

# Theoscatology: On Dirt, Dung, and Digestion in God's Garden

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Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.

—Joseph Smith, *History of the Church*, 3:295

That which is spiritual being in the likeness of that which is temporal; and that which is temporal in the likeness of that which is spiritual; the spirit of man in the likeness of his person, as also the spirit of every beast, and every other creature which God has created.

—Doctrine and Covenants 77:2

## 1. The kind of thing a body is

Mormons believe that we need bodies to become like God. But bodies are organs of passing. Bodies channel what they can of the world through narrow walls of flesh and bone. Bodies pass light through our eyes, sounds through our ears, smells through our noses, tastes through our tongues, food through our bowels, air through our lungs, blood through our veins, electricity through our nerves, and symbols through our brains. These things all come and these things all go.

But, especially, bodies are built around our need for food. We have brains, but these brains sit on top of a mouth on top of a stomach on top of some eight meters of bowels. We have hearts for circulating food, lungs for burning food, nervous systems for detecting food, brains for plotting about food, and limbs for chasing it down. We put the world in our mouths and the world passes through us. Our bodies borrow their living from the world. For both the eater and the eaten, this borrowing is costly. And no matter how much our brains or lungs or bowels manage to sponge, there's always a remainder. You can keep part of what you take in, but only for a time. No matter how stuffed we feel, our bowels will move again. No matter how full our lungs, we will exhale. No matter how clear the thought, we will think the next thing.

We could draft a whole taxonomy of possible theologies just in terms of how they deal with these passings and their remainders. A short survey would suffice:

What is your theology's position on digestion?

- a. Excrement is a regrettable, local, temporary phenomenon.
- b. Excrement is so essential to bodies that such remainders are eternal.

In many ways, this indelicate question is *the* theological question. How we choose to answer will decide how we treat time and how we think about matter. It will shape our understanding of creation, agency, desire, sin, and redemption.

If bodies are organs of passing, will resurrection bring all of this passing—all of this waxing and waning, this wanting and detesting, this flooding and emptying, this inhaling and exhaling, this endless digesting—to an end? Do resurrected lungs exhale? Do perfected bowels move? Is the remainder real? Is it divine?

Living bodies are porous. Would a resurrected body cease to be porous? And if it did, would it still be a body? Living bodies are membranes, filters for sifting the world. Would a resurrected body cease to be a membrane? And if it did, would it still be human? Living bodies are planted in ecological interdependence. Do resurrected bodies belong to their worlds? Does life circulate in heaven? Is it shared? Would a resurrected body cease to be ecological? And if it did, would it still count as alive?

If we reread the biblical account of the Garden of Eden with these questions in mind, what might we see with new eyes?

## 2. A methodological note

In what follows I will offer a reading of Genesis 2–3 (just one among many possible readings) that is not literal or metaphorical but instrumental. When, in Genesis 2–3, the story talks about trees, fruit, dirt, breath, and bodies, I will not treat these as symbols in need of decoding. I will just treat them as referring to trees, fruit, dirt, breath, and bodies. However, I will also not read this story literally, as if it referred simply to two particular people at one particular place and time. Rather, I will treat this garden story about dirt, fruit, and digestion instrumentally, as a constellation of ideas capable of leveraging our relationship to dirt and digestion into a different configuration. In other words, I will read this story as if it taught “nothing save it were repentance and faith on the Lord” (Mosiah 18:20).

## 3. Humans from the humus

It is commonplace in biblical commentaries to note the difference in tone between the first creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:4 and the second account that begins abruptly midway through Genesis 2:4.<sup>1</sup> Where the tone of the first creation story is high and formal, the second is colloquial and earthy. Where the first looks down on creation from a grand cosmic perspective, the second unfolds at ground level and on a human scale. Where the first tells how God created “heaven and earth” (Genesis 1:1), the second inverts the prior formula and, instead, tells how God created “earth and heaven” (Genesis 2:4). Where the grammar in the first account is paced, stately, and symmetrical, the grammar in the second, as Robert Alter notes, “begins with elaborate syntactical subordination in a long complex sentence that uncoils all the way from the second part of verse 4 to the end of verse 7.” More, in this second account, God “does not summon things into being from a lofty distance through the mere agency of divine speech, but works as a craftsman . . . blowing life-breath into nostrils, building a woman from a rib. Whatever the disparate historical origins of the two accounts, the redaction gives us first a harmonious cosmic overview of creation and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguities of human origins.”<sup>2</sup>

Alter’s translation<sup>3</sup> of the grammatically complex overture to the second narrative reads like this:

On the day the LORD God made earth and heavens, no shrub of the field being yet on the earth and no plant of the field yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to till the soil, and wetness would well from the earth to water all the surface of the soil, then the LORD God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature. (Genesis 2:4–7)

The syntactical complexity of this opening section signals, like a warning shot across the reader's bow, a dramatic shift in tone and perspective. The grammar foreshadows the kind of thematic complexity and ambiguity characteristic of the very human story that follows. In a single opening line, the text introduces us—all at once and in a jumble—to a host of actors, conditions, and locations: God, earth, heaven, shrubs, fields, rain, soil, dampness, tilling, the human, nostrils, breath, blowing, fashioning, and so on. The rush to squeeze all of these elements into a single opening line, as if no one of them could be introduced without at least mentioning the others that condition and situate them, hints at the ecological complexity of the creative act itself. As many elements as the text can manage must be laid out immediately and in tight proximity. Further, the passage's complex temporal braid of present, projected, and consequent actions is especially striking as it toggles back and forth between what has happened, what hasn't yet happened, and what will need to happen for the pieces of the world to be bootstrapped into a workable ecology. The temporality proper to this second account of creation is not linear. Rather, time gets structured by the same press of complex, interdependent feedback loops that, shortly, will also structure the initial human experience—especially for Eve—of good, evil, and desire.

Note, too, that this second account of creation quickly zeroes in on a key word that is entirely absent from the first creation account. While both the first and second stories talk about God's creation of "the earth" (*ha 'arets*), the second story immediately focuses its attention on "the soil" (*'adamah*). This shift from the earth (in general) to the soil (in particular) is pivotal for the arc of the second story because, in this version, God is going to fashion the human itself (*'adam*) out of the soil (*'adamah*). To be a human being, the story indicates, is to be soil that breathes. "Then the Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living creature" (Genesis 2:7). This is no metaphor. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust: humans depend on the soil, our bodies are made from soil, and those bodies will literally become soil once again. To be a human being is to be a shaped membrane of local elements put into a relation of active, ecological interdependence with its local environment. This ecological interdependence initially takes the form of respiration: the circulation of oxygen and carbon dioxide immediately embeds the human in a web of borrowed and co-conditioned strengths.

Soil itself recapitulates the temporally complex feedback loops crucial to sustaining life because soil, though it must in some sense precede plant and animal life, is itself alive and, more, is itself composed, in part, of decomposing plants and animals. Plants can't grow without soil, but soil is itself composed of dead plants. Animals can't eat fruit that trees haven't grown, but trees need the seeded dung that follows from eating fruit to root new trees. The world is a confusion of overlapping membranes that sift each other's remainders. Life, as ecological, consists of feedback loops embedded inside feedback loops. Ecosystems depend on the generation of these mutually anterior dependences.

After God breathes into the shaped soil and the human comes to life, God places the human in the garden "to till it and to watch it." Then God "commanded the human, saying, 'From every fruit of the garden you may surely eat. But from the tree of knowledge, good and evil, you shall not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you are doomed to die'" (Genesis 2:16–17). With some provisos about what's appropriate for food, God now directs the human not only to breathe but to eat. Further, God sees that, even well fed, it's "not good for the human to be alone," and after comically auditioning all the beasts of the field and fowls of the air for a companion, "the Lord God built the rib He had taken from the human into a woman" (Genesis 2:18, 22). The woman is now bone of the human's bone, flesh of his flesh, soil taken from his own breathing soil.

#### 4. Eating the fruit

The story kicks into high gear, however, once the serpent arrives and tempts Eve to eat fruit from the tree of knowledge. If she eats it, the serpent says, "you shall not be doomed to die. For God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:4–5). The woman

here is promised a very particular kind of knowledge. If she eats this fruit, she will be introduced, in the first person, to the costs of life, both good and evil.

Now, again, I don't intend to read the fruit in this story metaphorically or supernaturally. Rather, I want to read the fruit as fruit, and in particular, I want to read the eating of it as, in fact, an *eating*. "And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was lust to the eyes and the tree was lovely to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave to her man, and he ate. And the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths" (Genesis 3:6-7).

Note that the woman only eats the fruit (fruit that she must first, presumably, eat in order to know what is and isn't good) because she *already* sees that "the tree is good." As with the soil, her action presupposes a knowledge that the action itself is meant to account for. And note, too, that the immediate result is that after eating this fruit, both of the humans begin to feel shame (cf. Genesis 2:25) and rush to cover their nakedness. Suddenly, the humans are in need of fig leaves.

It is common to think that, because the humans are naked, their embarrassment has something to do with sex. But it's not clear to me what sex has to do with the kind of knowledge one acquires by eating fruit. For my part, I don't think that this pivotal revelation about the nature of good and evil was initially about sex. I think it was about digestion. This reading may involve less high-romantic drama and more low comedy, but what other kind of revelation would inevitably follow when you've eaten too much fruit? The humans may have rushed to cover their nakedness, but they weren't covering their sex. They were covering their sphincters. Shocked and ashamed and afraid, the humans were suddenly brought face to face with what it would cost to be a living, breathing thing: the consumption of other living things. And, more, they were brought face to face with the truth of what it means to be dirt that, digesting its world, will always leave a remainder that must itself be expelled as dirt.

Eating this fruit, the humans discover how death is intertwined with life. They discover how their bodies, shaped from dirt, were *built for* consumption and defecation.

Whether the humans had been ingesting and digesting and egesting all along in the garden, the story doesn't say. God permits them to eat the other fruits. But if they had been eating, it seems they didn't yet know what it meant. They didn't yet know what it meant to be a membrane. And once they found out, they wished they hadn't. Finding themselves embodied, they flinched at the cost.

The scriptures are full of talk about bowels, both human and divine. But, as John Durham Peters puts it in a beautiful article, "Bowels of Mercy," published in *BYU Studies*,

the bowels are subjects about which we are often embarrassed to talk. And yet the scriptures put the bowels unavoidably in our face. Our resistance to reflection about bowels is itself instructive. The bowels sit at the center of the human body and yet nothing is so furtive as the act of doing our business. But it is an experience "common to man," one to which we can all relate and one we all had to master at an early age. The bowels may repulse us, but few distresses are as acute as when they malfunction. Bowels are the part of embodied life which we rarely articulate but which is most intimately our own. When they are discussed, they are usually the stuff of bawdy humor, snickering puerility, or scatological writing, not scriptural truth. The bowels may be the most personal and hidden of all organs. The sheer relief of the bowels being moved—the release of inner containment—may serve as a secret metaphor of what it is to

go beyond ourselves, to let our insides go, to stop holding back. Perhaps in some ways, compassion, as the Greek suggests, has a similar motion.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of digestion, one can imagine our primal parents suffering the kind of terrifying, telescoping vision suffered by tennis prodigy Hal Incandenza in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*. Late in the novel, Hal, a teenage tennis prodigy, has a vision where the collective, horrifying weight of a lifetime's worth of food is exhibited to him in a single stroke. Hal says:

The familiarity of Academy routine took on a crushing cumulative aspect. . . . I re-experienced the year's total number of steps, movements, the breaths and pulses involved. Then the number of times I would have to repeat the same processes, day after day, in all kinds of light, until I graduated and moved away and then began the same exhausting processes of exit and return in some dormitory at some tennis-power university somewhere. Maybe the worst part of the cognitions involved the incredible volume of food I was going to have to consume over the rest of my life. Meal after meal, plus snacks. Day after day after day. Experiencing this food in toto. Just the thought of the meat alone. One megagram? Two megagrams? I experienced, vividly, the image of a broad cool well-lit room piled floor to ceiling with nothing but the lightly breaded chicken fillets I was going to consume over the next sixty years. The number of fowl vivisected for a lifetime's meat. The amount of hydrochloric acid and bilirubin and glucose and glycogen and gloconol produced and absorbed and produced in my body. And another, dimmer room, filled with the rising mass of the excrement I'd produce, the room's double-locked steel door gradually bowing outward with the mounting pressure. . . . I had to put my hand out against the wall and stand there hunched until the worst of [this vision] passed.<sup>5</sup>

With the revelation of good and evil vouchsafed, the humans now find themselves in a similar position. Having eaten the fruit, they now *knew the truth about hunger*: though they'd chewed the fruit up (and it was delicious), the fruit wasn't enough, and what the fruit did give, they couldn't keep. They saw what the gods see. Hunger is real. Death is the price of life. And they, too—ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt—were going to die.

This is a hard thing to see. The humans wanted to run away. They wanted to hide. They didn't want to face the passing that, in their flesh, they themselves gave body to. They didn't want to deal with the dirt that composed them or the dirt they expelled from themselves. They wished with all their might for that not-yet-invented-but-originally-sinful thing: a really powerful toilet. They wished for something to flush the truth away.

This Edenic fantasy of flight and flushing finds its apotheosis in Wallace's quasi-journalistic essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." For seven days and six nights, Wallace carefully traces how all the tiny details of his luxury Caribbean cruise collude to promote the fantasy of a gratification that will (finally!) neither pass nor disappoint, producing a satisfaction without remainder. The sales pitch is simple: on this luxury cruise, with its eleven-plus gourmet meals per day, all of your needs will be met. The meals, the massages, the entertainment, the weather, the pampering, the comfort, the company—all of it—will be, for once, *enough*. This fantasy comes to a head in Wallace's description of cabin 1009's astonishing toilet:

But all this is still small potatoes compared to 1009's fascinating and potentially malevolent toilet. A harmonious concordance of elegant form and vigorous function, flanked by rolls of tissue so soft as to be without the usual perforates for tearing, my toilet has above it this sign:

THIS TOILET IS CONNECTED TO A VACUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM. PLEASE DO NOT THROW INTO THE TOILET ANYTHING THAN ORDINARY TOILET WASTE AND TOILET PAPER [sic]

Yes that's right a *vacuum toilet*. And, as with the exhaust fan above, not a lightweight or unambitious vacuum. The toilet's flush produces a brief but traumatizing sound, a kind of held high-B gargle, as of some gastric disturbance on a cosmic scale. Along with this sound comes a concussive suction so awesomely powerful that it's both scary and strangely comforting—your waste seems less removed than *hurled* from you, and hurled with a velocity that lets you feel as though the waste is going to end up someplace so far away from you that it will have become an abstraction . . . a kind of existential-level sewage treatment.<sup>6</sup>

In one sense, this is the fundamental human fantasy. The fantasy we buy (again and again) is of an “existential-level sewage treatment” that will free us from life's troubles and costs, a treatment whose awesomely powerful suction will comfort us with the sheer concussive force of its vacuum-powered denial: There is no passing here! You are not dirt expelling dirt!

The serpent sells the humans this same old story: you can eat without death or defecation, you can enjoy without cost or loss, you can fill your stomach and stay full, you can live without dying. Commenting on the implicit promise of his luxury cruise, Wallace sums up this idolatrous fantasy:

We're maybe now in a position to appreciate the lie at the dark heart of Celebrity's brochure. For this—the promise to sate the part of me that always and only WANTS—is the central fantasy the brochure is selling. The thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn't that this promise will be kept, but that such a promise is keepable at all. This is a big one, this lie. And of course I want to believe it . . . I want to believe that maybe this Ultimate Fantasy Vacation will be *enough* pampering, that this time the luxury and pleasure will be so completely and faultlessly administered that my Infantile part will be sated. But the Infantile part of me is insatiable.<sup>7</sup>

Theologically, we might critique this kind of high-tech porcelain idolatry in one of two ways. (And the difference between these two possible responses hinges on how we answer the survey question with which this essay began.)

1. On the one hand, we might say that the luxury cruise's

“existential-level sewage treatment” is an idol, a false god, because only God can actually deliver on the promise of a satisfaction without passing and without remainder.

2. Or, on the other hand, we might say that cabin 1009's industrial-strength toilet is an idol, a false god, because God *intends* us to have (and keep) bodies that fundamentally are and will eternally remain *organs of passing*.

Again, this is not an idle theological question. What we think life is, what we think our bodies are, what we think sin is, and what we think redemption looks like will depend on whether we think the fantasy is sound (though perhaps only possible in a perfected heaven where life has no costs, bodies are not membranes, and living is not ecological) or whether we think this fantasy itself smells of fear, shame, and sin. In one story, the humans became sinners because they got dirty. In the other story, they became sinners because they didn't want to be dirt.

We might pose the question like this: does Christ's resurrection conquer *death*, or does it conquer *dying*? At present, life passes in us *as* a kind of dying. Does Christ save us from life as a passing and dying? Or does Christ save us from death as what brings this business of passing and dying (that is, life) to an end? We might also frame the issue a bit more abstractly. Metaphysically, the issue at stake is twofold. Is it possible to exist without cost and loss? And is it possible to relate without remainder?

## 5. The divinely appointed human task

In closing, I want to note how the story in God's garden ends. The story, we've seen, begins with God planting a garden and gathering that garden's rich and fragrant humus into the shape of a human. Then, with a kiss, God breathes life into that soil. After the humans have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge and hidden their bodies—from each other and from God—God sorts the mess by commanding Adam to spend the rest of his life trying to grow a garden of his own.

And to the human He said, "Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree that I commanded you, 'You shall not eat from it,'

Cursed shall be the soil for your sake,

with pangs shall you eat from it all the days of your life. Thorn and thistle shall it sprout for you

and you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread till you return to the soil,

for from there were you taken, for dust you are

and to dust shall you return." (Genesis 3:17-19)

God imposes on the human a very specific task, and he does so for, what seems to me, a very specific reason: the human needs to be taught a lesson, and to learn it he'll have to spend his life tilling the soil. He'll have to pass his days up to his elbows in dirt, and when he sits down to eat his sweaty bread, he'll find the smell of soil clinging to his hands.

Why this job? The text is explicit. The human's job is to spend his life working with the soil because he *is* soil. "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread till you return to the soil, for from there were you taken, for dirt you are and to dirt shall you return" (cf. Genesis 3:19). As John Durham Peters notes in this same vein: "More than any other organ, however, the bowels most ally us to the soil. We have, one might say, a long compost pit within. Our bowels add to the earth and remind us daily that we inhabit tabernacles of clay."<sup>8</sup> We are, in truth, walking colonies of compost. We are brightly burning engines of decomposition.

We might read this "curse" as penal, but I think that would be a mistake. I think the human's assignment is primarily pedagogical. The human needs to understand what kind of thing a body is and what kind of complex and costly entanglements that body depends on. The human recoiled from his own waste, but now, by divine design, his job is to spend his life coming to appreciate just what that magic ingredient is that will make a beautiful living garden grow. Through the human's digging and planting and dunging (as the Lord and his servants all do in God's vineyard), the nature of an embodied life will become clear to him. Day by day, meal by meal, squat by squat, the human will cultivate his garden and meditate on its passing. Gradually, a stillness will settle in him that results not

from the absence but from the presence of life's passing. Relieved, he'll expel a long, deep breath. And, more, he'll come to feel that he shares with all of the world's saints and sinners, down through all of time's passing, that same theoscatological imperative:

Something humble, placid even, about inert feet under stall doors. The defecatory posture is an accepting posture, it occurs to him. Head down, elbows on knees, the fingers laced together between the knees. Some hunched timeless millennial type of waiting, almost religious. Luther's shoes on the floor beneath the chamber pot, placid, possibly made of wood, Luther's 16th-century shoes, awaiting epiphany. The mute quiescent suffering of generations of salesmen in the stalls of train-station johns, heads down, fingers laced, shined shoes inert, awaiting the acid gush. Women's slippers, centurion's dusty sandals, dock-workers' hobnailed boots, Pope's slippers. All waiting, pointing straight ahead, slightly tapping. Huge shaggy-browed men in skins hunched just past the firelight's circle with wadded leaves in one hand, waiting.<sup>9</sup>

Partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the human will open his eyes. And then, by God's grace, he'll become like the gods themselves and his bowels will be filled with mercy.

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## NOTES

1.

The transition from one account to the next in the middle of verse 4 is not clearly rendered in the King James translation. I will include below a clearer translation that is more faithful to the Hebrew.

2. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 20.

3. Unless otherwise noted, I will use Alter's translations of Genesis throughout as found in his *Five Books of Moses*.

4. John Durham Peters, "Bowels of Mercy," *BYU Studies* 38/4 (1999): 32

5. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), 897.

6. David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1998), 304–5, emphasis in original.

7. Wallace, *Supposedly Fun Thing*, 316–17, emphasis in original.

8. Peters, "Bowels of Mercy," 32.

9. Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 103.