the Church has never announced a definite doctrine on this point.

Sincerely your brother,

Joseph L. Anderson, Secretary to the First Presidency.  

To the present, that statement has never been superseded by any other official declaration. Throughout Church history, some leaders have emphatically opined in favor of continuing progression, and some have opined emphatically against. Others have made comments that are open to interpretation on the theme. In what follows, I include a sampling of such views, along with my thoughts on what rationales may be relevant if not always explicitly addressed. Joseph Smith learned, as recorded in section 76, that the terrestrial world comprised those “who died without law; . . . who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh, but afterwards received it” (D&C 76:72, 74). His brother Alvin, who died in Joseph’s youth, would have been in that category—or so Joseph likely assumed. Hence his happy shock when, in 1836, through spiritual eyes he saw his brother in the celestial kingdom: “And [I] marveled how it was that [Alvin] had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been

baptized for the remission of sins” (D&C 137:6, emphasis added). The reasonable explanation for Joseph’s surprise is that he expected Alvin would indeed inherit a terrestrial kingdom as described in section 76. Verse 8 of the new revelation offered an explanation. An exception to the assignment that had been decreed in section 76 is apparently made for the unbaptized “who would have received [the gospel] with all their hearts.” It is therefore possible that the celestial kingdom may only be reached by those of the unbaptized who comply with the necessary vicarious ordinances and principles while in the spirit world.

However, it is also reasonable to infer that both section 76 and 137 are accurate as written: that the unbaptized, even if “honorable men [and women],” inherit the terrestrial kingdom but continue their progress from the terrestrial kingdom to the celestial. Thus those who “would have accepted” the gospel continue their progress indefinitely in the future. We cannot tell which possibility Joseph inferred, but the temple ritual he initiated, if read in the most literal way, recapitulates the eternal journey of the soul through the degrees of glory. The individual thus depicted advances from premortal life through mortality and into the beyond, passing through the lower two kingdoms and culminating with entry into a representation of the celestial kingdom itself. Excepting only those few who will refuse Christ’s mercy till the end, Joseph later taught, man “cannot be damned through all eternity, their [sic] is a possibility for his escape in a little time.”

The likelihood of interpreting Joseph’s views as encompassing a post–spirit world progression is enhanced by the fact that his two closest associates, his brother Hyrum and Brigham Young, both interpreted his teachings in just this way. Hyrum believed that salvific states in the hereafter were not static: He taught that “those of the Terrestrial Glory either advance to the Celestial or recede to the Telestial.” Brigham Young was also in line with such a conception. He was teaching in 1855 that those who fail to secure exaltation by the conclusion of their earthly probation “would eventually have the privilege of proveing [sic]
themselves worthy & advancing to a Celestial kingdom but it would be a slow progress.”

The Church of Jesus Christ’s eminent theologian and Seventy B. H. Roberts acknowledged that scripture was vague but argued that the ministry alluded to in each kingdom seemed meaningless “unless it be for the purpose of advancing our Father’s children along the lines of eternal progression.” However, whether “after education and advancement within those spheres” all could “at last emerge from them and make their way to the higher degrees of glory” was not revealed. The *Improvement Era*, published under the direction of Church President Joseph F. Smith, took a moderate position, holding that “the answer to this question may not be absolutely clear.” In some cases at least, the *Era* proposed, though not as a general rule, “passing from one [kingdom] to the other . . . may be possible for especially gifted and faithful characters.”

James Talmage, virtually the only Apostle to produce a theological treatise (two, actually) under official imprimatur, wrote in his first edition of *The Articles of Faith* that the answer was implicit in the principle of eternal progression itself: “Advancement from grade to grade within any kingdom, and from kingdom to kingdom, will be provided for. . . . Eternity is progressive.” He later elaborated that no man will be detained in the lower regions “longer than is necessary to bring him to a fitness for something better. When he reaches that stage the prison doors will open and there will be rejoicing among the hosts who welcome him into a better state.”

In subsequent editions of *The Articles of Faith*, the key words “from kingdom to kingdom” were removed. According to the translator of his work into German, Talmage clarified that in his earlier editions he had

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15. B. H. Roberts, *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1895), 419.
19. James E. Talmage, in *One Hundredth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 97.
declared for progression through the kingdoms at the explicit request of the committee of Apostles reviewing his work. So at that time, an apostolic majority (or a majority of the committee) believed that progression through the kingdoms was consistent with Church doctrine and did not approve of denying that possibility in a Church publication. Talmage reportedly claimed that he had personally never favored the principle and indicated as much in his revised twelfth edition.20

In the latter half of the twentieth century, other leaders explicitly stated the view of kingdom-to-kingdom progression. President J. Reuben Clark stated: “It is my belief that God will save all of His children that He can; and while, if we live unrighteously here, we shall not go to the other side in the same status, so to speak, as those who live righteously; nevertheless, the unrighteous will have their chance, and in the eons of the eternities that are to follow, they, too, may climb to the destinies to which they who are righteous and serve God, have climbed.”21

Some have found assurance in Joseph Smith’s comments about the power of sealing to bind children unconditionally to their parents. (It is perhaps arguable that such promises extend only to those who received the fulness of the priesthood, his audience at the time). The significance of those temple sealings was interpreted by Elder Orson F. Whitney and has been reaffirmed with increasing frequency in recent years: “Joseph Smith declared . . . that the eternal sealings of faithful parents and the divine promises made to them for valiant service in the Cause of Truth, would save not only themselves, but likewise their posterity. Though some of the sheep may wander, the eye of the Shepherd is upon them, and sooner or later they will feel the tentacles of Divine Providence reaching out after them and drawing them back to the fold. Either in this life or the life to come, they will return.”22 The extent of that return


is, however, not clearly indicated, nor are the implications for potential progression between kingdoms versus while in the spirit world.

Recently, leaders have reminded us that even sealing power cannot contravene individual agency; President James E. Faust believed the two principles—unlimited progression and personal accountability—could be reconciled: “I recognize that now is the time ‘to prepare to meet God,’” he said, affirming the words of Alma, but then asked, “If the repentance of the wayward children does not happen in this life, is it still possible for the cords of the sealing to be strong enough for them yet to work out their repentance? . . . Mercy will not rob justice, and the sealing power of faithful parents will only claim wayward children upon the condition of their repentance and Christ’s Atonement.” And he concluded, “There are very few whose rebellion and evil deeds are so great that they have ‘sinned away the power to repent.’ . . . Perhaps in this life we are not given to fully understand how enduring the sealing cords of righteous parents are to their children. It may very well be that there are more helpful sources at work than we know. I believe there is a strong familial pull as the influence of beloved ancestors continues with us from the other side of the veil.”

Opponents of progression have invoked difficult passages from Alma: “Ye cannot say, when ye are brought to that awful crisis [like Korihor], that I will repent” (Alma 34:34). This is because, as Amulek taught, we will emerge on the other side of the veil with the very same disposition with which we left this one, and time is the necessary requirement for change (Alma 34:34). Elder Charles W. Penrose felt that the book of Alma’s focus on this-life-only repentance failed to accommodate the diversity of life experiences and opportunities. He preached in a general conference address that “there are hundreds of thousands who have heard the Gospel in the flesh and through fear or folly have not embraced it, having been afraid to come forward and join themselves with this unpopular people, when they pass away from this stage of being into the spirit world [they] will be prepared to receive it when it is being preached among the spirits that are there.” Hence, he agrees

24. Charles W. Penrose, in Seventy-Sixth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1906), 86.
with Elder Talmage that repentance—the changing of the heart—will bring us to “a fitness for something better.” If the Book of Mormon also teaches that “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10) and that we should “consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments” (Mosiah 2:41), then there is no doubt that “this life is the time for men to prepare” (Alma 34:32).

Certainly, “repentance will be possible . . . even after death,” as Elder James E. Talmage insisted (see D&C 138:57–59). To some, he continued, “it may appear that to teach the possibility of repentance beyond the grave may tend to weaken belief in the absolute necessity of repentance and reformation in this life.” There is “no reason for such objection,” he explains, when we consider that willful neglect here and now will render the process that much more lengthy and difficult in the future.25 Whether such repentance can extend beyond the spirit world is not resolved by such caveats, but such readings mitigate the finality of Amulek’s timeframe.

The length and difficulty to which Elders Penrose and Talmage allude are crucial elements in understanding the logic of progression through the kingdoms. Any postmortal progress at all—within or beyond the spirit world—would in no way suggest shortcuts, cheap grace, or exemption from all salvational requirements. Progress would in any case require conformity to all the principles and ordinances of the gospel. This is why, as declared in Doctrine and Covenants 131 and 132:16–17, without accepting the law of celestial marriage, one does necessarily “remain separately and singly, without exaltation, . . . to all eternity.” Those choosing to persist in a state of wickedness undoubtedly will find it their “final state” (Alma 34:32, 35).

Those who believe in eternal progression for all must deal with one particularly challenging scriptural text in addition to those cited above: “Where God and Christ are they cannot come, worlds without end,” describes those who inherit the telestial kingdom (D&C 76:112). In his reworking of Genesis, Joseph Smith learned that Eternal is one of God’s names or titles: “Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; Man of Counsel is my name; and Endless and Eternal is my name” (Moses 7:35). The Lord reiterated this point to Joseph in section 19: “eternal” punishment is not endless punishment. “It is not written that there shall

be no end to this torment, but it is written _endless torment_. Again, it is written _eternal damnation_ . . . that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men” (D&C 19:6–7, italics in original). “Worlds without end” is an expression virtually identical to “eternal” in both usage and effect; why the Lord’s explanation of employing the first would not apply to his using the second is a fair question to ask.

So Hyrum Smith, Brigham Young, B. H. Roberts, the apostolic committee supervising the _Articles of Faith_, and J. Reuben Clark believed that God’s generosity would not preclude progression from a lower kingdom to a higher. Their position may be implicit though not expressed in the words of Robert D. Hales, who urged parents to “never, never shut the door of your heart to any of your children.” Like the Savior’s admonition to forgive “seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22), Elder Hales’ directive poses the question: Why would God impose limits to _his own_ forgiveness when in our quest for godliness we are told we should not?

On the other side of the question, we find a series of pronouncements that clearly reject any possibility of progression between kingdoms. Those voices have become more prominent in our own day. One early voice is Elder Melvin J. Ballard, who posed the question of progression through the kingdoms in 1922. In reply, he took Doctrine and Covenants 76:112 in its plainest meaning as regards telestial kingdom inhabitants: “Where God and Christ dwell they cannot come, worlds without end.” He then commented that “no provision has been made for promotion from one glory to another.” President George Albert Smith agreed. Quoting the same scripture, he doubted that heirs of lower kingdoms “will continue to progress until we will find ourselves in the celestial kingdom.”

In 1980, Elder Bruce R. McConkie denounced the idea as one of “seven deadly heresies.” In addition to citing Doctrine and Covenants 76:112, he added a rationale to resist such teachings: “This belief lulls men into a state of carnal security. It causes them to say, ‘God is so merciful; surely he will save us all eventually; if we do not gain the celestial kingdom now, eventually we will; so why worry?’ It lets people live a life

28. George Albert Smith, in _One Hundred Sixteenth Semi-annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints_ (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1945), 172.
of sin here and now with the hope that they will be saved eventually.”

Elder McConkie was following the lead of his father-in-law, President Joseph Fielding Smith, who derived the same conclusion from the same scripture: “The terrestrial and the telestial are limited in their powers of advancement, worlds without end.”

President Spencer W. Kimball was of the same opinion: “After a person has been assigned to his place in the kingdom, either in the telestial, the terrestrial, or the celestial, or to his exaltation, he will never advance from his assigned glory to another glory. That is eternal!”

Elder Russell M. Nelson, in 1985, added his weight to this view. After resurrection, he taught in a general conference, quoting President Kimball, “the soul . . . will come before the great judge to receive its final assignment.”

Although the term “final judgment” does not occur in scripture, Amulek did stipulate a “night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:33). Another scripture may also be interpreted as assuming, if not teaching, that no progression through kingdoms is possible. Doctrine and Covenants 88, elaborating on Paul's language about resurrection (1 Cor. 15), indicates that “your glory shall be that glory by which your bodies are quickened” (D&C 88:28). One reasonable inference from these lines is that our resurrected, immortalized bodies are fixed in a condition that corresponds to a fixed kingdom of glory (D&C 88:29).

Elder Boyd K. Packer and Elder Jeffrey R. Holland have both spoken to the immense reach of the Atonement, without stipulating whether that reach transcends resurrection and judgment. Elder Packer testified that “no rebellion, no transgression, no apostasy, no crime [is] exempted from the promise of complete forgiveness.”

Elder Holland affirmed that “however late you think you are, however many chances you think you have missed, however many mistakes you feel you have made or talents you think you don’t have, or however far from home . . .


and family and God you feel you have traveled, I testify that you have not traveled beyond the reach of divine love. It is not possible for you to sink lower than the infinite light of Christ’s Atonement shines.”

It is, of course, entirely possible that both are referring to a mercy that pertains to this mortal probation only—or is manifest in assignment to any of the kingdoms of glory. It is also likely, however, that such expressions of hopefulness and mercy, balanced against the realities of accountability and life as a “state of probation” (2 Ne. 2:21), factor into the decision of the leadership as a body to leave indeterminate the possibilities of those who at their death fall short of a celestial glory. It is also the case, as the historical record reveals, that a difference of opinion on the subject has characterized the minds of apostles and prophets throughout this dispensation.

What we can know is that the Church leadership decided not just once, as cited at the beginning of this essay, but again in 1965 and yet again in 1968 to declare that the question is officially open. Faithful Latter-day Saints can believe in the possibility of progression for all or believe the door is shut once assignment to a kingdom is made. We cannot, however, proclaim with any validity that one or the other belief is official Church teaching.

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Each Atom an Agent?

Steven L. Peck

And now, my sons, I speak unto you these things for your profit and learning; for there is a God, and he hath created all things, both the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are, both things to act and things to be acted upon. (2 Ne. 2:14)

What Is an Agent?

An agent, broadly conceived, references something causally efficacious. More narrowly, the word agent is usually deployed in at least three senses. The first is as brute causality. For example, to say that water is an agent of erosion on vegetatively barren hillsides is to claim that water directly causes the removal of the soil in particular drainage systems. The second sense, used predominately in biology, recognizes an agent as an individual autonomous system that constrains the flow of energy and matter such that its actions are performed for particular functions or goals. For instance, a simple bacterium is drawn to move upward toward light where food is more abundant. Typically, this is a much more complicated agent, in which information is used to sense environmental conditions and to respond to those conditions through metabolic functions, such as when energy is used for things like movement, reproduction, or energy capture.¹ In these first two instances, we note that since the

¹. See, for example, Alvaro Moreno and Matteo Mossio, Biological Autonomy: A Philosophical and Theoretical Enquiry (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2015).
time of Isaac Newton, these simple kinds of agents were thought to be part of the clockwork universe—a perspective that conceived of everything in the universe as nothing but deterministic machines with no freewheeling parts. The third sense of the word agent, the one most of this paper engages, is that of intentional agents that have, at least in some sense, volitional attributes based on information with which they make choices, possibly free choices for some advanced animals (including most vertebrates). These agents may be loosely described as having attributes such as sentience, sensing, consciousness, qualia detection, the ability to prehend, and other terms that suggest awareness of at least some aspects of the universe. Examples include bees, cows, and humans, all of which are suspected of harboring some kind of awareness. Even such simple organisms as bacteria and earthworms may sense the world in certain ways. Determining how far down the “chain of being” this awareness exists may be an insoluble problem. Are individual atoms aware of anything? What about electrons? Quarks? Photons? In a real sense, we cannot even tell if our neighbor is conscious or whether a honeybee is aware of its world in any way analogous to what we experience, so determining which organisms share these experiential capabilities is tricky. And at least since the early Greek pre-Socratic philosophers, some people have speculated that these capacities might reach all the way down to the very fundamental atoms of the universe—an idea often called panpsychism.

Panpsychism?

One concept related to agency is worth exploring further: What is the nature of consciousness? Consciousness has been called the “Hard Problem” because felt experience in the world seems detached from the causality of matter in motion. As Owen Flanagan asks, How can we explain “how mind is possible in a material world? How could the amazing private world of my consciousness emerge out of neuronal activity?”

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3. “Prehension” is a word used by Alfred N. Whitehead to describe the ability of the individual components of matter or collections of such matter to sense God’s aims and their place and relation to other components or collections of matter. See Franz G. Riffert, Alfred North Whitehead on Learning and Education (Newcastle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 43.
Marilynne Robinson puts it nicely in her book Absence of Mind: “If the brain at the level of complex and nuanced interaction with itself does indeed become mind, then the reductionist approach insisted upon by writers on the subject is not capable of yielding evidence of mind’s existence, let alone an account of its functioning.” There has been only a little attention to the nature of consciousness itself in theological considerations from thinkers within the Church; even so, the subject of consciousness is relevant to panpsychism because it appears to be part of the explanatory apparatus that panpsychism seeks to address—that is, How does consciousness emerge in the world?

Another branch of thought we might explore is the relationship between spirit and material body, with the idea that spirit matter is the consciousness-bearing substance in the universe. University of Richmond professor emeritus Terryl Givens points out that there are at least two views on how spirit and intelligence are framed: (1) before spirit-birth, there is an eternal entity known as an “intelligence” that possesses identity, agency, and individuality; and (2) there is a primal spirit matter that is eternal, from which the spirit body was organized. He points out that both views have been held by Latter-day Saint leaders (for example, Elder B. H. Roberts and Elder Bruce R. McConkie, respectively). Either view can be marshaled to provide support for a panpsychic cosmology, so we do not need to explore these speculations further except to note that these two views exist and that neither has risen to the status of official doctrine.

I will follow David Skrbina and define panpsychism as coincident with three main ideas: (1) objects have subjective experiences for themselves, (2) the experience is unified into one experience for each object, and (3) every physical thing made of matter has the first two properties.

Moreover, there are at least two ways that matter can be sentient or be receptive to what might be called some sort of experience. Dualist views suggest that matter is combined with some (perhaps nonmaterial) aspect—for example, having a soul. Others include vitalistic views that there is a pervading spirit or light or field that enlivens matter, as is found

in some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism and in animistic pagan religions. Still others hold monist views, in which there is ultimately one substance at some foundational level, and that thing is unitary; that is, at the most basic level all matter shares the same basic substance. Panpsychism would add that this foundational substance has some form of experience. Latter-day Saint thought can be viewed as either dualist, cashing out on our view that living things are composed of spirit and matter, or monist, because spirit matter is a form of matter (D&C 131:7–8).

A Brief History of Panpsychism

Ancient thinkers had an organic sense that the world was alive and that this gave a kind of animate aspect of indwelling powers that were partaking in some ways of the powers of the gods. Before Socrates, early philosophers had various views on which essential elements constituted matter (fire, water, and so forth). Thales and Anaximander argued that motion demanded a causative agent and must have a mind. There were exceptions, such as those articulated by the physicalist pre-Socratic philosophers Leucippus and Democritus, but by the time the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle were teaching in the Lyceum, their complex views that might be termed panpsychism can be controversially recognized. To tease these out fully would require much more detail, but both Plato’s “world-soul” and Aristotle’s doctrine of the different kinds of souls (his theory of hylomorphism) that inhabit the objects and living things of the world can be read as relying on panpsychic articulations.10

As Carolyn Merchant has demonstrated, throughout much of antiquity the world was held to be feminine, animate, and organic.11 For example, the minerals of the earth, like gold and silver, were assumed to grow in veins analogous to the way plants grow under the influence of the sun. The entire world was alive. These views tend to a vital dualism. With the rise of the Enlightenment, such views were replaced with a mechanistic ontology that pervades much of current Western thought. This transition, however, did not dispel panpsychism, as demonstrated by philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s monadology, the idea that the world was composed of blind monads, perceptual atoms that had written in their inner image the whole universe. Others who embraced a form of panpsychism include philosophers Margaret Cavendish, Baruch Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant. By the

late nineteenth century, panpsychism was being discussed broadly in philosophical and scientific circles with grounding from the German Romantics, influencing American thinkers such as Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, British process philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, and French thinkers such as Henri Bergson.

Parallel to these transitions, the Western esoteric movement’s views on panpsychic themes seem to have been influenced by occult knowledge such as that found in alchemy, Kabbalah, demonology, and magic. However, these views tended to see the world dualistically, with matter and spirit cleanly separated at its most basic level.12

**Panpsychism in Latter-day Saint Thought**

The clearest articulations, and perhaps the origin, of panpsychism in Church thought comes through the writings of Orson Pratt and his brother, Parley P. Pratt. Their influences appear to include a mix of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers and ideas. As John L. Brooke points out, “Building on [Joseph] Smith’s doctrine that ‘all spirit is matter’ and echoing Andrew Michael Ramsay, mediated by Scottish Common Sense, Mesmerism, and theories of electrical current, [Orson] Pratt argued that the Holy Spirit was ‘a diffused fluid substance,’ simultaneously inhabiting every particle of matter.”13 In addition, their reading of the book of Abraham inclined them toward panpsychic thinking. The clearest dissection of this concept is found in Terryl Givens’s work *Wrestling the Angel*. Givens points out that the Pratts’ reading of the statement in Abraham 4:18, that the Gods “watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed,” indicated that “those things” must have agential characteristics to have the capacity to obey.14 Orson Pratt is explicit in *The Seer* that “intelligence” is a fundamental aspect of the universe’s constituents. After explicating the intelligence of “man,” he explores the origin of conscious awareness: “Whence originated these capacities? When we speak of capacities we mean the original elementary capacities of the mind. . . These . . . qualities, if analyzed, will be found in all instances to be the result of the combination of simple, elementary, original capacities. The question is, whence originated

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these elementary qualities of the mind? We answer, they are eternal. The capacities of all spiritual substance are eternal as the substance to which they belong. There is no substance in the universe which feels and thinks now, but what has eternally possessed that capacity.\(^{15}\)

Orson Pratt sees these fundamental units of consciousness as being combined by God to form a spirit “infant” of which the individual parts work together to grow eventually into what we are today: “Each individual particle must consent, in the first place, to be organized with other similar particles, and after the union has taken place, they must learn, by experience, the necessity of being agreed in all their thoughts, affections, desires, feelings, and acts, that the union may be preserved from all contrary or contending forces, and that harmony may pervade every department of the organized system.”\(^{16}\)

Pratt goes further, coming into conflict with Brigham Young over several matters of theology, stating not only that this is how God formed his spirit children, but it is indeed how God likewise came into existence.\(^{17}\) Pratt had apparently formed his views years before his public disagreement with Brigham Young. In his journal, Wilford Woodruff summarized a conversation he had with Orson Pratt and Albert Carrington while walking in the initial 1847 pioneer company. Woodruff recounts an explanation “given by Professor Pratt” that “was something [sic] in the following language.” According to Woodruff, Pratt believed that eternal particles of atoms, existing for all eternity, “might have joined their interest together[,] exchanged ideas,” and eventually, “joined by other particles . . . formed A [sic] . . . body . . . through a long process.” Thus embodied, they gained power and influence over other intelligences and became the race of Gods.\(^{18}\) Pratt continued to teach this theory for many years.

Despite Young’s condemnation of Orson Pratt’s theology, Pratt’s ideas spread among the Saints. Perhaps one of the most scientifically informed expressions of this view was found in B. H. Roberts’s work *The Truth*,

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Each Atom an Agent?

Unpublished in his lifetime, the book opens with a grand sweep through the best science of his day in an attempt to frame a complete expression of the gospel’s power and scope. After exploring aspects of truth, knowledge, and contemporaneous conceptions of space and time (including references to Einstein), he argues that modern physics supports the notion of agential atoms. “All the new knowledge, however, respecting the atom and all that comes of it including resolving it into electrons, leaves us with the fact that it has within it something which ‘acts,’ and something which is ‘acted upon’; a seemingly necessary positive and negative substance in action and reaction out of which things proceed, an atom; an aggregation of atoms, a world; or a universe of worlds. . . . May they not be the ultimate factors, spirit and matter, acting and re-acting upon each other by which the universe is up-builded and sustained?”

Spirit matter, he argues, has the potential to act. He then argues, in ways reminiscent of Orson Pratt, that particles come together to create something greater than their individual instantiations. Roberts argues such particle-intelligences are bound together in unity of purpose manifest as the oneness of the universe. He does not explicitly state that atoms are conscious, but his hints make it clear that he sees them as agential and the basis, if not the essence, of intelligent behavior.

Since Roberts’s time, one of the more interesting modern explorations of sentient elements comes from Process Theology articulated by early twentieth-century philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead. While Whitehead’s ideas are too complex to explore in any detail here, there has been significant interest in using him and his followers to explore aspects of Church theology. Whitehead saw the universe


20. Roberts’s *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology* was considered as a manual for the Melchizedek Priesthood course of instruction and then the Gospel Doctrine manual for the Sunday School. However, conflicts between Roberts and Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith’s interpretation of scripture about contemporaneous scientific findings kept it from being published in his lifetime. James B. Allen, “The Story of The Truth, the Way, the Life,” in Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life*, 680–720.


as fundamentally made up of experiential units called “actual occasions,” which God persuades to join him in bringing about particular aims. These agents are free, individual, able to join in relational interactions, and endowed with an innate capacity to make choices. Miles specifically uses Whitehead’s thought to show how a process theology, joined with the thinking of Pratt and Roberts, can be used to derive a coherent Restoration theology.23

Panpsychism has also made an appearance in less official elaborations of Church doctrine. Cleon Skousen, a popular (and controversial) expounder on gospel topics, developed a theory of atonement based on panpsychic elements. Strangely reversing the primacy of God and matter, he argued that the elements of the universe act freely to follow God because he is worship-worthy. Christ’s suffering in the Atonement was intended to appease these agents, who otherwise would cease to obey God if he allowed violators of law to return to his presence.24

Panpsychic views have never been an official part of the received view of conventional Church doctrine. For example, I could find not a single reference to it in any general conference talk or any reference in Church educational material. Currently, it appears that the notion of atoms as agents is only a speculative venture that few members hold as part of their religious convictions. However, there are some intriguing possibilities that may be worth reconnoitering.

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The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible
Ancient Material Restored or Inspired Commentary?
Canonical or Optional? Finished or Unfinished?

Jared W. Ludlow

Joseph Smith began an ambitious program to revise the biblical text in June 1830, not long after the organization of the Church of Christ and the publication of the Book of Mormon. While the result came to be known as the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), it was not a literal word-for-word translation of ancient biblical languages from a manuscript but more of an inspired revision or paraphrase based on the King James Version in English, carried out primarily between June 1830 and July 1833.\(^1\) Since Joseph Smith never specifically addressed how or exactly why he made the particular changes he did, it is an open question whether he felt he was restoring ancient material, making inspired commentary, modernizing the language, a combination of things, or something else.\(^2\) Another open question related to this project is its status among Latter-day Saint scripture. Is the entire JST considered canonical or not? Perhaps a further open question is whether the JST

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1. Kathleen Flake described the process as more what Joseph saw than what he read: “It appears that when he read he saw events, not words. What he saw, he verbalized to a scribe.” From “Translating Time: The Nature and Function of Joseph Smith’s Narrative Canon,” *Journal of Religion* 87, no. 4 (2007): 507. Flake also described the use of “translation” as accurate since Joseph Smith remained bound to the text. “It can be said that, notwithstanding its English source, the JST asks to be understood as a translation, because it does not arise out of the infinite variations available to fiction but, rather, within the limits of an existing narrative of past events.” Flake, “Translating Time,” 508.

project was ever finished. This paper will address these issues by giving an overview of statements and approaches toward the JST.

The JST differs from the King James Version in about 3,410 verses (one-third in the Old Testament and two-thirds in the New Testament). These differences include slight changes to a word, new phrases, deletions, textual rearrangements, and entirely new chapters. A basic tenet of Latter-day Saint faith, starting with Joseph Smith, is a qualified belief in the Bible as most clearly stated in the eighth article of faith: “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (emphasis added). This statement shows both the importance of the Bible as containing the word of God but also a disclaimer that its transmission from source to reader needs to remain faithful to the original. Perhaps this principle—and Joseph Smith’s belief that during the ancient transmission process the original teachings of the Bible were corrupted and important truths lost—is the impetus behind Joseph Smith’s project and desire to present a version of the Bible that could be fully accepted as the word of God. One internal explanation found in the JST, now part of the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, alludes to the necessity of returning lost things to the text. The Lord prophesies to Moses about what will happen to the text he is producing: “And in a day when the children of men shall esteem my words as naught and take many of them from the book which thou shalt write, behold, I will raise up another like unto thee; and they shall be had again among the children of men—among as many as shall believe” (Moses 1:41).

Restoring Original Text

A common early explanation for the JST is the restoration of lost, original text. Building upon the teachings found in the Book of Mormon of plain and precious things being removed from the Bible by the “great and abominable church” (see 1 Ne. 13:26–29, 32, 34), many looked at the JST as remedying this corruption. Robert Millet, emeritus dean of religious education at BYU, is one proponent for the possibility of the JST restoring ancient text (while also acknowledging that some changes were commentary or harmonization).

I believe that as a divinely called translator and restorer, Joseph Smith also (1) restored that which was once recorded but later removed intentionally; or perhaps even (2) reconstituted that which occurred or was said anciently but never recorded by the ancient arbiters. To doubt either the Prophet’s intentions or abilities with regards to the Bible is to open the door unnecessarily to other questions relative to the books
in the canon of scripture, Joseph the translator of the Book of Mormon and the recipient of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants was the same man called and empowered as a translator of the Bible.\(^3\)

However, skeptics of this perspective question why so much would be taken away from ancient manuscripts when the usual scribal change is the addition of new material. Furthermore, since the time of Joseph Smith ancient manuscripts have been discovered, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which show they are not that drastically different from later transmitted manuscripts that became the basis for the traditional received text (of course there is a significant chronological gap backward from the Dead Sea Scrolls to an autograph copy, so we do not what changes may have occurred then).

Robert Matthews, one of the first Latter-day Saint scholars to do significant work with the JST, does not view every JST reading as a restoration of lost material but concurs with the restoration of at least some ancient texts through the JST and other restoration scripture: “The plain and precious missing parts have not yet been made known through manuscripts and scholars, but are available only through the Book of Mormon, the Joseph Smith Translation, and modern revelation through the instrumentality of a prophet.”\(^4\)

Kevin Barney studied the variants among ancient manuscripts and compared them with the JST to see if there was any correlation among them that could explain the restoration of ancient text.\(^5\) In the search for possible candidates as sources of restoring ancient textual material, he examined fifteen JST passages for which an ancient text offers a parallel not reflected in the KJV. Barney concludes that the JST seems to harmonize contradictions and rectify perceived doctrinal difficulties rather than restore the original text, so in the sample he examined there are no parallel ancient variants that we have for a majority of the JST readings. For example, in the Lord’s Prayer, the JST follows the more doctrinally palatable “let us not be led unto temptation,” rather than “lead us not

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into temptation” (Luke 11:4), which can be read literally as God leading us into temptation. Barney thus proposes “that this does not mean that the JST cannot be regarded as an inspired ‘translation’ in the sense of a paraphrase or interpretation of Joseph Smith’s exemplar, the King James Version of the Bible. In fact, this may be the most promising approach to understanding the JST from a believer’s perspective.”

**Inspired Commentary**

Rather than specifically restoring original text, many view the JST as an inspired commentary by Joseph Smith. This notion looks at examples where there could be explanations, clarifications, and theological discussion about biblical passages without resorting to the claim that these expansions were on original manuscripts. As Richard Lloyd Anderson stated, “One may label this as ‘translation’ only in the broadest sense, for his consistent amplifications imply that the Prophet felt that expansion of a document was the best way to get at meaning. If unconventional as history, the procedure may be a doctrinal gain if distinguished from normal translation procedure, for paraphrase and restatement are probably the best way to communicate without ambiguity.” Jeffrey Bradshaw and David Larsen propose, “We think it fruitless to rely on JST Genesis as a means for uncovering a Moses Urtext. Even if certain revelatory passages in the book of Moses were found to be direct translations of ancient documents—as was, apparently, D&C 7—it is impossible to establish whether or not they once existed as an actual part of some sort of ‘original’ manuscript of Genesis. Mormons understand that the primary intent of modern revelation is for divine guidance to latter-day readers, not to provide precise matches to texts from other times.”

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7. Even though the JST may have been an opportunity for Joseph Smith to give prophetic commentary and explanation, it was not only in the JST that this happened. During the process of preparing the JST, many separate, additional revelations were received and later included within the Doctrine and Covenants. Thus, the JST was a seedbed for further revelation, but not all these revelations were included as part of the biblical revision per se.


A recent claim is somewhat related: that some of the JST may be an inspired commentary on a commentary. Thomas Wayment and Haley Wilson-Lemmon examined contemporary biblical commentaries of Joseph Smith’s day. They claim to have found two hundred to three hundred examples of borrowing from Adam Clarke’s *Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments*, a primary Methodist theological resource for two centuries. They see this as reflecting an “academic interest” by Joseph Smith to update the biblical text, using the “best books” available and relying on the commentary “for matters of history, textual questions, clarification of wording, and theological nuance. . . . Our preliminary impression is that Smith was especially inclined to follow Clarke’s commentary in instances where Clarke drew upon manuscript evidence or language expertise. . . . This new evidence effectively forces a reconsideration of Smith’s translation projects, particularly his Bible revision, and how he used a scholarly source while simultaneously melding his own prophetic inspiration into the resulting text.” Wayment elsewhere concludes that “there are no parallels to Clarke between Genesis 1 and Genesis 24. But when we start to get to Matthew, it’s very clear that Adam Clarke has influenced the way he changes the Bible.” These findings can also affect the issue of JST’s canonical or nearly canonical status. “With some of the changes that Smith introduced into the text of the Bible resulting from academic sources, albeit modified and altered, the question arises as to whether the changes that arose via Clarke would have the same claim to canonicity that the longer revelatory insertions might have.”

Was It Ever Finished?

Although the bulk of the work for the JST occurred in the early 1830s, that was not the end of Joseph Smith working with the text. Since it was not published at the time he first worked through the entire Bible, Joseph Smith continued to make revisions to the manuscripts up until his death in 1844.14 We also have evidence that when Joseph Smith left the Old Testament to work on the New Testament and then returned to the Old Testament, he picked up a little before where he had left off so there was some overlap in the material being revised for the JST. In the overlapping material, the translation was not identical. However, “perhaps the most significant discovery in the duplicate translations is the fact that in the majority of cases in which substantive content was added to the text, similar information was added in both of the new translations. . . . We see that in both translations the Prophet added the same thought, yet he rarely expressed that thought in the same words, and sometimes it was not even inserted at the same location in the text.”15

As another example of not having the exact wording given to Joseph Smith, Robert Matthews described Joseph Smith’s process of working through the text and then making revisions as follows:

In the face of the evidence it can hardly be maintained that the exact words were given to the Prophet in the process of a revelatory experience. Exact words may have been given to the mind of the Prophet on occasion, but the manuscript evidence suggests that generally he was obliged to formulate the words himself to convey the message he desired. Consequently, he might later have observed that sometimes the words were not entirely satisfactory in the initial writings. They may have conveyed too much or too little. Or they may have been too specific or too vague, or even ambiguous. Or the words may have implied meanings not intended. Thus through (1) an error of recording, (2) an increase of knowledge, or (3) an inadequate selection of words, any passage of the New Translation might be subject to later revision.16

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14. For a succinct summary of sources that deal with the issue of whether the JST was ever finished, see Flake, “Translating Time,” 502 n. 19.
Kent Jackson strongly feels that Joseph Smith did indeed finish his JST project. “A misconception that survived among Latter-day Saints for over a century and a half is that Joseph Smith never finished his Bible translation. A more recent misconception is that he continued to make modifications to it until the end of his life. Neither of these ideas is true. The evidence is clear that in July 1833 Joseph Smith finished his revision of the entire Bible, and he considered it ready to go to press either then or shortly thereafter.”

Joseph Smith wrote to Saints in Missouri that they had finished translating the scriptures and from then on never “talked or wrote of translating the Bible but of publishing it.”

**Canonical Status**

When the major body of the Saints followed Brigham Young west, the manuscripts stayed near Nauvoo with Emma Smith and later passed down through her family until they became the property and stewardship of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ). There grew among the Saints in the West not only a geographic distance from the JST but a theological or canonical one as well. There arose uncertainty whether the RLDS publications of the JST were accurate printings of Joseph Smith’s original manuscripts. During this period of uncertainty toward the JST, it is noteworthy that many major Latter-day Saint works, such as James E. Talmage’s *Jesus the Christ*, ignored the JST outside of the Pearl of Great Price and any possible changes or insights this translation may have provided.

It was not until the efforts of Robert Matthews in the 1960s, about one hundred years after the first publication of the JST by the RLDS community, that access was granted to him, a scholar from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to compare the RLDS publications with the original manuscripts. It soon became evident that, by and large, the publications had been accurate to the original manuscripts. Yet it has still taken some time to overcome the stigma of the JST among the Latter-day Saint community, who for over a century had looked upon the JST with suspicion at best. That sentiment continued to change with the Church’s publication of the scriptures in 1979, which includes

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18. Jackson, “Joseph Smith Translating Genesis,” 24. Jackson goes on to argue that later modifications to the text were primarily done by others. See 24 n. 34.
an appendix of changes the JST makes to the biblical text as well as many footnotes throughout the biblical text of smaller changes. Yet even with all these additions to the Latter-day Saint–published Bible, not all the JST is included, and one has to go to separate publications to find complete lists of JST changes. This omission of all JST changes of course raises the question of why not all changes were included within the new scriptures and who determined what should be included or excluded.\textsuperscript{19} Are those changes published in the Latter-day Saint Bible considered canonical? If so, what about those excerpts not published in the Latter-day Saint Bible? The JST additions within the new scriptures were never voted on or sustained by the Church membership as part of the standard works, although the JST presence in this significant scripture publication not only aids in accessing the JST additions but points toward an acceptance as scripture by the leadership of the Church, just without addressing how far their authoritative nature goes.

One of the more recent semiofficial statements regarding the authoritative status of the JST is briefly laid out in the Guide to the Scriptures: “Although it is not the official Bible of the Church, this translation does offer many interesting insights and is very valuable in understanding the Bible. It is also a witness for the divine calling and ministry of the Prophet Joseph Smith.” The entry also addresses the lack of completion of the JST project: “Although Joseph completed most of the translation by July 1833, he continued until his death in 1844 to make modifications while preparing a manuscript for publication. Though he published some parts of the

\textsuperscript{19} A committee of Church leaders and scholars oversaw a seven-year project to produce an edition of the King James Version with Latter-day Saint study aids and notes, including excerpts from the JST. “The work was commissioned by the First Presidency, who appointed a Bible Aids committee to oversee the project. This committee (later called the Scriptures Publications Committee) consisted initially of Thomas S. Monson, Boyd K. Packer, and Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Ashton was later given another assignment and Bruce R. McConkie was appointed. The committee called scholars, editors, and publication specialists from Brigham Young University, the Church Educational System, and Deseret Book Company to prepare Latter-day Saint–oriented aids to help readers better understand the King James text.” William James Mortimer, “LDS Publication of the Bible,” in \textit{Encyclopedia of Mormonism}, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:110. While this general description explains the Bible project as a whole, there is not specific information given for why or who selected the six hundred passages of the JST. Presumably, they were selected because the JST affected the reading or doctrinal understanding of some verses more than others, where a word or two was simply modified without as much doctrinal significance.
translation during his lifetime, it is possible that he would have made additional changes had he lived to publish the entire work.”

It is generally recognized that the portions of the JST in the Pearl of Great Price are considered officially canonized as part of the standard works of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But there is still an open question as to why these particular passages found in the Pearl of Great Price were selected and not others. Were they simply the earliest ones available to the missionaries in England who first published them, or is their more expansive nature indicative of revelation more so than later selections of the JST where often only a word here or there was changed?


21 Kent Jackson explained the process in the following manner: “In 1851, Elder Franklin D. Richards of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was serving as president of the British mission in Liverpool. Sensing a need to make available for the British Saints some of Joseph Smith’s revelations that had been published already in America, he compiled a mission pamphlet entitled The Pearl of Great Price. His intent was that his ‘little collection of precious truths’ would ‘increase [the Saints’] ability to maintain and to defend the holy faith’ [from the preface]. In it he included, among other important texts, excerpts from the Prophet’s New Translation of the Bible that had been published already in Church periodicals and elsewhere: the first five and one-half chapters of Genesis and Matthew 24. Elder Richards did not have access to the original manuscripts of the New Translation, and the RLDS Inspired Version had not yet been published. For the Genesis chapters, he took the text primarily from excerpts that had been published in Church newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s. But those excerpts had come from OT1 and did not include Joseph Smith’s final revisions that were recorded on OT2. . . .

“In the late 1870s, the decision was made to prepare the Pearl of Great Price for Churchwide distribution at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City. Elder Orson Pratt of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was assigned to prepare the edition, which was published in 1878. Knowing that Joseph Smith had made later corrections to the New Translation, Elder Pratt drew the Genesis chapters not from the original manuscripts of the New Translation, and the RLDS Inspired Version had not yet been published. For the Genesis chapters, he took the text primarily from excerpts that had been published in Church newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s. But those excerpts had come from OT1 and did not include Joseph Smith’s final revisions that were recorded on OT2. . . .

“The Genesis text in the 1867 Inspired Version, though more accurate than the Liverpool version of 1851, was not always consistent with Joseph Smith’s intentions. The RLDS publication committee apparently did not understand the relationship between OT1 and OT2 and excluded a significant number of the Prophet’s corrections from the Inspired Version. As a result, our Book of Moses today still lacks important corrections that were made by Joseph Smith.
Some Latter-day Saint scholars feel that since the JST was a project undertaken by a prophet at the direction of the Lord, then all of it should be treated as canonical. In one of the most significant projects covering the manuscripts of the JST, *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts*, an appeal is repeatedly made to accept the JST in its entirety because of its revealed nature and continual inspiration under the direction of the Lord. Perhaps one of its strongest statements invites members of the Church to accept it as they do other scriptures. “Because the Lord revealed the Joseph Smith Translation for the salvation of His elect, Latter-day Saints can embrace it as they do the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price.”22

Yet others advocate for a partial acceptance of the canonical status of the JST. Royal Skousen, for example, points out that there are many issues with the JST that need to be considered before one could accept it in its entirety. In sum, Skousen states, “It is a mistake, I believe, to automatically assume that every change in the JST is inspired or that the final version is in its entirety a revealed text. I myself believe that the long non-canonized additions to the biblical text are the most valuable and could well be revelatory, while the minor changes that involve altering simply

“In the October 1880 general conference, the new Pearl of Great Price was presented to the assembled membership for a sustaining vote and was canonized as scripture and accepted as binding on the Church. Since then, the Pearl of Great Price has been one of the standard works, and the few chapters of the Joseph Smith Translation in it (the book of Moses and Joseph Smith—Matthew) have been recognized not only as divine revelation—which they always were—but also as integral parts of our scripture and doctrine.” Kent P. Jackson, “How We Got the Book of Moses,” in *By Study and by Faith: Selections from the “Religious Educator,”* ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 143–44.

22. Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 11. See another statement supporting the JST’s completion and readiness to be used on page 7, and again with one disclaimer regarding later editorial work on page 8: “Although the inspired work of translating had been completed by Joseph Smith as far as was intended, the text was still in need of some editing when he died.” For a more recent defense of the completion of the JST, specifically addressing whether Joseph Smith considered it finished or whether he continued to work on it until the end of his life, see Kent Jackson, “How We Got the Joseph Smith Translation, the Book of Moses, and Joseph Smith—Matthew,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities, Vol. 1,* ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and others (Orem, Utah: The Interpreter Foundation, 2021): 84–85.
a word or a phrase more often indicate a human reaction to perceived
problems in the biblical text.”

The Community of Christ seems to have mostly now rejected the JST.
A statement by its former president, W. Grant McMurray, is illustrative:
“It is time to identify it [the JST] properly as a product of Joseph Smith’s
fertile and creative mind. I have not preached from it for decades. There
are many fine versions available based on current scholarship and with
poetic and literary power. The Inspired Version [JST] should have no
standing as an authoritative Biblical version for the church.”

Conclusion

In reviewing statements about the JST from various perspectives, it
becomes evident that many questions still surround this significant proj-
et. There are different views of the JST’s main purpose and its relation
to the biblical text. Were the changes Joseph Smith made in his transla-
tion (1) restored text from original manuscripts, (2) material reflective
of historical experiences, or (3) modern commentary and interpretation
for today? Some feel the JST was finished to the point it is worth using,
while others note its lack of publication during Joseph Smith’s life. Its
canonical status continues to be debated from accepting it in its entirety
to rejecting it as authoritative and rather as reflecting Joseph Smith’s
creativity and thought. While we may not have all the answers to these
questions, it is apparent that the JST has had and will likely continue to
have an important impact on Latter-day Saint theology and interaction
with the biblical texts.

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23. Royal Skousen, “The Earliest Textual Sources for Joseph Smith’s ‘New Transla-
tion’ of the King James Bible,” FARMS Review 17, no. 2 (2005): 469–70.
24. W. Grant McMurray, “‘Something Lost, Something Gained’: Restoration History
and Culture Seen from ‘Both Sides Now’: 2006 Sterling M. McMurrin Lecture,” John
Is the Bible Reliable?

A Case Study: Were King Josiah’s Reforms a Restoration from Apostasy or a Suppression of Plain and Precious Truths? (And What about Margaret Barker?)

Eric A. Eliason

The Bible’s Reliability for Latter-day Saints

The eighth article of faith proclaims, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.” This statement by itself suggests that the Bible as we have it may or may not be fully and reliably the word of God. In 1 Nephi 13:28, we read, “Many plain and precious things [were] taken away.” This passage more expressly indicates that the Bible we have now is indeed not as complete as originally intended. Joseph Smith elaborated on this theme with his statement that “ignorant translators, careless transcribers, or designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.” Nevertheless, Elder M. Russell Ballard reminded us that “we believe, revere, and love the Holy Bible. We do have additional sacred scripture, . . . but it supports the Bible, never substituting for it.”

Latter-day Saints fully accept the Bible as scripture while acknowledging that there may be problems within. Traditionally, few Latter-day Saint authors have ventured to point to specific passages of the received text that should be seen as corrupted or in error, even though the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith seem to clearly indicate that such sections exist, somewhere. Over the last few decades, however, some Latter-day Saints have believed they have identified a prime suspect for a corrupt section of the Bible. Other Latter-day Saint scholars are by no means


convincing. The part of the Bible in question is 2 Kings 22 and 23, which discuss King Josiah’s reforms. While not the most famous Old Testament story in Sunday School, this section is seen by Bible scholars as highly relevant to understanding why and how much of the Old Testament took its shape, emphasis, and main themes. This essay considers the case both for and against this part of the Bible’s reliability and considers multiple ways Latter-day Saints have responded to it.

Josiah’s Reforms: What Is in Them for Latter-day Saints?

Once every four years, the Old Testament: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual drew our attention to King Josiah and the reforms he initiated after temple priests showed him a scroll of forgotten scripture found during a renovation of the Jerusalem temple. The lesson presents a mostly conventional Christian reading of this episode that includes some elements of particular interest to Latter-day Saints. The scroll adjured Israel to worship YHWH alone and stamp out idolatry and any sacrificial practice outside of Jerusalem. To avert the punishments the scroll promised those who forgot the Lord, a highly anxious Josiah sprang into action, purging the Jerusalem temple of idols and shutting down all other sacrificial high places around his kingdom. The Bible even records him stamping out child sacrifice (see 2 Kgs. 22:13–20; 23:3–25). It is easy to see how this seemingly straightforward story of a long-hidden work of scripture emerging to clear away the detritus of apostasy and reinstate true religion might have some special appeal for Latter-day Saints.

However, for many Bible scholars and some Latter-day Saints, this episode is hardly simple, straightforward, or of minor significance. Rather, it is pure dynamite—an obfuscating one-sided account that raises tantalizing questions and requires an against-the-grain reading to uncover what really happened. Is it not a little suspicious that the scroll commands eliminating all potential rival worship sites and that all sacrifices and donations now need to be brought to one place only—the Jerusalem temple administered by, ahem, the same priests who just so happened to find the scroll? And what to make of King Josiah’s counsel that the priests’ temple restoration work not be closely monitored, just before those same

4. The New English Translation renders 22:7 as follows: “Do not audit the foremen who disburse the silver, for they are honest.” In this translation, it is Josiah, not the Lord or the Bible narrator, saying they are honest.
priests produce their ostensibly forgotten scroll (2 Kgs. 22:7–8)? Was Josiah’s anguished rending of his clothing genuine (2 Kgs. 22:11), or was this just a showy diversion from his plot, in cahoots with corrupt priests, to consolidate power and set in motion a long process of controlling the writing and editing of scripture to suppress ancient beliefs and practices by means of promoting a fraudulent scroll to justify his actions?5

And what exactly were those beliefs and practices to be purged from the temple and Israelite worship? Archeology and scattered textual evidence in the Bible—not fully expurgated by Josiah’s uncompromising and long-enduring monotheistic movement—suggest a more plural, even familial, divine conception of a high god accompanied by a consort goddess (or wife), a son who was also a god, and a council of gods.6 Here, it begins to become clear how Latter-day Saints might also get excited about this alternate view of Josiah, even though secular scholars would likely emphasize the differences between these ancient Israelite concepts and current Latter-day Saint understandings of Mother in Heaven, Jesus Christ, and a divine council. But are these concepts close enough to ancient understandings to be some of the “plain and precious things” taken from the Bible that we read about in the Book of Mormon (1 Ne. 13:28)? Joseph Smith famously claimed, “Designing and corrupt priests have committed many errors.”7 Has modern Bible scholarship now identified who some of those corrupt priests were? If so, the Sunday School manual’s section on Josiah might need some updating.

In its broad strokes, and minus the interspersed Latter-day Saint reactions, the power-play scenario laid out above is a mainstream scholarly understanding of Josiah and his reforms. Scholars think the “found scroll’s” content is today known as the book of Deuteronomy and that the monotheist spirit of Josiah’s reforms has colored large swaths of the Hebrew Scriptures—retconning accounts of events from long before,

5. For an overview of this episode’s relevance to understanding the Old Testament in the minds of Bible scholars see Richard Elliott Friedman, “In the Court of King Josiah,” in Who Wrote the Bible? (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 85–99.


and continuing long after, his reign. Josiah might not be the most well-known Sunday School story, but for scholars of Hebrew scripture, his is an important, if not the most important, story in understanding who wrote the Old Testament, how its overarching editorial and narrative goals were established, how it was compiled, who compiled it, and why. But do Latter-day Saints really want to embrace this scholarly understanding? After all, secular scholars calling a long-hidden, but newly revealed, scripture a self-serving fraud is an accusation with which we are all too familiar. But on the other hand, might scholars have provided an explanation for “God the Son’s” relative absence from the Old Testament when he is omnipresent in the pre-Christian era parts of the Book of Mormon? It is easy to see how Latter-day Saints might see both things to like and things to suspect in both the traditional and scholarly understandings of Josiah and his reforms.

Some Latter-day Saint scholars—mostly in disciplines other than biblical studies—have gone even further than the mainstream understanding on Josiah by eagerly embracing the work of the prolific maverick Methodist Bible scholar Margaret Barker. As a significant influence on well-read Latter-day Saints’ reception of Josiah, she deserves some special attention. Barker suggests that some Jews managed to preserve the old understandings of God’s wife and son in hidden or underground form for hundreds of years after Josiah’s attempts at suppression. She further claims that before his reforms, a Melchizedekian priesthood was better known and seen as legitimate alongside, and probably over, the Josiah-favored temple priests’ lineage-based authority after the order of Aaron. According to Barker, pre-Josiah concepts still swirled in underground Jewish circles at the time of Christ—explaining how some Jews were primed to receive and accept Jesus as the Son of God. Others, who stood in the long also-vibrant tradition of Josiah’s reforms, were not.

It is easy to see how Barker’s books have found a considerable fan base among educated, perhaps even especially religiously conservative and educated, Latter-day Saints despite the books cutting directly, and perhaps uncomfortably, against the grain of the Sunday School manual and the idea that the Bible generally presents a reliable narrative. Unfortunately, it is hard to tell whether the limited and ambiguous nature of Barker’s evidence proves her point that ideas and practices were suppressed or whether this lack of evidence is evidence that they were never

there in the first place. She is often dismissed as a fringe figure in the biblical-studies field—including by professionally trained ancient scripture professors at BYU, who tend not to be her acolytes and rarely find her claims worth engaging. Even when what she says differs little from the mainstream take on Josiah, she is still often dismissed out of hand. This might not happen as much if she had a traditional academic appointment or was willing to subject her books to the peer-review process. These are baseline requirements to be taken seriously in academia, but should they be for the pursuit of religious truth, especially in the Latter-day Saint tradition? But neither does our Latter-day Saint faith tradition see reluctance to fully follow scholarly practices, in and of itself, as praiseworthy or evidence of reliability.9

Josiah, Margaret Barker, and Latter-day Saint Reception

To gain a fuller understanding of these divergent Latter-day Saint receptions of Barker, a closer look at Josiah and his aftermath is in order—as well as Barker’s take on it in particular. The religiopolitical action of Judean king Josiah in 622 BC, often characterized as a comprehensive religious reform, centralized power in the Jerusalem monarchy and priesthood. The core of Barker’s argument, made in various ways in her many books, is that Josiah’s reforms did irreparable damage to what she calls a “temple theology.”10 This temple theology was a unified outlook made up of a set of related themes that were, according to her, almost entirely excised from the Hebrew Bible by Josiah’s court and their successors. However, the core ideas were preserved in later noncanonical writings and kept alive by Christians who saw Jesus in and through the “ancient royal cult.”11 This theology is what Barker attempts to reconstruct through attention to Second Temple–period texts such as 1 Enoch, Jubilees, and Chronicles, and it includes other core ideas that attract Latter-day Saint attention, such as a once-orthodox divine feminine who was removed from the temple.

9. The discussion from here until the conclusory section was initially drafted by Cory Crawford, who has agreed to the use of his edited draft in this essay.
This is where Barker begins to go far beyond mainstream scholarship that shares her suspicion of Josiah but does not see much evidence of pre-Josianic religion persisting underground for centuries until Jesus’s day. Barker’s hypothesis allows her both to explain the absence of themes important to her and to create the space into which they can be inserted—or re-inserted, as she would have it—into the narrative. Barker’s work caught the attention of Latter-day Saint authors such as Noel Reynolds, John W. Welch, Daniel Peterson, and Kevin Christiansen, who seized on her notion of the alleged removal of temple ideas and motifs as evidence of ancient apostasy—a particularly pronounced moment of the removal of the “plain and precious things” alluded to in the Book of Mormon. Because of this particular interest, Margaret Barker has been a regular presence at Latter-day Saint scholars’ conferences and in their edited volumes. Still other publications by Latter-day Saint acolytes distill her work for a wider Church-member audience—generally with little skepticism.

Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History

To understand Barker’s work, one must first have a handle on both the history of Josiah’s reform and the compositional history of Deuteronomy and the historical narrative that follows it, which is known to scholars as the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua through 2 Kings, minus Ruth in the Protestant and Latter-day Saint canon). Literarily speaking, the book of Deuteronomy presents itself as Moses’s speech on the plains of Moab just before his death as the Israelites are poised to cross the Jordan River to enter Canaan. It recounts some of the stories from the Exodus and

12. Among her many publications and public addresses, see, for example, her remarks at BYU published as Margaret Barker, “What Did King Josiah Reform?” in Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 523–42. This volume also contains a chapter dedicated to her theory: Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” 449–522. For examples of the variety of her regular Latter-day Saint–organized conference appearances, see, for example, Margaret Barker, “Joseph Smith and Pre-exilic Israelite Religion,” in The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), 69–82; see also her various conference appearances at the Academy for Temple Studies conferences at https://www.templestudies.org.

13. See, for example, Kevin Christensen, Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2001).
wilderess wanderings, but at its core, and the apparent reason for its existence, is the legal material comprising chapters 12–26, which repeats much of the legislation given at Sinai in Exodus 20–23 but with some important differences that reflect a different historical setting of authorship. Because of a variety of textual indicators and their resonance with very particular historical situations, scholars argue that this legal material (Deut. 12–26) was in fact created in the time of Josiah as the basis of his religious reform.14

The Pentateuch did not then exist in its current form, and so the legal material in Deuteronomy was likely meant as a standalone version of Mosaic legislation—a recognizable but substantially modified version of the earlier “Covenant Code” (Ex. 21–23) that may have been in circulation before the Deuteronomic laws. According to 2 Kings 22:8–20, Josiah’s officials discovered the “book of the law” in the course of temple renovations and took it to the prophetess Huldah for verification of its authenticity. Since at least the 1780s, careful Bible readers have noted that the affinity between the specifically Deuteronomic laws—as opposed to the Covenant Code or priestly material—suggests that the 2 Kings narrative recounts the discovery of proto-Deuteronomy in the temple.15

The creation of Deuteronomy’s core of laws, which served as the stated justification for Josiah’s reform, was likely a response to Assyrian political and military intervention in the Iron Age Levant that had ebbed and flowed since the ninth century BC. Following Assyria’s conquest and annexation of the northern state of Israel in the eighth century, this empire had accepted Judah’s bid to become its vassal. In moments of royal transition or perceived weakness, Judah often made successive bids for independence. The most famous bid before Josiah’s time was that of his grandfather Hezekiah in 701 BC—a move that resulted in the destruction of Judean cities and very nearly Jerusalem itself. Assyria routinely forced its opponents into vassal treaties, which were formalized on tablets, some of which have been recovered archaeologically. One of these, the so-called Vassal Treaty of (Assyrian king) Esarhaddon (VTE) was even found on a podium in the “holy of holies” of a contemporary, though non-Israelite, temple at Tell Tayinat in modern-day...

southeastern Turkey. This suggests that even the biblical narrative of finding the law in the temple may have been intentionally evocative of an international diplomatic practice of the time.\footnote{16} Furthermore, the Deuteronomic legislation echoes the texts of such treaties, effectively creating an alternative to the VTE, or what one scholar calls a “counter-history,” whereby YHWH, not the Assyrian king, is the suzerain to whom the Judeans owed their loyalty.\footnote{17} The Deuteronomic laws were invoked to lay out a comprehensive religious and civic overhaul that included most aspects of public life, including civic and religious institutions.

Although the Deuteronomic project was disrupted by the early death of Josiah in battle, it seems to have lived on during the Babylonian exile and postexilic period, as its curators eventually added successive literary frameworks to make proto-Deuteronomy Moses’s recapitulation of the Exodus and Sinai events just before his death on the east side of the Jordan River. It was also probably at this point that the authors compiled and edited the subsequent history of Judah and Israel (that is, Joshua through 2 Kings) from sources available to them, weaving in stories of the legendary judges, kings, and prophets and adding commentary to evaluate these figures as obedient or disobedient to the injunctions prescribed in Deuteronomy.\footnote{18} These stories included the narrative of Josiah finding the “book of the law” in the temple and his reformative actions.\footnote{19} As best we can guess, they placed Deuteronomy at the head


18. Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza already observed in the seventeenth century that Joshua through 2 Kings utilized Deuteronomy as the primary literary lens through which to view the history of Israel. This eventually led to the twentieth-century theory by Martin Noth that a school of elites compiled the history under the influence of Deuteronomy, eventually known as the Deuteronomistic Historian(s).

19. There is a wide variety of argumentation over how to date the beginnings of the Deuteronomistic history. Some scholars see it as basically a continually updated narrative managed by successive kings, and others argue that it did not begin to be formed as a narrative until the exile or postexilic period. For an accessible presentation of these arguments, see Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds., \textit{Reconsidering Israel and...}
of this history, and then at some later point a different group, possibly exilic or postexilic priests, took this body of literature and attached it to the newly compiled narratives that we now know as Genesis through Numbers.

**Margaret Barker on Josiah’s Reforms and Their Aftermath**

Beginning largely with her 1987 monograph *The Older Testament* and continuing in her many subsequent works, Barker lays out what she sees as a dominant and coherent “temple theology” that went missing in the wake of King Josiah’s reforms. For Barker, Josiah’s actions had devastating consequences for “the” older religion of Israel. She argues that Josiah’s court effectively removed a system of worship that included, for example, apotheosis (humans becoming gods), the divine feminine (Asherah, Lady Wisdom, and the tree of life), a robust heavenly population of angels (or lesser gods), a veil theology, and YHWH as the son of El Elyon, the high god among many others. This older theology went mostly underground after the Exile, when she claims that the Deuteronomistic group returned from Babylon and came into conflict with those that had stayed behind in Palestine, who, according to Barker, had been keeping the older, and in her view better, traditions alive. At some point, Deuteronomists in the tradition of Josiah were able not only to purge Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history of this older theology but also to redact the entire Hebrew Bible, leaving only traces of the older religion in texts like Genesis 1:26–27, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: . . . male and female” (succinctly suggesting the plurality, bi-genderedness, and corporeality of gods), and Genesis 6:1–4, which speaks of the “sons of God” copulating with the “daughters of [humans]” and, according to one traditional interpretation, having superhuman male offspring. According to Barker, this older religion would mostly resurface much later, largely in noncanonical literature such as *1 Enoch*, *Jubilees*, and Qumran (Dead Sea Scrolls) literature, which Barker mines to reconstruct what she sees as lost temple concepts. *First Enoch* is of particular importance to Barker. Even though it postdates 1–2 Kings, she attempts to use its retelling of Kings to build the case that the Deuteronomistic reform was a “disastrous apostasy” that

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20. See Barker’s bibliography in “Publications History.”
removed these ideas almost entirely from the textual record. Barker claims the only way to reconstruct what was lost, then, is to extrapolate backward from these later writings.

Barker marshals this argumentation to juxtapose it with her second hypothetical reconstruction—namely, a temple-based Christianity, which she finds to be in complete harmony with her own reconstruction of pre-Deuteronomic Israelite religion. Note that this comparison deliberately circumvents mainstream Judaism, which she identifies by and large with the Deuteronomists. Among her arguments for why the temple is not more obviously a part of Christian texts and practice, especially in the New Testament, is one from silence. According to her, Christians only wrote down what was controversial and not what was generally accepted, and therefore she sees temple theology’s relative absence from the Christian canonical textual record as strong evidence of its presence in early Christian thought and practice. At this point, one might be reminded of the skeptical quip used to parody conspiracy theorists: “All of the evidence we don’t have agrees with us.” Conversely, one might also think of the orally transmitted nature of Latter-day Saint temple ceremonies from Nauvoo until the 1877 dedication of the St. George temple. Here a lack of available written records is indeed an indication of sacredness and importance.

Barker finds hints of the old temple ritual in Christian liturgy, speaking frequently, for example, of “the” Day of Atonement theology that is hidden at the core of the Eucharist—a theology that she reconstructs from an inventive reading of the letter to the Hebrews (particularly Hebrews 7:11’s quotation of Psalm 110:4 about being a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek) and not a little inference from Leviticus 16. She sees these connections not as Christians looking backward to Jewish texts in search of meaning but as a heritage carried forward in fragments by a reduced and marginalized tradition that left just enough traces to be pieced together by later close readers.

On the other hand, recognizing early Christians as temple-goers is not a Barker invention. Long before her work, Hugh Nibley synthesized

21. Margaret Barker, The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God (London: SPCK, 1992), 14. Note that she says explicitly that 1 Enoch sees the Exile and Restoration as the time in which “wisdom was despised and impurity installed in the temple,” but then she concludes that the period 1 Enoch was commenting on was instead the pre-exilic Deuteronomic reform.

evidence for early Christian temple worship. Terryl L. Givens wrote, “Luke records matter-of-factly a time when ‘Peter and John were going up to the temple’ to worship, and ‘there is an abundance of evidence,’ as S. G. F. Brandon writes, ‘that the Jerusalem Christians continued faithful in their reverence for the Temple and in their observance of its cultus.’”

Marcus von Wellnitz notes, “It appears obvious that the early Christians not only had their Sunday services, either in a Jewish synagogue or a member’s domicile, but also that they still retained the periodic visit to the temple and saw no conflict in the dual nature of their worship.”

Though much of what transpired in the temple at Jerusalem involved sacrificial offerings, the Temple Scroll discovered at Qumran envisions an eventual return to the temple’s ancient purpose: “the renewal of the covenant made at Sinai, i.e., the temple ordinances that were present before; from the beginning, the building was merely to accommodate them.”

In another move that has delighted her Latter-day Saint fans, perhaps the most important link Barker sees is the one between Yahweh and Jesus, both being understood by her as the son of the Most High, the anointed ruler-to-come lost in the rubble of Josiah’s apostasy.

Thus, Barker’s intense focus on Josiah, Deuteronomy, and the Deuteronomistic history derives from her larger project that is thoroughly and unabashedly a Christian enterprise. Her main objective is to connect Christianity to a First Temple uncorrupted by what would become the dominant strain of Judaism, and to do so she needs to be able to point to the moment things changed, when those temple elements were

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26. See Barker, *Great Angel*, for her fullest exposition of this argument.

27. This is not a criticism but an understanding of her work as less an attempt to understand the Hebrew Bible we have now on its own terms and more as an attempt to read between the lines to link it to early Christianity. Perhaps the most manifest confirmation of the overt Christian valence of her project is in her introduction to Barker, *Older Testament* — a work that suggests it might be about lost teachings of the Hebrew Bible but which consists mostly of a discussion of New Testament scholarship, because that is the background for understanding Jesus that she seems more interested in explaining than the history of Israelite religion.
lost to the record of both Israel and early Christians. She sees Josiah’s “reform” (she also calls it “alteration” and “apostasy”) as that moment, one which had cascading effects for the Hebrew Bible. Her stated goal is to root early Christian concepts about Jesus in a First Temple context, but one that must be recovered in order to make the connection. It is with that goal in view that she argues for a lost “temple theology” (hence “older testament”) that originally resembled something that the earliest Jewish Christians appealed to in order to understand Jesus, another conception that must also be recovered and reconstructed. Thus it bears keeping in mind that she is reconstructing not one but two theologies hundreds of years apart that she argues had once been dominant, remarkably similar to each other, but different from both Judaism and later Christianity.

Possible Reasons for Latter-day Saint Barker Enthusiasm

Before moving on to the reception of Barker’s work in the field of biblical studies, it is perhaps worth pointing out how the Latter-day Saint ground in which Barker’s work flourishes (even garnering a mention on her website) was primed to receive it. Many of the Latter-day Saint champions of her work point to aspects of the restored gospel that dovetail quite readily with Barker’s work, especially on issues where we are distinct from most Protestants: temple culture, apotheosis, the divine feminine, and apostasy. Barker’s Latter-day Saint champions see in her work a key to getting at hidden aspects of Israelite religion that Church members understand as having been current during the lives of Lehi and Nephi, the inaugural Book of Mormon prophets whose story is, remarkably, contemporary with Josiah’s reforms in late seventh-century Jerusalem.

Barker’s methods also evoke those of Hugh Nibley (1910–2005), the titan of Latter-day Saint apologetics and scholarship on the ancient world, whose influence is still strongly felt in Church circles. In many ways, Barker can be understood as filling the void left by Nibley (with the added benefit of her presumably nonpartisan Methodist affiliation). Her wide-ranging methods and prolific publications that resonate with

28. Barker, Older Testament, 5–6; see also Barker, Great Angel; and Barker, Great High Priest, among many others.

the Myth-and-Ritual school are similar to Nibley’s.30 Her assertion that lost temple teachings can be recovered piecemeal through creative readings of widely divergent texts and her skepticism of a discipline she claims has not properly understood its object of study in centuries of labor, may also remind readers of the late great Latter-day Saint scholar.31

Other affinities are worth pointing out. According to Kevin Christensen, Barker has remarked that she finds herself more comfortable outside academic institutions in order to “keep [her] academic freedom.”32 This may resonate with the demographic in which Barker’s work is most enthusiastically received—namely, among Latter-day Saint thinkers without doctoral training in biblical studies. This point is intended as an observation of patterns of correlation, not necessarily as a means of discrediting her work. She activates and invigorates a Latter-day Saint tradition of amateur scholarship (in the etymological sense of the word, as something that derives from one’s untrained passion rather than vocational expertise). Such thinking at the margins often yields productive conversations in a push-pull dialectic that can serve to refine and sharpen ideas and epistemologies.

There has not yet been a full critical response within Latter-day Saint circles that would take advantage of this dialectic.33 So far, Latter-day Saint scholars with doctoral training in the Bible and ancient Near Eastern religions seem to have mostly found it best to refrain from much comment on her work, leaving positive, uncritical attention to enjoy a heyday. This positive affinity is a double-edged sword, however, since

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31. See, for example, her claim in Older Testament, 1: “What I have done is select from a wide range of material sufficient to formulate a theory which brings together many of the problems of this field, and presents them as different aspects of a fundamental mis-reading of the Old Testament.”

32. Christensen, Paradigms Regained, 4. He does not provide a citation for this quote, instead calling in the footnote for the reader to “notice the simplicity of her solution.”

it leaves Latter-day Saint apologists open to the same critiques as those leveled at Barker’s work, to which critiques we now turn.

**Scholarly Critiques of Barker’s Work**

Many of Barker’s main points are actually fairly uncontroversial in biblical studies: that many Israelites were poly- or at least henotheistic; that this very likely included worship of a goddess (often Asherah); that Josiah’s reform cut against older, more decentralized traditions that were more widely distributed geographically; that the temple was theologically generative and its influence felt in a variety of narratives; that Enochic Judaism may have been a reaction to Zadokite Judaism; that some early Christians found meaning and identity in texts about the temple and still participated in its practices before its second destruction; and generally that Bible sources are products of particular schools with agendas and points of view and do not represent the full range of religious belief or activity in any given period. The Bible as it has come to us often manifests the hallmarks of theological disagreement and bears witness to struggles for priestly and prophetic authority. Where the discipline takes consistent and serious issue with Barker is in her methods, or lack thereof, that lead her to propose overly ambitious reconstructive scenarios, with the result that her distinctive conclusions have not made significant inroads in the field.

Reception of Barker’s work among biblical scholars can be summarized as appreciative of the general creativity of her readings but severely critical of the soundness of the evidentiary foundations on which she constructs her grand theological edifices, which are “undermined by serious problems of fact and method.” As eminent Enoch scholar George Nickelsburg puts it in his review of *The Older Testament*, Barker’s work “is repeatedly marked by two basic methodological flaws: the assertion that possibility is fact, and the assumption that a rhetorical


question will receive an answer that supports the author’s hypothesis.”

Similarly, H. G. M. Williamson, Emeritus Regius Professor of Hebrew at the University of Oxford, concluded that although Barker’s thesis in *The Older Testament* was creative, for her “absent or contrary evidence is the result of revision; fragmentary evidence testifies to what once was; material that might fit becomes strong evidence in favor, etc.”

More recently, Mary Coloe found *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* dissatisfying because “Barker’s process lacks solid argumentation, evidence, and a clear methodology. The work progresses by inference and an accumulation of text references without establishing the necessity that these texts be read intertextually. Statements are simply made without providing sufficient, and sometimes any, evidence in support. The accumulation of texts certainly suggests what Barker is proposing, but suggestion is not the same as evidence.”

Reviews also commonly critique her emendations of the Hebrew text to fit her objectives, her critically problematic dating of sources, and her citing texts without attention to their contexts.

At some level, all efforts to get to an earlier, “pristine” stage of belief are confronted with the same inherent problems and are open to the same criticisms—namely, how to determine, from later sources, what is a reemergence of a genuinely old tradition and what is the product of later syncretism and creative re-imagining; whether it is ever necessary to posit a hidden strand of theology that was not generated by other needs and forces; and how to determine what counts as “genuine”—on whose authority would this even be determined? And, finally, how to


prevent the anachronistic retrojection onto the past of one’s own outlook and assumptions about historical development.

Even with these critiques in mind, it is still not entirely clear that the rejection of Barker’s conclusions by her relevant scholarly community can be attributed *entirely* to her problematic methods. Might some of the reaction also stem from her own choice to stand apart from that community by not participating in identity-defining practices such as peer-review? And her conclusions are certainly strikingly revisionist in ways that threaten fundamental conceptions regarding both Jewish past and Christian beginnings. All these factors could well cause her to not be given the same benefit of the doubt enjoyed by other biblical scholars when they also sometimes propose broadly creative dot-connecting speculations as the most likely historical scenarios—which is often the case even in mainstream Bible scholarship when compared to other fields. But these observations only suggest a stretched room for possibility that there is space enough in our big complex world for her to be onto something. They in no way make it more likely.

**Implications for Latter-day Saints**

Latter-day Saint writers who ground their theology in Margaret Barker’s work open themselves to the charges of unsound reasoning leveled at her. Further, the minimal Latter-day Saint criticism of Barker’s work has also meant that many of her conclusions’ ramifications for our theology that do not fit so nicely with current Church practice and belief have gone unexplored.

For example, doing away with Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic history means understanding a major portion of the Hebrew Bible as historically suspect or outright unreliable. Since the reforms Josiah initiated are thought to have inspired generations of redactors who widely shaped the received text as it has come to us in our day, any suspicion of 2 Kings 22–23 is hard to limit to these two chapters alone and may open a can of worms bringing large swaths of the Bible into doubt. This possibility could be opened up by the eighth article of faith’s declaration that the Bible is the word of God “as far as it is translated correctly,” but it could also mean throwing out quite a few theological

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babies with the supposedly apostate bathwater. Are Church members really ready to label as ahistorical, even fraudulently apostate, virtually all of Deuteronomy and the major historical books of the Old Testament? Deuteronomy contains some of the fullest and most intricate expressions of bedrock theological ideas in the restored gospel, such as covenants and divine love, referenced approvingly by Jesus himself! “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (Jesus in Matt. 4:10, referencing Deut. 6:13). Following Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomistic historians articulated what Latter-day Saints may recognize as a “pride cycle” in Judges and identified faithful and unfaithful monarchs throughout 1–2 Kings—an approach that may have given rise to these themes’ prevalence in the Book of Mormon narrative.

A second point is that Barker’s interpretive practices require reading against the grain of scripture—a kind of “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which might splash over onto our reading of Restoration scripture. That is, in order for Barker to discover the lost temple themes in Hebrew texts, she must often adopt an antagonistic stance to the textual tradition she is examining. Must one also adopt such a contrary stance vis-à-vis the Book of Mormon in order to make it sing with temple themes? Does this mean that we should view suspiciously the prophet Mormon—whose editorial voice we hear throughout the Book of Mormon—as another Josiah who removed and suppressed such themes? Does the nonappearance, or at best minimal and much subdued appearance, of Barker’s “temple themes” (including Wisdom and the Goddess) in the Book of Mormon suggest that its authors were also victims of a suppressive editor’s hand, or that Joseph Smith as its translator inherited a post-Josianic tainted set of theological ideas?

Third, although Latter-day Saint leaders are sometimes enthusiastic about the existence of a Goddess—usually called Heavenly Mother or Mother in Heaven—few, if any, would encourage her worship as

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43. Daniel Peterson provides a Barker-esque reading of Nephi’s vision and proposes that, in fact, the Goddess may be a hidden presence in the Book of Mormon. Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25, 80–81. Peterson readily admits that the references are deeply cryptic and allusive, requiring much creative deciphering. His reading is by no means the plain and obvious meaning of the text for a modern reader, at least. But why is it not? Barker provides an answer for such subtle obfuscation—suppression and apostasy. Do we want to go there with the Book of Mormon composition process?
permissible within the mainstream Church.44 But this is precisely what Barker says was lost—not merely the knowledge of a Goddess but the removal of both her presence and the prayers and ritual worship activities directed toward her in the temple. Thus, championing Barker’s claim that the feminine divine was removed from the temple might be somewhat of a headscratcher coming from members of a Church whose temples are as bereft of Goddess worship as was, apparently, Jerusalem’s in the aftermath of Josiah’s reforms.

Although these issues might challenge our enthusiasm for Barker’s ideas, they also point to something more positive—Barker’s strong vision and prolific and provocative output have drawn Latter-day Saint scholars and laypeople a little bit deeper into engagement with the Bible, biblical scholarship, the study of Second Temple interpretation, and early Christianity. Reflecting on things overlooked in our reception of Barker’s work is an occasion to reflect on key points of our theology. The energy generated by her work among Latter-day Saints shows that, at least in some circles, these texts and ideas are not mere relics salvaged from the dustbin of history but remain vibrant sources of theological creativity for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Since many, if not most, Bible scholars would also invite us to counter-read the 2 Kings account of Josiah’s reforms, our community’s disproportionate focus on Barker still begs for further explanation. One reason may be that the biblical-studies consensus offers relatively few widely spread dots to connect and a few broad generalities of possible resonance with the restored gospel’s overarching historical themes of apostasy, restoration, plurality of gods, pre-Christian-era understandings of a savior Son of God, and possible corruption of the Bible. Barker’s work, in contrast, proposes vivid specific examples of details such as an ancient belief in a Mother in Heaven, a Melchizedek priesthood, Christ as part of pre-Christian era Hebrew religion, and a temple-focused earliest Christianity. She even proposes a specific instance of the removal

44. David Paulsen and Martin Pulido counted hundreds of references in official venues to counter the claim that no mention of Heavenly Mother is permitted. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, “‘A Mother There’: A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven,” BYU Studies 50, no. 1 (2011): 71–97. But beyond the mention of her existence, Latter-day Saints have by no means developed a robust theology of or set of ritual practices directed toward her—apart from the oblique attention paid to her in the occasional singing of the hymn “O My Father.” See Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” Hymns (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.
of “plain and precious things” alluded to, but not identified by Bible chapter and verse, in the Book of Mormon. Perhaps what she offers us is too good not to be true. But, perhaps unfortunately, that does not mean that it is.

Another reason for Margaret Barker’s enthusiastic reception may be her personal story’s more-than-passing resemblance to Joseph Smith’s—a solitary individual outside the scholarly establishment gathers together scattered ancient remnants, revitalizes marginalized themes, and restores them to their proper order to tell a coherent and compelling story of true religion lost, then found again. It helps too that the story Barker tells corresponds, on a number of key points, quite nicely with the one revealed through Joseph Smith. But we have Joseph Smith for this. Do we really also need Margaret Barker—especially if carrying water for her work might discredit Restoration truth claims by association?45

Bible scholarship, even at its most sober, is a field characterized by best guesses, tentative conclusions, and dot-connecting with far fewer available data points than most scholars would want. Not usually, but occasionally, the wildest guesses might jump up the plausibility scale with the help of newfound evidence. Barker’s thesis may someday get a boost of this variety. Or the truth may turn out to be something not best represented by either Barker or her critics. With or without her role in drawing our attention to it, the question of how to think about Josiah’s reforms remains a compelling one for thoughtful Latter-day Saints interested in the Bible as well as in its construction and reception.

45. The following story from the life of Elder Bruce R. McConkie provides an interesting illustration: “While returning from a conference assignment, he was reading [a book] while waiting for a plane and discovered some material by a sectarian scholar that harmonized perfectly with the restored gospel. As he boarded his flight, he met Marion G. Romney, then a member of the First Presidency, who was also returning from an assignment. He said, ‘President Romney, I have got to read this to you. This is really good stuff,’ and proceeded to share his newfound treasure. When he was finished, President Romney said, ‘Bruce, I have to tell you a story. A few years ago I found something that I thought was remarkable confirmation of Mormonism written by one of the world’s great scholars. I read it to J. Reuben Clark, and he said, “Look, Marion, when you read things from the great scholars of the world and they don’t agree with us, so what? And when you read something like that and you find they are right on the mark and they agree with us, so what?”’” Joseph Fielding McConkie, The Bruce R. McConkie Story: Reflections of a Son (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 252.
Nonbinary Interpretations of Josiah and Conclusions

Some Latter-day Saint scholars have eschewed binary approaches to the question of whether Josiah's reforms were good or bad, seeing the many themes of ancient Israelite religion, both before and after Josiah, as influences on the Book of Mormon. Grant Hardy sees, starting with Lehi and Nephi, an “unorthodox Deuteronomist” editorial tone throughout the Book of Mormon. On one hand, the text presents a straightforward Proverbs-style worldview where the wicked are punished with plagues, wars, and afflictions, while the righteous prosper—history being understood to show a repetitive cycle of repentance, prosperity, backsliding, punishment, and repentance. These understandings presumably continue from the time of Josiah and Huldah. In the Book of Mormon, there is little if anything similar to the book of Job’s depiction of severe afflictions besetting a righteous man (so God can win a wager with Satan!) or Matthew 5:45’s observation that God sends rain on both the just and the unjust. Second Nephi 28:8’s (along with Isa. 22:13’s) disapproving reference to the attitude of “eat, drink, and be merry” counters Ecclesiastes 8:15—another non-Deuteronomist section of the Bible—which seems to consider “to eat, and to drink, and to be merry” as one of several possibly valid approaches to life.

On the other hand, despite these Deuteronomist resonances, what makes the Book of Mormon’s editorial choices “unorthodox,” or even

46. “The [Book of Mormon] sees itself in continuity with the Bible—describing the same God, the same covenants, the same prophetic impulse and hope of redemption—and the basic story can be regarded as a sequel to the Deuteronomistic History.” Personal conversation with Grant Hardy, June 10, 2020. This theme also comes up in Hardy’s Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) and in his essay, “The Book of Mormon and the Bible,” in Americanist Approaches to the Book of Mormon, ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 107–35. “The book . . . adopts a Deuteronomistic perspective with a divine injunction that is repeated some twenty times: ‘Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper in the land; and inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments, ye shall be cut off from my presence’ (2 Ne. 4:4).” Hardy, “The Book of Mormon and the Bible,” 108.

47. The closest instance to something like this in the Book of Mormon may be the burning alive of blameless believers that Alma and Amulek were forced to watch (Alma 14). But the in-text interpretation brings even this horrific episode into a Deuteronomistic framework where the righteous are blessed and the wicked are punished. Alma 14:11 proclaims that the Lord ultimately received the faithful martyrs “up unto himself, in glory” into an afterlife of eternal happiness, and that he gave the wicked enough rope so that “the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just.”
counter-Deuteronomist, is the overwhelming presence of references to Jesus Christ as God and the Son of God. This grates directly against “orthodox” Deuteronomists’ militant monotheism. Lehi’s family seems not to have fully shared this particular point of the worldview ascendant in Judah in their day. This might explain some of Lehi’s persecution in Jerusalem at the time and stem, in part, from the less than fully monotheistic traditions inherited from their tribe of Manasseh ancestors who were, presumably, refugees from the Northern Kingdom’s fall to the Assyrians many years before.

Likewise, Julie M. Smith sees the tumultuous and contemporaneous-to-Lehi events of Josiah’s temple restoration and Huldah’s validation of the ostensibly recovered scroll as perhaps the most important immediate socio-religious context out of which the Book of Mormon narrative emerges. According to Smith, beginning with Lehi, the Book of Mormon seems in various ways to follow, counter, and react to these formative events throughout its many pages chronicling a long history. Smith wonders if Book of Mormon authors’ concerns about not only the importance of records but also of chronicling their chain of custody were set in motion by Lehi’s noticing around him the results in Judah of both having forgotten about a sacred record and the understandable suspicions that likely arose when a record suddenly appeared, seemingly from nowhere, claiming legitimacy. Smith proposes that “Huldah’s long shadow” may have influenced the portrayal of the Mulekites’ ignorance of the law and their own history and identity because they failed to preserve and remember scripture.

Perhaps Huldah’s shadow can also be seen in the book of Omni’s narrative devolution to reporting virtually nothing but the record’s chain of custody. As a response to suspicions about the provenance of Josiah’s “found” temple scroll, had “If you forget everything else, at least remember to record this record’s chain of custody!” possibly been drilled into record custodians’ minds since Lehi’s time? Smith also wonders if Josiah’s temple restoration events may have impressed sacred records’ importance so much on Nephi that he was primed to believe the command that “it is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” in the case of Laban’s withholding of the brass plates.


Smith also makes the case that the Book of Mormon’s lack of prophetic female voices can more reasonably be seen as evidence of a form of Nephite apostasy in the light of Huldah’s apparently well-established and highly respected role as a prophetess. The king came to her and not vice versa, apparently as she was the obvious person to authoritatively pronounce the scroll’s legitimacy and what to do about it. Smith wonders if Daniel Peterson might be onto something in interpreting Lehi’s vision as containing a restorative reference to a divine mother. And Smith proposes that, in Lehi’s mind, perhaps Josiah’s reforms were “fundamentally sound but slightly excessive” and that Lehi’s tree of life vision may have been a subtle “recorrection of Josiah’s overcorrection.”

Such nonbinary understandings may be a way out of the “what to think of Josiah” conundrum. A number of times in scripture, the Lord seems to command something that was not his first choice, or he institutes an order of things for humans that does not conform to an expressed ideal as closely as it might. For example, the Lord did not want Israel to have a king, for good reasons that Samuel explains (1 Sam. 8:10–18), but then he later not only allowed a monarchy but gave it his divine sanction—calling even troubled King Saul “the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam. 24:6, 10; 26:11). Doctrine and Covenants 19 suggests that the Lord may be countenancing an overreading of how the word “eternal” actually applies to afterlife punishment, since this understanding has proved useful in prodding people to repentance: “Wherefore it is more express than other scriptures, that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men” (D&C 19:7). Perhaps most famously, the law of Moses was reinterpreted in Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible as an ad hoc substitution for a higher, originally intended gospel fullness.

What all these scenarios have in common is the Lord responding to human weakness and imperfection. Might something similar have been at work with Josiah’s reforms? Perhaps God commanded (or just tolerated) them because they corrected some heinous aspects of the preceding situation. Yes, God has a wife. Yes, he has a son. Yes, in the heavens, gods are plural and familial as Joseph Smith later taught. But maybe these truths were just too easy for ancient Judah to confuse with the idolatrous religious beliefs of the surrounding societies that they were supposed to avoid. Maybe the Jerusalem temple practices in Josiah’s time were indeed too influenced by the pagan practices of other nations.

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Maybe what Judah needed, for a time, was to make a clean, even extreme, break to purify its practices. Maybe Josiah and his priests’ militant and uncompromising monotheism, “overcorrecting” as it might have been, was just the ticket. Yes, this monotheism might have made it harder to accept Christ as part of the Godhead later on, but at the time, Josiah’s reforms may have been solving a more immediate problem—like stamping out child sacrifice. Might this worthy goal have warranted the use of any ideology that could get the job done, even if the cost was oversimplifying more multifaceted truths for a time?

Whether or not anything like this scenario was the case, the understandings above are worth considering along with the traditional understanding of Josiah as righteous reformer; the prevalent scholarly view of him as an agenda-driven power consolidator/narrative reshaper worried about the Assyrians; and Margaret Barker’s view of him as a suppressor of a religion that was better, more beautiful, and more richly populated with divine beings. These various understandings are all full of wonderous ideas and potential resonances with the restored gospel. These possibilities are all worth pondering to our greater appreciation of how a multitude of possible Bible meanings might edify us and to revel in the mysterious ways of the Lord.

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Is the Song of Solomon Scripture?

Dana M. Pike and Eric A. Eliason

Many Latter-day Saint youth may have had their first exposure to the Song of Solomon in seminary or on a mission. “Tear it out of your Bible,” “Staple the pages together,” or “Write ‘DO NOT READ’ on the title page with your red scripture marker!” are variants of stories passed on about what seminary teachers or mission presidents have advised. Since such sensational admonitions are almost guaranteed to pique teenagers’ curiosity, they are presumably more alive in student rumors than in the actual practice of seminary and institute instructors or mission leaders. Such stories may be reactions to Bruce R. McConkie’s oft-quoted evaluation of the Song of Solomon as “biblical trash,” akin to verbal pornography. Yet nearly twenty years earlier Spencer W. Kimball had approvingly cited a verse from the Song of Solomon in an address entitled “Love vs. Lust”: “For love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire” (Song 8:6). With such variant considerations of the Song, it is easy to see how Latter-day

1. Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated in a 1984 address to Latter-day Saint religious educators that “the Song of Solomon is biblical trash—it is not inspired writing.” Bruce R. McConkie, “The Bible, a Sealed Book,” in Supplement: Symposium on the New Testament 1984 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984), 3; also available as Bruce R. McConkie, “The Bible: A Sealed Book,” in Teaching Seminary: Preservice Readings (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 127. Although McConkie was a Church Apostle at the time, his pronouncement is short of an official Church statement on the status of the Song.

Saints might wonder about the Song’s proper place in the canon of the restored Church.

To sort this out, it may helpful to look at the Song’s origin, content, and reception history. The Song of Solomon, now commonly called the Song of Songs (based on the opening phrase of the book), has been part of Jewish and Christian Bibles for about two thousand years. It primarily consists of words expressed between a male and female lover, metaphorically and suggestively describing and delighting in the joys of nature, each other’s bodies, and their physical attraction to each other. Although traditionally attributed to Solomon, most scholars reject Solomonic authorship, and even the Bible Dictionary of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints calls this “doubtful.” In reality, we do not know who composed this text, nor when it was produced. Suggested dates for the Song’s composition range from the tenth to the third centuries BC, but most scholars favor the later end of that span. Nor has there been unity of opinion on whether the Song originated as one composition or is a compilation of originally independent songs. Currently, most scholars view the Song as ancient Israelite love poetry that did not originate as sacred literature. This is because it lacks a religious focus, does not clearly contain the name of God, and shares several characteristics with other ancient Near Eastern love poetry, especially examples from Egypt.

Although at the time of Jesus there was a core of Israelite/Jewish books that were considered authoritative for all Jews (the Law and the Prophets, and some of the Writings; compare with Luke 24:44), uniformity had not yet been attained regarding all the books that eventually came to be viewed as canonical (authoritative for and binding upon all believers). The limited available evidence suggests that widespread acceptance of the Song as scripture was not achieved until the early second century AD, with Christian acceptance coming after that.

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Historically, most Jews and Christians have interpreted this book as an allegory in which the male lover was understood to represent Yahweh/Jehovah or Jesus Christ, with the female representing Israel, the Christian church, or the individual human soul. The Song thus represented their love and reciprocal desire for each other. It is not clear whether this allegorical approach with its spiritual focus preceded and allowed for the Song’s inclusion in the biblical canon (probably) or whether the allegorical-spiritual approach to the book arose later to justify its place in the canon (it certainly provided ongoing justification). James Kugel claims that anciently—when allegorical responses were taken much more seriously than they are today—the Song was drawn into the canon not because it was inspired, but by the force of its interpretation coming to be seen as inspired by God. One factor that likely influenced this interpretation is the husband-wife motif utilized in several prophetic books in the Old Testament, in which Yahweh/Jehovah (the husband) is bound by covenant to Israel (his wife). This motif continues in modified form in the New Testament, with Jesus as the bridegroom and Christians collectively as his bride.

However, not everyone in the past two millennia has been persuaded by this allegorical approach to the Song. So, in at least a limited way, Latter-day Saints stand in a long tradition of wondering about the Song of Solomon’s scriptural status. And if the question is reframed from “Is it scripture?” to “Is it appropriate for young unmarried people to read?” then Bruce R. McConkie would find himself in good ancient company—not only on the Song of Songs, but other scriptural books as well, especially Ezekiel. The canonical form of the Song itself may anticipate the

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7. See, for example, Isaiah 54:5–6; Jeremiah 6–14; Hosea 2:19–20; Matthew 25:1–13; Ephesians 5:25–32; Revelation 19:7–9; 21:2, 9 (in Revelation 21, the future holy Jerusalem and its inhabitants are depicted as the bride).

8. In a similar vein, the early Church father Origen reported that Jewish traditions warn against reading too early in one’s spiritual development the first few chapters of Genesis and Ezekiel’s florid, seemingly idolatrously anthropomorphization (Ezek. 1:4–28) and lewd metaphors for Israel’s unfaithfulness (Ezek. 16 and 23). But it is not entirely clear whether this rabbinic hesitancy has to do with concerns about youths’ general maturity or, specifically, fear of exposing them too early to sexuality. Jerome also believed this to be the case among Jews; however Jewish sources on this are lacking. For an examination of early Christian understandings of ostensibly Hebrew maturity-based Bible reading taboos, see Ed Gallagher, “You Can’t Read That Till You’re 30!” Our Beans: Biblical and Patristic Studies, Especially Dealing with the Reception of the Hebrew
dangers of its own reading when it twice counsels not to “awaken or arouse love before its proper time!” (Song 2:7, 8:4 ISV). Texts can be restricted because they are holy rather than profane; sexual intimacy is a sin outside of marriage but sacred within. Perhaps the first-century AD Mishnah contributor Rabbi Akiva had something like this in mind when, according to the Mishnah, he sought to refute those who questioned the Song’s value and canonicity with, “Heaven forbid that any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs is holy. For the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy and the Song of Songs is the holy of holies.”

Despite occasional questions about the Song’s canonical status and value, its place in scripture was generally stable until the 1700s, when some Western Bible scholars began to claim that it was not, at least originally, a spiritual representation of the mutual love between God and his people. However, most American religious leaders well into the 1800s still taught that it was. In July 1832, during his divinely directed efforts to provide inspired revisions to the biblical text (now called the Joseph Smith Translation, JST), Joseph Smith claimed, “The Songs of Solomon are not Inspired writings [sic].” What is lacking from Joseph Smith and from his contemporaries is any indication of the reason for this pronouncement. There has never been any official Church explanation of Joseph Smith’s comment or of the Church’s continuing view of

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9. We have admittedly cherry-picked the translation here. Many translations now read essentially like this International Standard Version (ISV) quote, but a few others, including the King James Version (KJV), render the abstract Hebrew form h’hbh suggesting letting the lover, rather than love itself, sleep until he or she is done sleeping. For a concise review of the translation issues involved here, see, for example, NET Notes, s.v. Song 2:7, n. 29.


12. The purpose of the plural “Songs of Solomon” in this JST statement is not known, if indeed it was intended to convey something specific. Perhaps Joseph Smith believed this song to be a composite of several songs, hence his use of the plural.
Is the Song of Solomon Scripture?

The Song, although one could postulate it has something to do with the sensual tone of the composition.

Deciphering the possible significances of Joseph's JST notation is complicated by the fact that Latter-day Saints have made various references to, and uses of, the Song over the following 140 years. In fact, variations of this phrase from Song 6:10, “fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners,” occur three times in the Doctrine and Covenants (5:14; 105:31; 109:73), with the latter two passages dating after the 1832 statement about the Song being “not inspired.” Baffled by this, Hyrum M. Smith and Janne M. Sjödahl, in one of the earliest Doctrine and Covenants commentaries, speculated that the uninspired Song was drawing upon some other now lost but truly inspired writing. This speculation resonates nicely with the Restoration theme of lost scripture and neatly preserves both the Song’s uninspired status and the legitimacy of its wording being in the Doctrine and Covenants. However, Smith and Sjödahl correctly admit this might be a notion too good to be true and alternately point out that there “is no reason why the Lord could not use [this language from the Song] in a revelation given to the Church in our own day.”

The Song of Solomon may also obliquely show up in Joseph Smith’s own exegesis as a student of Hebrew under Jewish professor Joshua Seixas (1802–74). Reading the latter’s Manual Hebrew Grammar for the Use of the Beginner may have encouraged Joseph to name his people’s place of gathering in Illinois Nauvoo from the Hebrew word navu (beautiful), occurring in the Bible only in Songs of Solomon 1:10 and Isaiah 52:7.

Furthermore, there were sporadic but ongoing mentions of the Song in official Latter-day Saint publications, including Young Women’s Journal (1897–1929), Improvement Era (1897–1970), and Relief Society Magazine (1915–70). References to and brief quotations from the Song occur in these periodicals in the context of comments on the Joseph Smith

Translation, on nature and the beauty of the earth, on literature, on self-improvement, and on the Bible and its books. For example, the February 22, 1934, edition of the *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* (published in England) under the heading “Auxiliary Guide for March” instructs that during the third week of March, the “Opening exercises” of Relief Society should include “selections from Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Songs of Solomon read to the class.” In the April 1959 general conference, Elder Henry D. Taylor observed in his address, entitled “Gratitude,”

Springtime is a glorious time of the year as new life begins to stir and the earth seems to awaken from its long winter nap. An ancient biblical prophet [the author of the Song!] has exclaimed:

“For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;
“The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle [meaning the turtle dove] is heard in our land.” (Song of Sol. 2:11–12.)

This awakening is reminiscent of the death and the resurrection of the Savior and we can appropriately dwell on the great debt of gratitude that we owe him for his atoning sacrifice.

Beginning in 1972, the Church undertook a major initiative to correlate all lesson materials and Church publications. This effort paralleled new access in the 1960s–1970s to the Joseph Smith Translation manuscripts in Independence, Missouri, which are owned by the Community of Christ (then the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). This led to the inclusion of notes with certain Joseph Smith Translation readings in the Church’s 1979 edition of the Bible. The development of Church correlation and increased official use of the Joseph Smith Translation appear to be major causes for the recent institutional ignoring of the Song of Solomon in official Latter-day Saint publications. Since the 1970s, references to the Song in Church publications and sermons have been very minimal and almost consistently

18. Henry D. Taylor, “Gratitude,” in *One Hundred Twenty-Ninth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1959), 56, second bracked phrase in original. This address was later published as “Gratitude,” *Improvement Era* 62 (June 1959): 446–47.
impart the Joseph Smith Translation claim that it is “not inspired.”20 (Notably, the Spencer W. Kimball quote in our first paragraph is from before this time.)

However, Latter-day Saints’ interest in the Song has not entirely waned. For example, both authors of this essay have published on it elsewhere.21 And some Latter-day Saints still read and enjoy the Song. For example, Ellis Rasmussen called it “worthwhile to enjoy [for] its beauty as romantic literature, complementary to the other great types of the literature of Israel.” He asserts that the Song’s identification “as ‘not inspired writings’ . . . does not negate or depreciate its value as romantic prose and poetry from a very literate people.”22

Ironically, the Song’s dubious status for Latter-day Saints has led to it enjoying a minor but special place among some Latter-day Saints for the curious issues it invites us to ponder. In a religion famous for additions to scripture, how does the institutional marginalization and folk-decanonization23 of a biblical book also help define what we mean by an open canon? What do we make of Joseph Smith’s short, cryptic notation in the JST, mentioned above, and its seeming similarities to the current scholarly consensus? If the Song was uninspired to begin with, why does its distinctive wording show up in several places in modern revelation and preaching? What of James Kugel’s contention that it is community acceptance into a canonical context and seeing a text’s use (as much as its creation) as inspired that can make a work of another genre into scripture? Might this enlighten our understanding of the

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20. Consider the witty observation from Boyd Petersen, “Landscapes of Seduction: Terry Tempest Williams’s Desert Quartet and the Biblical Songs of Songs,” Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 9, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 92: “that the Song of Songs is erotic love poetry probably would not have concerned [Joseph] Smith since he was not a prude, and, in fact, his teachings imply that sexual love is a divine gift. Whatever his motive was, Smith’s short notation has rendered the Song of Songs an impotent text within Mormonism.”


23. Our evidence here is anecdotal rather than systematic, but by “folk-decanonization” we mean that virtually every fellow Latter-day Saint with whom we have discussed this chapter is surprised that anyone in our faith tradition regards the Song as a scripture at all. In their minds it is simply not a legitimate part of the Bible.
Doctrine and Covenants, which contains many “thus sayeth the Lord”–style revelations but also high council meeting minutes (D&C 102), a follow-up letter on a doctrinal matter (D&C 128), a proclamation on rights and government probably penned by Oliver Cowdrey (D&C 134), and an editorial epitaph traditionally but unsurely attributed to John Taylor (D&C 135).\(^{24}\) Canonization seems to homogenize whatever previous genres a work might have been part of and invites readers to treat all sections equally as revelations, or at least as “scripture.”

With the special place of marriage in Latter-day Saint theology and the sacredness of sexual intimacy as underscored by talks like Elder Holland’s “Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments,”\(^{25}\) the content of the Song of Solomon may be ready for a transformation in Latter-day Saint reception from “scriptural pornography” to an appreciation of the Song, its beauty, and its value in its own right. (Emma Smith’s transformation from villain to hero in popular historical consciousness over a few short decades in the mid- to late twentieth century shows such things have happened.)

An avenue for such a reconsideration may have recently opened up. From 1979 to 2012, the Bible Dictionary in the official Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible described the Song of Solomon as “not inspired scripture.”\(^{26}\) This paraphrase was an overstatement of Joseph Smith’s actual notation and has been quoted frequently over the years, building an inaccurate impression that the Prophet directly claimed the Song was not scripture.\(^{27}\) Drawing on the critical work done by Joseph Smith Papers scholars, the 2013 scripture revisions restore the Prophet’s actual

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\(^{24}\) For the historical backgrounds of the sections referenced, see “Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, https://history.lds.org/section/revelations?lang=eng.

\(^{25}\) Jeffrey R. Holland, “Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments,” Brigham Young University devotional, January 12, 1988, accessed May 20, 2021, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland_souls-symbols-sacraments/. This address was delivered when Holland was president of Brigham Young University.

\(^{26}\) Bible Dictionary, in The Holy Bible (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), s.v. “Song of Solomon,” 776, emphasis added. Interestingly, in the same edition, a note accompanying the first verse of Song of Solomon reads, “The Songs of Solomon are not inspired writings,” as found in the actual JST manuscript.

wording of “not inspired writings.” This wording does not touch on canonical status directly but leaves open the possibility that the Song might nonetheless be scriptural—by inclusion in the traditional biblical canon and possibly by inspired interpretation, as James Kugel suggests.

Given this complex reception history as a whole, do Latter-day Saints consider the Song of Solomon scripture? This answer is based in part on the corollary question, What is scripture? The English word “scripture” derives from the Latin form scriptūra, “something written,” from the verb scribere, “to write.” When referring to the scriptures, it designates the authoritative writings containing divine words and will, as well as lessons and principles for a faithful life, produced by humans under the direction of the Holy Spirit (see, for example, 2 Pet. 1:20–21). Thus, believing Jews and Christians have historically referred to their written Bible as “scripture” or “the Scriptures.” For Latter-day Saints, the canon of “scripture” is larger: the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price. The Song of Solomon is thus in Latter-day Saint scripture.

However, Latter-day Saints bring an additional and different perspective to this issue. In 1842, Joseph Smith wrote, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly” (A of F 1:8). This qualification—“translated correctly”—seems to apply to transmission as well as to strictly translation matters. This provides a basis for understanding Joseph Smith’s decade-earlier Joseph Smith Translation claim. “Not inspired” indicates the Song does not contain the Spirit-communicated divine word, nor is it divinely intended allegory. It is not holy writ. Articles of Faith 1:8 has been used to support the Latter-day Saint belief that some things have been lost from, and corrupted in, the Bible. And this belief has, in turn, been employed to support the contention that the Song does not belong in the Bible, that its canonical status can be rejected. Thus, the spiritual intent of the allegorical interpretations of the Song can be (and have been) institutionally dismissed as authoritative even though they may have some value for some readers.

29. Compared to traditional Judaism and Christianity, Latter-day Saints have a larger canon, and one that is open to further additions. Additionally, Latter-day Saints have a further, less explicit concept of scripture. As stated in Doctrine and Covenants 68:4, whatever authorized missionaries, and presumably Church leaders by extension, teach “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will . . . the mind . . . the word . . . [and] the voice of the Lord.” This allows for a nonwritten or non-canonical dimension of “scripture.”
Even though there has never been a formal Church pronouncement on the status of the Song, the Joseph Smith Translation claim became de facto the official Church position, especially from the 1970s onward. Viewed from this perspective, it is fair to say that for current Latter-day Saints, the Song of Solomon is in the traditional collection of scripture, the biblical canon, but it is not institutionally regarded as scripture. Yet, as is fitting for an open topic, it should not be surprising if we cannot sum up the issue so neatly. It is after all the institutional Church that has never published an edition of the Bible without the Song of Songs and whose canonical Doctrine and Covenants significantly quotes it. And, by contrast, it is informally among some of the Church’s membership where the notion seems to exist that the Song should be literally torn from the Bible.

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Of the many unresolved issues facing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today, perhaps none has generated as much speculation and controversy as the question regarding where, exactly, the events recorded in the Book of Mormon took place. Beginning in Joseph Smith's lifetime and continuing to the present, scholars and interested members alike have offered a variety of possible locations for the more prominent places mentioned in the text, including the city of Zarahemla, the “narrow neck of land” (Ether 10:20), the river Sidon, and the site of the last battle between the Nephites and the Lamanites. Scores of books, articles, and presentations have taken up the topic, with adherents of different viewpoints pushing the limits of decorum at times in their interactions with one another. In recent years, many have turned to websites, blogs, and YouTube videos to make their cases, thereby eliminating the need to subject their ideas to scholarly peer review in order to gain an audience.

Rather than leading toward some sort of consensus on the topic, however, this free exchange of ideas and evidence has accompanied a virtual flowering of new and different propositions regarding the real-world lands of the Book of Mormon. Variations of the once-popular “Hemispheric” model, which envisioned the whole of North and South America as the setting for the book's events, have been joined in recent decades by more “limited” geographic models that see the book telling the story of a relatively small geographical area. Most prominent among the latter are the “Limited Mesoamerican” model, which places the book's narrative in southern Mexico and Guatemala, and the “Heartland” model,
which situates it in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys of the United States. Other suggestions include the west coast of South America, the Baja Peninsula, and even the Malay Peninsula or parts of Africa. Still others have suggested that the entire endeavor is a fool’s errand, as the destruction that reportedly accompanied Christ’s crucifixion so altered the book’s described geography as to make it unrecognizable today (see 3 Ne. 8). Remarkably, after years of research, discussion, and debate, the question of where the Book of Mormon played itself out is more wide open than it has ever been, with individuals from all walks of life and educational backgrounds weighing in on the topic.\footnote{For a brief review of proposed Book of Mormon geographies over the years, see Brandon S. Plewe, “Book of Mormon Geographies: 1842–Present,” in Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History, 2nd ed., ed. Brandon S. Plewe, S. Kent Brown, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard H. Jackson (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2014), 190–91.}

Like many other questions Latter-day Saints grapple with, this one has its basis in taking both Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon at their word. Both claim that the book is, in fact, a real history of real people who lived somewhere in the Americas hundreds of years before its European discovery in the fifteenth century. Smith’s account of finding the plates, protecting them from harm, translating them by means of a special instrument that had been buried with them, and finally showing them and other tangible artifacts to some of his close associates all underscore the physical existence of the record and, by extension, the people who created it. So, too, does the language of the book itself, much of which is written in the first-person voice of the ancient prophets who reportedly wrote and compiled it. In addition, hundreds of passages—at least 550 of them by one count\footnote{John L. Sorenson, “Mormon’s Map,” Maxwell Institute Publications 54 (2000): 6.}—discuss physical features like cities, villages, rivers, mountains, plains, forests, and seas, all of which fit into a remarkably internally consistent geography that serves as the backdrop for the movements, preaching, and warfare that make up the contents of the book. Neither Smith’s account nor the book’s internal claims, of course, can be seen as irrefutable “proof” that the Book of Mormon is real history, but they do bring its readers face-to-face with the question of the record’s authenticity. And for those who answer in the affirmative, the follow-up question of where, exactly, all these things took place is not an easy one to answer.

The essence of the problem is the simple fact that, with a handful of notable exceptions—all of them, such as Jerusalem and the Red Sea, in
the Middle East—none of the places mentioned in the Book of Mormon can reasonably be identified with real-world locations today at the exclusion of other possible locations. The exceptions are the “valley of Lemuel” (1 Ne. 2:14), “Nahom” (1 Ne. 16:34), and “Bountiful” (1 Ne. 17:5), all three of which are mentioned in the book’s opening chapters in a context that would place them in the northwest, southwest, and southeast reaches, respectively, of the Arabian Peninsula. Recent surveys of the area, combined with careful archaeological work and newly found inscriptions, have identified good candidates for each of these places, all of which are arguably consistent with the directions, distances, and descriptions given in the text itself.3

The situation is very different in the Americas, however. Here, a whole host of places have been identified for each of the major geographical features that made up the Nephites’, Lamanites’, and Jaredites’ home in the “promised land.” The difference between the two areas is a result of knowing where, precisely, the story begins in the Middle East and not knowing where it begins (or ends) in the Americas. With Jerusalem as a starting point (1 Ne. 1:4, 7; 2:4), and the Red Sea as a frequent point of reference (1 Ne. 2:5, 8, 9; 16:14), it is a relatively easy task to follow the early action in a general way through Arabia, even without the benefit of the recent finds. In contrast, we have no idea where in the Americas Lehi and his family landed after leaving the Middle East. Whether it was in North America or South America, on the Atlantic shore or the Pacific, is completely unknown.4 The only firm link between a specific location on the ground today and the Book of Mormon is the stack of plates Joseph Smith obtained from the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York. At best, such a link tells us only where Moroni, the ancient Nephite prophet who buried the plates, spent some time at some point after his people had been destroyed. It tells us very


4. While some have taken a short note in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams as a prophetic pronouncement indicating that Lehi’s family landed in Chile, careful analysis of the document has shown that it cannot be linked with any certainty to Joseph Smith. See Frederick G. Williams, “Did Lehi Land in Chile?” in Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 57–61.
little, however, about where he or his people had been prior to that. With places on two entire continents available to pick from—rather than a relatively limited area like the Arabian Peninsula—and with ambiguities in the text giving free reign to creative interpretations, it is little wonder that arguments can be made for a variety of areas throughout North and South America having served as the Book of Mormon’s setting.

While many researchers have overlooked it, the earliest effort to identify a specific real-world location with the events mentioned in the Book of Mormon appears to be a June 4, 1834, letter to Joseph Smith’s wife, Emma, written from Pike County, Illinois, “on the banks of the Mississippi,” as Smith was traveling to Missouri with Zion’s Camp. Purporting to be a letter “dictate[d]” by Smith himself, the letter recounts how he and his companions had been “wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally [sic] the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity.”5 A letter written the same year by Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps similarly identifies a North American setting for at least some of what happened in the Book of Mormon—in this case, New York’s Hill Cumorah, where Smith reportedly found the gold plates, as the site of the final battles of the Jaredites and the Nephites.6 Following the 1841 publication of John L. Stephens’s Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan,7 wherein Stephens vividly described pre-Columbian ruins of an ancient American civilization as advanced as that portrayed in the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saints close to Smith, and perhaps Smith himself, began linking places mentioned in the book with Central American sites as well. These and other sources suggest that Smith and his contemporaries eventually came to see Central America as the


6. Oliver Cowdery, “Letter VII: To W. W. Phelps, Esq.,” Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 1, no. 10 (July 1834): 158–59. Cowdery also identified this same hill as the site of the Jaredites’ final battles, as well as the place where other Nephite records, in addition to the Book of Mormon, had been buried (see Morm. 6:6).

center of Book of Mormon civilization, with sites in the Midwest and eastern United States coming into the picture toward the end of the narrative.\(^8\)

Following the lead of Orson Pratt, a more fully hemispheric Book of Mormon geography came into vogue in the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to this model, the southernmost reaches of ancient Book of Mormon lands—especially the “land of Nephi” and the city Zarahemla—were in northern South America, while the Isthmus of Darien was the book’s “narrow neck of land” that led into the land northward. New York’s Hill Cumorah, several thousand miles to the northeast, continued to be the Hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon where the last battles were fought. While some researchers continued to propound this model well into the twentieth century, others began to suggest the possibility that Book of Mormon lands were much more limited in extent. Although differing in the details of their respective models, proponents of the latter view believed that the events of the entire book, including the last battles at Cumorah, took place in a Central American context. By the mid- to late twentieth century, researchers favoring some variation of this “Limited Mesoamerican” model of Book of Mormon geography far outnumbered those adhering to the more expansive, hemispheric model that Orson Pratt had proposed a hundred years earlier.\(^9\) The fact that so few Native Americans had joined the Church in North America when compared to the numbers beginning to accept its teachings in Central America during the latter half of the twentieth century may have contributed to the increasing popularity of this model during this time. So, too, did the growing realization that the pre-Columbian Americas were home to a tremendous diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages and that the traditional assumption that the Book of Mormon was “the” history of “the” Native Americans failed to take into account the complexity of the cultural landscape. Seeing the Book of Mormon as an expanded and extensive “family history” of sorts, rather than as the history of an entire hemisphere, seemed a better fit for the evidence.

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By the 1980s and 1990s, David A. Palmer and John L. Sorenson had emerged as the new Limited Mesoamerican model’s most articulate supporters. Careful analysis of their research shows that their arguments hinged on two main points. First was their belief that the geographical descriptions in the text of the Book of Mormon itself absolutely require that the final battles of the Nephites and Jaredites took place relatively close to each civilization’s center near the “narrow neck of land” mentioned in the text. Second was their contention that the hill where Joseph Smith found the gold plates does not match the text’s description of the hill where the final battles took place.10 Building on this foundation, Palmer, Sorenson, and others have argued that only in Central America do we find all of the geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon occurring in a more-or-less limited area whose archaeological remains are consistent with the sophisticated level of civilization described in the text.11 The argument has perhaps found its ultimate expression in Sorenson’s *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book*, published in 2013.12

For all its popularity, the Limited Mesoamerican model is not without its critics. Even without having an alternative location in mind, some have questioned the argument that the Book of Mormon text requires a limited geography in the first place or a hill vastly different from New York’s Hill Cumorah as the setting for the final battles.13 Others have accepted the idea of a limited geography but have placed it in a North American rather than Central American setting. As with the Limited Mesoamerican model in its early phase, early proponents of this idea—first proposed by Delbert W. Curtis in 1988—varied in where, precisely, they believed individual geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon were located, but all agreed that the book’s narrative ran its course in a relatively limited area that included upstate New York. All agreed, too, that Joseph Smith’s Hill Cumorah was the hill of the Book


of Mormon’s final battles, while the Great Lakes served as the various “seas” mentioned in the text, and constrictions between the Great Lakes or the Finger Lakes answered to the book’s “narrow neck of land.” Each author also had the Nephites reaching the continent’s eastern seaboard by crossing the Atlantic, though they differed on where, precisely, the group had debarked.14

Given the momentum the Limited Mesoamerican model had at the time, several supporters of the North American model included reasons for rejecting a more southerly location for the Book of Mormon’s setting. For most, early Church publications by Joseph Smith’s close associates that identify the Hill Cumorah in New York with the Hill Cumorah of the book’s final battles have been key. If the two were one and the same, as people like Oliver Cowdery clearly believed they were, and a limited geography fits the textual and cultural evidence better than a more expansive one does, then a relatively limited area that includes upstate New York must be the setting for the book. For many, too, the prophecy that that the Nephites’ “promised land” would be a “land of liberty unto the Gentiles,” free from kings, bondage, captivity, “and from all other nations under heaven” (2 Ne. 10:11; Ether 2:12), is an important consideration because the United States seems to fit that description better than more politically unstable countries to the south.

Not surprisingly, the North American model has drawn a strong response from the Limited Mesoamerican camp. Questioning the underlying assumptions about the location of the hill Cumorah and the identification of the Book of Mormon’s “promised land” with the United States, supporters of a Mesoamerican location have argued that the region is a poor fit for the Book of Mormon’s internal geography and directions. They have also objected to it on archaeological grounds, contending that the archaeological record in the upper Midwest and Northeast simply doesn’t attest to a pre-Columbian civilization anything like that portrayed in the Book of Mormon, with its extensive agriculture, written language, and large population centers housing hundreds of thousands of individuals. Nowhere in the eastern half of the United

States, they concluded, do the book, the geography, and the archeology come together as well as they do in Central America.\(^\text{15}\)

As strongly worded as the criticisms against this North American model have been, they have done little to dissuade its supporters. Led by Rod L. Meldrum, proponents of the “Heartland” model, as it has come to be called, have responded to the critics’ objections by willingly and creatively adjusting their proposed geography to better match the descriptions in the text. Where the Mesoamerican model understands the text’s narrow neck of land to be an isthmus, for example, proponents of the Heartland model, noting that the text fails to explicitly mention a “sea” as the neck’s eastern border (see Alma 22:32), understand it to be a short stretch of ground between Lake Michigan—the text’s “west sea”—and some not-too-far-distant point to the east. Other adjustments include having Lehi’s party first landing in the vicinity of today’s New Orleans before moving north and east up the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, and identifying the Book of Mormon peoples with the relatively advanced, agricultural, mound-building Adena and Hopewell cultures that lived in those areas during Book of Mormon times. Less scrupulous about evidence than trained historians, scientists, and archaeologists might be, Meldrum draws on a variety of sources to offer real-world, visually compelling locations and remains for a variety of phenomena described in the Book of Mormon, including such traditional conundrums as elephants, horses, and Hebrew writing.\(^\text{16}\)

Sorenson, Palmer, and other proponents of a Mesoamerican geography have generally made their case in peer-reviewed journals and academic presentations, where they have directed their research toward university-trained specialists in history, archaeology, and anthropology. Through derivative publications, they have also reached a significant number of other Latter-day Saints, some of whom have helped develop a small tourism industry for various archaeological sites in Central America that seem to correspond to places mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

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\(^{16}\) For example, see Meldrum’s use of Cahokia—site of the largest pre-Columbian earthworks in North America, but they date to several hundred years after the Book of Mormon’s Nephites and Lamanites. Rod L. Meldrum, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America’s Heartland: A Visual Journey of Discovery* (New York: Digital Legend, 2011), 114–17.
Mormon. A similar industry has developed around proposed Book of Mormon sites in the Heartland model, with the internet, image-oriented publications, and convention-style conferences and presentations serving to spread the word in place of more academic venues. The result has been the development of two worldviews, essentially, whose ties to one of Mormonism’s foundational texts on the one hand and tourism industries on the other have moved the study of Book of Mormon geography into realms of faith, orthodoxy, and finances that transcend the mere differences of opinion or interpretation that characterize more abstract academic questions. One need only attend a conference put on by either camp or search the internet for “Tours of Book of Mormon Lands” to see how serious a business, both emotionally and financially, the whole thing has become for some.

While most interested Latter-day Saints appear to support either the Limited Mesoamerican or Heartland models, other explanations of Book of Mormon geography, offering very different locations as the book’s setting, are still being actively developed and defended today. One, for example, drawing on a variety of geographical and archaeological evidence, argues for Chile, Peru, and Bolivia as the land of the Book of Mormon.17 Another, arguing from an almost purely geographical position (since any supporting archaeology appears to be almost entirely lacking) suggests Baja California.18 Still others reject the Americas entirely and posit a location on the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia or in Africa—possibilities which handily account for the Book of Mormon’s elephants, perhaps, but run afoul of Joseph Smith’s report that the book is a history of people who lived somewhere in the Americas.19 Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, none of these more recent propositions has, at least so far, garnered the attention and support currently enjoyed by the Heartland and Mesoamerican models.

Popular or not, the very fact that new ideas on the question are still being propounded underscores the basic problem that plagues all proposed Book of Mormon geographies, including those that can count hundreds or even thousands of supporters. For all the evidence

17. See George Potter, Nephi in the Promised Land: More Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is a True History (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2009).
that each may be able to marshal in support of its position, no one has yet found any remains outside the Middle East that can be definitively linked to the Book of Mormon. Such remains could take any number of forms, although at this point it seems that they would have to include some sort of textual component—some inscription or record found in situ, dating to Book of Mormon times, that makes an unambiguous allusion to a person, event, or location (and preferably all three) discussed in the book itself. Until such a “Welcome to Zarahemla” signpost is found, the geography of the Book of Mormon seems destined to remain more a topic for discussion and debate than a real-world location on the ground.

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Joseph Smith did not offer many details about the translation process for the Book of Mormon, other than affirming that it was done through “the gift and power of God.” In 1831, at a Church conference where he was invited to share more information, he declined, saying that “it was not expedient for him to relate these things.” Along with the golden plates, he had been given a set of Nephite “interpreters” (Mosiah 8:13; Ether 4:5), which he described as “two stones in silver bows” (JS–H 1:35), apparently looking something like a pair of glasses or spectacles. According to eyewitnesses, however, after the loss of the 116 pages, he primarily used a seer stone that had been in his possession for several years, which he would place in the crown of his hat, and then, putting his face in the hat, he would dictate the text of the Book of Mormon to scribes. (Somewhat confusingly, after 1833 he referred to both devices


2. “Minutes, 25–26 October 1831,” in Godfrey and others, Documents, Volume 2, 84 (minutes from a Church conference in Orange, Ohio).

by the biblical term “Urim and Thummim.”) The open question in this case is what happened when Joseph looked at the seer stone.

He obviously did not know the language of the plates—reformed Egyptian (Morm. 9:32). His own education was limited, and the first rudimentary decipherment of any form of ancient Egyptian by scholars had happened just a few years earlier. So when Joseph spoke of “translating,” he was not using the word in its ordinary sense, whereby someone who knows the source language perceives the meaning and then formulates corresponding expressions in the target language. Some Latter-day Saints believe that the seer stone allowed Joseph to bypass the first step in such a way that the meaning of the golden plates’ text was revealed to him in a nonverbal or preverbal form, which he then put into his own words. Other Latter-day Saints think that when he looked at the seer stone, he could see English letters and words, which he read aloud to his scribes. This means that there was a pre-existing translation, which he could access through the stone. (John Gilbert, the non-LDS typesetter for the first edition, put it this way: “The question might be asked here whether Jo or the spectacles was the translator?”)

Either way, when Joseph “translated,” he was rarely looking at the characters on the plates, which were usually either on the table covered in cloth or hidden elsewhere in the house or vicinity. At the same time, however, the process was not as straightforward as ordinary reading, since David Whitmer reported that if Joseph was not spiritually in tune (as when he had some sort of argument with his wife Emma), the device did not work. In addition, Oliver Cowdery once attempted to translate

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and failed—though it is uncertain whether he had tried to use the seer stone (D&C 9).

Eyewitnesses to the translation process believed that Joseph was reading a pre-existing text. According to Martin Harris, “By aid of the seer stone, sentences would appear and were read by the Prophet . . . , and when finished he would say, ‘Written,’ and if correctly written, that sentence would disappear and another appear in its place, but if not written correctly it remained until corrected,” with Joseph occasionally spelling out difficult words or names.\(^7\) Other witnesses, including Emma Smith, Joseph Knight Sr., David Whitmer, and John Whitmer, gave similar reports.\(^8\) These witnesses did not look into the seer stone themselves, and there is no record of Joseph ever explaining the translation process, so their descriptions are presumably based on their own observations of Joseph at work. Nevertheless, an examination of the text of the Book of Mormon, particularly the original manuscript, may provide additional evidence.

In comparing these accounts to the original manuscript (of which 28 percent is extant), linguist Royal Skousen proposed three theories of translation: “loose control,” in which ideas were revealed to Joseph and then put into his own language; “tight control,” where he saw specific words and read them to his scribes; and “iron-clad control,” in which his reading from the stone could not move forward if a scribe had made an uncorrected mistake.\(^9\) Most of the witnesses appear to have believed the last theory, though the presence of spelling and transcription errors in the original manuscript appears to disprove it. Clearly the dictation moved forward even when a few words were missed by the transcriber or when names were misspelled. (It is important to note that the three theories refer only to the translation process, not to the translation itself. The English Book of Mormon may be a rather free translation that was nevertheless revealed word for word. In fact, the presence of so many phrases from the King James Version, particularly from biblical texts written after 600 BC, argues strongly for it being a translation characterized by functional rather than formal equivalence.)

\(^7\) Welch, “Miraculous Timing,” 149, 153.

\(^8\) Welch, “Miraculous Timing,” 142, 166, 170, 173–75, 179, 189.

\(^9\) Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 7, no. 1 (1998): 22–31. Joseph Smith’s oft-quoted comment that the Book of Mormon was “the most correct of any book on earth” (1981 Introduction) may have a more limited scope than some Latter-day Saints have assumed.
But the question at hand is, roughly, How much of Joseph Smith can we see in the Book of Mormon? Did he produce a translation, through miraculous means, that bears traces of his own words, concepts, and understanding? Or was a pre-existing text given to him by revelation, a text that would in turn reflect the mind of its celestial translator (or translators)? Many Church leaders and scholars have opted for the former scenario—which seems similar to how Joseph produced the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants—including Brigham Young, who asserted that “when God speaks to the people, he does it in a manner to suit their circumstances and capacities. . . . I will even venture to say that if the Book of Mormon were now to be rewritten, in many instances it would materially differ from the present translation.”10 B. H. Roberts, John Widtsoe, Richard Anderson, Blake Ostler, Stephen Ricks, Kathleen Flake, Samuel Brown, and Terryl Givens have expressed similar ideas.11

In general, these commentators seem to share a sense that revelation is always modulated by its human recipients. The kinds of evidence that might support viewing the English Book of Mormon as a translation jointly produced by divine revelation and Joseph’s personal capacities include:

- The nonstandard grammar, repetitions, and awkwardness of the original dictation. In many ways, the Book of Mormon seems like the sort of work that a young, religiously enthusiastic but poorly educated New York farmer might produce.

- The limited vocabulary of about 5,600 words (2,225 root words in English).


• Phrases and concepts, including religious concepts, that were common in early nineteenth-century America.

• Anachronisms. References to things that would have been out of place in the ancient Americas—such as horses, cattle, steel, chariots, and silk—might be attributed to a translator’s inattention, misapprehension, or use of loanwords.

• Biblical phrases, from both the Old and New Testament, that are scattered throughout the text. Whoever translated the Book of Mormon was very familiar with the King James Bible.

• The entire chapters that are reproduced from Isaiah, Micah, Malachi, and Matthew with only slight variations from the KJV, even when that 1611 translation was in error. Of particular note are the changes made to the italicized words, which indicated translators’ additions to the Hebrew or Greek in order to round out or clarify the English rendition. When the Book of Mormon quotes lengthy biblical passages, nearly 40 percent of the italicized words in the KJV are changed, sometimes resulting in nongrammatical sentences, though such changes account for only one-fifth of the total variations. It is easy to imagine Joseph opening a Bible when he realized he had come to a long quotation and making such changes as he went along; it is harder to understand why a heavenly translator would have cared about KJV italics.12

• The Lord’s response in Doctrine and Covenants 9:5–10 to Oliver Cowdery’s failure to translate may reflect Joseph’s own practice: “You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind” (though it is also possible that this instruction applied only to Oliver, or that “it” referred to the gift of translation rather than the words themselves).

• Joseph’s willingness to correct the style and grammar in the 1837 and 1840 editions. It does not appear that he regarded the original dictation as sacrosanct.

12. In 1879, Emma Smith said that when translating, Joseph “had neither manuscript nor book to read from” (Welch, “Miraculous Timing,” 143), but she was referring to the Book of Mormon as a whole, and perhaps had in mind accusations of plagiarizing the Spaulding manuscript. Her statement does not rule out the possibility that Joseph consulted a Bible occasionally for a few chapters of overlapping material. See also Roberts, New Witnesses for God, 3:425–40.
Many readers might wonder whether the Book of Mormon, as a revelation from God, should have been more eloquent, literary, and precise in its portrayal of a Christianized Israelite civilization in the ancient Americas. It can be helpful to think of Joseph Smith as the translator, transmuting distinct spiritual impressions into his own language.

Other Latter-day Saints have called attention to features of the text that would be difficult to explain if the book had been extemporaneously translated in Joseph’s mind. As a result, they posit a Nephite record that was carefully composed, meticulously translated in the heavens (perhaps being updated to appeal to the sensibilities of King James Bible–reading Christians in the modern era), and then communicated to Joseph in fairly exact words, which he read from the seer stone. This second theory of translation has received significant support in recent years from Royal Skousen’s work with the earliest manuscripts of the Book of Mormon, and it comports well with the detailed literary patterns explored by John Welch, Hugh Pinnock, Donald Parry, and Grant Hardy.¹³ Scholars who believe that Joseph read a pre-existing translation, besides Skousen, include Daniel Peterson, Stanford Carmack, and John Welch. In addition, both Richard Bushman and Dieter Uchtdorf

have suggested that in some ways Joseph’s seer stone was analogous to a modern iPad or smartphone.\(^{14}\)

Evidences suggesting that Joseph was reading from a pre-existing translation include the following:

- The extreme care taken in the dictation/transcription process to get the words exactly right. The original manuscript shows that Joseph dictated in blocks of twenty to thirty words, with the scribe then reading the words back to him and making immediate corrections as Joseph detected errors. There are many such corrections, often involving distinctions that are difficult to hear without close attention (plurals, verb endings, and so forth) and that make little difference to the overall meaning of a sentence.

- Joseph’s spelling out difficult names at their first occurrence. Quite regularly unfamiliar names were first spelled phonetically by the scribe and then immediately corrected when Joseph apparently spelled them letter by letter.

- Emma Smith’s testimony that Joseph could dictate for hours on end and would start each dictation session without reviewing where he had last left off.

- Intratextual allusions, in which distinct phrases from earlier stories are quoted in later episodes. One famous example is Alma’s exact, attributed quotation of twenty-one words spoken by Lehi (Alma 36:22; 1 Ne. 1:8), which is especially interesting because Joseph dictated the quotation before the original source (after the loss of the 116 pages, Joseph continued dictating the books of Mosiah through Moroni before turning to 1 Nephi through the Words of Mormon).

• Intricate literary patterns or rhetorical devices such as chiasmus, poetic parallelism, inclusions, and so forth. For instance, the complex chiasmus of Alma 36 appears to have been worked out beforehand in written form, and the inclusio that frames Alma’s career is characterized by the repetition of distinctive phrases: “The number of their slain/dead was not numbered, because of the greatness of their number,” with bodies “cast into the waters of Sidon and . . . in the depths of the sea” (at both Alma 3:1–3 and 44:21–22).

• The presence of Early Modern English grammar and vocabulary usages that were obsolete by the early nineteenth century and did not appear in the KJV. Some of the nonstandard grammar in the Book of Mormon—much of which was updated in later editions—would have been acceptable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though the overall syntax of the book does not match any particular time or place in the development of the English language, including Joseph’s native linguistic environment of nineteenth-century New York. Many of the particularities of Book of Mormon diction would have been foreign to Joseph. 15

• The presumption in the 1830 preface and D&C 10:6–19 that Joseph could have retranslated the lost 116 pages and produced exactly the same words. He was forbidden to do so because those who had stolen the manuscript would have changed the words so that the original and retranslated versions did not match.

• The Book of Mormon itself suggesting that its future translator would “read the words” (2 Ne. 27:19–26).

This list does not negate the previous one, but it complicates it, and so far neither translation theory has proven entirely satisfactory—both explain some features of the text while passing over others, or introduce new conundrums. While a pre-existing translation may have been either free or literal, it is unlikely that Joseph’s own improvised language would have yielded such precise literary patterns. On the other hand, if the translation came fully formed as a word-for-word revelation from God, why wasn’t it lovelier, more elevated, or a better fit for modern English?

15. For a comprehensive analysis of Book of Mormon syntax and vocabulary, see Royal Skousen, The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon, Parts 1 and 2: Grammatical Variation (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2016), and The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon, Parts 3 and 4: Nature of the Original Language (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2018).
In conclusion, the two sides will probably remain in tension for some time. Book of Mormon researcher Brant Gardner has attempted to split the difference with a hypothesis that the text was somehow subconsciously translated by Joseph and then projected by his mind onto the stone, but such an unparalleled psychological and revelatory process does not seem to solve all the difficulties.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, we should be cautious about assuming that Joseph used the same process for all his “translation” projects, including the book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible, neither of which involved the use of a seer stone. Without being able to compare the original reformed Egyptian with the English version, it is impossible to know just what sort of translation the Book of Mormon is. And without observing a seer stone in use, we cannot know for certain what Joseph experienced. Perhaps new evidence will someday be uncovered, or further studies may refine our understanding of the data currently available, but in the meantime, we might well agree with Emma Smith, who said that, even as an eyewitness to the process, “it is marvelous to me, ‘a marvel and a wonder,’ as much so as to any one else.”\textsuperscript{17}

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\textsuperscript{16} Brant A. Gardner, \textit{The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon} (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011). Gardner helpfully analyzes many of the evidences that have been advanced to support both theories of translation (137–247). Alternatively, Roger Terry, observing the grammatical inconsistencies in the text, has suggested that the translation may not have been made by Joseph Smith but instead by an immortal being with an incomplete grasp of English grammar—perhaps someone like the postmortal Moroni (which would still count as a pre-existing translation); see his “Archaic Pronouns and Verbs in the Book of Mormon: What Inconsistent Usage Tells Us about Translation Theories,” \textit{Dialogue} 47, no. 3 (2014): 53–80. For an attempt by a non-LDS scholar to make sense of the translation process, in naturalistic terms with comparative examples, see Ann Taves, \textit{Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths} (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016).

\textsuperscript{17} Welch, “Miraculous Timing,” 144.
Narrating Religious Heritage

Apostasy and Restoration

Miranda Wilcox

Latter-day Saints have a paradoxical relationship to the past. Even as Latter-day Saints invest their own history with sacred meaning—as the restoration of ancient truths and the fulfillment of biblical prophecies—they have traditionally repudiated the eighteen centuries preceding the founding of the Church as a period of apostasy. They believe that Christ’s original church fell into spiritual darkness that persisted until Joseph Smith restored Christ’s gospel and priesthood authority on the earth. Since the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, however, there has been a “spectrum of understandings” regarding the religious heritage of the Latter-day Saints, a spectrum that has included perceiving some continuity between the restored Church and traditional Christianity.¹ However, the story of radical temporal and spiritual rupture known as the Great Apostasy narrative has so dominated the last century of Latter-day Saint discourse that few members are aware of other precedents and possibilities for narrating their religious heritage.

Religious communities perform theological work when they tell historical narratives. Memorializing their divine origins is crucial for communities to maintain distinctive self-identities and to realize their divine mandate. When these stories become enshrined with the

authority of tradition, it is difficult to remember how much the cultural context and personal motivations of the initial narrators impacted the trajectories of the stories. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, Israelite narrators could recount the story of their ancestors’ deliverance from captivity in Egypt in their sacred scriptures to affirm their collective identity as Yahweh’s chosen people and as separate from gentile nations.2 The division between Jews and Gentiles was called into question when Jewish Christians were commanded to preach the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles from whom they had been taught to keep themselves separate (see Acts 10; 13). Latter-day Saints have likewise employed and revised historical narratives as paradigms of self-definition, particularly during periods of institutional transformation.

Early Latter-day Saints, including Joseph Smith, framed their relation to historical Christianity and other religious denominations in a variety of ways. As missionaries, early Latter-day Saints competed with and were persecuted by Protestant evangelists in the public sphere, so they denounced these denominations as false, drawing on Protestant histories that traced the corruption of Christian doctrines, practices, and leaders in need of reformation. As converts, however, many felt that their former religious experiences prepared them to embrace the fulness of the gospel, and they perceived a degree of continuity with their new church. In the wake of renouncing polygamy and political sovereignty in the 1890s, Latter-day Saint leaders began to recalibrate the Church’s identity by simultaneously assimilating it with and distinguishing it from mainstream American Protestantism. One aspect of this process was the systematic formulation of a salvation narrative that featured a period of universal apostasy preceding the founding of the Church in 1830. Adopting and modifying the Protestant histories of Catholic apostasy in need of reform offered the Latter-day Saints ways to construct a coherent narrative that framed the necessity of the Restoration and the restored Church’s claims of exclusive access to divine truth and authority. This narrative proved so useful in this period of definition and transition that it was distilled into Church curriculum materials in the mid-twentieth century as “the Great Apostasy” and became embedded in the Latter-day Saint worldview during the era of correlation. The dismissive attitude toward other religious traditions sanctioned in the Great Apostasy narrative aligned less well

with the Church’s increasingly international membership and ecumenical humanitarian partnerships in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Latter-day Saint leaders began to celebrate some earlier Christian and non-Christian figures, while Latter-day Saint scholars questioned the historical assumptions underpinning the Great Apostasy narrative. In 2009, the press release for the dedication of the Church History Library stated the following:

The Mormon worldview compels a historical consciousness. Upon joining the Church, each member becomes a participant in the great unfolding of God’s redemptive plan. Since the beginning, individuals and societies have sought their place within the larger network of human relations and tried to make sense of divine interventions. . . .

An active engagement in historical processes eliminates barriers imposed by time and space and enables Latter-day Saints to situate themselves within the grand sweep of history. The Mormon historical consciousness impels one to step outside the comfortable confines of the present, develop empathy to understand the past, and in turn, lay the spiritual groundwork for future generations.³

The degree to which Latter-day Saints revise their historical narratives to align with these goals remains to be seen.

**Nineteenth-Century Attitudes**

Latter-day Saints did not invent the concept of a Christian apostasy. The term itself has been around for centuries. In ancient Greek, *apostasia* was the composite of *apo*, “away from,” and *stasis*, “standing.” The word initially referred to forms of physical separation and expanded over time to include the severing of social, moral, and religious allegiance. In the sixteenth century, Protestant reformers and followers believed that Christianity had fallen into apostasy and needed reformation. The concept of a Christian apostasy was ubiquitous in Protestant discourse. For example, Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan preacher whose attitudes shaped American Protestant discourse, wrote in 1757,

> And the Apostles in their Days foretold a grand Apostasy of the Christian World, which should continue many Ages; and observed, that there appeared a Disposition to such an Apostasy, among professing

Christians, even in that Day. 2 Thess. ii. 7. And the greater Part of the Ages which have now elapsed, have been spent in the Duration of that grand and general Apostacy, under which the Christian World, as it is called, has been transformed into that which has been vastly more deformed, more dishonourable & hateful to God.⁴

These Protestant attitudes and rhetoric would have been part of the religious landscape with which early Latter-day Saint converts were intimately familiar. Echoing Protestants, many early Latter-day Saints wrote about the abhorrent state of apostate Christianity, while at the same time praising and borrowing religious models from other Christian denominations, particularly their former faiths.

Christopher Jones and Stephen Fleming traced early Latter-day Saint conceptions of Christian apostasy in sermons, articles, tracts, pamphlets, conversion narratives, and autobiographical memoirs. They concluded that, while Latter-day Saints believed that “a restoration of ecclesiastical authority and a new divinely mandated church were necessary,” there existed a spectrum of co-existing individual articulations ranging from “harsh and blanket condemnations to more conciliatory and nuanced views of Christian history.”⁵

In the public sphere, early Church leaders and missionaries “marshaled their understanding of Christian history to demonstrate the fallen condition and apostate character of their Protestant opponents and the churches to which they belonged” as they waged verbal attacks to defend themselves and to win converts in newspapers, doctrinal tracts, and sermons.⁶ In 1834, the leaders of the Church in Kirtland (including Joseph Smith) wrote a letter to missionaries abroad advising them about what to preach. One paragraph begins by contrasting the spiritual darkness dispelled by the light of the gospel.

Some may presume to say, that the world in this age is fast increasing in righteousness; that the dark ages of superstition and blindness have passed over, when the faith of Christ was known and practiced only by a few, when ecclesiastic power held an almost universal control over christendom, and when the consciences of men were held bound by the strong chains of priestly power; but now, the gloomy cloud is burst, and the gospel is shining with all the resplendent glory of an apostolic day;

and that the kingdom of the Messiah is greatly spreading, that the gospel of our Lord is carried to divers nations of the earth, the scriptures translating into different tongues, the ministers of truth crossing the vast deep to proclaim to men in darkness a risen Savior.7

Missionaries employed this framework. For example, Orson Hyde preached in 1838 that “a great apostacy, from the true apostolic order of Worship” had befallen Christianity and that it was their “duty to show the awful consequences of this apostacy.”8 Richard Bennett and Amber Seidel compiled preaching by Samuel H. Smith, Oliver Cowdery, W. W. Phelps, Orson Pratt, and other missionaries in the early 1830s who likewise condemned Christianity before the advent of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as corrupt and therefore inauthentic.9

Matthew Bowman explains that the most sustained discussions of Christian apostasy among early Latter-day Saints emerged when a few apologists began attempting to “bend the grand narrative of Christian history toward themselves” in an American print culture dominated by Protestant publishing societies.10 Latter-day Saint apologists, including Benjamin Winchester, Parley P. Pratt, John H. Donnellon, and William Appleby, surveyed popular Protestant church histories circulating in antebellum America. Then they published periodicals, tracts, and even books validating Latter-day Saint theological claims and historical legitimacy by pairing biblical prophecies with ecclesial changes identified in Protestant church histories.11 These sharply worded denunciations of Catholic and Protestant beliefs and practices set the precedent for later Latter-day Saint salvation histories, histories that traced the unfolding divine plan through dispensations of human history.


In private genres, Latter-day Saints told conciliatory narratives about their Christian heritage. Many early Latter-day Saints described their previous religious experiences in autobiographies and conversion narratives as preparing them to embrace the restored gospel; they perceived their new faith as “not so much a rejection of the contemporary Christian world as an expansion of its doctrines and gathering of its disparate parts.” For example, Lucy Mack Smith distinguished in her history between her personal religious practice and denominational affiliation. She did not perceive her life or the lives of her family members before her son’s theophany as characterized by spiritual apostasy; she describes miraculous healings, heavenly visions, and spiritual revelation flowing from their deep faith in Jesus Christ. Early Latter-day Saint attitudes, public and private, toward their religious heritage were “multifaceted, complex, and at times, contradictory.”

Joseph Smith’s attitudes were likewise complex. While the term “apostasy” occasionally appears in Joseph Smith’s papers in relation to Christian history, Joseph focuses on his divine mission of restoration. Like his parents and many Protestant Americans, Joseph was a primitivist who believed that Christianity had strayed from the pattern of the New Testament. In his earliest account of the First Vision made in 1832, Joseph describes reaching the conclusion while studying the scriptures as a young boy before his visions that humanity had “apostatised from the true and living faith.” Anxiety about this belief was a factor that motivated the prayer precipitating his vision in 1820 and the subsequent founding of the Church of Christ in 1830.

According to Terryl Givens, Joseph “conceived of apostasy as primarily the corruption of ordinances, and the loss of priesthood authority to perform them.” For example, Joseph wrote to newspaper editor

Noah Saxton in 1833, “We may look at the Christian world and see the apostacy there has been from the Apostolic platform, and who can look at this, and not exclaim in the language of Isaiah, ‘the earth is defiled under the inhabitants thereof because they have transgressed the Laws; changed the ordinances and broken the everlasting covenant’ [Isaiah 24:5].”18 Joseph’s project of restoring authority and ordinances to realize ancient covenants between God and humanity differed from his contemporary American Restorationists whose focus was to expunge false accretions from Christian worship to realize the original primitive purity of Christ’s church.19

According to Philip Barlow, Joseph focused on mending, not entrenching, fractured relationships.20 His project of restoration “included more than the return of principles, powers, doctrines, ordinances, and authority once allegedly lost through long-ago apostasies. . . . It included rendering things ‘as they should be,’ whether or not they once had been.”21 Joseph’s religion-making generated “doctrines, policies, priesthoods, keys, revelations, and ordinances . . . in the service of restoring proper relations and order in time and eternity.”22

For example, Joseph rewound time when he instituted baptisms for the dead in 1840; no longer were the living and dead estranged.23 A newspaper editorial in 1842, most likely by Joseph Smith, offers proxy ordinances as the key to understanding divine justice. This plan of human salvation “exhibits the greatness of divine compassion and benevolence” and renders moot the exclusive systems of belief religious communities jealously guard.24

But while one portion of the human race are judging and condemning the other without mercy, the great parent of the universe looks

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Givens, “Epilogue: ‘We Have Only the Old Thing’: Rethinking Mormon Restoration,” in Wilcox and Young, Standing Apart, 335–42.
19. See Givens, Wrestling the Angel, 23–41.
upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care, and paternal regard; he views them as his offspring; and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men. . . . He . . . is a wise lawgiver . . . ; he will judge them ‘not according to what they have not, but what they have;’ those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law; we need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the great Jehovah, he will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed; the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information; and his inscrutable designs in relation to the human family: and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess, that the Judge of all the Earth has done right.  

Here Joseph offers new perspectives about divine justice and religious pluralism. Every person remains capable of receiving revelation and performing righteous deeds; they will be judged fairly on their own terms, and they remain heirs to God’s promises and to the covenants made by their ancestors regardless of whether they were privy to God’s revelations and priesthood ordinances in mortality.

The Book of Mormon and other restoration scripture likewise testify that “peoples who live under conditions of apostasy remain participants in the covenants made by their ancestors, with the promise that the ancient covenant relationship eventually will be restored in full.”  

Joseph’s project of restoration involved healing and welding together the human family.

And now as the great purposes of God are hastening to their accomplishment and the things spoken of in the prophets are fulfilling, as the kingdom of God is established on the earth, and the ancient order of things restored, the Lord has manifested to us this duty and privilege, and we are commanded to be baptized for our dead. . . . A view of these things reconciles the scriptures of truth, justifies the ways of God to
man; places the human family upon an equal footing, and harmonizes
with every principle of righteousness, justice, and truth.28

Joseph reiterated his expansive vision in a letter to the Church in
September 1842 clarifying how to perform baptisms for the dead: “For it
is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times,
which dispensation is now beginning to usher in, that a whole and com-
plete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys,
and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days
of Adam even to the present time” (D&C 128:18). Instead of parsing out
blame for past apostasy, Joseph Smith here conceives of the restoration
not as filling a void or healing a rupture but as gathering, linking, and
building upon truths manifest throughout human histories and cultures.
For Joseph, the Restoration was a process of revision and renewal.

After Joseph’s death, the Latter-day Saints survived expulsion from
Nauvoo, weathered their exodus west, and solidified their distinctive
domestic, political, and economic practices in their frontier settle-
ments. In the 1890s, Latter-day Saints had to abandon some of these
practices to integrate with the United States. Latter-day Saint leaders
composed historical narratives to recalibrate their identity in ways that
would simultaneously distinguish the Church from and assimilate it
with mainstream American Protestantism. Formulating the doctrine
of apostasy and its historical implications played a significant role in
crafting a distinct Latter-day Saint identity as the Church moved into
the twentieth century.

Twentieth-Century Attitudes

The Great Apostasy narrative became a historical paradigm of self-
definition during two significant phases of institutional transition: the
Church’s redefinition after the 1890 Manifesto and Utah statehood, and
the Church’s global expansion after World War II. In the fertile era of
theological definition and interaction with secular learning at the turn
of the twentieth century, a group of scholarly Latter-day Saint leaders
composed lengthy salvation histories to strengthen the coherence of the
doctrine and the organizing principles of the Church after it abandoned
cherished polygamy, political sovereignty, and economic communalism.29

29. Miranda Wilcox, “Narrating Apostasy and the LDS Quest for Identity,” in Wil-
cox and Young, Standing Apart, 96–98.
According to Eric Dursteler, the chief narrators of the Great Apostasy and Restoration narrative institutionalized in the twentieth century were B. H. Roberts, James E. Talmage, and Joseph Fielding Smith. These Latter-day Saint leader-historians turned to Joseph Smith’s revelations and to “secular history” to replace the “nineteenth-century emphasis on theocratic and familial kingdom-building” with theological “claims regarding restoration of the primitive church, divine sponsorship, and living prophets.” In doing so, they applied the methodology of the earlier Latter-day Saint tracts; that is, they linked “biblical prophecy and Protestant church histories together to validate Mormons’ own theological claims,” but they also aspired to write objective Progressive-era histories. They were confident that Latter-day Saint truth claims “could be proved through the arguments of historical method.”

For example, B. H. Roberts lays out this methodology in the preface to his *Outlines of Ecclesiastical History*, published in 1893 as a study manual for the Seventies. He proposes “to sustain the position taken by the church of Christ in the last days,” and this position “may be readily discerned by the very first revelation the Lord gave to Joseph Smith” when he was told that “all the sects of religion . . . were all wrong; that their creeds were an abomination in His sight; that those professors were all corrupt.” Quoting Joseph’s 1838 account of his First Vision printed in the Pearl of Great Price in 1851, Roberts explains that “it has been to bring together the historical evidences of the truth of this divine announcement


that, in part, this work has been written.”\textsuperscript{35} After compiling historical evidence from a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century histories to corroborate Joseph Smith’s account, Roberts concludes that “the whole stream of evidence proves that there has been a universal apostasy from the religion taught by Jesus Christ and his apostles.”\textsuperscript{36}

Following Roberts’s work, subsequent salvation histories plotted a period of universal Christian apostasy as a prelude to Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Latter-day Saint salvation histories described the loss of priesthood authority in the early Christian centuries followed by the Dark Ages of apostasy from which the dawning light of the Renaissance and Reformation prepared the way for the Restoration. In 1909, James Talmage explained the doctrinal logic underpinning the Great Apostasy narrative: “The restored Church affirms that a general apostasy developed during and after the apostolic period, and that the primitive Church lost its power, authority, and graces as a divine institution, and degenerated into an earthly organization only. The significance and importance of the great apostasy, as a condition precedent to the re-establishment of the Church in modern times, is obvious. If the alleged apostasy of the primitive Church was not a reality, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not the divine institution its name proclaims.”\textsuperscript{37}

Talmage’s binary logic was distilled over a century to this stark statement in \textit{Preach My Gospel}, the Church’s missionary manual published in 2004: “If there had been no apostasy, there would have been no need of a Restoration.”\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, Roberts, Talmage, and Smith institutionalized a powerful narrative of Latter-day Saint self-definition that became deeply embedded in their communal historical consciousness through the twentieth century.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Latter-day Saint leaders responded to the Church’s international expansion by centralizing institutional authority and by standardizing its instructional resources.\textsuperscript{39} The


\textsuperscript{36} Roberts, \textit{Outlines of Ecclesiastical History}, v–vi.

\textsuperscript{37} Talmage, \textit{Great Apostasy}, iii.

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service} (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 36.

Lengthy salvation histories written in the early twentieth century were distilled to a few paragraphs about the Great Apostasy in Church manuals.40 Latter-day Saint apologists, especially influential Apostle Bruce R. McConkie and scholar Hugh Nibley, reaffirmed the authority of the Great Apostasy narrative during the age of Church correlation. McConkie preached, “With the loss of the gospel, the nations of the earth went into a moral eclipse called the Dark Ages. Apostasy was universal. . . . And this darkness still prevails except among those who have come to a knowledge of the restored gospel.”41 Hugh Nibley collected primary sources to argue that the apostolic Church did not survive intact; he concluded that “as ‘the great lights went out’ the most devoted Christians engaged in a wistful ‘Operation Salvage’ to rescue what might still be saved of ‘those things which came by the living voices that yet remained.’”42 The binary logic of Great Apostasy and Restoration became a self-evident tradition in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even as academic historians challenged and largely rejected the assumptions underpinning the historical periodization as inadequate to understand the complexity and richness of the medieval and early modern periods.

The simplified, standardized narrative of the Great Apostasy was easily communicated to members and converts. It promoted institutional unity by differentiating Latter-day Saints from other denominations competing for converts and by fostering a shared historical consciousness among members separated by geography, nationality, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, the narrative discouraged Latter-day Saints from seriously engaging with history before 1820, and it hampered friendships with people of faith whose religious histories and traditions were dismissed as “gross darkness” prophesied in Isaiah 60:2.

Such a stark narrative chafed as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints grew from a regional American church into a worldwide faith with diverse congregations and ecumenical humanitarian projects across the globe. Months before the priesthood ban was revoked in

41. Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 44.
1978, the First Presidency issued a statement “regarding God’s love for all mankind,” affirming that the founders of the world’s major religious and philosophical systems were inspired of God and that their teachings provide “moral truths” that “enlighten whole nations.” Echoing Joseph Smith’s cosmology, they confirmed that “God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation.” This inclusive affirmation anticipated redirections in the ways that some Latter-day Saints narrated their religious heritage in the twenty-first century.

**Twenty-First-Century Attitudes**

In the early twenty-first century, Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars reexamined and expanded the Great Apostasy narrative, a narrative that had been pared down to a doctrinal tenet by the end of the twentieth century.

In the years leading up to the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible in 2011, there was a surge of interest among Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars about the history of biblical translation, particularly in England and Germany during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. General conference talks, symposia, devotional books, and a television documentary praised some late medieval and Protestant reformers for promoting religious freedom and vernacular scriptural translations, two issues important to contemporary Latter-day Saints. For example, Elder M. Russell Ballard preached that “devoted people were prompted to protect and preserve” the scriptures; “we owe much to the many brave martyrs and reformers . . . who demanded freedom to worship and common access to the holy books.” This interest led to a slight expansion of the Great Apostasy narrative—the dawn of the Restoration was a bit longer and brighter—but the binary logic remained intact as did misunderstandings about the Middle Ages.

Brigham Young University faculty addressed some of the historical misconceptions fostered by the Great Apostasy narrative while defending its essential integrity. In 1996, Kent P. Jackson attributed internal

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intellectualism among early Christians as a major cause of apostasy.46 In 2001, Noel Reynolds organized a faculty study group to read early Christian texts in translation. The participating faculty produced a collection of essays that reevaluated Latter-day Saint assumptions about the process of apostasy in early Christianity, even calling some of these assumptions myths.47 In 2004, Brigham Young University’s annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, that year entitled “Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to Restored Church,” featured speakers celebrating Christian reformers, including John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, who had been less familiar to Latter-day Saints.48 In addition, two General Authorities, Elders Alexander Morrison and Tad Callister, published books in 2005 and 2006 tracing the Great Apostasy and affirming the Restoration.49

Although historian Richard L. Bushman had observed in the 1960s that the Latter-day Saint narrative of apostasy was too dependent on Protestant and anti-Catholic sources,50 this observation remained unexamined until Eric Dursteler’s landmark essay “Inheriting the ‘Great Apostasy.’”51 Building on Dursteler’s work, John D. Young and I organized a five-year collaborative research project in which fifteen Latter-day Saint disciplinary experts traced the development of and changes in Latter-day Saint narratives of apostasy within the context of Latter-day Saint history and American Protestant historiography.52 The project culminated in the publication of Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy in 2014.53 Contributors invited readers to consider their faith as deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions and not antithetical to other forms of Christianity.

47. Reynolds, Early Christians in Disarray.
53. Wilcox and Young, Standing Apart.
They suggested alternate ways Latter-day Saints might narrate their religious heritage that would engage with the past in generous and charitable conversation as well as recognize mutual concerns stemming from shared divine inheritance and humanity. Such narratives, they hoped, might offer new models of engaging with the past and building interfaith relations.

Joseph Spencer and Nicholas Frederick answered the call in *Standing Apart* to construct a new apostasy narrative “that is both intellectually defensible and pastorally productive.”54 Turning to 1 Nephi 11–14, they argued that Nephi prophesied a fundamental flaw in early Christian self-understanding, the perception that Christianity replaced or superseded Judaism, and that “the Book of Mormon and other aspects of the Restoration correct the prevalent anti-Jewish *replacement* theology in Christianity by recentering the Christian message on covenantal Israelite foundations through the rehabilitation of a *remnant* theology.”55

In the years leading up to the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith’s First Vision, Church leaders invited members to recognize the unfolding of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In April 2014, then President Dieter F. Uchtdorf reminded Latter-day Saints, “Sometimes we think of the Restoration of the gospel as something that is complete, already behind us—Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, he received priesthood keys, the Church was organized. In reality, the Restoration is an ongoing process; we are living in it right now.”56 In April 2020, President Russell M. Nelson presented a proclamation in honor of the anniversary of the First Vision titled “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World.”57 Without mentioning the word “apostasy,” the proclamation outlines the unique mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to prepare for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the ongoing nature of the Restoration that began with Joseph Smith’s sacred prayer in 1820. This reframing invites Latter-day Saints to narrate

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55. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement,” 107.
processes of restoration extending across human history and culture rather than dismissing whole eras as apostate. Elaborating the themes of the Bicentennial Proclamation, Patrick Mason described the purpose of the ongoing Restoration as “nothing less than to restore God’s people—all of God’s children, not just the members of our church—to wholeness.”

Looking to the future, will Latter-day Saints continue narrating a radical rupture with the past in ways that discourage nuanced historical inquiry and encourage separatist attitudes toward other religious traditions, or will they narrate the unfolding process of restoration in ways that foster the charity needed to hasten the Church’s work of salvation in its third century? The worldwide Church of the twenty-first century is not the persecuted kingdom of the nineteenth century nor the emerging regional Church of the twentieth century. As was the case in previous periods of institutional transition, its narratives of religious heritage might be refashioned to aid the Church in responding to future challenges. Reframed narratives might help Latter-day Saints reorient their self-understanding to flourish in a multicultural and religiously diverse world. Could Latter-day Saints narrate an ongoing story of restoration as a divine redirection of existing Christian identities toward fullness in Christ?

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Civil Disobedience in Latter-day Saint Thought

Nathan B. Oman

The twelfth article of faith declares, “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (A of F 1:12). On its face, this statement seems to be an unqualified acceptance of legal authority, one that would suggest that Latter-day Saints ought to shun civil disobedience. However, a closer look at Restoration scripture, teachings, and experience reveals a more complicated picture. To be sure, law-abidingness has long been central to the Saints’ identity, particularly in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and like the New Testament, Restoration scripture generally accepts the need to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17) and affirms the legitimacy of the “powers that be” (Rom. 13:1). However, there has never been a clear consensus among Latter-day Saint authorities on the precise extent to which the Saints owe deference to secular law. From the beginning, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have insisted that there are limits on the duty of obedience that Latter-day Saints owe to Caesar.

The Authority of Law in Restoration Scripture

While the Articles of Faith have been included in the Church’s canon, they were not received by revelation like most of the sections in the Doctrine and Covenants. Rather, the Articles of Faith formed the conclusion of a document known as the “Wentworth Letter,” which was prepared by Joseph Smith and his associates at the request of a Chicago newspaper
editor who sought a summary of Latter-day Saint history and beliefs.¹ The Articles of Faith themselves are largely modeled on an earlier statement of the Saints’ beliefs in a missionary pamphlet penned by Orson Pratt.² Interestingly, however, while most of the Articles of Faith have antecedents in the Pratt pamphlet, the twelfth article of faith is unique to the Wentworth Letter. The letter itself was penned in 1842, when political and legal controversy around the Saints in Illinois was intense. Joseph Smith was resisting extradition efforts by the state of Missouri, efforts that Latter-day Saints assumed would result in his murder if successful. Accusations of lawlessness against the Saints were common, and not surprisingly for a document aimed at a nonmember audience, the Wentworth Letter was at pains to emphasize the civic loyalty of Latter-day Saints.

Other Restoration scripture, however, offers a more nuanced take on legal obedience. The most extensive discussion of secular government in the Doctrine and Covenants comes in section 134. Strikingly, this document was also not given as a revelation. Rather, it was written by Oliver Cowdery and adopted in Joseph Smith's absence by a Church conference. Again, the context was public controversy around accusations of Latter-day Saint lawlessness, this time amid the growing tensions and persecution in Missouri. Section 134 states, “We believe that all men are bound to sustain and uphold the respective governments in which they reside,” but immediately qualifies this duty by saying, “while protected in their inherent and inalienable rights” (D&C 134:5). Those rights include “the free exercise of conscience, the right and control of property, and the protection of life” (D&C 134:2). In contrast to the apparently unqualified duty of legal obedience later announced in the twelfth article of faith, section 134 gestures toward a limited conception of legal authority of a kind similar to that found in the Declaration of Independence.

The earliest of Joseph Smith’s revelations to address the topic of law suggests that ultimate legal authority lies with God, not the secular state.


In January 1831, the Lord declared that “in time ye shall have no king nor ruler, for I will be your king. . . . And you shall be a free people, and ye shall have no laws but my laws when I come, for I am your lawgiver” (D&C 38:21–22). With the gathering of the Saints to build up Zion, many converts took this promise literally, believing that at best secular law would shortly fade away in the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Accordingly, the Lord declared later the same year, “Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land. Wherefore, be subject to the powers that be, until he reigns whose right it is to reign” (D&C 58:21). However, as mobs were expelling the Saints from Jackson County, Joseph Smith received a revelation that significantly qualified the claims of legal authority: “And that law of the land which is constitutional, supporting that principle of freedom in maintaining rights and privileges, belongs to all mankind, and is justifiable before me” (D&C 98:5). The revelation continued, “And as pertaining to law of man, whatsoever is more or less than this, cometh of evil” (D&C 98:7).

Taken as a whole, Restoration scriptures suggest that there is a strong prima facie obligation to obey the law. However, this is an all-things-being-equal obligation, not an all-things-considered obligation. The voice of the Lord in latter-day revelation insists that ultimate authority lies with God, not the state. Human laws demand human respect so long as they are broadly congruent with the laws of God and at a minimum protect “free exercise of conscience” (D&C 134:2) and other “inherent and inalienable rights” (D&C 134:5). Any law that fails to meet these standards “cometh of evil” (D&C 98:7). Alongside this theology of law, however, are defensive claims made to an often-hostile world that insist on nearly unlimited allegiance of Latter-day Saints to secular authority. The roots of this broader obligation to obey the law lie in the need for vulnerable Latter-day Saint communities to assure legal authorities that they are not a threat and therefore not fit objects of legal and political attacks. Importantly, this more defensive posture suggests that Latter-day Saints have an obligation to obey the law so as to protect the community of the Saints in precisely those cases where the state fails to meet its minimum obligation to protect “free exercise of conscience” (D&C 134:2).

**Conscientious Objection and Civil Disobedience**

The term “civil disobedience” does not have any precise, technical meaning. It entered the modern lexicon largely through Henry David Thoreau’s short essay “Civil Disobedience,” in which he justified his refusal
to pay federal taxes that were going to be used to support the Mexican-American War and the enforcement of the fugitive slave laws.\(^3\) As Thoreau’s usage suggests, civil disobedience involves deliberate lawbreaking but not necessarily lawlessness or criminality. Rather, civil disobedience refers to some morally serious decision to disregard the law. Civil disobedience thus is not the same thing as a general rejection of the moral authority of the law. Those who engage in civil disobedience are not philosophical anarchists. Rather, as in Thoreau’s case, civil disobedience is directed against particular laws.

It is useful to differentiate between two different ways in which the rejection of legal obedience might figure in one’s moral calculations. We can refer to these different ideas as “conscientious objection” and “civil disobedience.” This distinction is important because the Latter-day Saint tradition has been more congenial to the former than to the latter.

Conscientious objection refers to the idea that one refuses to obey the law because of deep moral scruples about the act of individual obedience to a particular law. This might be because the law requires one to do something that deeply offends one’s sense of right moral action. The classic case of conscientious objection in American law is the case of the religious pacifist who refuses to serve in the military, even when the law demands that he be drafted into the army. There is a tradition of accommodating such objections, for example by allowing Quakers drafted into the military to serve in the medical corps. A closely related objection has to do with the idea of complicity. Thoreau, for example, did not regard the payment of taxes as immoral in and of itself. Rather, he objected to the payment of taxes when doing so would make him complicit in some greater evil, an aggressive war of conquest against a neighboring country. The Quaker who serves in the ambulance corps, in contrast, may be willing to be complicit in his country’s war machine, so long as he is not required to take a human life himself. Both are examples of conscientious objection. Crucially, conscientious objection is not a political tactic. It is not directed toward achieving some concrete goal. Rather, it is an assertion of personal morality and is directed not at a social outcome but rather at the morality of individual conduct.

Civil disobedience, in contrast, is a political tactic. Calling it a political tactic does not imply any lack of moral seriousness, only that the

moral concern is directed toward the community at large and the shape of its laws. The classic example of civil disobedience in this sense is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Taking their inspiration from the example of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers deliberately violated segregationist laws. By riding on buses or sitting at lunch counters reserved by law for white people, African American protesters invited criminal prosecution in order to dramatize the injustice of those laws and work for their abolition. In practice, of course, there is often no neat distinction between conscientious objection and civil disobedience. One might refuse to become complicit in some wicked law from a sense of personal moral integrity while at the same time courting prosecution as part of a campaign to repeal that wicked law. However, conceptually the moral logic of each approach is distinct.

Latter-day Saint experience provides examples of both conscientious objection and civil disobedience. However, the strong prima facie obligation to obey the law, particularly in contemporary Latter-day Saint thought, means that both activities have required special justifications. Furthermore, of the two, Church teachings and history have proven more hospitable to conscientious objection than to civil disobedience.

The Latter-day Saint Tradition and Conscientious Objection

The most striking example of conscientious objection in Latter-day Saint history came in the 1880s, when thousands of Saints deliberately flouted federal laws against polygamy. Joseph Smith introduced the doctrine of plural marriage to certain trusted Church members during the Nauvoo period (see D&C 132). He taught that polygamy was a way in which the Saints should imitate the ancient patriarchs and obtain eternal blessings. Unsurprisingly, the practice was hugely controversial, and initially the Prophet tried to keep its practice secret. Hostility toward plural marriage, however, was one of the contributing factors to his murder in 1844 and the expulsion of the Saints from Illinois a few years later. In 1852, the Church, having established itself in the remoteness of the Great Basin, publicly endorsed the practice, and four years later, the newly formed Republican party declared polygamy one of the “twin relics of barbarism” (the other was slavery) that had to be excluded from U.S. territories.4

Congress responded in 1862 with the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, which criminalized polygamy. For over a decade, the law was unenforced until the Supreme Court upheld its constitutionality in 1879. The Latter-day Saints, however, insisted that plural marriage was a religious commandment and that the Supreme Court had erred in holding that the Morrill Act did not violate the Constitution's protections for the free exercise of religion, and they refused to comply with the law. Congress responded in the 1880s with a series of ever more punitive laws and a policy of mass prosecution and incarceration aimed at Latter-day Saint polygamists. The legal crusade against plural marriage ended with the 1890 Manifesto, although the Church did not move decisively to end polygamy until the early twentieth century. The “Raid,” as the Saints called this period, marked the most intense period of legal hostility toward the Latter-day Saints and continues to stand as the most prolonged confrontation between law and religion in American history.

Church members in the 1880s were keenly aware of the twelfth article of faith and the passages in Restoration scripture that enjoined members to honor and sustain the law. Nevertheless, Latter-day Saints insisted that they were justified in refusing obedience to the antipolygamy laws. They deployed a number of arguments to justify their position. First, they insisted that antipolygamy legislation was itself illegal because it violated the U.S. Constitution. When the Supreme Court held otherwise, the Saints insisted that it might at some future time reverse its decisions. Next, Latter-day Saints argued that the antipolygamy laws were being unfairly administered, singling out Latter-day Saints because of their religious beliefs, despite the protestations of federal officials that they were aiming only at criminal behavior and were not motivated by religious animus. Finally, many insisted that they were justified in resisting the law because of their loyalty to the higher law of revelation.

Future Apostle Rudger Clawson provided a succinct statement of the Latter-day Saint case for conscientious objection in 1884. He had been found guilty of violating federal antipolygamy laws and was asked at sentencing what he had to say in mitigation of his offense. He told the court: “Your Honor, . . . I very much regret that the laws of my country should come in contact with the laws of God; but whenever they do I shall invariably choose the latter. If I did not so express myself I should feel unworthy of the cause I represent.”5 He went on to make the by-then

5. “Sentence of Rudger Clawson, and His Speech before the Court,” *Millennial Star* 46, no. 48 (December 1, 1884): 741.
rejected argument that the Morrill Act violated the First Amendment. After all of the legal and rhetorical maneuvering, for Clawson the anti-polygamy laws created a stark choice between obeying the laws of God and obeying human laws, and he insisted that he had to choose the divine commands over secular commands.

The Latter-day Saint Tradition and Civil Disobedience

It is more difficult to find instances of Latter-day Saint civil disobedience. However, such instances exist. In part, the resistance to the Raid can be thought of as involving a strategy of civil disobedience. Latter-day Saints were not simply refusing to obey laws that they insisted required them to violate divine commands. They also claimed that if the Saints en masse ignored such laws, it would convince the nation of the laws’ injustice or at least impracticability. In 1856, as the Republican Party launched its attacks on plural marriage, Brigham Young insisted, “They will have to expend about three hundred millions of dollars for building a prison, for we must all go into prison. And after they have expended that amount for a prison, and roofed it over from the summit of the Rocky Mountains to the summit of the Sierra Nevada, we will dig out and go preaching through the world.”6 In his hyperbolic way, President Young was making a classic tactical argument in favor of civil disobedience. By violating an objectionable law en masse, the Latter-day Saints would make enforcing the law so expensive that it would be abandoned.

President Young gave his speech at the very beginning of the federal government’s antipolygamy crusade, before Congress had passed any laws against polygamy. Three decades later, when the Raid was at its height, hundreds of polygamist Saints had been sent to prison, and numerous plural wives had been prosecuted for perjury and other crimes when they refused to cooperate with law enforcement officials in convicting their husbands. A First Presidency letter to the Saints signed by John Taylor and George Q. Cannon again invoked the idea of deliberate lawbreaking as a means of legitimate expression: “Every man who goes to prison for his religion, every woman who, for love of truth and the husband to whom she is bound for time and eternity, submits to bonds and imprisonment, bears a powerful testimony to the world concerning the falsity of the views they entertain respecting us and our religion. If such noble and heroic sacrifices as men and women are now called upon

to make for their religion by Federal Courts do not teach the world the truth concerning us, then woe to the world.” Of course, the strategy of changing hearts and minds by deliberately violating the law and then submitting to its punishments proved ineffective for nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints. Minds were not changed. Indeed, the Saints’ resistance only further enraged antipolygamist activists, who responded with ever-more punitive laws until the Latter-day Saints were faced with a choice between submission or the institutional annihilation of the Church.

Perhaps because of the spectacular failure of civil disobedience as a political strategy for nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, contemporary Church leaders have tended to endorse Jeremy Bentham’s maxim for dealing with unjust or unwise laws: “to obey punctually; to censure freely.” For example, in the wake of World War II, the United States considered universal compulsory military service for all young men. The First Presidency issued a strongly worded statement in 1945 attacking the proposal. Such a measure, the First Presidency argued, would “deprive [young men] of parental guidance and control at this important period of their youth,” derail the educational plans of young men, “teach our sons . . . to kill,” deprive them of “adequate religious training and activity,” and encourage a host of other evils. “What this country needs and what the world needs,” they insisted, “is a will for peace, not war.” Notwithstanding these objections, however, the First Presidency also instructed leaders and members to cooperate with the peacetime military draft.

During the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, the term “civil disobedience” came to be associated in Church discourse not only with peaceful protest but also with lawlessness and contempt for authority in general. Accordingly, it is easy to find condemnations of “civil disobedience” in official publications, although the term is generally used imprecisely. However, civil disobedience in the more precise way we have been using it here has also been discouraged as a political tactic, even in favor of positions that have been endorsed by the Church. In 1995, for example, James E. Faust of the First Presidency gave a public address.

in which he discussed a member who urged “that the Church resort to civil disobedience and violence because of the moral wrongness of abortion.”

President Faust responded, “Civil disobedience has become fashionable for a few with strongly held political agendas. Even when causes are meritorious, if civil disobedience were to be practiced by everyone with a cause our democracy would unravel and be destroyed. . . . I tried to explain that when we disagree with a law, rather than resort to civil disobedience or violence, we are obliged to exercise our right to seek its repeal or change by peaceful and lawful means.”

**Legal Obedience and Latter-day Saints as a Vulnerable Minority**

Since World War II, the twelfth article of faith’s insistence that Latter-day Saints believe in “obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (A of F 1:12) has emerged as a consistent theme in official teachings about secular authority. This period corresponds with the massive missionary outreach that has resulted in the appearance of Latter-day Saint temples and stakes around the world. It has now been several generations since the typical member of the Church was an American citizen living in the predominantly Latter-day Saint regions of the Intermountain West. Today the majority of members of record live outside the United States, and Latter-day Saints are generally a tiny minority in the societies in which they live. Suspicion and hostility toward Church members remain, and Latter-day Saints have frequently been the targets of hostile governments and political leaders. During the 1980s and 1990s, leftist guerilla movements across Latin America murdered Church missionaries, and the Sandinista government in Nicaragua connived at the confiscation of Church buildings. For a time, the government of Ghana banned the Church, and Latter-day Saints have been the targets of legal harassment from Venezuela to Russia. Given this reality, the emphasis on legal obedience can be seen as part of a deliberate strategy to protect Latter-day Saint communities by convincing at-times hostile governments that Church members do not pose a political threat.

This means, however, that Latter-day Saints have often found themselves emphasizing legal obedience in precisely those contexts where legal regimes have been the most hostile. Rather than encouraging conscientious objection or civil disobedience, the Church has tried to

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12. Faust, “Integrity of Obeying the Law.”
formulate the minimum legal conditions for living as a faithful member and has refrained from missionary efforts in regimes that cannot meet even these basic standards. Those standards were articulated by David Kennedy, a former U.S. Treasury Secretary who was tapped by President Spencer W. Kimball to act as a special ambassador for the First Presidency. Kennedy wrote, “So long as the government permits me to attend church, so long as it permits me to get on my knees in prayer, so long as it permits me to baptize for the remission of sins, so long as it permits me to partake the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and to obey the commandments of the Lord, so long as the government does not force me to commit crime, so long as I am not required to live separately from my wife and children, I can live as a Latter-day Saint within that political system.” 13 While Kennedy’s formulation contains a certain amount of ambiguity—what precisely is involved in “obeying the commandments of the Lord” or “committing crime”?—in practice, this statement means that Latter-day Saints have endorsed legal obedience to odious regimes, such as the German Democratic Republic of Erich Honecker and the death-squad-wracked Chilean regime of Augusto Pinochet.

The ultimately ambiguous position of the Church and the difficult situation in which this stance can place Latter-day Saints are vividly illustrated by the case of Helmuth Hübener. Born in 1925, Hübener lived in Hamburg, Germany. He was raised as a Latter-day Saint and was active in his local branch. During the 1930s, German Latter-day Saints tried to allay Nazi suspicion of the American Church by emphasizing the commonalities between the teachings of the Church and those of the new Germany, seizing on the Nazi hostility to tobacco and drunkenness. However, the Nazi government suppressed missionary pamphlets making this claim, the Gestapo investigated Church branches, one man was sentenced to a concentration camp for developing pictures of American missionaries disrespectfully holding a Nazi flag, and at least one convert of Jewish ancestry was sent to the Theresienstadt death camp. Latter-day Saints responded by emphasizing their obedience to secular law and trying to avoid official attention. In 1941, Hübener began listening to war news on the BBC in violation of wartime German laws. Based on what he learned, he authored and secretly distributed anti-Nazi pamphlets with three friends. In 1942, a coworker denounced Hübener to

the Gestapo, and the seventeen-year-old was eventually tried for treason and executed. Before Hübener’s execution, his nonmember stepfather falsely fingered another Latter-day Saint, Otto Berndt, as the instigator of the plot, and Gestapo agents held Berndt for four days and interrogated him before releasing him. Hübener’s pro-Nazi branch president excommunicated him, and the temporary mission president approved the action. However, after the war, the First Presidency reviewed the excommunication and posthumously reversed the local leaders’ decision, restoring all of Hübener’s blessings.14

The above incident illustrates the way that Latter-day Saint obedience to the law can be a defensive reaction to an ultimately illegitimate regime rather than an affirmation of the regime’s legitimacy. There was nothing in official Church teachings that overtly encouraged Latter-day Saints to resist the Nazi regime. Rather, there was widespread distaste for Nazism—despite some scattered local supporters—and an effort to avoid the attentions of the Gestapo. Hübener’s opposition to the regime was undoubtedly fueled by his moral indignation against Nazism, a moral indignation that flowed from his upbringing as a Latter-day Saint. Nevertheless, Hübener’s actions endangered his co-religionists. The reaction of the Church as an institution was ambiguous, first cutting Hübener off, in large part as a defensive measure, and then posthumously acknowledging the justice of his actions through reinstatement.

Conclusion

In the end, there is no simple answer to the question of whether or not Latter-day Saints may engage in civil disobedience. The twelfth article of faith suggests an almost unlimited obligation to comply with secular law.15 The Articles of Faith, however, are not the only place where Restoration scripture discusses the obligation to obey the law. The Doctrine


15. It is striking, for example, that the text of the twelfth article of faith goes out of its way to insist that the obligation to sustain the law is not contingent on the particular form of government, insisting that Latter-day Saints are to be “subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates” (A of F 1:12).
and Covenants suggests a more limited duty of obedience, one that is broadly speaking contingent on the legal system being what might be called “a nearly just . . . regime.”16 In practice, Latter-day Saints and their leaders have endorsed both conscientious objection and civil disobedience at different times and depending on the circumstance. When pushed by a hostile state, some Saints have been willing to declare, as did Rudger Clawson, that if “the laws of my country should come in contact with the laws of God, . . . I shall invariably choose the latter.”17 However, history also reveals that the calculus for Latter-day Saints has never been as simple as Clawson suggested. Church leaders have generally counseled obedience to unjust laws coupled with engagement to improve them. More tellingly, in the face of at-times suspicious and vicious governments, Latter-day Saints have been counseled to obey the law as a way of protecting themselves and their community from predatory state actors. In short, the Restoration does not provide us with any neat or clear answer to the perennial question of where to draw the line between the claims of God and the claims of Caesar. Rather, it gives Latter-day Saints a native tradition within which they may consider such questions.

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16. This term is borrowed from the political philosopher John Rawls, who uses it in his discussion of the obligation to obey the law. See John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 293.

17. “Sentence of Rudger Clawson, and His Speech before the Court,” 741.
“As a righteous, endowed Latter-day Saint woman, you speak and teach with power and authority from God,” declared President Russell M. Nelson in October 2019. Women are “endowed with God’s power flowing from their priesthood covenants.” The endowment, he taught, bestows “a gift of God’s priesthood power” and “a gift of knowledge” about how to draw upon that power.¹ These teachings came at the close of a decade in which questions about the relationship of women and priesthood in the Church received intensifying discussion by leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

While the idea of female ordination to ecclesiastical offices does not seem to be an open topic in official Church discourse, there have been various formulations in thinking over time about where women fit into the larger picture of priesthood in the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Discussions about women and priesthood in the Church have played out over the past two centuries within specific historical contexts. While much more could be said in terms of analysis and interpretation, this essay takes a descriptive, contextual approach to tracing key inflection points in Latter-day Saints’ discussions of women’s relationship to the priesthood. The period divisions are necessarily somewhat arbitrary, and the examples discussed should be construed as representative rather than comprehensive. Moreover, as the following discussion will show, it should be noted at the outset that the meaning and usage of many priesthood-related terms—such as “ordain,” “set apart,” “confer,”

“keys,” and “preside”—have changed over time, and such terms were often used with less precision than in current practice and publications.² For that matter, definition and understanding of priesthood itself has evolved over time.³ My hope is that a clearer sense of the origins and development of the discussion over time will provide better ground for its continuance.

1840s: “The Ancient Priesthood”

The essential starting point, and seemingly inexhaustible seedbed, for all discussions about women and priesthood is Joseph Smith’s teachings to the Nauvoo Relief Society in 1842. In these sermons, we find three entangled threads pertaining to priesthood: ecclesiastical authority to lead and administer the organization, initiation into the order of the priesthood bestowed through temple ordinances, and charismatic power to administer healing rituals.⁴

I use the word “entangled” to describe the relationship of these threads because they were heavily entwined and largely undifferentiated. The primary reason for this entanglement is that Joseph used language that has been associated, then and now, with priesthood. Records of his words also contain significant ambiguity, providing room for differing interpretations according to the changing contexts within which his language has been cited.

In regard to ecclesiastical authority, Joseph clearly envisioned an integral place for women in the Church. He said that Emma and her counselors were to be “ordained” to their positions and “preside” over

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⁴. This analysis is influenced by Jonathan Stapley’s formulation of temple priesthood as “cosmological” and authority to administer ordinances as “liturgical.” Stapley, Power of Godliness. See, for example, Joseph Smith, Journal, April 28, 1842, in Andrew H. Hedges and others, eds., Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 52.
the Society—“just as the Presidency, preside over the church.” Other officers could be “appointed and set apart” if needed, “as Deacons, Teachers &c. are among us [that is, in the male priesthood quorums].”5 Joseph suggested that he expected the women to be largely self-governing and to take initiative both to “relieve the poor” and to “save souls.”6

Establishment of the Relief Society incorporated women’s organization and leadership into the formal structure of the Church, a significant departure from previous practice. Still, while Joseph established the precedent of female presidencies analogous to male priesthood presidencies, he did not establish—nor did Emma and the women of the Relief Society establish—quorums or priesthood offices for women. Moreover, Joseph repeatedly affirmed the need for order and even subordination within the Church. It was necessary, he said, for “every individual [to act] in the sphere allotted to him or her” and “aspire only to magnify his own office.” He also cautioned that the Society was to “get instruction thro’ the order which God has established—thro’ the medium of those appointed to lead.”7 Note that he did not explain whether “the medium of those appointed to lead” referred to the Relief Society presidency, the priesthood hierarchy, or both.

Priesthood’s relationship to the temple is the overarching context for Joseph’s teachings to the women of Nauvoo. In the months following the organization of the Relief Society, he delivered several sermons to the women in which priesthood language and concepts figured prominently. The most significant of these was the discourse of April 28, 1842, which Joseph characterized in his journal as “a lecture on the priesthood” showing “how the Sisters would come in possession

5. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes, March 17, 1842,” in The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History, ed., Jill Mulvay Derr and others (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 31.

Joseph Smith’s statement about officers for the Relief Society parallels the recollection of Sarah M. Kimball, who said that Joseph told her he would organize the women “in the Order of the Priesthood after the pattern of the church,” likely referring to the established pattern of appointing a president and counselors over the various priesthood quorums. “4.10 Sarah M. Kimball, Reminiscence, March 17, 1882,” in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 495. Eliza R. Snow sometimes referred to the Relief Society as a “quorum.” See, for example, “3.6 Eliza R. Snow, ‘Female Relief Society,’ [Deseret Evening News,] April 18, 1868,” in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 271.

6. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” June 9, 1842, in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 79.

of the privileges & blessings [sic] & gifts of the priesthood.’” He affirmed that the “keys of the kingdom” were about to be given to the women as well as to the elders, and he declared, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time.”

“Key,” of course, was a crucial term in Joseph Smith’s lexicon: the revelations often connected “keys” with priesthood (for example, D&C 81:2; 84:19, 26; 107:18, 20) but also referred to “keys” of revelation, restoration, and translation (for example, D&C 27:5–6, 9, 12–13; 64:5). If Joseph intended to give “priesthood keys” to the Relief Society or its leaders in some sense, he did not explain it. We do know that he used the term “keys of the kingdom” during this same period in reference to the temple, and this seems the mostly likely meaning for his statements to the women. Indeed, just one week after speaking these words to the women of the Relief Society, Joseph introduced the endowment to nine close male associates.

It would be sixteen months before women received all the temple ordinances and thus joined the “temple quorum,” largely due to Emma Smith’s vacillating feelings about plural marriage. Nonetheless, it is clear that Joseph always intended to include women in the temple and expressed this intention to others. In remarks to the Relief Society shortly after becoming one of the first to receive the endowment, Bishop Newel K. Whitney exulted, “Without the female all things cannot be restor’d to the earth it takes all to restore the Priesthood.” That restoration would include ordinances of washing and anointing (adapted from the Kirtland Temple and later called the “initiatory”), endowment, marriage sealing

10. For example, see Joseph Smith, “Discourse, 1 May 1842, as Reported by Willard Richards,” 94, Smith Papers, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-1-may-1842-as-reported-by-willard-richards/#source-note; see also Elizabeth A. Kuehn and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 10: May–August 1842*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2020), 6–7: “The keys are certain signs & words by which false spirits & personages may be detected from true.— which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed.” See also “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women.”
12. See discussion of this event, including the term “temple quorum,” in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 75 n. 188.
13. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” May 27, 1842, in Derr and others, *First Fifty Years*, 75–76.
Women’s Relationship to Priesthood

( monogamous or polygamous), and a culminating ordinance known as the second anointing. The latter two ordinances had to be received jointly by a husband and wife.

By the time of Joseph Smith’s death, a few dozen men and women had received these ordinances and related instruction from him, meeting together often as a group. Contemporary journals of some participants refer to the group as the Council, the Quorum, the Holy Order, and the Holy Priesthood. These people called themselves “the priesthood,” reflecting the collective sense of priesthood as comprising priests and priestesses. That is, they understood themselves to have entered into the highest order of the priesthood by making covenants and receiving temple ordinances, as reflected in Joseph’s now-canonized teachings referring to these ordinances as an “order of the priesthood” (D&C 131:2). In this context, it is worth stressing, “the priesthood” included women.

The idea that “it takes all to restore the priesthood” and that salvation (or “exaltation,” as it began to be called) could only be received jointly by a sealed man and woman was certainly a radical one that opened new spiritual avenues and status to women. But it was implemented in the context of an androcentric culture that accepted as fundamental New Testament teachings about the subordination of women. This context becomes especially clear in sources dating to the postmartyrdom period when Smith’s successors sought to implement temple ordinances more broadly as the temple neared completion. For example, Heber C. Kimball’s journal, which records multiple meetings of the temple quorum in 1845, is riddled with statements underscoring the subordinate status of women. Moreover, Brigham Young’s hostility to Emma Smith and the Relief Society undoubtedly prompted his edict disbanding the Relief Society and his declaration that women “must be led” into the celestial kingdom by men and that they “never can hold the keys of the Priesthood apart from their husband.” This pervasive rhetoric of male headship adds another layer

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14. These references are ubiquitous in the primary sources in Devery S. Anderson and Gary James Bergera, ed., Joseph Smith’s Quorum of the Anointed, 1842–1845 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2005). See also “The Quorum,” Glossary, Joseph Smith Papers, http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/topic/quorum-the. In the Utah era, this group also came to be known as the Anointed Quorum.


16. “1.13 Brigham Young, Discourses, March 9, 1845 (Excerpts),” in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 171. See also Brooke R. LeFevre, “I Would Not Risk My Salvation to
of complexity to interpretations of the Nauvoo-era and postmartyrdom understanding of temples, priesthood, and women.

The third thread of connection between women and priesthood in Joseph Smith’s teachings to the Relief Society was ritual authority to lay on hands and bless the sick. He insisted that women’s participation in these practices was “according to revelation” and that “it is no sin for any body to do it that has faith.” “If the sisters should have faith to heal the sick,” he said, “let all hold their tongues, and let every thing roll on.”

Healing had been considered one of the restored gifts of the gospel, as outlined anciently in the New Testament, but there was a great deal of variation in the ritual among Latter-day Saints. The practice of laying on hands (by both men and women) existed alongside the admonition to call “the elders of the church,” with no clear distinction about when one or the other was preferred. Joseph Smith’s affirmation of women’s healing practices, then, authorized their participation in rituals that could also be identified with priesthood.

Addressing the Relief Society on the subject of healing, Smith exhorted the sisters to see that “wherein they are ordaind, it is the privilege of those set apart to administer in that authority which is confer’d on them.” This statement may refer to women who were specially “ordained and set apart” to administer to the sick. It could also apply to Emma Smith and her counselors, a rebuke to those who evidently criticized these sisters for laying on hands to bless. As recorded, though, Joseph’s statement offers no explicit explanation of who had been “ordaind” or what “authority” had been “confer’d” upon them.

Moreover, it is important to understand that Joseph Smith envisioned the temple as the ultimate site for healing; salvific ordinances adapted

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17. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 55, 59.
19. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 55.
to healing—such as baptism for health and washing and anointing the sick—were implemented as part of the temple liturgy. This seems to be the most pertinent context for his remarks to the Relief Society on healing. “The time had not been before, that these things [that is, laying on hands to bless the sick] could be in their proper order,” he said, “and cannot be until the Temple is completed.”

However, even if we understand the temple as the context for Joseph’s endorsement of female ritual healing, some ambiguity remains. Did he mean that women’s healing practices were intended to take place within the temple? Or did he mean that the endowment to be received in the temple would impart the necessary power for them to bless the sick in any setting? For that matter, if his statement referred specifically to Emma and her counselors, did he believe that their “ordination” to leadership conferred authority to heal? He did not say. In any case, the practice flourished in subsequent decades, followed by controversy.

By the mid-1840s, then, Latter-day Saints’ understanding of women and priesthood encompassed the threads of ecclesiastical office and authority, sacral power bestowed through the temple, and performance of ordinance and ritual, including both healing and temple ceremonies. Much subsequent development in priesthood practice and discourse would consist of disentangling these threads.

1850–1900: “In Connection with Their Husbands”

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the three threads of women’s connection to priesthood persisted and solidified, but they were also somewhat disentangled.

In regard to the first thread—ecclesiastical—women’s authority to lead within the Church expanded over the course of the last third of the nineteenth century. After a few localized revivals of the Relief Society in early Utah, Brigham Young commissioned Eliza R. Snow in 1868 to reorganize the Relief Society throughout the Church, beginning the process of establishing groups in every local unit. In 1870, a Retrenchment Association was organized to promote thrift and economic and social solidarity among Latter-day Saint women; a Young Ladies’ Department—later renamed the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement

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23. “1.2 Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” April 28, 1842, in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 54.
24. See “3.5 Eliza R. Snow, Account of 1868 Commission, as Recorded in ‘Sketch of My Life,’ April 13, 1885 (Excerpt),” in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 266–69.
Association—followed. In 1878, the Primary Association was established to provide religious and moral training for children. All of these organizations were headed by women and came to feature presidencies, boards, and other leadership positions at the ward, stake, and general levels, and they functioned together as a vibrant women’s sphere within the Church.

It became customary for women leaders to be commissioned for their service by receiving a blessing from a male priesthood leader by the laying on of hands, and the expressions “ordain” and “set apart” came to be used in such blessings, seemingly interchangeably. In organizing the first general presidencies of the women’s organizations in July 1880, President John Taylor demonstrated this practice. In the blessing he pronounced upon Eliza R. Snow, he used both terms: “I set thee apart to preside over the Relief Societies,” he said, and “ordain thee to this office.” He “ordained” one of Eliza’s counselors and “set apart” the other.

On that same occasion, however, President Taylor felt it necessary to offer clarification. Referring to the “ordination” of Emma Smith and her counselors in the original Relief Society, which was explicitly invoked as the precedent for his actions in 1880, he observed, “The ordination then given did not mean the confering of the Priesthood upon those sisters.” Taylor’s clarification reflected a trend toward codification of priesthood language: “ordain” and its cognates increasingly referred specifically to priesthood ordination, while “set apart” applied to any calling or capacity. The latter—including all offices held by women—were still official positions within the Church and were generally filled with some involvement of priesthood leaders, but they were not priesthood offices and did not require priesthood ordination; indeed, they were subject to governance by priesthood leaders. This understanding has continued to govern women’s service in the Church to the present day.

A significant new development in the ecclesiastical thread occurred around the turn of the century when the calling of the first single sister missionaries opened a new arena of service for women. While there was never any consideration of ordaining women missionaries to priesthood offices or permitting them to perform priesthood ordinances such as baptism or confirmation, they did receive a call and commission that was otherwise parallel to that given to men. This new opportunity raised

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all manner of questions about priesthood, gender, and precedence. Male leaders acted quickly to “domesticate” women’s missionary work and to maintain boundaries between men’s and women’s functions. Nonetheless, women missionaries went forward in increasing numbers, gaining visibility and credibility as official representatives of the Church.27

When John Taylor stated in 1880 that Emma Smith’s “ordination” did not include conferral of the priesthood, he added a clarification that speaks to the temple thread of women and priesthood. He said, “Yet the sisters hold a portion of the Priesthood in connection with their husbands.” This expression—that women held the priesthood, or a “portion” of the priesthood, “in connection with their husbands”—was rather commonplace in Latter-day Saints’ discourse in the last half of the nineteenth century.28 This language was reflected in revisions to the Nauvoo Relief Society Minutes when they were edited by Church historians for inclusion in the History of the Church, which recast Joseph Smith’s language regarding women and priesthood as advocating male headship.29 Nonetheless, expressions of women holding priesthood “in connection with their husbands” seem to reflect the lingering influence of Nauvoo-era temple theology: by being sealed together in the temple, women and men jointly entered into an “order of the priesthood,” giving women some sense of priesthood status (D&C 131:2).

Elder Franklin D. Richards made perhaps the most forceful statement in this vein. Speaking in 1888 to the Relief Society of the Weber Stake, over which his wife Jane presided, Richards addressed the men in the audience directly.30 Other than ordination to priesthood office, he


29. For a full discussion of this incident and the full text of the revised minutes, see “2.2 Joseph Smith, Discourses to Nauvoo Female Relief Society, March 31 and April 28, 1842, as Revised for ‘History of Joseph Smith,’ September 5 and 19, 1855,” in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 198–208.

30. Jane Snyder Richards married Franklin D. Richards in Nauvoo in 1842. They later participated in plural marriage. See entries for both in “Biographical Directory,” Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 667–68.
insisted, “our sisters share with us any and all of the ordinances of the holy anointing, endowments, sealings, sanctifications and blessings that we have been made partakers of.” “Is it possible,” Richards continued, “that we have the holy priesthood and our wives have none of it?”

All such assertions made a positive claim—women had “priesthood”—alongside a qualification of the claim—“in connection” or “a portion.” Elder Richards’s strong assertions about women’s inclusion in priesthood, based on temple ordinances and echoing ideas that had circulated since Nauvoo, demonstrated that the understanding of a connection between temple and priesthood lingered but also that its implications were contested. Richards made a powerful case that women’s temple ordinances had bestowed a form of priesthood upon them, but like the authors of many similar statements scattered throughout contemporary sources, he envisioned women’s “priesthood” as shared and did not claim that it bestowed any specific authority.

During this period, the threads of ritual authority and temple priesthood remained entwined because the temple continued to serve as a site for physical healing. Indeed, this was a primary purpose for which many Latter-day Saints attended the temple. Baptisms for health, performed by men, and anointing and blessing the sick, performed by both women and men, offered a vibrant healing liturgy within the temple and a sanctioned status for women who administered the rituals. Moreover, both inside and outside of the temple, the late nineteenth century was the high point for women’s participation in rituals that involved laying on hands. Women blessed the sick, washed and anointed each other in preparation for childbirth, and gave blessings of comfort and prophecy. Some women were set apart under the auspices of the Relief Society to administer to the sick or to serve as midwives and medical

31. “4.20 Franklin D. Richards, Discourse, July 19, 1888,” in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 552.
32. See Elder Richards’s statement in this discourse that some men considered women’s work in the Church as being “out of their line and place” and that some men had “feelings of envy and jealousy” and “would like to keep [women] back.” Such brethren “withhold blessings from themselves,” Richards asserted. Richards, Discourse, 546–47.
34. See Stapley and Wright, “‘They Shall Be Made Whole,’” esp. 92–105.
practitioners within their communities, offering both physical care and spiritual administration.35

Both women and men consistently expressed confidence that these practices were legitimate, but questions repeatedly emerged about the authority by which women performed them. In 1880, the Quorum of the Twelve drafted a circular letter affirming that “all faithful women and lay members of the church” had the privilege “to administer to all the sick or afflicted in their respective families, either by the laying on of hands, or by the anointing with oil in the name of the Lord.” This should be done “not by virtue and authority of the priesthood, but by virtue of their faith in Christ, and the promises made to believers.”36

While Eliza R. Snow repeatedly affirmed this understanding—that women did not administer to the sick by priesthood authority—she sometimes suggested that women’s administration was authorized or enabled by the endowment, an assertion that the First Presidency did not endorse.37 The practice of anointing and blessing by men, invoking priesthood authority, existed side by side with the more general practice of healing by faith, with the same people engaging at different times in the various forms without anyone explaining why one was preferred in a given instance.38 Questions and disagreements show the beginning of a long process of

36. “4.8 Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Draft Circular Letter, October 6, 1880 (Excerpt), in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 489. In 1888, President Wilford Woodruff affirmed essentially the same principle with specific reference to washing and anointing expectant mothers. He cautioned that such practices should not be called “ordinances” in order to retain a distinction between them and the washings and anointings performed in the temple. “4.19 Wilford Woodruff, Letter to Emmeline B. Wells, April 27, 1888,” in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 542.
37. Eliza R. Snow said, “Any and all sisters who honor their holy endowments, not only have the right, but should feel it a duty, whenever called upon to administer to our sisters in these ordinances.” “4.14 Eliza R. Snow, ‘To the Branches of the Relief Society,’ September 12, 1884,” Woman’s Exponent 13, no. 8 (September 15, 1884): 61, in Derr and others, First Fifty Years, 516; see note 256 on that page for the First Presidency’s correction of Snow. See also discussion of this question in Stapley and Wright, “Female Ritual Healing,” 36–40.
disentangling the various ritual forms of administering to the sick and of asserting the primacy of priesthood administration, a process that would unfold over the next half-century.39

1900–1940: “The Blessings of the Priesthood”

In the first half of the twentieth century, the threads of women’s relationship to priesthood were further disentangled, and discussions about women and priesthood reached a point of stability that has more or less undergirded all subsequent discourse. Women did not “hold” the priesthood in any sense, but they shared in all its blessings. This understanding came to be expressed through a paradigm that posited priesthood and motherhood as parallel and equivalent callings.

The key backdrop to these developments was the priesthood reform movement initiated by President Joseph F. Smith and continued by President Heber J. Grant, which served to bring the modern Church into being. This movement involved “administrative modernization,” theological compilation and elaboration, and standardization of ritual practices. Priesthood was a central concern in all these efforts.40 Animated by progressive impulses to create order and rational organization, this movement emphasized the week-to-week ecclesiastical applications of priesthood in the local congregation and elevated priesthood quorums over auxiliaries as “the ruling, presiding, authority in the Church.”41 The results carried implications for all three threads of women’s relationship to priesthood.

Priesthood reform coalesced around President Joseph F. Smith’s definition of priesthood as “the power of God delegated to man by which man can act in the earth for the salvation of the human family.”42 Smith

41. Joseph F. Smith, “Editor’s Table: On Church Government,” Improvement Era 6, no. 9 (July 1903): 705.
42. Joseph F. Smith, in Seventy-Fifth Semi-annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1904), 5. Smith’s definition was not sui generis but brought together elements of
consciously distinguished between priesthood as the power of God or “the principle of power” animating priesthood office and what he called priesthood’s “ordinary meaning” of “a class or body of men set apart for sacred duties, or holding the priestly office” (that is, priesthood in the collective sense). This distinction, which gave rise to the practice of first conferring the priesthood upon a man and then ordaining him to a specific office in the priesthood, served to elevate an abstract concept of priesthood that further distanced Latter-day Saints from the sacral, collective sense that could include women, as reflected in Nauvoo-era temple ordinances.

Priesthood reform was in part a response to the significant expansion of auxiliary organizations and programs within the Church, which continued apace in the early twentieth century. This expansion opened even more opportunities for women to serve in recognized Church positions, but the fundamental understanding remained that setting women apart for those positions did not constitute priesthood ordination.

The most significant development in women’s ecclesiastical relationship to priesthood during this era occurred on the structural level. Joseph F. Smith made it clear that the women’s organizations (along with the Sunday Schools and Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Associations) were auxiliaries, subordinate to governing priesthood lines of authority at all levels. He predicted a day when “there will not be so much necessity for work that is now being done by the auxiliary organizations, because it will be done by the regular quorums of the Priesthood.” In principle, women’s organizations had always affirmed their subordination to priesthood leadership; priesthood reform put that principle into practice in expanded, concrete ways that meant a diminished role for the Relief Society as an umbrella for women’s organizations and a loss of some autonomy and latitude for women’s leadership.

his own and earlier authorities’ discourse about priesthood and articulated them in a concise formulation.


44. See Stapley, Power of Godliness, 23–26. Stapley describes the crucial shift from “viewing priesthood as channeling the power of God” to describing priesthood “as the power of God.” Stapley, Power of Godliness, 12, emphasis in original.

45. Joseph F. Smith, in Seventy-Sixth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 1906), 3.

The sense of women “sharing” something received in the temple lingered, but what was it they shared? President Joseph F. Smith was adamant that women did not share or “hold” the priesthood with their husbands; they did, however, jointly “enjoy the benefits therefrom.” Elder James E. Talmage, considered the doctrinal expert among the Twelve in this era, took up the subject as well. In his book about the temple, he acknowledged the lingering influence of earlier views. “It is a precept of the Church that women of the Church share the authority of the Priesthood with their husbands,” he wrote. This sharing of priesthood authority made it unnecessary for women to be “ordained to specific rank in the Priesthood.” In this formulation, “priesthood” has taken on an entirely ecclesiastical meaning; the sense of a priesthood associated with the temple is gone. Two years later, Talmage expressed this view even more clearly, in terms more parallel to President Smith’s: “It is not given to woman to exercise the authority of the Priesthood independently; nevertheless, in the sacred endowments associated with the ordinances pertaining to the House of the Lord, woman shares with man the blessings of the Priesthood.”

In this same article, Elder Talmage set forth an essentialist view of gender that he believed explained the priesthood order in this life. Men and women retain their “sex” (in his terms) “fundamentally, unchangeably, eternally.” Given this truth, Talmage taught, “woman occupies

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47. Joseph F. Smith, “Questions and Answers,” Improvement Era 10, no. 4 (February 1907): 308. This column was part of the monthly Editor’s Table section, written (and usually signed) by Joseph F. Smith. Many pieces from this series were later collected in Gospel Doctrine. The question was “Does a wife hold the priesthood in connection with her husband? and may she lay hands on the sick with him, with authority?” I will discuss the question of healing below.


a position all her own in the eternal economy of the Creator; and in that position she is as truly superior to man as is he to her in his appointed place.”51 Whatever that “position all her own” might be (Talmage did not elaborate), women’s subordination was part of the plan: “It is part of woman’s mission in this life to occupy a secondary position of authority in the activities of the world, both in the home and in the affairs of public concern.” This arrangement was rational: “In every organization, however simple or complex, there must needs be a centralization of authority, in short, a head.” A gender hierarchy, at least in this mortal realm, is ordered by God’s wisdom; priesthood assignment flows from that order.52

Proxy temple work and regular temple attendance were expanding dramatically during this period, under the umbrella of priesthood reform and liturgical modernization.53 Talmage’s teachings reflect the profound shift in understanding this movement had effected. All priesthood was now seen through the lens of ecclesiology and liturgy. Rather than the temple being a source of priesthood, the emphasis was on priesthood as the authority that enabled temple ordinances. As Joseph F. Smith taught, women did not “hold the priesthood in connection with their husbands”54—that is, temple ordinances did not bestow priesthood upon participants—but women shared in all the blessings of the priesthood (that is, all blessings made available through the priesthood, including the ultimate blessings promised in the temple, were available to women). In one sense, President Smith’s reformulation could be seen as a refutation of those earlier understandings about women holding the priesthood in connection with their husbands, but it also made plain something that had always been implied in those expressions: if priesthood meant ecclesiastical office and authority, women clearly did not hold the priesthood.

Men were not the only ones to examine priesthood theology in this era. Susa Young Gates—a prominent figure among Latter-day Saint women who served on the Relief Society general board, founded and edited the Relief Society Magazine, and relentlessly advocated genealogy

52. Talmage, “Eternity of Sex,” 602. He did not cite a source for this “Divine requirement.”
and temple work—had grappled with questions about gender and priesthood throughout her life. In the 1920s, she collaborated with her daughter, Leah Widtsoe, to articulate a rationale for the gendered order, echoing the terms expressed by Joseph F. Smith and James E. Talmage. “Women do not hold the priesthood, but they do share equally in the blessings and gifts bestowed on the priesthood in temple courts, in civic, social and domestic life,” they wrote in 1926.

Gates and Widtsoe went beyond this assertion, seeking a rationale. In short, women did not hold the priesthood because they were mothers: “No woman could safely carry the triple burden of wifehood, motherhood, and at the same time function in priestly orders. Yet her creative home labor ranks side by side, in earthly and heavenly importance, with her husband’s priestly responsibilities.”55 That is to say, men have priesthood; women have motherhood. Gates and Widtsoe seem to be the origin of this paradigm, which they considered wholly satisfactory.

The priesthood/motherhood paradigm has proven to be extremely durable in Latter-day Saint thought. Leah Widtsoe elaborated and popularized the idea through a series of articles in the Church news section of the Deseret News, published in 1934. Like Talmage, she was a progressive thinker who emphasized the need for a rational, efficient line of accountability and “division of responsibility” in society, home, and church. Motherhood would consume all of the energies of a righteous woman, she argued; “the added burden” of priesthood “would be just that much too much in her life of home building and conservation.”56 Righteous mothers would have “no time nor desire for anything greater, for there is nothing greater on earth!”57

Leah’s husband, Elder John A. Widtsoe, gave the priesthood/motherhood paradigm official imprimatur when he incorporated key passages from her articles into his important work, Priesthood and Church Government.58 This extremely popular and influential book served as a

course of study, a standard reference work, and a source for curriculum writers for the rest of the twentieth century.

In this work, John Widtsoe argued that women’s sharing of priesthood blessings with men was made clear in the temple. “The ordinances of the Temple are distinctly of Priesthood character,” he wrote, “yet women have access to all of them, and the highest blessings of the Temple are conferred only upon a man and his wife jointly.”59 He did not explain what it meant for temple ordinances to be “of Priesthood character,” but this statement reflects the fundamental understanding that those ordinances were essential to salvation and necessarily required joint inclusion of women and men. Where the earlier understanding of temple, priesthood, and marriage had been entwined with plural marriage and a more communal understanding of salvation, emphasis had now shifted to “temple marriage” within the framework of monogamy and the ideal of partnership in marriage as the basis for modern middle-class American life. Temple marriage became a subject of emphasis in discourse aimed at young people, complete with startling statistics about the number of Latter-day Saints marrying outside the temple.60

As these normative understandings of priesthood in the Church and temple solidified, sanction for women’s participation in healing rituals came to an end. In a 1914 circular letter, the First Presidency under Joseph F. Smith endorsed women’s blessing of the sick, affirming that “any good sister, full of faith in God and in the efficacy of prayer, may officiate.” In the same letter, however, they emphasized that women should “confirm” rather than “seal” anointings—presumably because “sealing” was associated with priesthood—and that “the command of the Lord is to call in the elders to administer to the sick,” giving primacy to priesthood blessings.61

59. Widtsoe, Priesthood and Church Government, 83. Widtsoe is quoting from his book The Program of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1936), 79.


This pattern of emphasizing priesthood administration without explicitly forbidding women to bless the sick continued in successive decades; meanwhile, the ritual form for administering to the sick was codified in priesthood manuals and handbooks as a Melchizedek Priesthood ordinance. An important step toward the end of sanctioned women’s healing practices came with the reformation of temple liturgy and practice in 1922. Under the leadership of President Heber J. Grant and Elder George F. Richards (Apostle and president of the Salt Lake Temple), healing rituals were removed from the temple, and the men and women who had served as temple healers were released. This removed a visible, authorized place for women to administer blessings at a time when the emphasis on priesthood reform had already rendered such practices increasingly anomalous. Women did, however, continue to lay on hands as part of officiating in certain temple ordinances, something that continues to the present.

To be sure, some leaders made strident statements explicitly discouraging women’s healing practices. Speaking in general conference in 1921, President Charles W. Penrose decried what he called “a revival of the idea among some of our sisters that they hold the Priesthood.” Penrose affirmed that women shared the blessings of the priesthood when they were sealed to their husbands, but he stated unequivocally, “The sisters are not ordained to any office in the Priesthood and there is authority in the Church which they cannot exercise; it does not belong to them.” Penrose allowed that women had authority to bless the sick “in one way”—quoting from Jesus’s exhortation about spiritual gifts—and said it might be appropriate on “occasions,” alluding to blessing pregnant women. “But when women go around and declare that they have been set apart to administer to the sick and take the place that is given to the elders of the Church by revelation,” he said, “that is an assumption of authority and contrary to scripture.” Penrose’s talk seems to have

64. Charles W. Penrose, “How Revelation from God to the Church Is Received,” Improvement Era 24, no. 8 (June 1921): 678. It is not clear what perceived “revival” prompted Penrose’s denunciation.
65. Penrose also denounced women holding meetings to speak in tongues and prophesy without permission of priesthood authorities. Penrose, “Revelation from God,” 678–79.
been a turning point after which women’s healing practices decreased significantly.\textsuperscript{66}

In 1946, general Relief Society leaders asked Joseph Fielding Smith, Apostle and doctrinal authority who had spoken forcefully in favor of priesthood administration, to draft a letter in response to queries about women’s healing practices. This letter presumably provided authoritative answers that could be sent out over the signature of the women. The fact that the women felt it necessary to have such a letter suggests that they continued to receive questions about women’s administration to the sick, likely reflecting uneven practice and understanding in the Church at large; the fact that they turned to a male authority to answer the questions indicates that they considered healing practices to be under the purview of the priesthood. Smith wrote that “the authorities” feel “it is far better for us to follow the plan the Lord has given us and send for the elders of the Church to come and administer to the sick and afflicted.” Women had “greatly abused” and “improperly done” these things in the past, Fielding Smith’s letter asserted, referring specifically to washing and anointing pregnant women, the one remaining form of female ritual healing that had maintained some legitimacy to that point.\textsuperscript{67}

For their part, women leaders said little publicly about healing. Relief Society general president Louise Robison, who served from 1928 to 1939, told one correspondent in a 1935 letter that “this beautiful ordinance” of washing and anointing expectant mothers should be done “very quietly” and only when priesthood authorities did not take “a definite stand” against it.\textsuperscript{68} Joseph Fielding Smith’s 1946 letter certainly seemed to constitute a “definite stand,” even though some of his other writings were more equivocal.\textsuperscript{69}

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\textsuperscript{66} Stapley and Wright note that “after this point, washing and anointings for childbirth make up the preponderance of documented female-only rituals.” Stapley and Wright, “Female Ritual Healing,” 72.

\textsuperscript{67} Joseph Fielding Smith, Letter, July 29, 1946, Relief Society Washing and Anointing File, CR 11 304, box 1, fd. 1, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, quoted in Stapley and Wright, “Female Ritual Healing,” 81.


\textsuperscript{69} For example, in \textit{Doctrines of Salvation}, Joseph Fielding Smith emphasized priesthood administration and outlined proper procedures, but he also quoted Joseph Smith’s sermon to the Relief Society and his own father’s (Joseph F.) qualified endorsement of a
It is impossible to discern now how much women’s healing practices were stamped out and how much they simply faded, perhaps along generational lines due to changing sensibilities. Charismatic practices were increasingly seen as old-fashioned, and with the Relief Society vigorously promoting progressive engagement in medicine and social work, calling in the sisters to anoint and bless an expectant mother, for example, must have seemed incongruous with the modern worldview taking hold. Moreover, in cases where a belief in such practices and a desire to engage in them continued, the disapproving rhetoric of priesthood leaders likely drove them underground or stopped them altogether. The result was that in official discourse and lay practice, the idea of women laying on hands to bless the sick all but disappeared, and this thread of women’s connection to priesthood was severed.

1960s: “The Home Is the Basis”

By the mid-twentieth century, Latter-day Saint discourse about women and priesthood had taken familiar and lasting form. Priesthood was power and authority from God; it was the governing principle of the Church. Men were ordained to the priesthood in accordance with a divinely appointed division of assignments that ensured order and reflected essential gendered characteristics. Women’s assignment as mothers was parallel to men’s assignment as priesthood holders. Women had access to and shared in the ultimate realization of all of the blessings of the priesthood through their husbands, the ecclesiastical system of the Church, and the ordinances of the temple. Women served as ordinance workers in the temple, based on authority delegated from priesthood leaders. Likewise, they held positions of recognized authority in their auxiliary organizations, but those organizations were subject to governance by priesthood authority. This understanding has remained remarkably stable and continues to undergird discourse about priesthood even now.

husband and wife unitedly administering to their children. Joseph Fielding Smith allowed that “a woman may lay hands upon the head of a sick child and ask the Lord to bless it, in the case when those holding the priesthood cannot be present” but reiterated that “a woman would have no authority to anoint or seal a blessing.” Joseph Fielding Smith, Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3178. Fielding Smith’s familiarity with the teachings of Joseph Smith, reflected in his popular compilation of the Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, may have kept him from making the blanket prohibition against female ritual healing he might otherwise have preferred. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 224–25.
The mid-century Priesthood Correlation movement headed by then Elder Harold B. Lee has rightly been seen in terms of its administrative, ecclesiastical, and structural implications for the Church. In practical terms, Correlation’s emphasis on priesthood governance resulted in further subordination of women’s organizations and severely curtailed women’s autonomy and influence. But it is important to understand that Correlation was rooted in a particular view of priesthood that enshrined it as the basis of the home and family. Lee himself expressed this view: The purpose of Correlation, he said, was to place “the Priesthood as the Lord intended, as the center core of the Kingdom of God, and the auxiliaries as related thereto; including a greater emphasis on the Fathers in the home as Priesthood bearers in strengthening the family unit.” The key to the whole movement, Lee explained, was found in a First Presidency statement: “The home is the basis of a righteous life and no other instrumentality can take its place nor fulfil its essential functions.” The vision of efficient Church organizations was related to the vision of righteous homes, and vice versa, with priesthood as the central and unifying element.

At the height of the Correlation movement in the 1960s and ’70s, “priesthood” became a ubiquitous term and a frequent subject of emphasis. Priesthood referred collectively to the men who held it and to the (male) governing structure of the Church. It is not always possible to tell which sense any given speaker was employing. Women were to honor and follow the priesthood—in their homes, in their personal lives, and collectively in their organizations. “There can be nothing more fundamental in the Church than a faithful sister supporting the priesthood, whether it be her husband, or her designated authority in the ward, stake, or mission,” declared Presiding Bishop Robert L. Simpson in 1967.

71. Harold B. Lee, regional representatives seminar, 2–3, in Bruce C. Hafen, A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 325. Lee was speaking at a regional representatives’ training seminar. Note that his statement regarding the auxiliaries echoes Joseph F. Smith’s 1906 statement quoted above.
72. Harold B. Lee, in One Hundred Thirty-Second Semi-annual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1962), 72.
An address by Elder Mark E. Petersen to Relief Society leaders expresses many themes typical of this era. He taught that the priesthood was “the divinely established foundation of a happy home life.” Temple ordinances assured each family of “the presence of the priesthood in the home.” When men and women are married in the temple, he said, “they jointly and together enter into the same covenants under the priesthood and receive the same promises of divine beneficence,” and they take this priesthood into their home.\(^5\) Note the slight but consequential difference in wording here from the previous century: instead of entering into an order of the priesthood, the couple enters into “covenants under the priesthood.”

Elder Petersen defined priesthood as “the power of God transmitted to mankind.” While he no doubt would have included “authority” as part of priesthood, this definition rendered priesthood a wholly abstract concept—a power that bestowed blessings. Priesthood was “the source of peace and happiness” in the home. But “priesthood” had also become interchangeable with “men” in women’s lives. Sisters were to encourage husbands and sons to magnify their callings and to recognize their husbands as “the priestly presidents of the family.”\(^6\)

The intensity of the efforts around this vision of priesthood-centered homes helps to explain the intensity of the response to feminism and the ERA in the 1970s and beyond.

1970–2000: Feminism and Responses

From the 1970s onward, discussions about women and priesthood have taken place along two general tracks, in definite if somewhat unacknowledged dialogue with each other. I will call these the feminist and the orthodox tracks, recognizing that such terms elide a great deal of diversity in opinion and tone and that the examples I cite are representative of many others. Whether specifically advocating priesthood ordination for women or not, most feminist voices have seen problematic inequality and asymmetry in gender relations in the Church, rooted in the male-only priesthood structure. Voices in the orthodox track, on the other hand, have seen themselves as defending women’s divinely appointed identity and the Church’s revealed lines of authority.


As the women's movement gained steam in the United States at large, many Latter-day Saint women felt invigorated and challenged by the questions of feminism. Informed by their own experience in life and in the Church, they began to explore questions about women's status. Most of these women were committed, lifelong members of the Church who genuinely saw themselves as “somewhere inbetween” ultraconservative traditionalism and ultraradical feminism. Inevitably, however, their work spurred a wave of awareness and discussion, with implications for discussions about women and priesthood that grew to take on a life of their own.

Common denominators among Latter-day Saint feminists—both in the 1970s and subsequently—included a willingness to bring intellectual and scholarly analysis to bear on the subject, to question the status quo, and in some cases (but certainly not all) to directly criticize Church leaders. Many argued that women's ordination or inclusion in priesthood was necessary for full equality and participation of women. The priesthood/motherhood paradigm came under particular scrutiny: Isn’t the parallel to motherhood fatherhood? And if so, what is the female parallel to priesthood?

Such questions were often seen as threatening and disloyal, coming in the wake of the Correlation-era emphasis on priesthood in the home and the Church and against the backdrop of strident feminism in the larger culture. Orthodox voices denounced “worldly voices” or the “women of the world” in implicit contrast to “faithful” women, characterizing such worldly voices as selfish and rebellious, rejecting marriage, motherhood, and homemaking. These orthodox discussions rested, implicitly or explicitly, on the belief that motherhood is women's parallel to priesthood and that women share all the blessings of the priesthood through temple covenants and sealing to their husbands. Within this framework, motherhood was extolled as the ultimate, godly identity of women, an eternal blessing made possible through the priesthood. Not far under the surface of these discussions, as well, was an affirmation of support for the priesthood order of the Church and the authority of its

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77. Grethe Ballif Peterson, “Somewhere Inbetween,” Dialogue 6, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 74–76. Peterson's essay was part of a special issue of Dialogue (sometimes called the “pink issue”) edited and written by women specifically to explore the intersections of the women's movement and Latter-day Saint belief and culture.

78. “We are not a sisterhood seeking power as are some women of our time,” said Relief Society General President Barbara B. Smith in 1976. “A Conversation with Sister Barbara B. Smith, Relief Society General President,” Ensign 6, no. 3 (March 1976): 8.
leadership, in implicit contrast to those who would criticize. By the mid-1990s, the atmosphere had become tense and polarized, and the tension and polarization intensified when several prominent feminist writers were excommunicated.79

Meanwhile, a vibrant wave of work on women's history took shape in this same period.80 Scholars and interested readers began rediscovering primary sources such as the Woman's Exponent, institutional records, and the life writings of early leaders and Saints, where they found much that startled and challenged them: Latter-day Saint women were the first to vote in the nation and were activists in the national woman's suffrage movement. They laid on hands to bless and heal. They ran their organizations with a great deal of autonomy. Many of these sources included the language and practices related to priesthood as described above.

This historical work resonated with both orthodox and feminist thinkers. Because the Church's treatment of women was under scrutiny, stories of the faith and accomplishments of previous generations could work through orthodox channels to counter the image of downtrodden Latter-day Saint women and provide models of faith and commitment for modern women—albeit largely with little acknowledgment of the potentially controversial elements such as healing and priesthood language.81

For feminist thinkers, historical sources seemed to provide important precedents for the kinds of reforms they advocated. The discovery of Joseph Smith's teachings to the Nauvoo Relief Society—in their original form—proved especially influential.82 Out of the historical sources,
particularly those cited above that mention “priesthood” and “keys” in relation to women, feminist thinkers constructed a durable and influential narrative: Joseph Smith had begun establishing a priesthood order that included both men and women; his death and the conservative trajectory adopted by his successors prevented full implementation of that vision and resulted in women’s exclusion from priesthood. The logical extension of this narrative, sometimes articulated directly, was that the Church should restore Joseph’s vision by including women in priesthood.83

As this narrative gained traction in feminist discussions in the early 1990s, Church leaders spoke out directly in response. Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted the sesquicentennial of the Relief Society with an address in general conference in which he discussed several of the key issues from the Nauvoo minutes. He emphasized that the Relief Society was intended to be “self-governing,” but not “an independent organization”; women’s authority in that organization came through priesthood channels. Elder Oaks directly asserted that “no priesthood keys were delivered to the Relief Society.” Priesthood keys, he taught, “are conferred on individuals, not organizations.” Elder Oaks also spoke of women’s “laying on hands to bless one another” and noted that over time those practices were properly confined to the temple.84

Elder Boyd K. Packer also refuted the feminist narrative, which he characterized as a teaching by some “that priesthood is some kind of a free-floating authority which can be assumed by anyone who has had the endowment.” “The priesthood is conferred through ordination,” he taught, “not simply through making a covenant or receiving a blessing.” Moreover, priesthood ordination was always carried out through established channels with public acknowledgement.85 Elder James E. Faust reiterated these principles six months later,86 speaking just weeks after the excommunications of several prominent feminists.

Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980).

83. These arguments and interpretations were brought together in Maxine Hanks, ed., Women and Authority: Re-Emerging Mormon Feminism (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).


Within Church ecclesiology, the correlated structure of the Church remained solid, and women's organizations (along with other auxiliaries) remained firmly subordinated within the governing priesthood structure. In the 1990s, however, Elder M. Russell Ballard opened a line of reform that has proved consequential. Beginning with a conference address in 1993, he stressed the importance of councils in administering the Church and called for “the cooperative effort of men and women officers in the Church.” Speaking directly to priesthood leaders, he admonished: “Brethren, please be sure you are seeking the vital input of the sisters in your council meetings.”87 He spoke again on the same subject six months later, feeling an urgent need for the Church to implement the principle.88

While this emphasis did not bring about structural changes in women’s ecclesiastical position, it did open up space for increased participation and influence of women at the local level where, it could be argued, most of the work of the Church actually takes place. Updates to the Handbook of Instructions and emphasis in leadership training soon began to reflect this focus on councils.

Twenty-First Century: Priesthood “Power” and “Authority”

In the twenty-first century, discussions about women and priesthood among Latter-day Saints have proliferated, fueled by the availability of online venues and sources. More than a generation removed from the second-wave feminist movement of half a century ago, views about gender that were once considered radical, alongside ground-level changes in how people’s lives are structured, have come to permeate the culture, even in quite traditional Latter-day Saint families. These trends have unquestionably reshaped some of the contours of the discussions. Moreover, the younger generation is less deferential to authority and more confident about speaking out and balancing their relatively progressive views with their faith commitments.89

By the mid-2000s, the advent of the blogosphere and the Bloggernacle provided thriving sites for discussion of Latter-day Saint theology and culture. Women participated actively in existing blogs and launched new online discussion forums, some of which focused on women’s issues and feminism. Discussions of women and priesthood unfolded in this kinetic context. Besides generating new ideas and points of discussion, these online forums disseminated the work of earlier feminist thinkers and historians, giving them new momentum. Online organizing enabled the formation of new groups and facilitated in-person action and protests, such as those launched by Ordain Women.

Responses from orthodox and authoritative voices to this new wave of feminist energy were not slow in coming, though in keeping with past precedent, they did not usually engage specific questions or arguments. Within a few months of each other in 2013, for example, notable talks were given by Sister Linda K. Burton, Relief Society General President, and Elders Neil Anderson and M. Russell Ballard (Elder Ballard gave two). These addresses, which at least tacitly acknowledged that “questions” were being asked, outlined fundamental contemporary definitions of terms like “priesthood” and “keys” and emphasized a distinction between priesthood authority and priesthood power that opened a sense in which priesthood could apply to women. Burton said, “Priesthood authority is conferred by ordination; priesthood power is available to all.” In these discussions, virtually all spiritual power received by men and women through ordinances and spiritual channels was defined as priesthood power. These ordinances and the attendant blessings they

90. “Bloggernacle” is a term coined to refer to the network of Latter-day Saint–themed blogs. See Mormon Archipelago, https://www.ldsblogs.org/, a site that bills itself as the “Gateway to the Bloggernacle.”


bring are available to men and women equally; who administers them is less important and simply reflects the Lord’s way of organizing his Church. Sheri Dew, prominent former Relief Society leader and CEO of Deseret Book, made many of these same arguments in her book, also published in 2013, *Women and the Priesthood*. Dew noted that women in the Church already perform many services and functions that would require ordination in other religious traditions. In 2015, the Church published an official essay, “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women,” that addressed many of the historical points embedded in the discussion.

The most consequential entry in recent discussions has unquestionably been Elder (now President) Dallin H. Oaks’s 2014 general conference address, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood.” In this talk, Oaks explicitly built on previous discussions, endorsing the principles that priesthood power blesses all. He added, “Priesthood keys direct women as well as men, and priesthood ordinances and priesthood authority pertain to women as well as men.” It is this latter point that constitutes Oaks’s reorienting contribution to the discussion. “We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be?” he asked. “Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.” This takes the discussion beyond access to “power” and “blessings” of the priesthood, essentially recasting all authority in the Church as priesthood authority, based on a distinction between keys and authority. In this view, women exercise priesthood authority by virtue of being set apart for their callings; they do not exercise priesthood keys, which are held by men ordained to priesthood office. President Oaks’s framing of these distinctions contrasts with previous understandings: in 1958, for example, Joseph Fielding Smith had taught women that they had “authority” but not “Priesthood.”

95. “Joseph Smith’s Teachings about Priesthood, Temple, and Women.”
President Oaks’s characterization of women’s authority as priesthood authority has been influential in shifting paradigms about women’s relationship to priesthood. In 2018, Elder Dale G. Renlund and his wife, Ruth Lybbert Renlund, published a thorough examination of the Melchizedek Priesthood in which they draw a distinction between priesthood as “the total power and authority of God” and priesthood as “the power and authority that God gives to ordained priesthood holders on earth to act in all things necessary for the salvation of God’s children.”98 This distinction seeks to clarify what I have called the abstract sense of priesthood (“the power of God”) and the collective meaning of priesthood—power and authority as embodied in men who have been ordained to priesthood offices. The Renlunds stress that God has delegated “only a portion of His total priesthood power and authority” to men and quote from Oaks to assert that “through a setting apart by an authorized priesthood holder, women have priesthood authority to use in their callings in their wards and branches throughout the Church. They have all the authority they need to fulfill their callings and stewardships.”99

The current Relief Society General Presidency likewise drew on President Oaks’s formulation in their joint talk at the 2019 BYU Women’s Conference. Sister Reyna I. Aburto cited President Oaks and said, “Priesthood authority is conferred by the laying on of hands under the direction of those who have priesthood keys. Women receive this authority in the form of a calling.” Sister Sharon Eubank added, “When we serve in any calling or leadership position, . . . these are authorized positions of authority in the work of God.”100 These examples suggest that the idea of women having priesthood authority in the Church is taking root.

In addition, recent discourse about women and priesthood has emphasized the availability of priesthood power to all endowed women, as reflected in President Russell M. Nelson’s statement that women are endowed with priesthood power that flows from their covenants. In this formulation, spiritual power becomes priesthood power when it is channeled through the priesthood covenants of the temple. Relief Society

General President Jean Bingham explained that “priesthood power is spiritual power used for priesthood purposes,” available directly to all endowed women who keep their covenants without need for human intermediaries. On another occasion Bingham taught that the priesthood power of God is multifaceted, encompassing keys, offices, authority, and power, and she encouraged women to study the revelations dealing with priesthood and seek spiritual understanding of the differences between these facets.

Meanwhile, a movement to reconsider women’s visibility, influence, and scope of action within present Church policies and structures has gained steam on both official and unofficial levels. Neylan McBaine’s book Women at Church was an early, influential entry, and this discussion continues to resonate in online forums. Within the Church, several significant steps have unfolded. In 2012, the minimum age for sister missionary service, previously twenty-one, was reduced to nineteen, opening a floodgate of young women eager to serve. Shortly thereafter, new leadership councils were implemented in missions, giving women an expanded role as “sister training leaders,” a position somewhat parallel to male zone leaders. In 2019, the role of witness at baptisms and other ordinances, which had previously been filled only by priesthood-ordained men, was opened to women and girls. In 2021,

106. Any baptized member, female or male, could serve as a witness to baptisms of living persons outside the temple or proxy baptisms in the temple, and any endowed member could serve as a witness for marriage sealings in the temple. Sarah Jane Weaver, “Women Can Serve as Witnesses for Baptisms, Temple, Sealings, First Presidency Announces,”
the Church announced that female area organization advisers would be called in areas outside North America to provide training and leadership to women leaders, increase the collaboration of men and women in Church work, and provide for women’s voices in councils at all levels.107

On the general level, women General Officers of the Church (the General Presidents of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary) were appointed to the priesthood leadership councils (Missionary Executive Council, Priesthood and Family Executive Council, Temple and Family History Executive Council) that previously included only male leaders.108 Most dramatically, perhaps, in January 2019, temple ceremonies were modified to excise some of the elements that emphasized gender differences.109

Conclusion

Latter-day Saints have maintained a belief in divinely restored priesthood authority and power since the earliest days of the Church. Early Saints understood the term priesthood to refer both to the authority bestowed by ordination and to the collective body of men who were so ordained. In any case, priesthood offices were conferred on only men. Over time, the Church’s lay priesthood structure expanded to include all worthy men regardless of race. This means that virtually all men who are active in the Church have been ordained to the priesthood. Despite this bedrock association of priesthood with men, dynamic discussions about women’s relationship to priesthood have unfolded and intensified over time.

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The ongoing discussion among Latter-day Saints about women and priesthood has ebbed and flowed and undergone several permutations while maintaining some consistent themes. The most consistent of these themes has been, as Elder Oaks stated in his 2014 address, that Church leaders are “not free to alter the divinely decreed pattern that only men will hold offices in the priesthood.”\textsuperscript{110} While there is no reason to believe that this understanding will change, discussions about women’s relationship to priesthood and their position in the Church will undoubtedly continue.

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\textsuperscript{110} Oaks, “Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” 50.
On the question of God's knowledge of future events, Old and New Testament authors respond in a motley chorus. Some biblical authors assume exhaustive divine foreknowledge of both individual lives and world historical events. Psalm 139 affirms that “your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Ps. 139:16).1 The Apostle Peter declares that Christ's crucifixion was accomplished according to “God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23). Other biblical accounts seem to show that God adjusts his intentions according to human behavior, implying that he does not or cannot know free human choice ahead of its realization. Of Israelite king Saul, for instance, biblical authors record the Lord’s words to Samuel, “I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions” (1 Sam. 15:11).

Latter-day scripture offers little clarification on the question. Again, some passages assert a strong view of divine foreknowledge, such as Alma’s teaching that God calls and prepares his high priests “from eternity to all eternity, according to his foreknowledge of all things” (Alma 13:7), and God's own declaration, through Joseph Smith, that he “knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes” (D&C 38:1–2). Nephi’s detailed vision of Christ’s incarnation and the providential sweep of human history suggests that God knows, and can reveal to his prophets in advance, the course of future events crucial to

1. All Bible citations are from the New International Version.
the redemption of his people (1 Ne. 11–14). Other scriptures, however, suggest that God’s foreknowledge of events and his interaction with humans depend on the real-time unfolding of human behavior. In July 1831, for instance, the Lord revealed Independence, Missouri, to be the place “appointed and consecrated” for the building of the city of Zion in anticipation of the Lord’s return (D&C 57:1). In January 1841, however, after the faithful had endured years of conflict with neighboring Missourians, the Lord rescinded that command, explaining that when the wicked hinder the work of righteousness, “it behooveth me to require that work no more” (D&C 124:49).

If scriptural statements about God’s foreknowledge are internally inconclusive, with primary emphasis on experiential and practical concerns rather than on reasoned explanation, Latter-day Saint authoritative discourse over the past fifty or so years has plainly asserted God’s comprehensive knowledge. The Church’s website states succinctly that “[God] is perfect, has all power, and knows all things.” Typically framed as a question of divine omniscience in general rather than foreknowledge as such, Latter-day Saint pastoral discussion of the question simply praises God’s perfect knowledge and power to save and affirms his responsiveness to human petition and human agency. For most believers, little intuitive conflict arises between God’s reassuring knowledge of the future and our genuine freedom of human agency. God sees, but does not predetermine, our thoughts and actions. In an important sense, then, the doctrine of God’s omniscience is settled in the present-day Church. What remains open, however, is the meaning of “omniscience” and, in particular, the status of foreknowledge of the future as a subset of all knowledge. Does God’s omniscience mean only he knows everything that can be known? Does it require that he know everything that will ever become knowable? Is divine omniscience contingent or absolute? Is God’s omniscience the same with respect to the past and the future? These questions, far from the immediate pastoral concerns of contemporary Latter-day Saint official discourse, remain open.

For Christian theology broadly, the question of divine foreknowledge has long been among the most contested and confounding. Influenced by Platonism, early Christian theists recognized a knotty logical conundrum in the reconciliation of exhaustive divine foreknowledge

with human free will. The problem for classical theism goes roughly as follows: because God, beyond time, is omniscient, immutable, and impassible, his simultaneous and unalterable knowledge of the future must exist logically prior to the creation of the world. Divine knowledge cannot respond to existing creation as it unfolds in time, because this would make God’s knowledge subject to temporal change on the basis of events outside himself, thus violating divine immutability and impassibility. But if God's foreknowledge is absolute and logically prior to creation, then two troubling implications follow. First, perfect divine foreknowledge means that God cannot intervene providentially in the world by, for instance, responding to spontaneous petitionary prayer. If God has always known that today I will slip on the ice and sustain a head injury, he cannot grant my morning petition for safety without backwardly falsifying his knowledge. Counterintuitive as it seems, it is logically impossible for a perfectly foreknowing God to reach providentially into the temporal flow of human experience. Second, divine foreknowledge means that humans cannot act with libertarian free will, defined as the ability to choose otherwise than they do. If God has always known that I will visit a friend today, but I, exercising genuine freedom to choose otherwise in the moment of action, decide instead to go shopping, I will have brought it about that God knew something that he does not in fact know. For classical theism, this is a logical impossibility. Thus it appears that absolute divine foreknowledge logically implies some kind of causal determinism.

It might seem that Latter-day Saint theology would enjoy a conceptual purchase on the problem that classical theism lacks. In LDS thought, God is progressive within time, responsive to human interaction, and co-eternal with free intelligent matter. There is no need to protect divine immutability and impassibility in the face of the unfolding realization of human free will. Yet serious questions, ontological and pastoral, remain. If God, material in some sense, exists within sequential time rather than in a privileged sphere of simultaneity, how is it that he can know the open future at all? If God cannot know and control future events except on the basis of prediction and persuasion, then on what basis can humans place trust in his power to carry out his plans or respond providentially to their petitionary prayers? Locating God in time and space, Latter-day Saints have discovered him to be responsive to human engagement, respectful of human freedom, and supremely relational in his divine workings. Yet this appealingly personal portrait of God calls into question the sovereignty of divine knowledge and power.
Historical Reckonings

Early Latter-day Saint reflection on God’s foreknowledge flowed in several different directions, three streams which I will call *epistemic progression*, *informal absolutism*, and *inductive inference*. The headwaters of each are Joseph Smith’s revelations, which conveyed heady intimations of a radical ontological materialism, a grounding plurality of co-eternal intelligence, and a temporal matrix embracing God himself in its dynamism. The revelations seeded various hermeneutic efforts to synthesize the revelations into coherent and often competing cosmological pictures. Among the best known of these theological wrestles is the debate between Orson and Parley Pratt and Brigham Young on the question of God’s omniscience. In a well-documented conflict culminating in Young’s 1860 *ex cathedra* denunciation of the Pratts’ views, two competing theories of God’s epistemic status emerged. For their parts, the Pratts argued in a theological vein that, while the person of God the Father may act within the dynamic flow of time, subject to the conditions of space-time, God *qua* Godhead possesses absolute omniscience. Thus, as a modern scholar summarizes, according to the Pratts, “God cannot progress in knowledge or ever learn anything which he did not previously know. . . . God knows all future events, including contingent acts of free agents.” For Brigham Young, this position was intolerable for the apparent limit it places on God’s potential for increase and, consequently, on human potential to develop in God’s image. Young argued that “according to [Orson Pratt’s] theory, God can progress no further in knowledge and power; but the God that I serve is progressing eternally, and so are his children: they will increase to all eternity, if they are faithful.”


4. This argument enjoyed a minor revival in James R. Harris’s article “Eternal Progression and the Foreknowledge of God,” *BYU Studies* 8, no. 1 (1968): 37–46. Harris posits a comprehensive repository of communal knowledge to which the divine minds of the combined Godhead contribute and from which each member of the Godhead may draw. While each particular divine being continues to learn and grow through experience, he may at any moment draw upon the divine communal mind for any knowledge necessary. God is thus progressing in knowledge as the Father and effectively omniscient as the Godhead.


chronological sequence of endless duration, wherein the past closes and recedes while the future remains unformed and invisible; at any given moment, only present events actually exist. That God would remain epistemically immutable in the midst of this dynamic temporal cosmos was, for Young, not the stable ground of reality that it represented for classical theism but an enervating restriction of divine potential. Conversely, the implication that God, acting from within a chrono-temporal frame, necessarily lacks exhaustive foreknowledge does not, for Young, vitiate divine venerability or God's worthiness of worship based on his greatness. Rather, Young rejoices in a buoyant vision of endless knowledge. Surveying the world's vast scope of created forms and natural kingdoms, Young exults in the prospect of endless learning and improvement promised by “eternity . . . before us, and an inexhaustible fountain of intelligence for us to obtain.”

The Young-Pratt debate over God's epistemic progression bloomed a suite of issues that would shape subsequent Latter-day Saint explorations of divine foreknowledge. These issues include the question of God's venerability given the limiting ontological conditions of materiality and space-time; the nature of God's relationship to time, be it chronological-sequential, atemporal-simultaneous, or some other mode of temporality; the nature of epistemology and consequent notions of truth as a fixed canon of propositions or an unfolding creative process; and indeed the very meaning of salvation, as a function of epistemic growth or as some other process.

Young's views on epistemic progression were eventually challenged themselves by informal absolutists during the next century. Yet progressivism's bracing appeal persisted, championed and nuanced by early twentieth-century Latter-day Saint intellectuals John A. Widtsoe and B. H. Roberts, among others. Roberts redefined omniscience within a defined chrono-temporal frame, acknowledging that God is omniscient only in the time-limited sense that “all the knowledge that is, all that exists, God knows. All that shall be he will know. . . . Much more is yet to be. God will know it as it ‘becomes,’ or as it unfolds.” Insisting that God knows all that can be known in the present and will know all that may be known in the future, Roberts seems satisfied with God's venerability as the unsurpassed knower, if not the classically omniscient deity. While

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retaining a sequential model of time, Roberts conceives of knowledge not as a fixed corpus of information but as an unfolding process of truth-making wherein the present bodies forth new realities into an open future, as much a matter of ontology as epistemology. In the late twentieth century, English professor Eugene England again advanced Young’s notion of epistemic progression, attempting a reconciliation with conflicting absolutist positions. England argues for a leveled cosmos in which God, acting within time, masters the episteme of one level and thus commands absolute worship within that sphere, while continuing to gain knowledge in higher dimensions. Implicit in the compromise England works is the juxtaposition of an open future of potentiality, undetermined and undiscovered, against a fixed past, its potential exhausted in actuality, to be mastered absolutely by God’s local perfection. It is toward the former that England’s imagination strains. While God is absolute within our space-time-bounded realm, he argues, “the universe is ultimately open, an invitation to adventure and change, that the very divinity of God demands.”

A second doctrine on divine foreknowledge emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, framed explicitly as a corrective to epistemic progression. From the Church’s beginning, some thinkers have layered traditional Christian theism over the theological innovations implied in Joseph Smith’s revelations. The result is a kind of informal absolutism, an approach that projects some of the sovereign attributes of the God of classical theism—his omnipotence, omniscience, and immanence—onto the embodied God of latter-day revelation. Instances of this approach abound in official Church discourse. Hyrum Smith in 1844 declared in familiar absolutist language that “I would not serve a God that had not all wisdom and all power.” Yet within a few seamless sentences, Hyrum draws on the bold cosmological monism of LDS revelation that placed God and humanity in a shared ontological stratum, declaring that “I can believe that man can go from planet to planet—a man gets so high in the mansions above.” The sovereign greatness of God seems to magnify and justify the greatness of human potential with a compelling intuitive force that brooks no ontological quibble. This strain of informal absolutism holds that a God lacking

omniscient foreknowledge is not worthy of worship; such a God cannot command the saving faith of his children. The concern is evident as early as the 1835 Lectures on Faith, which frame the question of God’s omniscience in terms of human faith: “If it were not for the idea existing in the minds of men, that God had all knowledge, it would be impossible for them to exercise faith in him.”¹²

In the first half of the twentieth century, Joseph Fielding Smith, Church Apostle and grandson of Hyrum Smith, mounted a sustained defense of God’s omniscience and omnipotence against the limitations of epistemic progression: “Do we believe that God has all ‘wisdom’? If so, in that, he is absolute. . . . If he is lacking in ‘wisdom’ and in ‘power’ then he is not supreme and there must be something greater than he is, and this is absurd.”¹³ Later, Elder Bruce R. McConkie followed this line of interpretation, maintaining that “eternal progression” implies only that God increases in dominion, not in knowledge: “It should be realized that God is not progressing in knowledge. . . . He has already gained these things in their fulness. But he is progressing in the sense that his creations increase, his dominions expand, his spirit offspring multiply, and more kingdoms are added to his domains.”¹⁴ Though positioned against epistemic progression, McConkie’s absolutist picture of eternal progression nevertheless resonates with B. H. Roberts’s notion of future “becoming”: both describe ontological processes of reality-making, rather than mere mastery of an extant body of knowledge.

For early- and mid-century proponents of omniscience, God’s knowledge of the future is merely implied. In the later decades of the twentieth century, however, Elder Neal A. Maxwell brought foreknowledge to the fore of what we might call his neo-absolutist position. Building on earlier notions of the qualities God must possess to command worship, Maxwell brought a new theological dimension to the question of temporality, citing sixth-century philosopher Boethius and arguing that God occupies a meta-temporal dimension that Maxwell calls “the eternal now”: “We may be surprised at the turn of events, but God in His omniscience never is. He sees the beginning from the end because all things are, in a way which we do not understand, present before

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¹⁴ Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 239.
Him simultaneously in an ‘eternal now.’”¹⁵ The opening phrase of this passage signals Maxwell’s primary pastoral intent to reassure readers of God’s loving power to shepherd them through affliction. Nevertheless, his remarks bring a renewed theological focus to the question of time and divine omniscience. Maxwell declines to comment on whether God is capable of experiencing surprise—that is, whether God’s nature is possible in such a way that he can feel the delight, horror, or strangeness of the unforeseen. Whether or not God can be surprised, Maxwell asserts that he never is, because he possesses a simultaneous awareness of all things. Interestingly, Maxwell specifically attributes to God only knowledge of “the beginning from the end,” the type of backward-facing past-knowledge of which the human mind is also capable. Comprehensive foreknowledge, one presumes, would allow God to know the end from the beginning, as God claims in Isaiah 46:10. Nevertheless, it’s clear that Maxwell intends to affirm God’s foreknowledge as the consequence of God’s privileged position within the metatemporal “eternal now.” Yet, as we have seen, this move undermines the coherence of human free will. Maxwell is aware of the theological debate around foreknowledge and free will and asserts simply that God sees our actions but does not determine them. “Some find the doctrines of the omniscience and foreknowledge of God troubling because these seem, in some way, to constrict their individual agency. . . . God’s ‘seeing’ is not the same thing as His ‘causing’ something to happen.”¹⁶ So long as humans, situated in a chronological present, approach their own choices with no knowledge of future outcomes, Maxwell argues, their free will is not compromised by God’s foreknowledge.

A third route, inductive inference, attempts to chart a middle way between epistemic progression and informal absolutism. James E. Talmage, Church Apostle and intellectual in the early twentieth century, suggested an inductive process by which God observes creation through time and, based on this cumulative understanding, infers its probable future. Aware of the logical problems besetting classical theism, Talmage rests his argument not on an impassible God whose foreknowledge logically precedes creation but, on the contrary, on a responsive intimacy between God and creation. “Our Heavenly Father has a full knowledge of the nature and disposition of each of His children. . . .

¹⁵. Neal A. Maxwell, All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 37, emphasis in original.
By reason of that surpassing knowledge, God reads the future . . . ; He knows what each will do under given conditions, and sees the end from the beginning.”¹⁷ Like epistemic progressivists, Talmage places God with creation in a chronological mode of time, but, unlike progressivists, he nevertheless affords God a privileged insight into the future. God’s inductive foreknowledge arises from a subjunctive apprehension of what his free creatures *would* do if placed in any given condition and a reasoned extrapolation of “the end from the beginning” based on these subjunctive conditions. For Talmage, inductive foreknowledge provides a satisfactory account of human free will while preserving divine venerability. “[God’s] foreknowledge is based on intelligence and reason. He foresees the future as a state which naturally and surely will be; not as one which must be because He has arbitrarily willed that it shall be.”¹⁸ While Talmage’s argument for God’s probabilistic inductive foreknowledge has not endured as a rigorous theological reckoning, his portrait of God as a loving parent who rationally infers his children’s future and providentially directs history has remained prominent in Latter-day Saint discourse. Elder Russell M. Nelson preached in 2013, “Your Heavenly Father has known you for a very long time. You, as His son or daughter, were chosen by Him to come to earth at this precise time, to be a leader in His great work on earth.”¹⁹ In pastoral contexts, human agency is confirmed by God’s intimate knowledge of his children and their destiny, not compromised. Knotty logical discrepancy between free will and divine foreknowledge melts away in the warmth of the familial intimacy binding creature to creator.

**Contemporary Reckonings**

Among contemporary thinkers engaging the issue of divine foreknowledge in Latter-day Saint teaching, Blake Ostler offers the only extensive systematic treatment. Disputing various Christian theologies of foreknowledge, Ostler rests his own argument on the principles of God’s faith-worthiness as a responsive personal being, the reality of libertarian free will, and a chronological-sequential model of divine time required, in his view, by Church teachings on God’s progression. In

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language akin to B. H. Roberts's, Ostler argues for “contingent omniscience,” the belief “that God knows all that can be known but that future, free acts of persons cannot be infallibly foreknown.” God is “maximally knowing,” not “all knowing.” God’s knowledge of the future is limited to knowledge of his own intention to act providentially in the future; he does not determine nor can he foresee the future free acts of other agents, because the future is open, knowable only in the moment of emergence. God may possess full knowledge of every possible eventuality and may plan his own response to every contingency, but he may not predetermine nor foreknow the free choices of individuals. Ostler attempts to reconcile contingent omniscience with scripture that implies full divine foreknowledge. Any scripture that seems to link God’s providential works to his foreknowledge must be interpreted to indicate merely contingent foreknowledge, he argues, because full foreknowledge logically forecloses God’s intervention in time. Nephi’s panoramic vision forecasting a detailed history of the Christian salvation of nations, for instance, should be understood only as “expressions of what God himself intends to bring about rather than what will occur through free acts of humans, for it is God himself who came down among men.” Yet Ostler’s notion of contingent foreknowledge can account for Nephi’s prophetic vision of the mother of Christ only by effacing female agency: if Mary assented freely to the divine commission to bear and nurture the corporeal God, then her assent could not have been foreknown. In the end, Ostler seems to acknowledge that some scriptural passages cannot be reconciled with a limited form of divine foreknowledge but argues that such passages should not be understood as “definitions of omniscience, for the writers of scripture nowhere attempt such definitions. Their beliefs arise out of experience and not out of philosophical thought or rational examination.” For this most technical of Latter-day Saint theologians no less than for other LDS thinkers, theology begins and ends with an experiential apprehension of God’s beckoning love.

Ostler’s treatment broadly chimes with several other contemporary LDS explorations of divine foreknowledge. Philosopher David Paulsen offers an account of limited foreknowledge based on Church

teachings of ontological materialism, primordial agency, and a passible God. In conversation with an evangelical theology known as “open theism,” Paulsen affirms that God is open and responsive to significant relation with his creatures and that the future is genuinely open to the free actions of individuals. Consequently, divine foreknowledge in an open theism is limited to “all that can be known.” Evangelicals understand God to voluntarily self-limit in a gracious invitation to humanity, whereas Latter-day Saints, according to Paulsen, understand God’s foreknowledge to be limited by ontological and not merely logical necessity or goodwill. Acknowledging the diversity of LDS positions on the topic, Paulsen concludes that any treatment of divine foreknowledge must, minimally, (1) acknowledge libertarian free will, (2) deny causal determinism, and (3) hold that “God’s knowledge, like God’s power, is maximally efficacious” within the ontological conditions described above.23

In similar fashion, Terryl Givens explores divine foreknowledge briefly, limning the historical controversies and concluding that Church teaching requires only the affirmation that “God is possessed of all the knowledge there is” without compromising human agency.24 Beyond these minimal commitments, he argues, Latter-day Saint dogma does not prescribe a particular view. Ostler, Paulsen, and Givens, heirs of early epistemic progressivism, represent a loose consensus around a parsimonious account of contingent foreknowledge, committed to human agency and attendant to the ontological implications of Latter-day Saint metaphysics.

Conclusion

The conversation among Latter-day Saint thinkers about God’s foreknowledge is certain to evolve, likely along the four axes that structure the issue: time, knowledge, reality, and agency. New voices may challenge the dominant account of agency as libertarian free will. They may further probe the contours of metaphysical materialism or propose new accounts of transcendence. They may object to the positivist epistemology

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that lingers in some accounts of eternal progression. Indeed, these conversations are already ongoing, though they have yet to be cashed out on the particular issue of divine foreknowledge.

In this respect, one emerging strand of Latter-day Saint thought is worth noting as a concluding nod to the future. In conversation with contemporary continental philosophy, philosophers Joseph Spencer and Adam Miller have explored a “messianic temporality,” a model of time that opens up the chronological-sequential model underlying the ideas of epistemic progression and limited foreknowledge discussed above. Messianic time, a term drawn from philosophical reflections on biblical promises of the future coming of a Messiah, critiques both classical theism and the causal closure of purely secularist naturalism, while offering an alternative to the opposed temporal models of timelessness and chronology. As a theoretical tool, then, it is a good fit for LDS thought’s twin projects to vex both secularism and classical theism with its conjoined sacramentalism and materialism. The messianic perspective shares with classical theism the insight that there must be some metatemporal seedbed from which chronological time emanates or is produced and dismay at the prospect of a closed past, a locked future, and a present exhausted in the actual. Yet as a species of materialism, messianicity cannot countenance a Platonic realm of timeless, transcendent simultaneity, where time does not exist at all as a divine reality. Rather, messianic time is an immanent matrix of potential that performs or produces time, a kind of subtemporality that itself gives birth to chronological time and infuses it with grace, creation, potentiality, and freedom, “simultaneously disrupting and composing it from within.”


26. Miller, Future Mormon, 42.

27. Miller, Future Mormon, 41, emphasis added.
present” of messianic time is, by contrast, radically unrealized, existing solely as potential for time and actuality that remains unexpressed and withdrawn behind the actual events of linear time—what we might call “paratemporal” rather than “metatemporal.” Messianic time, then, bears a kinship to Maxwell’s theology of time and divine foreknowledge—and to the Church’s unique development of materialism generally—while it offers new theoretical tools for theologians. In particular, the model of messianic time seems pregnant with insight into the question of divine foreknowledge, but Latter-day Saint thinkers have not yet explored the question specifically. It remains to be seen whether a fruitful messianic account will emerge to join the ongoing debate in Latter-day Saint theology about God, time, knowledge, reality, and agency.

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Will Things Get Better or Worse before the Second Coming?

Are the Latter-day Saints Premillenarians or Postmillenarians?

Jed Woodworth

For millennia, Christians of every variety have puzzled over the meaning of biblical prophecies that seemed at odds with one another. Passages in Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation spoke of impending disaster and doom at the end of the world. God was angry with the wicked and would destroy them with his mighty hand. Other passages in Revelation and Isaiah conveyed a different message. A new heaven and a new earth would come at the end of time, ushering in a millennium of perpetual peace. God seemed kinder and more benevolent, less inclined to destroy the wicked and the unjust. Just how the passages related to one another was never explained in the scriptures with any degree of specificity. Would the world end in calamity or in peace? Countless schemes have sought to work out a relationship between the two sets of images.

The fulcrum in these end-time scenarios was always the triumphal return of Jesus Christ. Would Jesus come at the beginning of the Millennium or the end? Would the wicked be destroyed before Christ returned or not at all? Beginning with the works of postrestoration English prophecy writers of the seventeenth century, two basic positions emerged. One view held that at the end of time, moral and spiritual conditions

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on Earth would progressively worsen, ending in a wave of natural and spiritual calamities. Only an event outside of history, the Second Coming of Christ, would end these terrors and establish God’s kingdom of peace on earth.² In contrast to the declension narrative, another view held that light and truth would gradually fill the world, brought on by human action, culminating in Christ’s glorious return at the end of time. In the one view, the world was getting worse and worse; in the other, it was getting better and better. These Christian millenarianisms are but two instances of countless millenarian schemes, religious and secular, designed to make sense of the future of the earth and the ultimate destiny of the human family.³

By the 1960s, scholars had begun to distinguish these competing Christian positions with the terms premillennialism and postmillennialism (alternatively premillenarianism and postmillenarianism, the terms used in this essay). As the prefix suggests, premillenarians hold that Christ’s return will come at the beginning of the Millennium, not at the end. Premillenarians typically look upon the state of the world in bleak terms: things are falling apart, and no amount of human effort can do anything to reverse the course of events. Postmillenarians, by contrast, tend to look upon the world more optimistically and to see human agency as vital to the dawning of the golden age. The spread of Christianity, the development of enlightened values like tolerance and equality, and the advent of educational and charitable institutions of all kinds are inching the world closer toward universal peace and harmony. Postmillenarians disagree on whether Christ will return, but all within the camp agree that human effort is not futile in creating a better future. Sometimes haltingly, sometimes rapidly, the world is steadily improving.⁴

The terms premillenarian and postmillenarian originally referred to beliefs about the timing of Jesus’s return. In scholarly usage, however, these terms have long been used more broadly to refer to the two divergent eschatological understandings described above. They are often


⁴. On Christ’s figurative reign, see Davidson, *Logic of Millennial Thought*, 261–76.
used with little or no reference at all to the timing of Jesus’s return relative to the Millennium. In these terms’ obsolete sense, Latter-day Saints are unquestionably premillenarian. This is no open topic. Yet how these terms’ current meanings might apply to Latter-day Saints is a more complicated question. The terms can only imprecisely characterize restoration theology but may sometimes be useful as shorthand descriptions for the various points of view considered in this essay.

Latter-day Saints are generally of two minds when it comes to this debate. On the one hand, the Doctrine and Covenants paints a dour picture of the conditions that are to precede the Second Coming. Famine, pestilence, and violence of wide and grotesque proportion fill the pages of Joseph Smith’s early revelations. Like other premillenarians, early Latter-day Saints spoke of Jesus’s literal and imminent return close on the heels of judgments that would wipe the wicked from the earth. But alongside these bleak pronouncements are more optimistic passages suggestive of postmillenarian thought. The Saints are to seek for light and truth. They are to establish temples and places of learning, to cultivate spiritual harmony between people in the hopes that understanding can grow “brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24). Even if the end-time scenario had already been worked out in the mind of God, human effort very much matters to Latter-day Saints, in the nineteenth century and today.

The case for the premillenarian and postmillenarian positions has much to do with where we are looking and what we believe counts for evidence. In general, nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints tended to be more premillenarian in worldview and disposition. In the twentieth century, members tended to be more postmillenarian. Even then, there are exceptions to these generalizations, and elements from both strands of thought inform the Church today.

The Case for Latter-day Saints as Premillenarians

At first glance, the Latter-day Saint movement appears to fit comfortably within premillenarian Christianity. Joseph Smith is often placed within a stream of Anglo-American prophets who preached that the world was rotten and had to be destroyed before the Lord’s Second Coming. Between 1750 and 1820, at least three hundred men and women were recognized as prophets in England and North America, many of them

doomsaying prophets of “loose millenarian movements”: Joanna Southcott, Richard Brothers, Ann Lee, David Austin, Jemima Wilkinson, and later Joseph Smith and William Miller, to name a few.6 Jesus was coming soon, and the wicked had to repent before it was too late.

These prophets can be joined together by a set of common concerns. As upstarts, they often criticized establishmentarian churches for their departure from the one true way. Like their Protestant Reformer and Puritan forebears, these prophets were concerned by dilution in the churches, and they taught a Christian primitivism that stressed a return of the spiritual gifts and power of New Testament Christianity. These prophets read the scriptures literally more than figuratively and sensed the nearness of sacred events. Jesus, after all, had spoken of destruction before his return. He had said he would come quickly (Matt. 24; Mark 13:26, 30, 33; Rev. 22:12–14). Awaiting Christ’s quick return, these upstart prophets often organized their followers in communitarian societies modeled on the book of Acts.7

Joseph Smith’s early revelations seemed to confirm the standard bleak premillenarian outlook. In his earliest recorded account of the First Vision, Joseph Smith linked Jesus Christ’s anger to his speedy return. “The world lieth in sin at this time,” the Lord said, “and none doeth good no not one.” God was displeased with the state of the world. “Mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth,” he said, “to visit them according to th[e]ir ungodliness. . . . Behold and lo I come quickly as it [is] written of me in the cloud clothed in the glory of my Father.”8 In Joseph Smith’s early revelations, “I come quickly” was repeated over and

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over, giving newfound urgency to the spiritual lives of Latter-day Saints (D&C 33:18; 34:12; 35:27).

Joseph Smith himself often spoke of the world growing worse, not better. The wickedness of the world filled him with “the most painful anxiety,” he once said. He observed the “withdrawal of God’s holy Spirit and the veil of stupidity which seems to be drawn over the hearts of the people.” Everywhere he looked, he beheld the judgments of God “sweeping hundreds of thousands of our race (and I fear unprepared) down to the shades of death.” While visiting New York City in 1832, Joseph wrote home to his wife, Emma, that he believed “the anger of the Lord [was] kindled” against the city’s inhabitants. Their works were sure to be “burned up with unquenchable fire.” He compared New York to Nineveh, a city ripening for destruction.9

Early Latter-day Saint converts tended to share the same bleak worldview. Sidney Rigdon, one of the leading lights of the early movement, broke with the postmillenarian preacher Alexander Campbell in part over the question of whether the Millennium could be brought about by preaching alone.11 Mormonism’s early convert base included Shakers, radical Methodists, and reformed Baptists, all groups that taught an imminent Second Coming. Many converts seem to have been attracted to the restored gospel precisely because it offered safety from the judgments surely awaiting a wicked world.12

For early Latter-day Saints, gathering with the Lord’s elect was the only way to avoid the judgments reserved for the wicked. The City of Zion, founded in Jackson County, Missouri, in the summer of 1831 was

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to be a New Jerusalem where God’s people could build a temple complex and find refuge from destruction while they awaited the Lord’s return.13 “A great many people imbibed the same idea which I did in the beginning,” Brigham Young later recalled, “and really believed that in Jackson County all the earthly sorrows, afflictions, disappointments, and weaknesses pertaining to the flesh would be at an end, and that every one would be sanctified before the Lord, and all would be peace and joy from morning until evening, and from year to year, until the Savior should come.”14 Joseph Smith later expanded the idea of the City of Zion to include multiple sacred cities designed to “fill up the world in these last days.”15

Even after the demise of the City of Zion at the hands of a mob, Latter-day Saints living in the nineteenth century and beyond anticipated a return to Jackson County. In 1890 and 1891, around the time when Joseph Smith would have been eighty-five years old, some Latter-day Saints anticipated a near Second Coming. Church leaders downplayed such rhetoric, however, and life soon returned to normal.16 Although the timing of events has changed over the years, the basic series of events thought to be connected to Christ’s return has remained largely unchanged since the mid-nineteenth century, and the basic premillennial assumptions of early Church members have not been called into question.

The Case for Latter-day Saints as Postmillenarians

The case for Latter-day Saints as postmillenarians begins with the complication of the premillenarian and postmillenarian camps. The distinction between the two is not as clean as it was once thought to be. As historians looked more closely at the evidence, they found premillenarian and postmillenarian strains within the writings of the same thinker or movement. Jonathan Edwards, for example, was often classified as a postmillenarian who wrote hopefully of Christianity’s advance, but

16. See Dan Erickson, As a Thief in the Night: The Mormon Quest for Millennial Deliverance (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998).
he also wrote of God as a wrathful deity, reminiscent of premillenarian writings.17

James West Davidson argues that eighteenth-century postmillenarians like Edwards embraced an “afflictive model of progress” in which the advance of Christianity comes only after a series of setbacks and trials.18 Thus, postmillenarians could hopefully anticipate the approaching Millennium while, at the same time, somewhat gloomily foresee only wickedness, persecution, and turmoil on the short-term horizon. Postmillenarians, in other words, were not necessarily the “dewy-eyed optimists” they seemed to be at first glance.19

The split mind can be found in Joseph Smith as well. In the same 1832 letter to Emma in which he said the wicked were doomed to be burned up by fire, Smith asked himself whether God was displeased with the “truly great and wonderful” architectural splendor he observed in New York City. No, he concluded, “seeing these works are calculated to make men comfortable, wise, and happy.” Presumably, Joseph Smith would have commended any invention intended to “make men comfortable, wise, and happy” as being in keeping with God’s plan for the latter days.20

Nor was Joseph Smith opposed to social reform, which was typically affirmed by postmillenarians. Evangelical Christians like Charles Finney taught that the expansion of United States sovereignty, Christianity, and social reforms like temperance and antislavery could help bring about an earthly millennium before Christ’s Second Coming.21 Like other postmillenarians, many early Latter-day Saints embraced social reform. One early revelation enjoined the Saints to be “anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness”—implying, of course, that individuals had a role to play in God’s eschatology (D&C 58:27). Setting the example, Joseph Smith revealed the Word of Wisdom, which promised “great treasures of knowledge” to those who shunned alcohol, tobacco, and hot drinks.22

17. Boyer, When Time Shall Be No More, 76.
22. Doctrine and Covenants 89:19; see also Jed Woodworth, “The Word of Wisdom,” in Revelations in Context: The Stories behind the Sections of the Doctrine and Covenants,
He later ran for president of the United States on a platform that sought to mitigate human suffering of various kinds: penal reform, the abolition of slavery, and the founding of “seminaries of learning.” Rather than seeing it as pointless to try to regenerate a dying world, as premillenarians often did, early Latter-day Saints saw themselves as active agents in preparing the world for the return of Christ.

Near the end of his life, Joseph Smith sought to distance himself from more ardent premillenarians. At the April 1843 general conference of the Church, while commenting on William Miller’s failed prophecy of Christ’s imminent return, Smith recounted praying and hearing a voice proclaim, “My son, if thou livest till thou art 85 years of age, thou shalt see the face of the son of man.” Smith then prophesied “in the name of the Lord God” that “the Son of Man will not come in the heavens till I am 85 years old.” That view pushed back the return of Christ even as other premillenarians were pushing it up.

Likewise, the reconfiguration of Zion tended to shrink the space ripe for destruction and expand space designated as a refuge. “The whole America”—North and South America—“is Zion,” Joseph Smith proclaimed shortly before his death. “Build chu[r]ches where ever th[e] people receive the gospel.” The instruction to build up churches everywhere implied that the Saints could build Zion anywhere and at any time. The idea could be found from the early days of the Restoration and stood in tension with the belief that Zion needed to be built in a single geographical location. Like the early Saints, later Saints conceived of their lives as a work: they were to proclaim the gospel to every kindred, tongue, and people; gather out the Lord’s elect; and strive to build temples and do temple work wherever they happened to be living.

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vastness of this labor pushed the timetable of the Lord’s return backward, not forward.

In the nineteenth century, Latter-day Saint missionaries routinely warned potential converts to flee from their lands of residence—Babylon—and move to Zion in the Great Basin of the American West. But in the twentieth century and especially after 1920, missionaries advised converts to stay in their native lands. The old “Babylon-Zion” distinction lived on in Latter-day Saint hymns, but the demarcation of space as “inside” and “outside” came to an end. Zion, more a state of the heart and less a geographical place, could be found wherever the person lived. Babylon was understood more in figurative than in literal terms.²⁶

Latter-day Saints continued to have much in common with premillenarians well into the twentieth century. At a time when postmillenarianism was in steep decline, leading Latter-day Saint theologians like President Joseph Fielding Smith and Elder Bruce R. McConkie articulated a dispensational view of world history not unlike that popularized by John Nelson Darby and other Protestant fundamentalists, in which the earth is divided into seven 1,000-year periods, or “dispensations.” The earth was thought to be very near the end of the sixth dispensation, awaiting the Lord’s return at the beginning of the seventh. According to some frameworks, the righteous would be caught up to meet the Savior when he returned amid widespread destruction.²⁷ More recently, some Latter-day Saints have overlaid belief in the rapture with a reading of the Book of Mormon that sees the book of 3 Nephi as a type or prophecy of the last days. Just as God’s wrath was poured out upon the wicked Nephites, leaving only “the more righteous part of the people” to witness Jesus Christ’s appearance in the flesh in the New World, so too will the ungodly be destroyed and a remnant spared at Christ’s Second Coming.²⁸

But the Protestant fundamentalist position, influential as it was, stood in tension with other Latter-day Saint thinking. Elder B. H. Roberts’s magnum opus, The Truth, the Way, the Life, accepted the dispensationalist framework without privileging a cataclysm at the end of time. For Roberts, “the destructive forces—so called—as well as the creative forces in the universe are under the dominion of law, which will conserve and perpetuate through eternity the orderly cosmos.” Destruction (and the regeneration he believed inevitably accompanied it) was more the order of a rational universe and less the workings of an angry God.29

Elder Roberts was one of a handful of important second-generation thinkers who represent a break from the first generation’s concern with apocalypticism. As the Latter-day Saints sought accommodation with the world, many aligned themselves with liberal Protestantism’s turn away from end-time speculation. In fact, twentieth-century Latter-day Saints can generally be distinguished from nineteenth-century Saints by their attention to the distant past more than to the distant or near future. Nephi Anderson’s novel Added Upon, which went through thirty-five printings between 1898 and 1973, captured the Saints’ fascination with a deep past where premortal spirits fall in love and find each other once again in mortality. It is telling that the tradition’s most beloved musical theater production, Saturday’s Warrior, descends directly from Added Upon.30

The basic tension in both Added Upon and Saturday’s Warrior is the idea of measuring up in mortality to the destiny one has already chosen in the premortal realms. This is a 180-degree turn away from the nineteenth-century Saints’ preoccupation with purifying and readying oneself for some glorious future event wholly outside of time.

Even if they accepted the dispensational framework, most twentieth-century Church leaders resisted making dire prognostications about the end times. During the Cold War, evangelical preachers often spoke of coming destructions as a way of driving people to repent, just as Jonathan Edwards had done. Not so in twentieth-century Latter-day Saint sermons, where the subject of the Second Coming largely disappeared.31

More stress was put on living righteously and peaceably in the present, and less emphasis was given to future destructions and signs. “We must have faith in the future regardless of the ultimate eventualities,” Apostle Richard L. Evans urged at the dawn of the Cold War. Elder Evans paraphrased President Wilford Woodruff, who, when asked when the Second Coming would be, reportedly said, “I would live as if it were to be tomorrow—but I am still planting cherry trees!”32 The quotation captured the divided mind on the matter of millenarian questions.

Unlike many premillenarian Christians, Latter-day Saints generally did not look upon the year 2000 as the beginning of the end. By the late nineteenth century, many Latter-day Saints had relegated belief in an imminent Second Coming to a “hobby of fringe elements.” This group said, in effect, “We will now move smoothly along into the millennium; [and] no great sorrows or upheavals will trouble us.” For some, the fall of Communism had suggested that a “progressive peace” would precede the Lord’s Second Coming.33

The chasm between Latter-day Saints and premillenarian Christians today can be seen in their approach to natural disasters. For prominent Protestant fundamentalists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Haitian earthquake were God’s way of punishing sin. Latter-day Saint leaders, meanwhile, spoke of these disasters exclusively in humane, compassionate terms, offering no explanation for the disaster’s cause. Modern Latter-day Saints are much less comfortable attributing natural disasters to God’s wrath than their forebears were. Food storage and emergency preparedness are necessary, Latter-day Saints teach, not just for the Saints to help themselves but to lend aid to others not in the Church. Rather than attributing the destruction wrought by natural disasters to God’s will, Latter-day Saint Charities and the Church’s “Helping Hands” program seeks to minimize the effects of natural disasters around the world.

32. Richard L. Evans, in One Hundred Twentieth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1950), 105. Martin Luther is alleged to have said much the same thing: if he discovered the world would end tomorrow, he would immediately “go out into the garden and plant a tree.” Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 181.

33. Avraham Gileadi, The Last Days: Types and Shadows from the Bible and the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 1. Still, the Church’s commercial press capitalized on interest in end times as the year 2000 approached. See, for example, Parry and Parry, Understanding the Signs of the Times.
Contemporary Latter-day Saints are known more for their sunny, optimistic dispositions than for an anxious, brooding, sky-is-falling premillenarianism. The outlook can be seen in a 2005 talk in which Apostle Boyd K. Packer briefly acknowledged that these are the last days of the earth’s history before he moved quickly to the many reasons to avoid pessimism. “When I think of the future,” he said, “I am overwhelmed with a feeling of positive optimism.”

Conclusion

Today, Latter-day Saints do not look for an imminent return of Jesus the way they once did. The “signs of the times” are not discussed in detail in the lessons missionaries preach to potential converts. Church leaders today do not talk publicly about a return to Missouri or about judgments that leaders once said must precede the Second Coming. But the internet has kept the older teachings alive. In the backs of their minds, believers know that teachings long forgotten and seemingly discarded could be taught once again in a Church that holds to a belief in modern revelation. Older teachings can reappear, and newer teachings can be set aside. Premillenarianism and postmillenarianism are likely to ebb and flow in the future, in new combinations, just as they have done in the past.

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35. Turner, Mormon Jesus, 149–50.
In several ways, this is not a normal book. But then, it does not cover an ordinary life. It should be read and revisited especially by every Brigham Young University student, faculty member, and alum. After all, no other biography has ever been written about a graduate of BYU (1954) who went on to become a clerk to the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court (1957–1958), a dynamic president of BYU (1971–1980), and also an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ (1984). I can only imagine that every Latter-day Saint and all readers of BYU Studies Quarterly will want to absorb this book in several ways and for a number of beneficial purposes.

This book will appeal to a wide readership. This well-illustrated and attractively designed book testifies and documents how the life of Dallin H. Oaks, a remarkable servant of the Lord, has been guided by the hands of the Master, Jesus Christ. This high-level biography offers thirty accessible chapters—averaging twelve pages—packed with information and featuring insights that are skillfully aimed to inspire and instruct both the young and old, female and male, novice and expert.

Behind the friendly personality of this book, readers will have no reason to notice that it was actually authored by a lawyer and about a lawyer. Richard E. Turley Jr., a graduate of the BYU Law School and former Assistant Church Historian and Recorder, has been privileged to work closely with Elder and now President Oaks for over three decades. Rick is a master organizer and brilliant analyzer of vast bodies of documentary evidence.¹ But even he could not have anticipated the vast sea

¹. Turley’s control of documentary evidence is already legendary. See, for example, his books Victims: The LDS Church and the Mark Hofmann Case (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); with Ronald W. Walker, Mountain Meadows Massacre: The
of storage boxes, archives, diaries, speeches, and letters that he would need to wade through in order to string together the hundreds of pearls of great price that adorn this biography.

While other biographies of LDS Church leaders have served readers well, this latest biography surpasses the others in its universal utility. For example, unlike the two volumes written by historians on J. Reuben Clark (1980, 1983)—who was also a lawyer and Counselor in the First Presidency—In the Hands of the Lord dwells more on divine influences and less on various contexts of life-changing events. Here, less can be more. And unlike the highly regarded and detailed biography of Spencer W. Kimball—who was not a lawyer but whose story was masterfully written by a lawyer-son Edward L. Kimball—this book focuses more on the personal and high-level leadership challenges faced by Dallin H. Oaks while making their life-lessons relevant to the ordinary reader. This orientation adds to pertinence. And while much like the biography of Elder Neal A. Maxwell—also superbly written by a close friend, Bruce C. Hafen—Turley's book dives less into deep wellsprings and instead relates religion more with law's roles to meld thinking with doing.

Throughout this book, I was struck by the balances that Dallin H. Oaks has been blessed to achieve within the full fabric of his life. His scope embraces both secular and spiritual, public and private, institutional and personal, professional and social, domestic and international, athletic and intellectual, speaking and writing, being chosen and also choosing. Professionally, he specialized in teaching the laws of fiduciary duties and obligations, while at the same time he defended the guarantees of all rights and freedoms. His life is well represented by the scales of justice, as displayed in the décor of the courtroom of the U.S. Supreme Court. Such a scale has two balance pans, not just one. And likewise, this book succeeds by seeing Oaks's life not just in the hand of the Lord, but in both hands of the Lord, fully embraced and not deviating either to the right or to the left.

On just about every page, readers will learn surprising things about President Oaks: for example, that his father died when Dallin was still just seven years old, that he was raised essentially by a single mom, and that the middle initial “H” in his name is for Harris, the maiden name of his mother, who was a great-granddaughter of Emer Harris, the brother of Book of Mormon witness Martin Harris (2). Or again, that Margie

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McKnight, his secretary, fittingly saw the words “all in” in the name D-all-in (376). Did you know that Dallin played the oboe in the band, struggled with arithmetic, and was bullied in school (12–13, 18)? Or that in young Dallin’s presence his grandfather revived, by the power of the priesthood, a child who had drowned in an irrigation ditch (16–17)?

Dallin’s growing-up years set the stage for many of his later contributions. For example, he was employed, beginning as a young teenager, at local radio stations (21–23), developing skills and interests that would make him a very precise public speaker (49) and would pave the way for him years later to become chairman of Public Broadcasting Services (153). One might wonder how formative it may have been for his later defenses of religious freedom (ch. 25) that he had served in the National Guard and that his cousin Merrill became a four-star general in the United States Air Force. Dallin certainly tied together his academic training and his spiritual interests, as is reflected in his first book, *The Wall between Church and State* (University of Chicago Press, 1963), and an article in the *Improvement Era* (December 1963) on the Supreme Court’s cases on prayers in school (90–93).

While some will know that he graduated as editor in chief of the law review and second in his law school class at the University of Chicago (55), how many would know that Dallin and June’s third child was born while they were still in law school (55–56) and while June also was furthering her education at Chicago’s Roosevelt University (51)? Or that Dallin regularly volunteered as a public defender in the inner city of Chicago while he was a student and then a faculty member there (100–103, 105–6), paving the way for his becoming a pioneer in the federal civil rights legal movement of 1964 and going on to publish the leading law review article in 1970 on a series of Supreme Court opinions dealing with the exclusionary rule, defining lawful and unlawful searches and seizures?2 His law school dean and mentor, Edward Levi, was Jewish and always admired Dallin for his extraordinary and humble devotion to his very demanding Church callings, appointing him as acting dean of the law school (88). These opportunities were the first of many extraordinary experiences—of helping and connecting with key people, of being in the right places at the right times—that prepared him to walk humbly forward and with decisive dedication.

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This is not to say that everything in this biography is serious and sobering. Many things learned here are just plain fun. For instance, readers will learn about “the family dog, Gretchen, a Great Dane” referred to by Dallin as “the beast” (124), who came with them from Chicago to live in the President’s House in Provo on the campus of BYU. By character, Dallin Oaks is smiling, radiant, happy, bold, and full of gusto. He even made a guest appearance once as Cosmo the Cougar (146).

Dallin H. Oaks’s adult life divides naturally into two main chronological periods: his years with his first wife, June Dixon (1952–1998, until she died of cancer), and then his years with Kristen McMain (2000–present). Dallin and June were together for forty-six years, including his nine years as BYU president and his first fourteen years as an Apostle (chs. 3–18). Dallin and Kristen have now been together for twenty-one years, with the great promise yet ahead for all they will yet enjoy and contribute together (chs. 19–30). Turley’s frequent inclusion of interesting information about Oaks’s mother (18, 22, 151) and the significant roles of other women and children in his life inform his repeated doctrinal emphasis on the family (chs. 18–20, 23). Although this biography runs mainly in a clear chronological order, a timeline of his life would have been useful in helping readers keep track of nearly ninety years of data as well as relate it more readily to important events going on in the world and in the Church during each of decades of his life.

Ever the scholar and teacher, Dallin Oaks has authored at least eight tightly focused books, thirty-three general conference talks (ch. 26), thirty-five videos available as BYU speeches, and literally thousands of personal ministering letters (ch. 27). His conference talks are solidly grounded in the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Gospels of Matthew and John. His range


5. His favorites include verses in 1 Nephi 1, 3, 11, 16 and 22; 2 Nephi 1–4, 25–32; Mosiah 2–5; Alma 5, 7, 22, 32, 34, 37, 40–42; 3 Nephi 9, 11, 18, 27; and Moroni 7 and 10. His talks
of topics is encyclopedic, returning often to the themes of atonement, blessings, commandments, faith, integrity, Jesus, knowledge, love, and virtue. Thinking like a lawyer, he often emphasizes the personal rights of all to exercise their agency powers and to reap the rewards or consequences. He is also ever mindful of priesthood duties, love unfeigned, authority, and powers of fathers, as well as why priesthood keys are essential and how they work and are necessarily surrendered when a person is released from callings to which those keys uniquely pertain (325). As is exemplified in this biography, President Oaks clearly articulates reasons behind rules, rationales behind duties, and God’s creation and bringing to pass of his eternal desires and plans for us, his children.

Each chapter title begins with a few quoted words followed by a subject subheading in italics. For example, chapter 11: “Absolutely Extraordinary”—The Nine BYU Years. Or chapter 24: “An Apostle, Not a Judge”—The Church and the Law. This technique for creating chapter headings was used in the 1975 Carthage Conspiracy book by Dallin Oaks and Marvin Hill, so it is especially fitting that Turley uses it here. The quoted words in each chapter title have been pulled from within the chapter, usually coming from a statement by Oaks himself. I found myself eagerly reading each chapter more attentively in order to spot the quoted words, which I then could appreciate in their full context.

This book delivers a steady stream of arresting gems of wisdom, typical of President Oaks’s succinct use of words: On his receiving a C in theology during his freshman year at BYU in 1951–1952, he simply said it was “perhaps a measure of my indifference during this time” (34), when he might instead have shifted some of the blame to the course itself. His trenchant maxims include: “Work first, play later” (40). “Faith . . . can move people”; “be not too easily discouraged”; “be not flattered by success” (79). Know the difference between “good, better, and best” (324). Revelation begins by “feeling vulnerable” (94). Revelation occurs for eight different purposes (see 321). Spiritual uplift and growth comes from “an ongoing practice of repenting, even of seemingly small transgressions” (355). No doubt, many more such statements, including spontaneous remarks, had to be left on the cutting room floor. For example, Joseph Bentley, a student under Professor Oaks at Chicago, told me of the advice Oaks gave him as he started law school there: “Remember to always keep the Sabbath Day holy.” I remember him telling me in
the hall outside our faculty offices in the J. Reuben Clark Law building, “A bad argument is worse than no argument at all,” advice I have made use of on many occasions.

In the end, most chapters conclude with a teaser that leads directly into the beginning of the next chapter. This device makes this book even more of a page-turner. And, indeed, this book rewards seekers. In almost every chapter, something fascinating, even thrilling, appears. This book takes readers behind stage, into the very rooms where things have happened: into the chambers of the United States Supreme Court (ch. 5); into temple rooms where Elder Oaks made the decision to marry Kristin, with June’s blessing, two years after June had died (235–38); into priesthood leadership meetings to learn what Elder Oaks taught in unpublished training sessions (325–27); and into the solemn council meeting conducted by President Russell M. Nelson, in which he first heard from all of the Apostles individually and then, after a long period of deep and reflective prayer, announced that Dallin H. Oaks and Henry B. Eyring were to serve as his two counselors (ch. 28). This, he said, was “for the good of the Church,” so that President Oaks, the next in line to become the prophet, could be trained in “items that are only done by the First Presidency” (346).

This book offers every reader an irrefutable and engaging testimony of how the life of Dallin H. Oaks, time and again, has been positioned and guided by the hands of the Lord and how Dallin H. Oaks, reciprocally, has faithfully taken those hands and turned his life over to the service of God and to leading God’s children everywhere. This book now places that torch into the hands of readers everywhere.

John W. Welch is Professor Emeritus of Law and Religion, having retired recently from the J. Reuben Clark Law School faculty. He became acquainted with Dallin Oaks in the 1970s, in connection with the beginnings of the Law School. Over the years, he interacted with Elder Oaks on the law faculty, on the editorial board of the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, and as editor of BYU Studies Quarterly. Coordinating with Richard E. Turley, he and Jan Shipps copublished through BYU Studies The Journals of William E. McLellin (1831–1836). Having launched the BYU New Testament Commentary published by BYU Studies, and having organized Book of Mormon Central, a tax-exempt organization that cooperates with BYU Studies, Welch and his wife, Jeannie, are now serving as a senior missionary couple.
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