Bowels of Mercy

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Although perhaps too earthy for squeamish readers, the idea of the "bowels of mercy" is found frequently in the scriptures, reflecting ancient views about human emotions and offering powerful insights about divine compassion.

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Ps. 139:14)

The scriptures often come to us like messages in a bottle, blown from distant times and places. They bring with them modes of expression that can sometimes be mysterious for latter-day readers. One of these mannerisms is the frequent use of concrete bodily language in describing spiritual conditions. We read variously of flinty hearts and stiff necks, bent knees and girded loins, blind eyes and ears waxed dull, and perhaps strangest of all, "bowels of mercy." In the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Septuagint, the Greek New Testament, the King James Bible, and the LDS scriptures, bowels play a central role as a term for deep human feeling, specific moral virtues, and the love of God. Such bowel imagery is ubiquitous, appearing not only in obscure passages, but also in many of the most important discussions of charity, God's grace, and, especially in the Book of Mormon, of the Atonement. That the bowels, of all things, should be singled out for special spiritual purposes arouses perplexity, if not aversion, in most of us. Yet if properly understood, the notion that the viscera can be the vehicle of virtue is poetically and morally powerful. The metaphor of the bowels reveals something about the workings not only of religious language but also of mercy.

Modes of Expression

God has expressly chosen to speak with human beings after the manner of *our* language. Scriptural language consists of bridges between divine command and human experience. As expressions of his will to prophets over the ages, the scriptures are historically shaped texts designed to stir human understanding and feeling (D&C 1:24; 50:10–12) rather than transparent packets of information. As such, they are also a storehouse of diverse and sometimes antiquated imagery. Modes of expression that are inclusive of bodily parts, both active functions and passive sufferings,

celebrate the corporeality of all mortal creatures together with the divine embodiment of the Creator himself. Rather than treat them as a stumbling block, we should appreciate these modes of expression for the religiously and aesthetically instructive offerings that they are.

Scriptural talk of bowels descends from ancient patterns of thought that place the emotions in particular internal organs.[1] Rage, lust, hunger, joy, compassion, and so on were once considered not as abstract moods or psychological states but as passions associated with specific anatomical parts. For the Hebrews, the *lêb*, or heart, was the vital center of human life, the place where we think as well as feel. For the Greeks, the *phrenes* had a similar role, but whether we should associate them with the lungs, diaphragm, or heart is still debated. Other organs could be assigned emotional roles such as joy to the liver, due to its large size, or discomfort to the kidneys. In such feelings, the true character of a person was thought to be localized. Consider Jeremiah 20:12: "O Lord of hosts, that triest the righteous, and seest the reins and the heart." The point that the Lord's gaze can pierce humans to the center of their being is clear enough, but we rarely note that the reins here are the kidneys, *reins* being an obsolete term (compare *renal*, French *rein*).

To have a pure heart is a habitual turn of phrase today, but to speak of pure kidneys sounds quite odd. Yet there is, of course, no compelling anatomical reason why the heart should be the main English term for our emotional center any more than any other inner organ. The heart is vital to our existence, can be felt under certain excited conditions, and sits at the core of our body, but it is not in strict fact an intellectual or emotional center or originator. We are used to thinking of the heart as the seat of the soul, not the liver or bowels, and yet the physical heart is ultimately only a metaphor as well.

Nevertheless, modern everyday language still often reproduces ancient habits of thought. The case of the heart shows that organ talk not only prevailed prior to modern medicine, but is still very much a part of modern English speechways. We speak of breath-taking music, heart-breaking stories, gut-wrenching suffering, stomach-knotting tension, fire in the belly, or a burning in the bosom. I might "spill my guts" to "get something off my chest," or as the era of Joseph Smith would have it, "unbosom my feelings." A plucky athlete, we say, has heart, as a courageous soldier has guts, an irascible person has spleen, and a coward is a lily-livered person.[2]

Similarly, *guts* can also designate the essential parts of something (the guts of a car) as well as the entrails proper. The bowels mark a person's humanity, as in *Moby Dick*'s references to "men that have no bowels to feel fear" or "no bowels for a laugh."[3] In *Tom Sawyer*, Tom picks a fight with a boy "with a citified air about him that ate into Tom's vitals."[4] With this

phrase, Mark Twain deliciously paints Tom's irritation with a term reminiscent of the taunt to "eat your heart out." In English, then, the innards, especially the bowels, are the felt site of some of our most intense passions.

The ancient terms that the King James's translators rendered into English as "bowels" had a long history in Hebrew and Greek. In the Hebrew Bible, three words (*rechem*, *qereb*, and *me'ah*) are translated as "bowels" in the King James Version (KJV). The most important of these, the plural term *me'im*, has a wide semantic range in biblical Hebrew and can signify the innards generally (not only the intestines), the reproductive organs, and the vital center of emotional life.[5] Referring to Song of Solomon 5:4, biblical scholar Marvin Pope summarizes this usage: the Hebrew *me'im* "designates primarily the inward parts of the body, the intestines, bowels, guts, and is used of the source of procreative powers male and female, of the seat of the emotions, pity, compassion, distress, and here of erotic emotion."[6] The Hebrew *qereb* "can represent the inward part(s),"[7] while *rechem* (more often translated as "compassion") is closely related to the word *racham*, "womb," and thus connotes a deep love grounded in some natural human relationship, especially that of parent and child.[8]

In classical Greek, one term (*splangchna*, a plural term that is cognate to *spleen*) could mean both the intestines and the edible inner parts of a sacrificed animal, such as the heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys, as well as the location of general character traits in human beings, although not specifically the seat of mercy.[9] In Septuagint and New Testament Greek, *splangchna* took on a more Hebraic color to include tender feelings and mercy.[10] In the epistles of Paul, for instance, *splangchna* is used to describe not only the vital organs but also the entire human personality, the body and spirit together. Paul described his deep love for the far away Philippians: "For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ" (Philip. 1:8). Similarly, in Philemon, Paul wrote on behalf of a beloved slave, Onesimus, whom Paul called "mine own bowels" (Philem. 1:12)—meaning someone tied up in his inmost affections, or as we might say, a bosom-buddy. (In Latin, *viscera* could mean "best friend," just as in somewhat old-fashioned modern Greek, *tzieri mou* means both "my dear" and "my liver.")

In both Shakespeare and the KJV, whose sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century usages were already shaped by the Hebraisms of earlier English Bible translations, *bowels* was a familiar term for the emotions and the inner parts. Up through eighteenth-century English, *bowel* could refer to any internal organ, even the brain. Only relatively recently has it acquired the restricted sense of the intestines. An *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for *bowels* captures much of the KJV sense of that word: "(Considered as the seat of the tender and sympathetic emotions, hence): Pity,

compassion, feeling, 'heart.'"[11] A humorous example of the failure to recognize the archaic sense of *bowels* is seen in how a 1639 text was classified. The London sermon called "Bowels Opened, or A Discovery of the Neere and Deere Love, Union and Communion betwixt Christ and the Church" was placed in the Yale Medical Library; apparently some hasty cataloguer thought its topic was the relief of constipation![12]

English has been enriched in many ways by its borrowings from Hebrew and Greek, among other languages. Rather than merely mirroring the original language, translation also enriches the target language.[13] We often speak of what is lost in translation, forgetting that much can be gained as well, for good and ill. A KJV passage illustrates how translation can enrich: "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" (1 John 3:17). The Greek simply reads "if he close his bowels away from him"; the King James translation adds "of compassion" to "bowels." The noun *compassion* appears nowhere in New Testament Greek though we think of compassion as the heart (guts) of New Testament teachings.[14]

Nineteen of the twenty occurrences of the word *compassion* in the KJV New Testament derive from verbs, and thirteen of these come from *splangchnizomai*—a verb form based on *splangchna*—which means to have compassion (or more literally, something like "to be boweled"). Greek innards become English love and sympathy, an inheritance that shapes LDS scriptural language as well. Indeed, the KJV supplies the basic "idiom" for much of LDS writ,[15] including its usage of *bowels.* How one word could mean the offal of a sacrificed animal, the tender emotions discussed in the Bible, and the compassion enjoined in LDS scripture is a puzzle to which we shall return below.

The Power of Gutsy Imagery

Scriptural bowel language, then, descends from deep-rooted traditions of conceiving internal organs—and not only the intestines—as the distinctive locations of human feeling. Understanding this history removes some of the strangeness of such language. Yet it is an error, I believe, to tame the metaphor too quickly, as do the Revised Standard Version and other modern Bible translations that usually replace this jarring language with soft euphemisms.[16] Much rather, there is something significantly uncanny and vaguely unsettling in the scriptural juxtaposition of the lowest and the highest things—guts and compassion, bowels and mercy. The bowels are at once both gruesome and tender. Both aesthetic and theological lessons are to be learned here.

Some of the most moving scriptural teachings about love and solidarity are couched in imagery that is frankly grotesque. At the Waters of Mormon, Alma tells the new converts that they "should look forward with one eye, having one faith and one baptism, having their hearts knit together in unity" (Mosiah 18:21). Imagining Alma's words concretely gives us a Cyclops of many people with interwoven cardiac tissues, but the literal meanings (at which we rarely pause) point to a much deeper sense.[17] Small means bring about great meanings. Similarly, Ammon exults that God's "bowels of mercy are over all the earth" (Alma 26:37). Surely the point is not a blasphemous revision of the rain falling on the just and the unjust alike, but the universality of God's love for his children. As a child I was similarly struck by the apparent grisliness of the sacrament prayers, where we pray to remember "the body" and "the blood" of Christ rather than just his love or works in general. Perhaps we need the vivid detail to anchor the larger significance more powerfully.

Twisting an old saying, the best way to a person's spirit may be via the stomach. Sensing another theological lesson here, sometimes we may need to be hit in the guts. Even the resurrected Jesus "groaned within himself"; his bowels were filled with compassion for the multitude at Bountiful when he was struck by the painful contrast between the holy innocence of the Nephite children and "the wickedness of the people of the house of Israel" (3 Ne. 17:14).

The perception of the sublime sometimes rests on sublimation. The loveliest moments in music often stem from dissonance just as the sweetest perfumes often have civet as their basic ingredient. A musky scent at the foundation of things may be a condition of the world's glory and beauty. "There is no excellent beauty," said Francis Bacon, "that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."[18]

The bowels are strangely an inner reflection of our outer selves. In a sense, they are a second skin; the gastrointestinal tract is an outside that is inside, a hole that runs all the way through our midst. We earthlings are doubles to ourselves. Our skin and bowels are one continuous surface; both in fact originate in the same embryonic germ layer. Our bodies are the original Möbius strip: two sides, one surface. As the "other" of our skin, the bowels are the poor relation we would like to keep in the closet.

Thus, curiously enough, the power of the bowels as a metaphor in contemporary English lies quite possibly in the disgust they evoke, whether they are understood as guts generally or intestines specifically. Disgust is intimately bound to gusto. Disgust is a *condition* of aesthetic perception; indeed, it is also a *kind* of aesthetic perception.

Few aspects of our embodiment are less attractive than the lower gastrointestinal bowels. There is something repulsive about their product and

function, their sounds, scents, and motions being beyond polite bounds. Even the body leaves them, of all vital organs, the least protected from injury. Surgeons, who might be expected to be immune to the metaphorical connotations of body parts, have commented to me about the messy and slithery quality of the bowels. The bowels' business is to cast off, and they get cast off symbolically as well.

More than any other organ, however, the bowels most ally us to the soil. We have, one might say, a long compost pit within. Our bowels add to the earth and remind us daily that we inhabit tabernacles of clay (Job 4:19). Jesus himself made the elimination process the subject of his teachings, in arguing that it is not what goes into the body, but what comes out of it that defiles (Matt. 15:18; Mark 7:15). Excrement in itself does not desecrate, but the words and thoughts that emanate from the heart. Jesus was not afraid of dealing, frankly but discretely, with human embodiment in its fullness. His doctrine crossed over traditional laws of cleanliness and hygiene; when the good Samaritan's bowels are moved, for example, he is looking at what the priest and Levite, perhaps with ritual horror, might have taken to be a corpse (Luke 10:33).[19] To have compassion is to care for things tainted with disease and death—as all mortals in some ways are. As humans—a term related to *humus* (= ground or earth)—we are earthlings, acquainted with soil.

The bowels are subjects about which we are often embarrassed to talk. And yet the scriptures put the bowels unavoidably in our face. Our resistance to reflection about bowels is itself instructive. The bowels sit at the center of the human body and yet nothing is so furtive as the act of doing our business. But it is an experience "common to man," one to which we can all relate and one we all had to master at an early age. The bowels may repulse us, but few distresses are as acute as when they malfunction. Bowels are the part of embodied life which we rarely articulate but which is most intimately our own. When they are discussed, they are usually the stuff of bawdy humor, snickering puerility, or scatological writing, not scriptural truth. The bowels may be the most personal and hidden of all organs. The sheer relief of the bowels being moved—the release of inner containment—may serve as a secret metaphor of what it is to go beyond ourselves, to let our insides go, to stop holding back. Perhaps in some ways, compassion, as the Greek suggests, has a similar motion.[20]

Culturally, Mormons tend to be queasy about explicitness in bodily depiction, even if our theology teaches the necessity of humane and divine embodiment. Anything too concrete on the "fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9) often makes us, perhaps rightly, nervous. Navels, let alone genitals, are already perplexing enough, though our theology allows for the possibility of their eternal continuation.[21] The issue is more one of representation and taste than doctrine. Much of modern thought and literature

has engaged in what we might see as archaeology of humus, an exploration of the extremities of bodily bliss and degradation. Such exploration can be both bracing and harsh, profane and profound. As considerations of what it means to be mortals—creatures with bowels—modern thought merits the attention of those who have a stomach for such exploration. Yet the modernist fascination for the proximity of the organs of eros and of excretion[22] has little resonance in LDS culture, despite the novels, stories, and essays of Levi S. Peterson, for example, which are exquisitely sensitive to the theological and earthy meaning of our nether regions.[23] Peterson stands in the lineage of the Christian grotesque that stretches from the Gospels and Paul's letters through Dostoyevsky and Flannery O'Connor and celebrates compassion for the maculate stuff of which humans are made. "Compared to God's perfection," he argues, "perhaps every living ounce of the human body, the heart and brain as well as the emunctories, is no better than night soil."[24]

Peterson makes the comparison too stark, however, since God's Son also made his tabernacle of such stuff. Human flesh is not just the opposite of God's glory, but a powerful sign of his grace and even of our kinship with him, an embodied being. The Lord God Omnipotent came down from heaven to "dwell in a tabernacle of clay" (Mosiah 3:5). And why? That by bearing the infirmities of his people, "his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh" (Alma 7:12). In LDS theology, the bowels are not opposed to God's perfection; they are its very vehicle.[25]

Atonement and the Bowels of Mercy

In LDS scripture, the bowels are not foregrounded; they are left to do their work, crucial as always but behind the scenes, away from ordinary view. In seeing the expanse of the eternities, Enoch had a vision of the entire human family and "looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook" (Moses 7:41). Enoch's yearning is not abstract or contemplative, but deeply visceral. The motions of his inner organs are in tune, as it were, with the shaking of eternity. Likewise, Abinadi says to the court of King Noah:

> And thus God breaketh the bands of death, having gained the victory over death; giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men—having ascended into heaven, having the bowels of mercy; being filled with compassion towards the children of men; standing betwixt them and justice; having broken the bands of death, taken upon himself their iniquity and their transgressions, having redeemed them, and satisfied the demands of justice. (Mosiah 15:8–9)

It would be hard to find anywhere in scripture a more compact description of Christ's work of intercession, central to which is the acquiring of the

bowels of mercy. For both Enoch and Abinadi, the vision of God's eternal workings is mysteriously connected with the inner organs; great and small, noble and ignoble, divine and human are tied together.

Why should something so earthly as bowels be used to describe Christ's mercy and work? There are several possible reasons.

The Divine Experience of Human Suffering. Several LDS commentators have honed in on what Elder Neal A. Maxwell terms the "stunning" Book of Mormon insight that Jesus suffered "in order that He might know how" to succor his people.[26] In a striking articulation of this aspect of the Atonement, Lorin K. Hansen argues, "It is not Jesus' suffering per se that redeems men and women. Suffering has an effect on him, and it is that effect (or change) that makes possible human redemption. The power of redemption comes through his expanded knowledge and sensitivity, which he then expresses through his role as mediator."[27] In contrast to traditional explanations of Christ's suffering as a ransom to the devil, a payment to an exacting God, or an avenging of God's wronged honor, Hansen develops what theologians call the moral theory of the Atonement. That is, Christ died to awake a moral transformation of our beings; the Atonement not only reconciled humanity to God but God to humanity.

The Atonement is in this view less a settling of cosmic accounts than part of God's education, so to speak, an experience he needed to conceive empathy with the human family, an immersion in pain not unlike what all in their second estate must experience—a condescension, in other words.[28] Hansen cites Hebrews 5:8 and Doctrine and Covenants 93:11–14 that Christ had no fullness at first but learned through suffering. Elder Maxwell similarly explains that "the infinite intensiveness of Christ's suffering" was necessary for him to become a "fully comprehending Atoner."[29]

Alma 7:12 also makes this very point: "And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities." Alma backpedals a bit in the next verse, as if having realized he might have implied gaps in divine knowledge: "Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance" (Alma 7:13). Bowels cannot, apparently, be "filled with mercy" without a mortal sojourn ("according to the flesh"), a requisite that implies the novelty of mortal life within God's experience (and fits more comfortably in a process theology than traditional notions of static omniscience).

Obviously, there is a huge difference between abstract, theoretical knowledge and knowledge developed and tested in the crucible of experience. To take a homely example, the picture on the box and a completed jigsaw puzzle are all but identical images, but the completed puzzle is almost infinitely richer to those who assembled it. They know its details, textures, colors, and patterns with both affection and frustration, while the cover picture is not invested with their care or acquaintance. To a nonparticipant, communicating the difference between the two images would be nearly impossible. In this way, "the spirit" might, in advance, know precisely what the picture of mortal life looks like but still have to learn the labor of matching pieces by color and shape.

Embodiment holds all kinds of secrets unknowable to the spectator. A spirit who has never lived in embodied mortality may know all things except what it is like not to know all things. In mortality, a spirit can become acquainted with the night, privation, and ignorance. It can encounter lack, absence, desire, and negativity in their fullness (or rather, their partiality). It can learn about waiting, surprise, the uncertainty of all action—everything, in short, that derives from living in time. The bowels stand as part for this whole.

Connecting with Mortality. Much of the bowel language in LDS scripture occurs in passages concerned with what 1 Nephi 11:26 calls "the condescension of God"—the descent of the divine into the human, or the inspiration of the human with divine characteristics.[30] The bowels are a unique sign of divine condescension into mortal clay. In 1841, Ludwig Feuerbach wrote that the hidden secret of Christianity is that humans project their mortal desires onto the heavens thus creating the gods; in contrast, the essence of Christianity is that God comes down to become acquainted with mortal matter.[31] The metaphor of the bowels offers a deep vision of condescension, by which I do not mean haughtiness, but the descent of the divine into the human so that the human may ascend into the divine.

Perhaps the *locus classicus* of such a notion in LDS literature is Joseph Smith's second letter from Liberty Jail: "Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God."[32] It is in the same letter that we read, "Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith" (D&C 121:45; compare 88:6). This is a manifesto for a kind of knowledge, art, and life that is not afraid of the heights or the depths, a kind of inquiry that is as broad as God's mercy and as deep as the lowest reaches of mortality. Taking condescension in this way has rich implications for our relation with God, each other, and our vision of our place in the cosmos.

The bowels, then, are the sign of our humanity and of God's succor for it. They are central to the language of the Atonement since they mark God's condescension. But the metaphor of the bowels, as Doctrine and Covenants 121:45 suggests, implies a horizontal dimension of mercy between fellow mortals. When Joseph in Egypt first saw his long-lost younger brother Benjamin, he "made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother: and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there" (Gen. 43:30). When King Solomon took a sword to divide the disputed baby before the quarreling mothers, the real mother's "bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give [the other woman] the living child, and in no wise slay it" (1 Kgs. 3:26). In both cases, the Hebrew word translated as *bowels* is *rachamim*, meaning something like "tender mercies" or "maternal nurture" (a word also rendered in the plural as *mercies*, *compassions*, or *pity*, and in the singular as *matrix* or *womb* in the KJV).[33] Both Benjamin (soon to be framed as a thief in Joseph's test of whether or not his eleven brothers have learned to care for each other in his absence) and the disputed baby are in mortal danger, on the brink of death. Acts of substitution in each case deflect the sword of justice: Judah steps forward to take Benjamin's punishment, just as the true mother lets her rival take her place as mother. Thus, the bowels in the King James idiom often signify a restoration of a prior relationship, a rescuing from exile, even a willingness to trade places with another in peril.

A Matter of Life and Death. Why the bowels should be the mark of mercy is perhaps illuminated by the ancient practice of animal sacrifice, a point alluded to above. Walter Burkert, a scholar of ancient Greek religion, offers an arresting interpretation of the origins of Greek tragedy. He argues that the participants in the sacrifice feel guilt and horror at the slaughter of a living animal for their own nourishment. A drama of expiation develops (this is the birth of tragedy) that shifts the blame for the animal's death from the killers to the animal itself. The *splangchna* are the first parts of the victim to be eaten.

> The slightly uncanny "vitals," the internal organs which come to light only now and may seem to contain the "life," which sometimes cause disgust and sometimes are regarded as rather a delicacy, must be disposed of first of all. No wonder that *susplangchneuein* [to share the flesh or internal organs of a victim at a sacrifice] is the firmest foundation of fellowship. The shudder [of horror at the animal's murder] dies away in a feeling of physical well-being.[34]

The *splangchna* of the eaters may be moved with contradictory feeling as they become literally filled with the *splangchna* of the animal. With horror and awe, the sufferings of the victim go directly from its bowels to those of the celebrants. Might the participants in the sacrifice recognize the tenderness of their own vitals as they consume those of the victim? Is pity for the

sacrificial victim a metaphor for solidarity with our fellows, to hurt with them where they hurt? Burkert, in any case, offers one way to connect the innards and the quality of mercy: a consuming empathy for the victim.

Scriptural *bowels* often appear where someone's life hangs in the balance: the vitals of a sufferer are at stake, and the observer's or the conqueror's bowels stir in identification. In the Greek New Testament text, bowels respond to a crowd perishing from hunger (Matt. 9:36), a debtor about to be sold into slavery with his wife and children (Matt. 18:27), two blind men pleading for sight (Matt. 20:34), a widow grieving for her son (Luke 7:13), a wayfarer wounded and left for dead (Luke 10:33), and a son returning as if from the dead (Luke 15:20). In the same way, a dog shows its belly to its enemy to admit defeat. Now openly exposed, the most vulnerable spot invites the victor to relent. Our bowels, so open to injury in battle and so easily upset by what goes in them, are our most tender spot. To beg for mercy is to ask the victor quite literally not to hate or hit our guts.

Sharing the Pain of Others. To have mercy (from Latin *misericordia*—a heart of pity) is to feel in one's own bowels the plight of the other, to share sorrows in a heart not one's own. To have bowels for another is to recognize a shared humanity, a common subjection to suffering and death. Bowels are the site of substitutional suffering. In modern Greek, one of the tenderest things you can say is *splachno mou,* meaning "my dear one"; its implication is that your soul is my soul, that you are my inner parts.

In the bowels, we learn to feel for others. Nothing is so difficult to share as pain. Our nerve endings terminate in our unique pain centers. Although people can share words and comfort with each other, the sorrow is each person's alone. To feel the pain of others is physically impossible but morally imperative. How can humans break out of the shell of private sorrow? Amulek flatly declared that no mortals can shed their own blood to pay for another's sins (Alma 34:11), explaining that only an infinite substitution by an infinite being could reach across the gaps between individuals: "Therefore there can be nothing short of an infinite atonement which will suffice for the sins of the world" (Alma 34:12). The problem of mortal life, for Amulek, is that all are hardened and thus destined to perish (Alma 34:9). "Hardening" suggests many things—to harden in pride, in sin, in will—but all of these suggest the hardening of the self. Hardening might be precisely the quality of individuality that makes every person solely responsible for his or her own sins and immune to the sufferings of others. If we persist in our hardness, according to Amulek, our pain is destined to be absolutely incommunicable. If not, then we have the opportunity to encounter a being, Christ, who can bridge the gap between the zero and the one. Christ died, then, in part, to save us from ourselves. One purpose of the Atonement is to soften us, to make us able to feel viscerally each other's

sorrows. With the bowels of mercy, the sharing of viscera, the walls between people seem to melt.

The epitome of other-bearing pain is pregnancy and childbirth. Bowels in the KJV idiom, as we have seen, are not only delicacies consumed at a sacrifice but the reproductive organs. The bowels suggest both the taking and the giving of life. Having bowels moved with compassion suggests pregnancy, an inward part being filled and moved for another's life. In labor, the mother risks her life for the sake of the child's, putting her own "bowels" in jeopardy. Here again "bowels" suggest a surface both inside and outside, self and other. "The bowels of Christ" might be poetically understood as a womb, the means by which we gain second birth. His sufferings in the garden and on the cross are like labor pains (see John 16:21). Scriptural bowel imagery, then, encompasses male and female, just as the bowels of Christ are filled for all (3 Ne. 17:7). To his sons and daughters, he has earned the right to say *splachna mou.*

LDS theologians often note the impossibility of comprehending what Jesus Christ went through in the Atonement.[35] While this protestation could be read as indicating a lack of a uniquely LDS account of the atoning process, I believe it evinces a deeper respect for the impenetrability of Christ's' suffering. No human sorrow, pain, sickness, or infirmity is strange to Christ;[36] he has gone through them all—bunions, backaches, birth pains. Believers in him need never feel that they suffer alone. But since the greatest human sorrow may be the loneliness of suffering and the isolation we feel in our worst moments, Christ's lone sorrows had to be incomprehensible to us before ours could become comprehensible to him. He had to learn the walled-in quality of pain firsthand to succor us in our own suffering loneliness. Our inability to fathom his sorrow is part of its saving property. If we could easily peer into his pain, we would be in the position of bridging the infinite gap between the pain felt by the self and by the other, something Amulek suggests finite beings cannot do. Gospel accounts of Jesus' disciples sleeping during his lonely agony in Gethsemane (Mark 14:34–40) and the withdrawal of the presence of God the Father during Christ's suffering on the cross (Mark 15:34) are poetically necessary to underscore his loneliness: believers are invited to consider if there is any hurt like his and to recognize that they can do nothing to lift his pain. Christ spills his guts, so to speak, on our behalf, a god in solitary sorrow, and we are inwardly moved in response.

By suffering infinitely, Christ brought about the bowels of mercy in many respects. Consider the climactic verse of Amulek's great discourse: "This being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men [and women] that they may have faith unto repentance" (Alma 34:15).

Lowell Bennion and Eugene England have rightly focused attention on the marvelously suggestive notion of providing "means for faith unto repentance,"[37] but perhaps the even more important phrase in this passage is "the bowels of mercy." Whose bowels these are is wonderfully unclear. These bowels of mercy are "brought about" on many levels—for God the Father surveying the sinful human family, for God the Son pleading for them, and for penitent people, who, recognizing the mercy they have received, are able to break through the self-enclosure of pain and succor others. We are thus all, as Sophocles had Antigone say of her dead brother, *homosplangchnoi*, of the same bowels: "There is no shame in paying respect to those of the same bowels."[38] Perhaps these atoning bowels of mercy belong to the universe itself in that they stave off the sword of justice. As we see that God's Son has bowels full of a sorrow that exceeds anything humans could ever know, the bowels of mercy are brought about in us. The hardness of each individual's inner core is pierced and open to compassion. As an infinite sufferer, Christ left himself vulnerable as a receiver of mercy—*our* mercy, pity, or *misericordia*—so that we might receive his mercy and God's mercy in turn.

Conclusion

The bowels, in short, are the inward parts of the Atonement, the place at which the inside and the outside, the boundaries between self and other, become blurry. The bowels are the site of a transaction between selves, the site of a great substitution. The pains of the other become one's own; we enter Zion, the community of genuine love, where, as Alma says, our hearts might be knit together. This is both the social and religious meaning of "bowels of mercy." In the metaphor, we discover not only something that is vaguely grotesque or suggestively poetic, but also a deep unity that is both aesthetic and theological: God's power to encompass with love all things—the heights and the depths, corruption and incorruption.

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1. On Indo-European organ symbolism, see Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954); for the ancient Hebrews, see H. W. Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Kaiser, 1973); and Mark S. Smith, "The Heart and Innards in Israelite Emotional Expressions: Notes from Anthropology and Psychobiology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 427–36.

2. Even here, organ talk is buried at a deeper level; "pluck" originally meant the heart and lungs, and "courageous" derives from the Latin *cor,* "heart." See Onians, *Origins of European Thought,* 69. Much of English organ language, such as "spleen," derives from Galen's notion of the four humors.

3. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851; reprint, New York: Norton, 1967), 155, 416.

4. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1875; reprint, New York: Collier, 1920), 7.

5. Victor P. Hamilton, "Me'ah," in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament,* 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:518; Onians, *Origins of European Thought,* 485–86.

6. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible, ed. David Noel Freedman (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 519.

7. Leonard J. Coppes, "Qereb," in Harris and others, *Theological Wordbook,* 2:813.

8. Leonard J. Coppes, "Racham," in Harris and others, *Theological Wordbook,* 2:841–43.

9. Paul Stengel, "Splangchna," *Jahrbuch des kaiserlichen deutschen archäologischen Instituts* 9 (1894): 115; Walter Burkert, "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 7, no. 2 (1966): 108; Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1843; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), s.v. splangchnon; Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* trans. and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.vv. splangchnizomai and splangchnon; Hjalmar Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1968), 769; Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 7:548–60.

10. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary,* 7:550–54.

11. *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2d ed., s. v., "bowels." In this connection, it is interesting that Martin Luther—the biblical translator apparently preferred by Joseph Smith in most cases—favors "*herz*" (with lowercase *h*) or "heart" as the translation for both *me'im* and *splangchna* (for example, Prov. 12:10, Philip. 1:8); see *Biblia Germanica 1545* (Stuttgart: Omnitypie Gesellschaft, 1967; facsimile edition).

12. Pope, *Song of Songs,* plate VI.

13. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations,* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 69–82.

14. The closest equivalents are *agapê* (love), *eleos* (pity), and *charis* (grace).

15. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

16. Hamilton, " Me'ah," 1:518.

17. The notion of "dissonant imagery" in LDS scripture I owe to Kris Cassity, who discussed this idea in a BYU Book of Mormon class taught by Reba Keele (spring 1976).

18. "Of Beauty," in *Francis Bacon,* ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 425.

19. For an analysis of the aesthetic and religious import of "abjection" in Christianity and of these passages, see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 113–32.

20. Compare Brigham Young's indictment of greed, anticipating Freud's link of miserliness and anal retention: "Men came into our midst, who shut up the bowels of their compassion, and held their money with an iron fist." Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses,* 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 1:75, September 11, 1853.

21. See John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 5th ed. (1915; reprint, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965), 69.

22. Freud, for instance, loved to quote Augustine: *Inter urinas et faeces nascimur* (we are born between urine and feces). See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 53. See also William Butler Yeats's poem, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," in *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1990), 309–10.

23. "I am not being altogether facetious when I say that I adhere to a theology of the emunctories. God created human beings with intestines, bladders, sweat glands, and nostrils, and he does not despise his handiwork." Levi S. Peterson, Letter to the Editor, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (winter 1987): 8.

24. Levi S. Peterson, "In Defense of a Mormon Erotica," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20 (winter 1987): 127.

25. Neal A. Maxwell, "*Not My Will, but Thine*" (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 31, 51, affirms that "the Atonement included the perfecting of Christ's mercy by His experiencing" pains and ordeals that "perfected His capacity to succor His people and his empathy for them."

26. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 35.

27. Lorin K. Hansen, "The 'Moral' Atonement as a Mormon Interpretation," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27 (spring 1994): 215. See also Truman G. Madsen, "Smith, Joseph: Teachings of," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 3:1341.

28. See George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955–61), 3:134. See also Alma 42:15.

29. Maxwell, "*Not My Will, but Thine*," 50

30. LDS language even offers a new, nonbiblical usage: "the bowels of the earth." See Doctrine and Covenants 84:101; Moses 7:48; and JST Mark 8:12.

31. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: Akademie, 1984).

32. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 3:295.

33. Coppes, "Racham," 2:841–43.

34. Burkert, "Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual," 108–9.

35. See Hansen, "'Moral' Atonement," 196. See, for example, John Taylor, *The Mediation and Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1884), 150; James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1915), 613.

36. Maxwell, "*Not My Will, but Thine*," 51.

37. Eugene England, "That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of Atonement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1 (autumn 1966): 148–50; Eugene England, "The Legacy of Lowell L. Bennion," *Sunstone* 19 (September 1996): 41–42.

38. Sophocles, *Antigone*, line 511.