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- Educated nonspecialist readers
- Scholars whose work merits publication in a venue committed to both revealed and discovered truth
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Across acres of parking lots we walk
in thick silence, the first snow
this year, the first ever to stick

on the Southern California clothes
of the kid ahead of me. Hunched
monkishly under a skater hoodie,

hands in pockets, he bears no backpack,
just a folder clamped into an armpit.
Drifting past islands of lone, bony trees

in an asphalt sea, he’s long gone,
driving all night for waves and sunshine
by late morning, if he had a car.

He turns west for the freshman dorms.
Cloud-break rays burnish his face,
caution and a pilgrim’s humility

brace him for winter this far inland,
this far north, the shadow he knew
by feel back home faint as breath.

I should follow his shuffling footprints,
promise him that snowlight will balance
the distance of cold with dark’s closeness.

Look, I’d say, the sun always fades
like this, the final sliver of a citrus
cough drop in your soon-sore throat,

like campfire embers—driftwood if you want—
raked over those frozen mountains, dying fast
and too far away to warm your hands.

— Kevin Klein

This poem won first place in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
The Curse of the Covenant
The Deuteronomic Curses in the Book of Mormon

T. J. Uriona

Introduction

The ancient Near East had a rich and well-developed covenant tradition that helped to define the relationships between covenant parties. Much like modern contracts, which tend to follow a conventional construction, there is within the ancient Near East tradition a prominent covenant construction known as the suzerain-vassal treaty.\(^1\) Covenant treaties of this type stipulated the conditions of loyalty between a lord or suzerain to the vassal or subject. A major feature of this type of treaty was the promise of blessings as well as the threat of curses. The blessings and curses ensured covenant fidelity and maintained the social and political relationships between covenant parties.\(^2\) It is this covenant type that seems to underlie the covenant God made with Israel under Moses’s

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\(^2\) “The view that divine beings played a role in political history through blessings and curses was pervasive in the ancient Near East. It shaped and shoved foreign relations to the extent that it reinforced the normative principle that promises should be kept.” Lucas Grassi Freire, “Foreign Relations in the Ancient Near East: Oaths, Curses, Kingship and Prophecy,” *Journal for Semitics* 26, no. 2 (2017): 664.
leadership (see Ex. 20–24). This is exemplified in the utterance, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life” (Deut. 30:19).

Many of the blessings and curses associated with God’s covenant with Israel are found in Deuteronomy 28. The power that these blessings and curses had on the hearts and minds of the Israelites is perhaps reflected in the fact that Deuteronomy 28 is one of the longest chapters in the Bible. It is telling that roughly four-fifths of the chapter lists prescribed curses for those who prove unfaithful, possibly underscoring the force that an impending curse had on the imagination of those in ancient Near East. Not surprisingly then, the threat of cursing also appears as a prominent feature of the Book of Mormon and can be best understood in relation to the Deuteronomy covenant text.

Scholars have posited over the years the importance of the book of Deuteronomy to our understanding of the Book of Mormon. For example, Noel B. Reynolds pointed out that in Lehi’s final appeal to Laman and Lemuel, Lehi evidently “feels he might touch [them] by making a rhetorical appeal to Moses as a second witness to Lehi’s own prophetic viewpoint. He especially knows that his rebellious older sons, who specifically rejected his visions, calling him ‘a visionary man’ (1 Ne. 2:11), will not respond to his teaching alone. And so he phrases his message in terms that repeatedly remind his hearers of Moses’ similar message delivered on a similar occasion . . . [Lehi] thus made Deuteronomy a powerful, though unmentioned, foundation for his own message.”

3. Leviticus 26 also contains an extensive list of blessings and curses.
4. There is a good example of this in the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, which tried to ensure covenant loyalty by an elaborate list of potential curses involving disease. In this example more than 150 of the 670 lines of the treaty deal with curses.
It seems that Nephi did a similar thing when he documented his history. Nephi recorded that the Lord said unto him, “Inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren. For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed” (1 Ne. 2:22–23). The next time cursing is mentioned in the record, Nephi clearly ties his understanding of being cursed to the covenant God had made with Israel through Moses. Speaking to his brothers, Nephi said, “Do ye suppose that [the Israelites] would have been led out of bondage, if the Lord had not commanded Moses that he should lead them?” (1 Ne. 17:24). Nephi added that the Israelites “had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fulness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them, and bless it unto our fathers; yea, he did curse it against them unto their destruction, and he did bless it unto our fathers unto their obtaining power over it” (1 Ne. 17:35). Lehi used similar rhetoric when speaking to Laman and Lemuel: “I have feared, lest for the hardness of your hearts the Lord your God should come out in the fulness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed forever; Or, that a cursing should come upon you. . . . That ye may not be cursed with a sore cursing; and also, that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you, unto the destruction, yea, the eternal destruction of both soul and body” (2 Ne. 1:17–18, 22). For example, when Lehi then confirmed the message Nephi received from the Lord saying, “If ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish” (2 Ne. 1:28).

These examples echo a similar promise in the book of Deuteronomy 28, which warned the Israelites that “if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God . . . all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee” (Deut. 28:15), and it is written that the Lord would “send upon

7. Much like we see with the focus of the suzerain-vassal treaty and God’s covenant with Israel, the first mention of a curse in the Book of Mormon seems to be inextricably tied to an appropriate understanding of divinely appointed power between Nephi and his brothers.

8. Noel B. Reynolds makes an important observation related to this point that again ties Nephi’s writings to Deuteronomy. “It is in the speeches in Deuteronomy that Moses declares Joshua as his successor (see Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28; 31:3, 7, 14, 23). . . . Lehi similarly seizes on the occasion of his pending demise to appoint Nephi as his successor, though in a somewhat indirect way. Recognizing the unlikelihood that Nephi will enjoy the same support that the early Israelites gave Joshua, Lehi promises and warns his sons that ‘if ye will hearken unto the voice of Nephi ye shall not perish’ (2 Ne. 1:28).” Reynolds, “Lehi as Moses,” 29.

9. In another example it reads, “All these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not unto the voice of the Lord” (Deut. 28:45).
thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings” (Deut. 28:20). Summing up these ideas, we read later that “all these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not . . . And they shall be unto thee for a sign” (Deut. 28:45–46). Importantly, both Nephi and Lehi used the same phrasal verb found in Deuteronomy in conjunction with the curse they warned would “come upon” Laman and Lemuel for failure to “hearken.” Furthermore, the word for sign comes from the Hebrew ʾôth, which can also be translated as “mark.” This is consistent with what the Lord had said to Nephi that “the Lamanites have I cursed, and I will set a mark on them” (Alma 3:14). These textual clues, along with their underlying context, point the reader to the book of Deuteronomy for a key to understanding how the Book of Mormon people perceived what it meant to be cursed.

The Metonymical Curse

The way Nephi speaks of curses provides further support for connecting the Book of Mormon to the book of Deuteronomy. In the writings of Jeremiah, a contemporary to Lehi and Nephi, the Deuteronomic curses were used to explain Jerusalem’s destruction. Jeffrey Anderson states, “It is widely recognized that the book of Jeremiah was influenced substantially by Deuteronomic theology. . . . In Deuteronomic fashion, the book of Jeremiah portrays the fall of Jerusalem as a result of the fulfillment of the covenant curse (Deuteronomy 27–28). The prophet Jeremiah shares the heritage of prophets who sought unsuccessfully to warn the people of God against breaking the covenant.” Lehi and Nephi share this same prophetic heritage.

10. See Deuteronomy 28:15–68 and Leviticus 26:14–39, which together catalog the consequences of being cursed because of failing to hearken unto the Lord.

11. James Strong, The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), H226; see Gen. 4:15 for an example of where it is translated as “mark.”


According to Anderson, “the curse is extended in the book of Jeremiah in a unique way, by means of the rhetorical principle of metonymy.” He adds that a metonym can “be employed when a cause is substituted for effect or effect for cause.” Then building on Josef Scharbert’s work, Anderson indicates that “it is this substitution of cause for effect that is important in understanding the curse in Jeremiah. Josef Scharbert has argued that curse terminology in the Hebrew Bible can sometimes be used metonymically as ‘a noun for persons on whom the curses pronounced come as devastating calamities.’ This, in effect, is a metonymical substitution of effect for cause. If, therefore, one wanted to curse someone else, he/she might refer to the dubious fate of that person who had been placed in such a dreadful situation that his/her whole existence could be considered cursed.”

Thus, when Nephi writes that the curse “came upon” his brothers, this can be understood as a metonymical substitution of effect for cause. In the case of Nephi’s brothers, Nephi could be relating the cause to the curses in the book of Deuteronomy. If this is the case, then according to Anderson, the curse “is not an invocation of misfortune but the actual embodiment of that misfortune. Thus, the object of this formula becomes an example of calamity and a proverb of disaster. Ironically, in dialectical fashion, this metonymical curse can then again become a derogatory speech act uttered against someone else by referring to that individual or group as a curse.” Therefore, to say that someone is cursed is to also enact a division. In relation to the social function curses played in the Bible, Anderson adds that

Curses in the [Bible] ordinarily imply two basic threats: the threat of devastating calamity, and the threat of exclusion from the community. These threats are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Threat of calamity is often expressed in what anthropologists deem as an “ecological” framework. Curse threats primarily target the fertility of humans, animals, and land. Pestilence, disease, consumption, and a general lack of

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15. Anderson, “Metonymical Curse as Propaganda in Jeremiah,” 3. Anderson defines *metonym* as “a trope or figure of speech in which there is a substitution of the name of one thing for that of another with which it is associated.” Anderson, “Metonymical Curse as Propaganda in Jeremiah,” 3–4.


productivity are usually cited in these threats (Deut 27–29). While the relentless power of the curse to pursue violators and bring malevolent force to bear on them is frightening, one also must not underestimate the power that threat of expulsion from the community can wield. The “contagious” nature of some curses to infect a whole family, tribe, or nation, created an incredibly strong taboo against one who would be perceived as “cursed.”

This presents the intriguing possibility that Laman and Lemuel and perhaps those that stayed with them were “loathsome” (2 Ne. 5:22) and “might not be enticing unto” (2 Ne. 5:21) the Nephites because they perceived that the Lord had caused to “come upon” the Lamanites some of the curses found in Deuteronomy.

The Stereotypic Deuteronomic Curse

We find additional threads in Lehi’s message to his sons Laman and Lemuel that connect to a common triad of curses found in Deuteronomy. After warning them of the curse, Lehi elaborates by saying that they would be “visited by sword, and by famine, and [be] hated” (2 Ne. 1:18). Not surprisingly, Jeremiah also seems to make extensive use of this triad within his prophecies. For example, in Jeremiah it reads, “I have punished Jerusalem, by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence” (Jer. 44:13). According to Nathan Mastnjak, the destruction due to a curse involving famine, the sword, and being hated because of disease is a stereotypical triad for “the enacted curses of the covenant” found in Deuteronomy.

21. See also Numbers 1:51; 3:10, 38 where the “stranger” that comes near the tabernacle “shall be put to death.” The word “stranger” comes from the Hebrew zûwr (Strong, Concordance, H2114) and implies that anyone unfit, loathsome, or adulterous is to be turned aside. Jacob seems to build on this idea when describing the Nephites’ sexual sins in relation to the Lamanites’ loathsome condition in Jacob 2–3.
22. In the book of Job, we are presented with a narrative that seems to challenge the Deuteronomic narrative related to being blessed or cursed. Significantly, in Job 7:5, Job is described as being “loathsome.” This description of Job can opens the door to a more nuanced reading of the Lamanite curse and Nephi referring to the Lamanites as “loathsome.”
24. Nathan Mastnjak, Deuteronomy and the Emergence of Textual Authority in Jeremiah (Tübingen, Ger.: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 120.
Deuteronomy. That Lehi alludes to all three further connects Lehi’s message to what we find in Deuteronomy.

There is another compelling example of this stereotypic triad in the account of David’s punishment for conducting a census in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. In this account, the prophet Gad is told, “Go and say unto David, Thus saith the Lord, I offer thee three things: choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee” (2 Sam. 24:12). David is then given the choice between “three years’ famine; “three months to be destroyed before thy foes, while that the sword of thine enemies overtaketh thee,” or three days of “pestilence, in the land” (1 Chr. 21:12). David would choose three days of pestilence, and “the Lord sent pestilence upon Israel: and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men” (1 Chr. 21:14). In this example, we once again read that a curse would come upon the Israelites, and the curse is explicitly identified as a “pestilence” that led to the death of seventy thousand men. This example can help explain why Lehi would cry, “O my sons, that these things might not come upon you” (2 Ne. 1:19). Lehi is in essence pleading for his sons to choose blessing and life rather than cursing and death due to the sword, famine, and pestilence.

The Book of Mormon contains many examples that support their belief in an enacted curse following a broken covenant. The prophet Abinadi would say to an unrighteous king “[the Lord] will smite this [his] people with sore afflictions, yea, with famine and with pestilence” (Mosiah 12:4). In contrast to Abinadi’s message to the unrighteous Nephites, the prophet Alma would later say that the righteous Nephites were blessed by the Lord in that they were “saved from famine, and from sickness, and all manner of diseases of every kind; and they having waxed strong in battle, that they might not be destroyed” (Alma 9:22). One of Alma’s converts and traveling companions, Amulek, would warn the Nephites that if they did not repent, they would “be visited with utter destruction; yet it would not be by flood, as were the people in the days of Noah, but it would be by famine, and by pestilence, and the sword” (Alma 10:22). Additionally, Alma would prophesey to his son Helaman that the Nepites would ultimately be destroyed, saying, “Then shall they see wars and pestilences, yea, famines and bloodshed, even until the people of Nephi shall become extinct” (Alma 45:11).

25. The destruction led David and the elders of Israel to clothe themselves in sackcloth in mourning for the dead. See 1 Chronicles 21:16.
Later in the Book of Mormon, another prophet named Nephi would plead with the Lord that his people would not “be destroyed by the sword; but O Lord, rather let there be a famine in the land, to stir them up in remembrance of the Lord” (Hel. 11:4). In answer to his prayer, he writes that the “work of destruction did cease by the sword but became sore by famine” (Hel. 11:5). Samuel, a Lamanite prophet, would make a similar prophecy concerning the Nephites, saying, “They shall be smitten; yea [the Lord] will visit them with the sword and with famine and with pestilence” unto their “utter destruction” (Hel. 13:9–10). Editorializing on these ideas, Mormon wrote that “thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him” (Hel. 12:3). All these examples echo the offer Gad made to David and strongly suggest that the enacted curse of the covenant, found in Deuteronomy, underlies how Book of Mormon prophets understood what it meant to be cursed.

Before mentioning that his brothers had been cursed, Nephi highlighted the advantage he believed the sword brought to the Nephites in their conflicts with the Lamanites. He stated that he “did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us” (2 Ne. 5:14). Nephi’s brother Jacob would later reinforce this point when he said that Nephi had “been a great protector for them, having wielded the sword of Laban in their defence” (Jacob 1:10; see also Omni 1:2, 10 and W of M 1:13–14). Furthermore, not only did the Lamanites fall by the Nephites’ swords but Nephi also wrote that “because of their cursing which was upon [the Lamanites] they did . . . seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Ne. 5:24), an activity which attests to a desperate want of food, given that eating beasts of prey is prohibited by the law of Moses. Additionally, Alma would mention that the Nephites had been spared from “all manner of disease” (Alma 9:22), which suggests

26. This is consistent with the covenant curse formula and Nephi’s use of the “sore” in relation to being cursed.
27. See also 2 Nephi 10:6, 15.
28. Later, Nephi’s nephew Enos would say that the Lamanites were “full of idolatry and filthiness; feeding upon beasts of prey,” adding further that “many of them did eat nothing save it was raw meat” (Enos 1:20). The eating of “beasts of prey,” which Israelites were forbidden to do, would have made them ritually impure or filthy (see Lev. 11). In addition, it could have led to further filthiness given that they were eating the meat raw. By not cooking the meat they ate, the Lamanites stood a higher probability of transmitting
that the same might not be true for the Lamanites. These comments all seem to lend support to the perceived fulfillment of Lehi’s warning of the triad curse involving the sword, famine, and being hated due to disease.

**Sore Curse**

The book of Ezekiel has an additional example of enacted covenant curses that is worth exploring.29 Typical of what we see in the Book of Mormon and Jeremiah, we read in Ezekiel, “Alas for all the evil abominations of the house of Israel! for they shall fall by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence” (Ezek. 6:11). Building on the above example we later read, “For thus saith the Lord God; How much more when I send my four sore judgments upon Jerusalem, the sword, and the famine, and the noisome beast, and the pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast?” (Ezek. 14:21).30 In this case, the addition of a *noisome beast* to the typical triad led to the qualifier “I will send my four sore judgments.” It is also significant to note that Ezekiel uses “sore judgements” and being “cut off,” which echoes what we find in Nephi’s record describing his brothers being cut off by a sore curse.31 This example can also provide a conceptual framework for how they perceived being cursed, where being cut off resulted in destruction by the Lord’s sore judgements, typified by the sword, famine, and pestilence (see Alma 9:11–12).

Lehi’s comments when he first mentioned a potential “sore cursing” for Laman and Lemuel reflect this understanding of a sore judgment. He wrote, “I have feared, lest for the hardness of your hearts the Lord your God should come out in the fulness of his wrath upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed”32 (2 Ne. 1:17)—a destruction that both Lehi...
and Ezekiel equate to the sword, famine, and pestilence typical of the covenant curse. This suggests that Nephi implies the same when he said of Laman and Lemuel, “they were cut off from [the Lord’s] presence. And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity” (2 Ne. 5:20–21). If we understand the “sore cursing” to be the same as Ezekiel’s “sore judgment,” then Lehi and Nephi’s references to a sore cursing could refer to the covenant curses described in Deuteronomy 28.33

Recognizing that the judgments of the Lord were to be “sore” might also inform our understanding of the curse that Lehi and Nephi reference. Nephi and Lehi were not the only writers in the standard works to use the phrase sore cursing, and a study of the phrase turns out to be significant for understanding the Deuteronomic promise of death and destruction due to cursing.34 Nephi’s younger brother Jacob uses the same phrase to warn the Nephites that if they do not hearken unto his counsel and repent of their wickedness, the Lord will “visit them with a sore curse, even unto destruction” (Jacob 2:33). Remember that Deuteronomy 28 reads, “All these curses shall come upon thee, and shall pursue thee, and overtake thee, till thou be destroyed; because thou hearkenedst not” (Deut. 28:45). Therefore, the coupling of sore curse with destruction because of a failure to hearken suggests that when Nephi spoke of the sore curse that came upon his brothers, he is also referencing potential death or destruction.35

Outside of Nephi’s and Jacob’s records, the phrase sore curse is only found in the book of Moses.36 The first example reads, “And God cursed the earth with a sore curse, and was angry with the wicked. . . . For they

33. Joseph Smith records the angel Moroni informing him “of great judgments which were coming upon the earth, with great desolation by famine, sword, and pestilence; and that these grievous judgments would come on the earth” (JS–H 1:45). Here we have the intensifying adjectives “great” and “grievous” that, like “sore,” are tied to God’s “judgment” consisting of the stereotypic covenant curse of “famine, sword, and pestilence” found in Deuteronomy 28.

34. Sore here comes from the Hebrew word raʿ (Strong, Concordance, H7451) and means bad, evil, or painful (see also Job 2:7). In Deuteronomy 32:23, this same Hebrew word is translated as mischiefs, a word Nephi also used to describe his brothers in 2 Nephi 5:24.

35. See Uriona, “‘Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing.’”

36. It has been hypothesized that non-Biblical phrases found in the Book of Mormon, such as “sore curse,” are possibly connected to the book of Moses via material originating on the brass plates. See Jeff Lindsay and Noel B. Reynolds, “‘Strong Like unto Moses’: The Case for Ancient Roots in the Book of Moses Based on Book of Mormon Usage of Related Content Apparently from the Brass Plates,” Interpreter 44 (2021): 1–92, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/strong-like-unto-moses-the-case-for-ancient
would not hearken unto his voice” (Moses 5:56–57). The second example reads, “And there came forth a great famine into the land, and the Lord cursed the earth with a sore curse, and many of the inhabitants thereof died” (Moses 8:4). In the second example, it is explicitly clear that the effect of the *sore curse* was death. Both examples differ from the *sore curse* that Nephi and Jacob spoke of because it is the land instead of the people that are the subject of the curse. But clearly, writers believed that failure to hearken to God could lead to sore curses.

Further, in all these examples *sore* seems to act as an intensifier to signal possible death or destruction.³⁷ For example, when Nephi speaks of a storm at sea that almost “swallowed” up their boat, he writes that the storm became “sore” (1 Ne. 18:14–15). Later, one of the twelve Nephite disciples tells of a “sore” war that threatened the Nephites with “utter destruction” (3 Ne. 2:13). With these examples in mind, by using *sore* to describe the curse that came upon his brothers, Nephi indicates his belief that Laman and Lemuel potentially faced death or destruction for failing to hearken to God.³⁸

As we saw in the book of Ezekiel, there are examples in the Bible where *sore* could be linked with curses. For example, in the book of Jeremiah we get a description of Jerusalem during the siege of the Babylonians which reads, “the famine was sore in the city” (Jer. 52:6). In Deuteronomy, we read that “the Lord shall smite thee in the knees, and in the legs, with a sore botch that cannot be healed” (Deut. 28:35),³⁹ adding later that “the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses . . . until thou be destroyed” (Deut. 28:59, 61).

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³⁷ See, for example, 2 Nephi 1:22; Mosiah 12:4–8; Helaman 11:5–6; Mormon 4:2; and Ether 14:4. It is not always the case that *sore* is used to indicate impending death or destruction. See Alma 37:28, 31.

³⁸ See also Mosiah 1:17; 9:3; 12:4; and Helaman 11:5, where *sore* is used in relation to the curses Moses describes, particularly famine and pestilence.

³⁹ Commenting on another time *sore* is used in the Bible, Van der Zwan writes, “This is one of the only two places (the other being Deut 28:35) in the Hebrew Bible where it [boil] is qualified by רע [sore]. It derives from the verb רע [to be hot, probably also to ‘be inflamed’ as in Arabic], an experience hinted at by [Job] 30:30 where blackness adds this same sense but now suggests being burnt from the outside. Alternatively, its heat could stem from the hunger inside him, as in Lamentation 5:10, or could be associated to his anger, but these possibilities are open and depend on the exact context.” Pieter van der Zwan, “Some Psychoanalytical Meanings of the Skin in the Book of Job,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 3.
The apparent mirroring of “sore” in Nephi’s record suggests that Nephi believed his brothers’ curse would have the same outcome of death or destruction brought on by the curse of the covenant.⁴⁰ Significantly, when Nephi next mentions that a “skin of blackness” (2 Ne. 5:21) came upon his brothers he is perhaps using an ancient Near East motif suggestive of death.⁴¹ For example, in a prominent Neo-Assyrian treaty we find a curse that reads, “May they [the gods] make your skin and the skin of your women, your sons and your daughters—dark. May they be as black as pitch and crude oil.”⁴² In this example the “skin . . . black as pitch” seems to be implying that the curse would bring death.⁴³ Therefore, Nephi’s reference to a “sore curse” and a “skin of blackness” may once again be an allusion to Deuteronomy and the promise of “life and death, blessing and cursing” (Deut. 30:19).⁴⁴

Cursing and Death

The Book of Mormon provides a great example of this Deuteronomic link between cursing and death. Early in the book of Alma, we learn of a war that broke out between the Nephites and an apostate group named the Amlicites who had joined forces with the Lamanites. Despite the record indicating that the Amlicites and Lamanites “were so numerous that they could not be numbered . . . the Nephites did pursue them with their might, and did slay them” (Alma 2:35–36). Later, the record recounts what happened to the Amlicites and Lamanites: “And it came to pass that many died in the wilderness of their wounds, and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air” (Alma 2:38). This comment is reflective of a curse described in Deuteronomy 28 that

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⁴⁰ Interestingly, after Nephi stated that a skin of blackness came upon his brothers, he never mentioned Laman or Lemuel’s names again as part of his record. This creates the impression that after Nephi mentioned that his older brothers were cursed, it was as if he considered them as dead. Whether this was intentional or not, the effect fits nicely into the Deuteronomic framework of cursing and death.

⁴¹ Black or blackness is also used in the Bible to describe death and destruction more generally. This is especially true for the writing around the time Nephi wrote his record. See Isaiah 50:3; Micah 3:6; Jeremiah 8:21, 14:2; and Ezekiel 32:7–8. The two examples in Jeremiah use the Hebrew word qāḏar, which means to be dark and by implication to mourn in sackcloth or sordid garments. This same word is used in Job 5:11 and 30:28 and Psalms 35:14; 38:6; 42:9; and 43:2.


⁴³ See Uriona, “‘Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing.’”

⁴⁴ Significantly, we find no mention of a curse that unambiguously speaks of a phenotypic change in skin color in the biblical curses.
reads, “The Lord shall cause thee to be smitten . . . and thy carcase shall be meat unto all fowls of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth, and no man shall fray them away” (Deut. 28:25–26).

Interestingly, the record includes the death and destruction that also befell the Nephites: “Now many women and children had been slain with the sword, and also many of their flocks and their herds; and also many of their fields of grain were destroyed, for they were trodden down by the hosts of men” (Alma 3:2). This once again reflects Deuteronomy 28 that reads, “Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field. Cursed shall be thy basket and thy store. Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep” (Deut. 28:16–18), adding further that “a nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young . . . which also shall not leave thee either corn, wine, or oil, or the increase of thy kine, or flocks of thy sheep, until he have destroyed thee” (Deut. 28:50–51).

Concerning the Nephites’ destruction and death, Alma commented that “the people were afflicted, yea, greatly afflicted for the loss of their brethren, and also for the loss of their flocks and herds, and also for the loss of their fields of grain, which were trodden under foot and destroyed by the Lamanites. And so great were their afflictions that every soul had cause to mourn; and they believed that it was the judgments of God sent upon them because of their wickedness and their abominations; therefore they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty” (Alma 4:2–3). Here the record indicates that the death of the Nephites by the swords of the Lamanites as well as the ensuing famine that followed the war were believed to be due to the “judgments of God” because of their “wickedness.” This understanding is reminiscent of Ezekiel’s reference to a sore judgment that typified the curse of the covenant.

That the Nephites related these events to the curse of the covenant is reflected in the comment that “they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty.” Earlier in the record, we read the way that King Benjamin described Lehi’s journey to his son Mosiah: “As they were unfaithful they did not prosper nor progress in their journey, but were driven back, and incurred the displeasure of God upon them; and therefore they were smitten with famine and sore afflictions, to stir them up in remembrance of their duty” (Mosiah 1:17). Their duty was to their God, and because of their unfaithfulness we once again get a reference to the famine and sore afflictions typical of the covenant’s curse.45

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45. See also Mosiah 13:30 where Abinadi says that the ten commandments were given “to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him.”
Mourning Practices and the Lamanite Mark

After Alma described the war’s death and destruction, he commented on the Lamanite curse. Before mentioning this curse, Alma described the appearance of the Amlicites and Lamanites: “the Amlicites were distinguished from the Nephites, for they had marked themselves with red in their foreheads after the manner of the Lamanites; nevertheless they had not shorn their heads like unto the Lamanites. Now the heads of the Lamanites were shorn; and they were naked, save it were skin which was girded about their loins” (Alma 3:4–5). Alma’s description of the Lamanites mimics earlier Nephite description of the Lamanites that came soon after Nephi indicated they were cursed (see Enos 1:20). Commenting on these verses, Ethan Sproat suggested the “possibility that ‘the skins of the Lamanites’ are to be understood as articles of clothing, the notable girdle of skin that these particular Lamanites wear to cover their nakedness.”

Further, it is important to note that Alma indicates that the Amlicites “marked themselves” and that their mark shared some relationship with the shaved head and loincloths of the Lamanites despite the fact that the Amlicites did not shave their heads. This peculiar distinction of the Lamanites can again find potential context in relation to the curse of the covenant. The practices of wearing a loincloth and the shaving of the head represent things that the Lamanites could have done as they mourned their impending death and destruction brought on by being cursed. For example, Jeremiah would say of the destruction of the Moabites that “every head shall be bald, and every beard clipped: upon all the hands shall be cuttings, and upon the loins sackcloth” (Jer. 48:37). Over time, mourning practices such as these might have become unique customs adopted by subsequent generations of Lamanites.


47. “The use of sackcloth as a symbol of mourning, and contemporaneous with the period when the custom of tearing off the garments had become specifically associated with mourning for a lost relative. The garb of mourning naturally becomes also the symbol of distress in general. . . . the putting on of sackcloth [was an] old established [custom], which had come to be specifically regarded as [a symbol] of mourning,” Morris Jastrow Jr., “The Tearing of Garments as a Symbol of Mourning, with Especial Reference to the Customs of the Ancient Hebrews,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 21 (1900): 35.

48. Nephi had grown up in the culture of the ancient Near East, far removed from the land of his inheritance. Nephi, as a first-generation immigrant, would most likely have a worldview shaped not by the new land he found himself in but by the old world he left. There is a real possibility then that Alma’s discussion of a mark, a curse, and skin
Robert Alter points out that during conditions of famine or plague, communities “adopted mourning practices such as the wearing of sackcloth and sprinkling ashes on the head. The underlying idea was that such practices of mortification would engage the compassion of the deity, and the disaster would end.”\(^{49}\) In their study of the Old Testament practice of rending clothes, Jerome and Uroko state, “One of the outstanding actions that accompany tearing of garments is ‘to put on sackcloth.’ Sack (šāk in Hebrew) is ‘a rough fabric woven of hair, dark in color, used among other purposes for grain bags.’ It is a poor-quality material of goat hair which is coarse in nature.”\(^{50}\) Adding to our understanding of this practice, Morris Jastrow wrote, “Scholars are now generally agreed that the \textit{saq} [sackcloth] was originally a loin-cloth made of coarse stuff and hanging down from the loins to cover these parts of the body which in the eyes of the Semites constitute one’s ‘nakedness.’”\(^{51}\) Alma indicates that the Lamanites used the loincloth to cover their “nakedness” and further adds that the loincloth was “dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them” (Alma 3:6). If the Lamanites were experiencing disasters such as death by sword, famine, and plague, it is quite possible that their appearance reflected mourning practices such as wearing dark loincloths and shaved heads.\(^ {52}\)

In the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel we find extensive examples of this type of a mark in response to the enactment of the covenant curse.\(^ {53}\) For example, in Ezekiel 7 after describing the stereotypic triad of sword, famine, and pestilence that was “upon all the multitude” (Ezek. 7:14–15)
of Israel, the record reads that those who escaped this fate “shall also gird themselves with sackcloth, and horror shall cover them; and shame shall be upon all faces, and baldness upon all their heads” (Ezek. 7:18). Marks of this type were self-inflicted and distinct from, but seen as related to, the death and destruction that came from being cursed. Marks of this type were seen as the result of being cursed but were not the curse itself.

**Lamanite Hearkening Leads to Blessing and Life**

The tension between the Nephites and the Lamanites persisted for many years following Alma’s discussion of the Lamanite mark. However, in the first example of a group of Lamanites who joined with the Nephites, there is potential to once again understand this event in terms of the Deuteronomic promise. According to the promise found in Deuteronomy, blessings and life come when one hearkens to the Lord. It is therefore telling that the first group of Lamanites to accept the words of God and the need to repent were from the land of Ishmael. Matthew Bowen points out that the name Ishmael means “‘May El hear [him],’ ‘May El hearken,’ or ‘El Has Hearkened’—[which] derives from the Semitic (and later Hebrew) verb šāmaʿ (to ‘hear, ‘ ‘hearken, ‘ or ‘obey’).” This meaning suggests that those first converted Lamanites were in a land prepared by God to “hearken.” Playing on this understanding of the name Ishmael and the conditional nature of the curse as it relates to hearkening, Ammon, the Nephite who taught these Lamanites, prefaced his teachings by first asking the king of that land, “Wilt thou hearken unto my words?” (Alma 18:22).

It is fitting, therefore, that the Lamanites would accept the gospel first in the land of “hearkening” and come to Christ by hearkening to the words of the Nephite missionaries. Lehi had promised Laman and

54. A mourning practice that was common in the ancient Near East but forbidden by the law was that of tattooing (Deut. 14:1). Jan Martin presents the intriguing possibility that the Lamanites marked themselves with tattoos and that this “might help explain at least part of the procedure for how someone, like a Nephite dissenter, became recognized as a Lamanite.” Martin, “Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature,” 125. Covering in ash is also associated with mourning rituals. This might have implications related to Gerrit Steenblik’s work looking at body paint in the culture of the Maya and the Lamanite curse. See Gerrit M. Steenblik, “Demythicizing the Lamanites’ ‘Skin of Blackness,’” *Interpreter* 49 (2021): 167–258.


https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol63/iss2/18
Lemuel that if they would “hearken” to Nephi, they would receive his “first blessing” (2 Ne. 1:28–29). In what seems to be a delayed realization of this blessing, we learn that those Lamanites who hearkened to the word of God were given land among the Nephites. The land they received was called Jershon,\textsuperscript{56} a name that is probably derived from the Hebrew root \textit{y-r-š}, meaning “inheritance.” Here again the name of the land appears to be suggestive. It suggests that these Lamanites received the blessings promised to Laman and Lemuel that were contingent on their hearkening: they had inherited a land among the Nephites as Lehi had desired.

Lehi’s concern for Laman and Lemuel and their posterity reflects his understanding that if cursed, they might perish.\textsuperscript{57} The story of Ammon and the Lamanites who hearkened to the Nephit missionary seem to validate the Lord’s words: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life” (Deut. 30:19). It also works as a narrative foil in contrast to Lehi’s warning to Laman and Lemuel that if they would not hearken, they would be cursed.\textsuperscript{58} Mormon would draw out this contrast more explicitly when he wrote, speaking of the Lamanites who joined with the Nephites, “they began to be a very industrious people; yea, and they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore, they did open a correspondence with them, and the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18). It appears that once the Lamanites began to hearken to the Lord’s teachings, “the curse of God did no more follow them” and they were no longer “cut off” and were blessed with life rather than death. In a dramatic realization of this promise, we read that the children of these converted Lamanites were so blessed in battle that they provide the only example within the Book of Mormon where all were


\textsuperscript{57} The death of the righteous Lamanites who hearkened to God is prefaced by the following words: “And the great God has had mercy on us, and made these things known unto us that we might not perish” (Alma 24:14). They were later described as “saved” (Alma 24:26). In this way, their deaths fit into the Deuteronomic framework of life and blessings.

\textsuperscript{58} When Ammon and his brethren go to preach to the Lamanites, “the main differences that the missionaries find during their fourteen-year mission are cultural, not racial. . . . These distinctions between the Nephites and Lamanites suggest that the boundary between the two groups is defined by moral values, not genetics, and that the curse of the covenant is manifest primarily in spiritual and behavioral, not physical, terms.” Steven L. Olsen, “The Covenant of the Chosen People: The Spiritual Foundations of Ethnic Identity in the Book of Mormon,” \textit{Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture} 21, no. 2 (2012): 26.
protected from death in battle.\textsuperscript{59} This once again validates the Nephite belief in the promise of life and blessing for those who hearken.\textsuperscript{60}

**Nephite Failure to Hearken Leads to Cursing and Death**

Nephi had seen in vision that the Lamanites would once again be reconciled with their God. Yet, in that same vision, he also saw that his own people would eventually be destroyed (see 1 Ne. 12–14).\textsuperscript{61} If we understand Nephi’s vision in light of the Deuteronomic promise of “life and death, blessing and cursing,” we are better able to see how the failure of the Nephites to hearken to God led to their ultimate destruction. For example, the Nephite prophet Abinadi said to a group of Nephites, who were no longer hearkening to the word of the Lord, that they would be “driven by men” and “slain; and the vultures of the air, and the dogs, yea and the wild beasts, shall devour their flesh” (Mosiah 12:2). Abinadi further added that they will be “afflicted with all manner of diseases because of [their] iniquities,” “smitten on every hand,” “driven and scattered to and fro, even as a wild flock is driven by wild and ferocious beasts,” “hunted,” and “taken by the hand of [their] enemies” (Mosiah 17:16–18; see also Alma 2:35–38; 16:9–11; 25:12; and Hel. 7:18–19).

Abinadi’s words echo what we find in Deuteronomy 28 (Deut. 28:25–26; see also Lev. 26:25). Much like Nephi did when he listed the blessings that came to the Nephites because they hearkened to God, Abinadi alludes to Deuteronomic curses that would come upon the Nephites if they failed to hearken. These similarities support the idea that the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy provide the context for understanding Nephi’s references to his older brothers’ cursing and the greater cursing that came upon the Nephites, which ultimately led to their destruction. In this way, the Book of Mormon authors reaffirm the idea that failing to

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\textsuperscript{59} See Alma 56–57 for the story of this event. Alma 57:26 says of this miracle, “And we do justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God, because of their exceeding faith in that which they had been taught to believe—that there was a just God, and whosoever did not doubt, that they should be preserved by his marvelous power.”

\textsuperscript{60} It should be noted that many Lamanites were killed soon after their conversion. However, the record indicates that their death led to many being “brought to the knowledge of the truth; thus we see that the Lord worketh in many ways to the salvation of his people” (Alma 2:4:27). This commentary helps to reframe the death of the faithful Lamanites in relation to “salvation” or life. A similar reframing takes place in the narrative of the death of those who believed Alma and Amulek’s preachings. See for example Alma 14:9–11. It is significant to note that following this incident the city of Ammonihah was destroyed (see Alma 16:9–11), according to what is described in Deuteronomy 13:12–18.

\textsuperscript{61} Unlike the children of Laman and Lemuel, the Nephites were not given the blessing by Father Lehi that if they were to be cursed, they would not be destroyed.
hearken to the Lord would bring cursing and death. Just as the Israelites believed that they perished because they failed to hearken, so did the Nephites.

The Nephites may not have provided the first example of being cursed within the Book of Mormon, but they provide the final example of a curse found in the book of Deuteronomy for those unfaithful to God’s covenant (see also Alma 10:22–23 and Hel. 12:1–6). Mormon describes the change that eventually comes over the Nephites before their destruction in a letter he wrote to his son during the final battles between the Nephites and the Lamanites. Mormon wrote, “And now I write somewhat concerning the sufferings of [the Nephites]. For according to the knowledge which I have received from Amoron, behold, the Lamanites have many prisoners, which they took from the tower of Sherrizah; and there were men, women, and children. And the husbands and fathers of those women and children they have slain; and they feed the women upon the flesh of their husbands, and the children upon the flesh of their fathers; and no water, save a little, do they give unto them” (Moro. 9:7–8).

We find a similar gruesome picture in one of the curses found in Deuteronomy 28, which reads, “And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and of thy daughters, which the Lord thy God hath given thee, in the siege, and in the straitness, wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee” (Deut. 28:53; also 28:32). Mormon’s description of the destruction that befell the Nephites echoes the curses found in Deuteronomy 28 for those who did not hearken to God. Because the Nephites rejected the Lord’s teachings, thousands were “hewn down in open rebellion against their God, and heaped up as dung upon the face of the land” (Morm. 2:15). Mormon recorded that after the Nephites turned away from their covenants, “they did curse God, and wish to die” (Morm. 2:14), once again confirming how they viewed the promise of cursing and death found in Deuteronomy.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we learn from the larger narrative arc of the Book of Mormon that it was the Nephites who were destroyed for failing to hearken to the word of the Lord. In wording that reflects the Deuteronomic framework of “life and death, blessing and cursing” (Deut. 30:19), Mormon, editorializing on the state of the Nephites, wrote, “And thus we see that except the Lord doth chasten his people with many afflictions, yea, except he doth visit them with death and with terror, and with famine and with all manner of pestilence, they will not remember him . . . [but] blessed are they who will repent and hearken unto the voice of the
Lord their God; for these are they that shall be saved” (Hel. 12:3, 23). Like Mormon, Nephi saw the unfortunate destruction of the Nephites. Nephi described that vision in language matching almost exactly the language he used to describe those that followed his brothers at the time of their cursing. Nephi laments, “I beheld, after they had dwindled in unbelief they became a dark, and loathsome, and a filthy people, full of idleness and all manner of abominations” (1 Ne. 12:23).62 Tellingly, when describing these scenes that Nephi saw in vision, Mormon used language that parallels the curse of the covenant as it is described in Deuteronomy 28.

This would suggest, along with the other examples provided in this paper, that when trying to understand the exact nature of the Lamanite curse, Deuteronomy 28 can act as a guide. The curses found there seem to be typified by the sword, famine, and pestilence we often find described in the Book of Mormon. Importantly, the book of Deuteronomy never describes a malediction involving a phenotypic change in skin color. Therefore, to understand the Nephi’s reference to a curse and his subsequent reference to a skin of blackness as relating to a changing of the pigment in the Lamanites’ skin does damage to the narrative of the Book of Mormon and imposes upon it nineteenth-century sensibilities. However, when the curse and the skin of blackness are viewed from an ancient Near Eastern perspective with an eye to the Deuteronomic curse tradition we are better equipped to evaluate curse traditions within the greater narrative of the Book of Mormon. It is this framework that seems to underlie the life and death struggles that both the Nephites and Lamanites experience in the Book of Mormon. In failing to choose “life and good” (Deut. 30:15), the Nephites’ eventual destruction at the end of the record becomes the final witness to this didactic message.63

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62. Mormon uses some of these same descriptors in some of his final words prior to the destruction of the Nephites. See Mormon 5:15.

“They’re Just Rehearsing”
Gospel Methodology and the Humanities

Rex P. Nielson

This article is adapted from a presentation given on November 6, 2023, as part of a lecture series titled “Inspiring Teaching: Gospel Methodology in the Classroom,” sponsored by Rick Gill, dean of undergraduate education at Brigham Young University.

As BYU approaches the fiftieth anniversary of President Spencer W. Kimball’s landmark speech “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” Church and university leaders continue to revisit this prophetic talk while reflecting upon the educational mission and potential of Brigham Young University. One notable phrase from President Kimball’s discourse that has gained currency at the university points to a potential difference between the educational efforts of BYU and the work of other universities: “Gospel methodology, concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”

The idea of a “gospel methodology” has a variety of implications for the pedagogical and scholarly work we are engaged in at BYU. For example, during the final years of his presidency, President Kevin J. Worthen repeatedly sought to interpret the phrase “gospel methodology,” including in his thought-provoking devotional given in 2021, “An

Obligation to the World,” which focused on how a “gospel methodology” can help us understand the principle of belonging in a university setting. Elsewhere, however, President Worthen admitted that he was not sure he fully understood “what President Kimball meant by the term ‘gospel methodology.’” BYU Administrative Vice President Keith Vorkink directly addressed the same topic in his 2022 University Conference address titled “The Gospel Methodology of Group Revelation,” outlining how a gospel methodology can lead to greater unity and inspired insights as we seek revelation in the process of addressing the challenges our administrative organizations face. Other reflections on this topic have come from the workshops prepared for the “Inspiring Teaching Series: Gospel Methodology in the Classroom” sponsored by Rick Gill, dean of undergraduate education at BYU. To date, this series has included presentations by Kim Clark, Richard Swan, Michael Johnson, Seth Bybee, Richard Osguthorpe, and Amy Jensen. While openly focused on President Kimball’s inspired invitation to adopt “gospel methodology, concepts, and insights,” the organizers of these workshops have also acknowledged that “this series won’t be the final word on ways to meet [President Kimball’s] charge but will provide individual case studies that generate new ideas and inspiration for instructors.” In fact, the diversity of these presentations has repeatedly pointed to the multiplicity of contexts and ways in which a gospel methodology “can help us do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.”

These reflections have inspired my own thinking about how a gospel methodology might inform my research and teaching in the field of the humanities. Over the course of my educational and professional

3. Kevin J Worthen, “This Is a Student” (University Conference address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, August 22, 2022), https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/kevin-j-worthen/this-is-a-student/.
life, I have found countless examples of the ways my scholarly activities have given me insight into doctrines of the restored gospel and my relationship with my Heavenly Father and my Savior Jesus Christ. But in this essay, I would like to consider the inverse of that relationship—that is, the way in which “gospel methodology, concepts, and insights” have impacted my teaching and research. In other words, I am not concerned here with the gospel insights I’ve found in literary and cultural studies—and there are many—but instead with how a gospel methodology might inform my research and teaching practices.

What follows is a meditation on how the methodologies of the gospel might augment and enhance the epistemologies associated with my own disciplinary training in the humanities. First, I will offer some thoughts about gospel ways of learning and knowing and teaching and becoming. I suspect that what I outline here will not be new to most readers, but perhaps it may inspire you to think of yourself and your own work of teaching and researching in new ways. In the second part, I will present a case study from the humanities in the form of a short story about a man on a stage who is struggling to read a script and act a role. I imagine this story may be new to most readers. My hope in presenting it here is that it will provide insights not only into how you approach your teaching, and possibly your research, but also into how you view your students, yourself, and your relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

**Toward a Gospel Epistemology**

What are the gospel ways of learning and knowing and teaching and becoming? I want to emphasize from the beginning that as I invoke the term *gospel methodology*, I am not thinking about the gospel-related content that may be present in my classroom or may be the object of my research. I certainly think there is a place for reflecting on the kinds of faith-promoting and gospel-centered content we might include in our classrooms or that might be present in our research. Instead, however, I’m asking a different question: Are there gospel methods—that is, gospel modes of inquiry—that might influence the way I and my students approach what it means to learn and know and teach and become?

As I’ve reflected on what we might call a gospel epistemology, my mind has turned repeatedly to a talk given by President Russell M. Nelson[^7] on how we understand our identity. The humanities—like other

disciplines on this campus—are deeply and fundamentally concerned with questions of identity: how identity is constructed, the practices and politics that condition and are conditioned by identity, how identities intersect and relate to one another. This is the essence of what we in the Church would simply call “charity.” Understanding who we are and how we relate to others may, in effect, underlie not only the humanities but all modes of human inquiry. In a worldwide devotional address delivered in May 2022, President Nelson taught the youth of the Church that there are three fundamental markers of identity that we should prioritize:

1. First and foremost, we are each a child of God.
2. We are each a child of the covenant.
3. We are each a disciple of Jesus Christ.

After discussing the importance of these forms of identity, he added,

I plead with you to take charge of your testimony. Work for it. Own it. Care for it. Nurture it so that it will grow. Feed it truth. . .

Engage in daily, earnest, humble prayer. Nourish yourself in the words of ancient and modern prophets. Ask the Lord to teach you how to hear Him better. Spend more time in the temple and in family history work. . .

. . . We live in the dispensation when “nothing shall be withheld.” Thus, in time, the Lord will answer all our questions.

In the meantime, immerse yourself in the rich reservoir of revelation we have at our fingertips. I promise that doing so will strengthen your testimony, even if some of your questions are not yet answered. Your sincere questions, asked in faith, will always lead to greater faith and more knowledge.8

There is much to unpack here, but I would like to focus on a possible gospel mode of inquiry that President Nelson emphasizes in this passage. First, he suggests that the foremost principle of the good news of the gospel is the truth that we are children of a Heavenly Being, God our Father, and that as his children we can discover joy and have an enhanced relationship with God by entering into a covenant with him and becoming disciples of his Son, Jesus Christ. But how do we learn this truth? What does it mean to learn the truth of our divine identity? Apparently, this truth is not learned simply by hearing it—even if it is a prophet of God

who is speaking. Notice that President Nelson states, “I plead with you to . . . work for it.” What is this work? And well might we ask, What is this method? In answer, he offers both practical steps and some intellectual—and we might even call them philosophical—principles. The practical steps include daily practices of “earnest, humble prayer,” nourishing ourselves in the words of ancient and modern prophets, participating in the sacred rituals of the temple, and engaging in service, which will teach us to love God and our fellow brothers and sisters. The philosophical principles on which these practices are premised are found in cultivating (1) openness to what God might reveal to us, (2) sincerity in our desire to learn truth, and (3) a disposition of faith in relation to what we do not yet know or truths we might not yet understand.

If I can belabor this point for a moment, there is an interesting synthesis that emerges in President Nelson’s talk between practice and disposition and their relationship to truth.

The truth of the gospel is that we are children of God and that our eternal relationship with God can only be fully realized as we make covenants with him and keep covenants through discipleship. The gospel mode of inquiry that will help us to learn and know and teach this truth involves both practice (for example, prayer, scripture study, temple worship) and developing mental constructs or habits of mind that include an openness to what God might reveal, sincerity in our questioning, and a disposition of faith in relation to what we do not yet know or truths we might not yet understand.

My students never cease to impress me with their creativity, their goodness, their sincerity, and their aspirations. I also mourn with them over their very real struggles, their anxieties, and their crises of faith that are related to both their practices and their beliefs. They (like their instructors) are all at different phases of the process of learning the truth that we are children of God, children of the covenant, and disciples of Christ. And as primary as this truth may be, some of them (like their instructors) may struggle to embrace or understand this foundational truth because, to be brief, the world is complex, life is messy, they may not believe that they are loveable, their capacity for receiving divine love may be immature and underdeveloped, and they may not yet have learned how to hold multiple unreconciled truths in their hearts at once.
President Nelson’s gospel methodology thus teaches us how to seek truth and live in relation to truth that we do not yet fully know or understand. If we believe, as Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught in a 2018 address to Church Educational System religious educators, “that indeed all truth may be circumscribed into one great whole,” the implication is that all truth is not yet circumscribed. Consider, for example, the tensions between religious and scientific truths that defined the medieval world, the early modern period, and the Age of Enlightenment. These periods were defined in part by conflicts between science and faith that seemed irreconcilable at the time. Some of these tensions have been resolved, or at least we have developed ways of reconciling them here at BYU, but there may remain truths in tension that we have yet to navigate. At times, it may seem that God’s pure love for us stands in opposition to his divine gift of free will and agency. I have had students ask me, How can God love us if we are cast into bodies that are imperfect? How can God love us when there exist the atrocities of war? We have ways of talking about this in the Church, but for many in academia and in society writ large, these positions remain irreconcilable.

In a notable sermon from the Book of Mormon, the prophet Mormon taught, “Wherefore, I beseech of you, brethren, that ye should search diligently in the light of Christ that ye may know good from evil; and if ye will lay hold upon every good thing, and condemn it not, ye certainly will be a child of Christ” (Moro. 7:19). Here Mormon provides a method for becoming a child of Christ that consists of searching diligently to learn good from evil and laying hold upon every good thing. But laying hold upon every good thing can also lead us to a feeling that we are being pulled in different directions by things that are good and true but are not yet reconciled with our current understanding of the gospel. So how do we do it? Mormon poses this same question: “How is it possible that ye can lay hold upon every good thing?” (Moro. 7:20). He answers, “And now I come to that faith, of which I said I would speak” (Moro. 7:21). Note the demonstrative pronoun here. He does not say, “And now I come to faith, of which I said I would speak.” Instead, he says, “And now I come to that faith” (my emphasis), meaning a specific kind of faith that will allow us to navigate tensions and seemingly irreconcilable positions.

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Put another way, gospel methodology implies living at times in a kind of suspension, exhibiting what we might call a form of faithful patience, or what Alma calls a state of “looking forward with the eyes of faith” to a future moment of revelation and reconciliation. Note how President Nelson describes this faithful mindset in his 2022 devotional: “We live in the dispensation when ‘nothing shall be withheld.’ Thus, in time, the Lord will answer all our questions. In the meantime, immerse yourself in the rich reservoir of revelation we have at our fingertips. I promise that doing so will strengthen your testimony, even if some of your questions are not yet answered. Your sincere questions, asked in faith, will always lead to greater faith and more knowledge.”

There is a futurity implicit in this gospel disposition as we embrace the promise of an as-yet-unrealized wholeness, the promise of fusion, of integration, of synthesis of truth that is circumscribed into one great whole. Our faith is thus premised on a concept of belief and spiritual feeling that logic at times fails to explain, reconcile, and circumscribe. There is a tension at work here, and living with and in this tension is what we in the humanities sometimes call developing a tolerance for ambiguity, a tolerance for contradiction. It may be what causes us anxiety. It may be what sometimes makes it difficult for our students to embrace the truth of who they are and what their divine potential might be. The poet John Keats calls this a negative capability or a “state of being in uncertainty.” The poet Robert Frost calls it a “momentary stay against confusion.”

But if I can perhaps reframe it in more positive terms, we might also say that we are being asked to live in a state of openness toward new knowledge, an openness toward expanding horizons, toward what we often call continuing revelation. For what is revelation if not an invitation to rethink what we might call “orthodox,” a call from God to expand our


imagination, to reframe our understanding of the world and our place in it and our relationship with him?13

So back to the question: What are the gospel ways of learning and knowing and teaching and becoming? I have so far tried to suggest that learning the truth of who we are as children of God, children of the covenant, and disciples of Christ requires learning to process ambiguity and uncertainty, to live in a state of suspended disbelief. Paul refers to it as looking through a glass darkly or as not knowing even as we seek to know (see 1 Cor. 13:12). Faith within this gospel methodology means not just a practice but developing habits of mind and a kind of affect, a mood, even a disposition of faith that allows us to live and even thrive in ambiguity.

How do we do this? Among the many methods given by prophets, let us return to President Nelson’s counsel: daily practices of earnest, humble prayer; nourishing ourselves in the words of ancient and modern prophets; participating in the rituals of the temple; and engaging in service. Of these various practices, I will focus the remainder of my thoughts here on how the relationship between reading scripture and developing a disposition of faith can lead us to the truth of who we are as children of God.

“Read the scriptures.” It is a Sunday School answer so common we may sometimes fail to appreciate what both terms mean—that is, what scripture is and what it means to read scripture. I am interested in considering here how the practice of reading scripture might reinforce faith in Jesus Christ. How might the experience of reading scripture help us to navigate ambiguities and uncertainties and learn truth, even if that truth still has rough edges and unseen limits? Do we read scripture differently than we read other texts? And if so, what is the gospel method of reading, and how might this gospel method of reading provide us with a sense and a form of meaning about our identity as children of God? In the case study that follows, I will focus primarily on the sense and form of meaning that comes from the scriptures. My intent is to illustrate a possible gospel method of learning the truth of who we are as children of God, what our purposes are on this earth, and what it means to be a

13. I also readily admit that revelation may also call us to a kind of renewed orthodox practice. The point I am trying to make is that if we are truly committed to living in a state of openness toward God, then we must be prepared for the many and varied ways he might call us to live.
disciple of Christ. Accordingly, this gospel methodology involves a practice of engaging the word of God, of reading scripture while developing, as President Nelson suggested, (1) an openness to what God might reveal to us, (2) sincerity in our desire to learn truth, and (3) a disposition of faith in relation to what we do not yet know or truths we might not yet understand.

The Living Word

The case study that follows comes in the form of a short story titled “They’re Just Rehearsing,” which was published in the year 2000. The author, Bernardo Carvalho (b. 1960), is one of Brazil’s most celebrated contemporary novelists, and he has received both national and international acclaim for his creative work. Born in Rio de Janeiro and based in São Paulo, Carvalho trained as a journalist and worked for many years as a correspondent for the *Folha de São Paulo*, one of Brazil’s most respected and widely read newspapers. Given this trajectory, it is unsurprising that Carvalho’s creative writing mixes fact and fiction, intentionally drawing upon while simultaneously obscuring historical facts and current events. Carvalho’s fiction constantly challenges readers to question narrative authority even as it foregrounds the urgent and indispensable role fiction plays in making sense of human experience.14

The story “They’re Just Rehearsing” takes place in São Paulo at the beginning of the twenty-first century. São Paulo is one of the largest cities in the world, what we sometimes call a megalopolis. Its size and scope are on a scale difficult to understand unless one has visited in person or visited a similar place like Tokyo or Mexico City. With a metro population of over twenty-two million people, São Paulo is a teeming urban organism full of life and death and every form of human experience imaginable.

The story begins in a theater where the rehearsal of a play is underway. It is late in the afternoon. Everyone present is tired, perhaps a little irritable. From within the theater can be heard the exterior city sounds

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of traffic and sirens. Inside the theater, up in the mezzanine, two lighting technicians hardly pay attention to the action on the stage as they tell each other jokes. Sitting out in the audience, the director of the play flirts with his assistant. And onstage, two actors step out to begin rehearsing a scene. The play is a fifteenth-century morality play. One of the actors embodies Death. The other actor is in the role of a humble peasant who has just lost his wife. In this scene, the peasant pleads with Death to bring his wife back to life.

However, rehearsal hardly progresses before the director interrupts. He is irritated that the actor playing the role of the peasant is not interpreting the scene properly. The director explains, “The humble peasant invokes Death with the only words he has left, as a last resort, that he wants Death to take pity on him and return his beloved wife, a victim of the atrocities of war.” And then the director “repeats, irritated, that the actor’s performance lacks vitality and desperation, and that it does not seem that the humble peasant is truly suffering or indignant at the injustice of the death of his wife in the flower of life.” Frustrated by the actors, the director instructs them to return to the wings of the stage and begin again.

Meanwhile, now offstage, the actor who plays the role of the peasant criticizes the director, “saying that it is impossible to show despair with a text like that, that it’s unrealistic, no one would talk to Death that way after losing his wife in such a violent matter.” The actor playing the peasant then further disparages the director for his lack of training, while looking at his watch and wondering when his wife will arrive to pick him up.

This opening confrontation initiates a cycle that repeats itself in the story. The lighting tech up in the mezzanine tries to finish telling his joke. Ambient city noises of traffic and sirens float in from outside the theater. The director flirts with his assistant. The actors begin the scene again. The director interrupts the action, insisting the interpretation is all wrong. The actor complains about the inverisimilitude and improbable nature of the text, saying that it is not authentic, that it does not correspond to real life, that it is not truthful. Meanwhile the narrator of the story justifies the interruption by flatly declaring, “They’re just rehearsing.”

And the cycle repeats: joke in the mezzanine, sirens outside, director flirting with assistant, peasant pleading with Death on stage, director interrupting, argument about interpreting the lines of the play.

In the midst of all this, the shadow of a person tentatively enters the back of the theater and slowly approaches the director. As the cycle of
scene, lines, and argument unfolds again, the shadow pauses with each interruption. Eventually, however, the shadow reaches the director, and there is a sudden and terrible moment of revelation. The story concludes with this paragraph:

The humble peasant wearing a watch and Death without a scythe or robe (they’re just rehearsing) enter the stage. The peasant turns to Death and recommences his litany with the same intonation and detachment that to him seem most appropriate. But this time, to his surprise, the director does not interrupt him, because his eyes are wide open and he is pale, while the man, previously just a shadow, whispers something in his ear. And as he sees the man whispering in the director’s ear, and the face of the director and his assistant, who for the first time do not interrupt him but continue to stare at him wide-eyed and aghast (the assistant with eyes full of tears before the peasant’s supplication of Death) while they listen to what the other tells them in their ears, leaning over the chair, even though the intonation on stage was the same and should therefore, logically, have been interrupted once more, the actor himself interrupts the action and finally understands, terrified and at the same time, the sinister coincidence of the scene and the moment, what that shadow has come to announce about the world outside, with horns, motors, and sirens; he understands why his wife has not appeared and finally what the humble peasant feels; he understands why the director has not interrupted him this time, because he is finally perfect in the skin of the peasant in his supplication before Death; he understands that for one instant he in fact has embodied the peasant, that involuntarily and unconsciously, by a trick of fate, he has become the peasant himself because of what that shadow has come to announce; he understands everything in a second, even without knowing the details of the accident that killed her crossing the street two blocks from the theater, before the wide-open eyes of the director and the assistant, beneath the unrestrained laughter of the lighting tech and the technician on the mezzanine, coming to the end of the joke. (my emphasis)

When I read this story with my students, a number of questions emerge. I typically use this story to introduce my students to concepts of metafiction and heterodiegetic narrative complexity. Our discussion focuses on the construction of space in the story, the theater as a real and metaphoric frame, the interplay between inside and outside, the transformation of the actor into a character, and the ironic meaning of the story’s title. But how might a gospel methodology also illuminate this story? In this case, a gospel methodology leads us to ask some additional questions of this text:
• Why does the author of the story repeat multiple times throughout the text the phrase “they’re just rehearsing”? What is the relationship between rehearsing and performing? Or between rehearsing and real life?

• What does it mean to read a medieval text today? How can we make ancient texts come alive in the present? In other words, how can a text from the distant past speak to us today? And what implications might the answers to these questions have for how we read and relate to scripture?

• Do we need life experience to help us understand text? Or do we need art to help us understand life? Does art imitate life, or does life imitate art? And if we think of scripture as a form of art, how might our answers to these questions change the way we understand and respond to scripture?

• How does reading shape us? How does it give us meaning? Does this story illustrate a gospel method of reading?

To begin answering these questions, let us focus on the turn or transformation that happens at the end of the story. Some critics might call it a twist. The narrator calls it a trick of fate. I like to think of it as a revelation.

Consider, for example, the narrator’s assertion that the actor is “finally perfect in the skin of the peasant” and that for an instant he “has embodied the peasant” and even that “he has become the peasant.” What forces made this transformation occur? If this text is a metafictional story about reading, we may well ask ourselves what role reading plays in our own transformations. Some might argue that it is only because the actor experiences the loss of his wife offstage—in real life, so to speak—that he is able to perfectly embody a character onstage who has lost his wife. This logic suggests that unless we have personally experienced the events, situations, and emotions presented in any given text, then we cannot fully understand that text. While I acknowledge that having firsthand knowledge or experience can certainly enhance and perhaps facilitate one’s understanding of and engagement with a text, I also think something entirely different is happening in this story. In other words, what happens if we explore the opposite conclusion—specifically, that it is the text, or the rehearsal of fiction, that prefigures, conditions, and enables meaning to be found in life?

I typically teach this story in an upper-division literary studies course in which 99 percent of my students have had the experience of serving as
missionaries. Given this unique demographic, when I present this story in class, I draw upon my students’ missionary experience and ask if they have ever felt that they have come to embody a scripture. I invite them to consider the NIV translation of Hebrews 4:12, which states that “the word of God is alive and active,”¹⁵ and I ask my students to reflect on a time when the word of God became “alive and active” for them. In response to this question, my students frequently share touching and emotional experiences in which a scripture has given meaning to their lives. I have also noticed that these students often describe experiences in which they first became familiar with a scripture (perhaps through a learning process of hearing, reading, or memorizing) and then later discovered that this scripture becomes “alive and active” due to the circumstances of their lives in a particular moment. In other words, this pattern suggests that familiarity with the text can precede a transformational moment in life.

I then invite my students to think about when they were missionaries and teaching others about Joseph Smith’s First Vision, and I ask them, “Why as missionaries, when we get to the account of the First Vision, do we change into the first person?” In other words, why don’t we typically tell the First Vision in the third person? We don’t say that Joseph saw a pillar of light, directly over his head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon him. Instead, we say, “I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.” We say, “I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air.”¹⁶

Why do we do this?

My suggestion to my students is that in this moment we become Joseph Smith to the people we are teaching. But there is something additionally transformative that can also happen in this moment—how many missionaries gain their testimony of Joseph Smith’s First Vision while recounting Joseph Smith’s First Vision? To put it another way, how many missionaries develop a testimony of Joseph Smith’s First Vision

¹⁵. The KJV translation of this scripture states that “the word of God is quick, and powerful” (Heb. 4:12).

while performing the role of Joseph Smith for those they are teaching? In my limited experience, I would submit that many if not most missionaries receive revelation about the truth of Joseph Smith’s testimony by recounting that testimony themselves, by rehearsing and then performing it. We might consider this phenomenon an example of President Packer’s well-known dictum that “a testimony is to be found in the bearing of it.”

To return to the case study at hand, “They’re Just Rehearsing” is a story in part about a script and the relationship of that script to events in the world outside the script. For me, the gospel methodology that illuminates this story lies in the way that scripture can give form to our experience, through which we can find meaning in our lives. The scripture is a form, and our engagement with it can in turn—or in revelation—give meaning to our lives.

Have you ever read a novel and discovered that the novel gave shape to something within you that you had not yet even articulated for yourself? Perhaps reading the novel called forth that something within you.

If I might indulge your patience as a reader, allow me to share a personal anecdote. Years ago, I felt inspired by the Spirit to try to memorize something long. At the time, I was studying the New Testament, and I decided to memorize a specific chapter from Paul’s letter to the Romans. I began reading this chapter every day as I worked to commit it to memory. There was one verse in particular that spoke to me, and I assumed that it was because of this verse that the Spirit had inspired me to memorize the whole chapter. Sometime later, however, an event happened in my life that was acutely distressing. As I faced this difficult situation, suddenly one of the other verses from the chapter in Romans that I had memorized burst into my mind. And in that moment, this verse of scripture became alive and active in my life. In an unexpected way, I found myself living out that scripture as it gave form and meaning to my life. In a flash of revelation, I learned a truth about myself and my place in the world. Now, if I had not been familiar with the scripture—that is, if I had not nourished myself with the words of the prophets—or to put it in even another way, if I had not learned this specific scriptural and literary form—would I have been able to grasp the spiritual truth of that experience? Perhaps. Revelation, after all, might be thought of as God’s way of giving us forms that the world does not yet know. But I can

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17. Boyd K. Packer, “That All May Be Edified” (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 340, emphasis in original.
assure you that the form I had previously learned undoubtedly prepared me to learn a new truth.

So then is scripture art? In this way, I would suggest that it is. Is all art scripture? Of course not. But scripture, like the best kinds of art, has this function. It provides a form through which we can make sense of life. The story “They’re Just Rehearsing” demonstrates this principle in a powerful way, suggesting that art may most forcefully impact us by giving shape, form, and meaning to our lived experience. And scripture shares this potential as well.

To return to my earlier framing comments, if we adopt a gospel methodology of developing (1) openness to what God might reveal to us, (2) sincerity in our desire to learn truth, and (3) a disposition of faith in relation to what we do not yet know or truths that we might not yet understand, and if we engage with scripture and with art, stepping into an eternal role as we make the text come alive, we will more likely learn truth and make the revelatory and transformational jump from rehearsal to lived experience, from practice to becoming.

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Lines for the Forgotten Familiar
Living with Loss: My Spouse to Alzheimer’s

Something is growing, changing alive,
under the leaves of words. —Brewster Ghiselin

Tight as a bulb, I wait in the dark,
wanting only the dark. But I’ve dreamed
the scent of sage, the smell of plowed soil,
a movement of wildflowers coming and going.

Another day moves in, feeling huge
as granite cliffs above and down into lakewater.
Living West all my years has seeded desires
not yet poached away by trauma.

Not wanting the cessation of grief, exactly,
I sit and watch light fill low unlit places.
Not wanting words, I feel them try to surface
when breeze slants blue timothy fields
into rippling; come sudden with the hawk
that dives like the blade of a knife.

Later through birch limbs, sunlight
coats my arms—rather like an anointing . . .
I want to reach, to touch paper-thin peeling bark
back to the tree-ness of their being.

With too easy conjectures of crickets,
dusk rises finally from low ground.
Over rock slopes, in fading spokes of sundown
sand lilies close tight
and open a thought—as though
I’ve at last remembered: some beauty flourishes
even when one’s own cannot.

— Dixie L. Partridge

This poem was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
A Forensic and Historical Look at John Taylor’s Watch
Evidence of Divine Mercy

Brian A. Warburton

In June 2023, the Church History Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced the public availability of forensic and historical research recently completed on the pocket watch of John Taylor. Taylor, an Apostle of the Church at the time, was present when Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a mob in the Hancock County Jail in Carthage, Illinois, on June 27, 1844. During the attack, Taylor was shot four times, and his watch was damaged. This artifact has long held a special place in the hearts of many members of the Church as a physical link to the last moments of the lives of the Prophet Joseph and Hyrum, the patriarch to the Church.

Generations of Latter-day Saints have heard the story of the watch and its possible involvement in preserving Taylor’s life. The consistent story for nearly one-hundred and fifty years was that the watch had stopped a bullet from entering Taylor’s chest, likely saving his life. However, after the watch was reexhibited at the Museum of Church History and Art in the 1990s, increased questioning and scrutiny led to scientific examinations of the watch in late 1998. One team of experts involved in this process advanced a new hypothesis: that the watch did not stop a musket ball but was damaged when Taylor was hit in the intense crossfire and fell against the windowsill, smashing the watch.
This new interpretation gained traction over the following years as influential historians included it in wide-reaching publications. By the 2010s, the windowsill explanation appeared in Church History Department products such as museum exhibit guides, signage, and in the first volume of the new official narrative history of the Church, Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, Volume 1: The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846. However, not all Church publications included the new windowsill theory. In 2014, a reprinted edition of the manual Church History in the Fullness of Times, used by institutes of religion in the Church, retained the narrative that the watch was struck by a bullet and saved John Taylor’s life. These discrepancies in Church publications, combined with questions from museum staff about the interpretation of the watch in The Heavens Are Opened exhibit that appeared in 2015, prompted Church History Department leadership to form a working committee in 2020 to examine the watch and the stories behind it.

This article will review historical sources about the martyrdom, trace the ways the story was told over time, summarize 1998 forensic investigations, and present findings from three recent studies that engage with the disciplines of forensic science, scanning electron microscopy, and finite element analysis. Significant detail will be provided about these recent multidisciplinary scientific studies and will then summarize the inconclusive nature of the results.

The Martyrdom

The attack at Carthage Jail and resultant murder of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum on June 27, 1844—something Church members refer to as the martyrdom—is well documented (see fig. 1). Written accounts of the assault are primarily based on the eyewitness


3. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church History in the Fulness of Times Student Manual (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014), 282–83.

Reexamination of John Taylor’s Watch

According to these accounts, the jailer had allowed the Smiths and their visitors to use his own bedroom in the jail so that they could be more comfortable. The room was on the second floor, off a landing at the top of the stairs. The men had opened the windows to the bedroom to provide some air circulation on the hot and humid afternoon. Outside they could see the local militia, the Carthage Greys, stationed around the jail, ostensibly to protect Joseph Smith from attack. Late that afternoon, they heard some commotion outside. Willard Richards looked out to see a large group of armed men entering the jail and rushing up the stairs. Gunfire erupted from outside through the open windows. The Smith brothers, Taylor, and Richards shut the door and put their weight behind it to keep the mob from entering the room. Joseph and Hyrum each had a handgun that their concerned friends, hearing rumors of plots to assassinate Joseph, had given them. Taylor and Richards also had heavy walking sticks.

Figure 1. Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, by Gary E. Smith. Courtesy Gospel Media Library.

statements of Elders John Taylor and Willard Richards, who were in the room at the time the Smith brothers were murdered.

According to these accounts, the jailer had allowed the Smiths and their visitors to use his own bedroom in the jail so that they could be more comfortable. The room was on the second floor, off a landing at the top of the stairs. The men had opened the windows to the bedroom to provide some air circulation on the hot and humid afternoon. Outside they could see the local militia, the Carthage Greys, stationed around the jail, ostensibly to protect Joseph Smith from attack. Late that afternoon, they heard some commotion outside. Willard Richards looked out to see a large group of armed men entering the jail and rushing up the stairs. Gunfire erupted from outside through the open windows. The Smith brothers, Taylor, and Richards shut the door and put their weight behind it to keep the mob from entering the room. Joseph and Hyrum each had a handgun that their concerned friends, hearing rumors of plots to assassinate Joseph, had given them. Taylor and Richards also had heavy walking sticks.
As the four men leaned against the door, the mob on the other side began to fire musket balls into it. Hyrum was struck four times, including by a ball that entered his face on the left side of his nose, killing him nearly instantly. Joseph briefly mourned over the body of his brother, then quickly “approached the door, and pulling the six shooter <left by Br. Wheelock,> from his pocket, opened the door slightly and snapped the pistol six successive times.” Taylor stepped into Joseph’s place by the door, and as the mob pushed their musket barrels into the opening, he “parried them off with [his] stick, giving another direction to the balls.” Taylor indicated that he soon recognized the futility of his efforts and had the thought that friends who could help them might be outside the jail. He thus determined to jump out the window. As he moved across the room toward the window, Taylor was “struck by a ball from the door, about midway of my thigh, which struck the bone... I fell onto the window sill and cried out I am shot. Not possessing any power to move, I felt myself falling outside of the window; but immediately I fell inside, from to me, at that time, an unknown cause.” He lay stunned for a moment on the floor, then crawled under a bed in the corner of the room. He was hit with three more musket balls as he maneuvered under the bed.5

Just moments after Taylor slid under the bed, Joseph Smith also tried going out the window. As Joseph reached the window, he was hit by balls from the doorway and from outside. He fell out the window, landing next to a well. The Prophet was dead.6

**Aftermath**

After Joseph was killed, the mob rushed outside, and Willard Richards, mostly unscathed from the melee, came to Taylor’s aid. Richards opened the door and dragged Taylor down the hallway into a jail cell in an adjacent room. Richards then covered him with an old mattress and said, “That may hide you and you may yet live to tell the tale; but I expect they will kill me in a few moments.”7 Instead, the mob fled, and Richards and Taylor were spared any further violence. Richards transported Taylor to a local hotel where his wounds were tended, and he rested for several days.

before returning to Nauvoo. Taylor noted that he had asked Richards to take his purse and watch to keep them safe while he recuperated at the hotel. After arriving back in Nauvoo, Taylor had his wife Leonora send for these items. He later recorded that “my family however were not a little startled to find that my watch had been struck with a ball. . . . It then occurred to me that a ball had struck me, at the time that I felt myself falling out of the window, and that it was the force that threw me inside.” Taylor continued that “the ball struck my watch and forced me back, if I had fallen out I should assuredly have been killed, if not by the fall, by those around, and this ball, intended to dispatch me . . . saved my life.” According to Taylor, “The Lord had preserved me by a special act of mercy. . . . I had still a work to perform upon the earth.”

**Early Accounts of Taylor’s Watch Saving His Life**

The promulgation of the idea that John Taylor’s life was preserved by his watch began within days of the attack at Carthage. William Clayton was likely the first to record details of the damage sustained by Taylor’s watch. His journal entry from June 28, 1844, states, “Bro Taylor sprung for the window but several balls hitting him he fell back under the bed. One ball struck his watch and dashed it to pieces. The hands yet remain in the same position the[y] did when the horrid deed was done. They stand at 16 minutes past 5. The watch saved his life.” Many contemporary Latter-day Saint diarists were serving missions in Great Britain or canvassing the United States as part of Joseph Smith’s presidential campaign at the time of the martyrdom, so Clayton’s journal entry is one of the few that details the events of the attack at Carthage.

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9. William Clayton, Journal, June 28, 1844, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as CHL). Clayton’s journal entry is dated June 28, 1844, the day after the attack. However, strong evidence indicates that Clayton likely wrote and backdated the journal entry several days or weeks later. See “John Taylor Watch Committee 19th Century Historiographical Essay Draft,” n.d., CR 100 8, John Taylor Watch Committee Research Files, 2020–2023, CHL, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/2625576d-7283-4621-a251-20366d0efb81/0/2.
10. Joseph Fielding also noted the watch narrative in his journal. Fielding wrote, “John Taylor attempted to get out at a back window but a Ball met him, which it seems threw him back into the Room owing to its taking his Watch which beat in the Watch thereby giving the exact time at which it occurred.” However, Fielding’s journal account was apparently written later since he references accounts from the *Warsaw Signal* and William Daniels that were not published until late 1844 and 1845. Joseph Fielding, Journal, 1843 December–1859 March, pp. 44–45, MS 1567, Joseph Fielding Journals, 1847–1859, CHL, https://
Within weeks, several published accounts of the watch saving Taylor’s life appeared. First, the July 10, 1844, issue of the *Nauvoo Neighbor* reported, “The senior Editor of this Paper Mr. Taylor, at the horrible assassination of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage jail, on the afternoon of the 27th day of June, received three wounds in his left thigh and knee and one in his left wrist; besides which, a *fifth ball*, spent its force against his *Watch* in his *left* vest pocket. This ball, but for the timely interference of this valuable watch, must have caused instant death, as it would have passed directly into his lungs. This watch, though dreadfully shattered, is a friend that points to the very moment, when he stood between *life and death*; the hands pointing to ‘5 o’clock, 16 minutes and 26 seconds.”11 Though Taylor, as senior editor of the *Nauvoo Neighbor*, doubtless informed the writing of the article while recuperating from his injuries, the author is unknown.

The first eyewitness account did not appear until two weeks later in the *Nauvoo Neighbor*. Written by Willard Richards, “Two Minutes in Jail” depicted the scene in this manner: “Mr. Taylor rushed into the window, which is some fifteen or twenty feet from the ground. When his body was nearly on a balance, a ball from the door within entered his leg, and a ball from without struck his watch, a patent lever, in his vest pocket, near the left breast, and smashed it in ‘pie,’ leaving the hands standing at 5 o’clock, 16 minutes, and 26 seconds,—the force of which ball threw him back on the floor, and he rolled under the bed which stood by his side, where he lay motionless.”12 Notably, Richards’s account does not specify that the watch saved Taylor’s life.

Although the watch was prominently incorporated into several early accounts of the martyrdom, it was missing from others. John Taylor and Willard Richards jointly authored a letter to Reuben Hedlock, president of the British Mission, in which they recounted the events from

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11. “Goodness Shall Be Rewarded,” *Nauvoo Neighbor*, July 10, 1844, 2, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/92fd2dlee-d159-42c0-ba06-2b01dab5b8f0/0/231.
Carthage but made no mention of Taylor’s watch. The Hedlock letter is likely one of the earliest known accounts, for it is dated July 9, 1844; however, it was not published until October 1844.\(^\text{13}\)

Taylor did not give official personal accounts of the attack until a decade later. On the tenth anniversary of the martyrdom, Taylor detailed the events of that day in a sermon. He stated, “I made an attempt to jump out of the windo [sic]. I fell on the windo sill and fell inside. I recovered my feeling and crawled under the bed. I had given Dr. Richards my watch and money. my watch was all broken up. the way I fell in was a party [sic] outside shot me as I was falling and the force of the gun threw me back.”\(^\text{14}\) Taylor provided more detail in an account he wrote two years later:

Previous to the Dr. leaving <Carthage> I told him that he had better take my purse and watch along, for I was afraid the people would steal them, The Dr. had taken my pantaloons pocket and put the watch in it with the purse cut off the pocket and tied a string round the top; it was in this position when brought home. My family however were not a little startled to find that my watch had been struck with a ball. I sent for my vest and upon examination it was found that there was a cut, as if with a knife, in the vest pocket, which had contained my watch. In the pocket the fragments of the glass were found literally ground to powder. It then occurred to me that a ball had struck me, at the time that I felt myself falling out of the window, and that it was this force that threw me inside.\(^\text{15}\)

Though Taylor’s personal recollections were not recorded until years later, it is evident in the sources that he and his associates concluded within days or weeks that his watch was damaged in the attack and that they believed it had stopped a bullet and saved his life.

The Watch Becomes Lore

By the time of John Taylor’s death on July 25, 1887, it was widely accepted that his watch had stopped a bullet at Carthage that almost certainly would have killed him. Within days of Taylor’s death, memorials,
tributes, and obituaries recounted the episode and the role his watch played in preserving his life.\textsuperscript{16} After his death, Taylor's watch remained in possession of his family.

In August 1894, the \textit{Salt Lake Tribune} reported that the watch was on display with other “early day relics” on the west side of the pavilion at Saltair resort as part of a celebration honoring the pioneers of 1847. The article noted that the “watch worn by President John Taylor at the time of the death of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in Carthage jail” was “marked by the indentions of the bullets fired by the mob. The cabinet for this souvenir was made by John Taylor himself.”\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{Salt Lake Herald-Republican} also reported on the celebration, stating that “the relics of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and Daniel H. Wells were very interesting. Not less so was the watch carried by John Taylor in Carthage jail, a dent in which shows where the bullet struck.”\textsuperscript{18}

The first extant photograph of the watch was taken within four years of the pioneer celebration at Saltair. This 1898 photograph (fig. 2) is annotated with the following title: “President John Taylor’s Watch. Historic time piece which saved his life at the time of the assassination of Prest. Joseph Smith. Bullet mark on face of watch. Copyright 1898 by the Johnson Co., Salt Lake.”\textsuperscript{19} It is important to note that the hands of the watch were missing by this date, but multiple early accounts, including those from William Clayton, Willard Richards, and those likely informed by


\textsuperscript{19} “President John Taylor’s Watch, 1898,” PH 952, CHL, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e85b9b03-d127-46b6-8217-b49ff7a7425b/0/0.
John Taylor himself, indicate that the hands remained intact and documented the moment during the attack that the watch was damaged.20

20. The hands must have either broken off or were purposely removed sometime after it was viewed by William Clayton and Willard Richards in June and July of 1844 and before the capture of this 1898 photograph. However, no records have been found that indicate what happened to the watch hands. An apocryphal story has circulated among Taylor descendants that Jack Taylor, a great-grandson of John Taylor, pulled the hands off the watch as a curious young child. This story was shared firsthand by Jack to Rick Turley, former managing director of the Church Historical Department, in 1995. Alan Morrell, curator at the Church History Museum and member of the John Taylor Watch Committee, communicated with Turley and received Turley’s journal entry describing the meeting. 

“June 6, 1995—In the early evening, Blair’s dad, Don Dowd, picked me up and took me to visit Jack Taylor, a great grandson of Church President John Taylor. Don and Jack had been hometeaching companions at one time. I had been told by more than one person that Jack had torn the hands off the watch that had saved John Taylor’s life on June 27, 1844. I asked Jack to tell me the story. He said that he was the son of John Taylor, who was the son of Richard James Taylor, who was the son of the John Taylor who was President of the Church. Jack’s family moved into a house at 2505 Tyler Avenue in Ogden, Utah, around 1917 or 1918, when Jack was about seven years old. The home had a library with bookshelves that had glass doors that lifted up and slid in to make the books accessible. Jack said that one day when he was in the library, he pushed in on some of the books and found the watch and a gun behind them. He said that, as he recalled, the watch had no crystal, and being a small boy and not knowing really what he was doing, he took the hands off. From that day to

Figure 2. Photograph of John Taylor’s watch taken in 1898. PH 952. Courtesy Church History Library.
Several years later, in 1906, John Taylor’s daughter Annie Taylor Hyde displayed the watch at a Relief Society meeting in conjunction with her address themed after “the championship of President John Taylor and the prophet, Joseph Smith.” A local newspaper reported that Annie produced “a watch that President Taylor carried in his pocket and which prevented another bullet from entering his body” as well as the four bullets removed from Taylor’s body.  

The watch remained in the possession of the Taylor family, and little is known about how it was utilized or stored. In 1934, A. E. Hyde Jr., son of Annie Taylor Hyde and grandson of John Taylor, gifted the watch to the museum owned by the Church of Jesus Christ at the Bureau of Information on Temple Square. Two old acquisition file cards documented the transfer of ownership and remain in possession of the Church History Museum today. Both cards record that the museum took possession of the watch on November 9, 1934, and that the watch “saved” John Taylor’s life.


22. The likely older of the two “Individual Record of Specimens at L.D.S. Museum” cards contains this description: “A watch which President John Taylor was wearing at the time of the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum it saved his life.” The donor is listed as Alonzo Blair Irvine, with the following annotation: “A. L. (the L has an E written above it) Hyde Jr.” A handwritten note is stapled to the card that reads, “The John Taylor Watch donor should be A. E. Hyde Jr. change when case is opened.” The second card looks to be the corrected version. The description of the second card reads, “The watch Pres. John Taylor was wearing at the time of the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum. It is the watch the watch [sic] that saved his life.” The name “A. E. Hyde Jr.” is the only name listed as the donor. Both cards indicate the watch was received on November 9, 1934. The handwritten note attached to the first card that reads “change when case is opened” appears to indicate that the watch was already on display soon after its acquisition when the note was written. Original cards are in the possession of the Church History Museum. Scans of the cards can be viewed in “Individual Record of Specimens at L. D. S. Museum,” John Taylor Watch Committee Research Files, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/29df27fb-5b49-45e5-8160-8802130f6b5/0/15.
The Deseret News reported that the watch was

turned over to the museum yesterday by President Heber J. Grant. The watch was presented to the Church by A. E. Hyde, Jr., and family. Mr. Hyde is a grandson of President John Taylor. ... The letter from President Grant which accompanied the watch said: “I am sending you with this letter, to be placed in the museum at the Bureau of Information, the watch which President John Taylor was wearing at the time of the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his brother, Hyrum, in Carthage jail, which watch was instrumental in saving the life of President Taylor. A ball fired through the window of the room in which these brethren were incarcerated, struck this watch, which was in President Taylor’s vest pocket.”

The Salt Lake Telegram also reported on the acquisition, noting that “the watch, carried by John Taylor in his breast pocket, which saved his life by stopping a bullet at the time Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed in Carthage, Ill., have been placed in the bureau of information in the temple grounds.” Presumably, the watch remained on display until the Bureau of Information Museum was demolished in 1976.

The watch was in the holdings of the Church between 1976 and 1990, though it is unclear if or when it was displayed during this period. The Museum of Church History and Art (later renamed the Church History Museum) opened to the public in 1984. For the next five to six years, the museum ran several temporary exhibits; whether Taylor’s watch was included in any of these exhibits is not clear. In May 1990, the museum opened a long-term exhibit titled “A Covenant Restored,” which included the watch. Before the exhibit opened, the Church News published an article


25. No documentation has been found that either proves or disproves whether the Taylor watch was on display at the Bureau of Information Museum for the entire forty-two years from acquisition in 1934 until demolition in 1976, but due to the significance of the artifact, I believe it quite likely that it was in fact on display for all, or nearly all, of that time. “Demolition of the old Bureau of Information and Museum began Wednesday as the first step toward construction of a second LDS Church visitors center on Temple Square,” in “Temple Area Museum Razed for New Center,” Ogden (Utah) Standard-Examiner, August 5, 1976, 8.

26. Exhibit Gallery Guides from this period did not always identify all artifacts exhibited.
by Glen M. Leonard, then director of the Museum of Church History and Art, titled “Artifacts in History Exhibit Recall Events of Martyrdom.” Leonard wrote, “Equally familiar to Church members is John Taylor’s watch. For decades it was one of the most popular items sought out at the old Bureau of Information on Temple Square.” The Deseret News also ran another article in which Leonard stated that the watch was “the most asked-for item in the museum’s collection.”

Throughout the twentieth century, numerous published accounts of the martyrdom and of John Taylor’s life helped cement the lore of the watch in the consciousness of Church members. Some of the more influential of these included the Documentary History of the Church and Comprehensive History of the Church by B. H. Roberts and Essentials in Church History by Joseph Fielding Smith. These publications further influenced lesson manuals, study guides, and other Church-produced learning materials that indicated the watch stopped a bullet and saved Taylor’s life.


Questioning the Accepted Narrative

After the “A Covenant Restored” exhibit opened, curators and docents at the Museum of Church History and Art began noting that some visitors questioned the accepted narrative that Taylor’s watch was hit by a bullet. Some patrons believed that the watch didn’t appear to have the type of damage that many would expect a projectile from a firearm to produce. Complicating the story further was the fact that a bullet also struck Hyrum Smith’s pocket watch in the same attack, though after it passed through Smith’s body. Compared to Taylor’s watch, Hyrum’s timepiece appears to have sustained significantly more damage (see fig. 3).

In 1998, Jennifer Lund, then Curator of Education at the Museum of Church History and Art, coordinated an examination of Taylor’s watch. Lund later shared what prompted the inquiry:

For people trained in certain branches of science, simply looking at the watch in an exhibit raised a contradiction between the physical evidence visible on the watch and the story related in the exhibit label. Over the last twenty years, the Museum has had a number of visitors report the obvious inconsistency. We were well aware of these comments, but had never followed through on them. Then a docent with academic training in physics started volunteering at the Museum and he raised the issue again and requested permission to conduct a physical examination of the watch.30

Figure 3. Images of Hyrum Smith’s Watch (left) and John Taylor’s Watch (right). Note the more extensive damage visible on Smith’s watch as compared to that on Taylor’s watch. Courtesy Church History Library.

Neil Ord, a physics professor at Weber State University and a museum docent, requested the opportunity to examine the watch. Lund facilitated the inspection and wrote that their objective was to “fully document the watch through measurements, photography, and analysis” as well as “explore the questions of how the watch was hit, what hit it, how much damage was done, etc.”

### 1998 Examinations

On October 12, 1998, staff from the Museum of Church History and Art removed Taylor’s watch from the exhibit case, and several experts assembled to scientifically examine the piece. The experts included Ord, who invited Dr. Charles Pitt, an emeritus professor of metallurgy at the University of Utah, to participate. Dave Packard, a firearms expert at the museum, also engaged in the inspection. A museum conservator disassembled the watch, and the experts carefully examined and photographed the inner workings, taking special note of damage both inside and outside the watch. After the examinations were completed, one museum staff member suggested that they invite James Gaskill, a forensics expert and professor in the Criminal Justice Department at Weber State University, to look at the watch before its return to the exhibit case. Two days later, on October 14, 1998, Gaskill performed a forensic examination of the watch. The two resulting reports contained some similarities as well as some stark contrasts.

Ord and Pitt authored a report in which they detailed several of their observations based on scientific measurements using tools such as a microscope, calipers, and scales. They also performed a Vickers hardness test and force calculations. Pitt and Ord noted the damage on the face of the watch including the hole that had often been referred to as a bullet hole in past interpretations. They clarified that a bullet did not cause the hole, but that the hole resulted “from a rod in the watch mechanism penetrating part way through the watch face, thus creating the damage on the front of the watch face when the watch was compressed by some force.” According to Ord and Pitt, “No evidence could

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be seen to suggest a bullet fragment had penetrated the hole.” Instead, it appeared the watch was crushed by enough force that internal mechanisms damaged the exterior of both the front and back of the watch. From these findings, Ord and Pitt formulated a new hypothesis. Because “John Taylor’s account indicates that he fell upon the window sill after being hit in the thigh,” they believed that “he crushed the watch when he fell against the window sill.” Their conclusion was very specific and given without qualifiers.33

Gaskill agreed with Ord and Pitt that “the scrape or dimple on the front of the watch which has often been interpreted as a bullet hole, is not one.” However, he cautioned that the hole might “be the result of damage from a bullet.” As a forensic scientist who often testified in criminal cases in courts of law, Gaskill presented his conclusions with more caution than Ord and Pitt. Gaskill also included other important findings in his report. He commented that “the force which Taylor describes as having pushed him back in the room could not have come from a bullet. Bullets do not push people backwards, no matter the caliber or range.” In addition, “no where [sic] on the watch is there damage which can be definitively linked to a bullet. . . . However, it is a distinct possibility that a bullet struck the watch.” Gaskill also stated that “damage to the watch is greater than would be possible from a fall of his body on the floor or knocking against the bedframe. . . . He would have had to fall against something sharp like a window ledge (for which there is no evidence) or a small sharp object like a newel post on a bed.” “From the evidence remaining after being handled and displayed for more than a hundred and fifty years,” he declared, “it is impossible to reconstruct the event in exact detail.” Gaskill concluded, “There is no evidence which questions the basic claims of the first person accounts of the martyrdom recorded by John Taylor and Willard Richards.” Essentially Gaskill stated that he could not definitively say what caused the damage to the watch.34

Just over three years later, Glen M. Leonard, then director of the Museum of Church History and Art, published his book Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise in which he summarized and cited Ord and

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Pitt’s report that the watch was damaged when Taylor fell against the windowsill.\(^{35}\) Though Leonard did not participate in examinations of the watch, he had granted permission for the work to be done and received a copy of Ord and Pitt’s report. It appears that he had misplaced or forgotten about Gaskill’s conclusions at that time but became reacquainted with them after publication of the book.\(^{36}\) As noted earlier, after the new interpretation was published in Leonard’s *Nauvoo*, other authors began to include it in their publications.\(^{37}\)

**Latest Forensic Studies**

In April 2020, Church History Department leadership authorized the creation of a committee to perform a multidisciplinary study of the watch. While museum staff sought clarification for interpretation and signage about the Taylor watch, leadership also wanted to provide consistent messaging in department publications and at historic sites. They recognized that “experts analyzing the watch could not agree on the cause of the damage,” which “raises questions on the museum’s interpretive position for this important artifact of the Restoration.” All evidence would be considered and made available for future researchers.\(^{38}\)

The committee first reviewed research related to the physical watch and its provenance, the events of the Martyrdom, and how the story has been told in the years since the attack. It quickly became evident that additional forensic research was necessary. The hope was that new advances or technologies in forensic science might provide more insight into what caused the damage to Taylor’s watch.

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35. Leonard, *Nauvoo*, 397–98; see note 47, which reads, “Neal and Gayle Ord have gathered evidence suggesting this interpretation ("Artifacts of the Martyrdom," unpublished manuscript in the author’s possession).”


The committee hired two teams of forensic experts who examined both the John Taylor and Hyrum Smith watches in the conservation lab of the Church History Museum on November 6, 2020. Michael Haag, owner and president of Forensic Science Consultants, based in Albuquerque, New Mexico, partnered with Justin Bechaver and Jennifer Gelston of J & J Forensic Consulting LLC in Kearns, Utah. Mitchell Pilkington, then crime scene investigation manager at Layton City (Utah) Police Department, partnered with Paul Rimmash, a crime scene investigator with the Weber County (Utah) Sheriff’s Office.

Chris Howard, an antique watch specialist in Salt Lake City, disassembled and provided valuable insights about both the Smith and Taylor watches. The forensic teams took detailed photographs, performed x-ray fluorescence tests to determine all elements present in both watches, and swabbed for lead residue, which a bullet would have left behind (see figs. 4 and 5).

The initial reports from both forensic teams provided similar conclusions. Pilkington and Rimmash stated that “damage to the John Taylor watch face is not consistent with the direct impact of a projectile” and that the “deformations observed are consistent with a compressive force being applied, creating stress fractures in the enamel.” Haag, Bechaver, and Gelston agreed, explaining that “careful examination” of the face of the watch “shows a characteristic that does not support, and rather refutes” the hypothesis that the divot near 1:00 on the watch was caused by a bullet striking the watch face. They explained that “conical fracturing, or beveling, exists in the enamel paint surrounding the site that indicates the force that created this damage was from the inside of the dial outwards. Additionally, there is a slightly convex, or outwardly bulging dome, at the center of the damage in the underlying metal, within the center of the site.” These findings were consistent with Pitt and Ord’s conclusions about the “bullet hole” on the face of the watch. Both teams recommended the completion of more empirical work to see if certain scenarios could duplicate the damage on period watches of similar age, style, and construction.


Figure 4. Internal working mechanisms of John Taylor’s pocket watch. Photographed by Michael Haag, President of Forensic Science Consultants, on November 6, 2020. Courtesy Church History Library.

Figure 5. Internal mechanism of Hyrum Smith’s watch. Photographed by Michael Haag on November 6, 2020. Courtesy Church History Library.
The committee next purchased eighteen English-made fusee pocket watches originally manufactured between 1820 and 1850. Replica period firearms and ammunition were supplied by Sam Weston, a Church History Museum docent, along with a replica of the windowsill at Carthage Jail. The committee obtained forensic ballistic gel, which simulates human tissue, and made some linen and wool pockets to simulate period clothing (see fig. 6). It also secured a high-speed camera to capture video of all the tests. The committee gathered the supplies and, with permission to use the Grantsville Police Department’s outdoor gun range, spent a day using multiple ballistic and blunt force scenarios to damage watches. Everything was carefully documented with before and after photographs of the watches. The exact cause of damage was carefully recorded for each of them (see figs. 7 and 8).

Analysis of the photographs, videos, and watches took the forensics teams several months to complete. While they worked, they suggested that the committee bring in experts from additional disciplines to help with the investigation. This included the conducting of Finite Element

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41. Watch expert Chris Howard helped the committee identify those most like Taylor’s watch, which was made in England in the 1830s. Fusee refers to a specific type of mechanical design in which a chain is wrapped around a fusee, or spindle, creating torque that allows the watch mechanisms to function.

42. Weston made the windowsill replica to the same dimensions and walnut wood type as the window frame at Carthage.
**Figure 7.** Screenshot from video recorded with a high-speed camera just as a ball makes impact with one of the watches. Courtesy Church History Library.

**Figure 8.** All pieces of each watch and the ball that hit it were saved together for detailed photography and analysis. Courtesy Church History Library.
Analysis (FEA), which uses advanced software and computing systems to simulate and predict how products and materials will react to physical forces. Mark Fleming from Fusion Engineering ran such simulated tests for scenarios that the committee could not attempt with its limited physical watches (see figs. 9 and 10).\textsuperscript{43}

\textbf{Figure 9.} FEA simulation images of impact of a lead ball against the back of the watch at three different speeds. Courtesy Church History Library.

\textbf{Figure 10.} Cross-section view of watch compressed against the edge of a walnut windowsill. Note that the deformation from the edge of the windowsill covers the length of the watch. Courtesy Church History Library.

\textsuperscript{43} For greater detail into the FEA analysis methodology see Mark A. Fleming, “John Taylor Watch Impact Simulation: Analysis Report,” John Taylor Watch Committee Research Files, https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/6044609a-590d-4211-a71c-07b5bea6a083/0/0.
Forensics expert Paul Rimmasch noted via microscopic photograph that inside the dent on the back of John Taylor's watch were what appeared to be globules of some unknown material. He observed similar dents and globules on some of the test watches (see figs. 11, 12, and 13). Rimmasch suggested that the watch, specifically inside the dent, be inspected with scanning electron microscopy (SEM). Felipe Rivera at the electron microscopy facility at Brigham Young University (BYU) agreed to scan and analyze the results.

**Figure 11.** Dent on back of John Taylor's watch. Courtesy Church History Library.

**Figure 12.** Microscopic view inside the dent on the back of Taylor's watch. Note the globules and striations inside the dent. Courtesy Church History Library.

**Figure 13.** Microphotography images of dents on test watches 18 and 19 with Taylor's watch on the far left as comparison. Courtesy Church History Library.
Rivera’s report indicated that the globules were not a foreign substance but the same composition as the metal around them. He noted that it appeared that the metal in the dent had been heated enough to create the globules that later hardened (see figs. 14 and 15).

Pilkington and Rimmasch synthesized the results from the physically damaged test watches with the results of the FEA and SEM and noted some striking similarities. Test watches eighteen and nineteen were damaged when Mike Haag fired a ball into a metal plate which
caused fragments of the ball to hit the watches at a 30° angle (see fig. 16). Both test watches exhibited similar dents to the one on the back of Taylor’s watch, and inside those dents were globules like those on Taylor’s. In addition, the FEA scenarios that Mark Fleming ran indicated that the simulated damage most like what was on Taylor’s watch occurred in a scenario when the virtual watch was hit by a bullet at a 30° angle and slowed down to approximately two hundred miles per hour. These similarities suggested that Taylor’s watch could have been hit by a fragment slowed by ricochet or from passing through something (see fig. 9). This would account for the minimal damage on the watch when compared to other watches that took direct hits from a bullet. Pilkington and Rimmasch cautioned, however, that the “analogous damage” to the test watches “is by no means definitive proof that the striations and melting to JTW [John Taylor’s watch] were caused by a projectile fragment.” Regardless, the findings are intriguing.44

But the forensics team of Haag, Bechaver, and Gelston were skeptical of the FEA findings. That team also had difficulties in contacting and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researchers/Reports</th>
<th>Method</th>
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<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ord and Pitt</td>
<td>Physics and Metallurgy</td>
<td>October 1998</td>
<td>Stated that the watch was not hit by a bullet but was crushed by the force of Taylor’s falling body pushing the watch against the windowsill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaskill</td>
<td>Ballistic Forensic Science</td>
<td>October 1998</td>
<td>Stated that the hole in the face of the watch was not caused by a bullet. Concluded that there was not enough evidence to prove whether the overall damage to the watch was caused by a bullet or bullet fragment or something else.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haag, Bechaver, and Gelston preliminary</td>
<td>Forensic Science</td>
<td>November 2020</td>
<td>Stated that the damage to the watch is not consistent with the damage that would be expected with a direct hit from a firearm projectile. Suggested more empirical testing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilkington and Rimmasch preliminary</td>
<td>Forensic Science</td>
<td>November 2020</td>
<td>Agreed that the damage to the watch is not consistent with the damage that would be expected with a direct hit from a firearm projectile. Suggested more empirical testing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleming</td>
<td>Finite Element Analysis</td>
<td>2021–2022</td>
<td>Results showed that an angled impact at 200 mph (294 fps) with the 45-caliber musket ball most closely replicated the damage to the back face of the watch cover. The 200 mph (294 fps) speed deformed the rear face of the watch but did not result in excessive deformation or complete penetration of the watch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivera</td>
<td>Scanning Electron Microscopy</td>
<td>January 2022</td>
<td>Results showed that globules inside the dents of Taylor and test watches were of the same composition as the metal alloys in the watches. It appeared that something heated those specific areas of the watches, melting metal fragments of the watches that later hardened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilkington and Rimmasch final</td>
<td>Forensic Science</td>
<td>July 2021–2022</td>
<td>Synthesized data from FEA, SEM, and forensic studies indicate an intriguing similarity between the damage on Taylor’s watch and the test watches hit with ricochet bullet fragments at a 30° angle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haag, Bechaver, and Gelston final</td>
<td>Forensic Science</td>
<td>July 2021–May 2023</td>
<td>Ballistic and material damage assessment only—concluded that the damage on Taylor’s watch most resembled that of a test watch smashed with significant force between two pieces of hardwood.</td>
</tr>
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coordinating with Rivera about the SEM work. It thus chose to exclude Rivera's data from the tests and focus strictly on a ballistic and material damage perspective. From this approach Haag, Bechaver, and Gelston believed that the damage most closely aligned with that found on Taylor's watch came from test watch 24, which, while lying on a walnut wood surface, was hit with considerable force by a plank of wood. Because it is clear that the watch was in Taylor's pocket when it was damaged, they knew that this scenario was not similar to how the watch was damaged. However, to Haag, Bechaver, and Gelston, the damage on that test watch most closely aligned with what is seen on Taylor’s watch.45

Yet Pilkington and Rimmasch indicated that in all smash-test scenarios that utilized forensic gel behind the watch to simulate human tissue, the watches were hardly damaged at all—certainly not to the level of Taylor’s watch. It was only when a test watch was smashed between two pieces of hard wood with considerably more force than a body falling could create that it exhibited the damage noted by Haag, Bechaver, and Gelston.

Conclusion

So what, then, can be concluded from the work of the committee and its consultants? When the committee started this project, it knew that finding an exact cause for the damage to John Taylor's watch was extremely unlikely, but it wanted to gather as much information as possible in the hope of finding more clues. The investigations certainly succeeded in gathering new and intriguing information. Because of them, the committee recommended that the Church History Department update its messaging to reflect that the cause of the damage to the watch is unknown. Though it is disappointing to not have a conclusive cause of the damage, it does not detract from what occurred in Carthage Jail to John Taylor. The fact remains that he miraculously survived four serious wounds and felt a force prevent him from falling out of the window. He concluded the force to be a bullet that would have mortally wounded him near his heart and attributed God's power in using the watch to save his life.

The committee invites scholars to review the data and findings in these reports. They are open to research and are available in digital format in the Church History Catalog at the following link: https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/b0736f07-13b3-4da5-b7f5-3678a91b9550/0?view=browse.

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Sometimes my children slept in his place.

Hyrum, ten years old, lanky, and thin, climbed in bed with me one night early in the treatments. He wanted to talk. Exhausted, I fell asleep mid-word and woke up to him laughing.

“You said something about coconut babies.”

Giggling like a drunk teenager, I tried to explain myself. “We were talking about your allergies and then . . .” And then my tired brain moved on to babies. “Maybe we better go to sleep.”

Eleanor, four years old, curly red hair matted like a halo around her head, would come in during the night. I could have taken her back to bed. Instead, I often let her fall asleep pressed against me, her face on my pillow, her sweaty-warm body waking me every time I moved.

I was not used to my children in my bed with me. Letting them stay was comforting, but also alarming. My body woke over and over to find them in the darkness, to listen to the unfamiliar sounds of breaths that were not my husband’s. My discomfort was small in face of their comfort. Already, my body had been held up as offering for them through our short years together. I knew my love walked hand in hand with pain. What frightened me was not the idea of giving up more for them, but the real concern that this time, I wouldn’t be enough. When the hollowed-out spaces around us were fully swiped dry by what cancer extracted from us, how would I draw from my own emptiness to fill theirs?

A little over a year before the cancer, the sense of a child came to me while reading my scriptures. Tucked up against my pillows, scanning
lines, an awareness spread over me. The feeling was all-engulfing—a warm and pulsing sensation at my core coupled with a clarity of insight in my mind—as if seeing through a newly cleaned lens. I knew two things: another child was waiting to come to our family, and his name was James. By this point, we’d been trying to have another child for a year. I started a medication that could increase our chances of getting pregnant. It altered my hormones and was only safe to take for a certain amount of time. Three months in, I got a positive pregnancy test.

About a week later, on the day I first saw blood, my husband’s sister, Rebecca, was at my house. On the cusp of a painful divorce, she and her two children were visiting Utah for the first time in ten years. I’d only met her once before.

“I think I’m losing a baby.” I told her. I crawled onto the couch and stayed there all day. There was a physical pain, aches through my back and stomach, but there was another pain no one could notice. Invisible pain. And invisible voices in my head that said, “Take some ibuprofen and get on with life. This is hardly worth making a fuss over. Five weeks is nothing—means nothing.” Nothing is a strangely terrible thing. Nothing hurts. Nothing is pain you feel guilt for having; a thing we do not speak of.

Rebecca stayed with me. There was room for both of us, still so uncertain of each other, to grieve together for a tiny life. “I lost a baby. A girl named Isabell. At five months along,” she told me. “I sensed that she wasn’t going to live long. I just knew.”

There is no way to explain this knowing we both experienced; it just comes. James was still with me, the presence of a child I couldn’t see, still waiting to be mine.

A few months later, the doctors let me try one last round of treatment. “It’s the last one we can do. This medicine isn’t safe to be on for long.”

A month later, I got another positive test. The same week, while lying in bed, a change came over the room. A hushed and sacred light I sensed but did not see permeated the space beside me. I felt James along with the presence of many angels I couldn’t name. I knew then that the body I carried was meant for James.

I knew.

A few days later, I saw blood.

When God promised Sarah she would have a baby, she laughed. She was an old woman, and my thirty years of life were nothing compared to her lifetime of longing. I imagine them sometimes: Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah. But mostly, I see Sarah, this shadowy woman who I find between the lines in Genesis.
Did Sarah never get pregnant until Isaac? Or were those years full of blood and loss?

Sometimes I’d lie in the king-size bed alone, the space that was Jacob’s cold and wide. I slept on my side of the bed, curled up like he was still there. When I woke in the night and remembered he was gone, I’d roll toward the emptiness and spread out, trying to fill what was missing.

After I lost James, I took Hyrum to the Provo Utah Temple grounds. Normally, the many flower beds outside a temple are full of color and growth, but this evening, they were bare and dead. Sitting on the edge of one of the beds, I reflected on my disappointment with the barren space.

When the thought came, it wasn’t loud; it simply settled over me. This is the bed where they will put the statue of Mary, Joseph, and the Christ child. I could clearly remember walking up the path in the cold of a winter evening years before, passing the nativity scene backlit by the temple. They are making room for me.

When Sarah finally found herself pregnant, when she held Isaac in her arms for the first time and touched the soft rolls of baby fat on the real and living child God gave her, did she remember the years of being barren? In my mind, I see her cradle the child to her breast and look to heaven. She is thankful for all the winters she has walked in cold and dark, relying on a promise made by God. If Abraham is to be father of many nations, then she is mother of the same. She sees for the first time the balance of her pain, a child who is loved with a magnitude only equaled by her loss.

That much sorrow has made room for this much joy.

A year after my experience at the temple in the barren beds left by the winter, I had nothing but space for God. I just wasn’t sure how he planned on filling it. Was it a question of faith? Maybe if I did enough, tried enough, I would be enough for my husband and children.

When Jacob came home, sleeping didn’t get easier.

The drains in his side had to be hung from the bed. Before they fixed the liver drain that was siphoning the fluids as fast as he took them in, I would sometimes get up in the middle of the night to help him empty it. The hole in his side was just another opening that shouldn’t be there, another space unable to be filled.

The first time he came home after chemo treatments, he had cold chills that shook his body. I piled blankets over him as he trembled in the
dark room and pulled a beanie hat over his head. He left me then, to a place of enduring that was inside his head.

When the chemo got into his body, even my touch hurt him. I slept half-awake then, afraid of brushing against him. There was a distance in that too.

Another time, we slept with the chemo machine pumping between us, poison occupying the space our bodies might meet.

It's a desperate thing, this tangle that forms inside you as you try to unravel how you'll save someone. Sometimes it’s like a mental checkbox; do this and that, and this and that, and he will live. Sometimes it's just mad running, yelling for help before it's too late.

I sometimes thought it was my fault James died. Maybe I ate something, moved a certain way, or something was wrong with my body. I wondered if I should try to get pregnant again, or if the chance to be James's mother had passed. The urgency had left me, and I didn't know what that meant. Had he lived, somehow, in a five-week speck of an embryo inside me? Was that all that he would get of life? Or was God giving him to someone else?

When Sarah heard God wanted Abraham to sacrifice their only child, did she think she'd done something wrong? Was she angry? Did she make a checklist of things she could do to save him? Did she cling to Abraham, begging for him to do something before it was too late?

The week before Thanksgiving, Jacob finished his chemo treatments. Like Sarah and Abraham welcoming a longed-for baby, we celebrated prematurely. Thanksgiving night, his body crashed, the weeks of built-up chemo leaving him limp and dazed. A pain hit, sharp and clawing in his side, followed by fevers. I sat on the couch beside him and prayed.

That night he was admitted to the ICU. His blood counts were too low, he had a blood clot in his arm, and he'd contracted a superbug infection called MRSA. If one problem didn't kill him, the other could.

Later that week, I dropped to my knees and begged God to tell me if my husband would live. I could almost see a world of spirits in my mind, a space full of souls who once lived.

I can use him here. I have work for him.

How do you tell God no? When you've walked through hell with him once before and you've come out the other side, how do you question him? I had a fire-branded memory of a dark night in a parking lot the December after my miscarriage.
That night I had curled toward the steering wheel and wept as words I’d avoided for months spilled from my lips. “Is James dead? Is there really no chance of me carrying a body for him to term? Of holding him in my arms?”

The answer wasn’t words so much as thoughts, He has passed on. “But I was only five weeks along.”

It was enough. You have done enough. It was all I required of you.

The peace that blossomed inside me shared space with my tears. Death, the worst possible outcome I could think of, had been confirmed. There would not be another pregnancy. James had lived the life he was meant to live. With clarity, I looked back on the day I felt him in my room, and I knew that the moment had been one of both life and death.

The same sense of a voice in my thoughts asked me, Now that you know how hard it is to lose James, would you do it again, if you had to make the choice over?

When we encounter the empty spaces of sacrifices God asks us to make in life, they are rarely only about us. I had made an imperfect body for my child, but it had been all he needed. There was no hesitation in my answer. It was and will always be, “Yes.”

In the end, even though it made no sense at all, even though it hurt worse than anything she’d ever known, Sarah let Abraham take Isaac.

On my knees beside my bed, when God told me he might take my husband, I couldn’t say no either.

On the day of the surgery to clean out the infection growing in Jacob’s body, I ended up in the waiting room alone.

Sometimes it feels like hard things are a rite of passage to endure. We stand in the human experience and think we must stoically bare this pain, that somehow, we get more faith points for never showing our fear. Maybe we visualize an angel in heaven keeping tally of all the times we scraped the bottom of our souls without flinching.

I didn’t tell anyone I thought my husband might die. Oh, I made sure my children weren’t alone. After leaving them in the care of my parents, I set out like a sacrificial offering to the hospital by myself. See, I’m not flinching. No fear.

It was a lie.

I sat in a blue padded chair with wooden armrests and saw them wheel Jacob back on a bed. For hours I sat alone in that chair, a storm of fear building inside me. I knew Jacob would die in there. The room
stretched around me, hazy and faded, the rush of sound in my ears like water I couldn’t slow. The space between me and God tilted, and I finally found the words I hadn’t been able to speak.

“Please. Don’t take him.”

If life is about opposites, if our existence requires first sorrow to find joy, then where is faith if we never experience fear? If we never taste bitterness on our tongues, never feel its breath on our face, never hear its hiss in our ear, is what we hold up really any sort of faith at all?

I see Sarah. She watches her husband and son leave, but her faith isn’t numbness. It’s not perfectly beautiful, but ugly with pain. Faith is also the Sarah that collapses to her worn and creaking knees in the abandoned tent she calls home, tears rolling down wrinkled and faded cheeks. She finds words, drawing on years of practice from all of her dark winter spaces. She turns to the Father she has learned to trust above all things. “Please, if there is any other way, don’t take him.”

Don’t take him.

What I felt next was the presence of an angel woman next to me in the waiting room. I knew, almost distantly, I was having a panic attack. Somewhere in the darkness and fear, I was still reaching for God, but I couldn’t find peace. But I could feel her. She reminded me of my husband’s sister, Rebecca.

I sent out a text.

Less than thirty minutes away, my sister-in-law, Rebecca, already had a thought come to her that she needed to shower and get ready. I was going to need her. When my text came in, she and her new husband, the man whose recently passed first wife I had been feeling next to me in the waiting room, got in their car and came.

Sacrifice is providing something for another of God’s children they cannot do for themselves. Miracles are when someone does something for you that you cannot do for yourself. I was still in the waiting room praying for my metaphorical ram in the thicket when Rebecca and Ryan arrived.

Jacob was wheeled from the surgery hours later than the doctors said it would take. They took him up to the recovery floor and by the time we got in the room, he was in so much pain, he could hardly speak. “We can’t give him any more pain medication until the anesthesia wears off,” the nurse told us before she left.

As he moaned and wept in pain, I sat beside him. I could do nothing. I’d emptied myself completely and had nothing left to give. Tears ran
down my face. Ryan laid his hand on the tray between us. “Here, squeeze my hand as hard as you need to.”

I took his hand. I squeezed. I prayed.

Don’t take him. I need him.

An unseen light filled the room around us. I recognized the feeling of James in the room with us. Behind him, around us, behind the bed Jacob laid in, I sensed an army of angels. There were no empty spaces.

I don’t think Sarah was alone. Maybe she had a handmaid, a servant, a friend. At the very least, I’m sure there was an angel near her, but not one making marks against her on a tablet of divine stone. No, this angel would be like the one sent to Christ when he faced his own deepest sorrow in Gethsemane. Christ doesn’t require people to stand on their own in a storm. He sends people to each of us, at different moments, to stand with us in our storms. We give up things and give away things not because God wants to leave us empty, but because another of his children needs to be filled.

As the same brightness filled the hospital room that once filled the room where I lost my child, I was surrounded by love. With Ryan’s hand in mine and Rebecca standing near, I saw the loops of a vast plan pulling us toward each other. Ryan had lost his spouse. Rebecca had lost her baby. Both had been present, were present, when I faced similar pains.

The ram that Abraham finds in the thicket after the angel appears to him is symbol of Christ. Empty tombs and missing things are sort of his specialty. He understands our limits, the spaces of darkness we will never be enough to bear on our own. Maybe the emptiness inside us makes room not only for him, but also the human saviors who come to us in his place. Through sacrifice, he gives us moments to experience for ourselves what he feels every time he provides the miracle we can’t create on our own.

That night, I slept beside Jacob in a reclining chair near his hospital bed. By the time morning came, I knew he would live.

This essay by JoLyn Brown was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.
Among the Book of Mormon’s most remarkable characteristics is its consistent interaction with the Bible. The Bible haunts this book, showing up in subtle allusions and type scenes as well as direct quotations both short and long. Further, the Book of Mormon explicitly reflects on the Bible’s historical origins, canonical shape, and scriptural destiny. As has long been recognized, the Book of Mormon’s most sustained interest is in the book of Isaiah. But at least one other biblical focus deserves detailed notice because it has a place of some privilege in the Book of Mormon: the book of Revelation. Indeed, it stands alone among New Testament books as one that early Book of Mormon authors specifically knew in advance would exist and that later Book of Mormon authors looked back on as existing already. Other potential New Testament sources (like most potential Old Testament sources) exist more spectrally, hovering around the Book of Mormon, influencing its language and composition in translated form. The book of Revelation or the Apocalypse, on the other hand, is explicitly referred to in the Book of Mormon as a text, deserving of attention as such.

In one of the volume’s most direct reflections on Revelation, readers hear the voice of “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of the heavens and of the earth and all things that in them is” (Ether 4:7).1

1. For a recent and novel examination of some of these forms of interaction, see Michael Austin, The Testimony of Two Nations: How the Book of Mormon Reads, and Rereads, the Bible (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024).

2. Quotations of the Book of Mormon come from Royal Skousen, ed., The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), although we have
Christ addresses himself through Moroni to latter-day Israelites, scattered abroad:

Come unto me, O ye house of Israel, and it shall be made manifest unto you how great things the Father hath laid up for you from the foundation of the world. . . . Yea, when ye shall call upon the Father in my name with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, then shall ye know that the Father hath remembered the covenant which he made unto your fathers, O house of Israel. And then shall my revelations which I have caused to be written by my servant John be unfolded in the eyes of all the people.

(Ether 4:14–16)

It remains unclear exactly how the concluding promise in this passage is to be understood. Does it look forward to when the events recorded in Revelation will occur? Or does it look forward to when the correct interpretation of the book of Revelation will finally be set forth? Is there another way of understanding the promise? However the passage is understood, it welds the Book of Mormon’s significance with that of the book of Revelation.

All this means that the Book of Mormon deserves serious attention from those interested in the history of how Revelation has been understood—and from those interested in the history of apocalypticism more generally. With this paper, we work to carve out a new, preliminary understanding of how the Book of Mormon interacts with the book of Revelation. We focus especially on a moment early in the text, where Nephi’s apocalyptic vision explicitly presents itself as a variant of the

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visions recorded in Revelation. This vision serves literarily as a recasting of the Bible's Apocalypse.

The method we employ in the following arguments deserves some explanation. Similarities and differences between the text of the book of Revelation and that of the Book of Mormon can, of course, be understood in several ways. One might imagine, for instance, that Nephi and John had similar visions, and so their vision accounts use similar images and phrasing but without any direct relationship between them—such that it is a futile exercise to examine those similarities or to think that anything significant lies in the differences that attend those similarities.

Or, taking quite a different approach, one might imagine that the similarities between the two texts indeed suggest some kind of relationship but that the two visions are fundamentally distinct in all kinds of much more important ways—such that the similarities are of little significance. In our view, however, it is important to underscore that the Book of Mormon was divinely translated in the context of and published for a biblically literate culture. This leads us to believe that the rendering of certain Book of Mormon passages in ways that recall the language of the book of Revelation was intentional and was therefore meant to be recognized by readers. Similarities and relevant differences that appear at points of similarity are, with such an approach, highly significant and interpretively crucial.

In all that follows, at any rate, we assume this last explanation of the similarities and differences between the two texts, and we ask what might be learned from approaching them with this in mind. (We acknowledge, of course, that there may be other ways to understand these matters.)

In what follows, we argue that Nephi's apocalyptic vision revises the New Testament's book of Revelation in three distinct ways.

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6. That Nephi's vision—or at least some part of it—fits squarely within the genre of apocalyptic literature is assured. For discussions, see Mark D. Thomas, Digging in
1. It wrests language concerning the New Jerusalem and the fate of the righteous from Revelation (see Rev. 21–22) and reapply it to terrestrial visits of Jesus Christ at the meridian of time.

2. It weaves language from throughout the second half of Revelation into two accounts of events surrounding the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

3. Finally, it offers a new reading of Revelation’s vision of the great harlot (Rev. 17–18) in terms of the events surrounding the Book of Mormon’s coming forth in the modern period.

Taken together, these revisions suggest that the Book of Mormon aims interpretively to stretch (the second half of) Revelation over a framework of schematic sacred history. This sacred history begins with several visits of Jesus Christ to the ancient world, moves through both local and global events tied to the Crucifixion of Christ, and culminates in the much later appearance of the Book of Mormon in the world—the moment when, according to the text, the revelations once given to John are to be “unfolded in the eyes of all the people.”

All three of these reapplications of Revelation share a central motif. Each in its own way reworks what scholars call the eschatology of the New Testament’s Apocalypse. The term *eschatology*, especially as we use it here, concerns the final events of earthly history—things at the end of time. Although the context of the book of Revelation is traditionally understood to be prophetic anticipations of the end of times, in the first two examples of our Book of Mormon revisions, Revelation is reapplied to times long before the end of history. In the third example, the end-times anticipation of the Apocalypse remains intact, but it is given a prelude quite foreign to the book of Revelation. Moreover, all three ways of helping readers understand the book of Revelation’s meaning in a new way are jointly predicated on a key preliminary gesture from the Book of Mormon: Nephi’s...
direct and explicit avoidance, in the text, of the task of describing “the end of the world” as witnessed in his vision (1 Ne. 14:22). Explicitly dropping the end of history from its fresh presentation of Revelation, the Book of Mormon goes on to rework every end-times phrase or motif it borrows.7

In what follows, then, after a few words of introduction to the Book of Mormon’s treatment of the Apocalypse, we begin by introducing the explicit avoidance of end-time concerns in Nephi’s vision. We then work our way in succession through each of the three reapplications of Revelation’s text summarized above. Finally, we draw a few conclusions about the revised apocalypticism of the Book of Mormon.

Another Vision of the Lamb

Nephi’s vision appears within a stone’s throw of the Book of Mormon’s first page. Somewhere in the Arabian desert, while he and his family are still in transit toward the New World, Nephi develops a strong desire to experience his father’s famous dream of a life-giving tree.8 When Nephi prays for understanding, he finds himself miraculously carried to a mountain where an angel guides him through a classically apocalyptic vision.9 At the end of the recorded vision, Nephi learns that his experience has a connection with a biblical book to be written centuries later. An “apostle of the Lamb of God” named John would see “many things” that Nephi has seen, and this Apostle would be “ordained” to “write them” for general circulation (1 Ne. 14:24–27). However, despite this explicit connection with the book of Revelation, the exact relationship between Nephi’s vision and Revelation is not exactly obvious.

7. Scholars today distinguish apocalyptic (which concerns a literary genre, a style of reporting on alleged visionary experiences) and eschatology (which concerns theological reflection on end times, in or out of the context of apocalyptic literature). For a helpful introduction to these distinctions, see John J. Collins, “What Is Apocalyptic Literature?,” in The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–16.


The text marks a certain difference in frame between Nephi’s and John’s visionary experiences. Although “many things” found in the account of Nephi’s vision are set to appear in the writings of “this apostle of the Lamb,” the angel forbids Nephi to write “the remainder” of what appears in Revelation (1 Ne. 14:24). Nephi indeed sees all these things—including, apparently, “the end of the world” (v. 22)—but he is not “ordained . . . [to] write them” (v. 25). The divinely ordained incompleteness of Nephi’s vision account thus induces him to offer a quasi-apologetic testimony of his record: “And if all the things which I saw are not written, the things which I have written are true” (v. 30). Later in his writings, when Nephi comments further on his visionary experience, he occasionally must stop himself from going further: “And now I, Nephi, make an end, for I durst not speak further as yet concerning these things” (1 Ne. 22:29; see also 2 Ne. 32:7).

That Nephi is prohibited from reporting what he sees “concerning the end of the world” (1 Ne. 14:22) is significant. Readers are led to expect some overlap, but they also expect John to go much further than Nephi. The text thus leaves them asking what in the book of Revelation relates to the end of the world and what appears in Nephi’s account that relates to the “many things which have been” (v. 21). Thus, through Nephi’s vision, the Book of Mormon directly and intentionally draws questioning attention to the book of Revelation, indicating the existence of—but not exactly providing—an ideal scheme for its plain interpretation. Readers are left with the task of laying Nephi’s vision and Revelation side by side to understand their interaction. In our view, the most obvious means available for doing so is a set of shared phrases: intertextual interactions where Nephi’s vision—as a literary artifact—takes up and redeploy recognizable language from

10. We owe thanks to one of our students, Michael Zackrison, for suggesting the importance of Nephi’s truncation of the vision found in the book of Revelation.

11. Nephi’s text suggests that the book of Revelation may be a corrupted text. The angel explains to Nephi that “at the time [the Apocalypse] proceeded out of the mouth of the Jew, the things which were written were plain and pure and most precious and easy to the understanding of all men” (1 Ne. 14:23). Rhetorically, this seems to suggest that something changed after the book’s early circulation. Earlier in the apocalyptic vision, Nephi witnesses some kind of corruption of the Bible, including the loss of “many parts which are plain and most precious” (1 Ne. 13:26). For some commentary on this matter, see Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement? Outlining a Possible Apostasy Narrative,” BYU Studies Quarterly 60, no. 1 (2021): 105–27. On the relevance of this matter directly to the book of Revelation, see Joseph M. Spencer, The Anatomy of Book of Mormon Theology, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2021), 1:98–103.
the book of Revelation. If a scheme for interpreting the book of Revelation is laid out in the Book of Mormon, it is to be discerned in sorting out the literary entanglement of the two vision accounts.12

It is to this work of examining the literary entanglement of the Book of Mormon’s apocalyptic vision with the New Testament’s book of Revelation that we dedicate the remainder of this paper. Before addressing details, we must first identify a general pattern that organizes every intertextual interaction between the two sources. Generally, when Nephi’s vision account unmistakably draws on the language of the Apocalypse, its sources are portions of the book of Revelation that seem most apparently to be about “the end of the world.”13 And yet Nephi’s vision redeploy all such language in emphatically non-end-times contexts—or, in one case, to events that are explicitly prior to the end of time. Thus, Nephi’s vision revises the overarching historical framework with which to make sense of apocalypse.

With these generalities out of the way, it is possible now to consider each of the three ways Nephi’s apocalyptic vision revises the end-times focus of the book of Revelation.

City or Lamb: Heaven Arrives Early (Revision 1)

Allusions to the book of Revelation begin to appear in the very first verse of Nephi’s apocalyptic vision account. Surprisingly, Nephi’s first passage is drawn from the very end of the book of Revelation. Nephi’s vision


13. Interpretations of Revelation are, of course, varied and complex, such that it makes little sense to say that any passage in it is “most apparently” about anything. In using such language, though, we refer to the long history of Revelation’s reception, the vast majority of which has focused the book’s meaning on “the end of the world.” For excellent large-scale histories of Revelation’s reception, see Jonathan Kirsch, _A History of the End of the World: How the Most Controversial Book in the Bible Changed the Course of Western Civilization_ (New York: HarperOne, 2007); Bruce Chilton, _Visions of the Apocalypse: Receptions of John’s Revelation in Western Imagination_ (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2013); and Timothy Beal, _The Book of Revelation: A Biography_ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). For an excellent commentary on Revelation with a focus on its reception history, see Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, _Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ_, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).
starts where John’s ends. This opening intertextual move thus introduces the theme of stripping apocalyptic language of its direct referentiality to the end of history. It takes the most emphatically end-times moment in John’s vision and repositions it as a point of departure instead, as if readers of Nephi’s vision account are to experience the Apocalypse in reverse. What unfolds, though, is something more complex. A network of passages from the last sequence of John’s vision are repurposed to paint a portrait of various visits to the earth by the Lamb.14

All this starts when Nephi describes his revelatory experience as beginning with him being “caught away in the Spirit of the Lord—yea, into an exceeding high mountain, a mountain which I never had before seen and upon which I never had before sat my foot” (1 Ne. 11:1). As indicated above, the language here introduces the final vision in the book of Revelation.15 After so much else John has seen, an angel approaches him and says, “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” The text then explains, “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:9–10).16 Despite the surprise that initially attends it, the tie between the first of Nephi’s visionary experiences and John’s very last is quite appropriate. In “the holy Jerusalem,” in or by “a pure river of water of life,” John sees “the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 21:10; 22:1–2). The very first thing Nephi sees in his protracted vision is “the tree of life,” a tree that “sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men” and is equated with “the fountain of living waters” (1 Ne. 11:22, 25).

This first connection between the inauguration of Nephi’s visionary experience and the conclusion of John’s is followed by a second, confirming connection. Nephi’s divine guide explains shortly after Nephi arrives on the mountain that he will witness “a sign” in the course of his visions: “After thou hast beheld the tree... , thou shalt also behold a man descending out

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16. The literary entanglements here are relatively apparent, but it is important to note differences too. John’s being “in the spirit” suggests a certain state, while Nephi indicates hypostatically that the “Spirit of the Lord” carried him away (and in subsequent verses even converses with this Spirit in something like human form). Further, Nephi dwells on the unfamiliarity of the mountain in a way John in Revelation never does.
of heaven” (1 Ne. 11:7). This Nephi sees when he later glimpses the Lamb’s post-Resurrection visit to his distant New World descendants: “And I saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven. And he came down, and he shewed himself unto them” (1 Ne. 12:6). The phrase “descending out of heaven” also appears at the outset of John’s final vision, in the passage already quoted above: “And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:10). Both visions concern something “descending out of heaven,” but while John sees the famed New Jerusalem, Nephi witnesses “a man” he is to identify as “the Son of God” (1 Ne. 11:7). With Nephi’s witness, the removal of end-times anticipation from the Apocalypse becomes clear. Language used in Revelation to point to the final return of paradise to earth becomes, in Nephi’s vision, language used to describe the descent of the Lamb of God from heaven to earth—anciently, not at the end of history.

A subtler connection might be added to these first two. Before John sees in vision a city coming down from heaven, the angel leads him to anticipate seeing a woman. “Come hither,” the angel beckons, “I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife” (Rev. 21:9), and the Lamb’s wife proves to be the city. This plays on the classical prophetic identification of cities with women in relationship with God, already a theme earlier in the book of Revelation. As Craig Koester explains, “Previously, one of the angels said, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment on the great whore’ (17:1), and now one says, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb’ (21:9). There is a clear literary connection between the scenes.”17 Much of the last part of Revelation thus balances on the contrast between the faithful woman-as-city from above and the adulterous woman-as-city from below. Nephi’s apocalyptic vision is similarly organized around such a polarity, although the contrast is starker still because the idealized woman is explicitly “a virgin most beautiful and fair above all other virgins” (1 Ne. 11:15); Nephi’s vision plays into the classic virgin-whore dichotomy influentially articulated by Sigmund Freud.18 At the same time, the symmetry of the two female figures in Nephi’s vision is somewhat broken, since the whore of his vision represents a whole people, while the virgin

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is simply an individual, “the mother of God” (1 Ne. 11:18).\textsuperscript{19} Significantly, however, where John sees a city, Nephi yet again sees a person—not only the Son of God in the place of the New Jerusalem but also the Mother of God in the place of the same city.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus, in Nephi's vision the bride-city of John's vision successively becomes (1) the Virgin who, after being “carried away in the spirit for the space of a time,” is seen “bearing a child in her arms”—namely “the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father” (1 Ne. 11:19–21)—and (2) the Lamb of God himself, not only as born of the Virgin but also as descending from heaven in glory to visit the distant descendants of Nephi and his brothers. What in the book of Revelation is an indelibly end-times vision, presenting the final dawn of paradise, lends its imagery and language to the Book of Mormon for the presentation of two ancient condescensions of God to earth. One of these is incarnational, and the other concerns the resurrected Lamb of God.\textsuperscript{21} From the very outset of the two visions’ entanglement, the Book of Mormon rewrites Revelation. In Nephi’s vision, history does not yearn for or move toward a final transformation of the world into Edenic paradise;\textsuperscript{22} rather, paradise comes to the world whenever Christ comes to it, as if he were Eden in person.\textsuperscript{23} Nephi’s vision takes events Revelation describes in terms of the end times and reconstitutes them as squarely first-century historical events.\textsuperscript{24}


\textsuperscript{20} Further, unlike the bride of the Lamb in Revelation, the Virgin in Nephi’s vision does not descend out of heaven. That honor is reserved for deity—that is, for the Son of God.

\textsuperscript{21} Strictly speaking, Nephi’s vision account restricts the language of “condescension” to the event of the Lamb’s baptism (see 1 Ne. 11:26–29), but the Book of Mormon more generally pluralizes the term (as in 2 Ne. 9:53; Jacob 4:7) and thus broadens its theological scope.


\textsuperscript{23} It is possible, as some have argued, that Nephi’s vision account means to equate the Virgin with the Edenic tree of life. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 191–243.

\textsuperscript{24} Of course, it might be pointed out that, according to the dominant historicist interpretation today, the book of Revelation itself conceives of its projections regarding
It should be noted, of course, that the Book of Mormon elsewhere concedes the broad conception of the end times described in the book of Revelation, although it recasts it in other ways. For example, when Jesus Christ, resurrected, visits the peoples of the Book of Mormon at the volume’s climax, he predicts the latter-day establishment of “a New Jerusalem” (3 Ne. 20:22)—but rather than a city come down from heaven, it would be a city built by “the remnant of Jacob, and also as many of the house of Israel as shall come” (3 Ne. 21:23). A similar prediction appears in Ether 13:4–10. Thus, although Nephi’s vision rather forcefully assigns non-end-times meanings to Revelation’s end-times vision, it does not attempt to deny the apocalyptic conception of history’s end completely. Instead, given how repeated motifs layer Nephi’s vision, the text leads readers to surmise that the language and imagery borrowed from Revelation would have appeared in two places. Not only does it appear in Nephi’s vision account, it also presumably appears in the unrecorded part of Nephi’s full vision of the “end of the world” (see, again, 1 Ne. 14:18–28). Be that as it may, the literary move made by Nephi’s vision account is perfectly clear. The aim is to free up apocalyptic language from its end-of-history determination so that it might be applied to other sacred events—especially, to Christ’s earthly sojourns.

The Death of the Lamb: An End Long before the End (Revision 2)

Nephi’s vision of the Virgin opens a larger sequence that culminates in the death of the Lamb. Seven times Nephi is told to “Look!” and seven times he watches some aspect of the Lamb’s mortal sojourn. The seventh time—in the seventh of his seven visions of the Lamb—he sees “the Lamb of God . . . taken by the people . . . [and] lifted up upon the cross” (1 Ne. 11:32–33). From the Lamb’s birth to this moment, stretching the end of the world as occurring early in the Christian era—perhaps even within the scope of the first century. This, though, the Book of Mormon rejects, presupposing a long postponement of the end of history. For some discussion, see Heather Hardy, “Sav- ing Christianity’: The Nephite Fulfillment of Jesus’s Eschatological Prophecies,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 23 (2014): 22–55; and Joseph M. Spencer, For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 71–78.

25. These end-times resumptions of apocalyptic themes later in the Book of Mor- mon were, in terms of the book’s reception, the earliest passages of intense interest, although they receive relatively little attention today. See, on early reception, especially Underwood, Millenarian World of Early Mormonism.

26. See, again, Easton-Flake, “Lehi’s Dream as a Template.”
across seven visionary sequences, recognizable borrowings from the book of Revelation have disappeared. But then, as the consequences of the Lamb’s death begin to unfold, the language of Revelation returns to Nephi’s vision account. A Christian reader might naturally expect the death of the Lamb to serve as the prelude to his glorious Resurrection, but Nephi’s vision makes the Lamb’s death the trigger for a larger and worldly conflict (his Resurrection goes unmentioned, in fact). Here again, but in a new way, it seems that Nephi’s vision aims to reapply the language Revelation uses for the end of history to events associated with early Christian history. But where the first several borrowings from Revelation in Nephi’s vision, analyzed above, are all drawn from Revelation 21–22, the ones brought together to clarify the stakes of the Lamb’s death come from passages scattered throughout the book of Revelation’s second half.

The first relevant borrowing from Revelation appears immediately after Nephi reports seeing the Lamb “lifted up upon the cross and slain for the sins of the world” (1 Ne. 11:33). He says, “And after that he was slain, I saw the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb” (v. 34). The language here echoes a passage found later in Revelation: “And I saw the beast,” John says, “and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army” (Rev. 19:19). Here again is the usual move of removing the emphasis on the end of times: a passage that in Revelation concerns the final battle between the Lamb and his opponents becomes a source for first-century events immediately following the death of the Lamb.

27. This is in keeping with a larger Book of Mormon tradition. Although the Book of Mormon affirms the reality of Jesus Christ’s Resurrection, it often dwells on conflicts and disasters associated with the event of Christ’s death. At the volume’s climax, for example, one finds a sustained historical account of apocalyptic destructions in the New World occurring at the death of Christ (see 3 Ne. 8–10). Nephi’s vision also reports such conflicts and disasters.

28. Scholars consistently divide the book of Revelation into two halves (Craig Koester calls them Act I and Act II): chaps. 4–11 and chaps. 12–22 (with the recognition that chaps. 1–3 stand quite apart from the remainder of the text in key ways). See Koester, Revelation and the End of All Things, 45, 115. The only language drawn from Revelation and applied to events surrounding the Lamb’s death in Nephi’s vision account that may come solely from the first half, rather than the second half, of Revelation, is found in Revelation 11:19, right at the halfway point. That this stands at the border of the two halves of the Apocalypse confirms that the focus of these borrowings is the second half of the biblical source.
But there are other revisionary gestures at work in the Book of Mormon text as well. Most crucially, where Revelation presents “the kings of the earth, and their armies” as Christ’s enemies, Nephi’s vision replaces these with “the multitude of the earth,” a broad term that Nephi’s angelic guide immediately narrows to mean just—and rather surprisingly!—“the house of Israel” (1 Ne. 11:35). Apparently, what matters to Nephi is less a story about the whole world—at least at this point in his vision—and more a story just about Israel and its inner conflicts. Further, because the Lamb is recently dead in the context of Nephi’s vision, those who gather in multitudes for battle focus their fury on the Apostles and less on the Lamb himself. In the end-of-history context of Revelation, he “that sat on the horse” is unconquerable. But while the protagonists of the battle may be different in the two texts, the end result remains the same: “Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb,” Nephi’s angelic guide says (v. 36).

A second relevant borrowing comes in this last-quoted warning that “all nations, kindreds, tongues and people” who fight against the Lamb’s Apostles will lose. The fourfold signal of universality here reproduces part of Revelation 14:6 (a passage significant to the Latter-day Saint tradition beyond the Book of Mormon’s echo of it). Revelation reads as follows: “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people.” Throughout the book of Revelation,

29. Significantly, the phrase “the twelve apostles of the Lamb” is also unique within the biblical context to the book of Revelation, appearing in Revelation 21:14. There the New Jerusalem has “twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” (On this motif, see the helpful comparative note in Koester, Revelation, 815. On the general connection between apostles in Revelation and Nephi’s vision, see Hopkin, “Seeing Eye to Eye,” 71–76.) It may be significant that Nephi’s vision not only draws out this uniquely apocalyptic title for the twelve of Jesus’s choosing (the name is angelically revealed to Nephi; see 1 Ne. 11:34) but also makes “the twelve apostles of the Lamb” the object of specific attack after the death of the Lamb. With the Lamb dead, his Apostles become the sole foundation of the fledgling church of the Lamb; to attack them may thus be to attack the very foundation of the church. As Nephi’s vision continues, it describes a sustained attempt at subverting the “pure” gospel promulgated by the twelve Apostles, but this effort at subversion is specifically a gentile one (see 1 Ne. 13:20–29). For some discussion, see Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?”

30. The same formula appears later in 1 Nephi 14:11, where it describes the dominions of “the whore of all the earth”—made up again of those who would do battle against the Lamb. As we will show later, this allusion seems tied specifically to Revelation 17:15, part of the third form of reapplication to be discussed below.
in fact, the formula appears with some variation in the grouped terms as well as in the terms’ order. 31 Whereas the fourfold totality of peoples in Nephi’s vision always embodies the enemies of the Lamb of God, Revelation uses the formula (in its several variations) to refer to groups who are righteous (as in Rev. 5:9; 7:9), wicked (as in Rev. 11:9; 17:15), and at least initially neutral (as in Rev. 13:7; 14:6). According to some commentators, it signals a Christian difference within the apocalyptic literary tradition: “The uncompromising universality of the proclamation of the message appealing to people to repent in view of the impending eschatological judgment of God is contrary to the normal parochialism inherent in Jewish apocalyptic literature, in which only a specific ethnic group . . . is the object of God’s saving activity in the world.” 32 The use of the fourfold formula in the account of Nephi’s vision is therefore distinct from its use in Revelation in at least two ways. Not only does it work to universalize warning rather than preaching, but it also reduces the end-times dimension of the circumstances that motivate the warning. It is the fate of those who resist the Apostles in early Christian history rather than of those who stand at the end of time that is the issue.

A third relevant borrowing that reapplies Revelation’s language about the end of history to the death of the Lamb comes a little later in Nephi’s vision. Following the war waged against the twelve Apostles of the Lamb, the vision changes settings dramatically, moving from Old World Jerusalem in Jesus Christ’s time to the thousand-years-long story of Nephi’s descendants in the New World. At the center of this second major sequence of his vision, Nephi witnesses the promised descent of the Lamb among his people after his Resurrection. Prior to his descent, however, the vision account describes a series of disasters: “And it came to pass that I saw a mist of darkness on the face of the land of promise,

31. Note that three other passages in Revelation reproduce all four terms from the passage in Nephi’s vision, but these follow different orders for the terms. One speaks of “every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Rev. 5:9); a second speaks of “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9); and a third refers to “the people and kindreds and tongues and nations” (Rev. 11:9). One passage produces only three of the four terms: “all kindreds, and tongues, and nations” (Rev. 13:7); and another passage replaces one of the four terms: “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” (Rev. 17:15). Only Revelation 14:6 reproduces all four terms in the exact order preserved in Nephi’s vision.

and I saw lightnings, and I heard thunderings and earthquakes and all manner of tumultuous noises. And I saw the earth, that it rent the rocks, and I saw mountains tumbling into pieces, and I saw the plains of the earth, that they were broken up” (1 Ne. 12:4). This massive New World destruction prior to the visit of the Lamb is something Nephi elsewhere ties directly to the Lamb’s Old World death—a terrestrial response to the death of God. Nephi’s description echoes language found in Revelation. In literally the first verse of the second half of Revelation,33 a brief scene sets the stage for—and perhaps embodies in one image—all the end-of-time events that fill out the second half of the book. This end-of-time event is described in heavenly terms: “And the temple of God was opened in heaven, and there was seen in his temple the ark of his testament: and there were lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail” (Rev. 11:19). Thus, while Nephi’s vision is a terror-inducing collapse of earthly things coincident with the Lamb’s Crucifixion, John’s is a terror-inducing vision of God’s very presence, glimpsed as the end of all things arrives. G. K. Beale comments, “In the [Old Testament] such series of cosmic phenomena indicate theophanies. Here the series comes from the innermost part of God’s heavenly temple. With the seventh trumpet [just sounded], as with the seventh seal [before it], the very end of history has been reached.”34 In Nephi’s vision, yet again this image is stripped of its attachment to the end of history and is instead attached to the death of the Lamb—an apocalyptic event in its own right.

The account of Nephi’s vision thus arranges together several images from Revelation to create a picture of the Lamb of God’s death in the flesh. The relevant sources from Revelation are scattered throughout the book’s second half but come together in Nephi’s vision as a single portrayal of the earth-shattering event of Christ’s Crucifixion. In their original New Testament settings, however, all these images are entirely focused on the end of times. The Lamb’s death, as much as the Lamb’s life, calls for removing the end-times dimension from Revelation’s language, allowing for such language to be repurposed and reapplied. The death of the Lamb on the cross becomes an end long before The End. History’s

center of gravity thus shifts hard from its end to its center in Nephi’s vision, with the result that final events are downplayed and earlier, apocalyptic events are highlighted.

There is a third set of interactions between Nephi’s vision and the book of Revelation that requires investigation, but it is worth briefly summarizing the first two sets together. Each of these begins with downplaying the end of history—reassigning certain words, phrases, and images from Revelation to some event much earlier in history. In both cases, this reassignment makes the formerly end-times language apply to events surrounding the life of the Lamb of God—the comings of Christ to the earth (in both the Old World and the New World), and his death by crucifixion. In Nephi’s apocalyptic vision, both the positive and the negative sides of the end of history—the descent of heaven to earth on the one hand and the rupturing of all earthly things on the other—are given their Christological applications. It is as if, in looking to the end of the world, one risks failing to look back to Christ’s advent that makes deliverance from earthly evils possible. This does not mean, however, that Nephi’s vision simply dispenses with the end of history. The third set of allusions to Revelation restores a kind of faith in end-times thinking, but it too introduces nuances that ask readers to rethink Revelation’s meaning.

The Harlot and the Book: A Prelude to the End of Time (Revision 3)

All the borrowings from the book of Revelation in the account of Nephi’s vision up to this point have been subtle—the kind of thing one notes only when looking for it. They are connections that commentators on the Book of Mormon have seldom noted. What remains to be investigated here, however, is a series of connections between Nephi’s vision and the Apocalypse that have long and often been noted by commentators. As Nephi’s vision turns its focus from ancient history (in both the Old and the New Worlds) to modern history (in Europe and the Americas especially), it begins deploying language unmistakably resonant of the New Testament’s book of Revelation. It is therefore this later portion of Nephi’s

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35. See, for instance, the textually astute commentary that nonetheless fails to note any of these connections in Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:198–227.
vision that has driven commentators to speak of “symbols and phrases from Revelation” that “also appear in the American apocalypse”—symbols and phrases “too specific to be accidental.”36 Despite the attention such connections have received, however, students of Nephi’s vision and Revelation have overlooked the way that the most obvious borrowings are intended to systematically recast the end of history. In light of that broader intent, these most overt interactions with the Bible rework still other words and phrases from Revelation and resituate them as a kind of prelude to the (unrecounted) end of history in Nephi’s vision.

The longest sequence of Nephi’s vision37 concerns, as noted just above, the dawn of modernity. Its task is to provide the context for the Book of Mormon’s latter-day coming forth. According to the vision account, what motivates the creation of the Book of Mormon in general, and what motivates its emergence in its specific time and place, is a set of problems in the received text of the Christian Bible. Thanks to the emergence in early Christian history of a “great and abominable church” (1 Ne. 13:6)—which included a version of Christian theology and practice driven by the idea of Gentile ascendancy over Jews—the Bible proves incomprehensible as “it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles” (v. 29).38 The language of Nephi’s vision connects this great and abominable church again and again to passages in the book of Revelation. This begins subtly in the long visionary sequence that motivates and then tells the story of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth, but it becomes forceful and unmistakable in the next sequence of Nephi’s vision—a shorter sequence that reports the final judgment of the great and abominable church. In both sequences of the vision, the great and abominable church is intertextually equated with the great harlot of Revelation 17–18, right through to—and especially in—their shared judgment.

The famed harlot of Revelation 17–18 is a thinly veiled image for the Roman Empire, so often the source of tribulation for early Christians.39

38. For discussion, see Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?”
39. “There can be no doubt that the harlot city of John’s vision is Rome, ‘the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth’ (17:18). He refrains from saying so
It “sitteth upon many waters” because of its far-flung domains, and “the kings of the earth have committed fornication” (Rev. 17:1–2) with her in the sense that the empire “has usurped and perverted the political power of all its provinces” and imposed “religious and idolatrous demands” on those under its power. The empire-harlot is richly clothed and ornamented, holding a goblet in a gesture of celebration (she in fact drinks “the blood of the saints” and “the blood of the martyrs of Jesus”; v. 6), but her real identity is written right on her forehead: “Mystery, Babylon the Great, The Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth” (v. 5). John watches as the woman is divinely condemned and her former consorts lament her passing.

The first indication that the great and abominable church of Nephi’s vision is to be identified in some way with this woman from Revelation 17–18 is, as already suggested, somewhat subtle. It comes as Nephi sees the church for the first time. He recognizes at a glance that “the devil . . . was the founder of it” (1 Ne. 13:6); he also sees “gold and silver and silks and scarlets and fine-twined linen and all manner of precious clothing” as well as “many harlots” (v. 7). An angelic guide lists all these things to Nephi as he sees them, explaining that they are “the desires of this great and abominable church” (v. 8). This list, in fact, condenses Revelation 18:12–13, where the harlot’s consorts lament the unavailability, after the woman’s judgment, of “the merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet,” as well as a host of other purchasable goods. The echo is clear, but it does not force itself on readers. Particularly important is the fact that at only implicitly, not to hide his meaning from the Roman police, for his image is too transparent to conceal its meaning from even the most obtuse Roman. He wants rather to involve the imaginations of his hearer-readers in evocative symbolic language that resonates with several levels of meaning at once.” M. Eugene Boring, Revelation (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1989), 179.


41. Beale, Book of Revelation, 848.

42. The reference to “many harlots” may be yet another subtle nod toward Revelation 17–18, not because the latter speaks of harlots as part of Rome’s trade but simply because Rome is a harlot in Revelation. With this gesture, Nephi’s vision perhaps demetaphorizes the image of the harlot, at least temporarily. Literal and historical prostitutes are a part of Nephi’s vision before any talk of a metaphorical prostitute arises.

43. Even more subtle is the way that Nephi’s angelic interpreter alludes to the drink of Revelation’s harlot (see Rev. 17:4; 18:6) when he says that the great and abominable church “destroy[s] the saints of God” (1 Ne. 13:9).
one point in this especially long sequence of Nephi’s vision is the church metaphorized as a prostitute;\textsuperscript{44} such metaphorical talk of the church as a harlot comes with real force only in the next sequence. Meanwhile, it seems that Nephi’s vision is—even in this third form of appropriation—subtly (although more gently than before) removing strictly end-times imagery from Revelation 17–18. Where in Revelation the catalog of goods appears only at the harlot’s final judgment at the end of history, Nephi’s vision moves it into a historical description of the great and abominable church—during a time when the church flourished.

Subtlety disappears entirely, however, when the long visionary sequence about the Book of Mormon’s coming forth gives way to the shorter visionary sequence that reports the final judgment of the church. This sequence opens with the angelic guide’s command to “look and behold that great and abominable church, which is the mother of abominations” (1 Ne. 14:9). The title here given to the church for the first time is a condensation of the last of the titles Revelation’s great harlot wears on her forehead: “The Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth” (Rev. 17:5).\textsuperscript{45} It immediately becomes a regular name for the condemned church, appearing another three times in the next seven verses, sometimes on the lips of the interpreting angel but sometimes also in Nephi’s voice (see 1 Ne. 14:10, 13, 16). It gives way in the last two verses of this further visionary sequence, though, to another (arguably more straightforward) condensation of the same title from Revelation: “the mother of harlots” (this title appears twice on the angel’s lips; see 1 Ne. 14:16–17).\textsuperscript{46}

Strung throughout the first several verses of this shorter visionary sequence—and then echoed again later in Nephi’s record—is a third and related title for the church. It too comes from the book of Revelation: “the whore of all the earth” (1 Ne. 14:10, 11), “the whore which sat

\textsuperscript{44} In 1 Nephi 13:34, Nephi’s angelic guide briefly refers to the church as “the mother of harlots”—an echo of Revelation 17:5.

\textsuperscript{45} The reduction of “the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth” to just “the mother of abominations” perhaps serves to highlight the reference to abominations in “the great and abominable church,” in a way focusing the critique of the Lamb’s enemies on specifically religious concerns.

\textsuperscript{46} This condensation of Revelation’s title suggests a return to the demetaphorized “harlots” of 1 Nephi 13:7 and thus perhaps takes the title from Revelation more literally than Revelation does—seeing the great and abominable church as in some way actually involved with prostitutes, rather than deploying prostitution as a metaphor.
upon many waters” (v. 12), and “the great whore” (v. 12). Revelation 17:1 introduces the figurative prostitute of John’s vision as “the great whore that sitteth upon many waters,” echoing two of Nephi’s three variations on this title. Revelation 17:15 further confirms the connection when John’s angelic guide explains, “The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues.” This clearly hovers in the background of Nephi’s report: “And it came to pass that I looked and beheld the whore of all the earth, and she sat upon many waters, and she had dominion over all the earth—among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people” (1 Ne. 14:11). Throughout the shorter visionary sequence, then, unmissable allusion supplants subtle echoes, and Nephi’s “great and abominable church” is figured directly and forcefully as the harlot of John’s vision.

Why should subtlety regarding Revelation’s relevance in one (rather long) sequence of Nephi’s vision be followed by such overt interaction in another (much shorter) sequence? Stephen Robinson has influentially argued that talk of the great and abominable church functions “in two different ways” in these two sequences of Nephi’s vision. In the one, the church appears “historically,” as part of a simple prediction regarding the context of the Book of Mormon’s coming forth; in the other, the church functions “typologically, or apocalyptically,” in a visionary context where “time ceases to be an important element” and where metaphor prevails because the content is “highly symbolic.”

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47. For later uses of these same titles, see 1 Nephi 22:13, 14; 2 Nephi 10:16; 28:18.
48. There is an echo here also of the earlier fourfold formula for universality (from 1 Ne. 11:36), although now the formula works to describe the spread of the harlot’s dominions.
49. See Robinson, “Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13–14,” 182. At the same time, there are important differences between the way Nephi’s vision account presents its “mother of harlots” and the way Revelation presents its harlot figure. Revelation’s harlot is lavishly and royally adorned, but she has little substance or power of her own; she is entirely supported by a marvelous beast that eventually turns against her, “eat[ing] her flesh and burn[ing] her with fire” (Rev. 17:16). In Nephi’s vision, no beast supports the mother of harlots; she carves out her own empire. In a word, the puppet of Revelation is the puppeteer in Nephi’s vision. Accordingly, in John’s vision, the beast stands before the Lamb at the final judgment, while in Nephi’s vision, the final judgment falls on the mother of harlots directly. Stephen Robinson notes and explores the significance of the lack of beasts in the Book of Mormon adaptation of Revelation. See Robinson, “Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13–14,” 180.
to poetic imagery, and instructively stark dualism replaces the messiness of concrete particulars. As judgment for the great and abominable church approaches, Nephi’s professed plainness in his preferred forms of prophecy fades, and a symbolic scene populated with lambs and harlots comes into focus. The end of history hovers in the near distance, and so the charged end-times language of Revelation appears in Nephi’s vision with biblical force. Exactly what is at stake in this final reworking of language concerning the end of history, however, needs a few words of examination.

As we have explored, Nephi’s vision reapplies some of Revelation’s end-times language and imagery to entirely non-end-times events: the earthly visits of the Lamb (now some two thousand years ago) and the vicious murder of the Lamb (in the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ). We have said that these reapplications in a way remove the end of history from (parts of) the book of Revelation. At the same time, naturally, such reapplications charge the relevant non-end-times events with something like end-times force; all of history centers on the first coming of Christ, as much as or more than it yearns for the great and terrible end associated with the Second Coming of Christ. Something different seems to be going on, however, with the Book of Mormon’s applications of the harlot from Revelation 17–18 to the great and abominable church. Were Nephi’s vision lacking the two sequences that connect forcefully with Revelation 17–18 (in 1 Ne. 13–14), careful readers might well conclude that one aim of Nephi’s vision is to strip the Apocalypse of its end-times focus, bending all its relevant imagery toward the life and death of the Lamb of God. With the sequences that entwine themselves with Revelation 17–18,

51. A verse at the end of the long sequence of Nephi’s vision transitions to the more apocalyptic sequence by introducing dualism into the vision: “For the time cometh, saith the Lamb of God, that I will work a great and a marvelous work among the children of men—a work which shall be everlasting, either on the one hand or on the other, either to the convincing of them unto peace and life eternal, or unto the deliverance of them to the hardness of their hearts and the blindness of their minds” (1 Ne. 14:7). Right at the outset of the following sequence, the text translates this dualism into a stark contrast between “two churches: the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil” (v. 10). It is not uncommon, however, for interpreters of Nephi’s vision to find important traces of dualism before these overt statements appear. See, for example, Hopkin, “Seeing Eye to Eye,” 80–81. Jared Halverson seems right, however, to say that “the dualism in Nephi’s vision becomes most pronounced as the narrative shifts from specific images and events to the opposing powers behind those elements.” Halverson, “Lehi’s Dream and Nephi’s Vision as Apocalyptic Literature,” 63.
however, Nephi’s vision restores the believing reader’s faith in the end of times. However, it does so in a peculiar way.

The final sequences of Nephi’s vision account concern events leading up to the end of history, which Nephi leaves unnarrated but claims to have witnessed in vision. While Nephi’s vision downplays the end-times aspects of other phrases and symbols from Revelation by reapplying them to Christological events in antiquity, it does not do so with the harlot image of Revelation 17–18. Rather, it essentially concedes the image’s relevance to the end times but draws out a kind of backstory for the thing the image symbolizes. Nephi’s vision does this by telling a mostly non-apocalyptic story but then, slowly and subtly at first and then with startling abandon, filling in the story with unmistakably apocalyptic language and imagery. The closer Nephi’s vision account draws to the end of history—before, of course, cutting the story short—the more that plain talk gives way to metaphor and symbolism. The end of history is real in Nephi’s vision, but it cannot be understood appropriately without having the book of Revelation demythologized a bit before allowing the full force of the mythologizing images to play their role. The work done by the earlier parts of Nephi’s vision account strips Revelation of its end-times focus and establishes this demythologizing mood, such that the text’s interest in the end of history—and even its often bizarre apocalyptic imagery!—works to give the Book of Mormon’s version of apocalypticism a kind of reasonableness, a plain apocalypticism.

**Conclusion**

In the end, Nephi’s vision early in the Book of Mormon presents readers with a substantial reworking of the book of Revelation’s significance. Instead of locating the whole of Revelation’s meaning in the end of history, it stretches the weave of Revelation’s language and imagery across a more complex historical framework. Nephi’s vision figures the arrival of Christ in the world as equivalent in a way to the final arrival of ultimate peace on earth. As for the disasters anticipated at history’s end in Revelation, Nephi reframes them as crucially equivalent to the upheavals—even physical and material upheavals—attendant on the death of Christ. Although the book of Revelation is explicitly said to recount “the end of the world” according to Nephi (1 Ne. 14:22), Nephi’s vision refuses

52. Mark Thomas is certainly right, of course, that the Book of Mormon’s “symbolism is not nearly as bizarre as that in many apocalypses.” Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah*, 103. It does not follow, however, that the Book of Mormon refuses to credit such symbolism.
to let the whole weight of Revelation’s forceful presentation lean in the direction of history’s end. The end of all things is real and deserves to be understood, according to the Book of Mormon, but it apparently should not be allowed to stand alone, as if it were sufficient to itself. It draws its force and meaning from the earthly sojourn of Jesus Christ understood in strict historical terms. In this way, Nephi’s plain apocalypticism presents sacred history as a function of repetition, typological in nature. The end of all things, like all of history before it, is for the Book of Mormon yet another “typifying of” Christ (2 Ne. 11:4).

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53. See, again, Easton-Flake, “Lehi’s Dream as a Template.”
Lehi Tries to Explain

“there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock”

How the liquid branches of that burning tree
whipped upward as if trying to shake
themselves free of the nothing
they consumed, as if they remembered
or anticipated spirits shucking
off bodies, finding a lighter form.

How when night came the pillar wound
tighter, wrapping itself in itself
against the desert dark, the deep chill
of wilderness, a place outside city
walls, a place without the borders born
of lamps assembled against the gloom.

I watched the fiery dance for days, he said,
and knew the flame dwelt there as I
too would one day dwell there, rock-bound and burning to rise night and day
in a land not yet ready to be called home,
ot yet settled, not yet promised.

— John Alba Cutler

This poem was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
Jesus and the Torah in Matthew
Beyond Replacement Theology

Jordan Lavender

Introduction: Matthew within Judaism

The book of Matthew is a first-century Jewish text that reflects the debates and concerns of Second Temple Judaism, a period of Jewish religious practice lasting from the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in the sixth century BC to its destruction by Roman forces in AD 70.1 The Gospel of Matthew’s position on the observance of the Torah, or Jewish law, has been the subject of scholarly debate, with some claiming that Matthew advocates for the observance of Jewish law2 and others arguing that the Gospel proposes abandoning the observance of Jewish law.3

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This paper follows the scholars in the former camp, who claim Matthew believed that Jewish law was still in force, even if the legal conclusions presented in the Gospel differ from protorabbinic legal practice. This paper further posits that the Gospel of Matthew reflects the intrasectarian debates within Second Temple Judaism rather than the supersessionism characteristic of second-century Christianismos. The Gospel of Matthew’s antagonism toward certain Jewish groups and traditions, especially the Pharisees, was similar to the ways in which other Jewish groups of the time expressed their identities as distinct sects.

The Gospel of Matthew and the Law

Matthew may have written his gospel to convince the Pharisees of Jesus’s messianic candidacy and to address concerns that the Christian movement would abolish the Torah. For Matthew’s audience, the entirety of the Torah remained in force, and the community defined itself against and Righteousness in the Gospel of Matthew—an Ongoing Debate,” in Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and John Nolland (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 53–84.

4. Supersessionism is the belief that the Christian church has replaced the nation of Israel as God’s covenant people. See Michael J. Vlach, “Various Forms of Replacement Theology,” Master’s Seminary Journal 20, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 57–69.

5. I have chosen to transliterate the Greek word behind “Christianity” rather than translate it into English to avoid anachronistic thinking surrounding the nature of the Jesus movements in the second century AD. Christianismos began as one of many varieties of ways of following Jesus as a messianic candidate. See Matt Jackson-McCabe, Jewish Christianity: The Making of the Christianity-Judaism Divide (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2020), 123–43.

6. John Kampen, Matthew within Sectarian Judaism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 38–67. Some of these themes can be seen in places such as the view of Jesus as the sole mediator of the knowledge of God (Matt. 11:25–27), Jesus’s identification with wisdom (Matt. 11:19), his performance of wondrous deeds, and the rejection of his unique identity by other Judeans (Matt. 11:20–24). The communal procedures in Matthew 18:15–20 for how to reprove community members are remarkably similar to those of the Qumran community. These procedures exist to reinforce the community’s difference to other groups. The Gospel highlights the differences between the Jesus group and other groups, and several instances in the Gospel serve to discredit the authority of other groups, especially their authority figures.

antinomian Christ-believing factions, or those who believed that observance of some Jewish laws was not required for gentile believers. Groups who denied the Torah completely would have created friction between Matthew’s audience and the synagogue. Although Matthew’s Gospel does not reveal anything about the nature of the historical Jesus’s conflict with the Pharisees or any other Jewish sect, it does proclaim that Jesus is the one who fulfills the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17). Depending on how listeners defined the Greek word typically translated as “fulfilled,” this type of claim may have sparked continued division within Judaism.

Matthew approached the issue of the Torah’s fulfillment in an innovative way by stating that obedience to the commandments is not the sole criterion for entering into the kingdom. There seems to have been a crisis post–AD 70 that led to an intense debate among surviving factions around the interpretation of the Torah. The Matthean community reinterpreted traditional Jewish identity markers (Sabbath observance, dietary restrictions, purity laws, and so on) as a way to separate themselves from both other Jews and pagan society. This distinguishes Matthew’s group from other Jews but also shows some similarities with the Pharisees, who required the observance of regulations beyond what was contained in the written Torah. Jesus’s exhortation to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees could be seen as a call to a new kind of Torah observance.

For example, Jesus’s announcement in Matthew 5 that he came to πληρῶσαι (plerosai), “fulfill,” the Torah and the Prophets has led to debates about the meaning of this word and situates the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount material. While some interpret “fulfill” to mean bringing something to its completion, others claim it means to “do,

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12. Traditions surrounding how to practically implement Torah commandments are referred to as “halakah” in rabbinic literature, Jewish studies, and the academic study of Second Temple Judaism. For a study, see Cuvillier, “Torah Observance and Radicalization in the First Gospel,” 144–59.
observe." Because Matthew regarded Torah observance as required by Jesus, I argue that he interpreted the word to mean “observe.”

Use of Early Rabbinic Sources

A brief methodological note is in order. This study utilizes early rabbinic sources, while acknowledging the complexities of dating such sources. It is generally accepted that in rabbinic material (mainstream Jewish texts), halakhic (legal) traditions are more reliably dated than haggadic (any nonlegal rabbinic material), and the names of rabbis associated with legal positions can serve as a means of dating a tradition. Matthew is typically dated after the destruction of the Temple in the AD 80s, although some date it earlier. Jewish scholar Isaac W. Oliver notes that the chronological gap between the time of the Gospel authors and


rabbinic materials dated to the second century (such as those discussed in this study) is fairly small, which allows for the comparisons and connections made here. 17

**Gentile Conversion**

Matthew addressed accusations that his community was a Torah-abolishing group and a threat to Jews everywhere, as Thiessen observes. 18 Based on his Gospel account, Matthew sees the role of Jesus as the official interpreter of God’s will and Torah. Matthew shows that, even though Jesus’s interpretation differed from the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus wanted his followers to observe Torah as faithfully as other Jews did. This paper proceeds under the view that the Gospel of Matthew was written to a largely Jewish community, 19 with a small number of gentile adherents who believed that the observance of the Law (Torah) was absolutely necessary for Christ believers. 20 However, the nature of

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17. This is especially true if a later dating for Matthew’s Gospel is entertained, as Oliver is willing to propose. Compare Oliver, *Torah Praxis*, 35 and n. 10; and David C. Sim, “Reconstructing the Social and Religious Milieu of Matthew: Methods, Sources, and Possible Results,” in *Matthew, James, and Didache: Three Related Documents in Their Jewish and Christian Settings*, ed. Huub van de Sandt and Jürgen K. Zangenberg (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 15–19.

18. “Just as the authors of 2 and 4 Maccabees believed that the Jewish Hellenizers brought about the Antiochian persecution, and just as Josephus argued that the law-abolishing Zealots brought about the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, so, too, some may have argued that Jewish-Christian abandonment of ancestral customs occasioned divine wrath. If so, the correct response of other Jewish groups to Matthew’s community should conform to Moses’ command. . . . The Gospel of Matthew consistently works against this understanding of Jesus; instead, Jesus is a new Moses who comes to enable faithful Torah observance.” Matthew Thiessen, “Abolishers of the Law in Early Judaism and Matthew 5, 17–20,” *Biblica* 93, no. 4 (2012): 554–55.

19. The idea of Matthew writing to a community is one that is hotly contested in scholarship, and some would not accept this assertion at all. See Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 20–42.

how those laws were to be interpreted was certainly a matter of debate, particularly between the Jesus movement and the Pharisees. This article’s view stands in contrast to the interpretation that the polemical statements against the Pharisees were intended as statements against the observance of the Torah or as statements claiming that the Jews were no longer God’s covenant people.

The gentile mission in Matthew has been interpreted in various ways. The call of the disciples to go to the nations and spread the teaching of Jesus was meant to bring Gentiles, through ritual initiation, under the authority of the Messiah. This probably meant conversion to the Matthean form of Christian Judaism. However, this might not be as overtly anti-Pauline as some have thought. New Testament scholar Benjamin L. White sees little reason to believe that there were competing schools of thought among “Matthean,” “Pauline,” or “Petrine” Christians in the first century, claiming instead that Matthew’s call to convert the Gentiles is understandable from his theology. Matthew reads Isaiah 56:6–7 as a call to convert the Gentiles to Israel’s covenant, a view fundamentally different from Paul’s but not in direct opposition to him.


The converted Gentiles were not seen as “Gentiles” anymore; they were considered full Jews.  

Supersessionism and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

An understanding of Matthew’s Judaism could provide means of self-reflection for modern Christians, especially in a post-Holocaust environment. Traditional Christianity has viewed itself as the “new Israel,” superseding Israel as God’s chosen community with the coming of Jesus. Various reflections on the nature of this supersessionism (sometimes called “replacement theology”) have led to extensions of traditional Christian doctrine or modifications of modern theological developments. Various passages in Matthew have been used to justify many churches’ supersessionist ideologies (see Matt. 21:19, 43; 23; 27:25). In contrast, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claims to restore the purity of the original Jewish faith and also argues that it is “preparing the way for the dispensation of the fullness of time in which all previously valid human truth [will] be combined in a new synthesis for the Millennium.”

Despite this, recent Latter-day Saint scholarship seems to engage with the Gospel of Matthew based on supersessionist understandings of the book. For example, in Gaye Strathearn’s study of Matthew’s role as author and editor of the Gospel of Matthew, she relies on earlier views of the text that claim that Christianity warranted a separation from Judaism. Understanding the nature of Matthew as a Jewish document rather than a supersessionist one can help Christians broadly, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints particularly, when interpreting scripture.

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Instead of a separation, I claim that Matthew’s Judaism formed a new sect within Judaism. The Gospel of Matthew rejects supersessionist theology by placing the continued covenantal status of the Jewish people at the core of its theology. In this regard, it is similar to Paul’s view of the Torah, which was unique even within the diverse range of views of Second Temple Judaism. In contrast to earlier views of Second Temple Judaism as homogeneous, a more diverse conceptualization of Jewish thought and practice from that time will lead to a post-supersessionist reading of all New Testament texts as intra-Jewish documents representing various sects within Judaism.

For example, the author of Matthew contrasts the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of the Pharisees in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew refers to the true teaching of the Torah with the phrase *God said* or an equivalent, and he refers to the incorrect teachings with the phrase *Moses said* or *you have heard it said*. Possibly anticipating how second- and third-century church fathers could receive his testimony, Matthew presents Jesus’s Torah teaching as an alternative interpretation to the Pharisaic teachings, which are referred to as the *traditions of the fathers*. This makes Matthew’s Gospel an alternative tradition used by Christian Jews that provided a new way to observe Torah law. We will examine one such case in the regulations surrounding divorce in the Matthean community, showing how that community differentiated itself from the Pharisees and other Jewish sects of the time.


Ethnic and Religious Divisions

The *Ioudaioi*, or Jews, were certainly a distinct ethnic group throughout the Greco-Roman period. These Jews were particularly open to the conversion of non-Jews through their observance of Jewish laws and traditions. There were two types of conversion: full or partial. Partial conversion included those who worshiped the God of Israel without being circumcised and who abandoned the worship of their ancestral or pagan gods. Full conversion, seen in several ancient texts, referred to an exclusive transition from one people to another—that is, an ethnic transformation.

Although many refer to the idea of “Jewish Christianity,” there are many models for understanding how rabbinic Judaism (referring to mainstream Judaism post-second century AD) and Christianity became separate religions. It is possible to see the parting as final during the mid-third century. The separation might have been caused by the changing political realities of the late third and early fourth centuries, especially with the conversion of Constantine and the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

The distinction between Christians and Jews is assumed by early church fathers such as Ignatius and Polycarp and by other second-century writers who saw the primary division as being between believers

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34. The English language is limited in its ability to capture the meaning of ancient words. There is no one-to-one equivalent for *Ioudaios*, with scholarly oscillation between “Jew” and “Judean.” The latter preserves the ethnic connection between land and people. However, it often contains only a geographical connotation and not a truly ethnic one. Additionally, modern readers might not associate the term with the entire ancient meaning. The term “Jew” is associated with ethnicity, culture, and religion. However, it might be too tied to modernity to truly convey the ancient meaning. While there are several problematic associations with the term, “Jew” and “Jewish” are the most accessible terms to the widest audience and so are used in this paper.


36. For contrasting views on this matter, see Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2007); and Baron, Hicks-Keeton, and Thiessen, *Ways That Often Parted*.


and unbelievers in Christ, irrespective of their ethnic background. In this sense, Christians become a new race of people, separate from the Jews. The maintenance of Jewish ethnic cultural practices appeared incompatible with the mission of Christianity because some Christians associated Jews with only one territory, language, and ancestry, whereas Christians come from all nations.39

Some have looked to the differing legal practices of Christianity and Judaism as a means of understanding the parting: Christians outsourced legal systems to host countries while Rabbinic Jews preferred legal autonomy.40 Some question the separation model entirely, reading into ancient references to Christianismos (representative of various sects within Christianity) that highlight the problems with the term “Jewish Christianity.”41 Recent work continues to point to New Testament Christian beliefs and practices within Judaism. Isaac W. Oliver’s recent dissertation asserts this, using Matthew’s affirmation of Torah observance.42

With all these possible narratives, there is no clear reason for the complete separation between Jews and Christians during the first through third centuries.43 I argue that with the inherent theological diversity present in the Judaisms of the period, it is impossible to say that Christianity fell completely outside the bounds of Judaism.44 Plenty of Jews held Christian beliefs and practiced Christian rituals.

42. Oliver, Torah Praxis, 23–25.
43. Boccaccini, Middle Judaism, 15–25; James Parkes, The Foundations of Judaism and Christianity (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1960), x–xv. Some see the Fiscus Judaicus (a special tax levied on Jews in the Roman Empire) as a possible starting date for the separation of Christianity and Judaism, especially given that Christians did not have to pay this sum and were subsequently subject to persecution by the Romans and not subject to Jewish exemptions vis-à-vis the public cult. See Marius Heemstra, The Fiscus Judaicus and the Parting of the Ways (Tübingen, Ger.: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Others note that Matthew’s community likely did pay the Fiscus Judaicus. See Anthony J. Saldarini, Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 141–47.
44. For further detail, see Daniel Boyarin, Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).
Matthew and the Double Torah

Understanding the origin of the oral Torah is vital to understanding the contextual debate that Matthew is engaging with when discussing his opposition to Pharisaic traditions. That is, rather than rejecting the law of Moses as a whole, Matthew is opposed to internal Jewish developments regarding the interpretation of the Torah. Any polemical remarks in his Gospel should therefore be understood as condemnations of other Jewish sects and not of Judaism itself.

The notion of additional regulations to the Torah is a characteristic of the Pharisees, one of the more prominent sects in the first century AD.45 The additional material in the Pharisaic corpus (mainly concerning diet, tithing, festivals, agricultural regulations, purity, and marriage) has been referred to as the “double Torah” tradition, as it includes both a written and oral Torah. These added laws might have arisen from the “traditions from the fathers.”46 Josephus describes these traditions in his Antiquities and claims that this is why the Sadducees rejected the added traditions.47

The Pharisaic traditions were added to the laws of Moses that were followed by all Jews and are most easily referenced in Josephus’s Antiquities volumes 1–12. These additional laws could be interpreted as the written version of the oral Torah,48 but some scholars have found no evidence of this idea in Josephus’s text. Steve Mason writes, “He [Josephus] first characterizes the Pharisees’ special ordinances as ‘not written in the laws of Moses’ . . . , attributing them rather to a succession of fathers. . . . The laws of Moses are contrasted not with oral laws, but with laws ‘from a tradition of the fathers.’”49 This means that the added Pharisaical laws were not part of the universal Mosaic constitution.50

What does Josephus explicitly state about the laws of the Jews? The universal Jewish law is rooted in God’s perfection and his unique attributes (Against Apion 2.190). Images and idols are prohibited (2.191); Jews are commanded to only have one temple to their God. Every Jew is commanded to offer sacrifices (2.196). The text also mentions regulations surrounding marriage (2.198–201), the prohibition of abortion (2.202), and raising children in sobriety (2.204).51

Philo echoes Josephus in his presentation of laws (Preparation of the Gospel 8.7.2). On the sabbath, the Jews were to assemble together, sit down with each other, and listen to the laws to avoid ignorance about their contents. The priest or elder read the laws to the people and interpreted them until the evening, and the people leave the assembly with an understanding of how to practice the laws (8.7.12–13).52 The law is a wonder for the Jews, according to Philo, and should not be violated. The reflections of Philo add to the ways in which the universal law can be contrasted with added Pharisaic regulation, known as the traditions of the fathers in both the New Testament and Josephus.

Where, then, did the idea of two Torahs begin? Was there more than one way of interpreting the two Torahs? Some of Philo’s statements provide evidence of a double Torah, especially in the way he speaks of two divinely legislated laws, one of nature and one of Moses.53 The law of nature cannot be written, only seen through the lives of the sages, in contrast to the written law of Moses. Philo’s unwritten law of nature is different from the tannaitic, or oral Torah, but he shows how these ideas might have developed. The beginning of the double Torah might come from the intertestamental period. For example, Jubilees mentions Moses receiving two Torahs: one written by God on tablets, one written by Moses with words given to him by an angel (1:1, 4–27).

Josephus claims that these added laws might have arisen from the “traditions from the fathers” (an idea that has found scholarly support elsewhere54) and that this is why the Sadducees rejected the added traditions.55 There might have also been competing legal theories underlying the divergence between Pharisees and Sadducees, with the Sadducees

espousing an originalist view—that is, only holding to the written Torah as the basis for legal observance. Based on a reading of Jesus's criticisms of the Pharisees in Matthew's Gospel, Late Antiquity scholar Holger Zellentin portrays Matthew as a non-Sadducean originalist.⁵⁶

Jesus as Interpreter of the Torah

Almost as important to Second Temple Judaism as the Torah itself was how to interpret it. Matthew’s Gospel presents a thorough examination of Jesus's teachings that interpreted the common issues of the day,⁵⁷ such as divorce and Sabbath observance.⁵⁸ Several of Jesus's statements have sparked intense debate regarding his views on the authority of Jewish leaders and their teachings.⁵⁹ For example, in Matthew 5–6, Jesus compares the Mosaic law with his own higher law using the thesis-antithesis formula: “You have heard it said, . . . but I say to you.”⁶⁰ Some have seen these antitheses as analogous to the rabbinic idea of fences around the Torah—namely, extensions around the law to ensure that one does not break the written prohibitions.⁶¹

In Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is presented as the new Moses,⁶² a concept found in earlier Israelite literature, which includes the idea that the Mosaic prophecy could be applied to later legislators and teachers.⁶³ Jesus consistently reveals the true meaning

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of earlier Mosaic legislation. New Testament scholar Francois P. Viljoen reads the Gospel as a defense of the Matthean mission of Gentile conversion against synagogal exclusivism. Viljoen also claims that the debate around the proper interpretation of the Torah is centered on a proper understanding of Jesus himself as God’s representative and superior to the Temple.

Matthew Thiessen argues that the polemic in Matthew 5:17–20 is evidence of an internal debate within Judaism. He suggests that Matthew’s Judaism is not in favor of abolishing the law and is therefore not a threat to other Jews. This is because they are not like the Hellenizers, who brought about the Antiocchian Jewish persecution in Maccabean literature, or the law-abolishing Zealots, who some Jews believed brought about the Roman destruction of their Temple. In Matthew’s Gospel, Thiessen claims that the debate centers on Jesus’s role as the authentic new Moses who correctly interprets the Torah.

Hans Dieter Betz also sees Matthew 5:17–20 as expressing a counterattack to accusations against Jesus’s interpretation of the Torah. Additionally, the word, δικαιοσύνη (“righteousness”), which appears in Matthew 5:20, implies keeping the Torah’s commandments. For example, Moses condemned adultery (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), and Jesus reveals that the underlying forbidden action includes adulterous thoughts (Matt. 5:28). This is how Jesus reveals the true interpretation of the law and not its undoing.

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66. This runs in contrast to earlier readings that suggested Matthew was indicating a radical change in the meaning of the law. Jesus interpreted the law as a witness to his own coming, and that Matthew intends this interpretation, rather than to mean that the law is to be literally observed by Christians. See Robert Banks, Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition, Society of the New Testament Studies Monograph Series 28 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 226–42; John P. Meier, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vol. 4, Law and Love (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 41–124; Robert A. Guelich, The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), 134–74.
68. Betz, Sermon on the Mount, 172–73.
Divorce as a Case Study

It is within the context of Matthew’s use of the Torah overall as well as the potential disagreements between the protorabbinic and Matthean communities that we begin to examine the Jewish texts relating to divorce. The texts demonstrate Matthew’s adherence to a strict originalist stance that opposes the Pharisees’ use of oral material not found in the written text of Torah. Matthew’s Gospel does not condemn divorce as a practice within Judaism; rather it interprets a specific text within the Torah.

Divorce in the Torah and Rabbinic Traditions

The Torah prescribes a means of initiating divorce if the husband finds עֶרְוָה דָ֔בָ֔ר (ervat davar) in his wife (Deut. 24:1). This Hebrew term has been translated in several ways. Provided below are English translations of the Masoretic (Hebrew) and the LXX (Greek) texts.

A man takes a woman [into his household as his wife] and becomes her husband. She fails to please him because he finds something obnoxious about her, and he writes her a bill of divorcement, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house. (JPS)

Now if anyone takes a wife and lives with her, and it shall be, if she does not find favor before him because he found a shameful thing in her, then he shall write her a bill of divorce and shall give it into her hands and shall send her out of his house. (LXX)

Differences in translation also give rise to differences in interpretation. An early rabbinic approach to divorce is appropriately found in Gittin, a collection of oral tradition dated to around the second century AD that deals with all legal matters pertaining to divorce. The text records several opinions concerning the phrase “ervat davar” used in Deuteronomy 24:1.

The House of Shammai says: A man may not divorce his wife unless he finds about her matter of forbidden intercourse, as it is stated, “Because he has found some unseemly matter in her . . . ” (Deut. 24:1).

And the House of Hillel says: Even [if] she burned his dish, as it is stated: “Because he has found some unseemly matter in her.”


71. Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., A New English Translation of the Septuagint, and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 165, emphasis added.
Rabbi Akiva says: Even if he found another woman better looking than her, as it is stated, “And it comes to pass, if she finds no favor in his eyes.” (Deut. 24:1) (Giṭṭin 9:10, author’s translation)

The House of Shammai focuses on ervat, which is translated in the JSP edition as “something obnoxious.” However, the word has another meaning: a forbidden sexual act. The House of Shammai understands the text to mean essentially that the couple may separate if there is a case of adultery. The House of Hillel focuses on the word davar, “thing,” which opens the permissibility of divorce to many more situations beyond infidelity. The third position of Rabbi Akiva extends this even further to a complete no-fault divorce position. The rabbinic consensus of the time followed the House of Hillel and essentially allowed for no-fault divorce.

Therefore, within the protorabbinic community, it seems there was a wide range of views, ranging from a very restrictive view of divorce in the House of Shammai to a fully permissive Rabbi Akiva, representing the more lenient wing of the House of Hillel. There were probably other positions along the continuum. However, there is no rabbinic voice that outright condemns divorce and remarriage.

This is not the case in the Book of the Covenant of Damascus (also called the Damascus Document), a fragment found in one of the caves at Qumran, the city where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947. The Damascus Document mentions a cryptic reference to the prohibition of “taking two wives at the same time,” which has been read as a condemnation of polygamy but also as a prohibition of divorce and remarriage.72

They are caught by two (snares). By sexual sin (זנות), (namely) taking (21) two wives in their lives (קבהל), while the foundation of creation is “male and female he created them.” [Gen 1:27]. (5:1) And those who entered (Noah’s) ark went in two by two into the ark [Gen 7:9]. And of the prince it is written, (2) “Let him not multiply wives for himself”

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[Deut. 17:17] And David did not read the sealed book of the Torah which (3) was in the Ark (of the Covenant), for it was not opened in Israel since the day of the death of Eleazar (4) and Joshua and the elders. For (their successors) worshipped the Ashtoreth, and that which had been revealed was hidden (5) until Zadok arose, so David's works were accepted, with the exception of Uriah's blood, (6) and God forgave him for them.73

The Qumran texts base their view of marriage on texts in Genesis, where it says, “male and female created he them.” It is the same text used by Jesus to justify his position in Matthew. This expresses the essence of marriage as the physical union between man and woman that cannot be broken.74 A strict reading of the text would imply that only a widower would be allowed to be remarried at Qumran, implying a nearly absolute prohibition of divorce and remarriage.75 If this reading is correct, the Qumran sect’s view of marriage can be placed at the extreme prohibitive end of the spectrum, further prohibiting divorce beyond what the House of Shammi envisioned. The Gospel of Matthew’s approach to divorce should be read with this continuum of options in mind: it is in agreement with the Qumran community and opposes the School of Hillel, which most likely reflects a common Pharisaic understanding of the Torah.

Jesus’s Teachings on Divorce

The Matthean Jesus addresses concerns of divorce and remarriage while agreeing with contemporary sources on the topic, placing his discussion firmly within the context of Second Temple Judaism and reflecting the concerns and the legal debates of the day. There are two instances of this in Matthew’s Gospel. The first incident is found within the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus makes a simple proclamation while quoting the proof text from the latter portion of Deuteronomy 24:1, cited above:

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and

whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matt. 5:31–32 NRSVue)

In the text from Deuteronomy, Moses provided for a bill of divorce, or permission to divorce. Jesus gave the intended “true interpretation” of the Torah in the antitheses section of Matthew (Matt. 5:21–47). His rule was provided to protect women and not as a means of no-fault divorce. However, he restricted it to cases where there is a “de-fac to” divorce due to adultery.76 This is made clear by Matthew’s use of the Greek πορνεία (porneia) to refer to the ervat davar (“indecent act”) from the Hebrew Bible. This term is used in Greek literature to refer to prostitution,77 and the Syriac word has many of the same connotations throughout Aramaic literature.

Thus, Jesus concurs with both the House of Hillel and the House of Shamai that divorce is lawful, although undesirable in most cases, placing Jesus’s comments on divorce on the first-century Jewish and proto-rabbinic continuum. This also indicates that Matthew’s audience would have assumed that a marriage would be damaged by any form of sexual impropriety.

In Matthew’s second account of Jesus discussing divorce, another scriptural reference is added to the argument, this one using God as the authority:

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he cured them there. Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?” He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” (Matt. 19:1–9 NRSVue)

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French theologian Élian Cuvillier reads Jesus’s interpretation of the Torah here as Jesus proposing that the Pharisees oppose God’s original purpose because God did not envisage the separation of a man and a woman from marriage. This leads to the conclusion that “when they [the Pharisees] obey the commandments of the law they disobey the will of God.”

When we focus on this aspect of Jesus’s arguments, we see a contrast between what God says and what Moses says in Matthew’s presentation of the text. The Pharisees ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” and Jesus answers by stating what “the one who made them at the beginning” said regarding husband and wife, stringing together two portions of biblical text: “he made him, male and female he made them” (Gen. 1:27, LXX; compare Gen. 5:2) and “a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24, LXX). When Jesus adds his own interpretation to these divine statements, declaring that “what God has joined together, let no one separate,” this clarifies his position against no-fault divorce.

“God Said” and “Moses Commanded”

In his second discourse on divorce, Jesus uses the framing God said to explain what he thinks is the correct interpretation of the biblical law and the phrase Moses commanded to give the current Pharisaic interpretation. The use of the phrasing Moses commanded is also found in other places in Matthew’s Gospel. For example, when Jesus heals the leper in chapter 8, he does so after the leper asks Jesus to make him clean, if he is “willing.” Jesus agrees, heals him, and tells him to bring the offering to the Temple as “Moses commanded” (Matt. 8:4). Granted, in this case, it is God who is directly speaking in the referenced text, whereas in Deuteronomy, Moses presents a restatement of the Torah to the people of Israel. However, labelling this direction as Moses’s command might hint at Matthew’s context as post-Temple and at how Jesus now fulfills the role of the Temple for his Jewish community of Jesus-believers (see Lev. 14:1–32).

In another case, Matthew 22:23–33, Jesus is asked about marriage and the resurrection by a group of Sadducees, who relate a fictitious story about a family of seven brothers who fulfilled the commandment of levirate marriage. Here, Moses said is stated by the Sadducees, perhaps to

79. A levirate marriage describes a widow marrying the brother of her deceased husband. m. Yevamot; Josephus, Antiquities 4.254–256.
contrast their lack of belief in the resurrection with the Matthean community’s belief. The Sadducees ask who will be married to the wife in the resurrection and quote what Moses said in Deuteronomy: “And if brethren should live together, and one of them should die, and should not have seed, the wife of the deceased shall not marry out [of the family] to a man not related: her husband’s brother shall go in to her, and shall take her to himself for a wife, and shall dwell with her” (Deut. 25:5, LXX).

In answer, Jesus turns to the matter of interpretation, saying that the Sadducees do not understand scripture or the power of God. He says that in the resurrection, people will not “marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels” (Matt. 22:30), reflecting the belief commonly found in Second Temple literature that angels do not die. This was an idea found in rabbinic literature as well: “There is no eating, drinking, or reproduction nor negotiations, or jealousy or hostility or competition in the World-to-Come. Rather, the just ones sit and their crowns [are] upon their heads and they enjoy the splendor of the Shekhinah, as it says: And they beheld God, and they ate and drank.”

Jesus then quotes scripture again, using God said to prove the doctrine of the resurrection: “I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and Moses turned away his face, for he was afraid to gaze at God” (Ex. 3:6, LXX).

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Matthean formula you have heard it said is used to refer to the Torah. The phrase comes before Jesus’s reinterpretation of the law, usually to add to its intended meaning. The topics include murder (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17), adultery (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), oath taking (Lev. 19:12), a reinterpretation of “an eye for an eye” (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21), and an expansion on the idea of loving one’s neighbor. These citations of Moses’s teachings are then followed by Jesus’s true interpretation of the Torah.

Placed as they are during Second Temple Judaism, the Gospel of Matthew’s comments on divorce and Jesus’s teachings about it contrast with the no-fault position adopted by the Pharisees while still differing from the Qumran position on divorce. When these passages are read

80. b. Berakhot 17a; See also 1 Enoch 15:6; 51:4; Wisdom 5:5; 2 Baruch 51:10; Qumran, Cave 1, Hodayoth 3.21–23.
81. b. Berakhot 17a, author’s translation from the Munich manuscript:
together with Jesus’s other comments toward the Pharisees, we see the
tension between other Jewish Christian sects and the Matthean com-
community. In Matthew 23:3 (NRSVue), Jesus instructs, “Do whatever they
teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice
what they teach.” The passage can be read as ironic\(^83\) in the sense that
it is Jesus’s instruction to those believers found under bad leadership,
meaning that there might be members of Pharisaic groups with some
sympathy to Jesus-belief.\(^84\) These potential believers were instructed to
follow the Pharisaic regulations.\(^85\) This implies a temporary ceding of
authority to the Pharisees for Jesus-sympathetic believers.\(^86\)

Jesus’s reference to a “seat of Moses” (Matt. 23:2) just before this
instruction could mean a literal chair or a symbolic representation of
Pharisaic authority to interpret the law. There is some archeological evi-
dence that points towards a literal chair,\(^87\) but the lack of any additional
textual evidence might indicate that Matthew coined a metaphor\(^88\) to
show the legal authority of Jewish leaders at the time.\(^89\) Alternatively, it
could refer to the authority of the scribes to guard the scrolls of the Torah
and the permissibility to read the scrolls in public—that is, Jesus’s follow-
ers should go to the scribes to read the texts but follow Jesus’s interpreta-
tion in practice.\(^90\) Unfortunately, the reference is something that cannot
be fully understood due to a lack of context.\(^91\)

The evolving interpretation of Judean law by Pharisees and Matthean
Jesus-believers likely overlapped but still differed on key matters such
as ritual purity, tithing, table fellowship, and so forth.\(^92\) The use of the
phrase Moses said is often used to refer to the added oral Torah laws and
not to refer to the literal text of the Torah. The phrase you have heard it

\(^83\) Joachim Jeremias, New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus (New
\(^84\) Jonathan D. Stuckert, “Forgive Our Presumption: A Difficult Reading of Mat-

\(^85\) David E. Garland, The Intention of Matthew 23 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1979), 48–49.
\(^87\) Kenneth G. C. Newport, “A Note on the ‘Seat of Moses’ (Matthew 23:2),” Andrews
\(^89\) Newport, “Note on the ‘Seat of Moses’ (Matthew 23:2),” 53.
said was used to introduce a contrast with other understandings of the biblical text within various sects of Judaism and Jesus’s novel interpretation. All of this suggests that Matthew frames Jesus as an interpreter of the Torah, providing an alternative to the Pharisaic “traditions of the fathers” and highlighting how a post-supersessionist reading of the text can help to uncover the original context of the Gospel without later anachronistic interpretations that paint Jesus as opposed to Judaism.

Early Christian Responses to Matthew and the Torah

As mentioned earlier in this article, it is possible that Matthew anticipated the ways in which the church fathers would receive the Torah. Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’s teachings as the correct interpretation of the Torah provided an alternative to those church fathers who claimed the Torah was misinterpreted or corrupted. For example, Justin Martyr implies that the Jews had misinterpreted parts of the Torah and that the Jewish ritual laws were only given due to “hardness of [their] hearts.” Irenaeus of Lyons moves further in this direction and accuses the Jewish elders of adding and removing parts of the Torah, as well as supplementing it with their own interpretations. Perhaps most famously, Marcion believed that the Torah was composed by a lesser deity, the Demiurge, in contrast to Matthew’s Gospel, which was given by the higher god. Marcion’s rejection of the Torah was not due to his view that it was not divine or that it was necessarily incorrect, but rather due to a moral disagreement with the actions of the deity in its books. Tertullian’s counterarguments to Marcion read the laws of the Torah as existing in one of two categories, either temporal or eternal.

Additionally, the example of Ptolemy’s Letter to Flora, recorded by Epiphanius, interprets Matthew’s comments in Matthew 5:17 as distinguishing between the divine law and human additions, presumably here

the interpretation of the Pharisees. After quoting Matthew 15:4–9 and Isaiah 29:13, Ptolemy argues that

from these passages, then, it is plainly shown that that Law as a whole is divided into three. For in it we have found Moses’ own legislation, the legislation of the elders, and the legislation of God himself, . . . and this division of that Law as a whole which I have made here has made clear what in it is true. But the one portion, the Law of God himself, is again divided into some three parts. It is divided into the pure legislation with no admixture of evil, which is properly termed the “law,” which the Saviour came not to destroy but to fulfill.98

Ptolemy associates the divine law with the Ten Commandments and claims that the ritual laws were meant to be interpreted spiritually.99

Many scholars claim that Pseudo-Clementine literature100 and Didascalia Apostolorum functioned as forms of nonrabbinic Judaism, combining adherence to Jesus’s teachings with the Torah. As Karin Hedner Zetterholm summarizes, “I argue that their theologies as a whole, not just particular traditions, ideas or interpretive practices, would have made sense to Jews in antiquity as coherent Jewish visions of the history and calling of the people of Israel, provided we allow for expressions of Judaism other than the rabbinic one.”101 Zetterholm’s reflections confirm that Matthew’s version of Jesus-believing Judaism existed within a broad spectrum of viewpoints during the Second Temple period.

Matt Jackson-McCabe’s reading of the Jewish culture and way of life represented in the fourth-century Pseudo-Clementine literature shows how the notion of a united “Jewish Christianity” should be discarded. “Neither Christians nor Christianism [are] in the Homilies; there are only Judeans, the Nations, and those called ‘from the Nations’ to become proselytes of the Judeans and even Judeans themselves.”102 The Pseudo-Clementine literature imagines a “perpetual law” (nomon aionion) to which the Jews and the proselytes of the Nations adhere. In this view,


100. This refers to a body of pseudepigraphal literature attributed to Clement of Rome but generally not considered to have been authored by him.


observance of the law is a reflection of God’s will, and “worshiping God” is seen as a synonym to “Jew.”

For the Ebionite sect,\textsuperscript{103} Jesus was a prophet who provided a perfect guide to observing the law but did not supersede or even really add anything to the Mosaic legislation. The author of the Pseudo-Clementine literature only sees Ebionite conflict with the Pharisees for their reluctance to spread the message of the Torah to the Nations—the primary mission of Jesus’s prophecy. However, it is important to note that “The Pseudo-Clementine \textit{Homilies}. . . do not articulate a distinctly Jewish form of Christianity . . . but a Judaism seeking Gentile converts.”\textsuperscript{104} The term \textit{Ebionite} is even problematic because it was used by Christian heresiologists to discredit the Jewish followers of Jesus. The Pseudo-Clementine \textit{Homilies} also refer to the Matthean Jesus teaching on divorce:

> Whence it is impossible without His teaching to attain to saving truth, though one seek it for ever where the thing that is sought is not. But it was, and is, in the word of our Jesus. Accordingly, He, knowing the true things of the law, said to the Sadducees, asking on what account Moses permitted to marry seven, “Moses gave you commandments according to your hard-heartedness; for from the beginning it was not so: for He who created man at first, made him male and female.”\textsuperscript{105}

Pseudo-Clementine literature seems to rely on the same dichotomy between what God said and what Moses said, as in Matthew. The Pseudo-Clementine community maintained the Matthean interpretation and rationale for its opposition to divorce. We can conclude that the Pseudo-Clementine literature exists in a continuum with other Jewish Christian literature, each with varying approaches to the continued applicability of Torah observance.

Another document, the \textit{Didascalia Apostolorum}, distinguishes itself from Pseudo-Clementine literature in its approach to the Torah. Preserved in Syriac and Latin, this document was written by a Jewish \textit{episkopos} (“overseer”) in Syria, who sought to distinguish his community

\textsuperscript{103} The Ebionite sect was a Judaist Christian sect, known only through attributions in heresiological literature. They maintained belief in Jesus and the observance of Jewish law.

\textsuperscript{104} Jackson-McCabe, \textit{Jewish Christianity}, 165. The same reluctance should be held with regard to the name \textit{Nazarene}/\textit{Nazoraean} as well.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{The Clementine Homilies} 3:54, in Roberts and Donaldson, \textit{Ante-Nicene Fathers}, 8:248.
from paganism and rabbinic Judaism. Directed at Christians who were either converted pagans or Jews, among others, the Didascalia Apostolorum notes that the “lost” must be saved through faith in Christ. The “lost” include the pagan and the converted Jew who still observe the Torah law because the Torah itself is a mixture of the pure divine law in the Ten Commandments and material added by Jewish elders. According to this view, Jesus came to liberate Jews from the burden of the “second legislation,” or the additional restrictions that were seen as a punishment given by God for worshiping the Golden Calf. The true law, consisting only of the Ten Commandments, is still valid for Christians, and the author of the Didascalia exhorts Jewish believers to embrace their new Christian identity and cease the practice of the legal prohibitions of the second legislation.

Conclusion

Matthew presents Jesus as a Second Temple Jew who followed the precepts of the Torah according to the standards of that time. This paper analyzed Jesus’s teaching on divorce and how the language in the verses discussing divorce revealed Jesus’s adherence to the Torah. Jesus’s teachings position the Matthean community as possessing the true interpretation of the Torah and distinguishes them from both the Pharisaic schools of Hillel and Shammai and the Qumran community, making Matthew’s

112. Didascalia 26 (241.9–15/223.3–8, alt.).
interpretation a unique sectarian viewpoint. When the Matthean Jesus uses the phrases Moses said and you have heard it said in Matthew’s Gospel, he contrasts himself as the ideal Torah interpreter with various Jewish sects of the time. Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and responses to questions about divorce show the debates going on within Judaism. Jesus’s teachings in Matthew’s Gospel do not indicate supersessionist ideas: that the Jews could not be Christians, or that Christians were his new covenant people, or that Christians were to replace the Jews. Instead, the Matthean Jesus participated in debates within the Judaism of the time and did not separate himself or his followers from Judaism. Even at the time of Matthew’s Gospel, the followers of Jesus were solidly located within the confines of Judaism and not yet conceiving of themselves as a separate religion.

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She That Showed Him Mercy

Ellis William LeRoy Jr.

I am a physician—a retired one now. I loved my work. It was what I always wanted to do, and I loved the people I cared for. I enjoyed taking care of them in all places and under all circumstances. In the hospital, I took care of them in the intensive care unit, the medical wards, and the office. I especially loved caring for them in their homes when they could no longer come to the office, or when they lived in a nursing home. It was required in my work to provide a bill for my service. I wished I didn’t have to do that, but I had student loans to repay and a family to take care of, and so the bills went out. I often thought of the parable of the good Samaritan and how he had paid for the care of the man he rescued, who had been beaten and robbed and left on the roadside to die. No bill was ever sent. He paid for that man’s care himself.

As a senior medical resident in 1982 at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, I was assigned to the medical emergency room on the morning shift. This hospital is a sixteen-story-high county hospital in downtown Atlanta, Georgia, with twelve hundred beds and five different emergency rooms. During this rotation, I became friends with a Black gentleman who I will simply call our “newspaperman.” I was told by others that he was homeless. He came to the ER early each morning with his newspapers in one of those canvas newspaper bags you never see anymore, the kind we had as kids on paper routes. It had a strap that went over the shoulder. Printed on the side in large black letters were the words “Atlanta, Journal and Constitution.” He wore tidy old clothes and shoes and had a greying short beard, curly white hair, distinctive round wire-rimmed glasses, and a wool golf cap turned slightly to the side. His
smile was wide and charming, and his morning greeting was warm, friendly, and worth far more than the cost of the paper. After his usual "good morning," he would stop for a few moments and say, "Doc, how are you today?" We would chat for a minute or two about myself, and I would ask how he was doing. His answer was always upbeat and positive. I would buy a paper, although I rarely had time to read it. Most everyone in the various ERs would do the same. His earnings were meager, though enough to buy his daily food. We always wondered where he slept at night. Rumors were that it was a shack, but this didn’t seem to match with his clean but old clothes and friendly manner. After visiting our emergency room, he would go to the other emergency rooms in the hospital and finish selling his papers. This ritual was one of the nicest parts of a day that was otherwise filled with illness, suffering, and pain.

On one cold, rainy winter morning, nurses and secretaries were doing their usual triage work near the entrance of the emergency room. They would determine to which of the five ERs in the hospital the patients would be assigned and record their personal information and insurance. Suddenly, at about 8:00 a.m., one of the triage secretaries came running through the doors of the medical ER area calling for urgent help. There on the floor was our newspaperman, having a grand mal seizure. When he had collapsed, he had struck his head on the side of a chair, causing a laceration to his forehead that was bleeding profusely. Placing him on a stretcher, we held pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding and rushed him through the double doors and into the medical area where I was supervising that day. In order to stabilize him and get his seizure stopped, we had to urgently remove the newspaper bag, which had become soiled with blood. To facilitate this, we cut the strap. An oral airway was placed and oxygen started. Intravenous fluids and an anticonvulsant were given. The seizure stopped. Then the laceration on his forehead was cleaned, anesthetized, and sutured. He remained in a post-seizure unconscious state.

His soiled and bloodied clothes were removed and placed in a plastic bag under his stretcher. He was bathed and placed in a clean hospital gown and covered in warm blankets. Searching his clothes for his ID, we also found an empty bottle of seizure medication that he had probably intended to fill that day. X-rays of his head were normal, so we thought it was probably the lack of medication that had precipitated the seizure. He slept for over an hour and a half. His stretcher was placed next to the wall across from the nursing station for close observation. I also kept my eye on him from a distance as everyone in the ER did their work.
This story might have been routine except for one remarkable person—the triage secretary. She was a distinguished-looking middle-aged white woman dressed in hospital scrubs. She had someone cover her desk and came to be at his side. She discarded his newspapers, which were soiled with blood. Unbeknownst to us, she gathered his clothes and newspaper bag, took them to the hospital laundry, and told the workers there she needed them washed and dried quickly. Then she circulated envelopes to the various ERs of the hospital with a note explaining his illness and informing them that they would not be receiving newspapers that day.

The note said, “Our newspaper friend has had an accident this morning and his newspapers have been damaged. You will not receive one today. This is his daily income, and he needs this to buy food and medication. Please contribute what you would normally for the paper and place the money in the envelope. I will come by in an hour to collect the envelopes.”

Employees gave more than the cost of the paper that day. When the envelopes came back, she put the money in his clean newspaper bag, the strap of which she had sewn together by hand. She had also taken his empty prescription bottle of seizure medication to the pharmacy and paid for the refill herself. She picked up his clean clothes from the laundry and put them in the bag under his stretcher. He never knew that she had been there.

When he awakened, it seemed to him like nothing at all had happened. He couldn’t remember anything about the morning because of the seizure. He looked at his shoes, his clean clothes, his empty newspaper bag with money in the bottom, and a full bottle of seizure medication. It seemed like an otherwise normal morning to him. He was puzzled and went to get up, but a headache told him otherwise. We told him he had experienced a seizure and fallen and cut his head, but he was okay now. He finished getting up, dressed, slung his newspaper bag over his shoulder, and said, “Thanks for taking care of me. I’ll see y’all tomorrow.” I walked him out to the door. He walked right past the triage nurse as he left, unaware that this woman had done so much for him that day. She smiled at him, and he smiled back and said, “Have a good day.”

The Savior was once asked which commandment was the greatest or most important. We all know his answer: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength.” He then added that the second great commandment was like unto it: love “thy neighbour as thyself.” The questioner then asked, “And who is
“my neighbour?” The Savior then gave an insightful answer in a story that we all remember, the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25–37).

On this winter day in the emergency room at Grady Hospital, most of us just did our job that day, but that triage nurse gave our newspaperman what she knew he needed most—mercy.

We have two hearts, a literal one and a metaphorical one. So often we just see the obvious as we do our jobs. Sometimes, what is also needed is obscured and must be sensed by our metaphorical heart. What the newspaperman obviously needed was medical care, but this good triage secretary knew he needed more than that. He needed clean clothes, medication, and money to buy food. He needed to wake up each morning with hope and the ability to survive another day in a world that is often cold and not as understanding as it should be. She was his friend, and he was her neighbor. She showed him mercy. Sometimes there are angels among us. That cold, rainy winter morning in Atlanta, I met one of them.

This essay by Ellis William LeRoy Jr. received first place in the 2024 BYU Studies personal essay contest.
Lessons We Can Learn from the Mountain Meadows Massacre

Richard E. Turley Jr.

This address was given at the St. George Tabernacle on September 11, 2023—the 166th anniversary of the massacre—and again on March 14, 2024, at Brigham Young University.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre of 1857 has been called the worst incident in Utah, Latter-day Saint, and northwest Arkansas history. I don’t remember the first time I heard about it, but I coauthored my first publication about the atrocity more than thirty years ago, an article on the subject published in a multivolume encyclopedia set issued by Macmillan Publishing Company of New York in 1992.

Over the ensuing decades, I have coauthored two narrative volumes about the massacre, Massacre at Mountain Meadows and Vengeance Is Mine, as well as three documentary volumes, two containing legal papers and the other the documents that historian Juanita Brooks tried to get for her 1950 book on the massacre but could not. In addition,
I have helped produce the mountainmeadowsmassacre.org website containing thousands of pages of useful information on the atrocity.

So what have I learned from studying this terrible topic for much of my professional life as a historian? Today, I would like to mention seven lessons: (1) avoid fanaticism, (2) don’t overreact to rumors, (3) don’t give in to peer pressure, (4) find safety in councils, (5) don’t try to cover up wrongdoing, (6) deal with hard topics honestly, and (7) love your enemies.

Avoid Fanaticism

Lesson number one: the Mountain Meadows Massacre teaches us to avoid fanaticism. In unsettled times, it is easy for people to become upset, to get emotional, and to gravitate toward attitudes and behaviors that at calmer times would be seen as fanatical. Perhaps that is why mass killings carried out by groups of individuals tend to occur in times of war or other major disruptions. Studying the massacre teaches us that in unsettled times, we should maintain our poise and not be caught up in what people in 1857 called “the spirit of the times.”

Had the citizens of southern Utah remained calm and avoided fanaticism, the massacre would not have occurred.

The same lesson applies to us if we hold leadership positions. In retrospect, we can see that the strong rhetoric and military resistance strategies of the times had negative unintended consequences. When people look to us for leadership, we need to recognize that when we sneeze, people might catch pneumonia.

Wilford Woodruff, a Latter-day Saint Apostle at the time and later Church President, reflected on the strong language of the so-called Reformation of 1855–57 that provided the background for the massacre. He concluded it had gone too far, even among leaders. As Thomas Alexander points out in an article on Wilford Woodruff and the Reformation, “Woodruff . . . exhorted priesthood leaders to deal with the Saints in ‘the spirit of God.’ They did not, he said, need to ‘knock the people in the Head in order to wake them.’”

As Barbara Jones Brown and I note in Vengeance


5. Turley and Brown, Vengeance Is Mine, 50, 77, 139.
Lessons from the Mountain Meadows Massacre

Is Mine, Wilford Woodruff told John Hawley “he was satisfied that some of our brethren had gone farther with this reformation and vengeance than they ought.”

This lesson is relevant to us today. We live in unsettled times, made more emotional by the rhetoric used in cable television broadcasts, partisan political advertisements, and unbridled social media. The result is a polarization of society. In calm times, the majority of people tend to gravitate toward the moderate middle in their attitudes and behaviors. Portrayed on a graph, the distribution would resemble the familiar bell curve, with most people in the middle half and only a small portion at the outer fringes.

During unsettled times, more and more people gravitate to the fringes, setting up battles between those on opposite ends of the spectrum. Surveys conducted in recent years have shown that an increasing number of people want to battle those on the opposite side of this spectrum, even to the point of physical violence. That is the consequence of polarizing fanaticism. The Mountain Meadows Massacre and its context teach us to avoid it.

Don’t Overreact to Rumors

Lesson number two: don’t overreact to rumors. In unsettled times, rumors abound. Some of these rumors may be true, and some may not be. Reacting immediately to a rumor without waiting a sufficient time to determine its truth or falsity may cause us to say or do things we would later regret. Historians of violence point out that mass murders often happen in reaction to false rumors that motivate people to do what under ordinary circumstances they would not.

False rumors have led to extralegal violence again and again throughout history. Often these crimes are followed by additional false rumors that people grasp in a vain effort to justify their wrongful violence. This was certainly the case with the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Rumors generated before and after the crime have been tenaciously believed to

this day to justify the evil that was the massacre, to wrongly condone the crime, or to try to rehabilitate the reputation of people who participated in it.

No one alive today is responsible for the massacre. But we are all responsible for how we deal with it. If we seek to deny, condone, or justify what is, in reality, entirely unjustifiable, we become guilty of perpetuating a historical cover-up and are party to accepting the murder of many innocent people. We should not overreact to rumors or continue to hold on to them after time—the great tester—has proved them to be false.

As my coauthors and I wrote in *Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, “The emigrants did not deserve what eventually happened to them at Mountain Meadows. The massacre was not inevitable. No easy solution for the perpetrators is possible. Their later posturing and rationalization could never overcome one irrefutable fact: All the purported wrongs of the emigrants—even if true—did not justify the killing of a single person. The best that could be argued was that during a time of uncertainty and possible war, some of the [Latter-day Saints], like other men and women throughout history, did not match their behavior with their ideals.”

**Don’t Give In to Peer Pressure**

Lesson number three: don’t give in to peer pressure. Mass killings carried out by groups of people, as in the Mountain Meadows Massacre, are the result of a mob mentality generated by fanaticism. That mob mentality is extremely contagious and can be hard to resist. The literature on the history of violence explains what happens when the mob mentality kicks in. Someone suggests that members of a group do something terribly wrong. There may be several people in the group who don’t think the idea is a good one. But they look around and don’t see anyone objecting. If no one’s objecting, they might rationalize, then maybe this bad idea really is a good one after all.

Resisting peer pressure by speaking up against bad ideas is one way to help stop extralegal violence. If just one person were to speak up and express disagreement, the others who disagree but did not have the courage to object might then speak up also. Sadly, in the case of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, none of the dozens of men on the ground at the time appears to have spoken up against the deadly plan.

Does this lesson apply today? Of course it does. With the polarization of society we see all around us, the efforts of many people to dehumanize or demonize those who don’t agree with them personally, and an increased willingness reflected in polls to use physical violence against others, there are many opportunities for people to speak up and recommend patience, tolerance, kindness, and civility.

There Is Safety in Councils

Lesson number four: there is safety in councils. In the Bible, the book of Proverbs, chapter 11, verse 14, we read that “in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” The history of the Mountain Meadows Massacre shows us councils making the right decisions and upset individuals making the wrong ones.

On Saturday, September 5, 1857, when Isaac Haight tasked John D. Lee to make the initial attack on the emigrant train, “Lee said he asked Haight if it wouldn’t ’be well to hold a council of the brethren before making a move.’ Haight replied, ‘We can’t now delay for a council of the brethren.’ He [promised that he] would bring the matter before a council [the next day] on Sunday.” With that, he sent Lee off to make the initial attack on the emigrants.11

When Haight convened a council the next day as promised, rumors about the emigrants’ supposed ill behavior were used by what Elias Morris called “the more radical members present” to justify “harsh measures,” including an attack on the train.12 Remember lesson one about avoiding fanaticism, lesson two about not overreacting to rumors, and lesson three about not giving in to peer pressure but instead speaking out against violence. One of the men in the Cedar City council, Laban Morrill, had the courage to speak up against the fanaticism.

“‘Do not our principles of right teach us to return good for evil and do good to those who despitefully use us?’ he later remembered countering [quoting Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:44)].” Morrill objected to the plan to attack the emigrants. When he spoke up, others in the council joined him in opposing the fanatical attitudes. “The debate continued until Morrill finally got the men to agree ‘that all should keep still [and] quiet and that there should be a dispatch to Governor Young to know what would be the best course.’”13

Brigham Young responded with a letter directing that the settlers “not meddle” with the emigrants. “There are no other trains going south that I know of,” Young replied. “If those who are there will leave let them go in peace. While we should be alert, on hand and always ready[,] we should also possess ourselves in patience.”

Responding to his council’s decision, and before writing to Brigham Young, Haight sent two men out to call off John D. Lee. Sadly, Lee led an attack on the wagon train early Monday morning before the couriers reached him, and emigrants died in that initial attack. When the couriers discovered they had not reached Lee in time, they shot at two emigrants who had gone back to collect stray cattle and were unaware of the attack. One died, and the other rushed forward to join his besieged wagon train members. Had Haight sought advice from his council in Cedar City before dispatching Lee to attack the train, the massacre would never have occurred.

The Mountain Meadows Massacre also furnishes us another example of when the advice of a council was better than the decisions of excited individuals. Late Wednesday evening, September 9, 1857, Isaac Haight and Elias Morris reached the Parowan home of William Dame, their military superior. Dame called a midnight council to discuss the recent attack by Lee and others on the emigrant train. After some discussion, it was proposed “that a company should be sent out from Parowan . . . to . . . gather up the stock of the company, and let them continue their journey in peace.” The council agreed.

This was good counsel and should have been followed. “Haight later admitted to Barton, ‘I would give a world if I had it, if we had abided by the deci[s]ion of the council.’” But he did not. And why not?

Don’t Try to Cover Up Wrongdoing

That brings us to lesson number five: don’t try to cover up wrongdoing with more wrongdoing. In some ways, the Mountain Meadows Massacre was a cover-up from beginning to end. Had Haight and the others followed the advice of the Parowan council, the casualties would have been limited to those that had already occurred. But Haight had done wrong in dispatching Lee to make the attack, and Lee and those with him had done wrong in inflicting casualties on the innocent emigrants. Haight wanted to cover up all those wrongs.

Joseph Smith, the founding leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, sent a letter in March 1839 while incarcerated in Liberty, Missouri. Since 1876, portions of the letter have been part of Latter-day Saint scripture as Doctrine and Covenants sections 121 to 123. Referring, I believe, to the Danite excesses of the previous year, Joseph Smith lamented in the letter, “When we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; [and] the Spirit of the Lord is grieved” (D&C 121:37).

Rather than abide by the decision of the Parowan council, Haight pulled Dame aside afterward and rationalized that they should instead wipe out the rest of the company to keep them from going to California and reporting the crime. Dame acceded to Haight’s request and authorized him to muster out members of the local territorial militia, send them to the Mountain Meadows, and wipe out the survivors of the initial attacks. They did so, killing all but seventeen children considered too young to tell the tale.

In other words, those who did wrong wanted to cover their wrongdoing with more wrongdoing. Had it not been for that, the final bloodbath on September 11, 1857, would never have occurred.

Deal with Hard Topics Honestly

Lesson number six: deal with hard topics honestly. As much as we wish the Mountain Meadows Massacre had never happened, it did. When I first began studying the topic, it was taboo in many corners of southern Utah. When people did talk with me about it, they sometimes did so in hushed tones after looking both ways first to be sure they were not being overheard.

But remember this: the truth will out. Efforts to cover up wrongdoing are wrong themselves. We cannot deny the massacre happened. We cannot condone it because it is unjustifiable. My coauthors and I have heard and carefully investigated all the arguments used over the years to justify the killing, and none of them comes close to excusing it.

Just one example. John D. Lee and others claimed that the massacred emigrants had deliberately poisoned a spring, killing cattle, local settlers, and Native people. Because this was a theory we could test using scientific means, my colleagues and I gathered all the descriptions of the

so-called poisoning we could find and presented them as a case study to a panel of distinguished physicians. Their conclusion: the symptoms were most likely caused by naturally occurring anthrax tracked along the trail by the cattle companies of 1857 and previous years. No one poisoned anyone. Those who died or became sick did so because of natural causes, not anyone’s ill intent.

We even went so far as to dig up a body. We knew that fourteen-year-old Proctor Robison, a local settler, had died after skinning one of the cattle that died, and that his death was attributed to emigrant poison. Proctor touched a sore on his nose, which then swelled up until he was unrecognizable before his horrible death. Was that poisoning? We decided to test our theory about anthrax, which can remain in the soil for hundreds of years. We knew where Proctor was buried in the Fillmore cemetery. I had a friend who was expert in doing the legal work to exhume bodies, and we filed the necessary papers and got a laboratory in Arizona to examine samples once Proctor was dug up.

But we needed the permission of the Robison family since Proctor did not live long enough to have his own descendants. One of the leaders of the Robison family in Utah was longtime Brigham Young University track coach Clarence Robison, a former Olympian. Clarence had passed away, but I phoned his widow, my cousin Monita Turley Robison, and got the family’s permission. We did not find anthrax spores, but Proctor’s death fits perfectly with the symptoms of cutaneous anthrax.¹⁸

Love Your Enemies

Lesson number seven: love your enemies. This is a lesson in not demonizing others, even if you think they have wronged you.

To return to the verse from Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount referenced by Laban Morrill, “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44).

In 1859, U.S. Army soldiers gathered up the scattered bones of the Mountain Meadows Massacre victims and buried them under a cairn topped by a cedar cross. On that cross, they carved words from the New Testament: “Vengeance is mine: I will repay saith the Lord.”

Let me read this passage in its New Testament context: “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: . . . Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19–21).

In this polarized age in which we live—an age in which we are tempted toward fanaticism, to brand others in ways that dehumanize, vilify, or demonize them, and to attack them verbally or physically—the Mountain Meadows Massacre teaches us to follow the Savior’s admonition to love people instead.

Conclusion

No one alive today is responsible for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. But we are all responsible for how we deal with it, including learning from the lessons it teaches. Let us never deny or condone the massacre or try to excuse those who took part. Rather, let us resolve to (1) avoid fanaticism, (2) not overreact to rumors, (3) not give in to peer pressure, (4) find safety in councils, (5) not try to cover up wrongdoing, (6) deal with hard topics honestly, and (7) love anyone we might be tempted to view as an enemy.

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Black Sheep

You don’t want to come to our party, you say. No one here knows you even though we all grew up together in the same home. No one understands how being with us feels

like ice melting under your collar—
like trying to hold back off-color laughter in a funeral room—
like shifting on a pristine chair in grease-stained coveralls.

You think we are whole without you, a complete panel of magistrates already in possession of a verdict. But I am not

judging you—I am judging

the lay of the land. I am plumbing the valleys and chasms between us, plotting how to hurl myself across and lay hold before you run.

— Merrijane Rice

This poem was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.
Ten Views on the Falling Away

John Gee

Latter-day Saints have long known about the falling away or Apostasy of Christianity from the Church established by Jesus Christ. The two terms both come from 2 Thessalonians 2:3. Falling away is the expression used by the King James translators to render the Greek word apostasia, which came into English as a loan word: apostasy. The terms are thus synonyms for the same thing. The term apostasia1 was a later form of the classical term apostasis2 and a more intense form of the term stasis,3 all of which mean “dissension, “revolt,” or “rebellion.” The Septuagint4 uses both the terms apostasia and apostasis to translate the Hebrew word maʿal as “disloyalty, infidelity, fraud (KJV: falsehood, grievously, sore, transgression, trespass),”5 mered as “rebellion (KJV: rebellion),”6 beliyyaʿal as “uselessness, wickedness (KJV: Belial, evil, naughty, ungodly, wicked),”7 and mešûbāḥ as “falling away, apostasy (KJV: backsliding, turning away).”8

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2. Liddell and others, Greek-English Lexicon, 218–19.
3. Liddell and others, Greek-English Lexicon, 1634.
We will look at some new and old views of the Apostasy or falling away and what they tell us about the subject. While we could examine many different facets of the falling away, we will generally limit ourselves to looking at whether there was an Apostasy and the issue of divine authority in the early Christian Church.

By way of background, it is worth noting how Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant commitments to ecclesiology color different views of the topic. Catholics and Orthodox believe that the Church was established by Jesus and that the ecclesiastical hierarchy goes back to the Apostles, if not to Jesus. This is necessary to establish the validity of the offices and authority of each denomination. Thus, Catholics assert that “the first Christian communities immediately established their ecclesiastical offices, which were considered necessary for guaranteeing the operation and development of the church” and included bishops, elders (or presbyters), and deacons.9 Protestants reject the authority of the Catholic and Orthodox churches and, rather than a tradition of authority stretching back to the Apostles, posit a priesthood of all believers. They see the organization and hierarchy of the Catholic Church as a sign of corruption and claim that there were no rigid offices and authority at an early stage of Christianity and that the offices were a sign of corruption. This was articulated by Max Weber, who hypothesized that earlier charismatic movements (Protestants) were replaced by later hierarchies (Catholics).

This yields two competing interpretations and understandings of the sources. As Karl Popper notes,

In history . . . the facts at our disposal are often severely limited and cannot be repeated or implemented at our will. And they have been collected in accordance with a preconceived point of view; the so-called ‘sources’ of history record only such facts as appeared sufficiently interesting to record, so that the sources will often contain only such facts as fit in with preconceived theory. . . . There will always be a number of other (and perhaps incompatible) interpretations that agree with the same records, and that we can rarely obtain new data able to serve as do crucial experiments in physics. . . . then we shall give up the naïve belief that any definite set of historical records can ever be interpreted in one way only.10

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The preserved record may not be sufficient to exclude either the Catholic or the Protestant view of the sources. Crucially, it may not be sufficient to exclude the Latter-day Saint view of the sources either.

**View 1: The Church Position**

The basic teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are generally well-known. We invite anyone interested to learn about them, and we provide tens of thousands of missionary volunteers who are eager and willing to teach anyone who wants to know about them. Missionaries teach standardized lessons whose content has been approved by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. They are thus basic teachings of the Church.

The first missionary lesson discusses the Apostasy of the early Christian Church and specifically teaches the following:

After the Apostles were killed, there was a widespread falling away from the gospel and Church of Jesus Christ. This falling away is sometimes called the Great Apostasy. Because of it, God withdrew priesthood authority from the earth. This loss included the authority needed to direct the Church. As a result, the Church that Jesus had established was no longer on the earth.

During this time, people changed many gospel teachings. Much of the knowledge about the true nature of Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost was distorted or lost. People also changed priesthood ordinances, such as baptism. . . .

Prophets and apostles had foretold the falling away (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1–3). They had also foretold that the gospel and Church of Jesus Christ would be restored to the earth (see Acts 3:20–21). If there had not been a falling away, a restoration would not have been needed.  

Previous editions of the missionary lessons followed the same basic lines: “With the death of the Apostles, priesthood keys and the presiding priesthood authority were taken from the earth. . . . Important parts of the doctrine of faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost became distorted or forgotten. . . . This apostasy eventually led to the emergence of many churches. . . . The Savior’s Apostles foretold this universal apostasy. They also foretold that

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the gospel of Jesus Christ and His Church would be restored once more upon the earth.”

In the missionary lesson, the Apostasy explains the need for a Restoration of the Church. This began with the First Vision, where God and Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith and “the Savior told Joseph not to join any of the churches, for they ‘were all wrong’ and ‘all their creeds were an abomination’ (Joseph Smith—History 1:19). Even though many good people believed in Christ and tried to understand and teach His gospel, they did not have the fulness of truth or the priesthood authority to baptize and perform other saving ordinances.” Through Joseph Smith, “the fulness of the gospel was restored to the earth.” Those who sincerely seek can “know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God and that the true Church has been restored to the earth.”

In their instructions, missionaries are specifically asked to “help people understand that a universal apostasy occurred following the death of Jesus Christ and His Apostles. If there had been no apostasy, there would have been no need of a Restoration.” This teaching is not just confined to the missionary lessons.

In the third missionary lesson, missionaries teach, “The priesthood authority . . . , which was lost centuries ago through the death of the Savior’s Apostles, was restored through angelic administration to a modern prophet, Joseph Smith. . . . This authority makes The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints different from any other religion in the world. By the Lord’s own declaration, it is ‘the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth’ (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30).”

In a letter written by Joseph Smith now included in the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith discusses the idea of gospel dispensations as dispensations of the power and authority of the priesthood to mortals: “Nevertheless, in all ages of the world, whenever the Lord has given a dispensation of the priesthood to any man by actual revelation, or any set of men, this power has always been given” (D&C 128:9). Latter-day Saints accordingly hold a view of God dispensing the gospel and priesthood

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authority to mortals from time to time and of it being taken away from time to time. The periods before a dispensation of the gospel are times of falling away or apostasy. This concept is key to understanding any concept of human history among Latter-day Saints.

This was recently affirmed by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve in “The Restoration of the Fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A Bicentennial Proclamation to the World.” As they stated,

Following the death of the original Apostles, Christ’s New Testament Church was lost from the earth. . . . We affirm that under the direction of the Father and the Son, heavenly messengers came to instruct Joseph [Smith] and re-establish the Church of Jesus Christ. The resurrected John the Baptist restored the authority to baptize by immersion for the remission of sins. Three of the original twelve Apostles—Peter, James, and John—restored the apostleship and keys of priesthood authority. Others came as well, including Elijah, who restored the authority to join families together forever in eternal relationships that transcend death. . . .

We declare that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, organized on April 6, 1830, is Christ’s New Testament Church restored. This Church is anchored in the perfect life of its chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ, and in His infinite Atonement and literal Resurrection. Jesus Christ has once again called Apostles and has given them priesthood authority.17

Recent conference addresses reinforce these teachings:

In Old Testament history, we read of successive periods when the children of Israel honored their covenant with Jehovah and worshipped Him and other times when they ignored that covenant and worshipped idols or Baalim. The reign of Ahab was one of the periods of apostasy in the northern kingdom of Israel.18

The Savior taught His doctrine in the meridian of time, and His Apostles struggled mightily to preserve it against a barrage of false tradition and philosophy. New Testament Epistles cite numerous incidents demonstrating that serious and widespread apostasy was already under way during the Apostles’ ministry.19

We know there was a falling away, or an apostasy, necessitating the Restoration of His true and complete Church in our time.  

We know the Apostasy occurred in part because the philosophies of men were elevated over Christ’s basic, essential doctrine. Instead of the simplicity of the Savior’s message being taught, many plain and precious truths were changed or lost. In fact, Christianity adopted some Greek philosophical traditions to reconcile people’s beliefs with their existing culture.

Through centuries of apostasy and spiritual confusion, the deeper meaning of what Christ did in Gethsemane and on Golgotha became lost or corrupted.

Following the apostasy and disintegration of the Church He had organized while on the earth, the Lord reestablished the Church of Jesus Christ once again through the Prophet Joseph Smith. The ancient purpose remains: that is, to preach the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ and administer the ordinances of salvation—in other words, to bring people to Christ.

President Russell M. Nelson has also taught about the Apostasy:

Prior to His Crucifixion, the Lord Jesus Christ had established His Church. It included apostles, prophets, seventies, teachers, and so forth. And the Master sent His disciples into the world to preach His gospel. After a time the Church as established by the Lord fell into spiritual decay. His teachings were altered; His ordinances were changed. The Great Apostasy came as had been foretold by Paul, who knew that the Lord would not come again “except there come a falling away first.”

This Great Apostasy followed the pattern that had ended each previous dispensation.

For the whole of its existence, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been committed to this view of history. It is the reason that Church leaders and members speak of it as the “restored Church.”

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25. See, for example, some general conference usage of some Apostles since 2010: David A. Bednar, “But We Heeded Them Not,” *Liahona* 46, no. 5 (May 2022): 15; Gary E.
View 2: Joseph Smith

The basic position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was articulated by Joseph Smith in January 1833 in a letter addressed to Noah Saxton, the editor of *The American Revivalist, and Rochester Observer*:

The time has at last arrived when the Gods of Abraham of Isaac and of Jacob has set his hand again the second time to recover the remnants of his people which have been left from Assyria, and from Egypt and from Pathros &c. and from the Islands of the sea and with them to bring in the fulness of the Gentiles and establish that covenant with them which was promised when their sins should be taken away. see Romans 11, 25, 26, & 27 and also Jeremiah 31, 31, 32, & 33. This covenant has never been established with the house of Isreal nor with th[e] house of Judah for it requires two parties to make a covenant and those two parties must be agreed or no covenant can be made. Christ in the days of his flesh proposed to make a covenant with them but they rejected him and his proposals and in consequence thereof they were broken off and no covenant was made with them at that time but their unbelief has not rendered the promise of God of none effect; no, for there was another day limited in David which was the day of his power and then his people Isreal, should be a willing people and he would write his laws in their hearts and print them in their thoughts their sins and their eniquities he would remember no more, Thus after this chosen family had rejected Christ and his proposals the heralds of salvation said to them. “lo we turn to the gentiles,” and the gentiles received the covenant and were grafted in from whence the chosen family were broken off but the Gentiles have not continued in the goodness of God but have departed from the faith that was once delivered to the saints and have broken the everlasting covenant in which their fathers were established see Isaiah 24th 5th. and have become high minded and have not feared therefore but few of them will be gathered with the chosen

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family Has not the pride highmindedness and unbelief of the Gentiles provoked the holy one of Israel to withdraw his holy spirit from them and send forth his Judgments to scourge them for their wickedness; this is certainly the case, Christ said to his disciples Mark 16, 17 & 18 that these signs should follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out Devils they shall speak with new tongues they shall take up serpents and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover, and also in connection with this read 1 Corinthians 12 Chapt, By the foregoing testimonies or through the glass of the foregoing testimonies 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."26

Note particularly what Joseph Smith said the remedy for this situation should be:

And now what remains to be done under circumstances like these, I will proceed to tell you what the Lord requires of all people high and Low, rich and poor, male and female, ministers & people professors of religion, and nonprofessors in order that they may enjoy the holy spirit of God to a fulness, and escape the Judgments of God which are almost ready to burst upon the nations of the earth— Repent of all your sins and be baptized in water for the remission of them, in the name of the father, and of the son, and of the Holy Ghost, and receive the ordinance of the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power, that ye may receive the holy spirit of God, and this according to the holy scriptures, and of the Book of Mormon; and the only way that man can enter into the Celestial kingdom. These are the requisitions of the new Covenant or first principles of the Gospel of Christ.27

Not three years from the organization of the Church and Joseph Smith is talking about an “apostacy . . . from the Apostolic platform.” This Apostasy consists of “departing from the faith” and “[breaking] the everlasting covenant.” The solution is for individuals to follow “the requisitions [sic] of the new Covenant or first principles . . . of the Gospel of Christ” which are to “repent of all your sins and be baptized in water for the remission of them, in the name of the father, and of the son,
and of the Holy Ghost, and receive the ordinance of the laying on of the hands of him who is ordained and sealed unto this power, that ye may receive the holy spirit of God.”

This outline of an argument, that the gospel was changed, the covenants were broken, and the authority was lost, and thus it was necessary to restore them to the earth, has been the teaching of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for two centuries.

This 1833 letter is not, however, the earliest mention of the Apostasy in the writings of Joseph Smith. That distinction belongs to his 1832 history: “By searching the scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.”

A quarter of a century later, Orson Pratt preached the same theme:

If it had not been for the great apostacy after the apostles had preached the gospel, during which the last vestige of the Church of Jesus Christ was rooted out of the earth by the wickedness of the children of men; if it had not been that the priesthood was taken from the earth and the power to preach the everlasting gospel in its fullness had ceased among the nations, I do not know that there would have been any necessity whatever for another revelation of the gospel, and its gifts, blessings and powers, and the priesthood and apostleship in the latter days. But I think it can be proved beyond the power of controversy or reasonable contradiction that the gospel of the Son of God, as it was preached in the days of the apostles, has been entirely rooted out from among men. I do not mean the letter of it; we have that in part; but I mean the power to preach it and to administer its ordinances; the power to build up the church and kingdom of God; the power to speak in the name of the Lord; the power which characterized the ancient servants of the living God; the power which rested on the inspired apostles by which they could call upon God and receive revelation from heaven. That power has been rooted out from the earth. A form has been left it is true,—in fact a great many forms; but what is the form without the power? What, for instance, is the use of preaching baptism for the remission of sins to the human family, if there is no person authorized and ordained from God to administer baptism to those who believe and repent? None at
all. People might go forth and preach baptism from age to age and from generation to generation, but who could be baptized, or what would be the use of it, unless there were authority to administer the ordinance?29

Pratt did not want to end on a negative note: “But we do not wish to dwell on the subject of this great apostacy and the loss of authority of which we have been speaking. We desire to dwell upon a more pleasing subject, namely, the restoration of authority and power to minister the word, and the ordinances, and the Spirit of the gospel, to the children of men.”30 At the time that Pratt gave this sermon, B. H. Roberts, one of the more articulate authorities on the subject, was only a year old, and another, James E. Talmage, was yet to be born.

While references to early Church leaders could be multiplied, it is useful to show that the general argument about the Apostasy goes back to the beginning of the Church. The argument continues to be used in the Church. Central to these claims are that the authority to perform ordinances, such as baptism and the bestowal of the Holy Ghost, had been lost after the death of the Apostles. The restoration of that authority had been key to Joseph Smith’s understanding of the Restoration of the Church. In his 1832 history, he outlined its projected contents, and even if he never got around to writing the narrative, he listed as important: “Thirdly the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of—Aangels to administer the letter of the Law <Gospel—> <—the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—> and in <the> ordinencs, fourthly a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordinence from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God confered upon him and the continuation of the blessings of God to him &c—.”31

The Church of Jesus Christ is a covenant organization. One becomes a member of the Church by entering into a covenant with God through participating in an ordinance: baptism. Covenants are agreements between God and humans. God dictates the terms of the covenant; we agree to them. In order for the covenant to be valid, it must be entered by both parties (or their representatives, their agents). In order for someone to represent God, God has to designate them as his representative

and grant them that authority. It is not something that we choose for ourselves. Because the Church of Jesus Christ is a covenant organization, both revelation (means by which God can communicate his will) and authority are prerequisites. Thus, loss of either revelation or divine authority will cause the Church to lose its legitimacy in God’s eyes.

In the multiple accounts of the First Vision, we are introduced to the same arguments that Joseph Smith used in his 1833 letter to Noah Saxton. In his 1838 account, Joseph Smith said, “My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right” (JS–H 1:18). In response, he was told “that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong” (JS–H 1:19).

Three facets of this declaration of the Apostasy from the First Vision accounts stand out:

(1) It was universal. “The world lieth in sin and at this time and none doeth good no not one” (1832). 32 “They were all wrong” (1838). 33 “None of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom” (1842). 34

(2) The teachings were corrupt. “They have turned aside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments[.] [T]hey draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me” (1832). 35 “All their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt, that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness but they deny the power thereof’” (1838). 36 “All religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines” (1842). 37

(3) The source of all these statements was Jesus Christ. “I saw the Lord and he spake unto me” (1832). 38 “The Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight” (JS–H 1:19). “They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines” (1842). 39

34. “‘Church History,’ 1 March 1842,” in Davidson and others, Histories, Volume 1, 494; Jessee, “Earliest Documented Accounts,” 18.
While our accounts of the First Vision do not mention authority to administer covenants, this was also emphasized by heavenly messengers. Joseph Smith wrote his 1832 account in part to describe “the reception of the holy Priesthood by the ministring of—Aangels to administer the letter of the Law <Gospel—> ←the Law and commandments as they were given unto him—> and in <the> ordinencs, [as well as] a confirmation and reception of the high Priesthood after the holy order of the son of the living God power and ordince from on high to preach the Gospel in the administration and demonstration of the spirit the Kees of the Kingdom of God conferred upon him.”40 When John the Baptist visited Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, he promised that the priesthood authority “shall never be taken again from the earth, until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness” (D&C 13:1). This is a clear statement that the authority previously had been taken from the earth.

Joseph Smith’s teachings about the Apostasy spread through the Church. An 1842 editorial in the *Times and Seasons* took as its starting point: “All the Protestant world agree that the Roman Catholic, or mother church, is so corrupt, and so far apostatised from the truth, that a reformation was not only needed but absolutely necessary.”41 It then argued that the key issue was the authority to perform ordinances: if the Catholic Church did not have the authority to perform ordinances, then the Protestants did not have any authority either. “Now the very moment they (the Protestants) take this stand, they deprive themselves of every claim to authority from God, in ministering holy things, unless it is derived from the mother of abominations.”42 The key issue was authority. “Since the great apostacy from primitive Christianity, all the reformers of which we have any knowledge have fallen into this one inconsistency. . . . [T]he Protestants have sought a reformation in doctrine without a recommission and a new administration of ordinances.”43

Thus, the teachings of the Church on the Apostasy go back to Joseph Smith, who got them by revelation from Jesus Christ. The label of the Great Apostasy goes back to 1842.

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41. “Grapes from Thorns and Figs from Thistles,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 16 (June 15, 1842): 815.
42. “Grapes from Thorns and Figs from Thistles,” 816, emphasis original.
43. “Grapes from Thorns and Figs from Thistles,” 816.
View 3: The Book of Mormon

Though the term *apostasy* does not occur in the Book of Mormon, the Book of Mormon does contain both descriptions of apostasy and prophecies about the Apostasy both in the Old and New World. Here we will concern ourselves only with the prophecies for the Old World.

In vision, Nephi sees the death of Jesus: “And after he [the Lamb of God] was slain I saw the multitudes of the earth, that they were gathered together to fight against the apostles of the Lamb” (1 Ne. 11:34).

And the multitude of the earth was gathered together; and I beheld that they were in a large and spacious building, like unto the building which my father saw. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Behold the world and the wisdom thereof; yea, behold the house of Israel hath gathered together to fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And it came to pass that I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (1 Ne. 11:35–36)

Later Nephi recounted,

I saw among the nations of the Gentiles the formation of a great church. And the angel said unto me: Behold the formation of a church which is most abominable above all other churches, which slayeth the saints of God, yea, and tortur eth them and bindeth them down, and yoketh them with a yoke of iron, and bringeth them down into captivity. And it came to pass that I beheld this great and abominable church; and I saw the devil that he was the founder of it. And I also saw gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing; and I saw many harlots. And the angel spake unto me, saying: Behold the gold, and the silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of this great and abominable church. And also for the praise of the world do they destroy the saints of God, and bring them down into captivity. (1 Ne. 13:4–9)

Nephi later notes that the great and abominable church “is the mother of abominations; and she is the whore of all the earth” (1 Ne. 14:10). The Book of Mormon later clarifies that “he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, shall perish; for they are they who are the whore of all the earth; for they who are not for me are against me, saith our God” (2 Ne. 10:16).
Nephi notes that “the desires of this great and abominable church” are “gold, and silver, and silks, and scarlets, and fine-twined linen, and all manner of precious clothing,” and “harlots.” The emphasis on clothing might strike the modern reader as odd, but cloth was a major form of wealth in Nephi’s day. For example, an Egyptian wedding agreement spells out that in the event of divorce, the wife will receive silver, emmer wheat, and the cloth that she had made while married.44

The desires ascribed to the great and abominable church are elaborated later in the record:

For the time speedily shall come that all churches which are built up to get gain, and all those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity; yea, in fine, all those who belong to the kingdom of the devil are they who need fear, and tremble, and quake; they are those who must be brought low in the dust; they are those who must be consumed as stubble; and this is according to the words of the prophet. (1 Ne. 22:23)

Later Nephi sees a book, which

proceedeth out of the mouth of a Jew. And I, Nephi, beheld it; and he said unto me: The book that thou beholdest is a record of the Jews, which contains the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; and it also containeth many of the prophecies of the holy prophets; and it is a record like unto the engravings which are upon the plates of brass, save there are not so many; nevertheless, they contain the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the house of Israel; wherefore, they are of great worth unto the Gentiles. (1 Ne. 13:23)

Nephi is told that

after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. And all this have they done that they might pervert the right ways of the Lord, that they might blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men. (1 Ne. 13:26–27)

44. P. Louvre 7846.6 (year 22 of Amasis = 549 BC), in Erich Lüddeckens, Ägyptische Eheverträge (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), 14–15.
The state of apostasy will not be allowed to remain, however: “Neither will the Lord God suffer that the Gentiles shall forever remain in that awful state of blindness, which thou beholdest they are in, because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church, whose formation thou hast seen” (1 Ne. 13:32).

The Book of Mormon predicted that the Apostasy, which it describes as “that awful state of blindness,” would come after the death of the Apostles and that the motivations behind it would be greed, lust for power, desire for popularity, and carnal appetites. As a result of this rebellion, plain and precious parts of the Bible and the covenants of the Lord would be removed.

**View 4: Jesus on the Apostasy**

Jesus also foretold the Apostasy to his Apostles. Any consideration of the Apostasy should take this into account.

In his instructions to the Twelve, Jesus told them “ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved” (Matt. 10:22; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17). “They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service” (John 16:2).

Jesus’s sermon on the Mount of Olives is provoked by three questions: “Tell us, when shall these things [the destruction of the temple] be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” (Matt. 24:3). Verses 4–20 answer the first question. Verses 21–51 answer the second two questions. First, many would come in Christ’s name and many would be deceived (Matt. 24:5). Then (tote) the disciples would be delivered up to be afflicted and killed (Matt. 24:9). Then (tote) disciples would be offended and deliver each other up (Matt. 24:10). False prophets would arise and deceive many (Matt. 24:11). Iniquity would abound and the disciples’ love for one another would be extinguished (psugēsetai, Matt. 24:12). The temple would then be destroyed (Matt. 24:15–21). After that time would be the time of “false Christs, and false prophets” who should not be believed, even though they might deceive the very elect (Matt. 24:23–24). This would last until the Son of Man should send his angels to gather the elect (Matt. 24:31). Jesus had previously warned that false prophets would be greedy and take things meant for others (harpagōges) but could be recognized by the things they did (Matt. 7:15–20).

Jesus thus prophesied a time when the Apostles would be put to death and false prophets and false Christs would hold sway on the earth.
View 5: Other New Testament Writers on the Apostasy

Jesus was not the only person in the New Testament who foretold a falling away. In one of the earliest letters of Paul, Paul tells the Saints in Thessalonica not to expect that “the day of the Lord has arrived,” for it would not come “unless a rebellion (apostasia) came first and the wicked man appeared” (2 Thes. 2:2–3, my translation). This should not have been news to them. “Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?” (2 Thes. 2:5).

To the Saints in Colossia, Paul warned, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments (stoicheia) of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8). Paul thought that philosophy, deception, the traditions of men, and conduct of the world were threats to the Primitive Church.

Paul also warned the Saints in Ephesus, the last time he saw them, “I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29–30). The flock would not be spared (pheidomenoi), they would all be gone, and the problem would arise from the disciples’ own number (ex hymōn).

Paul foresaw that things would become worse. Immediately after telling Timothy how to give instruction in the Church, he writes,

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. For of this sort are they which creep into houses, and lead captive silly women laden with sins, led away with divers lusts, Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith. But they shall proceed no further: for their folly shall be manifest unto all men, as theirs also was. (2 Tim. 3:1–9)

One thing that would change would be what was taught in the Church: “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but

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45. For this section, I am using the King James Version unless I explicitly note that I am using my own translation.
after their own lusts [epithymias] shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables [mythous]” (2 Tim. 4:3–4). The antecedent for “they” in these verses reaches back seven verses: “But evil men [ponēroi de anthrōpoi] and seducers [goētes] shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13). A goēs was a particular type of individual; it was someone who taught or practiced a religion that was seen as deceptive and destructive.

Peter also warned that

there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies [hairesis apōleias, destructive divisions], even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. . . . Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man’s voice forbade the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever. For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error. (2 Pet. 2:1, 15–18)

Using strong language and scriptural allusions (many of which have been omitted from the quotation), Peter warned his contemporary readers that false teachers who secretly deny the Lord but covet gain and the lusts of the flesh would come to gain their own followers among the early Christians.

Not only did the New Testament writers warn about apostasy, they documented it happening around them. In some ways, this is not terribly surprising. Communication to and from Church leaders was difficult and slow. Local Church leaders and members of the time often had less experience in the gospel than the typical young man blessing the sacrament does now. They came from diverse religious backgrounds that were usually incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were surrounded by a culture whose practices were usually hostile to the commandments. Rather than get mired in the endless scholarly debates about New Testament chronology, we shall survey the evidence geographically from east to west.

Judea: “Whence come wars and fightings among you?” (James 4:1).

Galatia: “O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth?” (Gal. 3:1).
Laodicea: “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:15–17).

Sardis: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God” (Rev. 3:2).

Thyatira: “I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols” (Rev. 2:20).

Ephesus: “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:4–5).

Pergamum: “I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:14–16).

Thessalonica: “We hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies” (2 Thes. 3:11).

Corinth: Paul said that there were divisions (schismata) among the Corinthian saints (1 Cor. 1:10). “For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies [sects, cliques] among you” (1 Cor. 11:18–19). “For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions [erides] among you” (1 Cor. 1:11). For modern readers “contentions” often brings up the idea of arguments, but eris also means “fistfight.” “Ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” (1 Cor. 3:3). As a result, they were suing each other: “There is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another” (1 Cor. 6:7). “It is reported commonly that there is fornication [porneia, sexual immorality] among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away
from among you” (1 Cor. 5:1–2). Not only are some of the Corinthians immoral, they are proud of their immorality. Some were also denying basic Christian beliefs: “How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor. 15:12).

Rome: “For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think” (Rom. 12:3).

Toward the end, John related, “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church” (3 Jn. 1:9–10).

Given the problems documented in the first century, the wonder is not that teachings and authority were lost but that anything that could be called Christianity survived at all.

**View 6: Efforts to Redefine the Apostasy**

While Latter-day Saint scholars have traditionally understood the Apostasy to entail the altering of the teachings of Jesus and the associated practices, as well as the loss of divine authority, recently some Latter-day Saint scholars have objected to previous narratives about the Apostasy put forth by Latter-day Saints.

Those who want to change the Church’s “traditional apostasy narrative” see it as being neither “intellectually defensible” nor “pastorally productive.” They have “ethical concerns” and “historiographical concerns” with the Church's teachings about the falling away: “Ethical concerns arise from intimations of wickedness and deliberate deception on the part of well-meaning Christians, while historiographical concerns arise from reliance on dated secondary treatments rather than reliable primary sources.” They claim that the traditional understanding of the Apostasy in the Church “owes its origins and developments to the efforts of, primarily, three authors: B. H. Roberts . . ., James E. Talmage . . ., and Joseph Fielding Smith.”

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47. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 106 n. 4.

48. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 105; Wilcox, “Narrating Religious Heritage,” 222; Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young, “Introduction,” in Standing
“historians today recognize that the synthesized humanist/Reformation narrative of a dark age of apostasy, born in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is not supported by historical evidence,”49 they claim that “academic historians challenged and largely rejected” the Church’s traditional narrative “as inadequate to understand the complexity and richness of the medieval and early modern periods.”50

As a result, some of these scholars take issue with the claim in “the Church’s missionary manual” that “if there had been no apostasy, there would have been no need of a Restoration.”51 They reject it as “simplified, standardized,”52 “binary logic”53 and claim that the Church’s teachings on an Apostasy are not charitable54 because the Church’s “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.’”55 To these scholars, to “imagine a scenario in which other churches are lacking God’s guidance—part of a great apostasy—and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a mere replacement of what was lost” is “to dismiss the inspired insights of ancient Christians or even other modern Christians.”56 After all, these are, in their view, “our kindred Christian saints” and “our


believing mothers and fathers,”57 and we should be “turning our hearts to our spiritual fathers and mothers so that we can learn to love and appreciate them.”58 They therefore desire “greater care in discussing a great apostasy—a term that does not appear in our standard works.”59

Some of these scholars think that “a call to return to the Abrahamic covenant forms a major—if not the chief—foundation of the project of the Restoration.”60 For them the ‘Great Apostasy,’ whatever else it includes, concerns first and foremost the transformation of the self-understanding of Jesus’s followers through a reconceptualization of Israel’s covenants as exclusively pertaining to themselves. It concerns, in other words, a misappropriation of Israel’s identity.”61 The covenants that would be lost “are clearly not covenants associated with particular ordinances—for example, the baptismal covenant or covenants made during the temple endowment.”62 In other words, “being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 18:10) is not “the right covenant theology.”63 Authority is not an issue because “in Paul’s time, these titles and the organizational structures that would come to define priesthood offices of the Church in coming centuries were new, still largely undefined, and much more fluid than they are today.”64

Changing the understanding of the Apostasy entails a change in understanding the Restoration. Because “the Doctrine and Covenants never speaks explicitly of a restored church,” the Church might want to rethink whether it should “use that unscriptural phrase, restored church,”65 despite its use by Church leaders. They call on Latter-day Saints to rethink what it means to be “the only true and living church.”66

60. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 126.
61. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 118, emphasis removed.
63. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 118, emphasis original.
One observer summarized the argument: these Latter-day Saint scholars “make it clear that they are not going to encourage, or even tolerate, the standard LDS view of early Christianity—the one where those silly Christians broke away from the truth after the apostles died and permitted Greek philosophy and Roman culture to permeate the plain and precious doctrines of Jesus Christ and turn His true church into something Great, Abominable, and of the Devil.”

There is an irony in this approach to the Apostasy. The traditional narrative of Latter-day Saints about the Apostasy is claimed to depend on a “reliance on dated secondary treatments rather than reliable primary sources.” (Ironically, the accusation comes in an article on the Apostasy that cites not a single early Christian source.) This accusation is a two-edged sword because most of the secondary treatments that these scholars rely on themselves will be outdated before they retire. Quality is more important in scholarship than date.

**View 7: The Take Over**

It would be a mistake to think that the traditional Latter-day Saint view of the falling away is only featured in out-of-date sources and that more recent scholarship does not support the Latter-day Saint point of view. We will now look at some recent scholars’ work on early Christianity that supports the traditional Latter-day Saint narrative, one by a Catholic and two by Protestants, one of which extensively examines Orthodox sources.

One of the recent examinations of the early church is L. L. Welborn’s careful examination of the incident that generated *First Clement.* For Welborn, “few writings from the period of the origin of Christianity offer the historian such an unobstructed perspective.” *First Clement* is a letter written at the end of the first century or beginning of the second by Clement, the bishop of Rome, to the church in Corinth because of an incident that happened in the Corinthian church that Clement largely only alludes to. Welborn finds “no reason to doubt that First Clement is a

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68. Frederick and Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement?” 106 n. 4.
70. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 1.
real letter occasioned by an actual incident.”71 “It is clear that the object of contention in the church at Corinth was ‘the office (or title) of bishop.’”72 Welborn argues that “if one wishes to hear Clement’s message, one must consult his Scripture citations in context, in order to grasp their relevance to the situation in the church at Corinth, as Clement perceives it.”73

Welborn notes that “the instigators of the στάσις [revolt]” or “rebels” are characterized as “rash, self-willed, immoderate, reckless, licentious, rebellious, arrogant, foolish, imprudent, uninstructed, immature, corruptible, disobedient, and seditious.”74 And yet, “Clement deplores the στάσις [revolt] ‘which a few rash and self-willed persons caused to blaze up to such a degree of insanity (ἀπόνοια).’”75 Welborn argues that Clement “points unambiguously to young men as the instigators of the uprising against the presbyters.”76 He concludes three things about the rebels: (1) “It seems unlikely that the men who led the revolt were older than thirty years of age, given the realities of demography in antiquity.”77 (2) “It seems likely that money was somehow involved in the conflict over ecclesial office at Corinth.”78 (3) “It is not impossible that the young rebels at Corinth alleged a lack of mental competence on the part of the elders whom they deposed from ecclesial office.”79 Welborn also argues that some in the congregation supported the rebellion.80

Welborn does not think that the evidence allows one to decide whether the rebels were clients81 or sons.82 He does, however, consider the motivations for the revolt. First, the rebels wanted to be in charge of the church.83 Second, “the administration of community resources motivated the young in their uprising.”84 And third, an “ideology,” or “intellectual ferment,” accompanied the revolt.85

71. Welborn, Young against the Old, 2.
72. Welborn, Young against the Old, 4.
73. Welborn, Young against the Old, 184.
74. Welborn, Young against the Old, 186.
75. Welborn, Young against the Old, 189.
76. Welborn, Young against the Old, 183.
77. Welborn, Young against the Old, 187.
78. Welborn, Young against the Old, 187.
79. Welborn, Young against the Old, 188.
80. Welborn, Young against the Old, 199.
81. Welborn, Young against the Old, 194–96.
82. Welborn, Young against the Old, 196–98.
83. Welborn, Young against the Old, 200.
84. Welborn, Young against the Old, 201.
85. Welborn, Young against the Old, 202.
Welborn concludes that the episode at Corinth addressed in *First Clement* was a watershed moment in the history of the Christian Church when the teachings of Jesus and Paul were “broken and destroyed.” For the writer of the epistle, “the agents of change in ecclesial office are dangerous revolutionaries who have overturned good social order.” Welborn also notes that we do not know whether the letter succeeded in rectifying the situation.

To be sure, Welborn accepts a Protestant view of ecclesiology. For him, an *episkopos* is a mere “overseer” and not a bishop. He therefore sees Clement’s interference in the bottom-up governance of the church in Corinth as bad, interfering with the good self-governance of the Corinthian church. Latter-day Saints would see both Clement and the Corinthian rebels as in the wrong. Clement did not have authority over the church in Corinth as it was out of his jurisdiction. The Corinthian rebels, however, were also in the wrong, deposing of legitimately appointed church leaders so that the rebels could take over the church in Corinth.

**View 8: Casual Christians**

In a recent book, Nadya Williams tries to draw attention that the problem of cultural Christians has been around a long time, back to the beginning of Christianity in fact. She uses the term *cultural Christians* to mean “individuals who self-identify as Christians but whose outward behavior and, to the extent that we can tell, inward thoughts and motivations are largely influenced by the surrounding culture rather than by their Christian faith and the teachings of Jesus.” She is concerned that modern Christians wrongly idealize and idolize early Christians.

Williams, a military historian, is a convert to Protestantism from a secular Jewish background. She wrote the book because “both the American public at large and American Christians in particular have a very limited understanding of ancient history and the world of the early church.” She wanted to push back against those who proclaimed “the superiority of early Christians to us.” She also thought that “if so many of us too are

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86. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 226.
88. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 224.
89. Welborn, *Young against the Old*, 194.
cultural Christians, then trying to fix the world through politics or just through particular policies on marriage, for instance, will never work.”

Though her work is divided into three sections—the New Testament Era, the third century, and the fourth and fifth centuries—the driving impetus behind the narrative is current cultural Christian practices that she finds in contemporary Protestantism. What she says about the first century is the most relevant for seeing the Apostasy of the early Church.

Her first chapter discusses how the earliest converts to Christianity brought in “cutthroat” “Roman ideas of property”: “Using wealth to acquire power and using power to acquire more wealth.” She cites Ananias and Sapphira as the first cultural Christians: “Cultural religion is idolatry and a direct violation of this commandment because it involves worshiping something (in this case, public honor and prestige, along with personal wealth) as being on par with God by withholding from God something that already belongs to him.”

Williams makes the point that “the New Testament abounds with stern warnings to converts against falling away. . . . The reason that the New Testament repeatedly addressed this issue in the strongest terms is precisely because it was so common.” Williams sees cultural Christianity as a large factor in apostasy. “Though persecution was one reason for apostasy during the New Testament Era and beyond, we should not put the chief blame on it so hastily.” Williams sees apostasy in the earliest Church. “Much of the New Testament consists of letters written by concerned leaders to congregations that were going through these and many other cultural sins and challenges. The testimony of these letters has much to tell us about the everyday struggles of these early believers.” Williams sees apostasy on the individual level, with someone’s rebellion against God manifest by leaving the Church rather than corrupting it. She points out, however, that on the individual level, apostasy was encouraged by the general lack of commitment within the general membership of the Church. Early Christians were often half-hearted and often followed the prevailing winds of the culture around them.

Even after the Christianization of the Roman Empire in the fourth century when almost everyone was Christian, the average Christian was not necessarily pious. Most of them, for example, did not attend church services:

93. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, xv.
94. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 12.
95. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 17.
96. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 62.
97. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 62.
98. Williams, Cultural Christians in the Early Church, 63.
Out of some 255 churches [meaning physical buildings] in some 155 towns and cities, wherever the remains survive for the record, the expected attendance ranged between a mere 1 per cent and 8 per cent of the general population. Such are the figures we have seen at Alexandria, Constantinople, Rome, Antioch, many little Syrian centers, Salona, Philippi, Oxyrhynchus, Carthage, Cirta, Tipasa, Nola... Only by exception, in the major centers, is a church built to accommodate more than 500 persons; a more usual figure for cities that had perhaps 20,000 in population was 350 or 400 per church; and no great efforts were made to multiply the number of churches... Need could be measured by those contemporaries who were best suited to do so, namely, the local bishops. They were guided in their planning by their experience of normal attendance, not by their lack of construction funds; and, as the fourth century draws to its end, and so into the fifth, we can see them sometimes cutting back the laity space in favor of the clergy, to make room for a more ample chancel, a solea or an ambo.99

Even if you packed the churches, only about one or two percent could attend,100 but even that seems to have been too much space: “The great Chrysostom observes often and with bitterness that the populace which recognizes him as perhaps the world’s greatest orator will not pay the slightest heed to his mildest admonitions, but continues to go about the business of money-getting while he, Sunday after Sunday, speaks to empty walls.”101 Your typical Christian in the fourth century was not the model of piety. Such seems to have been the case in the Middle Ages as well.102 The lack of righteousness among the laity of the Church is a symptom of the Apostasy, not its cause.

**View 9: The Casual Christianity of the Clergy**

In a recent volume, Ewa Wipszycka, a scholar mostly noted for her papyrological work, turns her attention to the interaction between monks

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100. Applying MacMullen’s method to the town where I live, if we count only the buildings, 10.3 percent of the population goes to church on Sunday. Since, however, more than one congregation meets in each building, if we count congregations, then 27.9 percent of the population goes to church on Sunday. Either figure dwarfs the estimates of church attendance in the fourth century.


and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. She is particularly interested in testing Max Weber’s thesis that charismatic movements conflict with traditional religious institutions. She finds, however, that his suggestions “do not help to understand those relations.”

Wipszycka uses three different types of sources in her study: the literary sources (hagiographies that substitute for historical accounts), the synodal decrees, and “editions of the hitherto unknown documentary evidence (it is fairly unlikely of sociologists of religion to read papyri).”

Wipszycka is interested in the way authority functions in the church in Late Antiquity, or from the late third to the seventh century. Her observations fall under three categories: ecclesiastical structure, hierarchical influence, and corruption.

Concerning ecclesiastical structure, Wipszycka finds that the church structure has changed from what it was in the first century or the second century: “The primitive (‘presbyterial’) structures of the Church, if they were still extant at the time, had already become marginalised.”

Concerning hierarchical influence, Wipszycka states, “The texts relevant to Egypt do not support the argument that presbyters, deacons, and other members of the clergy in monastic communities represented the interests of their bishops. I am not aware of any such case.” Similar situations occurred in Palestine though the source of the conflicts were different: “Relationships between monastic communities and the bishops were determined by doctrinal conflicts; monks and bishops (and patriarchs) were parties to these disputes.” These conflicts were “more important in Syria than in Egypt and Palestine.”

Finally, Wipszycka has much to say about corruption. Wipszycka notes that leaders of monastic communities, like Pachomius and Shenoute, “expelled from their communities not just individuals unsuited to monastic life but also monks guilty of sexual transgressions, fraud and other misdemeanours blemishing their reputation.”

103. Ewa Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church in Egypt and the Levant during Late Antiquity (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2021).
104. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 3–4.
105. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 459.
106. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 181–82.
107. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 182.
108. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 182.
109. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 259.
110. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 413.
111. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 183.
The problems, however, were greater than that; Wipszycka found that “conflicts inside the Church hierarchy resulting from unrestrained ambitions of more important bishops and causing divisions among them, only magnified the impunity of those who did not fear heavenly punishments. A bishop could be and often happened to be a saint, but he could as easily happen to be a tyrant. Still, studies of history of Late Antique Christian communities rather than just of activities of the Church hierarchy do not authorise the claim that the communities in question were for the most part led by tyrants; saintly bishops, however, were equally rare.”

Instead of gross wickedness or saintly bishops, what Wipszycka found was plenty of behavior that she classifies as “misdemeanour”: “Dishonest members of the clergy—chiefly bishops, and, to a lesser extent, presbyters and deacons—exploited material assets of monasteries mainly in order to increase the wealth of their families. Such thefts could assume various forms, and human greed bred astonishing schemes.” In modern terms, this is a called a breach of fiduciary duty.

View 10: The Early Christians

While recent secondary sources may provide unintentional support for the traditional narrative of the Church of Jesus Christ about the falling away, they do not replace the primary sources. Let us consider what the early Christians, or Christians from the first two centuries, had to say about apostasy, authority, and organization.

Apostasy in the Early Church

Amid all this talk about an Apostasy of the early Christian Church, the view of an Apostasy in the early Christian Church has largely not been examined. What has been looked at is heresy, which may, or may not, be the same things as apostasy. For our purposes here, we will start with the Apostolic Fathers.

There is good support for the latter-day Church’s teachings about the Apostasy in ancient sources. At the end of the first century, Christians observed that “a detestable and unholy rebellion (stasis)” had taken over the Church which was “utterly foreign to the elect of God.”

112. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 462–63.
113. Wipszycka, Monks and the Hierarchical Church, 460.
114. 1 Clement 1:1. All translations in this section are the author’s own.
revolt was instigated against their elders by the young,\textsuperscript{115} who kicked out the appointed bishops so they could take over the office.\textsuperscript{116} The early Christians observed that this had been prophesied: “Through our Lord Jesus Christ, the apostles knew that there would be fights over the title of the bishopric.”\textsuperscript{117} The church historian Eusebius claimed “that the discussed apostasy [\textit{staseōs}] took place among the Corinthians, Hegesippus is a trustworthy witness.”\textsuperscript{118}

It was not just power that was a temptation. Some were secretly unbelievers.\textsuperscript{119} They wanted to change the teachings and ordinances of the Church.\textsuperscript{120} “Many” who had been trusted were actually “wolves, they take captive those who are on the road to God by the lusts of the flesh.”\textsuperscript{121}

Because the Apostles were gone, there was nothing that anyone could do about the problems in the Church. One early Christian bishop who had known the Apostles complained, “I do not consider myself as qualified to give you commands like an apostle.”\textsuperscript{122} He knew he lacked the authority to do so.

The second-century Christian writer Hegesippus claimed that

up to that period the Church had remained like a virgin pure and uncorrupted: for, if there were any persons who were disposed to tamper with the wholesome rule of the preaching of salvation, they still lurked in some dark place of concealment or other. But, when the sacred band of apostles had in various ways closed their lives, and that generation of men to whom it had been vouchsafed to listen to the godlike wisdom with their own ears had passed away, then did the confederacy of godless error take its rise through the treachery of false teachers, who, seeing that none of the apostles any longer survived, at length attempted with bare and uplifted head to oppose the preaching of the truth.\textsuperscript{123}

Hegesippus recognized that the Christian church of his day had been corrupted and that it was traceable to the absence of the Apostles.

Irenaeus, writing later in the second century, says that “all of these, and many later, in the middle period of the Church, revolted in their apostasy

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{1} I \textit{Clement} 3:3.
\bibitem{2} I \textit{Clement} 44:4–6.
\bibitem{3} I \textit{Clement} 44:1.
\bibitem{4} Eusebius, \textit{Church History} 3.16.
\bibitem{5} Ignatius, \textit{Epistle to the Trallians} 10:1.
\bibitem{6} Ignatius, \textit{Epistle to the Smyrneans} 6:1–2.
\bibitem{7} Ignatius, \textit{Epistle to the Philadelphians} 2:2.
\bibitem{8} Ignatius, \textit{Epistle to the Trallians} 3:3.
\bibitem{9} Hegesippus, in Eusebius, \textit{Church History} 3.32.7–8.
\end{thebibliography}
Hegesippus says that “the church in Corinth remained in the right teaching until Primus was bishop in Corinth.”126 Hegesippus is also quoted as saying, “Until this time the church was called a virgin because it had not yet begun to be corrupted by vain reports. Thebouthis, because he did not become a bishop, began to corrupt it. . . . From that time there were false Christs, false prophets, false apostles, who broke up the unity of the church with corrupt teachings against God and against his Christ.”127

Whether or not it is popular to believe in an Apostasy, by the end of the first century, the ancient Christians were clear that the signs of apostasy were around them and that the early Church had rebelled against God. The earliest Christians after the New Testament knew that the Apostasy was a fact.

The term “apostate” appears principally in The Shepherd of Hermas. Hermas even provides an explanation of what an apostate is. In his eighth parable, the parable of the willow tree, Hermas sees a large willow tree,128 which he is told represents both the law of God (nomos theou) and the Son of God (ho huios tou theou).129 He sees many people who all receive the Son of God, but different things happen to the various branches that each possesses, and what happens is interpreted. Depending on what these people do to their branches, they receive different rewards. The worst group is “the apostates (apostatai), and traitors of the church, those who blaspheme the Lord by their sins, and also those who were ashamed of the name of the Lord by which they are called.”130 All of these refused to repent even when the invitation was extended to them. There was another group which was “close to them. For they were hypocrites and those who introduced other teachings, and those who deconverted the servants of God, especially those who sinned, by not allowing them to repent but persuading them with foolish teachings.”131 This perspective

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124. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.4-3.  
125. Eusebius, Church History 4.21.  
126. Eusebius, Church History 4.22.2.  
127. Hegesippus, in Eusebius, Church History 4.22.4–5.  
129. Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes 8.3.2.  
130. Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes 8.6.4.  
131. Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes 8.6.5.
Ten Views on the Falling Away

is further reinforced later in the same vision: “Others who lived with the gentiles in the end, and being corrupted by the worthless opinions of the gentiles, apostatized (apostēsan) from God, and did the works of the gentiles. They will be counted with the gentiles.”

Hermas also says that certain words that he was given in vision were “for the gentiles and the apostates (apostatais).” What were those words? “Wicked desires have arisen in your heart.” “Those who desire wickedness in their hearts, bring death and captivity upon themselves, especially those who concern themselves with this world and pride themselves on their riches and do not hold fast to the good things which are to come.” One of the problems, Hermas was told, was that “since you are so fond of your children, you did not correct your household, but you let them become completely corrupted, and therefore the Lord is angry with you.”

Clement of Rome does not use the word *apostasy* but instead uses the word *stasis*, or “revolt.” He was concerned with the rebellion in the church at Corinth. He said he was writing because of an “ unholy rebellion (staseōs)” which was “foreign and strange to the elect of God” caused by “a few reckless and arrogant persons.” Clement wrote in hopes that “this vain apostasy (staseōs) might quiet down.”

This was not the way it used to be: “Every revolt (stasis) and every schism used to be an abomination to you.” As a result the church at Corinth prospered.

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132. Shepherd of Hermas, Similitudes 8.9.3.
133. Shepherd of Hermas, Visions 1.4:2.
137. 1 Clement 1:1.
138. 1 Clement 63:1.
139. 1 Clement 2:6.
140. 1 Clement 3:1.
141. 1 Clement 3:2.
142. 1 Clement 3:3.
143. 1 Clement 3:4.
into despair, and many into doubt, and all of us into sorrow, and yet your rebellion (stasis) continues.”144 “It is a disgrace, beloved, an exceeding great disgrace and unworthy of your conduct in Christ, to hear that the well-established and ancient church of Corinth should be in rebellion (stasiazēn) against the elders because of one or two persons.”145

Clement saw the rebellion as the result of jealously from some young church members who were jealous of those with authority and sought to seize it. He cited several examples of how jealousy led to apostasy. Notably, three times he referred to Dathan and Abiram, who “were led down to hell because they rebelled (dia to stasiasai) against Moses, the servant of God.”146 “Jealousy arose concerning the priesthood and the tribes rebelled (stasiazōsōn) about who should be decorated with a glorified title.”147 “It is better for a man to confess his transgressions than to harden his heart, as the hearts of those who rebelled (stasiazontōn) against Moses, the servant of God, whose condemnation was made clear, for they went down alive to hell.”148

The solution was that “you who have made the foundation of the revolt (staseōs) should submit to the authority of the elders and be educated in repentance, bending the knees of your hearts. Learn to submit, setting aside arrogance and pride.”149 “Those who set themselves up as leaders of the apostasy (staseōs) and dissension ought to look to the common hope.”150 If not, they should have left the church: “Let one say: If apostasy (stasis), and contention, and schism have come through me, I will depart. I will go wherever you wish, and I will do whatever is ordered by the congregation, just let the flock of Christ have peace with the properly appointed elders.”151 The revolt at Corinth was started by rejecting the properly appointed leaders.

By What Authority?

As discussed above, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that one of the key issues with the Apostasy of the early Christian

144. 1 Clement 46:9.
145. 1 Clement 47:6.
146. 1 Clement 4:12.
147. 1 Clement 43:2.
148. 1 Clement 51:3–4.
149. 1 Clement 57:1–2.
150. 1 Clement 51:1.
151. 1 Clement 54:2.
Church is that the authority to act in the name of God in making covenants was lost. If, as we have seen, one of the key claims about the Apostasy concerns the authority to act in God’s name, then it is worth looking at the change in attitudes and understanding of authority among the ancient Christians.

One of the noteworthy things about Jesus, according to the Gospel writers, is that he had authority (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:36). Others posed him questions about where he received his authority (Matt. 21:23–27; Mark 11:28–33; Luke 20:2–8). His response was to demonstrate authority that they could see (performing miracles) to show that he also had authority over things that they could not see (forgiving sins) (Matt. 9:6; Mark 2:9–11; Luke 5:24). He could “command [ἐπιτάσσει] the unclean spirits with authority and they obey him” (Mark 1:27, my translation; Luke 4:36). He was given the authority to execute judgment (John 5:27), over all flesh (John 17:2), to lay down his life and take it up again (John 10:18), and to grant eternal life (John 17:2).

What this authority meant is demonstrated in the words of the centurion: “I am also a man possessing authority (ἐξουσία), able to order (τασσόμενος) my own; I say to this one: Go, and he goes, and to another: Come, and he comes, and to my slave: Do this, and he does” (Matt. 8:9, my translation; Luke 7:8). The capability to order and put things in order was, to the centurion’s mind, authority.

During his mortal ministry, Jesus gave his Twelve Apostles “authority over unclean spirits so that they could cast them out and heal all sicknesses and all maladies” (Matt. 10:1, my translation; Mark 3:14–15; 6:7; Luke 9:1). He also gave them “authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and all the powers of the enemy” (Luke 10:19). He promised to give at least one of them authority that “whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19). He also gave the Seventy authority, and the devils submitted (ὑποτάσσεται) to them (Luke 10:17).

After his Atonement and Resurrection, Jesus was given “all authority in heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18). He gave some of his authority to some of his disciples. Thus, he gave the Apostles authority to “make disciples of all the nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and by teaching them to keep all things whatsoever I command you” (Matt. 28:16–20, my translation). They had authority to give the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands (Acts 8:19). The authority to baptize, to give the gift of the Holy Ghost, and the authority to heal are things that we still recognize in the modern
Church. A later tradition specifies that he gave the Apostles this authority when “he laid his hands upon the holy apostles one by one.”\textsuperscript{152} The elders were given power to “pray over him [the sick], anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). The earliest Christians recognized that “there is no authority unless from God, the current authorities are ordered by God,” and therefore “every soul should submit to the higher authorities” (Rom. 13:1, my translation).

The earliest Christians were clear about authority and that they should submit (\textit{hypotassesthai}) to authority (Titus 3:1). The Apostles had authority. The seven were also appointed by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:3–6), as were Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2–3).

At the beginning of the second century, however, things had changed. Who had authority in the early second century? The Twelve Apostles had been given the authority over the gospel.\textsuperscript{153} The Christians acknowledged that God “had given them [their ancestors (\textit{patrasin})] the authority over the kingdom . . . so that we may be subject to them.”\textsuperscript{154} The bishops, however, had no authority to organize the Church. Ignatius, the bishop of Smyrna, tells the Trallians, “I do not consider myself capable to organize you like an apostle.”\textsuperscript{155} It was a frank recognition that the Apostles held an authority which he, as bishop, did not.

In some things, God had authority that he had not given to men. In other things, authority that had once been had by the Apostles had returned to God. Jesus still had authority over repentance.\textsuperscript{156} God still had authority over all things.\textsuperscript{157} Even the power to heal, which God had once shared with men, had gone back to God.\textsuperscript{158}

In the late second century, a new line of argument came on the scene. Irenaeus of Lyon argued that there had been an apostolic succession. It was a “tradition which is from the apostles, which is preserved in the succession of presbyters in the Churches”\textsuperscript{159} or “by the succession of bishops.”\textsuperscript{160} It starts off well: “Having founded and built up the Church, therefore, the

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152. \textit{Discourse on Abbaton} fol. 6.
153. \textit{Barnabas} 8:3.
154. \textit{1 Clement} 61:1.
155. Ignatius, \textit{Epistle to the Trallians} 3:3.
156. Ignatius, \textit{Epistle to the Smyrnaians} 4:3; \textit{Shepherd of Hermas}, \textit{Mandates} 4.3.5.
157. \textit{Martyrdom of Polycarp} 2:3; \textit{Shepherd of Hermas}, \textit{Mandates} 4.1.11; \textit{Shepherd of Hermas}, \textit{Similitudes} 5.7.3.
158. \textit{Shepherd of Hermas}, \textit{Mandates} 4.1.11.
159. Irenaeus, \textit{Against the Heresies} 3.2.2.
160. Irenaeus, \textit{Against the Heresies} 3.3.2.
}
blessed apostles entrusted the work of the bishopric to Linus.”

Later “Clement inherited the bishopric.” Unfortunately, the “apostolic tradition of the Church” consisted of teachings or preaching rather than authority. His argument was that “if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they taught the perfect separately and secretly from the rest, they would have passed them down to those to whom they entrusted the churches themselves.” As far as authority is concerned, for Irenaeus, Christ had authority and the Apostles had authority, but he mentions no one else who does.

What is absolutely clear from the early second-century Christians is that the Apostles had authority and they did not.

**Church Organization at the End of the First Century**

The sixth Article of Faith proclaims, “We believe in the same organization that existed in the Primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth” (A of F 1:6). The Primitive Church refers to the Church of Jesus Christ that existed during the time that the New Testament was written. The organization that existed in the later Christian church was much different. To understand better the organization that existed in the Primitive Church before and the Christian Church afterwards, we should understand the organization that existed in the Church at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century. In that period, the organization is clear.

At the end of the first century, there are three offices in the Church: bishops, elders, and deacons. The terms presbyter and elder are synonymous, both rendering the Greek term *presbyteros*, one being a borrowing of the term and the other being a translation of it.

At the beginning of his letter to the Magnesians, Ignatius lists the leadership of the church at Magnesia: “Damas, your godly bishop, and your worthy elders, Bassos and Apollonios, and my fellow servant, the deacon Zotion.” Magnesia had one bishop, two elders, and one deacon. We know of more than one deacon in Smyrna.

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161. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.3.
162. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.3.
163. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.3.
164. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 3.3.1.
165. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 1.27.4, 4.36.1.
166. Irenaeus, Against the Heresies 1.27.4.
What do holders of these various offices do in the church of the early second century?

The bishop was the highest officer left in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and thus should be obeyed.169 As a representative of God, the bishop stood in the place of God. The bishop, however, was a local officer without the authority to act outside of his jurisdiction, unlike the Apostles.170 For Ignatius, there was no longer a general Church organization or general Church officers; only the individual local units were left. The bishop was in charge of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper171 and baptism, and he presided over the meetings.172 Without the Apostles, it was the end.173

If the bishop was in the place of God, the elders were in the place of the Apostles.174 The elders thus acted as representatives of the bishop, perhaps counselors to him. They presided over the church (under the bishop).175 They were charged with visiting the sick, the widows, the orphans, and the poor and specifically converting those who were erring.176 They were tasked with admonishing church members.177

Deacons were entrusted with the ministry of Jesus Christ.178 Nothing in the local church should be done without the bishop and the elders.179 “That was the ideal. The reality differed from the ideal. Ignatius claimed that those who acted in secret, hiding from the bishop, “worship the devil.”180 Clement said that some of the general Church in his day had revolted against the elders.181

The structure of the church at the end of the first century contrasts with the structure in the middle of the first century. In the middle of the first century, Christ “himself appointed some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11, my translation). The bishops and presbyters of the end of

170. Ignatius, Epistle to the Trallians 3:3.
171. Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans 8:1.
172. Ignatius, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans 8:2.
175. Shepherd of Hermas, Visions 2:4:3.
176. Polycarp, Epistle to the Philippians 6:1.
177. 2 Clement 17:3.
179. Ignatius, Epistle to the Magnesians 7:1.
181. 1 Clement 54:2.
the first century seem to match the pastors and teachers of the middle of the first century. The First Epistle of Peter equates the pastor (poimena) with bishop (episkopon, 1 Pet. 2:25). The offices seem to go from greatest to least in scope. Pastors and teachers were local leaders; apostles and prophets were over larger areas. The New Testament does not provide enough information to determine if an evangelist was local or regional.

What we see comparing the Church organization at the end of the first century with the middle of the first century is in some ways a streamlining of the organization but also an elimination of churchwide offices and an emphasis on local ones.

An examination of the Apostolic Fathers, that is, Christian writers who lived at the end of the first century and beginning of the second, indicates that (1) they were aware of apostasy occurring around them, (2) they recognized that they did not have the authority that the Apostles had earlier held, and (3) the structure of the Church had changed significantly from the time of the Apostles. All of these facts are consistent with the latter-day Church’s view of the falling away.

Conclusions

The term Great Apostasy has been used in the Church since at least 1842 and is still used in current Church materials. The position of the Church on the falling away or Apostasy is essentially unchanged since it was first taught by Joseph Smith at least as early as 1833. There is evidence that he was taught about it in the First Vision. It is also taught in the Book of Mormon. It was prophesied by Jesus Christ and is witnessed in the earliest Christian documents after the New Testament. Some contemporary scholarship also supports the Church’s teachings on this subject.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell once wrote of a gospel methodology for dealing with this particular topic:

More and more, for instance, real scholarship will point to the validity of the dispensational view of God’s dealings with mankind from age to age. Early in this dispensation such ideas were utterly disregarded. Christianity preceded Christ in the sense that his work did not begin at once, in the meridian of time. His gospel and power and church have been on the earth at many points in history, and we should not be surprised to discover this fact in more and more ancient texts in the future. We shall also learn more and more about temple work’s having been practiced and understood periodically. There will be a convergence of discoveries (never enough, mind you, to remove the need for faith) to make plain and plausible what the modern prophets have been saying all along.
Latter-day Saint scholars will show the way by being able to read firsthand such ancient texts rather than relying on secondary scholarship, as was the case earlier in this dispensation. We will be able to reach such texts through a Latter-day Saint lens rather than relying solely upon able Protestant and Catholic scholars, of whom it is unfair to expect full sensitivity to the fulness of the gospel’s doctrines and ordinances.182

Few Latter-day Saint scholars have taken up Elder Maxwell’s challenge other than Hugh Nibley. An examination of the primary sources, however, shows that the early Christians were aware of a loss of authority that coincided with a loss of the Apostles. There was a rebellion (apostasy) against that authority and the teachings of the Church. It was prophesied by Jesus and the other New Testament writers. By the end of the century, Christian writers such as Clement and Ignatius described an Apostasy occurring. Early second-century writers like Hegessipus testified that it had occurred, and even Irenaeus in the second half of the second century testified that the Apostasy had taken place.

The fact of the Apostasy does not mean that everyone afterward who did the best that they could without authority or revelation was evil, or that there is nothing good to be found in those times. We need neither turn them into heroes nor villains; we could treat them as human beings while recognizing that they were—to use the Book of Mormon’s phrase—in “that awful state of blindness” (1 Ne. 13:32).

There is no intellectual reason to reject or change the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with respect to the falling away. They are intellectually defensible and account for the early Christian evidence as well as, or better than, any other theories. There is more work to be done, but work done along the lines that Elder Maxwell requested will be of more use to Latter-day Saints than redefining the falling away along the lines of recent work.

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Liberty Jail

Seedbed for Eternal Temple Blessings

Steven L. Olsen

Introduction

The difficult Missouri winter of 1838–39 exacerbated an emerging existential crisis for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its founding prophet, Joseph Smith. Latter-day Saints were being driven from their homes and killed by armed militias who justified their aggression with the “extermination order” of Governor Lilburn W. Boggs. This forced evacuation also dispossessed the Latter-day Saints of their “land of promise” and “center place of Zion”—the capital of their millennial utopia that was named for the primordial patriarch Enoch’s “City of Holiness,” whose inhabitants’ righteousness was sufficient, according to Joseph’s visions, to effect its translation into heaven, where it became God’s “abode forever.”¹

During their preparations to “establish Zion” in western Missouri, Latter-day Saints had come to see this homeland as the material sign of an eternal covenant with God, the purpose of which was to fulfill the mission of the Creation—namely, “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man[kind]” (Moses 1:39). In short, western Missouri had

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become, by divine decree, an axis mundi—the point of contact between heaven and earth, the revealed pattern for human life on earth, the foundation of the Saints’ distinctive identity as God’s chosen people, and the locus of their anticipated eternal blessings (see D&C 38:16–20). To this end, Latter-day Saints hoped to create a covenant community (“earthly Zion”) that would prepare the earth and its inhabitants to be united with “heavenly Zion” at the end of time to establish the kingdom of God.

For Latter-day Saints, western Missouri became the first physical location in the final period of Earth’s temporal history to receive from God a distinctive name (“Zion”) and to be formally dedicated by holders of the priesthood—the power of God that had been restored to earth through Joseph Smith by the ancient apostles Peter, James, and John—thereby further distinguishing this “land of promise” from all other earthly places. These geographical firsts were especially auspicious because, according to Joseph’s revelations, the earth itself was eventually to become a “celestial kingdom,” or supreme heaven, for those of its inhabitants who had lived worthy of the ultimate blessing of eternal life (see D&C 57:1–3). The dedication of Zion’s “center place” and the “gathering” of the “elect” to “establish Zion” through their “consecrated” labors inaugurated this ambitious worldwide mission.

The Saints’ enthusiasm to receive their eternal “inheritances,” however, outstripped their practical preparations, resources, and capabilities. Resulting tensions among Church members and with surrounding residents and local governments spawned conflict that led to Governor Boggs’s October 27, 1838, coup de grâce.

Compounding the seriousness of the Saints’ chaotic exodus across the frozen Mississippi River into Illinois was the imprisonment of Joseph Smith and other Church leaders in the Clay County jail for crimes whose conviction could have led to their execution. The details of this difficult time are well documented and need not concern us here.2 Suffice it to say that these events caused the Latter-day Saints to acknowledge that establishing Zion would be complicated and delayed, if not abandoned altogether. Nevertheless, God gave them hope with the assurance that “Zion shall not be moved out of her place, notwithstanding her children are scattered” (D&C 101:17). While Joseph felt

that God’s people should continue their quest for Zion, the effective terms and conditions of the continued quest were not immediately clear. Further revelations were needed to define a meaningful future for this covenant community.

A huge practical step forward came with the offer to the Church from a major land developer to purchase a large tract of mostly undeveloped property on a sweeping bend of the Mississippi River in west central Illinois. Joseph Smith redirected the latter-day gathering to this place, which he designated Nauvoo. For several years, this and adjacent areas became the locus for the redefinition of the Latter-day Saint concept of Zion and its covenant community.

Additional revelations came to the Prophet as he sought divine answers to these searching questions, not at the ecstatic pace of 1830s Kirtland, Ohio, but with spiritual insights as sublime as any in Joseph’s prophetic oeuvre. They nuanced in remarkable ways the concept of Zion and expanded its focus, scope, method, and ideal outcome. Threads of this remarkable change had been evident in many of the Prophet’s earlier revelations, but Nauvoo gave Joseph the opportunity to distill a revised and expansive worldview that encompassed the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ and served as the capstone of his nearly quarter-century prophetic ministry. His sacred writings from the jail in Liberty, Missouri, helped lay the foundation for this spiritual transformation, whose structure and significance can be appreciated through a systematic comparison of the literary craftsmanship of the Prophet’s sacred writings from Liberty Jail with his subsequent revelations in Nauvoo. While the analysis which follows is neither definitive nor exhaustive, it illustrates the general thesis that

- Liberty Jail was a seedbed whose eternal truths blossomed in the house of the Lord in Nauvoo,
- the sacred covenants and associated priesthood ordinances that were initially established in the Nauvoo Temple extend the blessing of eternal life to all God’s children who have ever lived, and
- the plan of “exaltation” that was implemented in Nauvoo has become standard in all Latter-day Saint temples, helping to fulfill Nauvoo’s divine destiny as the “cornerstone of Zion.”

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4. As will be seen below, “exaltation” is a specialized Latter-day Saint term for eternal life that became part of the sacred Latter-day Saint lexicon in Nauvoo, and “cornerstone
Method

Central to this thesis are the following premises.5

- Sacred texts like sections of the Doctrine and Covenants are better understood as integrated perspectives—coherent spiritual arguments, if you will—than as collections of disparate doctrinal or behavioral directives.

- Thus, deeper insight from the study of modern revelations results from an in-depth reading of these texts and identification of complex and pervasive literary patterns that unify their respective contents.

- Recurrent literary conventions and rhetorical themes that span multiple revelations illustrate larger patterns of spiritual significance.

- The systematic comparison of seemingly distinct revelations can illustrate not only more comprehensive spiritual messages but also ways that subsequent revelations may expand, refine, and develop earlier ones.6

To this end, the present study compares Joseph Smith’s sacred writings from Liberty Jail, especially Doctrine and Covenants 121,7 with his revelations from Nauvoo, especially Doctrine and Covenants 124 of Zion” is a distinctive identity repeatedly bestowed on Nauvoo by divine revelation (see D&C 124:2, 23, 60, 131).


6. The doctrinal foundations of the concept of continuing revelation are found in Joseph Smith’s ninth Article of Faith: “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”

7. Texts that now constitute Doctrine and Covenants 121–23 were part of a letter dictated by Joseph Smith to members of the Church on March 20, 1839. The letter was published in May 1840 in the Times and Seasons, and highly edited excerpts were canonized by the Church as sections 121–23 in the 1876 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. “Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge, 20 March 1839,” Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed March 1, 2024, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/1?highlight=Doctrine%20and%20Covenants%20121; Mark Ashurst-McGee and others, eds., Documents,
and 132, to outline a remarkable spiritual transformation for the Church of Jesus Christ. Following the systematic comparison of sacred texts, the study reflects briefly on several pedagogical principles of Joseph’s revelations, abundantly evident in section 121, that suggest ways that the Lord mentored him throughout his prophetic ministry. To set the stage for this comparison, this study initially summarizes the literary structure of Doctrine and Covenants 121.

Analysis

Structure of the Scriptural Text

Doctrine and Covenants 121 consists of a “crucial conversation” between Joseph Smith and the Lord. Initially, Joseph challenges the Lord with a series of rhetorical questions: “Oh God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place? How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries? Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?” (vv. 1–3).

He also demands divine judgment and deliverance:

O Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven, earth, and seas, and of all things that in them are, and who controllest and subjectest the devil, and the dark and benighted dominion of Sheol—stretch forth thy hand; let thine eye pierce; let thy pavilion be taken up; let thy hiding place no longer be covered; let thine ear be inclined; let thine heart be softened; and thy bowels moved with compassion toward us.

Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and, in the fury of thine heart, with thy sword avenge us of our wrongs.

Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever. (vv. 4–6)

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9. “A question propounded for its rhetorical effect and not requiring a reply or intended to induce a reply. The principle supporting the use of the rhetorical question is that, because its answer is obvious and usually the only one possible, a deeper impression will be made by raising the question than by the speaker’s making a direct statement.” C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon, A Handbook to Literature, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. “rhetorical question,” italics in original.
In response, the Lord chastens Joseph:10 “My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands. Thou art not yet as Job; thy friends do not contend against thee, neither charge thee with transgression, as they did Job” (vv. 7–10).

The Lord then addresses Joseph's demands for judgment and deliverance in terms that Joseph may not have anticipated. Rather than destroying the “enemies” of the Saints and liberating their leaders from prison, the Lord extends remarkable promises of judgment and of deliverance, whose implications go far beyond mortality and which find initial fulfillment several years later in the ritual program of the Nauvoo Temple. These promises deserve further examination.

**Judgment (vv. 11–25)**

The standard works of the Church of Jesus Christ contain few condemnations of the wicked more sweeping and graphic than this litany of curses. While enemies of the Church are not specifically named, they are identified by the following pejorative characteristics: “they who do charge thee with transgression”; “their hearts are corrupted”; “all those that shall lift up the heel against mine anointed . . . and cry they have sinned when they have not sinned before me”;11 “servants of sin”; “children of disobedience”; “those who swear falsely against my servants”; “they [who] have offended my little ones”; and “all those that discomfort my people, and drive, and murder, and testify against them.”12 The

10. While “chasten” is not used in this sacred text, its abundant use elsewhere in the Doctrine and Covenants, especially section 95:1, and its complementary English meanings—“to correct, discipline” and “to render chaste”—make it an appropriate descriptor for this counsel, in which the Lord not only corrects his prophet but also gives him experience that will further prepare him for eternal life. See The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, 17th printing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), s.v. “chasten” (hereafter cited as OED); R. Gary Shapiro, comp., An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price (Salt Lake City: Hawkes Publishing, 1977), s.vv. “chasten,” “chastened,” “chastening,” “chastisement.”

11. The prepositional phrase “before me” acknowledges two different standards of judgment. While the Lord’s servants may be guilty of sin or crimes as determined by human judges, whose judgments reflect temporal perspectives, God is the ultimate judge who assigns guilt and innocence from an eternal and divine perspective.

12. Four of these divine indictments include bearing of “false witness” against the Lord’s servants, a sin explicitly prohibited in the Ten Commandments. See Exodus 20:16.
general wording of these phrases makes them applicable to more groups than those associated with the troubles of 1830s Missouri. The associated condemnations are expressed largely in figurative language using third-person plural pronouns, thereby giving the Lord considerable latitude in administering specific justice to the wicked: “their hope shall be blasted,” “their prospects shall melt away,” “they may not understand [God’s] marvelous workings,” “their hopes may be cut off,” “they and their posterity shall be swept from under heaven,” “they shall be severed from the ordinances of mine house,” “their houses and their barns shall perish,” “they themselves shall be despised by those that flattered them,” “they shall not have the right to the priesthood, nor their posterity after them from generation to generation,” “a generation of vipers shall not escape the damnation of hell,” and they will receive “a swift judgment in the season thereof.”

Deliverance (vv. 26–46)

Rather than political, legal, and physical freedom, section 121 promises spiritual deliverance at a level unanticipated by the Prophet and directed not only at Joseph and his fellow prisoners but also at the entire covenant community. The promise of deliverance is summarized by the themes of knowledge and power.

Knowledge (vv. 26–33). In three sentences and a concluding short paragraph, the Lord promises knowledge about the most sublime questions that humankind has ever contemplated: “What is the structure and animating force of the universe?” and “What is the purpose of the Creation and humankind’s place in it?” The scope of the promised knowledge also addresses three core dimensions of human consciousness: spatial (“bounds,” v. 30), temporal (“times,” v. 31), and governmental (“thrones” and so forth, v. 29). The revelation also asserts that these transcendent truths have been kept from humankind since the beginning of time and will be revealed by the “unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost” in God’s due time and only to those who qualify.

Concluding the promise of divine knowledge are two rhetorical questions, the same literary device by which Joseph initiates his desperate demands (see vv. 1–3). God’s use of this device, however, is far more sophisticated and sublime than Joseph’s. Rather than informing Joseph why he had not been more proactive in securing the liberty of

13. This specific curse uses similar wording of a divine blessing earlier promised by God to his covenant people. See Doctrine and Covenants 59:17.
his servants and the safety of his people, God uses a metaphor of water to indicate his willingness and capacity to bless his people with divine knowledge in view of their eventual salvation: “How long can rolling waters remain impure? What power shall stay the heavens? As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints” (D&C 121:33).14

**Power (vv. 34–46).** The remainder of section 121 summarizes the spiritual qualities consistent with the proper exercise of God’s power (priesthood).15 More will be said of this statement later. Suffice it to say here that the sermonette on power contrasts characteristics by which “almost all men” pervert God’s power through “unrighteous dominion” (v. 39; see vv. 34–40) with those by which the proper exercise of priesthood bestows heavenly blessings on all who would receive them (vv. 41–46).

**Literary Comparisons**

The following analysis provides a systematic, if preliminary, comparison of the language of Joseph’s canonized writings from Liberty Jail and Nauvoo to illustrate ways that Liberty Jail served as a seedbed for remarkable truths that flourished in the house of the Lord in Nauvoo.

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14. Several words and phrases in this concluding paragraph deserve further comment. Purity and power are godly qualities mentioned in the Lord’s rhetorical questions. The promise implies that they are inevitable consequences of the knowledge to be revealed. The theme of divine power introduces the second dimension of God’s promised deliverance and pervades the water metaphor: the “puny arm” of humankind; the unalterable (“decreed”) course of the Missouri River and the impossibility of arresting or deflecting its flow; the self-identifier “Almighty,” which is the title that Joseph uses to address the Lord in his initial demands (v. 4); and the irresistible force (“pouring down”) of heavenly revelations on God’s covenant people. The verb *stay* hearkens to Joseph’s initial challenge (v. 2) and reinforces the literary craftsmanship of the Lord’s response, since it is used primarily in English poetic contexts. These literary and rhetorical patterns not only connect the Lord’s response to Joseph’s plea but also provide a broader purpose for God’s heavenly mission than simply the physical protection of his disciples. See *OED*, s.v. “stay”; Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.vv. “stay,” “stayed.”

15. With more than two hundred uses, “power” is one of the most frequent nouns in the Doctrine and Covenants, mostly as a synonym of God’s power (priesthood), and is widely distributed throughout the revelations. This general rhetorical pattern implies that the worthy acquisition and proper use of priesthood constitute central themes in modern revelation. See Shapiro, *Exhaustive Concordance*, s.v. “power.”
1. Gnostic Epistemology

**Liberty Jail**

“God shall give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost, that has not been revealed since the world was until now” (D&C 121:26).

**Nauvoo**

“I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 124:41).

“Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its presuppositions and basis, and the general reliability of claims to knowledge.” Since the type of knowledge addressed in section 121 is of ultimate value to human consciousness, it is crucial for God on this occasion to state its source and legitimacy— “the incomparable gift of the Holy Ghost,” who, for Latter-day Saints, is the third member of the Godhead, God’s regular spokesperson, and the source of all eternal truth. Thus the knowledge promised to Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail is of ultimate significance and comes from the most reliable authority in the universe. The promised knowledge is also gnostic—that is, to be shared by God only for special purposes, on special occasions, in special venues, and with special persons.

Nauvoo revelations reinforce the gnostic quality of this sacred knowledge by further specifying that these sublime truths are to be shared exclusively in the house of the Lord, which is to be dedicated to his holy name. More generally, Doctrine and Covenants 124 implies that a distinctive and crucial feature of the latter days is the restoration of this sacred knowledge and its associated ordinances, covenants, and authorities as well as the creation of a proper venue to share these supremely sacred truths. More will be said below about the Latter-day Saint concept of “fulness.”

2. “Ordinances of Mine House”

**Liberty Jail**

“They shall be severed from the ordinances of mine house” (D&C 121:19).

**Nauvoo**

“Let this house be built unto my name, that I may reveal mine ordinances therein unto my people” (D&C 124:40).

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While the terms “ordination(s)” and “mine [my] house” are found in many sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, section 121 is the first revelation that combines these terms in the same phrase.19 While Joseph had learned many things about latter-day temples in prior revelations, in Liberty Jail he learned that the house of the Lord exists primarily for the performance of specialized priesthood ordinances.20 The analogous passage in Doctrine and Covenants 124 strengthens and refines the Liberty Jail phrase with three crucial truths:

- Temples are to be the exclusive venue for the performance of priesthood ordinances that provide formal access to the blessing of eternal life.
- Temple ordinances are the sole stewardship of God. That is, only he through his ordained prophet is authorized to reveal them to humankind and to regulate their earthly performance.
- Temple ordinances distinguish God’s covenant people from the rest of humankind.

Parenthetically, “severed” is an especially poignant term used in Doctrine and Covenants 121.21 The verb’s common English connotations imply a physical division—“cut off,” “cleave,” “rend,” “separate,” “exclude,” “limit,” and “mark off.”22 In this revelation, the term connotes a spiritual cursing as well—restricting the wicked from the heavenly blessings that are available to the righteous through sacred temple ordinances.23 “Severed” is an especially graphic expression of this curse, implying a categorical, even violent separation of the wicked from divine blessings.24

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19. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “house,” “ordinance,” “ordinances.”
20. For example, the ordinance of washing bodies with water and anointing them with oil, symbolic of their purification, was initially performed in the Kirtland Temple. Similarly, the Saints experienced an “endowment of power” in the Kirtland Temple, but it was more of an ecstatic, Pentecost-type experience connected with the structure’s dedication than the formal, ritual experience of the Nauvoo Temple. See Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 310–15.
21. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “severed.”
23. On the inevitable curses consequent to breaking a covenant with God, see Scott W. Hahn, Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 316–19.
24. 1 Nephi 22:13 uses the metaphor of decapitation to describe the destructive end of evil, symbolized as the “great and abominable church,” at the end of time.
Thus the phrase “severed from the ordinances of mine house” implies that prohibiting access to temple blessings is one of God’s most severe curses, potentially even worse than physical death (see v. 23).

3. “Right[s] to [of] the Priesthood”

“Those shall not have right to the priesthood, nor their posterity after them from generation to generation” (D&C 121:21).

“That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, [which] cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness” (D&C 121:36).

Section 121 contains two complementary phrases regarding the role of priesthood in administering gospel blessings. The first, “right to the priesthood,” refers to authorized access to divine power. It clarifies who qualifies to receive the priesthood. The larger statement of which this phrase is a part is a negative statement of this principle. It restricts the priesthood from the unworthy and extends that restriction to “their posterity after them from generation to generation.” In short, the complete declaration implies that the “right to the priesthood” is both individual and collective: the Lord intends to make his “kingdom of priests” not only spiritual but also familial and perpetual.25

The second phrase, “rights of the priesthood,” refers to the proper scope and authority of the use of divine power by God’s children acting in his name. The sermonette on power of which this phrase is a part specifies that the effective exercise of priesthood power depends on “principles of righteousness.”26 To illustrate this point, section 121 draws a positive and negative contrast. On the one hand, those who abuse priesthood authority to “cover [their] sins, or to gratify [their] pride, [their] vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion . . . in any degree of unrighteousness” are guilty of “unrighteous dominion” and thus forfeit their right (“Amen to the priesthood”) to act authoritatively in the name of God (vv. 37,


26. Several proximate expressions of these two phrases exist in the Doctrine and Covenants, but these are the only specific examples of this wording in Joseph Smith’s canonized revelations. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.vv. “right,” “rights.”
“rights of the priesthood” depend qualitatively upon such “principles of righteousness” as “persuasion,” “long-suffering,” “gentleness,” “meekness,” “love unfeigned,” “kindness,” “pure knowledge,” “reproving . . . when moved upon by the Holy Ghost,” “faithfulness,” “charity,” and “virtue” (vv. 36, 41–45). Those who exercise the priesthood in righteousness are promised the following blessings (vv. 45–46):

- “Thy confidence [shall] wax strong in the presence of God,”
- “The doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven,”
- “The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion,”
- “Thy scepter [shall be] an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth,” and
- “Thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever.”

Nauvoo revelations further clarify the doctrine of the priesthood in crucial ways:

- The term “rights” is given a more formal designation, “keys.”
- The house of the Lord becomes the exclusive venue to perform the most sacred priesthood ordinances.
- The principal purpose of temple ordinances becomes the bestowal of the heavenly blessings of “honor and glory” (D&C 124:34).

More will be said of these blessings below.
4. “Fulness of Glory”

“The phrase “fulness of glory,” with variations, appears five times in the Doctrine and Covenants, all in supremely spiritual contexts (D&C 84:24; 93:6, 16; 121:27; 132:6). In modern revelations, “glory” connotes almost exclusively a central quality of godliness—the visual evidence of God’s might and majesty. Its companion term, “fulness,” has several complementary connotations in the Doctrine and Covenants consistent with its common English usage, including “filled,” “abundance,” “completeness,” and “perfection.” In the Doctrine and Covenants, “fulness” also connotes eternal life (D&C 93:1–20)—a sublime usage that is not recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary, the ultimate authority on English vocabulary. All these connotations of “fulness,” including the unique Latter-day Saint one, are consistent with the phrase “fulness of glory.” In addition, section 121 expressly connects this synonym of life eternal with the use of two key characteristics of this holy status—namely, living in God’s “eternal presence” and enjoying God’s “immortal rest.”

A Nauvoo-period revelation expands and refines the “celestial” connotation of the phrase “fulness of glory” by associating the house of the Lord with the heavenly blessings of “honor, immortality, and eternal life.”

5. Sacred Cosmography

“The phrase “fulness of glory,” with variations, appears five times in the Doctrine and Covenants, all in supremely spiritual contexts (D&C 84:24; 93:6, 16; 121:27; 132:6). In modern revelations, “glory” connotes almost exclusively a central quality of godliness—the visual evidence of God’s might and majesty. Its companion term, “fulness,” has several complementary connotations in the Doctrine and Covenants consistent with its common English usage, including “filled,” “abundance,” “completeness,” and “perfection.” In the Doctrine and Covenants, “fulness” also connotes eternal life (D&C 93:1–20)—a sublime usage that is not recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary, the ultimate authority on English vocabulary. All these connotations of “fulness,” including the unique Latter-day Saint one, are consistent with the phrase “fulness of glory.” In addition, section 121 expressly connects this synonym of life eternal with the use of two key characteristics of this holy status—namely, living in God’s “eternal presence” and enjoying God’s “immortal rest.”

A Nauvoo-period revelation expands and refines the “celestial” connotation of the phrase “fulness of glory” by associating the house of the Lord with the heavenly blessings of “honor, immortality, and eternal life.”


30. Of the 171 uses of “glory” in the Doctrine and Covenants, nearly all are nouns, and all but one of these connote a quality of godliness. See Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “glory.”

31. OED, s.vv. “fullness,” “fulness.”
In Liberty Jail, the Lord promised his prophet authoritative understanding of the “bounds” of the heavens and the earth. He also enlarged this promise to include the “glories, laws, and set times” that govern their operations.32 While understanding the structure and functioning of the universe is one of the highest expressions of human consciousness, grasping this knowledge from the perspective of the Creator gives it ultimate significance.

Nauvoo revelations expand and refine this ultimate knowledge. The noun “house” appears more than two hundred times in the Doctrine and Covenants, with several complementary connotations, including a physical dwelling or family group; a person’s lineage or covenant community (for example, “House of Israel”); a public structure (for example, the Kirtland print shop and “Nauvoo House”); a place of worship (for example, a church or temple); and the heavenly kingdom (for example, “my Father’s house”). Of these varied uses, approximately half are synonyms for “temple.”33

“Order” also appears frequently in the Doctrine and Covenants but fewer than half the number of times as “house.” Its connotations are as varied, complementary, and spiritually significant as those of “house,” including an ideal social arrangement (for example, “united order”); a proper or coherent sequence or array; priesthood rank or status (for example, “order of Enoch,” “o[rd]er of Melchizedek,” “O[rd]er of the Son of God”); and purpose.34

In Doctrine and Covenants 132, the “order” of the “house” of God encompasses several of these standard English connotations, including covenant community, temple, kingdom, ideal spiritual arrangement, and priesthood status. As specifically enumerated in this revelation, the order of God comprises a covenant of “sealing” whose associated priesthood ordinance is performed exclusively in a temple by officiators who are anointed to do so by delegation of the president of the Church. If couples who are thus “sealed” keep the conditions of the covenant throughout their lives and have their sealing confirmed by the “Holy Spirit of promise” (D&C 132:7–24),35 they receive the promise of eternal life, or exaltation, the “greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 6:13; 14:7). “Exaltation” is the special Latter-day Saint

32. An earlier expression of this lofty concept is found in Doctrine and Covenants 88:36–50.
33. OED, s.v. “house”; Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “house.”
34. OED, s.v. “order”; Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “order.”
35. Four of six uses of “house of order” and the only use of “house of confusion” in the Doctrine and Covenants appear in section 132, implying that the ideal arrangement of the heavenly kingdom of God is achieved largely through the covenants and associated priesthood ordinances of the temple. See Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “house.”
term that was introduced by revelation in Nauvoo to express the unique concept of eternal life established in the Nauvoo Temple.

6. Theology

“All their glories, laws, and set times, shall be revealed in the days of the dispensation of the fulness of times—According to that which was ordained in the midst of the Council of the Eternal God of all other gods before this world was” (D&C 121:31–32).

“Theology is the study of the nature of God. Latter-day Saint theology is unique among Christian religions in the belief in a premortal “council” of Gods—that is, multiple divine beings who together conceive and carry out the Creation and related plan of salvation. This Latter-day Saint pantheon dramatically expands the social complexity and animating power of the universe, discussed in section 5 on “sacred cosmology” above.

While the passage from Liberty Jail focuses on the planning role of the divine council in the premortal existence, the corresponding passage from Joseph’s sacred Nauvoo writings specifies that “the Gods” not only “ordained” the plan of salvation in the beginning but also have implemented (“organized and formed”) their plan throughout time, including the role of the earth and its inhabitants in the Creation. These sublime truths are featured in the temple ordinance introduced in Nauvoo and known as the “endowment.”

7. Theosis

“Nothing shall be withheld, whether there be one God or many gods, they shall be manifest. All thrones and dominions, principalities and powers, shall be revealed and set forth upon all who have endured valiantly for the gospel of Jesus Christ” (D&C 121:28–29).

“Then shall they be gods, because they have no end; therefore shall they be from everlasting to everlasting, because they continue; then shall they be above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods, because they have all power, and the angels are subject unto them” (D&C 132:20).

37. While Joseph Smith began translating the sacred text of the book of Abraham as early as 1830s Kirtland, its first publication occurred in Nauvoo in the Church’s official newspaper, the Times and Seasons. See Givens, Pearl of Greatest Price, 7.
A related passage in the Liberty Jail revelations extends the pantheon beyond the primordial past and into the eternal future. Thus, not only does the sacred Latter-day Saint universe contain a society of gods, but its plan of exaltation also anticipates a perpetual cycle of creation and sanctification of life throughout eternity.\(^39\) While Joseph’s revelations do not provide descriptive details of this extensive heavenly society, they do promise additional “knowledge from time to time” (D&C 1:28) about its essential features, but only to those who themselves qualify for this supreme degree of eternal glory.

A Nauvoo-period revelation is much more explicit about this ultimate sphere of existence. Doctrine and Covenants 132 specifies that those who achieve this “fulness” will be deified (for example, “they shall be gods”). Selected formal requirements of this status are summarized as the “order” of God, mentioned above.

While theosis, or the philosophical notion that humans can become gods, is not unique to Latter-day Saints among Christianity and other religions, the expanded concept as restored through Joseph Smith includes the following distinctive dimensions:

- social, involving the eternal union of sealed husbands and wives;
- generative, granting eternal couples the power to create innumerable spirit offspring who will inhabit “worlds without number” (Moses 1:33); and
- universal, extending the possibility of life eternal to all God’s children, including those who have died, through the performance of vicarious temple ordinances on their behalf.\(^40\)


\(^{40}\) The third canonized article of Latter-day Saint faith, articulated by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, affirms, “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.”
8. “Exaltation”

Liberty Jail

“Then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven. The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter shall be an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever” (D&C 121:45–46).

Nauvoo

“If ye receive me in the world, then shall ye know me, and shall receive your exaltation; that where I am ye shall be also. This is eternal lives—to know the only wise and true God, and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent. I am he” (D&C 132:23–24).

“For I am the Lord thy God, and will be with thee even unto the end of the world, and through all eternity; for verily I seal upon you your exaltation, and prepare a throne for you in the kingdom of my Father, with Abraham your father” (D&C 132:49).

Several qualities of this deified status are implied in the Liberty Jail revelations:

- living in the presence of God,
- receiving and being authorized to use God’s power (priesthood),
- enjoying the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, and
- reigning eternally over a sovereign dominion.

While the righteous may realize a measure of these spiritual qualities in mortality, their “fulness” is enjoyed only by those who attain eternal life. This series of blessings clearly implies eternal life by the explicit use of the phrase “in the presence of God” in the first and the phrase “forever and ever” in the last.

So unique and expansive is this concept of eternal life that traditional Christian vocabulary fails to express it. Thus the Nauvoo revelations introduce a new term to the Latter-day Saint lexicon. “Exaltation” appears twelve times in the Doctrine and Covenants but only in Nauvoo-period revelations—once in section 124 and eleven other times in section 132. This term with the connotation of eternal life occurs nowhere else in Latter-day Saint scripture, nor is it recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary.41

41. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “exaltation”; OED, s.v. “exaltation.” The first use of the verb form of this term, “exalt,” occurs in a Liberty Jail revelation in which God promises Joseph, “If thou endure it [affliction] well, God shall exalt thee on high.” At the time of Joseph’s incarceration, the implied definition of this term is limited to a traditional spiritual concept of deliverance: “Thou shalt triumph over all thy foes” (D&C 121:8). The definition of this term would greatly expand in Nauvoo.
To ensure the possibility of this eternal promise for all humankind and to reward Joseph Smith for his faithfulness, the Lord sealed upon him his “exaltation,” as seen in the passage cited above. Thus Joseph Smith became not only the principal advocate for the doctrine of exaltation in Latter-day Saint thought but also its initiator and exemplar in Latter-day Saint practice.

**Conclusion**

The present study provides two general insights into the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this dispensation.

First, the spiritual concepts introduced or substantially expanded in the sacred writings of Liberty Jail were so innovative that they required new and refined vocabulary to express them, new rituals to enact them, and substantially revised forms to contain them. These crucial features of the kingdom of God were revealed by God to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo (see A of F 1:9).

- New or substantially redefined words and phrases include “exaltation,” “sealing,” “endowment,” and “baptism for the dead.”
- New rituals include an array of priesthood ordinances that formally implement the plan of exaltation.
- While the Nauvoo Temple was neither the first envisioned nor the first dedicated by the Church of Jesus Christ, it was quite different from all previous Latter-day Saints temples. As was mentioned above, “temple” was the term that initially referenced this sacred edifice in Joseph Smith’s revelations (see, for example, D&C 36:8). However, subsequent revelations not only expanded and refined the concept but also shifted preference to the phrase “house of the Lord,” which, with close variations, appears in the Doctrine and Covenants roughly seven times more frequently than “temple” in reference to this sacred edifice.

The expanded worldview of this spiritual revolution is summarized in a statement attributed to Brigham Young on April 6, 1853, at the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the temple to be built in Salt Lake City, Utah: “Your endowment is, to receive all those ordinances in the House

of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, . . . to walk back to the presence of the Father, . . . and gain your eternal exaltation.” This grand statement applies to the Salt Lake City Utah Temple and all subsequent Latter-day Saint temples because of the ritual ordinances that were introduced in Nauvoo and established in the Nauvoo Temple.

This study does not claim that Liberty Jail was the absolute beginning nor that the Nauvoo Temple was the ultimate end of this spiritual revolution. Threads of these sublime doctrines and practices appear in many of Joseph’s prior revelations. In addition, at the temple in Kirtland, Ohio, heavenly messengers restored to earth crucial priesthood keys that empower this ritual program. Furthermore, prophets who succeeded Joseph Smith have used priesthood keys and the prophetic gifts of their office to realize more fully the universal potential of the ritual ordinances officially introduced in Nauvoo. The central point of the present study is to show that the sacred experiences in Liberty Jail prepared Joseph Smith for his transformative revelatory experiences in Nauvoo. They anticipated revelations that extend the promise of eternal life through sacred temple covenants and associated priesthood ordinances potentially to all humanity, including those who have died.

Liberty Jail revelations also illustrate ways that the Lord mentored the Prophet throughout his earthly ministry. This pattern of spiritual development is apparent in section 121 and many other revelations and can be summarized in two general areas of growth: pedagogy and human development.

Pedagogy

Modern revelations indicate that God regularly meets Joseph Smith where he is but always expects the Prophet to progress to where God is. In short, God condescends to the learning style and level of intellectual, social, and spiritual maturity of his servants, but doing so is only the first step in accomplishing his heavenly purpose. The complementary and more crucial process of exaltation assists his children to prepare for the blessing of eternal life. Examples of this two-way pedagogical process are evident in the following revelations.

God regularly chastens Joseph. As was mentioned above, the verb “chasten” has two complementary connotations relative to the process of sanctification: “to correct” and “to make chaste or holy.” Divine chastening certainly corrects, but more importantly, it furthers one’s spiritual progression—helping God’s children realize their divine potential. In Liberty Jail, the Lord responded to Joseph’s complaint with the counsel “Joseph my son, peace be unto thy soul.” This message communicates reassurance, for example, “Don’t worry. All will be well,” and a mild rebuke, for instance, “Settle down; stop complaining.” The rest of the revelation provides Joseph with a broader heavenly perspective on judgment and deliverance, which considerably refines his prophetic ministry. For example, never again would Joseph emphatically seek divine condemnation of his enemies. At the same time, he opened himself to the further light and knowledge the Lord promised in Liberty Jail. Fulfillment of these promises came in the transforming revelations of Nauvoo, which collectively serve as the capstone to Joseph’s prophetic ministry.

A prior example of this two-way connotation of divine chastening occurs when the Lord indicts the Saints in Kirtland for not completing the temple in a timely manner. While repeating four times in Doctrine and Covenants 95 that the Saints are chastened for committing a “grievous sin,” the Lord reiterates three times that chastening is a sign that he loves his servants, and he emphasizes three lofty blessings he intends to bestow upon them as a result: “to prepare mine apostles to prune my vineyard for the last time,” to “pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,” and “to endow those whom I have chosen with power from on high” (D&C 95:3, 4, 8).

Consistent with Joseph’s experience in Liberty Jail, God also occasionally answers questions that he wants Joseph to ask, not necessarily the questions that Joseph and fellow Church members are asking. For example, in Doctrine and Covenants 27, early Latter-day Saints seek divine clarification on appropriate emblems of the weekly sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. A few days after answering this specific question, the Lord reveals more sublime counsel about the eternal significance of the sacrament, considerably enlarging upon the original request. The Lord indicates that the ritual reminder of his atoning sacrifice is also a rehearsal for a millennial meal.

45. OED, s.v. “chasten.”
46. Verse 1 of this revelation is the only one in Latter-day Saint scripture of which I am aware that reiterates three times God’s love for his disciples. Other examples of divine chastening from the Doctrine and Covenants concern the loss of the initial translated pages of the Book of Mormon (D&C 3) and the explanation for the forced evacuation of the Saints from the dedicated “center place” of Zion (D&C 101).
that holy men and women from all periods of earth's history will share with the Savior to celebrate his victory over Satan and the permanent establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. This supplemental revelation also compares the sacrament covenant to the “whole armor” of God, which protects the covenant community against the “fiery darts of the wicked” (D&C 27:15, 17).47

Another instance of the Lord answering a different question than that which Joseph had asked occurred toward the end of his prophetic ministry. Joseph had been curious why certain ancient patriarchs were divinely justified in having “many wives and concubines.” The Lord’s “answer . . . as touching this matter” is embedded in perhaps the Prophet’s most far-reaching revelation that defines holy matrimony in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ as the covenant of sealing that is essential for all who would receive the blessings of “exaltation.” While the Lord’s answer to Joseph’s initial question is found in verses 34–39 of section 132, it occurs in the context of a revelation that far transcends it.

God’s mentoring of Joseph in section 121 also finds analogues in communications that respond to a given question in a way that motivates the next question that he wants Joseph to ask. For example, several of Joseph’s early revelations end with a declaration of the Lord’s imminent return (D&C 33:18; 34:12; 35:27). A revelation received on December 9, 1830, repeats the usual refrain but adds that “my temple” is the place where the Savior will return (D&C 36:8). This revelation shifts the Saints’ preoccupation with the Second Coming from a time to a place, a doctrine that is virtually unique among Christian denominations of mid-nineteenth-century America.48 It is also the first use of “temple” in modern revelation.49 By adding a short prepositional phrase to a familiar closing of divine communications, the Lord not only forecasts the fulfillment of a central prophecy of both the Hebrew Bible (Mal. 3:1) and the Book of Mormon (3 Ne. 24:1) but also reorients the Prophet’s prophetic ministry (JS–H 1:36).

Finally, as illustrated in Doctrine and Covenants 121, God’s answers frequently exceed Joseph’s immediate capacity to grasp the full import of what he has received. Thus, it often takes Joseph months, even years, to fully comprehend his divine encounters. For example, the written

47. See also Steven C. Harper, Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 92–94.
49. Shapiro, Exhaustive Concordance, s.v. “temple.”
account of Joseph’s First Vision, which the Church eventually accepted as scripture, was written eighteen years after his supernal experience in the Sacred Grove.50

Human Development

A related impact of Joseph’s revelations, as seen clearly in his experiences in Liberty Jail, involves his spiritual growth as a person and as a prophet. The following are some examples.

While Joseph’s spiritual experiences acknowledge God’s interest in his mortal condition and temporal concerns, they more directly address Joseph’s eternal potential and God-given mission. For example, one of Joseph’s most poignant and deep-seated temporal preoccupations involved his family’s “indigent” financial circumstances. According to the accounts of his initial encounters with Moroni, Joseph had to learn that the gold plates were more valuable for their spiritual contents than for their monetary worth (see JS–H 1:46).51 His perpetually limited financial resources were also the subject of later divine counsel: “Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold, the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich” (D&C 6:7; see also 11:7).

In addition, Joseph’s periods of substantial spiritual growth often coincide with his most severe earthly trials. For example, his certain knowledge of God obtained in the First Vision directly followed a personal encounter with Satan that nearly proved his “sudden destruction” (JS–H 1:15).52 Similarly, Joseph’s brutal tarring and feathering received at the hands of neighbors and acquaintances in Hiram, Ohio, came shortly after and was likely motivated by his transcendent vision of the three degrees of heavenly glory received at the home of John and Else Johnson.53

50. Steven L. Olsen, “Literary Craftsmanship of the Joseph Smith Story,” in Joseph Smith and His First Vision: Context, Place, and Meaning, ed. Alexander L. Baugh and others (Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2021), 219–36, argues that the literary craftsmanship of this account, written in 1838, symbolizes the eternal mission of the Church of Jesus Christ and the central message of its earthly restoration.


Finally, many of Joseph's most remarkable periods of spiritual maturity came at substantial personal cost. For example, recounting his First Vision alienated local clergy, obtaining the golden plates made him the target of local treasure seekers, persisting to translate the Book of Mormon caused a permanent rift with his wife's family, exercising spiritual gifts like revelation often spawned jealousy among friends and associates, and the revelation that addresses perhaps his most transcendent doctrine (D&C 132) alienated his wife and contributed in part to his untimely death. Reminding his prophet of these and other traumatic incidents, the Lord rehearsed in Liberty Jail an impressive litany of adverse earthly experiences and concluded with wise counsel and perhaps the most poignant rhetorical question in Latter-day Saint scripture: “All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?” (D&C 122:7–8).

Following Joseph's transformative experience in Liberty Jail, his next canonized revelation (D&C 124) prefigures the sublime heavenly blessings that accompany completion of the house of the Lord in Nauvoo. Its design, construction, dedication, and use are all well-documented in available sources.54 The point of the present study is that the covenants and associated priesthood ordinances of the temple were precipitated by spiritual experiences received a few years earlier in Liberty Jail. These covenants and ordinances formally implemented the plan of exaltation, which has become standard in all Latter-day Saint temples and whose blessings are now extended to all of God's children through the vicarious performance of sacred priesthood ordinances on their behalf. This crucial watershed role contributes to Nauvoo's revealed identity as the “cornerstone of Zion” (D&C 124:2).

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54. See especially McBride, House for the Most High.
Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith by Stephen C. Taysom (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2023)

Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith by Stephen C. Taysom dives into the extraordinary life of Joseph F. Smith, the sixth president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Taysom expertly navigates the complexities of Smith’s life, offering readers a comprehensive and insightful biography of this important Church leader.

Taysom takes readers through Smith’s early years, marked by hardship and resilience as he faced the challenges of being orphaned at a young age and having the numerous responsibilities thrust upon him. Taysom looks at Smith’s experiences as a missionary, shedding light on pivotal moments that shaped his beliefs and convictions. Smith’s time in the First Presidency—as a counselor and as its leader—is also examined. This third period may be of particular interest to many readers of Latter-day Saint history, as President Smith presided over the Church—and played a vital role—during a time of profound social change and doctrinal codification.

This biography goes beyond the public persona and generally known anecdotes, offering readers a look into Smith’s struggles, familial relationships, spiritual experiences, and associations with fellow Church leaders and followers.

The title, Like a Fiery Meteor, aptly encapsulates the dynamic and impactful nature of Smith’s life, suggesting a trajectory that left an indelible mark on the history of the Church. This biography is a testament to Taysom’s careful research and engaging storytelling. He has written a page-turning portrait of a leader whose influence continues to be felt today. This book not only provides a window into the past but also prompts reflection on the lasting impact Joseph F. Smith has had on the Church and its ongoing narrative, providing a rich tapestry of history, spirituality, and enduring influence.

—Matthew B. Christensen
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