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Joseph Smith and His Complex Legacy

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The year 2005 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Joseph Smith. To mark this event, the annual conference of the John Whitmer Historical Association will consider the complex legacy of Mormonism’s founder. Preference will be given to papers and panel presentations focused on the following: (1) Joseph Smith, himself, up to June 1844—the date of his assassination, specifically his life, work, and the influences he had on those individuals he came in contact with both within and outside Mormonism; (2) the many, so-called “divergent paths” taken by “the restoration” after 1844—i.e. Strangites, Cutlerites, followers of Lyman Wight, etc.—as influenced by the Mormon Prophet’s personality, teachings, etc.; (3) Comparisons/contrasts between Joseph Smith and the founders/promoters of other indigenous religions or “American originals”—such as Ellen White, Mary Baker Eddy, Charles Taze Russell, etc.; (4) the dynamics between Joseph Smith and state/local officials during the Mormon sojourn in Illinois.

Younger scholars/college students are particularly encouraged to submit proposals. The JWHA will provide a number of scholarship stipends to cover travel and other conference expenses.

Send Proposals for Papers to: Newell G. Bringhurst, Program Chair, Department of History, College of the Sequoias, Visalia, CA 93277
Or email to newellgb@hotmail.com. The deadline for submitting proposals is 28 February 2005
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OLD “WHINE”

MARGARET TOSCANO’S MISTITLISHED
Heavenly Mother essay in the July 2004 SUNSTONE turns out to be nothing more than a ‘70s-vintage feminist whine about male chauvinist ecclesiastical power and the oppression of so-called female intellectuals. She hits the nail right on the head with her words, “I am reopening the ‘old issues’ that many think feminists have complained about too much already.”

Toscano uses the Heavenly Mother theory as a “metaphor”—really an example—of how the male power structure in the Church suppresses feminist “discourse” about Mormon theology. She presumes that a Heavenly Mother most certainly exists, asserts that such a doctrine ought to be more actively taught, and contends that it would be we not being unfairly blocked by the Church’s all-powerful, male chauvinist hierarchy. She implies further that if she and other excommunicated feminist activists were given more ecclesiastical power, this vital truth would achieve its deserved stature in Mormon theology. If we relegate the Heavenly Mother to the dustbin of theology, she cries, “we visit this same treatment upon her daughters—and upon all the outcast and despised . . . and [even] upon Jesus Christ and the Heavenly Father.”

Toscano bemoans “the dearth of women theologians,” which can’t possibly be due to a lack of interest. No, no—it is because the LDS authority structure “discourages women from full participation in theological and philosophical discourse . . . [which] creates a class system where at least half of the Church is denied the benefits of full citizenship.” The entire essay is filled with other examples of fuzzy logic that would seem uncharacteristic of a professor at my alma mater.

Governance of the LDS Church is based on its members’ faith that it is led by the collective divine inspiration of the First Presidency and the Twelve, whose role is to define, interpret, and implement Mormon theology. Toscano observes, “Sparse referencing to the Mother in Heaven [in Church literature and talks by General Authorities] implies that she should not be a topic of major concern for members of the Church.” It’s important to her, though, so it should be important to the membership—especially women—whether true or not.

Whether or not there is a Heavenly Mother, I fail to see how a precise knowledge about the genitals of the Godhead would improve either the understanding or practice of Christianity. Possibly gender itself is only a temporal attribute, and not all human attributes are necessarily analogous to Deity’s.

An essay containing a logical and convincing argument about whether or not there is such a thing as a Heavenly Mother might be engaging. A feminist dissertation about a male ecclesiastical power structure that abuses the right of women, or anyone, to rewrite Mormon theology is not very interesting.

STEVEN HANSON
Vancouver, Washington

MARGARET M. TOSCANO’s response: Steven Hanson’s letter in response to my article, “Is There a Place for Heavenly Mother in Mormon Theology? An Investigation into Discourses of Power” (SUNSTONE, July 2004), exemplifies the major obstacle any woman faces who speaks out about gender inequality in Mormon culture. She will immediately be accused of being angry, whiny, illogical, and man-hating. Such name-calling is a convenient technique for Hanson (and others) to sidestep the two major questions my article poses: Does denying women access to formal power (priesthood and leadership positions) limit their ability to speak and thus to define doctrine and practice? And does the limited or prohibited discourse about the Heavenly Mother make it difficult for women to think of themselves as fully in the image of God and thus fully citizens in God’s kingdom?

Hanson says that he fails “to see how a precise knowledge about the genitals of the Godhead would improve either the understanding or practice of Christianity.” But my point is that how we view God absolutely shapes the way we treat each other and live our everyday lives (at least, we use it to justify our actions). If we believe God is judgmental and vengeful, then we will think these are appropriate responses to those who are not complying with the rules of the Church (i.e., God disapproves of the “gay lifestyle,” so we should punish and disenfranchise gay people). If we view the Godhead as exclusively male, then we likely will see Church leadership as a male prerogative. If the gender of God does not matter or is only temporary, as Hanson suggests (does Hanson really think this is the doctrine of the Church?), then why can’t we refer to God as “she” or “Mother”? And would it matter to men if God were only female?

Hanson also states that Church members
have faith they are “led by the collective divine inspiration of the First Presidency and the Twelve, whose role is to define, interpret, and implement Mormon theology.” Therefore, it is their decision, not mine, that prevails; so I should not complain if they are not interested in the Heavenly Mother. Again, Hanson’s argument reinforces my thesis. Only men are in a position to define Church doctrine and practice. And the hierarchical nature of the Church ensures that no one will question whether the status quo fully reflects the will of God. Has any male leader desired a revelation about the Heavenly Mother, or sincerely asked for one?

In the Sunday afternoon session of the recent October Conference, President Hinckley instructed men not to think of themselves as superior to women and not to use their priesthood to hold dominion over women. I applaud President Hinckley’s inspiration and sensitivity in addressing this topic. But the very fact that he has to give such instruction illustrates the nature of the problem. Women would not have to be told they are of equal worth with men if there were no question about their status or if women felt fully empowered. When was the last time men had to be told that their role is just as important as women’s? The problem is systemic; the Church structure privileges men and maleness.

MISS ED OPPORTUNITY

As far as I have been able to determine, there has been only one previous Mormon representation of our Mother in Heaven: the attempt by John Hafen for the 1909 illustrated version of Eliza R. Snow’s hymn “Oh My Father.” Apparently Hafen concluded that if God the Father is a white, gray-haired old man, then God the Mother must be a conventional, white, gray-haired old woman.

Mormon feminists have collected impressive Goddess images: “The Birth of the Goddess” on the cover of Maxine Hanks’s Women and Authority; “Tower of Mothers,” on the cover of Janice Allred’s God the Mother; cover author Margaret Merrill Toscano’s own collection of ancient sacred icons displayed during the most recent Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (session SL04–271). Couldn’t some of these images have inspired a more enduring cover? With images of God the Mother so conspicuously absent from LDS art, SUNSTONE missed a unique chance to create something original and powerful.

HUGH SALLEY
Charlotte, North Carolina

ARTIST’S RESPONSE: I put a great deal of thought into the cover, consciously designing it to incorporate issues and themes from Margaret Toscano’s article. In choosing an expression for Heavenly Mother, I deliberately chose to make it ambiguous. I also made the drawing slightly sketchy, so her face and overall look would be even more open to interpretation. The only expression I absolutely wanted to avoid was the “beatific” look so often encountered in religious art depicting powerful female religious figures.

In sharing the SUNSTONE cover with many others, I have heard Heavenly Mother’s expression called everything from sad and angry to concerned and powerful. Mr. Salley is the first who has interpreted it as that of a battered woman.

I think Heavenly Mother looking through a wall of bricks with her light blocked yet still spilling forth is a powerful statement about a figure we don’t really know much about. While art is subjective, I believe I actually did create an “original and powerful” piece of art, and I’m rather proud of it.

JEANETTE ATWOOD
Salt Lake City, Utah

DELIBERATELY MESSY

I READ WITH INTEREST WILLIAM D. Russell’s article, “Let’s Put Warning Labels on the Standard Works” (SUNSTONE, July 2004), and wholeheartedly agree that the scriptures occasionally contain doctrine that, if taken to the extreme, has resulted, currently results, and will continue to result in genuine evil. Pascal said it best: “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” However, I’ve begun to wonder if providing opportunities for evil to be done in the name of religion might be the whole point, the underlying design and purpose of the scriptures.

Some of the most potentially toxic Bible stories are also the most central. In a modern court of law, the God of Genesis would be characterized as a monster. He allows inno-
cent children to play next to deadly fruit in a garden without anything more than verbal warning to protect them. Then he knowingly allows a stranger to entice the children into eating the fruit so they can die. Once poisoned, instead of rendering aid, he drives them out into the wilderness to suffer a painful and protracted death. On the face of it, this is a profoundly sick story. But the creation story is also one of the most important—presented three times in the standard works and again in the temple endowment—because it is a compelling symbolic portrayal of the law of opposition (among other principles).

Joseph Smith framed much of his theology in terms of the Abrahamic covenant, but the founding of that covenant involves a sick story as well. Abraham believes God wants him to sacrifice his son (and all the promises God declared would flow through his son). Abraham knows human sacrifice is evil, having almost been a victim of it at the hand of his own father, but he decides to follow his “inspiration” anyway. In the Bible, an angel stays Abraham’s hand, but in our times, some folks actually follow through with the act. In my BYU masters program, I knew a student who had previously worked at a mental institution. One of his former patients was a father who, to demonstrate his faithfulness, had sacrificed his child to God on the kitchen table. Why would God link obedience and human sacrifice, knowing full well that some would take it to evil extremes?

Christ himself epitomized this principle of intentionally teaching something that could potentially lead to evil in John 7, when he found many disciples following him for the wrong reasons. Fully recognizing this fact, he deliberately introduced controversy and confusion by apparently linking salvation to the ostensibly paganistic practice of eating his body and drinking his blood. Since stunning idolatrous, pagan practices is one of the central tenets in Judaism, many of his disciples were justifiably horrified by this revelation and followed him no more. On the face of it, Jesus’s teaching was a sick affirmation of a barbarism that had previously brought divine condemnation and captivity upon the Jews.

So why might God choose ambiguity and use contradictory or dangerous affirmations? I wonder if it might be because the first, most fundamental and important act of a religious person is creating a personal image of God. Based on our mental image of God, the nature of faith, sacrifice, consecration, and salvation take shape in us. The scriptures themselves are of little help, offering a variety of contradictory descriptions of God and his attributes. On the one hand, God is loving (1 John 4:16), merciful (1 Peter 1:3), gentle (2 Corinthians 10:1), patient, meek, lowly of heart (Matthew 11:29), and the good shepherd (John 10:7–18, Alma 5:38–60). But God is also portrayed as an omnipotent “King of Kings,” both “mighty” and “terrible” (Deuteronomy 7:21; Jeremiah 20:11), a “God of Battle” (D&C 98:23–48, 105:14), a being full of wrath toward the wicked (D&C 1:9), and, since we are all wicked, someone who must be approached with “fear” and “trembling” (Psalms 2:11, Colossians 3:22, D&C 1:7).

We are left to reconcile and integrate these metaphors—the mighty, terrible, and gentle God; the humble and lowly God who yet must be approached with fear and trembling; the God of love who occasionally commands wholesale slaughter of men, women, and children. We need to proceed wisely, for at the start of the Third Lecture on Faith, Joseph Smith taught that one of the three things “necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation” is “a correct idea of his character, perfections and attributes.” If we use religion to strengthen and justify our pride, our God will take the form of the evil in our souls, and we will find scriptures that allow us to define him as elitist, sexist, harsh, cold, cruel, or in whatever form our own evil embodies. If we use religion as a tool to strengthen our spirituality, God will take the form of the love in our souls, and we can find scriptures that define Him as gentle, patient, compassionate, and meek. This choice must be freely made, and it has great repercussions. Perhaps this is what Christ meant in the Sermon on the Mount when he warned some of the outwardly religious but spiritually bankrupt listeners, “I never knew you: depart from me” (Matthew 7:23)—or, better yet, as the Joseph Smith Translation renders the final line, “ye never knew me.”

In his SUNSTONE essay, Russell suggests that teaching children the scriptures are not always inspired and are sometimes downright evil will inoculate them against acting out religious principles in toxic ways. Even if parts of the scriptures are uninspired, I believe this approach is naive. When it comes to favorite sins and powerful emotional urges, do any of us listen to counsel? Children (and most of us adults, for that matter) do not listen to preaching. We look instead for examples and then draw our own conclusions as we evaluate those examples through a filter of our own emotional and spiritual experiences. I have developed a fundamental faith that people who are loving and spiritual are more influential than those who are proud and elitist, unless such wickedness happens to appeal to someone more than does the Spirit of God. If it does, no words nor warnings will have much effect.

Taken as a whole, the scriptures and other teachings of the prophets are a contradictory mess. But the problem does not end there. Priesthood leaders, taken as a whole, are a contradictory mess, full of human failings and struggles, teaching a mix of divine inspiration and their own human precepts. I have seen priesthood leaders who are so loving, kind, and inspired that I have expected them to be “twinkled” any day. I have also seen a bishop enable a high priest group leader’s sexual abuse of both his daughters and granddaughters. (Postscript: the stake presidency felt differently and acted to stop the abuse.) I believe God wants life and scripture to be messy so we can pick and choose. We define ourselves by how we define the sacred, how we experience the fruits of our choices, and how we adjust accordingly. Given the scripture’s inherent contradictions, no person can follow all of them, nor can one follow every leader—what we remember and act on reveals our beliefs and lusts, and we ignore or conveniently forget the rest. The scriptures and leaders we use to define God and testify of him say much more about our nature than they do about God’s. Can warnings, annotations, or explanations compete with the forgetfulness and rationalization that accompany pride and unrighteous desire? I haven’t seen it in my life. Before a truth will stick, I must want it. If I do not want it, I will find a way to avoid it every time.

Given our different states of spiritual development, there are probably as many different conceptions of God and interpretations of His scriptures as there are people, and almost every conception can be grounded in some prophet’s teaching. Given our powers of self-deception and rationalization, prophets have consistently taught that to truly find God, to know Him, to see Him, we must first truly know and see ourselves (e.g., Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses 10:2). As we act on the principles we believe, we can feel our hearts changing—softening or hardening, becoming more open and loving or more closed and indifferent. And, as we feel these things, we can adjust if we choose to. Without exception, with each choice, one part of our soul will become stronger and another weaker. Until we progress to the point where the Spirit can fill us with truth and light, our conception of God and our interpretation of the scriptures
will act more as a mirror of ourselves than as a window to the divine (1 Corinthians 13:9–12).

The law of opposition suggests that were we to rid the scriptures of all their potentially evil interpretations and applications, we would at the same time be stripping them of their transformational power. In my experience, the choice between good and evil is more a personal choice between good and evil influences, spirits, and examples; words, alone, are relatively impotent. Hence, I would very much prefer to avoid a Mormon Talmud, whether that body of commentary be constructed by the Church’s Correlation Committee or the Sunstone Board of Directors. Because of their paradox and contradiction, the scriptures act as a mirror with which we can explore ourselves. In the end, the image and attributes of God that we develop and act on are the personal creation that defines our soul. By them, we will be judged because we will have transformed ourselves in their image. We are walking on holy ground, but ground that is full of danger. Our only safety harness is holding onto the covenants we make. I would not have it any other way. How we deal with the contradictions we meet is the primary test of our second estate. As Eugene England asks: will we endure to the end in faith and love or choose another path?

ROB PAGE
Cheshire, Connecticut

CONTENSION FOR TRUTH

CONGRATULATIONS TO JOHN-Charles Duffy and SUNSTONE for one of the finest articles ever written in Mormondom (“Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith: How Apologetics is Reshaping Mormon Orthodoxy,” SUNSTONE, May 2004). Although I was disappointed that Duffy (correctly) defines himself to be an LDS “revisionist” rather than an “apologist” like me, I nevertheless appreciate the clarity of his analytical history of LDS polemics or argumentation. He lists the major players: (1) LDS orthodox apologists, (2) Christian counterculturists, (3) LDS revisionists, (4) and secular academics. He clearly and helpfully articulates the Church’s historic rejection of “contention” and apologetic conflict, of scholastic “intellectualism,” and the recent rise of independent, “progressive” LDS argumentation. Duffy’s analysis is good, and I agree with his condemnation of the increasing “verbal aggression” that has arisen in response to LDS semi-critics such as himself.

As a retired lawyer, however, I naturally side with Daniel Peterson’s “indispensable” and “entertaining” contention for truth. Indeed, if the law is a correct teacher, “contention” is essential in clarifying issues, determining genuine agreement or disagreement, revealing assumptions, and tracing the history of error in an opponent’s and one’s own assertions. The Church’s “no contention” principle was responsible, no doubt, for the discipline faced by my close friend (a stake missionary) who had attended anti-Mormon meetings in order to understand their positions and correct their errors. My friend was summoned for his excommunication by a stake president who had “warned” him not to attend those kinds of meetings. That stake president’s “solution” to the then-prevailing anti-Mormon assaults was to ignore them. But surely, we must ask by what “priesthood authority” that stake president coerced my believing LDS friend into ceasing his defense of orthodox LDS doctrine and practice against anti-Mormon disputants. As a result of this coercion, my friend is now inactive in church but very active in verbal and email defense of LDS orthodoxy. How ironic that he had to go “inactive” in order to become a genuine missionary to well-informed intellectual conservatives. His testimony, he says, has been fully enhanced by serious study of anti-Mormon principles. He refers to his stake president’s “priesthood-coerced ignorance” as “priesthood arrogance,” and he feels quite safe to ignore it per Doctrine and Covenants 121:36–37. I tend to agree with him.

While I applaud Duffy’s clarity and thoroughness, I disagree with him on two points: First, where Duffy suggests that few “outside” (or missionary) conversions will occur as a result of orthodox apologistics, I report my own “conversion” primarily at the hands of Arthur Budvarson (founder of the anti-Mormon Utah Christian Tract Society) in his Del Mar, California, residence many years ago. Taken to Budvarson’s by friends seeking to dissuade me from converting to Mormonism, I was soon convinced of the fallacy of Budvarson’s transcendent apologetic—especially his repeated references to “original sin” and the inherent evil of little children. Apologetics may be efficacious in the “conversion” of others—or of ourselves. We “prove” truth not merely from the probity of our own positions but also the apparent falsity of the assertions of our detractors.

Second, I disagree with Duffy’s repeated pessimism that LDS apologists “will find mainstream skepticism insurmountable.” Even though a formal defense of LDS theological positions is in its infancy, many non-LDS philosophers, theologians, and historians have already begun to recognize the strength of our approaches. Further, we’ve just recently begun seeing the formation of scholarly groups such as the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, which will undoubtedly build upon the success of its first conference where Latter-day Saint thinkers engaged in open-hearted discussions with leaders in the “open theology” community. I believe Mormons may yet influence “mainstream skepticism,” and even if we don’t, our LDS minority influence is fully consonant with Jesus’s claim that “few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:14).

GERRY L. ENSELY
Los Alamitos, California

LET IT BEGIN WITH ME

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE MAY 2004 issue of SUNSTONE! You have produced an excellent assemblage of complimentary essays, literature, poetry, tributes, and columns. They represent some of the finest examples of diverse thinking within Mormon intellectual culture. To our genetic Latter-day Saints who have been around for a long time and are enriched by hearing differing points of view, SUNSTONE is a treasure!

How encouraging to have John-Charles Duffy in his “Defending the Kingdom, Rethinking the Faith,” point out the contributions made by the diverse kinds of Mormon apologists. As we know, in most cultures, change can be a long, slow process (much too slow for most of us). Thanks also to J. Bonner Ritchie’s, “A Paradigm Shift from Conflict to Peacemaking.” It reminds us of a more hopeful time in our nation’s history when the leaders of our country acted from the peace paradigm. One way to make a contribution to peace is by respecting a person’s differing opinion—by listening to what they are saying instead of just trying to persuade them to agree with us. The magic response would be, “Now that is an interesting point of view.” Try it and see what happens.

The song lyrics, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me,” converge nicely with the Thirteenth Article of Faith’s declaration, “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.” If only people and leaders of people could learn to listen to each other, the world would be a better place. Once in a while, we should remember that our own religion came about because Joseph Smith was a seeker who listened to the Lord.

DAWN SANDBERG
St. George, Utah
**Words of Mormons**

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DEVOTIONAL

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS: A PARABLE FOR OUR TIME

By Frances Lee Menlove

Today I am going to tell you a story. This is a Jesus story, the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which Jesus told to some people who trusted their own righteousness and regarded others with contempt.

I’m a grandmother, and I’ve learned that not only are stories important but they also can be adjusted to meet the occasion. One of my grandson’s favorite stories is “The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig.”

So, I will first tell this parable as it appears in the Gospel of Luke and then take some liberties. I’m allowed to do this because I’m a grandmother.

Two men went up to the temple to pray—one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 18:10–14, RSV)

Remember the audience here. Jesus was talking to people who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others” (Luke 18:9, RSV). Perhaps this parable is speaking to us in these contentious times.

A parable is a made-up story with a powerful theological punch, but this story is so familiar to us, we know the ending and have successfully moralized the sting out of it.

We reject arrogance and self-righteousness and have identified ourselves with the tax collector. The jolt is gone. We even think of self-righteousness when we simply hear the word “Pharisee.” But that is not the way an audience in Jesus’s day would have heard it.

Pharisees were respected citizens. They were devoted to serving God, though they tended to apply the Mosaic Law less rigidly than did the Sadducees. It was the Pharisee Gamaliel who defended the apostles before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:34–40). Pharisees represented righteousness and justice and the laws of Moses. They studied God’s word and urged people to live right.

Tax collectors, on the other hand, were despised. Tax collectors were collaborators with the Roman occupation forces. They would agree to collect a given amount in taxes, and their profit came from whatever they were able to collect in excess of that. This system lent itself to corruption and extortion. Self-interest bent the tax collectors toward dishonesty. The more toll collected, the more profit made. And all this with the support of the Roman occupation. The money taken from the Jewish citizens went to the Roman government, which some Jews felt approached blasphemy—gathering taxes to keep the pagan occupiers in power. Tax collectors were traitors and unclean.

Now, can you hear the punch in the ending? The good guy in this ancient culture is the Pharisee, but the Pharisee is the anti-hero in the story. And the tax collector went home right with God—without even being told to change occupations.

Pretend for a moment the parable said: “Two men went into the Church to pray—one, a bishop, the other, a Hell’s Angel. The bishop prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people—that Hell’s Angel over there, for example. I fast, I pay my tithe, I do my temple work and am a bishop to boot.” The Hell’s Angel prays, “Have mercy on me a poor sinner.” The Hell’s Angel goes to his home made right with God, but not the bishop!”

That story stings. We wince hearing it. Remember, our imaginary bishop is doing the right things, fasting, tithing, and obeying the commandments. The problem is all in his attitude, his sense of self-righteousness.

Why does Jesus take self-righteousness with such deadly seriousness? Why does this one negative trait—self-righteousness—trump all the Pharisee’s positive ones? I think there are a couple of reasons.

First, self-righteousness is the bane, the destroyer of human relations. Self-righteousness depends absolutely on a division of humanity into “us” and “them.” I can’t be up unless you are down. Contempt for others is always a partner of self-righteousness. The reason is clear. Pride is not accidentally, but essentially, competitive. This way of thinking about human relationships, in terms of “us” and “them,” was anathema to Jesus. Jesus was constantly and consistently inclusive. He went out of his way to make non-Jews heroes of his stories. Jesus kept company with outcasts.

Nowhere did Jesus make his feelings about this issue clearer than with the second great commandment—to love our neighbor as ourselves. Self-righteousness leads directly to disdain for our neighbor, which short-circuits love.

The Gospel of Matthew adds a further warning: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3–4, RSV)

There is another ugly side of self-righteousness—the inability to be self-critical. If we are totally convinced of our own righteousness, self-examination is not necessary. Listen to this old aphorism: “A surplus of virtue is more dangerous than a surplus of vice.” “Why?” we ask naturally. “Because a surplus of virtue is not subject to the constraints of conscience.” Being on the side of right can delude us into believing anything is justified because of our relative moral superiority. The history of religion-fueled hate and killing and oppression is horrific.
based self-righteousness has fed Crusades, jihads, Inquisitions, and witch trials.

Thus, self-righteousness not only warps interpersonal relationships, impeding love of neighbor, it also deadens the need for self-reflection.

How do we avoid the most grievous temptation of self-adulation? How do we avoid cheap patriotism?

William Sloane Coffin says there are three kinds of patriots—two bad, and one good. “The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country; a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.” Good patriots love their country enough to address its flaws. Bad patriotism would be the self-righteous patriotism of our imaginary Pharisee.

“How do you love America?” Reverend Coffin asks. Don’t say, “My country, right or wrong.” That’s like saying, “My grandmother, drunk or sober.” It doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag, and don’t burn it, either. Wash it; make it clean.

The prophets of the Bible were self-critical. They paid little heed to the sins of Babylon. Jesus was self-critical. He paid little attention to the evils of Rome. All of them, prophets and Jesus, loved Israel enough to address Israel’s flaws. As we should in our own countries.

“Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.” As people of faith, we have a moral obligation to raise difficult questions. Christianity is not synonymous with the celebration of American prosperity and freedom. The evangelical Jim Wallis goes so far as to ask us, “How did the faith of Jesus come to be known as pro-rich, pro-war, and pro-American?” The vision of a uniquely virtuous nation belies the gospel teaching that the line between good and evil runs not between nations, but inside every human heart.

St. Augustine reminds us to never fight evil as if it were something arising totally outside of ourselves. We remember Paul’s admonition that all have sinned and fallen short. The temptation is to say some have sinned and fallen short. Remember also the scene at the Last Supper (Mark 14:19) when Jesus told the apostles around the table that one of them would betray him. The reaction of the apostles was not, “Oh, no! We have been infiltrated by an evil-doer!” The response was immediate self-examination.

“Surely, not I?” they asked. They did not point fingers at each other but looked inside themselves. They understood the inner conflict of good and evil in each of us. At that last supper, the apostles did not externalize evil and make it something “out there.” They owned the struggle.

Self-righteousness diminishes our capacity for self-criticism as a nation, just as it does with individuals. Reinhold Niebuhr, warning about the perils of national pride, said the “good fortune of America and its power place it under the most grievous temptations to self-adulation.”

The conviction that our convictions are universal, that those who disagree with us are patently wrong, and that our convictions are God’s will and should therefore guide public policy without criticism are fundamental temptations of a lived faith. Pascal said that humans never do evil as completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

Mormons have a wonderful gift. Virtually all our wards are sprinkled with returned missionaries who have lived in other countries, learned other languages, and become a beloved part of other church families. They can hear the hollowness of the insistence that there are none as great as we are and the perspicacity of externalizing evil to those out there and far away. This diversity of experience and background is a gift to our congregations, a gift that should be kept alive in our storytelling. This gift should be cultivated, encouraged, and celebrated as a powerful antidote to American self-righteousness.

But then, how should we invoke God or religion in our political life? Rather than following the way of the Pharisee and invoking God to justify ourselves and bless all our policies and actions, assured that God is on our side, that we are good and they are evil, let us choose another way. Let us ask God to hold us accountable, to put us under judgment, and to show us our sinfulness and our trespasses.

The Pharisee’s way leads to triumphalism and a sense of a divine mandate for our foreign policy. It leads, in effect, to a theology of empire. It is from this posture that President Bush can announce that the purpose of this country is “to rid the world of evil” and can repeat frequently that “our nation is the greatest force for good in history.”

The second way, asking God to hold us accountable, led Lincoln to say, after the Civil war, that all had failed. All have sinned. The terrible war is a consequence of our failures and sins before God. Lincoln did not divide the nation into the “good guys” and the “bad guys,” good on the side of the Union and bad on the side of the Confederacy. Lincoln’s understanding is profoundly biblical.
So how then should we invoke God in our political life? We do not pray to enlist God in our projects but to examine ourselves—to change and to do God’s will.

YOU and I can’t leave this parable just yet. We must acknowledge the disturbingly ironic trap in our story that snags all of us.

What do you think of this prayer? “God, I thank you that I am not like that hypocritical, self-righteous Pharisee in our gospel parable.” The smug trap. This parable of the two people who enter the temple to pray leaves no one of us untouched. We all engage in disparagement. Self-righteousness is one of the fundamental temptations of a lived faith.

It is so easy, so natural, so satisfying to feel self-righteous. We are often smug. We are pretty sure that our views are advanced and others’ views are outmoded. When everyone else grows up, we believe, they will think like us. Or, if those “others” weren’t so stupid or selfish or weak, they would think like us.

John Ortberg said, “This is a struggle inside every human being who seeks to take faith seriously. There is self-righteousness in me that does not want to die. And there is something inside me that is not bothered when others are excluded, that wants others to be excluded, that feels more special when I’m on the inside and somebody else is not. There is something in me that enjoys thinking about how much wiser and more loved by God I am than those foolish, exclusive Pharisees.”9

Let’s remember that Jesus addressed this parable to a specific group of people, to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else (see Luke 18:9). That sounds to me like it is special delivery to us, now, here in the U.S.A.

Both individuals and nations are at their worst when, persuaded of their superior virtue, they crusade against the vices of others. Both individuals and nations are at their best when they claim their God-given kinship with all humanity.

I WILL end now with both a prayer and a blessing. The prayer is adapted from Reinhold Niebuhr.

First the prayer:

Lord, we pray this day mindful of the sorry confusion of our world. Look with mercy upon this generation of your children so steeped in misery of their own contriving, so far strayed from your ways and so blinded by passions. We pray for the victims of tyranny, that they may resist oppression with courage. We pray for the wicked and cruel, whose arrogance reveals to us the sin of our own hearts.

We pray for ourselves who live in peace and quietness, that we may not regard our good fortune as proof of our virtue, nor rest content to have our ease at the price of others’ sorrow and tribulation.

We pray for all who have some vision of your will, that they may humbly and resolutely plan for and fashion the foundations of a just peace. Amen.10

And finally some words to keep us company. This is a Franciscan blessing. A blessing I also offer for my grandchildren, who have made me eligible for the title of “Grandmother.”

The blessing:

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them, and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.11

NOTES

2. William Sloane Coffin, A Lover’s Quarrel with America. VHS (New York: Old Dog Documentaries, Inc.).

6. Quoted in Coffin, “A Lover’s Quarrel With America.”
8. See Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address.

ALMANAC, 1997

The names have vanished from the pages, as if the Songin mine still sings, but there remains a marble mark in Portage Pennsylvania, weathered with the winds of fifty-seven winters and the whispers of children, sixty-three at once, as quickly as the timbers snapped, shut the narrow shafts of life, ripped the bare electric lines the simple yellow bulbs, sixty-three into the quiet dust.

They burn among us still like the black rock bits they spent their miners’ breath to yield.

—JOHN P KRISTOFCO
IN MEMORIAM

ELDERS NEAL A. MAXWELL AND DAVID B. HAIGHT

By Blake T. Ostler and Charlotte England

ELDER NEAL A. MAXWELL of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles died on 21 July after a long battle with leukemia. Maxwell earned a master’s degree in political science from the University of Utah and served as legislative assistant to Senator Wallace E. Bennett. He later served as executive vice-president at the University of Utah and commissioner of education for the LDS Church Educational System. In 1974, he was appointed a general authority, and in 1981, he became an apostle.

Author of some thirty books, Maxwell will be remembered as a prolific writer and a gifted speaker. His general conference sermons are known for their conceptual complexity, linguistic richness, and skillful use of metaphors.

A T THE PASSING of my friend Elder Neal A. Maxwell, I feel both immense sadness and incredible joy at the magnificence and gifts of his life. We have all been blessed by the generosity, intelligence, and sheer graciousness of this great man. However, I have been particularly blessed to know him personally.

Perhaps the best glimpse into my love for Elder Maxwell is illustrated by my experience upon first meeting him. While a student at BYU, I had written a paper arguing that God is not timeless. My philosophy teacher, Truman Madsen (who himself is a Mormon legend), asked me if I would be willing to discuss this issue with Elder Maxwell, who had recently written a book suggesting that it is God’s timelessness that helps us have greater faith in him. Needless to say, I was stunned. However, at that point in my life, I was too stupid to be humbled at the prospect of discussing this issue with Elder Maxwell. I was actually going to straighten an apostle out on an idea that he seemed to get wrong. (Imagine the kind of pomposity that such an attitude expresses—nevertheless, that was my mindset at the time.)

Elder Maxwell’s secretary established a time, and I took a beloved friend, the inimitable Wallace Johnson, with me. It was an incredible experience. Elder Maxwell ushered us into his office. He then sat down, took off his shoes, and put his feet upon his desk. As best I recall, he began by saying, “From my discussion with Truman, I understand that there must be something that I am just not getting.”

I launched into a discussion of why, from an LDS perspective, it makes little sense to suggest that a corporeal being such as the Mormon God could be outside of time in the sense that Boethius, the renowned Catholic philosopher, had argued for. Elder Maxwell had quoted Boethius in his book to support his view of God’s timelessness. Elder Maxwell listened patiently for about thirty minutes. When I concluded my observations, he said something that stunned me:

“You know, it’s kind of amazing. When I was first made a general authority, I was a member of the Assistants to the Quorum of the Twelve. Nobody really cared what I thought or what I said. That was a great time because I was pretty much free to say what I wanted. One day I was a member of the Assistants to the Quorum and nobody paid any attention, and the next day, I was made an apostle, and suddenly everything I say is scrutinized so much that I don’t even dare say it.”

Elder Maxwell very graciously and humbly explained that he did not know the theological framework in which Boethius had written and that he could see that such a framework was quite inconsistent with LDS theological commitments. He asked if he could write a letter to me, which I could quote, that would say so. Part of that letter is quoted in a footnote in my article, “The Mormon Concept of God” (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 17, no. 2 [Summer 1984]:65–93). Imagine an intellect as great as Elder Maxwell humbly listening to a pompous undergraduate student about a theology that he understood far better than I have ever begun to grasp it!

Other interactions with Elder Maxwell followed. After I wrote the article, “Book of Mormon as an Expansion of a Modern Source” (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 20, no. 1 [Spring 1987], 66–123), he called me and asked if we could meet. In our meeting, he very gently cautioned me to not assume too much of Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon. He acknowledged that there may well be a good deal of Joseph Smith’s own personality and character in the phrasing and language, but to focus on that is like “starving from nearsightedness because one cannot see the banquet of food on the table right before them.” Somehow he always had a phrase that stopped me dead in my tracks and caused me to think about what I wasn’t seeing. He would often urge me to “fly the flag of faith.” I would respond by suggesting that I would stand steadfast in the solace of the spirit but I would probably choke on my own tongue from too much aliteration.

NEAL Maxwell possessed one of the finest minds that the restoration has been blessed to know. More important, he had a humble heart. At one point in my life, I thought that my whole world had ended. Somehow he simply knew. He called me out of the blue and asked if he could be of assistance. There was no way he could have known of my personal trial because I had not told anyone—but he knew anyway. I never had an illusion that he knew everything or that he was somehow omniscient. However, from this experience and others like it, I knew that he was always intimately attuned to the service of others.

Neal also manifested a certain largess and nobility of spirit. It was never more evident than when he confronted cancer. How can I explain what it is like to be with a friend who is facing death—and yet who is focused on the well-being of others? How can I express the depth of feeling in a man who loves purely and tenderly? And how can I convey to you the certainty of knowing that God is here, now, in every word, every gesture, every sweet breath of life of this remarkable man? Perhaps he could have found the words that eclipse the barrier of any limita-
BLAKE T. OSTLER is a Salt Lake City attorney with Mackey, Price, Thompson, and Ostler. He is the author of many articles on Mormon theology and philosophy, as well as the book Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God.

In 1976, Haight put his business interests aside to become an apostle. In his advanced age, he became hard of hearing and nearly blind. Since he could no longer read a teleprompter, he often delighted Church members with his candid, off-the-cuff sermons.

NOTES TO GOD - 6

Aspens shiver in fall wind, wave thousands of bright flags to the blue band of sky.

I am acquainted with this family all the trees related and from a common seep root; this canyon clone shakes in the remnant wind of glacial pasts.

When limbs fall marks like bird wings flutter and ascend from bark, fly to the falling sun.

Carvings I made fifty years ago are sealed and fading in the soft, white bark. - MELVIN ADAMS
FROM THE EDITOR

SHIFTING

By Dan Wotherspoon

Shortly after learning of the deaths of Elders Maxwell and Hunter this past July, like many people in the Church, I’m sure, I began playing the “Who will be the new apostles?” game. I made mental lists of candidates from the existing pool of general authorities, noting whom I would love to see called and—more telling about my need to deepen my own spirituality—whom I fervently hoped wouldn’t be named. I pondered the great men I knew who were not general authorities but who I thought would make wonderful apostles. I also caught myself reflecting on the historical significance of this current moment—politicizing and personalizing it even. In my mind, these new callings were shaping up to be a litmus test. What message would the announcements reveal about the minds and goals of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, and (gulp!) how comfortable might my church home feel during the coming decades?

Then, sometime in late August, my feelings about this game and how I’d been playing it began to shift. As is my habit following Sunstone symposiums, I began the very pleasant exercise of listing to recordings of all the sessions. (I must confess this habit is really more of a “perk,” since this job allows me to borrow rather than need to buy the tapes and CDs!) Most papers and panel discussions I heard were wonderful, and I was thoroughly enjoying myself, loving the diversity of voices and ideas, basking in a self-congratulatory glow of knowing that what we do at Sunstone is important and good.

Spiritually prepared by many of the sessions I’d heard before it, my heart began to open to a different wavelength as I listened to the tape of the “Why We Stay” panel. As had been my experience with the panelists who had spoken on that same topic last year, my soul began to swell with gratitude for these Church members tested by time and struggle and their inspiring examples of lives well lived. As I listened, I felt my heart cry out, “Will my spirit someday sing the way hers does? In another couple of decades, will I be as faithful as he is? Oh that I will!”

I loved each of the panelists’ remarks, but something Dorothy Wilkinson shared struck me the hardest, becoming the impetus for the first of several changes of heart I would undergo in the weeks that followed. After reflecting on her early life and mission to Japan, Dorothy spoke briefly but powerfully about her brother Ted and his personal struggle with the issue of the Church’s past denial of priesthood to blacks. In the sixties, Ted, a returned missionary, had begun graduate studies in sociology at the University of Michigan and there became directly involved in the civil rights movement. An activist by temperament, Ted demonstrated equal housing opportunities for people of all races and even led an effort that ultimately created one of the nation’s first work-study programs for poor black youth. Vocal in the community and in his classroom teaching, Ted embodied very well the role of scholar-activist. He was convinced that the Church was wrong to deny priesthood and temple blessings because of race and couldn’t reconcile his temperament and understanding of the issues with the slower pace of the Church’s actions in these arenas. The tension Ted felt became so great that, as Dorothy phrases it, “the Church eventually left him.”

I’ll allow Dorothy’s own words to tell the story of the different way she and her friends had met the same issue.

“We were also bothered because blacks didn’t have the priesthood. We felt that Christ would not approve of that. But we handled it by praying for twenty years that a prophet’s mind would be prepared to change [the policy]. I’m sure there were many people praying for the same thing.

“We were with a group of friends when the news [of the revelation ending the ban] came. We all hugged and laughed and cried like it was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to us—and maybe it was! And we all said, ‘Thank you, Lord. Thank you! And thank you for President Kimball.’”

As I heard Dorothy’s words, I immediately recalled the feelings MaryAnne Hunter and Grethe Peterson had shared in their “Why We Stay” remarks the year before. They too had spoken of the unabashed joy they had felt upon hearing the news of the ban’s end, of weeping with friends in person and on the phone, of their heartfelt gratitude for prayers answered.

I was then knocked cold by a question I’m still wrestling with. “If this very day, the prophet announced a revelation that matches perfectly my fondest dreams, will I have earned the right to fully enjoy the moment the way these people had?” Sadly, I had to reply, “no.”

Sobered, I carried my “no” answer around with me for the next few days—days of coming to grips with my falseness. My professions during the past years about really being in the Church even though I was a “thinking” Mormon felt hollow to me. Yeah, I loved the Church, but I didn’t really pray for it. Sure, I respected Church leaders (or at least their positions), but I didn’t pray to grow to love them.

I am now close to the age that Dorothy, MaryAnne, and Grethe were when the announcement of the revelation ending the priesthood ban had been made. But as I searched my heart, I came to the sad realization that should President Hinckley choose this very moment to announce something special—perhaps a full and complete renunciation of all the racist folklore that had once been used to explain and justify the past policy and which still clouds minds and hearts and hurts people today—I wouldn’t have known pure delight the way those wonderful souls had. I would have been very excited, to be sure, but I had to admit to myself that rather than immediately pouring my heart out in gratitude to the Lord, my first reaction would likely have been some sort of, “Well, it’s about damn time!”

My spirit cried out, This isn’t who I want to be! A shift had begun.

As I continued to ponder how far I was from where my heart wanted to be in relationship to Church leaders and my capacity to love and feel true joy with the Saints, I started to review more seriously my relationship with members of my ward. In what ways was I aloof and impatient with them, holding them at arm’s length? Through my position at Sunstone, I had been working very hard in what ways I could to effect greater inclusiveness in the Church, but how inclusive had I been, really?

As I hit upon that thought, my mind im-
mediately tracked to what had, through the years, become my mantra of sorts whenever I had wanted to defend myself from some perceived attack on my lack of orthodoxy: “Well, you know, who someone is is much more important than what someone believes.” Of course, I didn’t invent that concept nor coin that phrase, but I’d adopted that stance as my way of asking orthodox Latter-day Saints to look more at my heart and the good things I wanted to create around me rather than at my screwed-up (as they saw it) beliefs. Surely they could see that someone’s character trumps in importance his or her ability to assent to some doctrinal checklist! “Holy smokes,” I thought. “How hypocritical am I? All these years in which I’ve felt marginalized, in which I’ve asked ward members to accept me for my heart rather than my beliefs—yet I’ve hardly ever applied this idea in reverse!” In my frustrations over week after week of unimaginative lessons and what seemed to be an epidemic refusal by the majority of members to think and engage the world in all its complexity, I had failed to look at their hearts, their character. Just as surely as I may have been so measured, I had been holding them up to a checklist of sorts. Instead of a criteria of orthodoxy, however, my measuring sticks had been more along the lines of: “Have you ever, for even just a few minutes, thought outside the box?” or “Do you actually read anything besides the scriptures?”

My spirit cried out, This isn’t who I want to be! And I shifted some more.

The “Who will be the new apostles game” officially ended 2 October with the calling of Elders Uchtdorf and Bednar. (In case you’re wondering, neither had been on my shortlist.) But the way I had been playing the game had changed so dramatically in the weeks prior to their being called that it hardly seemed to be the same game I had begun in July. Dorothy, MaryAnne, and Grethe’s joyous reception of long-sought news had prepared me for my own calling—a call to more fervent prayer, to pleading for greater faith and love.

In her “Why We Stay” remarks, Dorothy followed up the story of her prayers to end the priesthood ban with this petition: “Now I hope everyone is praying for civil rights and protection for homosexuals. Is someone preparing a prophet’s or politician’s mind to understand this [issue]?”

I am, Dorothy. I am. And I will do the same in response to any and all of my other fervent hopes for my brothers and sisters, my church, and my country.

HOW I’d been playing the apostle game also served as a good metaphor for how I’d been engaging in my ward life. Longing for progressive leadership, inspirational messages, and interesting discussions, I had forgotten to look clearly at whom the Lord had chosen to place me in relationship with. As I finally did look around, I saw that he had chosen good-hearted people who loved their families and were striving to magnify their gifts in service to the rest of us. In looking more closely at those in my ward, I couldn’t help but imagine that our new apostles, whoever they would be, would be equally as eager, equally as giving of themselves. I determined that when that’s the case, it’s really pretty hard to go wrong, and I let go of any desire to want to hunt for a meta-message at the moment the callings would be announced.

The very week that I began to think about the way I’d been holding my church relationships at bay and determined to proceed differently, I experienced the most remarkable day of Sabbath meetings. I really don’t think the sacrament meeting speakers were better prepared than usual, nor did they stray far from the scriptures or the Ensign, but they surely seemed more interesting. Our Sunday School teacher again gave a lesson heavy on application and light on originality and depth, but the Book of Mormon passages we read really did seem insightful. What’s more, I actually spoke up, adding my hopes and commitment to the discussion. And wouldn’t you know it, priesthood meeting was taught that day by my, until then, least favorite ward member. But sometime during the first few minutes of the lesson, he posed a question in such an interesting way that I just had to join in. The spirit stayed with us the whole lesson and even afterward, causing me to be late meeting my family and prompting my daughter Hope to come looking for me. My wife Lorri couldn’t have been more shocked when Hope told her whom she had found me talking with!

IF this very day, the prophet announced a revelation that matches perfectly my fondest dreams, would I weep with happiness and gratitude? I don’t know yet. I’d sure love to find out! I trust that someday I will get that chance. Until then, I’m learning to love the quieter kinds of joy that come as I realize I’m surrounded by people whose character truly does trump whatever it is they may or may not believe. A shift is on.

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- Megan Fotheringham
- Harry R Fox Jr
- Jack Frost
- Andrew R Hall
- Brian M Hall
- Connie Cannon Holbrook
- Beverly I Hoppe
- M Reed and Mary Anne Hunter
- Gary Huxford
- Ian C Hyde
- Louise Moser Illes
- Mark D Jameson
- Norman W Jarvis
- Mark A Jensen
- Thomas F Joachim
- Mary Jane Johns
- Ann M Johnson
- Stuart T Johnston
- Sandra G Jolley
- Margaret F Kenney
- Thomas S Kimball
- Katherine Koldewyn
- Norman B Koller
- Jack Landro
- Anthony J LaPray
- G Olof Larson
- Clark R Layton
- Linda Lindstrom
- Ann Madsen
- Laurel M Madsen
- Janet E Mayhew
- Karma and Frank McLeskey
- Susan Mickelsen
- John Lewis Needham
- Michael E Nielsen
- Sandra D Noakes
- Richard K Olsen
- David G Pace
- Eunice Pace
- Betty Ruth Parker
- J Rigby Patterson
- Jane A Patterson
- Boyd J and Zina Petersen
- Nathan C Peterson
- Allison Pingree
- Dan Pingree
- Geoffrey B Pingree
- Boyd L Robertson
- Bruce G Rogers
- Maida Sengupta
- Candadai Seshachari
- Beverly L Shaw
- Floyd W Sherwood
- Linda Sillittoe
- Kerry Smithson
- Emma Lou Thayne
- Renee Tietjen
- Gil and Marva Tobler
- R Don and Deveda Vernon
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A WARD TOWN MEETING

I ONCE HAD A VERY INNOVATIVE BISHOP. A PROFESSIONAL teacher, he sometimes ran sacrament meeting like a town meeting or ward-sized class, asking questions of the congregation from the pulpit. He would solicit answers from all categories of ward members—children, teens, adults, seniors, men, women, traditionalists, and liberals. We would just raise our hands, and he’d call on us right there in sacrament meeting.

For instance, one week he asked us what we would bring to a potluck dinner. Ward members suggested hot dogs, potato salad, fruit, drinks, and brownies—basically a list of what we liked to eat. He then asked in what ways our ward was like a potluck dinner. This required some thinking. Some said that we bring to the ward what we really enjoy and are good at, like our special recipes. Others said that a ward requires balance or we would end up with all desserts! Everyone couldn’t have a “brownie” kind of job—someone had to do the “broccoli” jobs. Others said that sometimes we get to bring our favorite dish and sometimes we end up bringing an assigned dish, just like callings. One person said that wards need structure just like potlucks need some level of organization. Everyone agreed that getting together to eat and talk nourished us body and soul.

Another time, the bishop asked what we knew about geese flying south. Various people answered that geese fly in a “V” and seem to know when it is time to leave. (We all laughed when someone said they fly in a “V” because they can’t spell “W”!) Next, the bishop asked how our ward is like a flock of migrating geese. Of course, someone brought up that the V shape is aerodynamic and so the geese fly with greater speed and efficiency in that shape, just like a ward works better when we have a plan. “What is the hardest position in the “V”?” he asked. We answered that it is the goose at the point of the formation. “Is it always the same goose?” “No,” we answered, “the geese trade off flying in this position. Our ward is like that because we alternate in leadership positions so people don’t become exhausted.” “What happens if a goose becomes ill or injured and can’t keep up?” he asked. We didn’t know, so he told us that another goose will fly down with the weak one and stay with it until it recovers or dies. He hoped that in our ward, no one would go down alone! “Do geese have a different mate each year?” he asked. “No,” we answered, “they mate for life.” “And in this ward, we should be true and loyal to each other,” he said.

We all loved the give-and-take of these sessions, the questions and the answers, adults and children. We loved the children’s responses, for it seemed vital that they be included in the ward discussion. It said a lot about our bishop that he would frame questions just for the children and that even very small children dared speak up in that large group. If during the discussion, the bishop didn’t get a cross-section of opinions, he would call on people he knew had certain viewpoints in order to make sure that a wide variety of ideas was represented.

I’ve never seen such sacrament meetings anywhere else. They were warm, bonding experiences for us—times when we felt like a family, like a community, laughing, thinking, and worshipping together.

ANONYMOUS

A FASCINATING JOURNEY

IN 1963, BETTY FRIEDAN OPENED HER LANDMARK book, The Feminine Mystique, with the following description of the personal unrest of the average American woman:

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she
was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question— "Is this all?"

In that same year, Helen Andelin, a Latter-day Saint wife and mother, responded to the feminist critique of traditional middle-class gender roles with her book, *Fascinating Womanhood:*

If women have been unhappy with their role in the home it is because they have not given enough to it. If we merely feed and clothe children and keep the house clean, we are “unprofitable servants,” deserving neither thanks nor reward. Success and happiness comes when we make a wholehearted effort, go the second mile. This follows a principle of truth, “He who loseth his life in service to others, will surely find it.”

Imagine NetMo’s surprise to discover that today, more than forty years after Andelin’s counter-revolution was launched, what would to some seem “quaint” maintains a substantial Internet presence. Andelin sponsors an active website (http://www.fascinatingwomanhood.net) with “Fascinating Womanhood” chat rooms, bulletin boards, and email lists. Andelin’s picture on the site must be from the 1960s. (Since Andelin is now in her eighties, NetMo guesses that one way a woman can be fascinating is by being ashamed of her age.) The site is dedicated not only to selling Andelin’s several books but also to a counter-feminist movement driven by an international training program supported by Mormons, Christian fundamentalists, and followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon.

The Friends of Fascinating Womanhood Program “grants permission to churches, educational institutions, and outreach programs to teach this course. We also grant permission to women to conduct study groups in their homes.” Since the Teacher’s Lesson Guide and the Student Workbook are available only to authorized teachers, the program also provides formal teacher training and official certification.

NetMo finds one of the most fascinating sections of this fascinating site for fascinating women to be the success stories. The sharing ranges from the unintentionally self-revealing to the hyperbolic:

Michael has controlled the money for about five years. One day we were making a grocery list. He was complaining and saying I hadn’t done it right. I said, “You act like I don’t know what I’m doing” (pouty). He said, “Oh, honey I didn’t mean to make you mad.

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**Media Watch**

**WORLDS WITHOUT END**

How far can the Kingdom of God expand? Apparently “to infinity and beyond!” The creation of universal stakes of Zion seems to be the concept behind *Outpost Zarahemla,* the first video game geared toward LDS audiences. With its combination of intergalactic missionaries, jazzy music, and interspecies camaraderie, *Outpost Zarahemla* promises hours of entertainment for Mormon teens and pre-teens.

“We built it because we had LDS bookstores telling us they were looking for LDS video games for teens,” says Rex Hale, president of sales at Cleanware, the Springville, Utah, company that is releasing the product.

“Join Elder Hero on his mission to expand the Mormon colonies in space,” reads the game presentation website. “As you embark on your work, you will find that you are responsible for providing for the three-fold mission of the Church on your outpost. You will need to build structures and facilities to help spread the gospel and do family history work, as well as provide for the temporal welfare, social needs, spiritual development of the guests of your outpost.”

As part of his mission, Elder Hero must build lemonade stands, expand the outpost, and put up with his senior companion. “I’m Elder Bubbles, your trainer,” reads the subtitle, as a half-human, half-fish missionary speaks in an unintelligible dialect that seems to come right out of Star Wars. “My job is to knock you into shape.”

Says Hale, “One of the [spaceships] may come through doing genealogy work and [a traveler] will say later, ‘Oh, my great-great grandfather was a fish,’ or something like that, because all the characters are [descended] from alien characters. So we’re not trying to be strictly doctrinal here; we’re supposed to have a lot of fun with it.”

Part of the humor of the game resides in the way it creatively employs Mormon cultural tidbits. For instance, the outpost’s university, BYU-Zarahemla (the name was later changed to Church College), has the slogan, “Enter to serve, go forth to learn,” an inversion of BYU’s real slogan.

No word yet on how much the game will cost, but you can download the trial version and play free for one hour by going to www.outpostzarahemla.com.
I'm sorry” (I hear that often now). He asked me how much money I needed. He usually gave me $40 or $50. I said, “Whatever you want to give me.” He gave me $40. I didn’t say anything. He gave me $60 and said, “Is that enough?” I didn’t say anything. He said, “I cannot give you any.” Then I said in a helpless way, “Well, if you can’t give me any, then I just can’t go to the store, can I?” I ended up with $80. If I had argued in a hateful, nagging way, I would have done good to have gotten $40. Michael has always been cautious with money, so this was very surprising!

Is NetMo to understand that manipulation through pouting and feigned helplessness is something a fascinating woman should be proud of?

Another testimonial states, “The miracles of Lourdes produced no greater miracle than did Fascinating Womanhood for Chris and me.” I don’t know how Chris feels about it, but being healed by the Virgin Mary seems like awfully big stuff to NetMo.

Unofficial lesson outlines of the “Fascinating Womanhood Principles” are also on the Internet. From a lesson, “The Feminine Manner” (http://members.tripod.com/~frankysj/fwlsn19.html) NetMo learned that women talk too much and should avoid gripping inanimate objects firmly. NetMo also learned some potentially helpful stuff about “cooing” and “languor.”

[Cooing] is a hard trait to incorporate for today’s woman, but it is a distinctly feminine trait. You can observe it best when you watch someone talking to a baby. You soften your voice, make nice faces and talk baby-talk and gibberish. You can use this same technique with a man. They find it fascinating even when used on a baby.

Of languor, we learn:

If you can picture a cat lounging before a fireplace, relaxing, then quietly stretching, you have a picture of languor. The opposite of languor is to be high-strung, nervous, irritated, fidgety, and hyperactive. This includes habits like biting the fingernails, twirling your hair, twisting a handkerchief, tapping the toes, or the fingers.

Well, “Coo-Coo, Cachoo,” I say as I NetMosey “languidly” further down the rabbit hole. I’ve not yet tried cooing to an elected official. I wonder if it works on traffic cops? Ahh, the possibilities. . . .

[If you have a suggestion for NetMo’s next cyberdestination, please direct it to netmo@neatniks.com]
has been letting gay people get temple recommends. “Maybe they’re sneaking into the Manti Temple or something—do you think?” I ask.

Right here people generally get furious with me, and they have every right to. I know darn good and well what they meant, and they know that I know darn good and well what they meant, but it’s an irresistible jab for someone like me. Actually that’s not true. While it is irresistible, it’s not really a jab. From what I’ve heard, homosexuals are not getting married in the temple, so from even the most conservative and orthodox position, temple marriage isn’t being affected by the recent imbroglios in San Francisco, Boston, and Oregon. In fact, when it comes to the subject of marriage, Mormons even take potshots at traditional heterosexual marriage whenever we can: “Oh yes,” we’ll say, “but of course they were married in the stake center . . . for time.”

Who cares if marriages for time are being undermined, really? I don’t spend much energy honing that argument because the whole thing isn’t very interesting to me, finally. I’m just not convinced that gay marriage (or even gay dating) is the most pressing issue on the planet right now. I’m much more concerned that my friend Rick has just volunteered for body re-trieval duty in Baghdad and that his wife and three kids who live up the street have to try to make it another fourteen months without a dad in the house. That strikes me as a pretty serious marital problem. I’m also concerned that fewer people have health insurance today than they did last year and that the national debt is approximately 7.4 trillion dollars.

With real problems like these weighing on the people I know, I can’t even muster the energy to get behind trendy liberal Mormon arguments such as, “If so many Americans believe that celestial (read: plural) marriages are not only depraved but improper and ungodly, why is the Church now condemning gay marriage as depraved, improper, and un-godly?” No, my highly trained, academic intellect is much more transfixed for the moment by the state of mind that allows Mormon people to simultaneously despise homosexuality and adore ‘80s-era British synthesizer pop.

To be sure, the terms “gay” and “new wave” are not synonymous, but ‘80s synth pop of the stripe that continues to jangle through Church Institute buildings from Rexburg to Provo has nothing to do with the sober nineteenth-century bordello music of our beloved hymnbook. This ‘80s stuff is straight out of after-hours West End disco clubs, which anyone not asleep during the ‘80s is fully aware were gay clubs. The people surprised by this are the same people who were surprised when George Michael came out on Oprah this summer. Many of the Mormon people I know have rejected this truth about ‘80s music, masked it, hid it in the same way that macho rocker types rejected, masked, and hid the truth that the heavy metal spike and leather stylee came “straight” out of the American and European gay leather scene of the ‘50s and ‘60s. It’s difficult to make a metal fan understand that Rob Halford of Judas Priest is one hundred percent out of the closet and that the band Queen was called, um, well . . . Queen.

Similarly, Mormon people seem to have no idea how nuts it is to fret over queer plots to destroy the marriages of Mormon boys and Mormon girls who fell in love underneath a basketball standard with pineapple sherbet on their breath and strains of “West End Girls” filling the cultural hall. Remember, scripture also says that we can’t serve two masters. If we Mormons are really worried about the insidious infiltrations of gay culture, we’d call a stop to the ‘80s music and to Elton John’s Lion King soundtrack and kibosh that blue lesbian fish, Dory, from Finding Nemo so history will not be doomed to re-repeat itself. Because we will recall that in the ‘50s and ‘60s, a man named Liberace crept into God-fearing American tract homes with his candelabra and his gentle—oh so gentle—ivy-tickling, ring-encrusted fingers. By the dates alone, we can see that it was the beginning of the end. After that f’. piano man from Wisconsin won our hearts, we climbed into his rhinestone-studded handbasket, released the emergency brake, and started slipping down that long slope to Las Vegas.

**Blogwatch**

**ETERNAL JEOPARDY!**

*Earlier this summer, Ken Jennings, the thirty-year-old Latter-day Saint software engineer and elders quorum president from Murray, Utah, and record-breaking Jeopardy! champion, took time out of his busy schedule making millions on the syndicated game show to answer ques . . . er, question answers on the Mormon Internet blog, Times and Seasons (www.timesandseasons.org). The following are excerpts from his responses. The “answer then question” format was not used consistently throughout the online interview.*

**Q:** Late Night with David Letterman and The Tonight Show

**A:** I had a fascinating chance to closely compare the Letterman and Leno shows, since I taped them only a week apart. Both
CLIMBING THE LADDER TO HEAVEN?

ACTOR JOSEPH GORDON-Levitt plays an LDS missionary struggling with his sexual identity in the gay Mormon romantic comedy Latter Days. But the typo on his character's missionary name tag (inset) has led us to wonder: Was this an honest mistake? Is it a deliberate joke? Or did the film's producers spell the Church's name incorrectly as a tactic to keep Church lawyers at bay?

shows oddly reflect the personality of their hosts and the cities where they operate. Late Night is quintessentially New York: a barely controlled anarchy, where everyone, even the girl bringing the bottled water, is as unpredictable and prickly and funny as the big boss. The Tonight Show is much more California. It's well-oiled, even micro-managed—my "pre-interview" took more than a dozen separate phone calls! And the whole staff is as accommodating and schmoozy and glad-handing as the host is.

Letterman's a lifelong hero of mine, by the way, and it was a thrill to meet him. I'm sure Relief Societies across America were a little taken aback to hear me say, "Who gives a rat's ass?" as part of the Top Ten. A handful of members of my own ward certainly didn't spare their disapproval. But I didn't think twice about doing it once they gave me the list. It wouldn't remotely offend me to say (or hear) it in real life, so why quibble about it in a scripted comedy bit? I saw it as a great opportunity to demonstrate that Latter-day Saints, even Utah ones, aren't as homogenous or dull as stereotypes might suggest.

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ANSWER: Brigham Young University

QUESTION: What was the best six months of my life?

("Best six months" joke copyright 1990 Earl Cahill, my long-time BYU roommate.) After growing up in Seoul, Korea, I spent my freshman year studying up on Korean for dummies, since I knew very well that I wasn't very fluent and that a mission call to Korea was very likely in the cards for me. My Korean was actually getting pretty good by the time my call arrived...to Madrid, Spain.

Spain is incredible, and I had the best time on my mission. It was one of those experiences that's so dense and intense that you can't really believe how much happened in such a short time. Even the hard or dull times have acquired a rosy, nostalgic glow in hindsight, just because of how valuable the whole experience was to me. Most specifically, what I took home from my mission was an increased love for and testimony of the Book of Mormon. I was amazed by how differently it read when I was tearing through it like a novel and not sleepily reading a bite-sized chunk every night. I also find it harder to take the Book of Mormon for granted after watching how quickly it can surprise and change the lives of people (investigators, mostly) who didn't grow up with it like I did.

Those of you who served European missions can probably guess that Spaniards, with their centuries of ingrained Catholicism, don't comprise the most open and receptive culture in which to spread new religious ideas. As the old folks always joked to us, "I don't even believe in my religion, and mine's the true one! Why should I believe in yours?" But we still had just enough success to keep us going and appreciated it more for its rarity. I had many proficient, effective professors in both the English and computer science departments, though I have to admit that, especially for an institution that focuses so strongly on undergraduate education, there were few who were really great or memorable or life-changing presences in any way. Maybe this says more about me than about anything else, and I should have been paying more attention to class lectures and less to the crossword in the Daily Universe. In any case, because the faculty failed to make much of an impression, the structural unit of my BYU experience was not the class or the department, but the ward. I would guess that many BYU grads share this perception. Despite the transient nature of student life, the student wards I lived in had a cohesiveness and a surprising sense of family and community that far outweighs any family ward I've lived in since. And that's mostly what I came to Provo for anyway: LDS friends and a social scene that wasn't as alcohol-soaked as what I'd seen elsewhere.
went through missionaries like missionaries go through suit pants but were finally baptized a year later. Since I told a faith-promoting Missionary Success story, I guess I should include some Mission Weirdo story as well. Okay, I also had a companion who would spend discussions blowing free-floating spit bubbles into the air and falling asleep, and who now runs a remarkably cracked anti-Mormon website. There you go.

QUESTION: What was your family like? How did you meet your wife?
ANSWER: My family is, above all, loud-talking and fast-talking. In-laws and guests are frequently mystified by the impenetrable conversations around the dinner table, which sometimes almost seem to be spoken in a private language. And, to be fair, my whole family is pretty bratty as well. When my parents got engaged, a friend told them, “You two can’t get married! You will spawn a super-race.” Sadly, that didn’t happen, but we are all pretty good at Scrabble. Sort of a letdown as super-races go, but what are you going to do?

Mindy and I met at BYU, where we lived across the street from each other. She was the girl next door! I was good friends with her roommates, and when we stayed too late or talked too loudly at her house, she would stomp out of her bedroom to yell at us to shut up. It didn’t actually happen this way, but I picture her then in curlers with cold cream on her face, yelling at me. I would stomp out of her bedroom to yell at us to shut up. It didn’t actually happen this way, but I picture her then in curlers with cold cream on her face, straight out of a ’50s movie. It was love at first sight! We learned we had both lived overseas, and from there found out we had a truly bizarre number of things in common, like an encyclopedic knowledge of the sorta-funny 1972 comedy What’s Up, Doc? We were engaged three weeks after our first date. Do not try this at home! Especially if you are one of my own children reading this twenty years in the future!

QUESTION: Aren’t Daily Doubles a form of gambling?
ANSWER: Yes. I feel like the wagering aspect makes Jeopardy! the moral equivalent of gambling, and therefore I just don’t feel right about paying tithing on my winnings. No, not really. Heber J. Grant said that the Church “is opposed to any game of chance, occupation, or so-called business, which takes money from the person who may be possessed of it without giving value received in return.” Wagering on Daily Doubles doesn’t strike me as the kind of thing that could lead my family to financial ruin (on the contrary, there’s been plenty of “value received in return”!) nor is it a particularly addictive behavior, so it doesn’t really qualify for either of the reasons why I consider gambling a dangerous behavior.

QUESTION: Tithing—gross or net? Why?
ANSWER: This is like the Times and Seasons equivalent of “Boxers or briefs?” isn’t it? MTY questions for the Sunstone crowd! “One Cumorah or two? White shirt or colored? Ay-men or ah-men?” I don’t think there’s one right answer to “gross or net,” and I almost think that to ask that question is to fixate on the wrong elements of the law of tithing. But I’ll be paying gross on the Jeopardy! winnings. It makes the math easier, for one thing.

QUESTION: Has your celebrity allowed you to share the gospel more? Have you taught any discussions or given away any pass-along cards to curious fans?
ANSWER: The “Have you taught any discussions?” part of this question displays an MTC zeal and innocence that makes me nostalgic for my own mission:

- Newly minted elder leaving the plane: I sat next to a deaf 95-year-old Filipino woman who speaks no English and slept the whole flight.
- Travel group leader: Oh (Pause). So, did you teach her a first?

Many press interviews I’ve done have brushed on tithing and the Word of Wisdom, which is about the extent of the Jeopardy! missionary-ing I’ve done. Alex Trebek is surprisingly knowledgeable about the Church, and he and I have had many gospel-themed discussions both on and off camera. And I’ve received a truly astounding amount of mail from Protestants and various other “friends of other faiths” complimenting me on my clean-cut appearance, willingness to tithe, etc., with nary a “But you’re going to hell. Your biggest fan, Agnes.” If nothing else, in some parts of the country, I’m sure it’s good to have a Mormon on TV who evidently doesn’t have horns and ten wives. So, yes, there have been some opportunities, and I’m sure there will be more.

ANSWER: Yes.

QUESTION: So, it sounds like things have been pretty hectic for you and your family. Would you do it all over again?

ANSWER: Yes.

WILDFLOWERS

Wildflowers is an organization that exists to support the beauty, strength, courage, and rebirth of women who have been or who are currently married to homosexual men.

www.wearewildflowers.com

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A FEW YEARS AGO, I HAD A THERAPY SESSION WITH a Mormon couple who were probably the most emotionally abusive people I’d ever counselled. For the first time ever, except for situations involving severe physical or sexual abuse, working with them led me to suggest, “Why don’t you two get divorced.” I said this because they were destroying each other and, in the process, really hurting their children. In their relationship pattern, he’d take a very patriarchal, condescending “If you were more righteous” attitude, and she’d respond with a more rebellious attitude, and they’d just go on, back and forth. They name-called and screamed constantly. The family had become a battleground. Yet they turned to me in utter shock, saying almost in unison, “How could you say that? We go to the temple every week, and we have family prayer every morning.”

I replied, “It isn’t working. Your mutual cruelty has injured each of you and your family, and it needs to stop.”

They were still shocked, “But we go to the temple.” Finally they said, “If couples are living the gospel like we are, how can you suggest we’re unhappy?”

I replied: “You just can’t go through the outward rituals of the Church and believe they will make up for a lack of love, respect, and communication. Besides, both of you report rage and unhappiness.”

The confrontation—which I didn’t mean as a therapeutic technique—actually woke them up. I saw them recently, and they have saved their marriage. It may not be the kind of marriage I would choose, but they’ve become much less spiteful and much more human. They had worked on the essence of their relationship, not just the form.

We in the Church have a lot of illusions about marriage and, like all people, challenges. Mormons have the whole range of marital issues and problems—differences around money, sex, interests, communication, roles—found in any other culture. Mormon marriages can be happy; they can be miserable; they can involve affairs; they sometimes end in divorce; and some are exercises in staying together miserably. One couple I have known to be fighting the entire time I’ve been acquainted with them, said at their fiftieth anniversary, “We did this partly to show everybody that you can stay together.”

Mormon divorce statistics really aren’t significantly different than those of the rest of the country. What follows, then, are some issues I do find interesting with regard to Mormon marriages.

Some of the news is good. Research indicates that religious couples report having greater happiness in their marriage, although there are obviously individual exceptions. They also report more satisfying sexual lives than do irreligious people. Within our LDS religion are a couple of especially positive indicators. First, we celebrate and elevate marriage in the eternities. We teach that marriage is indeed important and that our commitment to marriage is important. When we consider the ways some other faiths honor celibacy, we actually elevate marriage, and that’s helpful.

Many Mormon families have institutionalized certain practices such as family home evening, prayer, and other rituals that are performed together, and these can be very healthy and helpful. The temple fosters a sense of commitment, and social pressure helps keep some families together. That may not always be a perfect thing, but the sense of commitment is an overall positive. Indeed, there is a strong support system for marriage. Many Church programs also support marriage and help with children. Troubles often bring aid from well-meaning people. These are pluses.
I list ten.

1. **Age.** The first potentially problematic issue is the age at which many Latter-day Saints get married and how that often prevents them from really coming to know each other. Some Mormons marry young or quickly because of societal expectations, and a surprising number follow this course because they want to have sex. This follows from the idea that we can't be intimate until we're married. I'm not suggesting that Mormons should encourage couples to live together before marriage—statistically, people who do so have higher divorce rates than those who don't. But among Latter-day Saints, there is sometimes a real lack in how well we really get to know our companions before marrying. Many issues fail to get explored ahead of time, and the Church does not have an institutionalized program of pre-marital counseling such as some other faiths have. Very few cultures in the West have such a short “dating to marriage” span as do Latter-day Saints.

   In order to have a successful marriage, we need to know and to check out a lot of things. And that takes time, and Mormons as a whole don't seem to take time for it. I don't know what the statistics show about the average age at which Mormons marry, but most of the friends of my daughter, who just got married at twenty-one, are already married. My son, poor guy, just turned twenty-four, and practically all of his friends are married. Our culture seems to put so much emphasis on marriage that many couples just don't know each other. In counseling, I have asked them, “Why did you get married after just three months of dating?” Some have honestly said: “Well, we wanted to meet society’s expectations and have sex.”

   Moving into expected social roles and experiencing sexuality are two purposes of marriage and life, but not the only purposes.

2. **Sex and intimacy.** Overall, sex doesn't seem to be more problematic in Mormon marriages than in other marriages. One of the great secrets is that Mormons are allowed to enjoy sex. However, there are some twists. One is the sense of guilt people harbor over past behavior. Another is the idea—although I don't see it often—that sex is sinful. Some can't quite process how if sex was sinful before, why it is okay to be sexual now that they are married. A third issue arises when couples have differences in definitions: What's allowable; what's not? For example, I recently saw a couple who had been together thirty-two years, and she had never taken her temple garments off in front of him. She confessed to me that she thought maybe it would be okay to take them off. But she had had a very strict definition about what is and is not appropriate.

   Recently, a colleague told me that if he asks his wife, “Can we make love?” that's very acceptable. However, if he uses other euphemisms, she won't speak to him because somehow in our culture, in our efforts to make sex spiritual, we've created a huge differentiation between what is allowable and what is not. So if we keep our love-making within certain parameters, or if we use certain colloquialisms, it is more acceptable than if we just “have sex.”

   How we express intimacy is also very important in a marriage. In many Mormon marriages, couples were not exposed to intimacy because sex was often perceived as evil. Obviously, couples need to have well established boundaries between their sexual life and their children. Still, it's important for children to see their parents hold or caress one another, because this shows that physical expressions of affection and intimacy in a marriage are important and good.

3. **Expectations.** Another concern is certain illusions about marriage and unrealistic expectations. Both men and women are troubled with these, but women seem to feel them more deeply, particularly in Mormon culture, because marriage is so emphasized as a solution to life's problems. It's the fairy tale.

   Once, when my daughter asked me, “Won't I just be really happy married?” I replied, “It depends on if you're a happy person.” Marriage doesn't change life so much; you still do many of the same things. But many have a lurking illusion that marriage will make everything all better. Men aren't raised with quite as many expectations, so the research shows that overall, men are happier with marriage than women are. Women are more often the ones who are disappointed and depressed because marriage did not fulfill the dreams they thought they'd been promised.
LDS marriages are not immune from societal pressures either. The rapid economic and cultural changes in the last decades, along with the increasing rate of change, has taken its toll. Economic pressures around the world, including in the U.S.—it often takes a two-income family to sustain the lifestyle that a one-income family produced previously—make a difference. Add the pressure to succeed financially, to provide a multitude of experiences for the children, to get ahead in one's career, to fulfill the many expectations of a spouse that were not usually demanded in previous generations, plus a lessening of extended family support, and the pressures on the modern-day marriage can be substantial. We in the LDS culture experience all of these pressures, plus the expectation to fulfill time and financial commitments to the Church and community, the expectation that women stay home (although the percentage of LDS women who work outside the home appears to be similar to the same percentage for other women) and an emphasis on family and having children (sometimes many). These make for a challenging balancing act that can add tension to a marriage.

We also see a lot of codependency in Mormonism. In my practice, I often hear the myth expressed that, “If I live the religion, all my marital problems will go away.” I get particularly upset when I see a battered wife, for example, whom the bishop has counseled to go home and pray harder. Prayer will not stop abuse. But the illusion persists that, “If I make it better—if I’m a better person—my marriage will be better.” I counter that statement by having them think instead, “If I learn how to be happy in my own skin, and I find a partner who is happy in his or her own skin, we can come together, share, be intimate, and have a good marriage.”

4. Gender roles. Disagreements about marriage and gender roles also contribute to many problematic Mormon marriages. A BYU professor's study indicates that Mormons have some of the most conservative gender-role stereotypes in the country—for instance, in communication patterns; who does what; who takes care of the children; who cooks; who makes the living. Another study discussed gender-role attitudes at BYU among males and females and found them becoming even more conservative.

I encounter many problems in this area of gender roles and hierarchy—and not just during counseling sessions. In a priesthood meeting once, somebody said, “Marriage is like the Church.” He then gave the example that God calls the prophet, and the prophet then calls the Jordan River temple president. He said, “Even if the temple president is a good man, if he doesn’t do what the prophet wants, he has to be released. That’s the way a marriage should be.” I was shocked. I couldn’t help blurting out, “What does that mean? If your wife disagrees with you, you’re supposed to get a divorce?” Curiously, that individual is divorced today, and I’m not.

In other settings, I’ve heard at least four men stand up and tearfully share the “beautiful” story of how they proposed to their wives: “God and the Church come first in my life; will you be second or third?” Some of the wives have told me that they’re not as thrilled with this as their husbands seem to be. It is important that a spouse feel like he or she is an important priority. Conceptually, if your dedication is to something else, your awareness of your marriage may suffer.

The priority we sometimes give to the Church over our spouse can be significant, but so is our LDS focus on raising children. It’s not that focusing on children is bad nor an matter of right or wrong in and of itself. But with our large families and the emphasis on being good parents, we often go overboard in paying attention to parenting tasks when the primary relationship is the marriage. It must survive. It also requires attention. When a couple’s energy goes primarily to the children, very often when the kids are gone, the partners will find that they have nothing left in common. Giving energy to your spouse is a healthy message.

We also tend to be very busy in the Church. I like to say that sometimes in Mormon culture we are not human beings so much as doing beings. We stay very, very busy. Relationships need fun, down-time, too.

5. Communication. A fifth concern is a lack of openness in Mormon culture. We Latter-day Saints feel the need to look good, and we often tend to compare ourselves with others. More than from any other culture, I hear Mormons say in therapy, “I can’t believe my family or my spouse has this problem because nobody else in my ward has this problem.” I want to blunt out, “No, many people have those problems; it’s just that nobody talks about them!” The need to look good promotes a sense of isolation. Once I gave a requested lesson in priesthood meeting about incest and child abuse. I said, “Secrecy is one of the things that reinforce incest.” Somebody retorted, “These sorts of things need to remain in the family! You never talk to anybody but the bishop. Families must keep secrets.” While honoring confidentiality is important, secrecy does not promote healthy communication.

As I grew up, there was also great stress on the family name. We should do nothing to dishonor the family name, or in any sense to make our family look bad. So if somebody is different in our family, or in our marriage, we really up the ante because
it's about something that's wrong with them or with us.

6. Judgmentalness. Another concern is a Mormon pattern which tends to view things in black and white terms, which often causes a great deal of judgmental behavior. When we believe we are living in a culture that knows the truth, that knows absolutely what is right and wrong, we have difficulty negotiating and compromising. One of my counseling couples shared with me their fight over an R-rated movie he had seen on TV. His wife thought that if it was rated R in the theater, it was pornographic. As a result, she had no ability to negotiate on this point. In her mind, his actions were wrong, and not seeing R-rated movies was right. He was not allowed to give an explanation. Their communication pattern did not allow her to consider another point of view. With that kind of attitude, it's difficult to find alternatives. Every marriage partner needs the ability to discover and create new ways of viewing, speaking, loving, and talking.

7. Psychological issues. Our psychological health is a strong factor in determining how we are going to operate in a marriage. And one important factor in Mormon marriages is mental health. LDS awareness of mental health issues is improving, but problems such as depression, substance abuse, and anxiety are often more difficult to deal with in our culture because we have such a strong perfectionistic bent. We assume that if we live right, nothing bad will happen to us. A friend's wife called me over because her husband was suicidal. He suffered from a bi-polar disorder, but she thought it was his fault. What was wrong? He didn't enjoy his mission and felt unworthy. But he was depressed because he was bipolar, not because he served an unfaithful mission. Too often we tend to assume that when someone doesn't fit in the culture, he or she must be somehow less worthy than those for whom the gospel and "typical Mormonhood" fit like a glove.

The flipside to the conviction that we have the best lives on earth is the feeling of estrangement that can come when we personally do not fit in that category—if we're unhappy, single, divorced, gay, or if something else has kept us from having the kind of life we've been taught is ideal. Another flipside is how an emphasis on the whole family can really up the stakes in terms of pressures to conform to the ideal model. It's the empty-chair-at-the-table-of-hereafter syndrome—this idea that somehow our family will not be complete, or we won't be grateful children or grateful spouses, if we do not all choose the same path or live in the same way.

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THOU SHALT NOT COERCHE THY SPOUSE

By Robert Kirby
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The Lord is breaking up my friend's marriage. After twenty-four years of marriage, Boone's wife has decided that he isn't going to the celestial kingdom. She's threatening divorce. Trouble started about a year ago when Boone began having serious doubts about religion. He kept going to church but didn't exactly keep his concerns to himself.

I've known Boone for years. He doesn't beat his wife, insult her, cheat on her, get drunk and/or blow all their money. He's a good father and provider. If he has any serious faults, it's the [Utah] Jazz. But the more Boone talked, the more alarmed his wife became. Last week, she decided that the devil had possessed her husband. She makes both of them sleep in the basement.

Boone has a choice. Either he stops his heretical musings and gets back on track, or his wife will divorce him. Put another way, he can lie to his wife or be honest to himself. This sort of thing probably happens a lot. You marry someone who shares your beliefs, but something happens along the way. They grow, they change, maybe they go a little nuts. Meanwhile, you're a rock.

Yeah, right. Here's a news flash. Everybody changes, even if it's just to become even more insecure and inflexible and dogmatic about their original beliefs. Assuming that everything else in the relationship is cool, it's the height of irony to divorce someone over God, particularly since faith in him is supposed to be all about patience, forgiveness, and love. Frankly, who better deserves this kind of treatment than the person you vowed to love forever?

I think this happens because, for some people, exercising their religion is simply another way of exercising control over others. And life only makes sense if their loved ones stay in the box. It doesn't happen just in marriage. When one of my relatives left the LDS Church several years ago, he produced angry and bitter words from his immediate family. Rather than letting him know they still loved him, their knee-jerk reaction only widened the rift.

Remember the part about people changing? Life is a process, not a status. Keeping that in mind, maybe it makes sense not to nail the door shut just because someone leaves the room for a few minutes. When it comes to faith, what we say matters far less than what we do. Nowhere is this truer than it is with children. People will make mortal enemies out of their children under the guise of saving their eternal souls.

Unless your kids are drones, it's reasonable to expect that they will at some point express considerable doubt about the merits of church. Any kid who doesn't was probably born old in the first place. So how do you handle things when your teenager says he or she doesn't believe and doesn't want to go? You try reasoning, then you yell, then you ground them. Maybe you whack them, or tell them that they're risking your love in the great "families are forever" scheme of things.

Want to know what else is forever? Shame. Yeah, good old-fashioned family guilt has probably produced more apostates and heretics than any external form of deliberate evil. The amazing thing is that since emotional coercion and extortion wouldn't work on us, where do we get the idea that they would work on those we love?
8. **Shame**. Shame can be toxic to our being. Shame is the fundamental sense that no matter who we are, we’re fundamentally flawed or damned, and there is no escape from that state of being. One of the scriptures, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), can be a setup for shame because none of us is flawless. Too often in our striving for what we consider perfection, we become frustrated, depressed, and disappointed in ourselves. We “should” ourselves to death and emphasize action rather than Christian grace. We imagine God as loving, but often punitive. Unfortunately, I see a lot of poisonous demons, including the feeling of being damned. I’ve seen people who choose extreme behaviors because when the shame hits they feel there is no hope for redemption. As a youth, I was told that after I died, all my relatives would watch the movie of my life. I was horrified. Now I think how boring that would be, more punishment to them than to me!

9. **Individuation**. A ninth issue that can cause tension and unhappiness in marriage is failure in individuation. Obviously, developmentally, we must individuate from our families, our culture, our parents, and so internalize our own value system and way. But individuation can be tough to accomplish in Mormon culture. Our theology emphasizes free choice, direct inspiration, choosing our path. But culturally, this can translate into an almost permanent parent-child relationship. It’s a very hierarchical structure. We don’t always trust journeying—the need to go on our journeys and develop our own wisdom. That’s a conflict I see often in marriages: “I need to look at other things” is too often met with a spouse’s reply of, “No, you cannot; you need to leave other things alone.” We must individuate or we’ll constantly be negotiating control and boundary issues. The result can be a serious problem.

10. **Religious views**. Finally, many Mormon couples struggle over the ways they view gospel truths. When one views truth in black and white terms, religious issues can be very difficult to negotiate. Guilt and shame result from an attitude that suggests that “if you fall away, we won’t be married for eternity.” I like to ask couples whether their religious life is focused on this life or the next one; if it is about meeting God’s perceived requirements or about living by grace; if they are preoccupied with their own salvation more than that of others. In doing this, I hope to help them understand that compassion, not judgment, is the essential ingredient in a religious life.

Marriages require a certain amount of openness to grow, but the issue of one’s perceived eventual salvation can be problematic. If we believe that marriage is the only way to gain salvation—and since many women have been taught that they can gain salvation only through their husband and with their children—negotiation is very difficult.

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**GALILEO’S DAUGHTER**

Tonight he discovers a tiny moon swimming into view out of the glare of its bright swollen parent.

Laboring down late from his garret bearing telescope and books he finds me by the window where he left me after supper, refusing again to play with me. Now my dark eyes crush, annihilate him. Tonight he discovers two black holes. While he spent his hours upstairs staring at light-years I was blowing out my breath on the cold dark windowpane, creating with my fingertip in vapor tiny spirals, stars, and galaxies again and again, seeing them fade and disappear—alone, detesting him. Tonight he discovers an unexpected domestic cosmos on his way to bed where Mama sleeps: stops a moment, sucked into the clouds of my eyes, comes crashing into my core.

—RICHARD ARNOLD

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**EVERY CULTURE CARRIES its own baggage, its own twists. Mormon marriages require the same work as do other marriages. It's up to us to grow and develop in a way that helps our relationships work. Marriage takes commitment, love, flexibility, communication, a sense of humor, a willingness to allow someone to grow and a desire to grow ourselves.**

Fortunately, as Mormons, we come from a culture that reinforces marriage and provides support to us. All of us who have been married realize that in the real world there is still much to be learned, behavior and attitudes to change, and a need for openness both to ourselves and to our spouses. At times, some of the learned instincts and assumptions we carry from our families and cultures of origins need to be questioned and adjusted. Being more appropriately open about our own marriages could provide a bit of fresh air in our communities. We need to ask how we can strengthen both marriage and the processes leading to getting married. Marriage deserves this. May we be willing to commit to each other and develop our marriages—for only in attending to our spouses can we fully bless our children and community.
Many of us have grown out of believing the story of Noah’s flood to be literally true. Now scientists have pinpointed a large-scale deluge and a sudden population dispersion from the Black Sea area around 5600 BC. Is it time for Latter-day Saints to reexamine the Flood as well?

# NOAH’S FLOOD: MODERN SCHOLARSHIP AND MORMON TRADITIONS

**By Duane E. Jeffery**

**AUTHOR’S PREFATORY NOTE:** The subjects embraced in this essay cover areas far beyond the academic expertise of any one person. Accordingly, I do not intend this analysis to be anything more than a starting point for discussion clearly needed in contemporary Mormonism. I seek public input from dedicated students who will seriously avail themselves of at least several of the critical books before venturing into the discussion.

Since delivering this presentation at the 2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, I have learned that a manuscript dealing with the Noachian Flood, authored by two BYU faculty members, has been in review at BYU Studies for many months. Interested readers should watch for the appearance of that analysis as well.

For those of us raised in Christian households, the biblical story of Noah and the Flood is likely one of our earliest remembered tales. Its scope and drama have fascinated artists and scriptural commentators for centuries. It is also fair to say that the notion that all known animals were represented on Noah’s ark easily lends itself to imaginative artwork, cartoons, and jolly good speculations. Just how did Noah stop the two tyrannosaurs from consuming half the creatures and people on the boat, and was it any trouble to keep the woodpeckers and woodworms from drilling holes in the boat’s sides?

For most of us, there comes a time when we begin to evaluate more critically our childhood fascinations, and we soon realize that the Noah story as given does not square easily with the known world. Ancient cultures can be documented back into the mists of history, all across the earth; and human beings’ diverse physical attributes, languages, and religions are so well developed that it becomes very difficult to imagine that all people could have derived from a common ancestral family just 4400 years ago. But if we check the Bible, that is the time span we must confront. It is simple indeed to just add up the given ages of biblical personalities and conclude that Noah entered the Ark in 2344 BC.

For these reasons among others, the story is ignored as childish nonsense in most of the academic world, given no more attention nor validity than Grimm’s fairy tales. But not all academic disciplines are quite so cavalier about Noah and the Flood. Folklorists, for instance, have spent a great deal of time collecting variants of the story, and scholars of ancient history have wrestled with it from a variety of perspectives. Still, few are those who give it any credence as a real historical event. Yet it is apparently the oldest recognizable story in existence.

Is it time for a fresh look at the Flood? I believe so. Where has scholarship taken us regarding the idea of a universal deluge? What have new discoveries suggested about a possible literal event that might have spawned the Flood story? Exactly what have Latter-day Saints taught or believed about the Flood? Is there a way of understanding the Flood story as containing important moral imperatives for us today even if it is not accepted as historical in its literal reading?

## I. BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NOACHIAN FLOOD

* A downsized Flood; a mythologized Noah

The basic story of the Flood is too well known to need repeating here. The tale of a universal flood that destroyed all human life save eight souls and all animal life save mating pairs of each species was generally accepted as literal truth in Christianity until just a few hundred years ago.

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But with growing awareness of the natural world, interpretations of the story shifted from literal history to a figurative or mythological view. The change was gradual but definite as increasingly serious questions from geology, anthropology, and archaeology accumulated one after another, and few solid discoveries seemed to give any promise of resolving the issues in favor of historical reality. The recognition that fossils are the remains of formerly living organisms that are very different from extant species, that there are far more species on earth than can by any stretch of the imagination be sequestered on one modest-sized vessel, that the species on distant continents are vastly different from anything recognizable in the Bible, created a domino effect that led many Christians to rethink the traditional understanding. The litany of problems also includes post-Flood dispersal of organisms from Ararat: how could marsupials have traveled to Australia, or how could animals that neither fly nor swim (e.g., dodos) have found their way onto isolated oceanic islands? There are practical problems: how could eight people have managed to feed that many animals and remove their wastes? The methane from animal wastes would have made the ark a floating bomb, susceptible to the slightest candle flame. Eventually, most mainline Christians decided that at least the first eleven chapters of Genesis (Creation through the Flood and Tower of Babel) were not historical events in the same sense that modern society understands history. They came to recognize that all peoples worldwide have stories that have been handed down from antiquity and that those stories carry fundamental messages about that group’s ideas of who they are and how they fit into the wide scheme of life. Universally these stories focus on the particular group, asserting that theirs is the true historical story, and, where deity is concerned, they were or are the ones favored by the gods. These grounding tales are “cosmic history”—stories wound together to help people make sense of their lives and their world. But “cosmic history” does not necessarily match “event history”—the accounts of fact-based, empirical events that are usually what we think of when we hear the term “history.”

While the majority of mainline Christians followed this mythologizing trajectory, others favored a lack of modifying the scope of the Flood from a world-wide devastation to one of more limited extent, from a violent pounding of waters to afloat on a rather tranquil pond. It was variously argued that Noah, to whatever extent he actually is an historical figure, was relating events only from his own limited perspective, and that repeated re-tellings and interpretations over millennia have added details that make the story more appealing, more impressive, marvelous, and supernatural.

*Backing the trend: The rise of Young-Earth Creationism*

IN THE MIDST of this trend to scale down the story, there have always been those who, despite the overwhelming mass of contrary evidence, have insisted that the Flood indeed was worldwide and killed off “all flesh”; hence all living organisms trace their genealogies back to Ararat in Turkey just 4400 years ago. During the early twentieth century, these ideas were kept alive by such persons as Harry Rimmer and George McCready Price. But in 1961, this literalistic view received a major boost in visibility and influence with the publication of the book, *The Genesis Flood*, by John Whitcomb Jr., an Old Testament scholar, and Henry Morris, a hydraulics engineer. Their book provided the major impetus to the resurgence of religious/political activists who can be designated collectively as “Young-Earth Creationists.” Briefly, their views can be summarized in the following two assertions:

1. Some 4400 years ago, humans became so corrupt that God killed all but eight persons (men, women, children, and infants included), and generally all animal life except for those species preserved on the ark. Authors within the movement have differed as to whether God’s statements that he would destroy “all flesh” and “every living substance that I have made” include fish, marine mammals and reptiles, and plants, but they agree that it certainly includes all birds and terrestrial animals: mammals, reptiles, insects, and so forth.
2. All the geological strata from what are known as the Cambrian rocks upward—essentially all the thousands of feet of strata holding the fossil record of macroscopic animals—are said to be the product of the Flood. This includes all the dinosaurs, mammoths, and other extinct plants and animals of all types. These commitments entail the assertion that the earth is very young, hence the name “Young-Earth Creationists.”

In order to bolster their literalistic claims, Young-Earth Creationists expend great effort toward discrediting all the dating techniques that show the earth to be old. But new dating techniques are continually being developed, and they have a remarkable consistency that creationists have never yet been able to explain and have traditionally ignored.

Creationists also face the challenge of shoehorning huge numbers of species onto the ark; a hurdle made all the more daunting in recent years as inventories of the number of species in the world have grown steadily. Recognized biologists now estimate the number of unique species at thirty or even one hundred million. A conservative estimate is ten million; I’ll stick with that. Can one really fit ten million species onto a single ocean-going vessel, feed and care for them all with their often very restrictive diets or living conditions (many of which we are helpless to duplicate even with modern systems), and keep it all going with just eight people for an entire year? The answer, plainly, is no.

Yet defenders still try. The most ambitious recent defense of the idea is John Woodmorappe’s book *Noah’s Ark: A Feasibility Study*. His is a marvelously inventive attempt, envisioning bamboo tubes to carry water to the animals and divinely-selected animal personalities to keep the carnivores from eating the herbivores and the strong animals from destroying their cages. The book has been hailed as showing how the literalistic
Flood story can be understood without invoking any miracles whatever. This is pure puffery; despite its inventiveness, the book resorts to miracles from front to finish. Let us take just one item: the number of species.

Recognizing that Noah could not have had ten million species on the ark, Woodmorappe proposes that Noah needed to take only about eight thousand “kinds”—a reproductive pair of the dog kind, the kangaroo kind, the beetle kind, and so forth. As soon as animals left the Ark, Woodmorappe hypothesizes, God sped up the mutation rate by thousands of times to generate all sorts of different genes and chromosomes, sped up the speciation rate to produce the ten million or so species we presently have, and then slowed it all down again to the rates we see today. On average, each “kind” would thus have had to give rise to 1250 new species. And in this scenario, God did not have 4400 years to do it, either, since numerous representatives of many “kinds” have been known and described from antiquity (e.g., references to the “dog kind” alone include domestic dogs, jackals, wolves, foxes, fennecs, dingoes and dholes). In Woodmorappe’s story, God had to do all this in one blazing hurry, essentially a Creation all over again. And since two of the standard arguments of creationism are that mutations cannot make anything new, or novel, or useful, and that new species cannot develop (evolve), Woodmorappe has had to jettison two of the creationists’ major historic doctrines even to get to the obviously compromised position he holds.

Figure 1. A Cosmology of the Ancient World

The earth is a flat disk surrounded by waters above and below. (The notion of a spherical earth did not appear in Jewish thought until the fourteenth or fifteenth century.) The firmament, with the sun, moon, and stars embedded in it (Genesis 1:17), is a solid dome which “divideth the waters from the waters” (Genesis 1:6)—the ocean of heaven from the primeval ocean upon which the earth floats. As a solid dome, the firmament requires support: the “pillars of heaven.” As a disk floating on “the deep,” the earth also requires support: “pillars of earth.”

As evidenced by Job 36:27–28, the ancient Hebrews had an elementary understanding of the relationship between water vapor and the source of rain in the clouds, but their experience had taught them that at times, God induces great atmospheric catastrophes. Therefore, they conceived of mechanisms through which God might execute his punishments. Since obviously the clouds alone could not have held enough water for the Flood, to unleash the amount of water needed for a universal deluge “all the fountains of the great deep [were] broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened” (Genesis 7:11).

(This explanation and rendering of the ancient cosmos were inspired by material found at http://www.aarweb.org/syllabus/syllabi/pg/jet/306/commoncosmos.htm.)
But give him credit, he has tried, more ambitiously than anyone else, to float a sunken ship.

Alternate explanations for the widespread flood motif

ARCHEOLOGISTS AND HISTORIANS of ancient civilizations have added further challenges to the literalistic view. The biblical account seems not to be the oldest version. Many scholars believe that the Genesis version was assembled from at least two earlier accounts, and estimates so far are that the Genesis account was put into written form only about 700–900 BC. The Genesis story is commonly claimed to have derived from earlier accounts stemming back to the ancient Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations, the Sumerian accounts dating even prior to 2000 BC.9

This recognition of flood tales far older than the Genesis story clearly raises the issue of the significance of the many more recent non-biblical accounts of massive floods. Historians have documented such stories among native peoples world-wide—China, Southeast Asia, Australia, the Americas. But the stories are missing in some regions: Egypt, interestingly, and most of pre-Christian Europe.10

Do these ancient stories validate the view that the Flood was indeed a world-wide phenomenon—that it has left such an impression on human collective memory? Apparently not, for several reasons.

First, if the existence of widespread stories from antiquity is a good criterion for establishing truth, we would all believe in mermaids, mandrakes, multiple competing gods, and reincarnation. Polytheism, so far as scholarship has ever been able to determine, has a far older and more widespread history than does monotheism. Popularity and age do not mean truth.

Similarly, floods are among the most common major meteorological or geological phenomena which humans experience, even with modern flood control measures. And we must remember that humans throughout the long sweep of history have experienced very different types of weather than you and I experience.11

So what alternate explanations may plausibly account for the widespread flood motif, other than collective memory of a truly universal deluge? It is well established that about 12,000 years ago, our planet was just emerging from the latest of its numerous Ice Ages. Sea level was hundreds of meters lower than at present. With the melting of the ice, sea levels rose. Since humans have traditionally found their most hospitable homes in lowlands adjacent to oceans, and since these are habitats ready-made for massive flooding, a rise in sea level flooding into shallow valleys adjacent to the ocean provides a ready mechanism to generate widespread flood stories.

Tsunamis (sometimes called “tidal waves” but actually caused by underwater volcanic activity or earthquakes) add further possibilities for the emergence of flood stories. Indeed a significant proportion of the stories alleged to be linked with the Noachian Flood specifically refer to massive waves coursing violently upon the land from the sea.12

It is now well established that huge Ice-Age lakes such as Lake Bonneville (which covered large portions of Utah, Nevada, and Idaho), and Lake Missoula (located mainly in modern Montana) were held in place by ice dams or other geological features, and that when those were breached, almost unbelievable amounts of water were released, causing catastrophic floods. I do not suggest that Lakes Bonneville and Missoula gave rise to the Noah’s Flood story—they seem to be slightly too old. But some readers may recall the Native American story reported in LeGrand Richards’ book A Marvelous Work and a Wonder, which purports to relate the loss of Lake Lahontan, an Ice-Age lake in present-day Nevada.13 Perhaps Amerind cultural memory does indeed go back further than we can presently validate.

But dozens of Ice-Age lakes existed in the Old World as well, and these could easily have given rise to their own remembered stories.

It seems clear that the claimed “Flood stories” from around the world stem from a wide variety of experiences. Indeed, many are likely (and some are known to be) contaminations of accounts of “primitive peoples” recorded by early Christian missionaries. One missionary to the Hottentots, for instance, records how a Hottentot told him a purported legend of his people. Suspicious because the telling was so close to the biblical account of the Noachian Flood, the missionary pressed his informant as to his source. The man adamantly insisted it was an old legend of his people. But when the missionary later shared his experience with another missionary, the latter laughingly reported that he had taught the story to that very Hottentot some time earlier.14

Indeed, one scholar of flood accounts evaluated 303 such stories and concluded that 35 were mere allusions with no meaningful detail. Among the 268 remaining, 77 were identifiably local floods, 80 were cases of inundation by rising waters (such as tsunamis or rising lake levels, as happened with Great Salt Lake in 1983–84), three were from melting snowfall, 58 were about excessive (but local) rain, and so forth. Very few seemed to resemble genuine Noachian accounts.15

Linguistic challenges to the literalist view

LINGUISTS HAVE ALSO joined the Flood game, challenging various biblical interpretations that have traditionally supported the creationists’ agenda. A critical issue in the Flood story in the King James Bible has to do with translations of the Hebrew words cretz and adamah as meaning the entire “earth.” What do these terms actually mean? It is widely recognized that Hebrew is a wonderful language for poets, since virtually every word has multiple meanings. But that same characteristic makes it a horrible language for precision. As it turns out, cretz and adamah can indeed be a geographical reference akin to what we usually mean by “the earth.” But it is not at all clear that the ancients had the concept of a spherical planet that you and I do. Many scholars argue that the Bible writers thought in terms of a flat earth that was covered by a bowl-shaped firmament into which the windows of heaven were literally cut, foreign though all that seems to you and me (see Figure 1).16 So
we must be very careful when reconstructing ancient perceptions of “earth.” Further, "eretz" and "adamah," the “earth” of the biblical Flood, can also mean land, nation, country, field, or ground. In short, linguistic evidence allows those who want their Flood universal to construe it that way, but it also helps those who postulate that the writer(s) of Genesis could have been describing a more localized event.

**Telling stories**

THE ACADEMIC WORLD in general has concluded that the Noachian Flood is a legend, perhaps founded on some local event to which details have been added over time, or something possibly hatched up altogether. We would do well to remember that our ancestors used to sit in the evenings in community groups, or around open fires or the hearths in their homes, and tell stories—marvelous stories of the past, of great heroes and heroines, of wars among the gods, of great catastrophes. And sometimes these story sessions went on and on, evening after evening, for days on end. I suspect these gifted storytellers have had far more influence than we have imagined.

**II. THE RISE OF THE BLACK SEA HYPOTHESIS**

Is there evidence of a major flooding event during Biblical times that could have given rise to the Noachian Flood tradition?

DURING MY YEARS at BYU, my students and I have frequently puzzled over just what lies behind the Noachian story. The scientific data from geology, biology, genetics, archeology, and anthropology overwhelmingly negate the traditional view; the linguistic data also leave the story clearly compromised. Attempts by various Christian apologists to explain the story are unsatisfactory. Was the story merely fanciful folklore, like Pegasus or Pan, or was some historical event really involved?

In 1998, a book by two world-class geologists, William Ryan and Walter Pitman, both associated with Columbia University, appeared on the scene. In *Noah’s Flood: The New Scientific Discoveries about the Event that Changed History*, Ryan and Pitman claim they have found evidence of a flooding event and subsequent major cultural dispersion that may conceivably match with much in the Noachian Flood story.

Ryan and Pitman build from the established knowledge that at the end of the last Ice Age, numerous massive meltwater lakes formed on the Eurasian continents. One of them has been named the New Euxine Lake, the forerunner of today’s Black Sea. According to Ryan and Pitman’s findings, the lake received sufficient amounts of meltwater that at one time its level was virtually even with that of the Sea of Marmara (the northeaest portion of the Mediterranean Sea) and of the world’s oceans at large. In fact, the lake had an outlet to the Sea of Marmara across what is now the Bosporus land-bridge connecting Europe and Asia. Climatological data indicate that a dramatic thousand-year period of colder and drier conditions (the so-called Younger Dryas period) then set in, during which the inflow to the lake from northern rivers was greatly reduced. Evaporation lowered the lake’s level some five hundred feet below the lip of the Bosporus shelf. This dried up the lake’s outlet to Marmara (Mediterranean).

At the end of the Younger Dryas, glacial melt raised the level of the oceans more than that of the lake. Eventually the rising ocean breached the Bosporus shelf, and a massive flood ensued. This rapidly expanded the size of the lake, which we now call the Black Sea. (See Figure 2, which shows the size of both the New Euxine Lake and the present Black Sea.)

Ryan and Pitman argue that during the Younger Dryas, the New Euxine Lake would have acted as a biological magnet,
drawing animals and people from the surrounding arid areas. The thousand-year period would have given people centuries to establish themselves along the shoreline, probably close to the mouths of incoming rivers. Note that in Figure 2 that even along the southern edge of the Lake, there was several miles’ distance between the New Euxine Lake edge and the present shores of the Black Sea; these areas would have been dry (and allegedly inhabited) land during the life of the Lake. And along the north shores, people at the edge of the Lake would have been more than a hundred miles inside the present shores of the Black Sea.

Reflecting on Figure 2, and recognizing that today’s Black Sea is seven hundred miles long east-to-west, and three hundred wide from north-to-south, it is clear that great tracts of land exposed during the life of the Lake are now deep under water.

Ryan and Pitman calculate that once the ocean broke across the Bosporus shelf, waters would have poured into the New Euxine basin at more than two hundred times the rates measured at current-day Niagara Falls. The Lake would have risen six to twelve inches per day throughout its basin. In many areas, people would have had to move at least a kilometer (about two thirds of a mile) per day, with children, animals, and possessions, to keep ahead of the water. Those isolated by irregularities in terrain would likely have moved to whatever higher ground was readily available, but that ground, too, would have soon been overtopped. (There are no significant islands in the Black Sea; it is presently more than 7200 feet deep.) The only escape, then, was to move to the higher ground that surrounded the basin, if one could or, if the paths out were blocked, to try to escape on whatever floating material or devices one could cobble together.

And all this, Ryan and Pitman claim, may have provided grist for the story of the Flood. It is a very ambitious thesis. What is their evidence?

The story of how they arrived at their conclusions is as follows:

1. Ryan and Pitman were already familiar with a similar scenario involving the Mediterranean Sea. It was once a desert, with the ocean being held back by a geological shelf across what is now the Strait of Gibraltar. About five million years ago, evidence indicates, the Gibraltar shelf was breached and the Mediterranean flooded to essentially its present size.18

Some decades ago, the two geologists came upon some skimpy evidence that the Black Sea had been smaller than it is now. It appeared to them that underwater shelves exist in its bed, which they suspected could have been shorelines of a freshwater lake. These shelves are similar to the terraces we see in northern Utah today as remnants from Lake Bonneville.

But since the Black Sea was the Soviet Union’s only reliable
year-round ocean port, it was tightly guarded; Westerners were not given access. That stalemate began to break down a bit in 1961, when an American research vessel was allowed in to perform a limited number of soundings of the bottom. Sporadic subsequent visits were also permitted.

2. Eventually Ryan and Pitman were contacted by a Soviet geologist who also had noticed the terraces and independently concluded that the Black Sea had once been a freshwater lake. The three researchers began a collaboration.

3. Eventually, better access was allowed, and the New Euxine Lake story became well established. But how the freshwater lake changed to a somewhat salty sea (still, today, only half as salty as the ocean) was less clear.

4. Eventually core drillings of bottom sediments were done all over the Black Sea. The corings contained mollusks (seashells). In the lower sediments, only freshwater species were found. But in the higher sediments, the corings revealed only salt-water species. Further, it appeared that the shift from fresh-water species to salt-water species had occurred, all at a given time, all over the Black Sea basin. The shift was geologically very sudden, occurring about 5600 BC.

5. Currently, the salt contents of the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara (Mediterranean) are still moving toward full equilibrium. The salty water flowing in through the Strait of Bosporus is heavier and therefore sinks to the bottom of the Sea. Fresh water then flows out as it is displaced to the top. This phenomenon creates an almost unbelievable situation in the Bosporus Strait: surface water is flowing out of the Black Sea while the bottom water in the channel is flowing in. This oddity has been known from antiquity. For centuries, boatmen wishing to travel upstream in the Bosporus would fill a basket with rocks, then suspend it on a rope from their boat deep enough to catch the lower current, which would pull them upstream through the outflowing surface water!

6. Recognizing that any major diaspora from the Black Sea area due to sudden flooding should result in peoples suddenly showing up somewhere else, Ryan and Pitman turned to archeology. Figures 2 and 3 summarize the peoples they have identified that seem to fit that requirement—i.e., those that appeared in new areas in 5600 BC or shortly thereafter.

7. Ryan and Pitman have also mustered limited linguistic and genetic evidence in support of their thesis.19 Their basic argument for a tie-in to the Noachian story, then, is that from these events at the Black Sea, a story was transmitted orally through the generations, picking up additional dimensions and details, until it became the “Noah family” of flood legends that are identifiable as variants of the Book of Genesis. Different versions are identifiable among the ancient Babylonians (successors to the Sumerians), and most authors think the Genesis account was derived from these Sumerian and Babylonian sources.20

An Australian writer who has previous experience with biblical subjects has taken up the torch from Ryan and Pitman. Ian Wilson’s book, Before the Flood: The Biblical Flood as a Real Event and How It Changed the Course of Civilization, adds extensive new evidence to bolster their position. As indicated by his subtitle, Wilson does indeed argue that the Flood changed the course of civilization. Somewhat parallel to the thinking expressed by Hugh Nibley in his book The World of the Jaredites21 (see sidebar), Wilson argues that civilization spread out from the Black Sea area. He finds evidence in this region for the first, or at least very early, designed breeding of plants and animals, writing, bookkeeping and accountancy, for major developments in ancient city building and planning, and so forth. He traces religious motifs such as a widespread worship of a Mother Goddess (which he claims was deliberately quashed into oblivion by later patriarchal societies), and great respect for, and indeed worship, of bulls (which he ties to the golden calf of Exodus). Other motifs include temple prostitution (as found in Genesis), child sacrifice (also in Genesis), and priestly self-castration as referred to in the New Testament by Christ (“some make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake”—Matthew 19:12). He traces a deep cultural commitment to the color red (which appears in the Bible as the blood on Israelite doorposts and various other blood motifs). He makes an interesting case, but I do not have the expertise to evaluate the legitimacy of these claims of cultural contacts and dispersions.

There are detractors of the Black Sea hypothesis, of course. Most archeologists seem to be cool to the idea, but I know of no detailed refutations. The same goes for linguists and geneticists. Recognizably, most new ideas take time to gain popularity among professionals. The fact that the idea is tied to biblical matters possibly creates additional caution.

Among geologists, a team based in Canada have sampled sediment cores at the mouth and the outlet of the Strait of Bosporus. They think they have evidence that the Black Sea has maintained a connection to the Sea of Marmara for at least the last ten thousand years, challenging the Ryan-Pitman proposal.22

But despite this possible new evidence, the proposal does seem to be gathering a wider circle of interest—enough that Robert Ballard, the famed undersea explorer credited with finding the Titanic, Bismarck, John Kennedy’s PT–109, and numerous other sunken vessels, has mounted missions to the Black Sea. It is widely recognized that the critical evidence for the Lake-to-Sea story will be finding remains of human habitations on the bottom of the Black Sea. Ballard has reported initial findings, such as implanted timbers and stone tools, but the finds are not yet extensive, and it is not clear when he next plans to pursue the project. Even if he demonstrates that human habitations existed on the now-flooded shorelines, it will not, of course, demonstrate any connection to the story of Noah. It will only validate the Black Sea story as theorized by Ryan and Pitman.23

More recently, a young British geologist has developed a sophisticated computer analysis of the Ryan-Pitman hypothesis. His models largely validate their basic story of the filling of the Black Sea basin, though his scenarios show that the filling probably took closer to thirty-three years rather than the three years postulated by Ryan and Pitman. Ryan reportedly sees this modeling as no problem for their overall thesis. 24
HUGH NIBLEY ON THE ORIGINS OF CIVILIZATION

The idea that civilization spread out from the area that fits generally with the Black Sea hypothesis is not new to Latter-day Saints who have read Hugh Nibley. In one of his early books, The World of the Jaredites (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), Nibley argues to a historian critic that the Jaredites were Asians, genuine Asians, not Hebrews or any other identifiable Biblical people. He argues that they traveled eastward across the steppes and mountains of Asia to the North Pacific, where they crossed and came to the New World.

Still, what interests here is not the Jaredites; it is rather what Nibley says about the origin of civilization:

- “The great Babylonian civilization throughout the many centuries in which it flourished was merely coasting, sponging off the achievements of a much earlier civilization…” (151).

- “Every great national shrine of antiquity had a founding legend of how in the beginning it was brought through the air from some mysterious faraway land. And this faraway land always turns out to have been in central Asia” (159).

- “The weather of Asia is the great central driving mechanism of world history” (168).

- “As you know, there are two classic points or centers of radiation from which all the great migrations of antiquity took their beginning—the heart of Asia and (to a far lesser degree) the Arabian desert” (170).

- “Now it is a fact that in ancient times the plains of Asia were covered with ‘many waters,’ which have now disappeared but are recorded as existing well down into historic times…” (177).

- “All the major migrations without exception,’ writes Eduard Meyer, ‘which repeatedly in the course of world history have moved into the face of the European-Asiatic continent . . . have moved into the distant regions of the west from a point in central Asia”’ (188).

- “Scholars began to suspect that both Egypt and Babylonia took their civilization ‘from an unknown common source,’ which ‘in the beginning at least,’ united all the civilizations of the world in a single world civilization, of which all subsequent civilizations are but variations on a theme. In my recent studies on the origin of the super-state, I have tried to show that the original heart and center of this world civilization is to be located somewhere in central Asia” (190).

- “Writing was already well-established somewhere in the world, and that somewhere would seem to be in the region to the north of Mesopotamia” (260).

So we wait. But the work to date has put an entire new face on the public view of the Flood.

III. THE NOACHIAN FLOOD IN MORMONISM

Scripture, speculation, and revelation—What have Latter-day Saints taught about the Flood?

For more than four decades, I have discussed matters of science and religion with Latter-day Saints, investigators of the Church, and many scientists I have met during my career. Quite often during those interactions, the matter of the Noachian Flood comes up, and though for most the story seems too quaint and far away to be particularly relevant, for a few people it has been a matter of serious spiritual concern.

These encounters, especially with Latter-day Saints for whom the Flood story is vexing, have often left me hoping that someone would take up the task of gathering together the many and fragmented statements about the Noachian Flood in LDS scripture and discourse to see if it were possible to synthesize a coherent foundation for meaningful further reflection. As I have discussed the Black Sea hypothesis with friends and colleagues, it became increasingly suggestive that the time for such a project has arrived, so with their encouragement, I’ve begun.

A number of factors make forging such a synthesis a difficult task. For instance, Latter-day Saints don’t even seem to agree about the importance of the Flood story. Some Church members have opined that it’s not a key gospel issue since the LDS scriptures say so little about the biblical Noah. Whereas many creationist authors insist emphatically that belief in a literal universal Flood is fundamental to Christianity, many Latter-day Saints do not seem to share that view; at least with the same intensity. While some LDS commentators venture to identify the “pillars” of theology or of eternity (creation, fall, atonement), none known to me have included the Flood.25

Current Church manuals seem to reflect this same sense that the Flood occupies no critical place in our theology. For instance, the Old Testament manual used by seminary and institute students takes a trifle more than one page of text to make (almost list) the following assertions: the ark was to float, not sail; the waters went back to their original sources after the Flood; all the high hills were covered; the earth’s baptism was an act of God’s love so righteous spirit children would not have to tabernacle with unrighteous parents; all humans were killed but eight; the Flood occurred circa 1600 years after Adam’s creation; the exact location of the biblical Ararat is unknown, but the Flood made “great changes” on the face of Earth as the continents were being divided. The manual also has a chart to compare the size of the ark to that of four other types of ships. 

This section is compressed into the middle of a single chapter titled “The Patriarchs,” which covers Genesis chapters 4 through 11. No attempt whatsoever is made to engage the
obvious issues that arise from any thoughtful analysis of the story.

The current Old Testament Sunday School manual has even less discussion of the Flood. Rather, it builds the story into a series of important moral lessons, especially about how we should be spiritually prepared for times of stress. It makes no attempt to analyze the specifics of the story and the many tasks required of Noah and his family, but it does include the same chart to illustrate the size of the ark.26

Clearly, as a faith tradition, we don’t know exactly what we think about the Flood. To me, the mixed signals from the manuals reflect the unspoken battle between our desire to read the scriptures literally whenever we deem it possible to do so while recognizing that perhaps they don’t reflect literal events so much as they do opportunities for moral reflection.

Scriptural statements about the Flood

LEAVING THE SECONDARY literature behind for the moment, it is important for our attempt to frame the Flood story to see exactly what our LDS scriptures say about it.

The Book of Mormon refers to the biblical Noah only twice; both are ancillary comments without elaboration. The Doctrine and Covenants mentions Noah four times, each time in reference to genealogy or priesthood ordination. Although the D&C clearly suggests Noah is an historical figure, it never refers to the ark or the Noachian Flood.

As for the word “ark,” the Book of Mormon has only one reference: that the Jaredite barges were “tight like unto the ark of Noah” (Ether 6:7). In Ether 13:2, Moroni does seem to refer to a universal flood. In the Pearl of Great Price, Noah is clearly presented as an historical figure. Moses 7 and Joseph Smith—Matthew (a reconstruction of Matthew 24) each mention the ark once but without elaboration.

What about the word “flood”? The Book of Mormon uses the term just once, in a passing comment (Alma 10:22). The Doctrine and Covenants contains no references. In the Pearl of Great Price, Joseph Smith—Matthew uses the term twice, again without elaboration. If we pursue the plural term, “floods,” we find no relevant entries in the LDS scriptures except in Moses 7 and 8, where each time the word refers to the Noachian event. The passages always use the term floods, plural, never the singular. Is there any significance to that? Nowhere else in the standard works does such a distinction appear.27

Latter-day scriptures do not really clarify the question of whether the Noachian Flood covered the entire earth or if it was a more localized event. Clearly, throughout our tradition’s history, we have tended to read the Flood as universal, but I believe that is less from the influence of scripture itself and far more because we have been culturally predisposed to read it that way. In Moses is a comment attributed to the Lord: “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, and the creeping things, and the fowls of the air. . .” (Moses 8:26). And the final two verses of Moses assure us that “all flesh” will be destroyed. But then the book closes, and we are not treated with any further comment on the Flood story.

What should we do with this? I think we have tended to understand “all flesh” as meaning “all animal life on earth.” But as we know from our analysis of other scriptures, neither the term “all” nor the term “flesh” finds consistent scriptural use. The meanings of these terms seem to me to be beyond documentable resolution.28

In his 1980 speech, “Before Adam,” LDS scriptorian Hugh Nibley touched briefly on the possible survival of humans other than Noah’s family. Nibley asserts that Noah merely described things from his personal point of view, that “all Noah tells us is what he saw . . . ,” that the Flood story from Noah’s “point of view makes perfectly good sense.” But Nibley then suggests that
people other than Noah’s posterity survived the Flood. We remember that Enoch is said to have begotten Methusaleh, who begat Lamech, who begat Noah; Noah is thus the great-grandson of Enoch. If no humans other than Noah’s descendants survived the Flood, then all subsequent humans must be descendants of Noah and of Enoch; nobody else would exist but their direct descendants. So why, asks Nibley, does God make it such a point to promise Enoch that “a remnant of Enoch’s seed will always be found among all nations, while the earth [shall] stand”? The blessing and promise have no meaning whatever if all nations, all people, are Enoch’s direct seed, as they would have to be if only Noah’s party survived.29

 Statements about the Flood from LDS leaders

WHAT HAVE LDS prophets and apostles taught about the Flood? To date, all seem to have accepted Noah as an historical personage, but very few have ventured substantively into analyzing the specifics of the Flood.30 Uniformly there seems to be a tacit assumption that it was universal. Usually it is treated as a miracle to be accepted without further analysis.

Apostle/scientist John A. Widtsoe did work briefly with the issue.31 He recognized that we Latter-day Saints must deal with two basic complications that non-LDS commentators do not: the Flood’s putative geography, and the concept of the earth’s baptism. Let us consider these below.

Geographical concerns. Elder Widtsoe forthrightly acknowledged the most utilitarian problem that the Flood story requires the existence of massive amounts of water, far beyond what currently exist on Earth, water that had to be produced quickly for the Flood and then eliminated quickly afterward. He proposed as one possibility that the Flood consisted merely of worldwide rain; that heavy rain blanketing the mountain slopes could fulfill the necessity of a baptism. Though this idea creates questions of its own, it does negate the “big water” problem. Then Widtsoe turned to the LDS concept that humanity began its history in the area of Missouri and that Genesis chapters 1 through 10 occurred on the North American continent. He considered that the heavy rains had possibly flooded down the Mississippi river valley to create the perception of a worldwide flood—that Noah faithfully reported events as he saw them, but that, one way or other, the ark made its way eventually (a year later) to somewhere in the Old World, i.e., the mountains of Ararat.32 Though he indicated that no one knows the real story, Widtsoe pointedly declined to defend the literalistic view.

Various other LDS writers have asserted that the Western and Eastern hemispheres were joined at the time of the Flood, so Noah did not need to be taken from the West to the East. This assertion exploits Genesis 10:25, the passage that one of Eber’s sons was named Peleg, “for in his days was the earth divided.” The general scientific consensus is that the continents were once joined across the present-day Atlantic, but scientists have adduced very strong evidence that the division took place over many millions of years. So any attempt to squeeze the data into a timeframe of, at maximum, 3900 years (from 2400 BC to Columbus around 1500 AD) seems insurmountable.

Far more likely, the Peleg statement refers to political divisions of the land, not to a dividing of continents. Indeed the Book of Jubilees, a very early Jewish work (from the second millennium BC), details clearly that the Peleg division was a stewardship designation of the locally known land among Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Jubilees 8). Jubilees carefully describes the boundaries of the various allotments for each son and his descendants, and this has nothing to do with continental rupture.34

Earth’s baptism. Widtsoe’s second concern, however, is the LDS notion that the earth needed to be literally baptized for its eternal welfare, with Noah’s Flood being its baptism by immersion. As far as I can determine, this idea is not taught in scripture but was first outlined in brief by Joseph Smith and then articulated in much greater detail by Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, and others.35

Many Latter-day Saints and students of our theology make us out to be animists who believe the earth to be a living thing and therefore in need of baptism. By this logic, then every living thing needs to be baptized. I’m not sure we’d want to take that on.

Many Latter-day Saints and students of our theology make us out to be animists who believe the earth to be a living thing and therefore in need of baptism. I’m not sure we’d want to take that on.
are mentally handicapped or under eight years of age) do not need baptism. But many such persons surely have sentence beyond anything we could likely identify for the earth as a planet. Admittedly, it is not clear what criteria one would use to evaluate sentence for a planet—but I personally find nothing even remotely promising.36

It seems plausible to me that our gospel commentators may have posited that the earth itself needed baptism as a way to emphasize the importance of baptism in the gospel plan. The Flood story was handy, so it seemed a plausible connection. But the earth’s need for baptism is not a doctrine defined in scripture.37 In this context, it may be relevant to note that many early Church leaders also carried certain concepts of the relationship between spirits and bodies that later writers have chosen to ignore—i.e., that virtually everything, living organisms and inanimate objects, have life and spirits. For Orson Pratt, for instance, all plants have spirits just as we do; vegetable spirits are born to resurrected celestial vegetable parents. Heber C. Kimball avered that even houses and gardens possess spirits that “were made, as well as our spirits.”38 From this point of view, the necessity of baptism for the earth is quite logical, though a similar case could then be made for every organism and every thing. Revelation always arrives in bits and pieces, and in the absence of specific revelation, prophets are left, as Pratt admits, to draw their “own conclusions.”39 We will return to this theme later.

**LDS discourse on the fossil record**

LET US NOW turn to the fossil record. Standard science synthesizes the available masses of data to indicate that what we know as the fossil record is the result of progressive accumulation through natural processes over millions of years of time. Young-Earth Creationism, on the other hand, insists that the entire geological column from the Cambrian strata upwards was deposited in one massive event, and all within a one-year timeframe. Every dinosaur and mammoth fossil, every plant that formed our coal beds, and all the organic remains that formed our petroleum deposits—all were formed, say they, by the Noachian Flood. This amounts to thousands of feet of sediment, fossils, coal, petroleum, and minerals.

Certainly a worldwide Flood would carry and deposit massive amounts of sediment. But explaining the fossil strata as deposits from the Flood is a luxury Latter-day Saints may not have. For instance, scripture makes clear that Adam blessed his posterity in a specific small valley before his death; other LDS scripture indicates very strongly that this event took place in Daviess County, Missouri, and that Adam will one day return there.40 Tradition further states that the very altar that Adam built upon leaving the Garden of Eden was still standing on top of the ground in Missouri in the 1830s. Clearly this topography and altar could not have survived a massive, planetary Flood. If we wish to maintain the altar story, one highly treasured in some quarters of Mormonism, we must face squarely that there was no worldwide Flood. Either that, or we must become very inventive indeed to square our own theology.41

Some Latter-day Saints have tried to explain the fossil record with an uncanonized statement reportedly made by Joseph Smith that this earth was created from fragments of other earths.42 This sentiment is then extended to propose that dinosaurs, mammoths, and Australopithecines all come from other planets that have been destroyed, broken up, and recycled.

What size were the fragments? I have encountered claims all the way from continent-sized portions, to tectonic plates, to specific geological formations complete with living bristlecone pines on them, to mere atoms. Suffice it to say that no scientific evidence whatever exists to support such a model, and massive amounts of data indicate that our planet has, from its beginning, been a single dynamic but integrated entity—with continued accretions of space dust and meteorites of course.43

Further, there seems to be no consistent theological support for the fragment proposal either. In fact, a well-ingrained teaching about the earth’s wickedness may complicate the picture for those who align themselves with the fragment theory. Many LDS commentators have interpreted Moses 7:36, “Wherefore, I can stretch forth mine hands and hold all the creations which I have made ... and among all the worksmanship of mine hands there has not been so great wickedness as among thy brethren,” as applying in a cosmic, not just an earth-limited, sense. They argue that this planet’s wickedness is beyond any wickedness God has ever encountered on his millions of other and older earths. Indeed this notion of the earth’s supreme wickedness is well-entrenched in popular LDS theology, containing major implications for a variety of theological issues, such as the “infinite-ness” of Christ’s atonement and why it was important for him to perform it on this planet.

Such questions lie far beyond the scope of this present article, and we’ll be content to recognize that the Church itself has never validated this interpretation nor resolved the many related questions it raises. But the scriptures do consistently teach that God’s judgments are just. They further teach that the eventual destiny of our earth is to become a celestial kingdom (D&C 77:1; 88:17–20). Given this, the fragments idea raises the obvious question of how it would be just for planets that were more righteous than ours to be destroyed and recycled as part of the creation process of this earth. I am unable to resolve this contradiction, but it is a contradiction of interpretation rather than of scripture. Given the great number of problems with the fragments thesis, I think it merits no further serious consideration.

**Questions for future LDS inquiry**

WE MAY SAFELY say that LDS commentators in general have not developed any significant tradition of sustained study to understand the Flood. Why?

Clearly there are many reasons, a few of which we have explored above. But for those inclined to begin a sustained study, where might they start? What questions might they want to address head on?

First, it would seem reasonable to question the clearly problematic Flood date of circa 2344 BC, 1656 years after creation.
In my studies, I have found no one who wants to defend that
date beyond just doggedly quoting the scriptures, both the
King James Version and the Joseph Smith Translation, and in-
sisting that secular knowledge and history are wrong. Other
versions of the Bible derive other dates, though they still land
within a few centuries or so of 2344 B.C. But other flood event
dates exist among ancient records. The Sumerians, for in-
fstance, put the Flood at 241,200 years after creation (rather
than the Bible’s 1656 years) and claimed that many thousands
of years had passed since. I believe our sheer ne-

Is it unthinkable to expand our usual time-frame for bib-
lical events? We know that both New Testament writers and
early LDS leaders had compressed views of time that demon-
strably are not accurate— they expected the Second Coming,
for instance, at dates that have long since passed. Such an
erroneous conception of time seems to serve no better for
the distant past than it has thus far for the future. Where good

evidence dictates, it would seem reasonable to turn to dates
other than those suggested in the Bible.

Second, I believe it is reasonable to re-examine the question
of whether the idea that the earth needed baptism is really as
solid as we have long assumed—and if it is, we should look at
whether the Widtsoe suggestion about heavy rains covering
even the highest mountain slopes is adequate.

Third, I believe it is crucial that we abandon the concern
that because we’ve told the Flood story so often in the Church
that many of our children believe it in the most literal sense,
that their testimonies will be shattered to learn that perhaps
the story isn’t literally true. I would hope that no one has based
his or her religious commitments on a literal universal Flood.
But if there is such a risk, to delay facing the issues will only
generate (and they can be powerful!), we need to ask if a gen-

neither wise nor necessary to create barriers of misunder-

regarding the testimony of prophets and biblical peoples who
have spoken of the Flood as a literal, earthwide event? Perhaps
we can come to some peace on this question through a look at
our own history.

In the Church we possess a rich history of folklore that il-

Many of the scientific world having discovered that
the earth is round and not flat as the people of the Old
Testament evidently believed it to be have ungener-
ously . . . thrown the good book into the discard. . . .
They point out with glowing satisfaction that the God
of the Hebrews is a capricious, jealous, tribal God,
fighting the battles of his favored people and reveling
in the defeat of their enemies. And then in . . . tri-
umph they point to the so-called miracles of the
Bible: the standing still of the sun, the incarceration of
Jonah in the belly of the fish . . . and tell you that all
these accounts are manifestly untrue because they
contravene the known laws of nature.

Richards argues this is unfair, that the Bible is far too precious
for this type of treatment. He then continues:
[So] what if Hebrew prophets, conversant with only a small fraction of the surface of the earth, thinking and writing in terms of their own limited geography and tribal relations did interpret [God] in terms of a tribal king and so limit His personality and the laws of the universe under His control to the dominion with which they were familiar? Can any interpreter even though he be inspired present his interpretation and conception in terms other than those with which he has had experience and acquaintance? Even under the assumption that Divinity may manifest to the prophet higher and more exalted truths than he has ever before known and unfold to his spiritual eyes visions of the past, forecasts of the future, and circumstances of the utmost novelty, how will the inspired man interpret? Manifestly, I think, in the language he knows and in the terms of expression with which his knowledge and experience have made him familiar. So is it not therefore ungenerous, unfair and unreasonable to impugn the validity and the whole worth of the Bible merely because of the limited knowledge of astronomy and geography that its writers possessed[?]"50

These points seem critical not only for the Bible but also for latter-day scriptures. Every writer of LDS scripture was raised in an environment, so far as we know, where the Noachian Flood was accepted as literal with little or no questioning. None, so far as we can identify, had gone to God for information on the details of the Flood; they either referred to the story in anecdotal asides or came to mention it through their seeking information on matters such as priesthood structure. I believe the same can safely be said for the utterances of our LDS leaders who have made similar, uncanonized statements. LDS tradition has rarely claimed that the recording and interpretation of scripture is infallible, and certainly a claim to infallibility for prophetic writers and speakers in our own dispensation cannot be defended.51 I believe many of the dilemmas we face in today's Church regarding possible conflicts between science and religion would be significantly reduced were we to more consciously remind ourselves of this principle: that leaders' fallibility on factual issues does not negate the sacredness and genuineness of their calling nor our responsibility to listen carefully and respond prayerfully to their guidance on spiritual and moral principles.

In conclusion, the distinction between “cosmic history” and “event history” does seem to be a useful one. A framing of the scriptures as cosmic history perceives that scriptural writers primarily intend to teach moral lessons and make it clear that Deity operates in the affairs of men, bolstering in the minds of adherents a sense of meaningful place in a larger scheme of things. This is distinguished from “event history,” the type to which we are presently accustomed and which apparently became the norm only with the Enlightenment. It has been said that in order to understand these distinctions and the nature of scripture as cosmic history, we must learn to think like Hebrews, not like Greeks. Modern society, it seems, thinks like Greeks.

I acknowledge my own personal bent toward “thinking like a Greek,” though I try to blend Hebrew understandings with the science and general approach to the world I derive from the Greeks. But even as I say this, I strongly believe that most of the challenges facing our modern world must be addressed by thinking like a Greek. Let me conclude with one quick example illustrating why I think this entire discussion is worth our time.

LESSONS FROM A “COSMIC HISTORY” APPROACH TO THE FLOOD STORY

By turning the story of Noah’s Flood into a story for Primary children, have we missed important lessons for today?

I AM CONCERNED with the notion of compressed time that underlies so much LDS discourse. From the very beginning, our people have underestimated God’s timeline. We are not alone in that; it is a common failing of humankind to want to live in cosmically important and exciting times, and to interpret scripture and current events to fit that sense of who and what we are. This desire permitted some early Latter-day Saint leaders to prophesy emphatically that the endtimes would occur in the late 1830s or early 1840s, and we have seen many similar (and failed) assertions since.52

But resolving or addressing many of our environmental and social problems clearly demands a long-term view—something we as a people are not used to adopting. Indeed, our penchant for short-term thinking brought early divine warnings. God repeatedly cautioned the Latter-day Saints as they

(Continued on page 42)
SECRET to good journalism: ask the right questions; don’t settle for the first answer. Secret to good living: know yourself; trust the journey even when it takes you places you never thought you’d go.

Paul Swenson was born to Swedish immigrants in Logan, Utah, the youngest of ten children. He grew up in a busy home, inhabited by strong personalities, where he was imbued with a love for language. Paul’s dad had been the editor of Nordstjarnan (North Star), the Swedish Mission magazine; Paul’s paternal grandfather, Swen, had written wonderful poetry; and Paul’s oldest sister, May, was soon to become one of America’s most honored poets.

Following his LDS mission to Sweden, Paul majored in journalism at Utah State University, where, as a senior, he was editor of the college newspaper. After serving briefly in the National Guard, Paul was hired by the Deseret News as a general assignment reporter, a position at which he worked happily for some fifteen years.

Near the end of his time at the News, Paul began part-time editing for mission friend Robert Coles, who had launched Utah Holiday, a news magazine originally geared toward tourists. After Utah Holiday became better established, Paul came aboard as its full-time editor-in-chief. During Paul’s fourteen years at the helm, the magazine’s focus (though not its title) shifted toward investigative journalism, contemporary local issues, and media criticism. Reflecting the personality of its editor and the kinds of writers Paul was able to enlist, the magazine became Utah’s feisty watchdog, and during a five-year stretch in the ’80s, it won more awards for investigative reporting than did the Deseret News and Salt Lake Tribune combined. Following Holiday’s sale to outside interests, Paul edited two shorter-lived local news and culture magazines.

Recently, the first of several new and richly satisfying loves came into Paul’s life—writing poetry. For Paul, this new love was a huge surprise: “May was the poet in our family, not me.” But his new avocation has led to immediate success. In 2003, his first collection, Iced at the Ward, Burned at the Stake, was published by Signature Books and was a finalist for a Utah book award, and he’s now seeking publishers for two more volumes.

A second, recent, happy surprise came when Paul connected with Leanna Rae Scott at the 1999 Counterpoint Conference, which explores women’s issues in Mormonism. Paul’s thirty-year-plus marriage to Sharon Lee Esplin, with whom he had adopted Caitlin and Jonathan, had ended earlier that year. Of his and Leanna’s relationship, Paul claims, “Ours is a feminist love story.” Beginning as two writers sharing their work through email, they married in October 2000. The couple now live in Salt Lake City with three of Leanna’s children—all teenagers!

A third surprise late in Paul’s life: a love for teaching. Now semi-retired from his editing career, Paul teaches journalism and communications at Utah Valley State College in Orem, Utah. He is revitalized to learn he has the ability to interact with students in mutually enriching ways.

A “Sunstoner” since the Foundation’s inception (he’s never missed a Salt Lake symposium), Paul speaks appreciatively of the role Sunstone plays in his religious life. The opportunities it creates, raising questions and leaving room for a great number of approaches and answers, remind Paul of the lessons he learned from his sister May, with her non-dogmatic but firm and inspiring faith. “May asked all the ultimate questions and found her own answers. She was able to articulate powerfully who she was and what she stood for. That’s the type of faith I admire.” Sunstone, like May, has helped Paul feel comfortable being a believer.

In capturing Paul’s eyes, Michael Schoenfeld’s portrait reveals this man’s secret: Enjoy life’s irony and humor, but keep at least one eye open, watching for the next surprise!
streamed unwisely into Missouri that they should gather “not in haste or by flight” (D&C 58:56, 101:68) but rather let things “be done in their time” (D&C 101:72), lest hasty- ness should bring “pestilence” (D&C 63:24). The wiser course, God counseled, was to take a long-term view; they should “act upon the land as for years, and this shall turn unto them for their good” (D&C 51:17). It took the pioneers considerable time to learn to act for the long-term good. Lorenzo Snow recalled, for instance, that when he first took the Saints to Brigham City, he could not even get them to plant currant bushes; they thought they would not be in Utah long enough for currants to mature.53

So what difference will it make for our present generation to adopt a long-term view instead of the short-term one that has plagued us through our history? As a start, we could collectively acknowledge the physical and biological laws that have produced and presently operate our wonderful world and which we must apply to seriously discharge the real responsibilities of scriptural stewardship. The Church’s current Old Testament Sunday School manual, noted earlier for how it moves toward moral planning on issues such as greenspace preservation, climate change, resource distribution, and population pressures.

Gratefully, some Latter-day Saints are alert to the tasks immediately ahead. Like Noah, they intuit what is soon to come unless we change our ways and are taking steps to meet the challenge.54 But they, again like Noah, find that their warnings too frequently fall upon unhearing ears.

PREFATORY NOTE ON SOURCES. The literature dealing with Noah’s Flood is truly vast. However, the following discussions seem indispensable for serious analysis and lead to hundreds of additional references. Sources within each section are listed chronologically.

I. SOURCES DEFENDING THE FLOOD AS LITERAL HISTORY


Since none have provided substantive data, I do not list the many books recounting ambitious attempts to locate the ark in the mountains of modern-day Ararat.

II. SOURCES ON BIBLICAL MATTERS AND ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS


E. Loren Fisher, Genesis: A Royal Epic (n.p.: Xlibris, 2000). This book is a new translation of the available Genesis documents, attempting to avoid the “traditional patina” that is said to cover our usual translations.

III. SOURCES SPECIFICALLY CRITIQUING LITERALIST VIEWS


IV. SOURCES REVIEWING THE LITERATURE AND CONTROVERSY


V. SOURCES PRESENTING THE BLACK SEA HYPOTHESIS

B. Ian Wilson, Before the Flood: The Biblical Flood as a Real Event and How It Changed the Course of Civilization (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001).

NOTES

1. Commentators vary as to whether dinosaurs would have been among the creatures on the ark, but modern biblical literalists have claimed that Job 40:15–24 (behemoth) refers to dinosaurs and thus “proves” that they survived the Flood. Some writers even propose that dinosaurs gave rise to the legends of dragons, complete with fire-breathing capabilities.

2. This is the date derived from the King James Bible and the Joseph Smith Translation. Other Bible versions give variant dates, but absolute precision is not critical. A nice summary table that calculates the date and will be readily available
to Latter-day Saints is in W. Cleon Skousen, The First 2000 Years (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1953), xi. For the purposes of this essay, I use the rounded-off phrase “4400 years ago” to indicate the critical time frame.

3. See for example, Dundes, The Flood Myth, and Pleins, Great Abyss. It is widely concluded that the biblical version is derived from an older account, the Epic of Gilgamesh. “The oldest story in the world is the Epic of Gilgamesh [which] . . . appears in Sumerian times and is known to have been written down soon after 2000 BC” (Roberts, History of the World, 41). The Sumerians were a Semitic-speaking people in which roughly 3300 B.C. moved into southern Mesopotamia (roughly southern Iraq on today’s map; the valleys of the lower Tigris and Euphrates Rivers). They somewhat displaced the region’s prior people, the Ubaidsians, who apparently had been there for more than a thousand years. The Sumerian-Ubaidsian culture features very prominently in early inventions (pottery wheels, wheeled vehicles, the earliest-known writing, and the development of civilization itself.) But the Sumerian culture as such was lost about 1800 BC (Roberts, History of the World, 31–51; Mark A. Stevens et al., eds, Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Encyclopedia (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster), 1560–61.

4. Moore, Impossible Voyage, covers some of these concerns. Pleins, Great Abyss, 70, cites a 19th-century German naturalist: “I find it incomprehensible how the sloth could have made the pilgrimage from Mt. Ararat to South America since it requires an hour to crawl 6 feet.” John A. Moore, Science as a Way of Knowing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 102–113, nicely reviews earlier concepts of the nature of fossils.

5. I specifically refer to such groups as the Creation Research Society and their affiliated Institute for Creation Research, based in southern California, or Answers in Genesis, based in Kentucky.

6. Numerous books over the past thirty years have dealt with these issues. The subject of dating techniques eventually became so insistent that the Institute of Creation Research assembled a committee of their scientists to formulate ratiocines to nullify radiometric techniques. This committee is known as the RATE Group (an acronym for Radioisotopes and the Age of the Earth). This group plans to release its final report in 2005. Acts and Facts 33 (September 2004) 1. Whatever RATE’s success dispensing with radiometrics, numerous other dating techniques also indicate a very old earth. Antarctic ice cores and their annual layers of deposition, for instance, have now revealed a continuous record of deposition dating back 740,000 years, and considerable optimism exists that this can be eventually taken to at least one million years of continuous deposition. See the series of three articles on the Antarctic ice core in Nature 429 (10 June 2004): 596–597, 611–612, 623–628, especially the third one, “Eight Glacial Cycles from an Antarctic Ice Core.”


8. Woodmorappe, Noah’s Ark.


11. The data documenting climatic changes in the earth’s past are massive, highly detailed, and obtained from a wide variety of techniques. Those who argue for a worldwide flood or a young earth must face these data, but I have never encountered any attempts by literalist groups to do so. The following sampling from my files will give readers a taste of the types of data available.


12. Some Flood apologists have suggested that the tsunami-like stories are a reflection of the Bible’s statement that the “fountains of the deep” were broken open. Douglas, Bible Dictionary, 380–381, suggests rather that “. . . this may be a metaphorical statement” based on a Hebrew word usage usually confined to poetic passages “so it is not profitable to seek references to geological phenomena in it.”


16. Douglas, Bible Dictionary, 866. These authors are clearly uncomfortable with the idea but acknowledge that it is held by scholars and apparently has some historical validity.

17. Ibid., 381; Strong, Exhaustive Concordance, 8, 17. In Genesis 4:14 Cain is banished from the “earth” (adamah)—but this plainly does not mean planet. The word “land” in the Bible comes overwhelmingly from eretz; a few times from adamah. Ezekeil 25:5 translates eretz as field. The word “countries,” with only one exception, comes from eretz. The singular form, country, comes mostly from eretz, once from adamah and a few times from other Hebrew words. One finds this same “land/earth” intermixing in LJS scripture, as in Moses 1:29 “he beheld many lands; and each land was called earth . . .” Helaman 14:20 says that at the time of Christ’s death total darkness will cover the entire “land,” while just seven verses later 14:27 it is to cover the “whole earth” for three days—which clearly it did not, since the New Testament makes no such mention but instead records events that occurred during the indicated period.


20. Virtually all the books referenced as introductory sources, except for those of the Creationists, accept (on the basis of internal textual evidence) that the early Genesis chapters derive from at least two early Semitic texts. The Semitic languages include those of the Sumerians and Babylonians, and it is among those peoples that the earliest “Noah family” stories occur. Wilson, Before the Flood, 14–18 gives a side-by-side rendition of the early parts of the two postulated ancient texts, called J and P. The texts themselves, however, are not extant. See also Dundes, The Flood Myth, 61ff.


25. A possible exception is found in the work of Apostle Mark E. Petersen, who cites the Flood as one of three major events in our planet’s eternal life. This is not, however, quite the same as being a pillar of the plan of salvation or the gospel. See Mark E. Petersen, Noah and the Flood (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 1.


27. Orson Pratt, Journal of Discourses 20: 9–10 (1878) does use the plural form in discussing the Noahian event. But this is due to his particular speculation about mechanism, not identifiably due to scriptural usage.

28. “All” is a term denoting absoluteness, of course. Such terms (“all” “every,”
“forever,” etc.) characteristically have both precise and vernacular meanings; the two can be quite different. The precise sense of “all” means, of course, that there are no exceptions. But it is a matter of taste, I suspect, as to which scriptural uses of the word are interpreted in the precise sense and which in the vernacular. It is a most revealing exercise to scan through a comprehensive concordance such as Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance for the word and see what proportions of its entries are defensible or comfortable in the precise sense and which surely must be vernacular uses. But since there are more than 5000 such uses of the term in the Bible, I shall leave this to individual study! Let us suffice here with just a few problematic illustrations. Genesis 6:12 makes it clear that “all” flesh was corrupt, apparently including even living forms with no moral capabilities whatever. Yet Genesis 7:12 makes it clear that Noah was not included: God had adjudged him to be righteous. Genesis 6:19 has instructions to take only two of all flesh into the ark; Genesis 7:2 divides organisms into the clean and unclean and says to take seven (some say seven pairs) of the clean, but Genesis 7:15–16 again says two by two of all flesh. Genesis 6:19–20 clearly stipulates fowls as among the two by two. Genesis 7:2–3 clearly says fowls are to be by sevens, etc. See also the final paragraph of this endnote.

“Flesh” is more interesting. Does it include aquatic organisms? I have never encountered a universal Flood defender who wanted to include aquatic organisms among the ark’s passengers; the usual claim is that they would survive without assistance. But that argument clearly negates the “all flesh was destroyed” statement unless flesh is interpreted to mean only terrestrial animals. Some more religious, to be sure, try to exclude fish from the scriptural meaning of “flesh” or at least from “meat.” But aquatic organisms include not only fish, but marine reptiles (e.g., sea snakes) and marine mammals such as whales, walruses, seals, and sea lions. And we cannot invoke animal intelligence, to an exclusion of marine life, for our criterion of flesh, for by all measures, dolphins are more intelligent than virtually all terrestrial animals except ourselves and certain great apes. Scripture has no knowledge whatsoever of microscopic life, so the Flood’s application to that entire extent of God’s creations is beyond any attempt at resolution. Did Noah and his family carry all the known human disease pathogens, one wonders?

James R. Christianson of BYU’s College of Religion has proposed a novel approach. In his essay, “Noah, the Ark, the Flood: A Pondered Perspective,” The Old Testament and the Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1986), he suggests that God directly created only certain limited types of life—the ones into which God breathed “the breath of life” and which were pronounced “good.” Accepting the idea that the earth is a living thing, Christianson further suggests that additional forms of life were produced by the earth itself but did not form part of the divinely recognized group—they were only extensions of the earth. In this view, God’s concern for punishment and preservation was confined only to those species that God had originally called “good.” Christianson thus finds no difficulty with organisms that lacked the “breath of life” surviving the Flood; they did not fit in the “all flesh which I have created” category at all. But such survival does not negate the Flood’s destruction of “all flesh” since these earth-generated organisms have no eternal identity and it was only the “good” organisms with which God’s actions and commentary are concerned. Says Christianson, God “never intended that all (his emphasis) animal life should die.” Species which go extinct (no matter when) fall into the “earth-products” category, and one assumes that this category must include aquatic life of all sorts.

But though potentially resolving one problem, this view raises others, about such things as plants, aquatic species, and so forth. LDS teachings about spirits and spirit bodies (i.e., that all living organisms have spirits, and that their bodies look like their spirits) would also have to be re-assessed. Such questions must wait for another day.

The Old Testament uses the term “flesh” in various ways (Douglas, Bible Dictionary, 379–380). It can denote the principal constituent of the body, or the entire body itself, or meat to be used for sacrifices. Husband and wife are to become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24), and Abimelech reminded his relatives that “I am your bone and your flesh” (Judges 9:2). Elsewhere “flesh” can mean just the moral qualities of humans, as in weaknesses or sins of the flesh. The New Testament adds yet other meanings.

I conclude that no commentator has made a case for the use of these terms consistent with even just the Flood story itself as to what proportions, and types, of God’s creations were taken on the ark. Most Bible scholars indicate that this is because the Genesis account is combined from two independent sources with different perspectives, cf. sources cited above.


30. The most extensive such treatment seems to be that of Joseph Fielding Smith, Man His Origin and Destiny (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1954), 414–436. Petersen, Noah and the Flood, takes note of a few concerns but just asserts “it was a miracle” and humans cannot be expected to understand the things of God (various pages, but particularly 58–65). Pratt, Journal of Discourses 20:9–10 gives a very imaginative interpretation of how the waters were distributed. 31. John A. Widtsoe, “Did the Waters of the Flood Cover the Highest Mountains of Earth?” Improvement Era 43 (June 1940): 353.

32. Widtsoe’s tying matters to the central portion of the continent, does not take note of the report by one of Joseph Smith’s brothers-in-law, Oliver Huntington, and published in the Juvenile Instructor, that Joseph taught that Noah built his ark in the vicinity of our present-day states of North or South Carolina. Juvenile Instructor 30 (November 15, 1895): 700–701.

33. R. Clayton Brough and Rodney D. Griffin, Scientific Support for Scriptural Stories (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 2000), 64–68, identify three lay LDS views of the physical splitting of continents: All are at best speculative; none is identified with LDS prophetic commentary.


36. Some readers may be familiar with the so-called Gaia hypothesis, by which some secular writers have imputed a sort of mystical sentience to the planet and its ecosystems as a type of super-organism. Such interpretations have not generally been considered justified by the major proponents of the hypothesis, however, and a review of that literature is far beyond the scope of this paper. Among Latter-day Saints, many authors have referred to the anthropomorphic depictions of the earth in scripture, such as the earth “groaning” and a voice from within its “bowels” (D&C 123:7, Moses 7:48). John Tanner wrestles with the literary power of, and what literal meaning is to be given to these and similar passages but without conclusion. He does, however, recognize the problem of excessively literal interpretation of scripture. Reflecting those concerns, one does wonder what to do with comments from Brigham Young that the earth’s breathing in and out “causes the ebbing and flowing of the tides, and not the moon as some have vainly supposed. The moon has nothing to do with this natural phenomenon. The motion is natural to the Earth and independent of the moon’s influence.” Fred C. Collier, ed., The Teachings of President Brigham Young, 3:241 (Hannah, UT: Collier’s Publishing, 1988). Indeed, President Young may have received the idea from Joseph Smith himself. Martha Cragun Cox records Jacob Hamblin’s telling her that Joseph had taught this to him directly, along with other interesting details about our planet. See Autobiography of Martha Cragun Cox, 58–59; typescript copies in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, and in LDS Church archives, Salt Lake City.

37. Numerous authors cite Doctrine and Covenants 88:25–26 as scriptural validation for their view of the necessity for the earth to be baptized, that “the earth abideth the law of a celestial kingdom, for it filleth the measure of its creation, and transgresseth not the law”—[w]herefore, it shall be sanctified.” It seems to me, however, that the phrase “ . . . transgresseth not the law” more clearly indicates that the earth has not been the moral transgressor that baptism would seem to require. One can do a variety of scripture chases with this topic, but I am unable to find substantive resolution of the scriptural meaning.


41. History of the Church 3:39–40. Further pursuing the tradition of Adam’s altar will take us far afield from this article. An early first-person account: Oliver B. Huntington, “Adam’s Altar and Tower,” Juvenile Instructor 30 (15 November 1895): 700–701.

43. A comprehensive review is sorely needed of the teachings of LDS prophets on the earth as a planet. The books by Turner (Footstool of God) and by Sloane (Earth) are useful collections but incomplete. From a more analytical point of view, readers will benefit from Erich Robert Paul, *Science, Religion, and Mormon Cosmology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

44. An exception regarding defense of the date is that of John P. Pratt, “Astronomical Witnesses of the Great Flood,” *Meridian Magazine*, www.meridianmagazine.com/sci_rel/030813flood.html (accessed 28 September 2004). Pratt, who traces dates among various calendars, places Adam’s first breath of life on Saturday, 17 October 4070 BC, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden on Sunday, 9 April 4001 BC, Enoch’s birthdate on Friday, 19 September 3378 BC after 6 p.m., and the beginning of the Flood on Saturday, 16 November 2343 BC. It seems wise to wait until these are published in a peer-reviewed journal to see how well they withstand analysis.

I have encountered several different dates for the Sumerian kings list and the Flood, but all fall into this very long age range. The figure given here is from “Sumerian Kings,” www.oddworldz.com/theoldpath/sumerkings.htm (accessed 6 August 2004). Douglas, *Bible Dictionary*, 188–89 discuss difficulties with dating the early Old Testament and warns against any literalistic interpretation of its dates for the Flood and similar events. It is also recognized that ancient writers “played with numbers,” and considerable skepticism must be exercised with many of them. Nibley, in his *World of the Jaredites*, also warns that Biblical chronology may be far too short (see p. 149).

45. For early Christian misperceptions, see Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 12:65, (1867); Lars P. Qualben, *Discourses 12:65* (1867); Lars P. Qualben, *Footstool of God* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); John McManners, ed., *Discourses* (1867); also warns that Biblical chronology may be far too short (see p. 149).

46. Christianson, “Noah, the Ark, the Flood,” 48.

47. William A. Wilson and Austin Fife, among others, have made a career of studying the origins and growth of such stories and have published extensively. See, for instance, Fife’s review of elaborations on the seagull story in Austin E. Fife, “Seagulls and the Crickets,” *Western Folklore* 37 (1978): 61ff. David Knowlton, in “Missionary, Native, and General Authority Accounts of a Bolivian Conversion,” *Sunstone* (January 1989): 14ff., traces one such story—an account of the “miraculous” origins of the LDS branch in Huacuyo, Bolivia—from its tiny start in an Andes village, to the Church News, to the General Conference pulpit, with new details and enlargement of scale being added all along the way.

Church members have doubtless heard many folk stories that serve to bolster doctrinal concepts (so-called “faith–promoting rumors”). These include LDS versions of the universally-known "Wandering Jew" and "Vanishing Hitchhiker" legends, stories of Cain, tales of the immanence of the Second Coming, or stories about how various temple sites were chosen by miraculous means. (The foundations of at least one Utah temple was formally laid by Nephites and all the Latter-day Saints had to do was sweep off the foundation rocks and then build the temple thereon.) A useful source to begin analysis of some of these is Donald Lee Penrod, *Critical Analysis of Certain Apocryphal Reports in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993). While these latter authors offer a far more sophisticated approach to the interpretation of scripture than appears in any other Latter-day Saint literature I know, they do not deal substantively with such issues in the early Old Testament.

48. Christianson, “Noah, the Ark, the Flood,” 48.

49. See note 39.


52. See note 45.

53. Lorenzo Snow, *Conference Report*, 10 April 1898, 64.


HER VOICE

It keeps me awake, reminds me of nights on the prairie, when as a child, I tiptoed into the bunchgrass, looked into the deepest dark for the invisible light illuminating the visible stars.

That great bowl sprawled with bright notes, filled the dome of my head with perfectly pitched vibrations. Subduing my breath, I listened behind the mosquito’s whine to a music that according to Mother was all in my head.

Tonight, what keeps me awake is Mother’s voice, singing.

I hear it above the airliner’s drone. It is as clear as those headlightsa below, where some vehicle arcs its light across the dark plain, down an invisible road.

—JUDITH IRWIN
THE TEACHING AND STUDY OF RELIGION ARE both dominated by implicit assumptions about what constitutes normal religiosity. For instance, in many institutions that offer courses in religious studies, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism are placed under the rubric of “world religions” while Christianity, in its various mainline Protestant and Catholic forms, is often taught as “theology.” Religious traditions perceived as “other,” either because of their worldviews or because of the character or number of their adherents, are often lumped together in courses that examine “cults” or “sects.”

While the Latter-day Saint tradition has a broad temporal and geographic sweep, in many religious studies curricula, Mormonism and Mormons themselves are indeed considered to be “other.” From this perspective, Mormons are often considered to be a “peculiar people” with an unconventional charm in the claims they make about the world, but they are ultimately considered to be of scholarly interest primarily for what their history can tell us about the development of new religions or about the history of the American West. The tendency to relegation of the Latter-day Saint tradition to a tangential scholarly space can be especially pronounced in institutions that themselves embrace a Christian religious identity. After all, the Latter-day Saint tradition claims to be a restoration of the Judeo-Christian tradition, a claim that many other Christian denominations, whether Catholic or Protestant, would vigorously contest as they assert their own claims to attention and authority.

The following are my reflections on teaching Mormonism in a classroom at a Catholic liberal arts college that embraces the Latter-day Saint tradition in higher education. I will share not only my pedagogical strategy for teaching the Latter-day Saint tradition but also how the largely Catholic students in the class engaged the diversity of Mormonism and the discourse surrounding it. I will then offer more general reflections on how Mormonism can be taught in the Catholic classroom, not as a religious tradition that is “other” or “heretical” but as one that both complements and challenges the Catholic tradition. Now, I am not an expert in Mormonism. While I have published in the area of American religiosity, my primary expertise is religious traditions of South Asia, where I lived and worked for four years as a student and researcher. While I am Roman Catholic myself and I have received training in Catholic theology, my scholarly methodology is religio-historical and ethnographic. As such, my comments are intended to be provisional and open to amendment, correction, and challenge.

I teach in the religious studies department at the College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Massachusetts, some forty miles west of Boston. The archbishop of Boston established the college of the Holy Cross in 1843 and entrusted it to the Society of Jesus (or the Jesuits, as they are more commonly known). Holy Cross has changed through the years, reflecting changes in Catholic educational institutions throughout the United States. Today, Jesuit clerics and Catholic laypersons are a minority among teaching faculty while the vast majority of Holy Cross’s 2700 students identify themselves as Catholics. Although Holy Cross students are required to take one class in religious studies, this class need not concern Catholic tradition or theology. One certainly does not need to be Catholic in order to teach in the religious studies department, and no formal assent to core elements of Catholic doctrine is required of Catholic faculty members in religious studies, although this is currently a matter of some debate within Catholic higher education. And so the curriculum in religious studies and the college as a whole is in many ways very similar to that found at secular liberal arts schools, although the Jesuit mission and identity of the institution does shape the life of the college in

In planning the course, I had assumed that Mormonism would be considered different, other, or perhaps even bizarre from a conventional Catholic perspective. As the course progressed, it was clear that this was not the case.

TEACHING MORMONISM IN A CATHOLIC CLASSROOM

By Mathew N. Schmalz

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powerful and unmistakable ways. Holy Cross students, for example, carry the Jesuit identity of the institution with them in numerous programs of public service. Moreover, the Catholic tradition, in its diversity, is often a touchstone or common point of reference in much campus discourse both within and beyond classroom confines. It was in this context that I offered the course, “Modern Religious Movements,” in which thirty students enrolled.

I. MODERN RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I taught Modern Religious Movements as a seminar, in which I foregrounded the discussion of the Latter-day Saint tradition. I began with Fawn Brodie’s No Man Knows My History.1 Of course, Brodie’s work is very controversial: some scholars working in the field of American religiosity still consider it the classic or definitive work on Mormonism; others, and not just Latter-day Saints, find it deeply flawed. Students’ collective reaction to Brodie’s treatment of Joseph Smith was encapsulated well by one student who observed, “I’m glad there weren’t historians and journalists who approached Jesus this way in the century following his death.” I had hoped that my including Jan Shipps’s insightful study Mormonism would counterbalance Brodie’s work, especially Shipps’s compelling discussion of how Hebrew Bible narratives shaped the Latter-day Saints’ understanding of their exodus to Utah.2 I concluded, however, that Shipps’s discussion is better suited to a more advanced class, or as the culminating work in a much more in-depth discussion of the Latter-day Saint tradition. As I considered that earlier seminar in preparation for the class I was about to teach, I realized that my initial approach to the LDS tradition lacked an overall critical framework for understanding various portrayals of Mormonism. Also, I had not been able to generate a deeper engagement with Mormonism that moved beyond stereotypical understandings of Mormon distinctiveness from mainline Christianity.

Hence, when planning my second offering of Modern Religious Movements, this time as a course for a larger group of students, I choose a different tack. Instead of introducing the course through Mormonism, I saved the LDS tradition until the very end. I structured the syllabus around a critical consideration of themes within the discourse surrounding new and alternative religions: the category of “cult,” brainwashing, charismatic leadership, disconfirmation of prophecy, and violence. These overall theoretical issues framed the discussion of specific modern religious movements such as Scientology, the Unification Church, the Children of God, the Watchtower, the Branch Davidians, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Heaven’s Gate, and the Raelians. The driving pedagogical objective was to examine contemporary discourse surrounding cults and to probe the implicit standards behind such discourse, in order to force students to reflect upon how “cult discourse” might apply to religious practices that they find quite familiar. In this effort, I also included a discussion of various Catholic groups that have been characterized as “cults.” In order to bring together many of the theoretical issues elicited by the course, we then engaged the Latter-day Saint tradition as the culmination of the class.

II. ENGAGING THE LDS TRADITION

I BEGAN OUR discussion of Mormonism with the first chapter from Klaus Hansen’s Mormonism and the American Experience, which succinctly overviews the “Birth of Mormonism.”3 In describing the religious and social ferment of Joseph Smith’s youth, Hansen draws particular attention to how the Book of Mormon, within the context of its time, could be perceived as something eminently rational that did not contradict the scientific knowledge of the day. Students found this argument compelling, as they did Hansen’s discussion of Joseph Smith as a “genius” not unlike Mozart, Darwin, or Marx. They were less impressed by Hansen’s use of the “bi-cameral brain” hypothesis to account for the psychology of Joseph Smith. The bi-cameral brain, as envisioned by the psychologist Julian James, posits that the human mind is divided into separate parts, and so it is theoretically possible for these two parts to interact in ways that a person might interpret as external voices or visions.4 Many students interpreted Hansen’s allusion to the bi-cameral mind as a way of having one’s cake and eating it too, similar to the way Catholic scholars might use psychoanalytic methodology to explain the visions of a mystic.

Unfortunately, Hansen’s Mormonism and the American Experience is now out of print; it would have made a fine foundational text for the course. But after giving a very general introduction to the beginnings of Mormonism, I had students engage a work that is arguably more polemical than Fawn Brodie’s No Man Knows My History: Jon Krakauer’s Under the Banner of Heaven: The Story of a Violent Faith.5 My intent was certainly not to use Krakauer as some sort of unbiased explication of the Latter-day Saint tradition. Instead, it was to draw students into a discussion of Mormonism by having them reflect upon the implicit assumptions that shape Krakauer’s discussion of what he calls “a violent faith.” Krakauer focuses on a murder committed by Ron and Dan Lafferty whom he describes as Mormon “fundamentalists” because of their practice of polygamy and expansive claims of prophetic discernment. In order to unpack the specifics of the case, Krakauer draws upon key elements from what could be best described as anti-Mormon polemics: blood atonement, polygamy, and the Mountain Meadows Massacre. These canards, of course, have long been standard fare in classifying Mormonism as a “cult” or a Christian heresy.

The students in Modern Religious Movements were drawn to Krakauer’s journalistic writing and the sensationalist subject matter. With specific regard to polygamy, however, some students who had taken a Comparative Religions course with me commented that polygamy is permitted in Islam and many other religious traditions and thus is perhaps not as strange or necessarily oppressive as one might think. While students had a variety of reactions to Krakauer’s discussion, the most interesting discussion crystallized around his discussion of the
By making a connection between the discourse surrounding Mormonism and Catholicism, students were able to find common ground between themselves and Mormons, who are often portrayed, as Catholics sometimes are, with broad and prejudiced brush strokes.

Elizabeth Smart case. Most students were quite familiar with the general outlines of her case. But they were generally not aware of the identity of Elizabeth Smart’s kidnapper, Brian David Mitchell, whom Krakauer portrays as spiritually akin to the polygamist Lafferty brothers, nor of his wife Wanda Barzee. But Krakauer focuses not only on Mitchell’s worldview but also on Elizabeth Smart’s. Specifically, Krakauer observes:

Raised to obey figures of Mormon authority unquestionably, and to believe that LDS doctrine is the law of God, she would have been particularly susceptible to the dextrous fundamentalist spin Mitchell applied to familiar Mormon scripture. The white robes Mitchell and Barzee wore, and forced Elizabeth to wear, resembled the sacred robes she had donned with her family when they entered the Mormon temple. When Mitchell bullied Elizabeth into submitting to his carnal demands, he used the words of Joseph Smith—words she had been taught were handed down by God Himself—to phrase those demands. “Being brought up as she was made her especially vulnerable,” says Debbie Palmer, who is intimately acquainted with the coercive power of fundamentalist culture from her own upbringing in Bountiful. “Mitchell would never have been able to have such power over a non-Mormon girl.”

Many students were taken aback by Krakauer’s analysis. Some seemed to think Krakauer’s analysis of Smart’s mindset followed quite well from his account of the Mormon tradition. Furthermore, Krakauer’s focus on what he portrays as the sexual appetites of Joseph Smith seemed to prefigure not only the acts of Mitchell and the Lafferty brothers on Mormonism’s fringes but also the contemporary affairs in the LDS Church. But the students who found Krakauer’s argument in this instance compelling were in a distinct minority. Instead, most students found Krakauer’s claims not only inappropriately sensationalist but also a disturbing example of cult discourse.

Many students understood Krakauer’s approach to be premised upon particular understandings of authority and the effects of submission to authority. Of course, Krakauer draws considerable attention to the importance of authority within the LDS worldview and the LDS Church itself. Coupled with this is an understanding of prophecy which, Krakauer seems to argue, lends itself to a grandiosity that can justify even murder, whether in Mountain Meadows or Utah County. The students understood Krakauer to be saying essentially that Elizabeth Smart, as well as many other LDS women, are in some ways “programmed” or “brainwashed” to accept male authority. The Smart case then becomes not a terrible story about how a disturbed man used power and force to rape a young woman. Instead, for Krakauer, Smart’s story encapsulates the tensions and the pathologies of Mormonism as a whole.

In recognizing Krakauer’s sensationalist approach to the LDS tradition, students made an interesting connection to contemporay discourse surrounding Roman Catholicism, particularly in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis. I live in Massachusetts, the epicenter of the crisis that has continued even after the resignation of Bernard Cardinal Law. I was, in fact, interviewed by the Boston Globe about the international ramifications of the scandal. But the Globe, when it talked to me, seemed to be chiefly interested in more examples of sexual transgressions by Catholic priests in India and Africa (although, to their credit, they did quote me accurately.) My students argued that Krakauer’s discussion of Mormon fundamentalism is in many ways structurally similar to critiques of the Catholic Church for its handling of the sexual abuse crisis. If, for Krakauer, Mormons are in some ways preprogrammed to be subordinate to authority, so too are many Catholics “authoritarian” in disposition, at least according to many accounts...
even in the mainstream media. If, for Krakauer, there are various sexual pathologies in Mormonism reflected in the persistence of polygamy, then, as conventional wisdom would have it, there are various sexual pathologies found in Catholicism, especially because of its valorization of celibacy. One of the interesting characteristics of the discourse surrounding the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is how various groups have drawn different lessons from it. For many Catholic conservatives, the Church has become too liberal and too tolerant. For Catholic liberals, the crisis has shown that the Church is too hierarchical. In either case, however, the crisis becomes not only a crucial point for generating critiques of contemporary Catholicism but also emblematic of the essential nature of the Catholic Church. Krakauer’s approach to Mormonism displays a similar dynamic: the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart or the practice of polygamy among those excommuniﬁed by the LDS Church somehow becomes emblematic of the essential nature of the LDS tradition. What happens in both cases is that the diversity of experience and practice in both traditions is set aside in the effort to develop a kind of monomodal or exemplary history that serves an inherently polemical point of view.

The effect of reading Krakauer’s Under the Banner of Heaven was to break through the common prejudices that often color perceptions of the LDS Church and Latter-day Saints themselves. By making a connection between the discourse surrounding Mormonism and Catholicism, students were able to find common ground between themselves and Mormons, who are often portrayed, as Catholics sometimes are, with broad and prejudiced brush strokes.

Our discussion of the LDS tradition next concerned Douglas J. Davies’s An Introduction to Mormonism. A non-Mormon British academic, Davies presents a theologically sophisticated discussion of the LDS tradition that takes seriously its distinctiveness from and continuity with conventional Christianity. Davies emphasizes a variety of themes in the LDS worldview. Chief among these are the Mormon emphasis upon agency and activity and the understanding of salvation as a continuing process of joyful labor.

Most compelling for most students was Davies’s argument that for Latter-day Saints, it is Jesus’s experience in Gethsemane, not his cruciﬁxion, that is essential to understanding his nature as Christ. Davies cites LDS thinkers’ reﬂections that Jesus himself experienced a kind of cosmic battle within his psyche as he asserted his own agency to do his Father’s will. For my Catholic students, this view resonated with Catholic emphasis not only upon the sufferings of Christ but also upon the mystical “dark night of the soul,” in which suffering leads to “purgation” of self and surrender to God’s will.

Of course, Davies also discusses the LDS tripartite understanding of the afterlife, which some students thought to be an interesting expression of the Indo-European tendency to divide everything into three parts—an aspect of Indo-European thought that scholars have identiﬁed in ancient India and Iran, as well as in Western Europe and the United States. Students also found strong parallels between Mormon understandings of endowment rituals and Catholic sacraments. For Catholics, sacraments such as baptism, the ordination of priests, marriage, and the Eucharist or celebration of the last supper, are not just rituals with a symbolic import. Instead, sacraments effect what they symbolize through an infusion of grace. Students discerned a similar dynamic in the LDS celebration of marriage for time and eternity, in the household blessing, and in the special endowment clothing Mormons wear during their temple rituals. For both traditions, there is an emphasis not only on the ritual transmission of supernatural gifts but also upon the human being as a union of soul and body. But perhaps what struck students the most was the Mormon emphasis upon community. In addition to Davies’s work, students read an article by Mario DePillis, published in SUNSTONE, that describes the persistence of Mormon community and the tight, almost mystical, communal bonds fostered by the LDS Church.

Our discussion of the LDS tradition did not focus exclusively on secondary works, although these were certainly necessary to place Mormonism in context. Correlated with speciﬁc sections of Davies’s work, students also read primary texts. From the Book of Mormon, we read the vision of the tree of life and the rod of iron from the First Book of Nephi. We read sections from Doctrine and Covenants, including Joseph Smith’s prophecies concerning polygamy, the coming Civil War, and his proclamation of the Word of Wisdom. We also read President Gordon Hinckley’s speech given soon after the 9/11 attacks, in which he articulates quite clearly the sense of millennial expectation that underlies the LDS worldview.

Through engaging the speciﬁcity of primary LDS texts, students were also introduced to points of doctrinal disagreement between Mormonism and Catholicism. Issues concerning the Trinity, the status of God and his physicality, the notion of prophecy and prophethood are very real issues of difference between the LDS and Catholic traditions. These points of difference have led many to label Mormonism as a new religion, not really Christian. This, however, was not the conclusion my students drew. The focus of the class was not to engage the LDS tradition theologically nor to evaluate its claims of restoration. Instead, it was to try, in an inevitably limited and partial way, to understand how LDS tradition imbues the lives of believers with meaning. In planning the course, I had assumed that Mormonism would be considered different, other, or perhaps even bizarre from a conventional Catholic perspective. As the course progressed, it was clear that this was not the case—and not because of anything that I did as a teacher. Instead, many students in the class had grown up with Mormon friends, particularly in Belmont, Massachusetts, and surrounding towns, where there is a substantial LDS community. For these students, Mormons were not others, but friends and also fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

III. CATHOLICISM AND MORMONISM IN DIALOGUE

WHEN I PRESENTED the above reﬂections at the 2004 Sunstone Symposium, I greatly beneﬁted from the response by Dr. Richard Sherlock of Utah
One of the central elements in both Catholicism and Mormonism, and one that draws deep suspicion and criticism from the surrounding culture, is the emphasis upon authority. Where one finds the difference, however, is the level to which authority extends.

State University. With a perspective gained from a tenure at Fordham University, Dr. Sherlock called attention to the contrast between Catholicism and Mormonism. For Sherlock, the LDS tradition combines the liberalism of Protestant Anabaptism with Catholicism’s concern for magisterial authority. To this extent, Mormonism has a fuller understanding of the individual’s agency, while Catholicism has a more deeply developed tradition reflecting upon the exercise of authority. From this perspective, Mormonism and Catholicism do not share much in terms of doctrinal content. Instead, what the Catholic and LDS traditions do share is a concern with particular religious and ecclesiastic issues. If I were to develop a course with a more robust engagement between Catholicism and Mormonism, I would structure it precisely around such issues or themes of mutual concern.

The first of these themes is authority. One of the central elements in both Catholicism and Mormonism, and one that draws deep suspicion and criticism from the surrounding culture, is the emphasis upon authority. Within Catholicism, authority is transferred through apostolic succession and holy orders, and, of course, the Pope exists as the “Vicar of Christ.” Within the LDS Church, there is a generally similar emphasis upon authority and particularly the need for a central authority to adjudicate doctrinal issues. Where one finds the difference, however, is the level to which authority extends. Sherlock’s response pointed to the example of a family trying to decide whether to withdraw life support from a terminally ill family member. As Sherlock characterized it, when faced by such a choice, the Mormon response would be “to pray” for guidance. Catholics, however, could consult a rich body of authoritative teaching to inform this most difficult of decisions.

As a member of a Catholic family who actually had to make this decision, I know there is a strong and highly specific tradition of ethical reflection in Catholicism. But it is also true that such “authoritative” Catholic teachings are interpreted, often with different degrees of emphasis, by often fallible human beings. So if Mormonism and Catholicism have different understandings of the scope of ecclesiastical authority, nonetheless they both must deal with the human beings who exercise authority in the first place.

The issue of authority also brings with it the associated issues of adaptability and resistance. Both Mormonism and Catholicism are patriarchal—only men have full access to religiously sanctioned authority—even though both traditions have significant female presence and participation in religious life. Accordingly, within both the LDS and Catholic traditions, there is inevitably discussion of what aspects of doctrine or practice can be modified or changed in response to changing times or a fuller understanding of divine will. In discussions with my students, however, it was the LDS Church that emerged as having greater institutional and religious means of adapting to a changing world. Clearly, the Mormon understanding of prophecy as vested in the First Presidency, and which can be exercised by Mormons within the appropriate context, can become a powerful means for adaptation or a progressive understanding of God’s involvement in the world. The point is evidenced by how the LDS Church has changed and developed over time, particularly regarding polygamy and what was once called “the Negro question.” Nonetheless, opposing tendencies exist within both Catholicism and Mormonism that either resist change or contest the status of teachings presented as authoritative by ecclesiastic leaders.

Another crucial theme I would articulate next time is embodiment. Embodiment can mean a variety of things: the importance of the body, for example, or of understanding the
body as a crucial index of one’s orientation to the world. Clearly, within the LDS tradition, the body is central: the prescriptions of the Word of Wisdom have to do with the body, as do various ritual endowments. This is all subsumed, as I understand it, within an understanding of the person as a combination of spirit and body unified by the soul. Mormonism also emphasizes a particular way of presenting the body, as one can see in the Mormon missionaries or even in the success of BYU’s sports teams. By way of comparison, my home institution, the college of the Holy Cross, has as one of its claims to fame the only basketball team from New England to win the NCAA Division I basketball championship. For Catholicism, athletics became a way of articulating a Catholic religious vision of discipline and collective action. While Christianity is often characterized as dualistic, relying upon a distinction between the soul and the body, Catholicism has a much more unified understanding of the body as an index of the condition of the soul. In both Catholicism and Mormonism, embodiment in its most specific and abstract forms is central to articulating a religious vision of the Divine that is closely related to the physical or material aspects of human life.

Finally, there is the theme of meaning or, more simply, how each tradition is able to imbue the lives of adherents with meaning. What has always struck me about both Mormonism and Catholicism is the dual emphasis upon will (or agency) and surrender. For both traditions, there is an understanding of conquest that is achieved not only by a disciplined human agency but also through surrender to God and to appropriate authority.

In the end, any course that engages the breadth of human religiosity needs to be sensitive to difference, diversity, and variation. One of the crucial mistakes that commentators on both Mormonism and Catholicism have made is to consider each tradition as a monolithic, undifferentiated whole. But the power of Mormonism and Catholicism is that they work on a variety of levels and speak to people in powerful yet different ways.

NOTES

4. Ibid., 17–21.
6. Ibid., 45.

—ANITA TANNER
In another language, Mary's grandmother's maiden name meant "a river which forms a boundary." Still means "a river which forms a boundary," even now, three years after her grandmother's death. The name still exists even if Mary's grandmother does not. Mary doesn't believe in, doesn't even make much distinction between, the existence of the name and the non-existence of her grandmother. She believes in life after death. She believes in heaven. Hell, she believes, is in our own minds, or will be when we get to the other side and discover what we might have had, had we understood the truth. The truth being that we have always existed and will always exist as children of God, just as her grandmother does now, in heaven. On the other side.

Mary's grandmother, Rosemary, lived the last fifty years of her life on the same two acres in the same county where she was born. By the time she died, the city had grown into the county and the acreage became condos and a small yard for Rosemary's modest but comfortable house. Comfort meant beauty most of the time. Peonies in the sun, begonias in the shade. Wedgewood china and good blue wool to knit with. But Rosemary also knew that when the need for comfort was terrible, tragic in the ordinary sense of an average woman's life, beauty could turn to torture. As when Rosemary's second son was taken suddenly, like a breath before diving, by a telescoped intestine at the age of seventeen months. The baby died in the fall, and it was many years before Rosemary could look at an ash tree without averting her eyes. Golden ashes hurt her.

There is a church on the corner, one that Mary has never entered but which she has driven past probably three times a week for twenty years. It is on the way to her grandparents' old place. She passes it on her way to other places now. It has a wide lawn and big trees near the street. Locusts, she thinks. And a white hawthorne. She turns right at the church and then almost immediately left down into the gully, below the freeway overpass, and climbs the road up the other side, crossing at some unmarked point from the city limits into the county. At the deepest point of the gully, in the hollow of the horseshoe-shaped road under the roaring, straight arrow of the interstate, Mary can always smell the creek—the creek that carves the gully and feeds the undergrowth of willows and scrub oak, and the monstrous cottonwoods that make the overpass necessary and prudent. She considers herself allied with the creek and the trees. The smell of the creek never fails to comfort her, the smell of water touching the edge of such dry, dry earth and stones, turning dead leaves—so much rusted chaff—damp and cool and nourishing. Of course, the leaves themselves are only there because of the creek, and she only finds comfort in the smell because of the creek's proximity to where her grandmother lived, her grandmother who is no longer there.

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HE HAD BEEN fussy all night. Rosemary kept him in bed with her while her husband slept in the den, slept through the last night they would have him, two rooms away. Slept through her singing to him as he lay on her chest, breathing too fast between electric-like spasms of discomfort. He would cry and draw his hard, fat knees up under himself and try, it seemed, to burrow right through her, right through her sternum and lungs and spine, with his damp, dark head. She thought it must be a tooth. A molar coming in. A big one.

He calmed down some by dawn, and when her husband dressed to do chores, he told her he would feed their other son breakfast before he left for the store. Her husband looked down at her and then at the baby curled against her like a big pup in need of weaning, and said softly, softly as a man can, so as not to wake him, “And the winner is…”

“Not mama,” she whispered, almost mouthed, and smiled at the fight in the little body beside her, smiled at the stubbornness, the spirit that came complete except for any memory of where it had been before its own birth. Smiled at her tough one, her willful child of God, and then went to sleep. She woke about nine o’clock to the sound of her baby. A strange baby sound, not crying so much as murmuring, and breathing too fast. Terribly fast. In hot, death-sweet pulses of air on her cheek as she bent close. There was light in the room now, beautiful, gold light moving across the walls and ceiling with the swaying of ash branches outside. He opened his eyes without quite waking. His dark hair was curly with sweat, even in the autumn-chilly bedroom. She must check the furnace, she thought at the same moment, precisely the same moment, that she knew she would not check it, not any time very soon because there was something wrong, very seriously wrong, with her baby. She carried him into the children’s room and lay him in his crib to change him. Such a big baby boy. Bouncing baby boy. Fat. Hair like hers. Long upper lip like his father’s. Eyes…like she had never seen them, open but not seeing anything except some distress too big for him, even big as he was. She glanced at the diaper open around his legs, unwrapped as if from a package, his chubby ankles still crossed in her right hand, to lift his bottom, the corner of the soggy diaper in her left, ready to fold and remove it from beneath him. The clean, lovely, bleached and softened new diaper lay open and ready to replace the old, right next to him. She looked from the wet diaper to the clean one and back again. Looked from one to the other for what seemed like eternity, eternity the way it is read and meant in the scriptures, forever and ever, amen and amen, before she could see what was there before her, what had been before her and next to her and lying on top of her for long minutes and all the hours of the night. The old diaper was wet and heavy and at its center, in its deepest creases, through six or seven of its ten cotton layers, it was red.

MARY HAD A lover, but only once. A friend of her husband’s. She had broken off the relationship because she knew that her lover was about to. Because she could hear the change in the way he pronounced the two syllables of her name, making them distinct from each other and perfectly balanced by his inflections—Ma-ry—instead of landing with gentle emphasis on the first and sliding so quietly to the next that they sounded like one—M-a-a-ry. Months later, she went with her husband to the movies where they ran into her lover and his wife and another couple. They chatted in the foyer as they bought popcorn, the women with the women and the men with the men. Mary excused herself to go to the ladies’ room. Once inside the stall, she hung her purse on the hook provided and sat fully clothed on the lidless toilet seat and wept, as violently, and silently, as she could. When she was quite certain that the feature had started, she left the stall, repaired her face as well as she could with what she had, and walked into the darkened theatre. She had just found her husband, his silhouette waving at her in short chops against the opening credits, when the sound suddenly ballooned and twisted like something dying, and the house lights abruptly went up. She saw in a glance that her lover was seated exactly two rows behind and one seat to the left of where she would be. She sat down quickly, discovering almost immediately that when she turned to look at her husband, she could see her lover out of the corner of her eye. By looking up, as if...

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she were interested in the theatre's old moldings, she could actually tell whether her lover's face was directed toward her. Finding that it was, she looked at her husband, and asked with her most animated, most provocative tone and expression. “Did you miss me?”

Looking surprised and pleased, her husband said, “Well, sure. A little worried, though. You sick or something?”

“I’m fine,” she said, waiting as she had through all the weeks of her affair for what she knew would not come. Another question. A follow-up, something that would explode the flat land between them like a mine. Something insinuating, dark, angry. Something true.

Instead, her husband picked up her hand and laced his fingers between hers. He covered both of their hands with his other one. She looked from their hands lying against her husband's leg, over her left shoulder, directly into the unsmiling eyes of her startled lover. She did not smile, and she did not look away as the house lights came down.

SHORTLY AFTER THEY bought the property, after the house and fencing had gone up but before the barns, Rosemary's husband agreed to board three horses for a friend. They grazed in the valley-high, irrigated grass, and every other day, her husband fed them grain from a tin pail. Rosemary didn't care for horses, but they were pretty to look at and a passion with her husband and teenaged son. Both of them were more than willing to drive an extra ten miles to the store and the high school in the city every day. Horses were the reason they had bought the property in the first place, and as soon as they had forgotten and had to be told again and again, that her baby was in the ground, the granite-hard ground of the old desert it had been out the day before, taking the newly graveled lane around the pasture and just-planted cherry orchard. The surveyor had been out the day before, and the stakes for the new barns were planted as neatly as the cherry trees inside a cleared space where the lane looped back upon itself. The stakes, painted red on the tops, stuck out of the granite-hard ground like patient settlers in old portraits, waiting for who-knew-what, surrounded by the hardest, strangliest, ugliest weeds that the old desert this new “farm” really was could produce. Waiting for who-knew-what. Rosemary stood, bucket in hand, the very image of the farm wife her own mother had been, that

Rosemary had never wanted to be, and thought about the sweet plums waiting for her.

On her way back to the house, the pail full and heavy, her hands sticky and her arm and feet aching, she left the lane, walking straight through the unbuilt barns and across the rows of cherry saplings. When she came to the pasture fence, she still had half its length to go and decided, since the horses were down at the far end, well away from the house, that she would cut across. She looked carefully up and down the length of the property to make sure she would not be observed doing anything so unladylike as climbing a five-rail fence in her dress. Then balancing the bucket on the top rail with one hand and no little effort, she got herself and her plums safely to the other side without having to jump even the last rail. Jumping would have been too unladylike even to do unobserved. She picked up the bucket and started across the pasture, noticing almost at once that the three horses, two grays and a sorrel, were watching her in a way that she could only think of as interested. They began to walk her way. With the bucket of plums banging in heavy rhythm against her skirt and leg, she walked a little faster toward the house. The horses, it seemed, began to walk faster, too. She looked over her shoulder, trying to remember whether she had ever heard of an unprovoked attack by horses. She could not remember any such story but it occurred to her in a bright flash behind the eyes that there were a great many stories she had never heard, never would hear, of things that were terrible or wonderful and true. Probably thousands of them, maybe even millions. She began to trot, hoisting the pail ahead of her and looking over her shoulder. She saw that the horses were trotting now. She held the plums in both arms and broke into a run, thinking that if she could get to the fence she could toss the bucket over onto her short soft lawn without doing too much damage. The plums might scatter, but their landing place would be soft and clean, and she had picked them mostly for jam anyway. They would still be good, sweet and dark red, and still warm from the sun. But Rosemary heard the horses behind her, heard them running, the cadence of a true gallop, and knew that she was lost, her plums were lost. She ran faster, as fast as she could, knowing what she had to do, suddenly knowing what the horses were after, and just as suddenly knowing, remembering, as if she had forgotten and had to be told again and again, that her baby was in the ground, the granite-hard ground of the old desert it really was, and she tossed the perfectly good, wild plums, bucket and all, over her shoulder, taking the fence with one leap and a scramble over the top rail.

She landed on the other side, falling hard onto her knees and then her sticky hands. Blades of her soft, clean lawn stuck to her palms as she raised them to her face, as she covered her face, and cried out loud for what seemed like a very long time.
OH MY LOVE, my love, is a river through trees in a desert of bright sage and red clay. My love is a refuge I cannot dream, not even dream, because it is too real and close and will be the end of everything I know. My love is the sound of water on old, old rocks, unmoved but worn away by motion. My love is nothing left in me but the fear of nothing being left.

MARY HAS THREE children, a boy and two girls, a moderately fulfilling half-time position as a high school art teacher, a well-ordered home, and a good husband. A kind man. In the heat of high summer, with her children at home and her days overrun, Mary feels free rather than oppressed. She paints early in the mornings—blanched landscapes, dry riverbeds, portraits of her children—from snapshots. She listens to the radio and feels exhilarated rather than anxious at the news of shrinking reservoirs and slowing creeks. She feels reassured that beneath all the acre feet of land and water, beneath the measurements of need, the earth has a memory stronger than sprinklers or garden hoses, ditches or wells. It does not know its own limitations. Underneath the smell of a creek, deeper than comfort, the earth is wild and alive.

Mary has had terribly vivid, disturbingly real, erotic dreams since before she’d ever even been with a man. They have always been about men she knows, not movie stars or sports figures, and since her marriage, not usually her husband, but sometimes. In the past, whenever she dreamed about another man, she would wake feeling vaguely guilty but comforted by the fact that her dreams were not within her power to control and that the pleasure she took from them was free in a way that other, more conscious pleasures never could be.

But Mary cannot dream about her one, real lover. She believes that when she broke her marriage vows, she broke something real, as real as skin or a bottle of milk. Still, every night, when she says her prayers, she asks that she will be sent a dream of him, that since she has had the strength to put an end to this terrible physical betrayal, that at least she be sent this succor, this stand-in for immediate joy, for the real body of the stranger she loves. She does not pray for more than a dream of the act itself—she does not dare—but what she most hopes for is that, in the dream, her lover will say her name the way he did before he decided to leave her, the way he made her two syllables one. Even as she prays, she knows the dream itself is too much to ask. Every night, she knows.

Not every night, but almost every other, her husband slides a hand along her hip or cups a breast and whispers, “I miss you,” and she asks herself, instead of him, if a man can miss what he’s never really had. She knows a woman can.
Once we have dispensed with the “old explanation” for the priesthood ban, what can we offer instead?

DISPELLING THE CURSE OF CAIN

OR, HOW TO EXPLAIN THE OLD PRIESTHOOD BAN WITHOUT LOOKING RIDICULOUS

By Armand L. Mauss

Forget everything I have said, or what . . . Brigham Young . . . or whomsoever has said . . . that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.¹

This statement by Elder Bruce R. McConkie in August of 1978 is an apt characterization of the doctrinal and apologetic commentary so pervasive in the Church prior to the revelation on the priesthood earlier that year: that is, it was based on limited understanding. Yet, it is not clear how wide an application Elder McConkie intended for his reference to “limited understanding,” for ironically, the doctrinal folklore that many of us thought had been discredited, or at least made moot, through the 1978 revelation, continued to appear in Elder McConkie’s own books written well after 1978, and continues to be taught by well-meaning teachers and leaders in the Church to this very day.² The tragic irony is that the dubious doctrines in question are no longer even relevant, since they were contrived to “explain” a church policy that was abandoned a quarter century ago.

Indeed, it was apparent to many of us even four decades ago that certain scriptural passages used to explain the denial of priesthood to black members could not legitimately be so interpreted without an a priori narrative.³ Such a narrative was gradually constructed by the searching and inventive minds of early LDS apologists. With allusions to the Books of Genesis, Moses, and Abraham, the scenario went something like this:

In the pre-existence, certain spirits were set aside, in God’s wisdom, to come to earth through a lineage that was cursed and marked, first by Cain’s fratricide and obeisance to Satan, and then again later by Ham’s lèse majesté against his father Noah. We aren’t exactly sure why this lineage was set apart in the pre-existence, but it was probably for reasons that do not reflect well on the pre-mortal valiancy of the partakers of that lineage. Since the beginning, the holy priesthood has been withheld from all who have had any trace of that lineage, and so it shall be until all the rest of Adam’s descendants have received the priesthood, or, for all practical purposes, throughout the mortal existence of humankind.

Neat and coherent as that scenario might seem, the scriptures typically cited in its support cannot be so interpreted unless we start with the scenario itself and project it retrospectively upon the scriptural passages in proof-text fashion. For if we set aside the darkened glass of this contrived scenario, we see that the Book of Abraham says nothing about lineages set aside in the pre-existence, but only about distinguished individuals (Abraham 3:22–24).⁴ The Book of Abraham is the only place, furthermore, where any scriptures speak of the priesthood being withheld from any lineage; but even then it is only the specific lineage of the pharaohs of Egypt, and there is no explanation as to why that lineage could not have the priesthood, or whether the proscription was temporary or permanent, or which other lineages, if any, especially in the modern world, would be covered by that proscription (Abraham 1:25–27). At the same time, the passages in Genesis and Moses, for their part, do not refer to any priesthood proscrip-

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tion, and no change of color occurs in either Cain or Ham—or even in Ham’s son Canaan, who, for some unexplained reason, was the one actually cursed! (See Genesis 9:18–25.) There is no description of the mark placed on Cain, except that the mark was supposed to protect him from vengeance. It’s true that in the seventh chapter of Moses we learn that descendants of Cain became black (Moses 7:22) but not until the time of Enoch, six generations after Cain—and even then only in a vision of Enoch about an unspecified future time (Moses 7:2–4). There is no explanation for this blackness; it is not even clear that we are to take this literally.

Much of the conventional “explanation” for the priesthood restriction was simply borrowed from the racist heritage of nineteenth-century Europe and America, especially from the justifications for slavery used in the ante-bellum South. Understandable—even forgivable—as such a resort might have been for our LDS ancestors, it is neither understandable nor forgivable in the twenty-first century. It is an unnecessary burden of misplaced apologetics that has been imposed by our history upon the universal and global aspirations of the Church. Until we dispense with this explanation once and for all, it will continue to encumber the efforts of today’s Church leaders and public affairs spokespersons to convince the world, and especially the black people of North America, that the Church is for all God’s children, “black and white, bond and free, male and female” (2 Nephi 26:33).

Once we have dispensed with the old “explanation,” however, what can we offer instead? How can we explain the situation to those inside and outside the Church who ask us about the Church’s erstwhile doctrines and policies on racial matters? Let me answer that question by asking you to listen in on an imaginary conversation between me and one of my college students. (I have never had precisely this conversation, but it is a composite of many that I have had over the years with members, non-members, and LDS youth confronting this issue for the first time). In the dialogue that follows, “Q” will stand for Questioner and “A” will stand for me, Armand.

Q: I hear that the Mormon Church is racist, or at least that many Mormons are. Anything to that rumor?
A: I guess most white people in America have grown up with some racist beliefs, and Mormons have had their share. However, national polling data for more than a decade have revealed that Mormons are actually less likely than other Americans, on average, to support racist ideas and policies.

Q: But aren’t black people unwelcome in the Mormon Church, or subjected to some kind of second-class status?
A: Not for the past twenty-five years. It is true that from the middle of the nineteenth century until 1978, the relatively few black people who joined the Church could not be given the priesthood or access to temple rites.

Q: Why was that?
A: The reasons are not entirely clear, but the policy seems to have begun officially in 1852 with an announcement by Brigham Young, who was Church president at that time. He made the announcement as part of deliberations by the Utah territorial legislature over the legal status of both blacks and Indians, and in particular over whether slavery should be permitted in the territory.

Q: So, was slavery permitted?
A: Yes, for about a decade.

Q: That sounds pretty racist to me. How can you justify that?
A: I don’t try to justify it. Slavery in America was a racist institution. Brigham Young himself did not actually want slavery in Utah, but he did believe that black people were not the social or intellectual equals of white people, and that slavery should be tolerated for Mormon slaveholders moving to Utah as long as it was tolerated elsewhere in the United States.

Q: Why would Brigham Young believe such things?
A: Because he was a nineteenth-century American and hardly any white people of that time, North or South, believed in equality for blacks. Slavery was still an unsettled issue throughout the nation, with some even in the South opposed to it and many even in the North willing to tolerate it. Brigham Young’s ideas were really right in the mainstream of American thinking at that time. They were very close to the ideas of other prominent Americans from Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln, who himself did not even free all slaves with his Emancipation Proclamation.

Q: I thought most Americans of that time believed in God and in the Bible. Where was God in all this?
A: I doubt that God had anything to do with it. Many Americans of the time, including Brigham Young and most other Mormon leaders, believed that the scriptures justified the subordination of black people because they were descendants of Cain or of other Biblical figures who had sinned egregiously. Latter-day Saints do not believe that God takes responsibility for the evil in the world, nor that he condones the use of his name or of the scriptures to justify evil. Yet he has granted human beings their agency, either to operate a society according to his principles or to pay the consequences. The Civil War and continuing racial strife since then have been the consequences of slavery.

Q: But don’t Mormons believe that their Church is led by prophets of God? How could prophets have permitted racist ideas and practices to become part of their religion?
A: Prophets are not perfect and don’t claim to be; nor do they always act as prophets in what they say and do. People in all ages, including those who become prophets, grow up without questioning much that is assumed by everyone else in their respective cultures, unless some experience motivates them to seek revelation on a given matter.

Q: Well, maybe so, but racism is such an obvious evil that I would think authentic prophets would have been more sensitive to it.
A: Why? It seems obvious to all of us now, but not to people who believed in Manifest Destiny, the White Man’s Burden, and “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Even the original apostles of Jesus assumed that non-Jews could not become Christians unless they first accepted Judaism and circumcision. The apostle Paul disputed that, but the idea persisted.

Q: Did all the early Mormon leaders hold racist ideas?
Not many institutions in American society, including religious institutions, can be very proud of their historic treatment of black people.

More than thirty years.

Q: Didn’t anyone question Young’s views during all that time or later?

A: All of Brigham Young’s successors tended to assume that he had had a good reason for withholding the priesthood from black members and had probably gotten the policy from Joseph Smith. A few black members questioned the policy a time or two, but when they did so, Church leaders reconsidered and simply reiterated it. By the time the twentieth century arrived, no church leaders were living who could remember when the policy had been otherwise. Meanwhile, the nation as a whole had become permeated with so-called Jim Crow laws restricting all kinds of privileges for blacks. In that environment, the Mormon restriction on priesthood seemed entirely natural.

Q: But other religious denominations were critical of such racial restrictions, weren’t they?

A: Eventually they were, but not until the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Prior to that time, only a minuscule number of blacks were ordained in any denomination—except, of course, in the so-called black denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) tradition and the predominantly black Baptist groups.

Q: But wasn’t the Mormon racial policy more pervasive and severe than in other religions?

A: Not really. In the Mormon case, the policy was simply more conspicuous because of the universal lay priesthood that Mormons extended to all males except blacks. In other churches, the racial restrictions were more subtle. Ordination to the ministry in all major denominations required access to the professional seminaries. Before the civil rights movement, the seminaries, like the schools of law and medicine, were the gatekeepers to these careers, and blacks were rarely admitted to any of the professional schools, including seminaries (except, again, in the black denominations). Most of today’s religious critics of the erstwhile Mormon racial restriction belong to denominations in which there were scarcely any more black ministers or priests than in the Mormon Church. Not many institutions in American society, including religious institutions, can be very proud of their historic treatment of black people.

Q: So you are saying that the Mormons were really no worse than others in their teachings and policies about black people?

A: That’s about right, small comfort though that might be in retrospect. National surveys comparing Mormons with others in racial attitudes indicate that Mormons in the west, at least, were close to the national averages in all such measures during the 1960s and 1970s—more conservative than some denominations but more liberal than others.

Q: When did the Mormon Church finally change its policies about blacks?


Q: That seems a little late. Didn’t most churches and other institutions drop all their racial restrictions a lot earlier than that?

A: Yes, generally a little earlier. But even LDS leaders had the matter under consideration for at least twenty years before 1978.

Q: What took so long? Why couldn’t the prophet just change the policy?

A: Especially in such important matters as this one, a prophet or president in the Church is not inclined to act alone. The president, his two counselors, and the twelve apostles are all considered “prophets, seers, and revelators,” and they usually act as a body when deciding on fundamental doctrines and policies. This process is by definition a conservative one, since it requires a relatively long period of discussion, deliberation, and prayer in order to reach a consensus—in order to feel that they have all been moved by the Holy Spirit toward the same decision. The prophets came close to consensus more than once across the years before they finally achieved it in 1978.

Q: That seems like a very cumbersome process, which might actually constrain God in getting through to the prophet with a revela-
tion. Why couldn’t God just speak to the president or prophet and tell him what to do?

A: Well, of course, God could do anything he wanted to do. In the Mormon tradition, however, the revelatory process normally (not necessarily always, but normally) begins with human initiative, whether that of a prophet or of any other individual seeking divine guidance. The individual formulates a question or proposal and takes that to God in prayer for divine confirmation. This was the pattern followed by Joseph Smith himself in what Mormons call “the Sacred Grove.” It is the pattern also in Mormon scriptures such as Doctrine and Covenants section 9 and Moroni 10:4-5. Mormon prophets do not sit around waiting for revelations. They typically take propositions to the Lord for confirmation, and these propositions are the products of a great deal of prayerful deliberation, both individually and collectively.

Q: So this is what finally happened in 1978?

A: Yes. President Spencer W. Kimball had anguished for some time over the restrictions on black people, and he took a great deal of initiative in persuading his colleagues to make it a matter of the most earnest prayer and deliberation. In response to their collective efforts, he reported on 8 June that “the Lord [had] confirmed” (my italics) that the priesthood should be extended to all worthy male members (Official Declaration —2).

Q: Was President Kimball the first prophet to focus so intensely on the issue?

A: Not necessarily. Most of his predecessors said little or nothing about the matter, except for President David O. McKay (president from 1951–70). He was clearly concerned about it even in the 1950s when he visited several parts of the world that had black populations and even black Church members. One of his counselors, Hugh B. Brown, was also publicly anxious to see a change in Church policy. However, they were apparently never able to galvanize the consensus among the other apostles that might have changed the policy ten or fifteen years earlier.

Q: Too bad. It would have looked a lot better for the Church if the change had come sooner.

A: Maybe, but not necessarily. During the 1960s, the Church was under a great deal of pressure from various national organizations and leaders over its racial restrictions. Indeed, I recall that period as a public relations nightmare for the Church. Yet if the Church had made the policy change then, the public relations outcome might have been antclimactic, since the Church would have appeared to be caving in to political expediency, instead of maintaining its own prophetic and procedural integrity, even in the face of public criticism.

Q: Well, anyway, now that the Church has dropped its earlier racist ideas and policies, is it attracting many black members?

A: Conversion numbers in Africa are quite startling, but of course racial conflict in the U.S. has never been especially salient to Africans. The growth of the Church among African Americans, however, has been much slower, largely because of the lingering racist heritage of the past and the reluctance of the Church to deal with this heritage candidly. Those black members and investigators who find it hard to look past all that have also found it hard to remain active in the Church. We have a lot yet to do.

The fact is that we do have a lot more relevant historical knowledge than the we-don’t-know response would indicate.
are black. The fact is that we do have a lot more relevant historical knowledge than the we-don’t-know response would indicate. This knowledge, furthermore, is based on authoritative historical research by responsible scholars, to which I have alluded in the hypothetical conversation just summarized.

Although this historical literature cannot tell us anything about the mind of God, or about revelatory encounters of our leaders with Deity, it can tell us a great deal about the evolving historical contexts within which racial conceptions developed across time, both in the nation and in the Church. Understanding these contexts, in turn, will help us to understand the ideas and policies of Church leaders, especially where influences upon them from those contexts can be demonstrated or at least reasonably inferred. Obviously divine guidance does not depend upon historical context, but it is clear from history that some revelations have been received by prophets in response to inquiries motivated by the surrounding social and political environment.

What I have presented here draws upon historical context, but for obvious reasons I have not broadened that context beyond what seemed necessary for a discussion of the ideas and policies of the Latter-day Saints regarding black people. There is, however, a still larger context, and that is the origin and development of LDS conceptions about race and lineage more generally. My recent book, All Abraham’s Children, undertakes to explain our changing views about blacks within the still larger context of changing views about Jews, about Lamanites, and indeed about American Mormons as Anglo-Ephraimites. Our understandings about all such lineages, and others, too, have evolved in response to our experiences with the world’s peoples encountered in our global missionary enterprise. Through that process, we have come to understand the ultimate irrelevance of all mortal lineages, whether African or Israelite, in the divine plan of salvation. As Paul taught the Galatians, all who accept the gospel of Christ become the children of Abraham.24

NOTES

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2. See ibid. 128, where McConkie reaffirms the notion that blacks descended from Cain and Ham. Even recent editions of his 1966 Mormon Doctrine (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft) retain racist ideas under headings such as “Caste System” and “Pre-existence.” See also his The Mortal Messiah (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81, 4 vols.), 1:23; The Millennial Messiah (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 182–83 (plus all of chapter 16); and A New Witness for the Articles of Faith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 510–12 (plus chapter 4), in all of which he ties the unequal conditions of various mortal lineages to decisions made in the pre-existence. For the continuing influence of such writings on grassroots Mormon thinking, see my All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 261–64; also Darron Smith, “The Persistence of Racialized Discourse in Mormonism,” SUNSTONE, March 2003, 31–33, and “Speak the Truth and Shame the Devil: A Roundtable Discussion on Race, Experience, and Testimony,” SUNSTONE, May 2003, 28–39. A selected list of in-print books by LDS publishers that contain these ideas can be found in SUNSTONE, March 2003, 34–35.


4. Hugh Nibley, in his Abraham in Egypt (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), eventually offered the explanation that the denial of the priesthood to the pharaionic line had nothing to do with racial lineage but with the claim of the priesthood through the matriarchal rather than the patriarchal line (see esp. page 134). This explanation might have been more helpful if it offered a decade earlier, before the lineage issue became moot.


7. The 1852 declaration was recorded in Wilford Woodruff’s journal for January 16, 1852: “. . . any man having one drop of the seed [of Cain] . . . in him cannot hold the priesthood, and if no other Prophet ever spake it before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ . . . ” (Matthews Cowley, Wilford Woodruff, Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1909, 351). Questions had arisen about the ordination of black members in some of the eastern branches of the Church in the late 1840s, so it is possible that a de facto restriction on the priesthood had already begun unofficially before 1852. See Newell G. Bringham, Saints, Slaves, and Blacks: The Changing Place of Black People within Mormonism (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 84–108.

8. Slavery in early Utah never involved as many as even a hundred blacks, and it was never an important economic institution there. The process by which the permissive “Act in Relation to Servitude” was adopted by the Utah Territorial government is a complicated story, which is summarized very nicely by Newell G. Bringham in his Saints, Slaves, and Blacks, chapter 4, especially 61–73. As I read Bringham, the reluctant acceptance of slavery in the Utah Territory was the product of (1) a series of national political compromises expressed in the Compromise of 1850, which attempted to limit the spread of slavery while still allowing room for “popular sovereignty” (local option) in the western territories, and (2) a concession to the few Southern Mormon slaveholders who had immigrated to Utah. As Bringham also points out, however, the legal restrictions placed by the territorial legislature upon the practice of slavery, and upon the treatment of slaves, made the institution more like the indentured servitude that had occurred at other times and places in American history than like Southern slavery per se. In the intensifying sectional strife of the 1850s, Brigham Young was trying to avoid ruling slavery either in or out, in principle, hoping to keep the Territory separate from this political strife. In all discussions of potential statehood during this period, however, neither Young nor other LDS leaders contemplated admission of Utah to the Union as a slave state. See also the extended discussion of the slavery issue in Lester E. Bush, Jr., “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68, especially 22–31.

9. Brigham Young’s personal distaste for slavery is apparent from several of his comments quoted by Bringham in Saints, Slaves, and Blacks, 69, 110–11, among others.

10. Lincoln partisans among contemporary historians have tended to gloss over his views on the race issue before and during the Civil War. From his debates with Stephen A. Douglas all the way to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862–63, Lincoln’s public statements do not reflect the principled opposition to slavery that appears in his Gettysburg Address and afterward. Near the beginning of the Civil War, when journalist Horace Greeley asked Lincoln if his main objective in the war was freeing the slaves, Lincoln famously responded that his main objective was saving the Union, and that if he could achieve that goal without freeing any slaves, he would do so. Even the Emancipation Proclamation freed only those slaves living in the states still in rebellion at that time. See the somewhat jaded treatment of Lincoln by Lerone Bennett, Jr. (editor of Ebony magazine) in his Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 2000), which has the opposite of the conventional bias but is nevertheless a useful corrective to the naive popular assumption of today that white racism was mainly a feature of the South (or of Utah) from the 1860s to the 1960s.

11. The Prophet Joseph Smith himself is quoted in the so-called
“Documentary History of the Church” as admonishing us that prophets are mortal men with mortal frailties, so that “a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such” (B. H. Roberts, ed., History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Period I, 6 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1902–12], 5:26). The complications in identifying which directives from Church leaders are to be understood as binding on the Saints are extensively addressed by President J. Reuben Clark in a lengthy Church News article of 31 July 1954. See the reprint of that article, “When are the Writings or Sermons of Church Leaders Entitled to the Claim of Scripture?” in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 12, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 68–81. Applying all of this to Brigham Young’s 1852 declaration in a political forum (the Utah Legislature), despite his citing of prophetic authority, leaves us with an interesting quandary, considering that today’s Church leaders (at least since 1969) have clearly retreated from Young’s ideas on race, priesthood, and many other things.

12. See, for example, Acts 15; Galatians 2; and 2 Peter 3.

13. See the well-documented account of Elijah Abel’s 1836 ordinations to the offices of elder and seventy, and his full fellowship in the Kirtland days of the Church generally, in Newell G. Bringham, Elijah Abel and the Changing Place of Blacks within Mormonism,” Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 12, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 26–36.


15. The crystallization of the Church’s race policy after Brigham Young, through inertia and the loss of institutional memory, is recounted by Lester Bush in his “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine,” 331–39.

16. The final three chapters of Woods’s Arrogance of Faith are devoted to the historical impact of slavery and racism on the various religious denominations of America. It is clear from this account that even after the denominational schisms around the period of the Civil War, and all the way down to the present, all the major denominations, North and South, have continued with racial segregation and other forms of discrimination. Even as late as 1985, black bishops in the Roman Catholic Church, constituting only 3 percent of the total American bishops, complained about racial bias in the church, according to a report in the Los Angeles Times, 14 November 1985, 1–5.

17. For evidence on national and Mormon attitudes toward blacks and civil rights, see, for example, Angus Campbell, White Attitudes toward Black People (Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, 1971), especially chapter 7. For a comparison of the attitudes of Mormons with those of other religious denominations during the 1960s, see my “Mormonism and Secular Attitudes toward Negroes,” Pacific Sociological Review 9 no. 2 (Fall 1966): 91–99; also my The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), chapter 4, especially 52–54, and my All Abraham’s Children, 219–26.


20. See the account by Elder Bruce R. McConkie in his “The New Revelation on Priesthood,” esp. 128; also various other accounts cited by Quinn in Mormon Hierarchy, 16–17.


23. See the extended discussion of this point in my All Abraham’s Children, 241–64. See also Newell G. Bringham and Darron T. Smith (eds.), Black and Mormon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), a mixture of analytical and anecdotal essays that offer the reader plenty of candor.


HOUSE AND BARN

Remember how the house stood firm but the barn swayed slowly at the slightest hint of a nor’easter.

So strong the foundations, the rooms around us seemed to grow like my bones, put on flesh, while the rotting rust-red shadow of this bed-rock structure shed shingles like skin, creaked in every rotting rafter, burst its nails with each new stress.

Remember how the family split, the house was sold, proceeds divided up, the wretched barn an unwilling partner to the deal, cash taken off the top for razing and replacing.

Know how, in my heart, the house caught fire, the next family or the one after that too careless with the boiler, too rough and ready with the kindling of our history, and insurance money paid for some new place none of us have ever lived in.

But the barn stood, if not firm, steady in its weakness, always in the state of one good breeze cheating the wrecking ball. But there never is that one good breeze, not now, in this silent room, where I sketch at faces but nothing comes, where the sigh for outlived years mimics the endless heave of wood.

—JOHN GREY
THE LONG-PROMISED DAY?

BLACK AFRICAN JEWS, THE MORMON DENIAL OF PRIESTHOOD TO BLACKS, AND TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

By Robert A. Rees

THE LONG-PROMISED DAY?

H ere has been much publicity recently about DNA studies of native peoples of the Americas and the traditional claim of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that many, if not most, inhabitants of North and South America are direct descendants of Lehi, the Book of Mormon prophet who left Jerusalem around 600 BC and came to the New World. To date, no DNA study has established a link between New World and Semitic peoples. How this study affects our understanding of the Book of Mormon has yet to be determined, but it is a clear example of science challenging a long-standing religious theology.

DNA studies, although a relatively new area of scientific exploration, have proven effective elsewhere, including establishing proof of paternity, guilt or innocence of convictions, and genetic links for certain diseases. Had DNA analysis been available before 1978, presumably it could have been employed to establish black ancestry and therefore priesthood denial. And in that case, good science would have been used to enforce questionable theology.

But what if DNA investigation had uncovered a black African line in the genealogy of Joseph Smith or a later prophet? What if it had identified descendents of ancient Israelite priesthood holders among black African tribes, thus making them, even though black, legitimate inheritors of the right to the priesthood?

BLACK AFRICAN JEWS

DNA studies are now being used to establish links between living peoples in various parts of the world and ancient peoples, including the proverbial lost tribes of Israel. Since the dispersal of the house of Israel beginning with the Babylonian captivity, people have been fascinated with the fate of the lost tribes. The concept has persisted that they exist hidden somewhere in the earth today or that they were transplanted to some other planet to await the time the Lord will bring them back.

Most modern scholars believe that the tribes were scattered and intermingled with various Middle Eastern, African, and Asian populations. In Across the Sabbath River: In Search of a Lost Tribe of Israel, Hillel Halkin explores evidence of the lost tribes in China, Thailand, and northeast India. And in The Quest for the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel to the Ends of the Earth, Rivka Gonen examines claims that remnants of the lost tribes can be found in China, Africa, and many other nations.

Among the most intriguing claims to Israelite ancestry is that of the Lemba, a Bantu-speaking people who live in various parts of southern Africa, primarily Zimbabwe. For thousands of years, the Lemba have claimed Jewish heritage and priesthood lineage. Their religious practice has included, among other things, monotheistic worship, circumcision of male children, ritual slaughter of animals, and dietary codes closely related to those prescribed in the Old Testament, including eschewing pork. Although some scholars have dismissed these Jewish ancestral claims, new DNA evidence, including a particular genetic marker among the Lemba’s priestly group, has confirmed the descent of these tribes from the house of Israel. Among Jews today, males with the name Cohen or one of its derivatives are paternal line descendents of priesthood holders from the time of Aaron and Moses. Members of this tribe or class have a specific genetic signature, a Y-chromosome termed the “Cohen modal haplotype.”

The Lemba claim of direct Israelite lineage was confirmed through DNA studies conducted by Professor Tudor Parfitt and his associates at the University of London’s Center for Genetic Anthropology. These so-called “Black Jews” believe “they descended from the ancient tribes that lived in the land of Israel 3,000 years ago.” They have believed for centuries that their ancestors left an ancient city called Sena, sailed along the eastern coast of Africa, and landed near their present homeland. Parfitt was able to establish the existence of a contemporary city called Sena in the Hadramaut Valley of present-day Yemen. Many Lemba clan names echo, and some are identical to, tribal names among the present inhabitants of Sena.

Parfitt compared DNA samples from the Lemba, including their priestly class, with samples from Yemeni Arabs and from Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, including Cohanim or members of the Jewish priestly class. They discovered an astonishing correspondence. In an interview with NOVA for a PBS special called “Lost Tribes of Israel,” Dr. David Goldstein of the University of London states, “The first striking thing about the Y chromosomes of the Lemba is that you find this particular chromosomal type [Cohen modal haplotype] that is similar to what you see in major Jewish populations. Something just under one out of every ten Lemba that we looked at had this particular Y-chromosomal type that appears to be a signature of Jewish ancestry. Perhaps even more striking is the fact that this Cohen genetic signature is strongly associated with a particular clan in the Lemba.”

Some geneticists believe the Cohen modal haplotype can be traced back 3,000 years to the time of Moses. What Parfitt and his associates established, therefore, is that the Lemba are literal descendents of ancient Israelites and that some of them are legitimate heirs of the priestly line.

THE MORMON PRIESTHOOD BAN

W hat does such a finding imply for Latter-day Saints? For one thing, it suggests that had Lembas been converted to the LDS Church while priesthood ordination was being de-
priesthood and that the descendents of at
least one black priesthood holder, Elijah
Abel, continued to be ordained after the ex-
odus to the Great Basin.10 We also know that
under Brigham Young’s leadership, blacks
were not only denied the priesthood (with
the exception noted above) but were seen as
a fallen race, cursed for ambivalence or lack of
valiency in the preexistence and destined
to come into mortality through the cursed
lineage of Cain and Ham. The teachings of
nineteenth-century prophets on this subject,
while consistent with the prevailing cultural
views of the time, are abhorrent to contem-
porary hearts and minds. But many such sen-
timents, although milder in tone and expres-
sion, are found in the statements of
Church leaders well past the mid-twentieth
century and thus long after the liberating in-
fluence of the civil rights movement.

Due primarily to the groundbreaking re-
search of such scholars as Lester Bush, Newell
Brighthouse, and Armand Mauss, as well as the
more popular writings of Darius Gray,
Margaret Blair Young, and Darron Smith,11
among others, it now seems clear that the
Church’s denial of priesthood ordination to
blacks was based not on scripture or revela-
tion but on deeply entrenched racist trad-
tions that flourished in Europe after the
fifteenth century and came to the New World
beginning in the seventeenth century. Two
new scholarly studies, David M. Goldenberg’s
The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and Stephen R.
Haynes’s Noah’s Curse: The Biblical
Justification of American Slavery explore, re-
spectively, the evolution of the tradition of
the curse of Cain or Ham and the justification for
American enslavement of black Africans.12
Both offer convincing evidence that all ideas
relating to the placement of blacks in an infe-
rior or cursed position are based on misinter-
pretation of language, misreadings of
scripture, and misanthropic impulses towards
blacks. Ideas for which Mormons and others
have claimed to have a basis in antiquity are
in fact rather modern inventions.13

In his seminal study, “Mormonism’s Negro
Doctrine: An Historical Overview,”14 Lester
Bush challenged the doctrinal foundation on
which the denial of priesthood ordination to
blacks was based. A consensus that has been
building since Bush’s article appeared is that
the teaching was based not on revelation but
rather on myth and tradition. As Armand
Mauss explains, “The full-fledged racialist
framework of modern Mormonism . . . was a
product not of any particular revelation but
of a social and intellectual movement among
some of Mormonism’s most powerful and ar-
ticulate leaders.”15 Mauss argues that the
twin influences of “British Israelism and
Anglo-Saxon triumphalism” prohibited the
full and equal embrace of all God’s children
for more than a century. So influential were
these beliefs that they overpowered the egal-
tarianism of the New Testament and the
Book of Mormon, as summarized in the
scripture: the Lord “inviteth . . . all to come
unto him and partake of his goodness; and
he denieth none that come unto him, black
dreaded, and without sex, bond and free, male and female”
(2 Nephi 26:33).

While many ideas about blacks and the
priesthood are no longer part of official
Mormon teaching, most have never been of-
icially renounced or repudiated. Darron
Smith observes that the change in policy “did
very little to disrupt the multiple discourses
that had fostered the policy in the first
place.”16 The fact that racist statements sup-
porting the idea of black curse and priest-
hood denial continue to appear in books by
General Authorities indicates that the
Church itself has unfinished business in
these matters. As Mauss argues, “As long as
these doctrines continue to appear in succes-
se reprints of authoritative books and are
freely circulated at the Mormon grass-
roots, they will continue to rankle many of
the black Saints,”17 and, I add, many white
Saints as well.

Perhaps there is no more striking example
than the teachings of Apostle Bruce R.
McConkie, who echoed and reinforced the
teachings of previous Church leaders, in-
cluding especially his father-in-law, Joseph
Fielding Smith. In an exhaustive study of
the background for the references to race,
slavery, priesthood denial, and a divine curse
on blacks in McConkie’s Mormon
Doctrine and other books, Stirling Adams dem-
onstrates persuasively that Elder McConkie’s
 teachings were based on a faulty reading of
scripture, a perpetuation of misconceptions
by earlier Church leaders, and folkloric tradi-
tions that emerged as European and
American justifications for slavery.18

Following the rescinding of the practice of
priesthood denial, Elder McConkie stated,
“Forget everything that I have said, or what
President Brigham Young or President
George Q. Cannon or whosoever has said in
days past that is contrary to the present
revelation. We spoke with a limited under-
standing and without the light and knowledge that
now has come into the world” (emphasis in orig-
inal).19 In the same address, speaking about
the affirmation in the Book of Mormon, “all
are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33), Elder
McConkie added:

These words have now taken on a
new meaning. We have caught a
new vision of their true signifi-
cance. This also applies to a great
number of other passages in the
revelations. Since the Lord gave
this revelation on the priesthood,
our understanding of many pas-
sages has expanded. Many of us
never imagined or supposed that
they had the extensive and broad
meaning that they do have.

A general authority friend told me that when
he heard Elder McConkie repeat this state-
ment in his presence, he replied, “Bruce, I
have been telling you what these words really
mean for years.”

Although McConkie revised and toned
down some of the racist language in Mormon
Doctrine following the 1978 policy change,
much continues to appear in subsequent
reprintings. In a synoptic table comparing
the 1958, 1966, and 1979 editions of
Mormon Doctrine, Stirling Adams reveals that
McConkie retained the essence of many
teachings from his earlier editions, including
the relationship of preexistence to race, the
curse of Cain/Ham/Caanan, the association
of a black skin with being cursed, and the
correctness of denying priesthood ordination
to blacks before 1978.

Perhaps the most pernicious idea about
the unworthiness of blacks to hold the priest-
hood was the belief that only one drop of
black African blood was sufficient to cancel
thousands of drops of Caucasian or other
blood, including supposedly royal Israelite
blood. If one found any trace of black African
lineage in one’s genealogy, one was disquali-
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lineage in one’s genealogy, one was disquali-
fied from holding the priesthood or receiving
times and strongly discouraged it in modern times. According to Apostle Mark E. Peterson, who was particularly passionate about interracial marriage:

If I were to marry a Negro woman and have children by her, my children would be cursed as to the Priesthood. Do I want my children cursed as to the Priesthood? If there is one drop of Negro blood in my children, as I have read to you, they receive the curse. There isn’t any argument, therefore, as to inter-marriage with the Negro, is there?20

There is no way to calculate the extent of personal suffering black Latter-day Saints endured from the Mormons’ entry into the Great Basin until the change in policy in 1978. Nor is it possible to calculate the advantages black membership might have meant to the Church had there been no exclusion. It is also impossible to calculate how the denial of priesthood to blacks affected the Church’s missionary effort, and, worse, kept many blacks from enjoying the blessings of the gospel. As Armand Mauss argues, the effect of the denial “was to delay for generations the extension of the powerful Mormon missionary program to a segment of humanity that it might have benefited greatly.”21

As a young missionary, I had this thought as I unknowingly knocked on the door of a black family in Kankakee, Illinois. Our instructions at the time were to be friendly but not to teach them. It saddened me that I was unable to share the liberating teachings of the restored gospel with this family.

Unfortunately, the effects of our practice are still being felt. As Mauss argues, the residue of that “contradictory and confusing legacy of racist religious folklore hangs like a cloud over LDS relationships with American blacks, even those who have joined the church.”22 Currently, baptism and retention rates of African-Americans are among the lowest for any minority population proselytized by the Church.

**TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by the South African government to resolve issues related to racial conflict in that country has produced remarkable results, especially in healing the wounds caused by apartheid in all its official and unofficial manifestations. And what has happened in South Africa has spread its healing influence to other parts of the world where ethnic, racial, and religious conflict have destroyed communities and divided nations.

In his *No Future without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, talks about the courage and love that were necessary for the Commission to do its work. He says, “There is a movement, not easily discernable, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility, and disharmony.”23 That movement, Tutu argues, requires both the seeking of forgiveness from those responsible for the wrong and the willingness to forgive on behalf of those who have been wronged. This movement worked in South Africa because, as Tutu says,

Our leaders were ready . . . to say they were willing to walk the path of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation with all the hazards that lay along the way . . . It is crucial, when a relationship has been damaged or when a potential relationship has been made impossible, that the perpetrator should acknowledge the truth and be ready and willing to apologize.24

Tutu argues against what he calls “cheap reconciliation” which, like cheap grace, has no lasting influence: “True reconciliation is not cheap. It cost God the death of His only begotten Son. Forgiving and being reconciled are not pretending that things are other than they are.” Obviously, reconciliation is more complicated when those needing to ask for forgiveness may not have been guilty of the transgressions themselves but may be the present representatives of those persons, policies, and institutions responsible for the wrongs. Nevertheless, if true healing is ever to take place, the representatives must take the risk. As Tutu argues,

True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking, but in the end, it is worthwhile, because in the end, dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can only bring spurious healing.25

In *All Abraham’s Children*, Mauss suggests that within the past few years, the Church considered but then backed away from making a formal institutional repudiation of past racist teachings and practices.26 If true, this is most unfortunate since such repudiation would seem necessary to begin the process of healing the spiritual and emotional wounds suffered by black Latter-day Saint victims of those teachings and practices. But the Church might also consider seeking forgiveness of those white saints who suffered institutional censure or disapproval for championing the cause of their black brothers and sisters. For many, black and white, those wounds remain more than twenty-five years after the lifting of the priesthood ban.

Each time I renew my temple recommend, I am asked if there has been any past sin or misdeed that has not been resolved with an appropriate priesthood authority. Personally, I have benefited from such an introspective review of my behavior. As a bishop, I also found this review a constructive step in helping members of my congregation complete the process of repentance since it gave them an opportunity to relieve themselves of burdens they had carried, often for years. It is a sensible way to wipe the slate clean and begin anew.

If such a practice is constructive and healing for individual members, wouldn’t it also be constructive and healing for the Church itself? It seems even more compelling for Church leaders to resolve matters surrounding this issue, especially since the failure to repudiate past teachings and practices that have harmed both individuals and the Church continues to harm individual saints, especially our black brothers and sisters, and to have a negative impact on the Church’s mission.

As a bishop, I counseled at times with people who not only had not resolved past sins and mistakes but who also believed that if enough time passed, they would not need to seek formal forgiveness nor make formal restitution for their actions. Sometimes they felt that if they just began acting in ways opposite to their old pattern, this would be sufficient to resolve the matter. But it didn’t work that way. And I don’t think it works that way for institutions either.

Since 1978, the Church has taken a number of steps to distance itself from past teachings and practices relating to blacks. One recent example is the Church’s ambitious cataloging of the records of nearly half a million black depositors to the Freedman’s Savings & Trust Co., a banking firm into which many blacks deposited their savings after the Civil War. This database provides a treasure trove of genealogical information on American blacks. As the Deseret News reports, this is “the largest searchable database of genealogical information available on African-Americans.”27

During a recent celebration of Black History month in Utah, the Church took the additional step of providing free workshops...
on the use of the database and free copies of the database CD-ROM. In February 2004, the Church, along with two black genealogical societies, co-sponsored the African-American Family History Conference in Los Angeles. Marvin Perkins, director of African-American relations for the Church’s Los Angeles Public Affairs Council, stated, “In order for families to be together forever, you need to know who they are.”

Ironically, the same Church whose previous policies had prevented black families from being together in the eternities, and whose teachings meant serious consequences for those with black ancestors, is now assisting blacks in tracing their roots to those same ancestors.

One result of the Church’s not taking steps toward truth and reconciliation is that many members continue to harbor racist folklore and tradition. The effect of this lack of resolution is that these teachings continue to influence Mormon cultural attitudes and behavior. For example, the Church recently gave its employees, including BYU and CES faculty, a special edition of John Taylor’s *The Gospel Kingdom*, which contains the following quotation: “And after the flood we are told that the curse that had been pronounced upon Cain was continued through Ham’s wife, as he had married a wife of that seed. And why did it pass through the flood? Because it was necessary that the Devil should have a representation upon the earth as well as God . . .”

This egregiously racist statement is also found in the 1998 *CES Supplement* distributed to CES faculty attending a Church history seminar at BYU. I suspect that such an incident is the result of thoughtlessness and insensitivity rather than intent, nevertheless, imagine how such an offensive expression might sound to the ears of our black brothers and sisters! It seems positively alien to the generous-hearted pluralism expressed during the past decade by President Gordon B. Hinckley.

A knowledgeable BYU faculty member reports that such ideas as blacks lacking valiancy in the preexistence, dark skin being the mark of Cain, and cursed lineage continue to be taught in some religion courses at BYU as well as in institute and seminary classes and in Sunday School and other classes in various parts of the Church. In addition, black Latter-day Saints continue to be subject to humiliating racist treatment. Recent reliable reports of two black sisters serving in temples in the Salt Lake area include one overhearing in reference to their presence, “What’s that N____ doing here?” Another overheard a comment, “I can’t believe they have a N____ woman working in the temple.”

What is particularly puzzling about the Church’s failure to resolve this issue is that the Church itself has been the beneficiary of generous apologies or requests for forgiveness from others. For example, in the spirit of reconciliation, the Illinois state legislature recently issued a formal resolution apologizing to the Church for acts committed against the Saints by its citizens more than a hundred and fifty years ago. President James E. Faust praised the resolution as a “message of respect and reconciliation” that will “long live in the hearts of this people.” Such an apology was unexpected made it even more significant.

In an article in the University of Utah Chronicle (3 Aug 2004) entitled, “The Value of the Illinois Apology: History Has Shown that Compassion and Forgiveness Work Wonders,” William Pingree states, “The great value of the Illinois apology comes from the fact that the state itself recognized the wounds caused by its own actions and now seeks to reconcile itself with the church. This is an act of great courage on Illinois’ part, and the effect of such an act will also undoubtedly provide a point of healing for generations to come.” Pingree adds, “The LDS Church itself has gained a vision of the value of the role of forgiveness. Some years ago, President Gordon Hinckley met with the descendants of the Mountain Meadows Massacre on the very site and acknowledged the role of members of the church in that tragic event. He apologized for that role, returned artifacts to the families and thus started a trend for reconciliation that continues today.

Pingree concludes, “Perhaps we can take a lesson from all this. The attempts at reconciliation and healing will boldly affect the events of our future. Clearly compassion and forgiveness are some of the highest forms of human conduct.”

While realistic about the scope of the Illinois apology, an article in the Washington Post provides a powerful argument for resolving the issues relating to blacks and the priesthood: “The apology does not remove psychic scars, heal old wounds, end pain, or pay for lost lives and property. But it does recognize the humanity of those wronged and the humanity of those seeking forgiveness, and that’s a significant step away from ignorance, hate and prejudice toward tolerance and peace.” One wonders, if the Church could issue a formal apology for what a small group of its followers did at Mountain Meadows on one particular September day in 1857, might it not also consider doing so for a policy and practice that not only involved large numbers of Latter-day Saints and their leaders, but that also has negatively impacted a much larger group of people for more than 150 years?

Another recent example of how asking forgiveness for past offenses can be healing is an initiative of the Rock Canyon Assembly of God congregation in Provo. Under the direction of their pastor, Dean Jackson, the church issued a formal declaration of apology to...
members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for un-Christlike attitudes and behavior. The declaration, which was signed by 160 members of the congregation, reported that this group had first sought forgiveness from the Lord. It stated, “Having received forgiveness from God, we now ask for forgiveness from the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” A special Day of Confession held at the church was attended by several Latter-day Saints, including area and general authority Carl Bacon and author Stephen Covey. BYU religion professor Stephen Robinson said, “Dean Jackson and his congregation have shamed us. All this time we Mormons have been complaining about our treatment in America, and they... came with a confession of their wrongdoing. I am embarrassed that they had to make the first move.”

In No Future without Forgiveness, Archbishop Tutu says, “In the act of forgiveness we are declaring our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to make a new beginning on a course that will be different from the one that caused us the wrong. We are saying here is a chance to make a new beginning. It is an act of faith that the wrongdoer can change.”

I firmly believe that the future of the Church’s relationship with not only its black members but with all victims of institutional abuse or wrongs will be brighter and more in keeping with the Lord’s vision of his kingdom’s ultimate possibilities if forgiveness—both seeking and giving it with generous hearts—is central to our church life.

CONCLUSION

WHEN I was editor of Dialogue and decided to publish Lester Bush’s article on blacks and the priesthood, I invited three responses. In one, Hugh Nibley, who testified that he had received a revelation that the priesthood ban was from God, stated that acceptance of this teaching ‘provides the best possible test for our faith, our hope, and above all our charity.” It has been a test of my faith in the unassailability of the doctrinal teachings of the Church; it is a test of my hope that we can avoid such problems in the future; and it is a test of my charity for the prophets and apostles of the Church who defended a teaching that harmed so many people, black and white, for so many years and who have yet to formally repudiate those teachings and seek forgiveness from those whom these teachings and practices offended.

Although mindful of the challenges, I am on the way toward passing these tests. While I am more skeptical about claims of doctrinal purity, I continue to have faith that my leaders seek to do right and are motivated by the teachings of Christ. While I am aware that Church leaders might promulgate teachings that could affect people negatively, I remain hopeful about the future of the Church and its pivotal place in the unfolding of the Lord’s plan for all of his children. And I continue to love, sustain, and support the leaders of the Church even though I believe they were in error on this matter. My relationship to the Church, like that of others, will continue to involve grappling “with the uneasy balance and uncomfortable mixture of the divine, the practical, the corporate, the temporal, and the humanness of the Church.”

I fully realize that it is not my role to call the Church nor its leaders to repentance, and that is not my intention here. Nevertheless, the Church belongs to all members, not just to General Authorities, and all of us, perhaps especially those endowed in the temple, have a special covenantal stewardship for the welfare of the Church—a responsibility, as Eugene England put it, to “speak the truth with love.” Until the Church makes a clear, clean break from its racist teachings and practices instead of ambiguously distancing itself from them, racism will continue its ugly and corrosive effect on the social and spiritual fabric of the Church.

Many years ago, Karl Keller published an essay in Dialogue titled, “Every Soul Has Its South.” In speaking of his decision as a branch president to go to the South and participate in the civil rights movement, Karl wrote, “Involvedness is after all the only dialogue a man has with God, action the only angel, risk the only kingdom.” Years later in an essay I wrote on apartheid in South Africa entitled “Every Soul Has Its South Africa,” I quoted a passage from Alan Paton’s moving novel, Cry, the Beloved Country, on the love and courage required for true reconciliation and healing between the races: “Cry, the beloved country, these things are not yet at an end.”

1. For a full discussion of this subject, see the articles in The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 12, no. 1 (2003), SUNSTONE, March 2004; Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003); and the website for FAIR which lists presentations on this subject at various FAIR conferences and links to other papers (www.fairlds.org/apol/bom/bom01.html).


3. Hillel Halkin, Across the Sabbath River (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); Rivka Gonen, To the Ends of the Earth: The Quest for the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2002).


8. According to Stirling Adams, this belief, called “hypodescent,” was common during the early years of the Restoration. See his unpublished “Race-based teachings in Mormon Doctrine after 1978,” page 10, typescript in my possession.

9. There is some uncertainty about whether the prophet actually ordained Elijah Abel a seventy: but he did sign the ordination certificate. See Eunice Kennedy, My Testimony of the Latter-day Work, 1885, unpublished ms, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah. Elijah Abel was ordained an elder on 3 March 1836 and a seventy on 20 December 1836, the latter ordination being renewed on 4 April 1841. Abel was called to serve a mission for the Church in Canada in 1883. He returned home sick the following year and died Christmas day, 1884. Personal correspondence from Darius Gray, 7 September 2004; see also Lester Bush, Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview; Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 8,
no. 1 (Spring 1973): 11–68.

10. Elijah Abel’s son, Enoch, was ordained an elder 10 November 1900. Enoch’s son, Elijah, was ordained a deacon sometime before 1925, ordained a priest 5 July 1934, and ordained an elder 29 September 1935. Ironically, some of Abel’s descendents passed over the color line, and at least one contemporary descendant was unaware of her heritage until recently. See Donna Ables-Smith’s online review of Margaret Blair Young and Darius Gray’s book series, *Standing on the Promises*, pages 3–5.


13. Sirling Adams has written an intelligent, thorough review of both books. Unpublished manuscript in my possession.


15. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 4. Some, including General Authorities, continue to believe that the denial of priesthood ordination to blacks was based on revelation. In speaking at a special dedicatory service in honor of Elijah Abel, Elder Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve stated, “We don’t know all the reasons why the Lord does what he does. . . . It’s difficult to know why all things happen. I’m perfectly content to believe the Lord is in control.” Quoted in Lynn Arave, “Monument in SL Erected in Honor of Black Pioneer,” *Deseret News*, 29 September 2002.


20. “Race Problems—As They Affect the Church,” address given by Mark E. Peterson at BYU, 27 August 1954, LDS Church archives.


22. Ibid.


24. Ibid, 269.


33. washingtontimes.com/upi-breaking/200404 408-114729-9042r.htm; accessed 3 August 2004.


35. Ibid., 71.


“Honey, quick—get the video camera!”
EASY COME, EASY GO: THOUGHTS ON GAINING AND LOSING A TESTIMONY

By D. Jeff Burton

TESTIMONY BEARING IS a regular practice at all levels of the church. There is also a general expectation that church members have or will gain a testimony. This tradition and expectation can be troublesome for many Borderlanders.

A typical shared testimony at the ward level goes something like this: “I testify/know/am certain the Book of Mormon is true. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. I know that this is the one and only true Book of Mormon:” McMullin, a testimony of Christ can come in the past 175 years.

I call this type of testimony a “manifestation-based” testimony.

Others who respond to me (especially those who feel compelled to share with me how I might gain my own witness) will often quote or allude to Moroni’s promise from the Book of Mormon:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moroni 10:4)

I call this type of testimony a “manifestation-based” testimony.

A third method for gaining a testimony is less discussed, for it is a more time-consuming and difficult path, but it was presented at the April 2004 General Conference by Bishop Keith B. McMullin of the Church’s Presiding Bishopric. According to Bishop McMullin, a testimony of Christ can come through a person’s making four distinct efforts: (1) having the desire, (2) studying, (3) living Christ’s teachings, and (4) offering prayer. I call this type of testimony a “life-tested” testimony.

1. The member easily (after a few tries or within a relatively short time) receives the “feeling” and now has a testimony.
2. The member doesn’t receive a “feeling,” and this “no feeling” quandary leads inevitably to one or more of the following results:
   a. The member, often after much effort and trial, eventually gets the “feeling” and is relieved.
   b. Despite strenuous attempts, the member never gets the “feeling” and, because of various pressures, opts to say nothing (becomes a “closet doubter”), pretends as if he or she has a testimony, or even lies about it. “Yes, I have a testimony,” this member will say when asked, e.g., in the temple recommend interview. (The pressures to be part of the group can be very high.)
   c. The member never receives the “feeling” and develops emotional problems, including feelings of alienation, anger, and confusion. This often leads to feelings of guilt (“I must be an unrepentant sinner”); denial (“Of course, I believe,” or “It’s just a test,” or “I must stop thinking this way”); shame (“What kind of a person must I be?”); anger (“Why me?”); and loneliness and estrangement (“I’m the only one with this problem,” or “No one else understands,” or “God must hate me”).
   d. The member never gets the “feeling” but opts to accept Church teachings through faith. (This is my own approach and one I urge others to try if this is an option for them.)
   e. The member leaves church activity, not feeling as if (or not being treated as if) he or she is “one with the Saints.” Very likely, many, many people have had this outcome in the past 175 years.
3. The member receives a “feeling” but at some future time loses the feeling-based testimony.
4. The member receives a “feeling” but soon after begins to wonder, “Was the feeling
While one is on the path to a “life-tested” testimony, it is perfectly acceptable to walk in faith, to “hang in there” during the proving processes.

from God? I’ve had people tell me, “I get the exact same feeling when I listen to The Sound of Music or see the American flag. So I’m really wondering now…” This outcome seems to be experienced most often by scientists, intellectuals, skeptics, and others who have been taught to think critically.

I’ve seen each of these last three “feeling” scenarios played out in the lives of many members. Unfortunately, nothing of real worth in life comes easily. Something as precious as a testimony cannot truly be gained through one or two prayers and the presence of a “feeling.” Feeling-based testimonies are too easily lost when members read non-correlated histories, have conflicts with other members of their congregation, or encounter instances when the “gospel plan” fails to work in their lives.

I and others have tried to shepherd folks with feeling-based testimonies during their testimony crises. (See, for instance, my book, For Those Who Wonder: Managing Religious Doubts and Questions.) As with any loss, when a loss of testimony occurs suddenly, it takes a while to gain some perspective and move on with life.

The “manifestation-based” testimony. Outcomes for those whose testimonies are gained through “manifestation” are similar to the outcomes for those with a feeling-based testimony. Many active members have had a “manifestation” of some type. Those having trouble gaining a testimony often interpret the lack of manifestation as meaning that they are not “sincere” enough, or don’t have “real intent,” or lack “faith in Christ.” Much like a failure to receive a “feeling,” a failure to receive a manifestation can lead to various emotional dilemmas.

Another problem arises in the wide range of events that might be considered a “manifestation.” For some, a manifestation might be an answer to a prayer about school or a job, a healing blessing, a coincidence that saved a life, and so forth. One woman told me her testimony manifestation was a strange noise she heard in the temple one day; it was enough to convince her of the truthfulness of the proposition she was pondering. Others find their manifestation in unusual synchronicities. One man related to me the story of his “manifestation”: wondering about his distant mother and then, on that very day, getting a letter from her. Others I have known use plumb bobs to receive answers or manifestations of various kinds. Clearly, one member’s “manifestation” is another’s foolishness.

Among the many I’ve asked, no one has related a vision nor a direct, revelatory “manifestation.”

The “life-tested” testimony. As you may already have inferred from my foregoing critiques, I believe the life-tested testimony is the surest way of coming to “know” that any proposition or claim is correct or right. Living a principle or acting on a propositional claim is similar to how one employs the scientific method—we test the proposition to see if it works under various conditions or if it is falsifiable. With each experimentation, each test, we gain or lose confidence in the truth or usefulness of the proposition. In a gospel context, those with “tested” testimonies are typically better grounded. Like the wise persons in Jesus’s analogy about those who have built their homes on a foundation of rock, people with life-tested testimonies have both heard and acted upon the principles (see Luke 6:46–49). They have applied their faith and are thus able to deal with anti-Mormon literature or more complex historical analyses that we are shielded from in regular church settings, as well as with personality conflicts in church contexts and other setbacks.

In his conference talk on the four-step method, Bishop McMullin suggested that a testimony of Christ is available to everyone. Although he didn’t strongly emphasize the effort required to gain a testimony via the steps he outlined, I think we can all agree that we cannot live Christ’s gospel principles (honesty, unselfishness, love, forgiveness) for fewer than months or years to achieve the experience necessary to firmly conclude that Christ-centered living and behavior is “right.” One must work to get a testimony of Christ.

Although Bishop McMullin didn’t state this directly, I think it is useful to remember that while one is on the path to a “life-tested” testimony, it is perfectly acceptable to walk in faith, to “hang in there” during the proving processes.

NOTES
1. In previous columns, I have introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief, and testimony; a different view of LDS history; some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 “acceptability” criteria. See Figure 1.
2. The wording in this verse is interesting: “ask God…if these things are not true…” (my emphasis). I’ve had people tell me, “Yes, the truth of it was manifest to me—it is not true.”
3. In a future column, I may describe testimonies borne at general conference and how they differ from those heard at the local level.
4. Bishop McMullin’s discussion was limited to gaining a testimony of Christ, but others have described similar methods for those who wish to gain a testimony of any gospel principle, such as the Word of Wisdom, fasting, or paying tithes.
5. Years ago, the renowned counselor Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified five phases people will often pass through when a major loss occurs. These are: (1) shock and denial, (2) anger, (3) negotiation, (4) depression and sadness, and (5) acceptance of the reality of the situation. Generally, the “crisis stage” seems to last about six to eight weeks before the person begins to move on through the later phases. Many members who experience a loss of belief or testimony (or the loss of the expectation of a testimony) seem to follow this pattern quite closely. Once they reach the acceptance phase (which can take months and, in some cases, years) they are able to deal effectively with the situation, often finding healthy, creative, affirming ways to manage their faith and relationship with the church that had once nurtured them. The big questions for members in the crisis stages are: “How do I get on with the process of adaptation and healing?” and “What do I do about my changed perspectives once I achieve acceptance?” I will present some possible “What to do?” answers in a future column.
6. Faith, as I define it, is the willingness to accept a proposition in the absence of knowledge and act as if it were true. See my column, “Can a ‘Faith-Based’ Personal Religion Find a Home in a ‘Testimony-Based’ Church?” (SUNSTONE, October 2003, 64–67), in which I discuss terms and definitions.
The 2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium

IMAGES FROM A SYMPOSIUM

The 2004 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, held 11-14 August at the Sheraton City Centre Hotel, offered attendees an especially enriching buffet. Fitting this year’s special emphasis on the divine feminine, the Wednesday evening plenary session featured Smith-Pettit lecturer Margaret Starbird, author of several books on Mary Magdalene and women’s spirituality. Then Thursday through Saturday materialized in their usual form—friends greeting, speakers sharing, hearts and minds soaring.

Next year’s symposium will be held at the same location, though two weeks earlier than usual. Mark your calendars, update your PDA’s, get a tattoo if you must, but remember: 2005 SALT LAKE SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUM, 27–30 JULY.

Many thanks to our talented photographers, Steve Mayfield and Emily Hatch!
KUTV reporter Rod Decker interviews symposium attendees

Is Robert Kirby amused, or is it something else?

Laura Bush speaks on the messages about sexuality Mormon women receive

Jan Shipps smiles while other panelists “Excavate Mormon Pasts.”

Todd Compton waits for his session to begin.

See, young people really are interested in Sunstone!

Kevin Barney speaks on the Book of Mormon during the Thursday evening plenary session.

Lorie Winder Stromberg chats with a friend between sessions.
DIETER F. UCHTDORF, DAVID A. BEDNAR CALLED AS APOSTLES

TWO LDS LEADERS with broad managerial experience inside and outside the Church have been called as junior members of the Quorum of the Twelve, filling the vacancies left by the passing of Elders Neal A. Maxwell and David B. Haight (see In Memoriam reflections, pp. 10–11).

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, 63, was born in Czechoslovakia in 1940. His family joined the LDS Church in Zwickau, of the former German Democratic Republic, in 1947.

Uchtdorf studied engineering, business administration, and international management. He joined the German Air Force and received pilot training in the U.S., earning his wings as a jet fighter pilot in 1962. He later joined Lufthansa Airlines as a pilot and held a number of executive positions in the company, including senior vice president of flight operations and chief pilot. In 1994, he was called to the Second Quorum of the Seventy.

Uchtdorf is one of eleven apostles in Church history born outside the U.S. and one of only three who grew up speaking a language other than English (Anthon H. Lund grew up speaking Danish, and John A. Widtsoe, Norwegian).

“This is not an American church,” Uchtdorf said during a press conference following the announcement of his call. “It is the Church of Jesus Christ.”

Elder David A. Bednar was born in San Leandro, California, in 1952. After receiving a Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Purdue University in 1980, Bednar taught management and business administration at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville and later at Texas Tech University. Since July 1997, he had been serving as president of Ricks College, where he guided the school’s transition into a four-year university, known today as BYU-Idaho. He is the co-author of two books on organizational behavior.

J. Bonner Ritchie, a Sunstone board member, professor emeritus of organizational behavior at BYU, and currently a scholar-in-residence at Utah Valley State College, calls Bednar “a very astute administrator” and “a very thoughtful, careful scholar.” He adds, “He’s incredibly likable, not an ideologue, very pragmatic. He crosses boundaries very well.”

Bednar, 52, is, by more than a decade, the youngest member of the current Quorum of the Twelve.

TABERNACLE TO GET SEISMIC RETROFIT

“BUILDINGS, LIKE MEN, get old,” said President Gordon B. Hinckley as he announced plans for extensive renovations to the historic Mormon Tabernacle. The edifice will be closed until mid-2006 as it undergoes a seismic upgrade. “I don’t want anything done here that will destroy the historical aspect of this rare gem of architecture,” Hinckley added. Some of the most peculiar features, such as the wooden pegs and rawhide straps will be retained, as well as the horse and cattle hair that is mixed into the original roof plaster.

During the renovation, dressing rooms, restrooms, and a library will be added to support the 350-voice Mormon Tabernacle Choir, whose Sunday morning television and radio broadcasts originate from the Tabernacle. Until the Tabernacle reopens, the choir will broadcast from the Conference Center.

Presiding Bishop H. David Burton said that no decisions have been made regarding Tabernacle seating, currently consisting of wooden benches that offer congregants little leg room. The Tabernacle currently seats 4,500, but changes under consideration could eliminate as many as 1,000 seats.

It is believed that Brigham Young conceived the idea for the Tabernacle building while eating a hard-boiled egg, which he cut through end-wise and then set up on toothpicks. Master architect Frank Lloyd Wright called the Tabernacle “one of the architectural masterpieces of the country and perhaps the world.”

ELDER PERRY TO PRESIDE IN EUROPE

THE FIRST PRESIDENCY announced that Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles will serve as president of the Europe Central Area. Elder Perry is the third apostle to be assigned as area president and sent outside the U.S. Elders Dallin H. Oaks and Jeffrey R. Holland recently completed similar assignments in the Philippines and Chile, respectively.

This assignment has led some observers to speculate that Perry’s appointment could be related to his highly unusual and informal talk at the Idaho Kuna Stake conference last March. During his remarks, Elder Perry reflected on the varied personalities of the Church’s apostles, reportedly joking that although President Boyd K. Packer is a very loving man, Elder Perry has taken upon himself to kick President Packer in the shins on those occasions when Packer becomes irate (see SUNSTONE, May 2004, pp. 76–77).

While Elders Oaks and Holland had been assigned to developing countries where the Church is experiencing spectacular growth, Elder Perry was assigned to Europe, where Church growth is comparatively insignificant. Elders Oaks and Holland are relatively junior apostles, occupying (until recently) positions six and eleven in the Quorum; Elder Perry is the most senior member of the Quorum after President Packer.
**People**

**Deceased.** WILLIAM BENNION (WILL) QUIST, age 42, LDS bookseller and Sunstone volunteer, on 4 October from brain tumors. After a mission to Coventry, England, Will enjoyed a career centered on the written word, working as an editor in the Church Education System and then as a used and rare book buyer for Benchmark Books before opening his own small bookshop, Alpha Books. For several years, Will authored the regular SUNSTONE book column, “Recently Released,” and was a stalwart Sunstone volunteer until just this past year due to rapidly deteriorating health. Will is the son of Bill Quist and SUNSTONE associate editor and office manager, Carol Quist. Will and Elsa Quist have six children.

**Deceased.** CHRIS KEMP, age 45, on 27 July, after living with colon cancer for more than four years. Chris grew up and lived most of his life in Logan, Utah. After obtaining an MBA from Northeastern University, Chris worked in finance and marketing for several corporations. A long-time SUNSTONE reader, after moving to Ogden Chris became a wonderful, dependable Sunstone volunteer, helping out whenever we called. A regular symposium attendee, in 2002 he was finally persuaded to speak, giving a very moving response to the paper, “The Eternal Value of Hardship and Tragedy: Another Take on Why God Lets Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Chris is survived by his wife, Kimberly, and their four daughters.

**Deceased.** ARTHUR KANE, age 55, bass player for the influential 1970s punk rock band the New York Dolls, in Los Angeles, of leukemia. After years living in the fast lane, Kane converted to Mormonism and spent the final years of his life doing genealogy work at his stake’s family history center.

**Deceased.** NORMA OLSEN NICHOLS, age 94, the person behind the “Choose the Right” motto and ring. A member of the general Primary Board from 1956 to 1970, Nichols was assigned to head and ring. A member of the general Primary Board and director of the Church’s Family and Church History Department. Elder Jensen endeared himself to many Latter-day Saints when, in a candid 1998 interview with the Salt Lake Tribune, he forthrightly declared that, contrary to the belief of some, it is possible to be both a faithful Mormon and a Democrat.

**Vindicated.** CHRISTINA AXSON-FLYNN, 24, the LDS student who in January 2000 sued the University of Utah and its faculty in the Actor Training Program. Axson-Flynn alleged her rights to free speech and free exercise of religion were violated when she was forced to use the F-word and take the Lord’s name in vain during an in-class exercise. The university will reimburse Axson-Flynn for tuition and fees paid during the 1998–99 academic year and, through the state’s risk management office, will pay her attorneys’ fees of approximately $250,000. Perhaps more important, as part of the settlement the University of Utah has instituted an Accommodations Committee charged with developing a policy to address religious conflicts.

**Awarded.** Salt Lake Tribune reporter PEGGY FLETCHER STACK, the Cornell Award for Excellence in Religion Reporting, by the Religion Newswriters Association, in Washington D.C. Stack was the editor of SUNSTONE magazine from 1980 to 1986.

**Eliminated.** BRETT DEPUE, after a short stint on Bravo Channel’s reality show Manhunt: The Search for America’s Most Gorgeous Model. Depue, whose show bio claims he had “served as a Mormon elder for five years, and danced for Chippendales for a year” was one of twenty dreamboats in the competition but was eliminated during the show’s second week.

**Jailed.** Returned missionary MARK HACKING, after confessing to killing his wife Lori and throwing her body into a dumpster near their Salt Lake City apartment. Mark served a mission in Winnipeg, Canada, and married Lori in the Bountiful Temple. Before Mark’s confession, thousands of Mormon volunteers, including LDS missionaries, participated in search parties organized from an LDS chapel. Lori’s disappearance has led to Salt Lake City’s receiving media attention it had not seen since the 2002 abduction of Elizabeth Smart.

**Hitched.** TRACIE LAMB AND G. BRUCE SMITH. After noticing Tracie at the 2002 Northwest Sunstone symposium, where Tracie read excerpts from a book she was editing, Bruce eagerly awaited the 2003 symposium, hoping Tracie would also attend. They began talking in Molly Bennion’s kitchen and haven’t stopped since, becoming engaged in December 2003 and married 19 March 2004. A family physician, Bruce has four children, Leah, David, Kathryn, and Rachel. Tracie, who left community college teaching to focus on family, has two daughters, Sarah, 13, and Emily, now 16, who gave Tracie dating tips, like, “Mom, don’t blow it. I don’t think you’re going to find another guy.” Following Todd Compton and Laura Hansen, Bruce and Tracie are the second couple SUNSTONE knows whose relationship began at a Sunstone symposium.

**Named.** ELDER MARLIN K. JENSEN to succeed Elder Todd Christofferson as the executive director of the Church’s Family and Church History Department.

**People.**
FIVE MONTHS AFTER several U.S. cities began issuing marriage licenses to gay couples, the First Presidency issued a one-sentence “statement of principle” stating that the LDS Church “favors a constitutional amendment preserving marriage as the lawful union of a man and a woman.” The First Presidency statement coincided not only with the push for such an amendment in the Senate, but also with campaigns to place defense-of-marriage amendments in ten state constitutions, including Utah’s. Nevertheless, the First Presidency prefaced the 7 July statement by saying that “it is not an endorsement of any specific amendment.” On 14 July, the Senate failed to produce the necessary votes to initiate debate on the matter.

In a second statement issued 19 October, this time just two weeks before the 2 November elections, the First Presidency declared that the Church “favors measures that define marriage as the union of a man and a woman and that do not confer legal status on any other sexual relationship. . . . We realize there may be great loneliness in [the lives of gays and lesbians], but there must also be recognition of what is right before the Lord.”

On 22 June, a congressional hearing on the issue put the two most powerful LDS politicians, Utah Senator Orrin Hatch and Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, on the same side of the aisle. In a perhaps somewhat startling move for a Latter-day Saint, Romney cited Utah’s territorial battle over polygamy as an example of when federal intervention in state marriage policy was warranted and necessary: “There was, a long time ago, a state that considered the practice of polygamy [legal], and as I recall, the federal government correctly stepped in and said, ‘This is not something the state should decide.’ . . . We have a federal view on marriage. This should not be left to an individual state.”

The Massachusetts Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in Romney’s state last May, prompting President George W. Bush to ask the U.S. Congress for a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. LDS Senator Orrin Hatch, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, supports the initiative. “Absent of a constitutional amendment, this issue will be resolved by the United States Supreme Court, and many believe it will likely be resolved in favor of same-sex marriage,” said Hatch.

On 13 June, a coalition of gay Mormon organizations ran a display outside the Salt Lake City Library that included illustrations of Captain Moroni, Helaman, and the 2000 stripling warriors. A caption read, “Gays and lesbians are fighting for the exact same freedoms that Captain Moroni, the Nephites, and the stripling warriors fought for.” The coalition was formed for Utah’s Gay Pride celebration and included members of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, Gamofites (Gay Mormon Fathers), LDS Reconciliation, and other groups.

Utah Attorney General, Mark Shurtleff, has publicly opposed the proposed Utah marriage amendment (Proposition 3), claiming to have alerted an “LDS official” (presumably an apostle) that he was going to do so. According to Shurtleff, the official didn’t clarify the LDS position on the matter, but the conversation made the Attorney General “comfortable in going forward” with his opposition. LDS spokesperson Dale Bills has said that “the Church has not endorsed Amendment 3” but declines to elaborate.

Utah’s amendment has been endorsed by several BYU faculty, including philosophy professor Terry Warner. “It is madness to destroy the most venerable of our civilization’s institutions just because a relative minority of intellectual faddists have taken to the notion that their social theory will work,” said Warner on 5 October during the “Families Under Fire” conference at BYU.


TWO WEEKS AFTER two national gay organizations denounced a speech by Deseret Book CEO Sheri Dew, the speech’s text was removed from the website of Meridian Magazine (www.meridianmagazine.com).

On 30 August, the Human Rights Campaign and the National Black Justice Coalition sent a letter to President George W. Bush asking him to repudiate three “inflammatory speakers” at the Republican National Convention. Dew was included in the list because she offered a prayer at the convention.

In a 28 February speech in Washington D.C., Dew expressed revulsion at the idea of gay couples raising children...
and suggested a comparison between the gay rights movement and the rise of Hitler. Said Dew, “At first it may seem a bit extreme to imply a comparison between the atrocities of Hitler and what is happening in terms of contemporary threats against the family, but maybe not” (See SUNSTONE, March 2004, p. 73).

“Mr. President, featuring individuals on the stage of your convention who compare a group of Americans to Hitler . . . is divisive and irresponsible,” says the Human Rights Campaign letter. “The American people abhor discriminatory, false, and inflammatory language against any group of Americans.”

Grassroots Coalition Sends Flowers to President Hinckley

MORE THAN 900 pink carnations were delivered 1 October to the office of President Gordon B. Hinckley. The gift was prepared by members of the Safe Space Campaign, an LDS grassroots coalition concerned with the treatment of gays and lesbians in the Church. Organizer Bridget Foster, the wife of an LDS bishop, says she has been concerned about the issue since she learned of a gay friend who committed suicide.

Kay and Ted Packard, LDS parents of a gay son, participated in a press conference held at a flower shop in Sandy. Said Kay, “I believe [the Church] can be a beacon of hope for all people, a Church that opens its doors to all as a safe space, a tolerant and embracing place, where a homosexual member’s options are not limited to eternal silence, repression, excommunication, or suicide.” Packard added: “God makes no mistakes in the creation of his children . . . . All humans are endowed with both the desire and the right to form lasting, nurturing relationships built on honesty and love.”

This is not the first time the Mormon grassroots have used flowers to send a message to the Church’s general authorities. In October 1993, shortly after the excommunication or disfellowshipping of six LDS writers and feminists, a grassroots group delivered 1,000 white roses to Church headquarters as a gesture of peace and support both of the Church and of the members who had been disciplined.

RANDOM HOUSE TO PUBLISH BOOK OF MORMON

TOUTED AS THE volume’s first commercial edition, a printing of the Book of Mormon by Doubleday, an imprint of Random House, will be in bookstores in November. The text will be printed in a single column instead of two and will exclude the cross-references of the LDS-produced edition. Priced at $24.95, Doubleday’s edition will include a reference section outlining key events, ideas, and people.

Doubleday Religion Division Vice President Michelle Rapkin says: “The Mormon faith has become one of the largest in America. We’re proud to be the first publisher to bring this vitally important work to bookstores across the country and to add it to our outstanding library of authorized religious texts.”

According to Deseret Book President Sheri Dew, an edition by a major publisher may help reach a different kind of reader. Says Dew, “For some people out there, it might cause them to pick up the book when otherwise they wouldn’t, because it looks like it’s a legitimate religious text instead of some funny book put out by some funny group in the West.”

Distribution centers will continue to sell the LDS edition for a little over $2. Even though the original text of the Book of Mormon is in public domain, the current LDS edition, which includes textual and punctuation changes, is copyrighted.

CHEROKEES HOLD CEREMONY AT MOUNTAIN MEADOWS

WITH SOME JOINING the ceremonies and others criticizing the event, a Cherokee band performed a healing ritual at Mountain Meadows on 7–11 September. Located near St. George, Utah, Mountain Meadows is the site where some 120 Arkansas emigrants were killed in 1857. Although blame was first placed upon local Indians, it was later revealed that Mormon settlers were primarily responsible for the massacre.

A 1999 forensic analysis of skull remains asserted that a few of the slaughtered emigrants had Native American characteristics, a claim that some dismiss as speculation. Terry Fancher, president of the Mountain Meadows Association, called the Cherokee ceremony insensitive and asked the band to cancel the event.

“In my heart, I know these people were of mixed Cherokee blood,” said spiritual leader Larry War Eagle Williams. “That’s why we’re here. This is not just about the Baker-Fancher families.”

BYU NEWSPAPER YANKS T-SHIRT AD

AFTER RECEIVING NUMEROUS complaints, BYU’s student newspaper, the Daily Universe, decided to pull the plug on an ad for a T-shirt featuring the humorous slogan, “I Can’t . . . I’m Mormon.” According to a story in the Deseret Morning News, many in the campus community felt the slogan implies Mormons wish they could drink, smoke, and have casual sex and the “only” thing preventing them from doing so is their re-
**Solar Flares**

*Parade float creates a pickle.* When the Holladay South Stake asked Christie Kimball to design a Pioneer Parade float with the theme “Preserving Our Ancestors,” she decided to be as literal as possible. She ended up creating a gigantic apron-clad woman standing over a pot, with two mannequins dressed in pioneer garb carefully “preserved” inside Mason jars.

According to the official description posted at www.ksl5.com, the jars represent “a family that has been forever sealed together.”

Kimball’s float was part of the Days of ’47 Parade held in Salt Lake City this past July. “The parade committee thought it might be a little morbid,” Kimball had told the Salt Lake Tribune with a chuckle. “We are still trying to convince them [to allow the float].”

The committee did allow the “preserved” adult pioneer mannequins to be displayed but kept out a little girl mannequin, who was also supposed to go inside one of the jars holding a sign that read “Don’t forget me.” According to Kimball, the little girl added to the float’s overall impact by reminding people that they need to be careful in genealogy work to not forget anyone.

Kimball’s creation is by no means the first Pioneer Day float to tap a humorous vein in Mormon themes. The 2001 parade featured two members of the South Jordan Utah Stake in futuristic attire, representing two Martian converts sitting under a hovering LDS Galactic Fleet spaceship.

Beam me up, Elder Scotty.

**Steaming up the campus.** Would you like to know in advance how steamy the romance novel you’re planning to read really is? That’s no problem for patrons of BYU’s Harold B. Lee Library. The romance novels shelf, situated in the library’s “Sampler Room,” features a ratings binder where students can check out the ranking of any romance novel in the library’s collection. The system ranks the novels from one (mild) to five (extra-steamy).

“While BYU’s selection is pretty tame compared to others, we want to help students know what’s pretty mild and what might be spicier,” says Michael Hooper, the library’s communications manager. “Those books that get a high ranking don’t get ordered by the library.”


So who’s the steamiest author of them all? According to a recent story in the Deseret News, author Susan Johnson winds up with 4.67 points.

But even if you find yourself, um, *accidentally* reading a novel a bit too steamy to handle, you can quickly turn to a set of the LDS scriptures, also featured in the Sampler Room.

Others complained that the woman modeling the T-shirt in the ad is striking a provocative pose.

The T-shirts are sold via the Internet by Chad Ramos, a student at Utah Valley State College. Ramos says the phrase, “I Can’t . . . I’m Mormon,” served him well as a young Latter-day Saint growing up in Las Vegas. “I found if I told people I didn’t drink, they didn’t know how to react,” he says. “But if I said, ‘I can’t, I’m Mormon’, they said, ‘Oh,’ and boom, it was over.”

Other T-shirts in Ramos’s collection include the messages, “I’ve Upped My Standards . . . So Up Yours,” “VL” (Virgin Lips), “I Date Mormon Girls,” “DTR” (Define the Relationship), and “NCMO,” which is BYU slang for “Non-committal Makeout.” The whole product line can be viewed at <icantimmormon.com>.

While some smile and others frown over the controversy, Ramos is laughing all the way to the bank. Since the ad was banned from the Daily Universe, sales have gone from two or three a day to forty or fifty.

Another potential sales boost may have come after NBC’s Saturday Night Live lampooned the story during the Weekend Update segment of a recent show. Update co-anchor Tina Fey noted the T-shirts had been a new trend at the Church-owned institution, but that the slogan, “I can’t . . . I’m Mormon,” had soon been followed by another shirt, “You will . . . I’m Kobe.”

**BYU FOOTBALL HAS ONE FAN TEE-D OFF**

A SECOND T-SHIRT controversy may be underway now that another enterprising student has begun distributing a shirt calling for the ouster of BYU football head coach Gary Crowton. The front contains the unimaginative message, “Fire Crowton,” but the back quotes the Book of Mormon passage, “It is better that one man should perish than a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Nephi 4:13).

The shirt’s designer, James Rex, conceived of the shirt during the offseason but didn’t go into production, wanting to give Crowton and this year’s team a chance to turn their fortunes around after the past two disappointing seasons. But after watching the Cougars lose two of their first three games,
he decided it was time to act.

In an interview with the Deseret Morning News, Rex says he’s been asked several times if he’s concerned that his shirts will make Crowton feel bad.

“I don’t feel bad for anyone who makes $400,000 a year and stinks at his job,” Rex said. “People say I’m going to hurt his feelings. He hurts mine every Saturday.”

STANFORD BAND TEASES ABOUT POLYGAMY IN HALFTIME SHOW

STANFORD UNIVERSITY’S MARCHING band created a minor stir during its halftime show as its Cardinal football team hosted BYU’s Cougars on 18 September. Following a tradition of incorporating some sort of salute to whatever team is visiting, the Cardinal band struck a raw nerve by including a veiled jab at polygamy, featuring several female dancers wearing veils and performing for a single male.

On the Monday following the game, Stanford athletic director Ted Leland issued an apology: “The actions of the Stanford band ... were inappropriate, and I wish to apologize to BYU, their team, fans, and alumni.”

Leland said he intends to meet with the school’s board of directors to discuss possible sanctions against the band.

HBO DRAMA TO DEPICT UTAH POLYGAMY

HBO AND TOM Hanks have announced they will produce Big Love, a cable drama series about a Utah polygamist who
The following four selections are taken from Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s final book, a collection of short essays titled, Whom the Lord Loveth: The Journey of Discipleship (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 2003).

Stretching to Reach the Higher Branches

HAPPILY, MANY OF US HAVE already picked and been greatly nourished by the low-hanging fruit from the gospel tree. Yet, on the higher branches, much fruit still remains, unreached for and unplucked. Neglecting to harvest this fruit deprives us of greater joy and of greater capacity to help others. This further feast includes, for example, those fruits of repentance ripened from correcting our sins of omission. The “cease and desist” portion of repentance is surely vital but so is doing the good heretofore undone.

The higher hanging fruits also embody the sweet savor of submissiveness, the nourishing nectar of consecration, and the milk of meekness. All these await our stretching grasp and represent the further expressions of love of God for us (1 Nephi 11:21–22). This fruit, said Lehi, is “most sweet” and will “make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:11, 10; 11:7).

No wonder God, who “delight[s] to honor” those who will so stretch, urges us onward (D&C 76:5). His own beckoning arm is stretched out and even extended all the day long (D&C 103; Jacob 6:5).

He knows all about stretching (2 Nephi 19:12, 17, 21).

Doctrinal White Dwarfs

SO MUCH MEANING is compressed into the doctrines of the gospel. We dare not be superficial or discouraged, therefore, by the unfoldingness in our understanding. The doctrines are like the “white dwarfs” in the universe, which have so much compressed matter that their density defies our present understanding.

Certain doctrines of the kingdom are so full of meaning and of personal significance that one can only sense their full importance by accepting in faith pronouncements of the Lord. Even though some of their dimensions are now well beyond us, neglecting these doctrines entirely is not the answer.

Illustrating deep implications are “Man was also in the beginning with God” (D&C 93:29) and “All things for their glory are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord” (D&C 130:7). In the justice and mercy of God, we finally receive “according to [our] desires” (Alma 29:4).

We cannot process all the implications, because they bear upon us profoundly and personally. No wonder it is to be “line upon line” and “precept upon precept” (D&C 128:21)—and course correction upon course correction—so far as our personal comprehension and application are concerned. What an inexhaustible gospel!

What Is Allotted to Us

WHILE WE ARE expected to improve our lot by developing our talents, using our gifts, and stretching our capacity to serve, it is clear that some of life’s general circumstances constitute what is “allotted” to us (Alma 29:3). As to the latter, we are urged by the prophet Alma to be “content” with what is allotted to us (Alma 29:3, 6). It is no use, for example, desiring the voice of a trump to ensure greater influence on mankind than one’s circumstances permit. Hence the consoling and concluding words: “Why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” (Alma 29:6).

Again, subject to our need to stretch and to better ourselves, especially spiritually, there is no justification for perpetual resentment or restlessness, which keep us from being “content” with what is “allotted” and often unused. Such contentment is a form of meekness, because we are willing to wait upon the Lord’s allotments and His timetable. We are strongly encouraged by various scriptures to touch those within our present circle of influence rather than obsessively wishing for a larger circle.

Enduring and Stretching

BY ITS VERY nature, the process of enduring does not permit exemptions or shortcuts. Likewise, there can be no skipping of the relevant experiences. There can be no convenient deletion of the phrase, “to the end.”

Stretching our spiritual capacity takes time, but it is tied to our eternal happiness. We wouldn’t really want to cut classes now anyway, if we knew how our future capacity would then be diminished. In sum, there is no auditing, because the classes are for credit.

Any recesses are very brief, and school is not out until the bell rings.
THE SUNSTONE FOUNDATION invites writers to enter the 2005 Eugene England Memorial Personal Essay Contest, made possible by the Eugene and Charlotte England Education Fund. In the spirit of Gene’s writings, entries should relate to Latter-day Saint experience, theology, or worldview. Essays, without author identification, will be judged by noted Mormon authors and professors of writing. The winner(s) will be announced in SUNSTONE and at the 2005 Association for Mormon Letters conference. Only the winners will be notified of the results. After the judging is complete, all non-winning entrants will be free to submit their essays elsewhere.

PRIZES: A total of $400 will be shared among the winning entries.

RULES: 1. Up to three entries may be submitted by a single author. Four copies of each entry must be delivered (or postmarked) to Sunstone by 16 JANUARY 2005. Entries will not be returned. A $5 fee must accompany each entry.

2. Each essay must be typed, double-spaced, on one side of white paper and be stapled in the upper left corner. All essays must be 3500 words or fewer. The author’s name should not appear on any page of the essay.

3. Each entry must be accompanied by a cover letter that states the essay’s title and the author’s name, address, and telephone number. Each cover letter must be signed and attest that the entry is the author’s work, that it has not been previously published, that it is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere and will not be submitted to other forums until after the contest, and that, if the entry wins, SUNSTONE magazine has one-time, first-publication rights.

For examples of past contest winners, see the May 2003, July 2003, October 2003, March 2004, May 2004, and July 2004 issues of SUNSTONE.

I believe that the struggle to find truth is only really successful when united with the struggle to find God, and that the struggle is worth the pain and setbacks, worth enduring to the end.

—EUGENE ENGLAND

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Could a flooding event in the area of the Black Sea circa 5600 BC have provided the impetus for what eventually became the story of Noah’s Flood? As scholars consider this possibility, perhaps it’s also time for Latter-day Saints to think in fresh, new ways about the Flood story and lessons it may hold for us in our very precarious world today.