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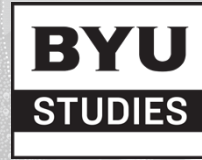
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FIGURE 1. Ada Bird Petyarre (Alyawarr, ca. 1930–2009), *Awelye for Arnkerrthe*, 2003. Acrylic on linen, 51" × 41". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Visually Translating Sacred Knowledge “From Above”

Aboriginal Art at the Church History Museum

Laura Paulsen Howe

In a 2021 Leadership Enrichment Series presentation made available to employees of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Elder Gerrit W. Gong traced the internationalization of the faith. He noted that in 1980, 72 percent of Church members were from the United States and Canada, while 17 percent were from Latin America, 7 percent were from Asia and the Pacific, 4 percent were from Europe, and less than 1 percent were from Africa. By 2020, only 42 percent of Church membership came from the United States and Canada, while 40 percent came from Latin America. Eleven percent of members were from Asia and the Pacific, 8 percent were from Africa, and 3 percent were from Europe.¹

After musing about how those trends might affect future globalization of Church membership, Elder Gong introduced Jonathan Wing, a product manager for RootsTech (a Church-sponsored conference for family history). Wing was asked to respond to the statistics shared by Elder Gong. He mused, “Thinking about the global Church, just knowing and recognizing that there are differences is just the surface. Knowing how they’re different and how that informs or adjusts the way that we create products or messages to touch the hearts and minds of members around the world—that’s where the real work needs to happen and can continue to happen.”²

1. Gerrit W. Gong, Beth Whisamore, Jennifer Greenwood, Jonathan Wing, Layne Butterfield, and Milena Gevorgyan, “Leadership Enrichment Series: Elder Gerrit W. Gong from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,” transcript of panel discussion for Church employees, September 15, 2021 (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2021), 3, copy in the author’s possession.

2. Gong and others, “Leadership Enrichment Series,” 4.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is cognizant that it needs to contemplate how the products it creates and disseminates communicate to a global audience. As the art curator of the Church History Museum, I am sometimes overwhelmed by that audience. How does one present effectively to an audience who is the entire world? Certainly, there has been an effort since the organization of the Church to preach the gospel “unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (D&C 133:37). As of 2019, Latter-day Saint missionaries teach in 58 languages.³ As of 2025, the Book of Mormon has been translated into 115 languages.⁴

But language is not limited to the spoken word. Art is a visual language, or rather, art is a system of several visual languages with different dialects. When The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints preaches to every tongue, it is important to remember that one style of art communicates different things to different audiences and that another style, completely incomprehensible to one viewer, may speak beautifully to another.

In March 2026, the Church History Museum opened an exhibition titled *From Above: Aboriginal Australian Art from the Bird Family*. The exhibition gives space for members of the Bird family, who are Aboriginal Latter-day Saints living in Anmatyerr in central Australia, to proclaim their Latter-day Saint belief through Indigenous art. By so doing, they showcase how translating Latter-day Saint belief into their own visual language has been an effective proselyting tool and provided an outlet for these Aboriginal believers to share their convictions.⁵

The Australian Aboriginal Artists

The Indigenous Australian culture “is the world’s oldest continuing living culture, and draws on a lineage estimated to be over 60,000 years.” Linking their lives to “ancient spiritual traditions,” Aboriginals express their spirituality through what is called Dreaming stories,⁶ and each individual and family inherits “custodial responsibility and stories for Country

3. “Missionary Training Centers Around the World,” *Liahona*, February 2019, 5.

4. “Book of Mormon,” Scriptures, Translations and Formats, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/translations-and-downloads/scriptures/book-of-mormon>.

5. “From Above: Aboriginal Australian Art from the Bird Family,” online exhibit, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/learn/history/from-above-aboriginal-australian-art-from-the-bird-family>.

6. Marie Geissler, *Dreaming the Land: Aboriginal Art from Remote Australia* (Thames & Hudson, 2023), 11.

that are specific to them.”⁷ The Dreamings are “a series of sagas about ancestral beings or spirits” whose wanderings mark “the history of the world, the nature of being (ontology), and the rules of living (ethics and politics). Consisting of many verses or song cycles, they [are] performed over many days.” Versions are also told as stories and illustrated through rock paintings.⁸ These songs and stories tell of spirits “who move over the land, creating both life and the landscape’s physical characteristics.”⁹

More than a creation myth, the Dreamings have practical realities in Indigenous Australian life. The Dreamings identify the land’s association with the First Nations people of Australia. An individual’s Dreaming gives them an identity and an association with a particular “totem” or symbol. Kathleen Kemarre Wallace wrote, “Our spirits reflect our totem, and exist as a representative from our conception place. The totems we have are sometimes plants, animals or features of the land.”¹⁰ Those individuals with shared totemic Dreamings have obligations toward each other. The totems (life forms from the place where their spirit originated) and their Dreaming paths (like the path of the honey ant or mulga tree) determine how people are related, whether one can marry, and who supports whom.¹¹

Aboriginal anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner observed, “What life is, how it should be lived, what it can and cannot become, what things in it are significant, . . . all these may be so well known, so unproblematic, that they do not have to be formulated in any clear way. A single idea and word . . . may summate such ultimate meanings. The Aboriginal concept of The Dreaming is such a summation. The traditional pattern or design

7. Geissler, *Dreaming the Land*, 14.

8. Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (Reaktion Books, 2016), 16–17.

9. “From Above: Aboriginal Australian Art from the Bird Family.”

10. Kathleen Kemarre Wallace with Judy Lovell, *Listen Deeply, Let These Stories In* (IAD Press, 2009), 21. See Ian Keen, “‘Religion,’ ‘Magic,’ ‘Sign’ and ‘Symbol’ in Stanner’s Approach to Aboriginal Religions,” in *An Appreciation of Difference: WEH Stanner and Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Melinda Hinkson and Jeremy Beckett (Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008), 127.

11. Deborah Bird Rose, “Common Property Regimes in Aboriginal Australia: Totemism Revisited,” in *The Governance of Common Property in the Pacific Region*, ed. Peter Larmour (Australian National University, 2013), 130; see also “Julie Pengarte’s Honey Ant Story,” Utopia Lane Gallery, November 8, 2025, https://www.utopialaneart.com.au/blogs/news/julie-pengartes-honey-ant-dreaming?_pos=1&_sid=8874781db&_ss=r; Sarah Morton Kgwawerlanem, “Ngkwawerlanem and Arnkawenyer,” Aboriginal Art Directory, accessed April 23, 2026, <https://aboriginalartdirectory.com/artwork/ngkwawerlanem-and-arnkawenyer/>.

of Aboriginal life is grounded in this conception.”¹² Because a Dreaming is individual to each nation, clan, family, or individual, the English word “Dreaming” is incomplete. It is more accurate to refer to the spirituality of each nation by the word identified in each nation’s language.¹³ For those who speak Anmatyerr (the language the Bird family speaks), the term is *altyerre*.¹⁴

Altyerre sagas are performed. Historically, they are not written down but sung and danced. In the performance, props are used, including body and ground paintings, decorative shields, spears, and other objects.¹⁵ On these props, performers paint the pathways taken by the ancestral beings. Therefore, the land itself is a record of the *altyerre* beings’ pathways, and the marks made on bodies, on the ground, and on shields and spears are a record of the record.¹⁶

A new art form was born in 1971 in Papunya, a government settlement in central Australia for the Aboriginal people near Mparntwe (Alice Springs). Geoffrey Bardon, a white teacher from Sydney, arrived to teach art to the children of displaced First Nations people.¹⁷ Bardon established a relationship with several important older men in the community, including Kaapa Jampijinpa, Billy Stockman Japaljarri, Long Jack Phillipus Jakamarra, Old Mick Jakamarra, and Uta Jangala. Using European acrylics and canvases provided by Bardon, these artists painted their Dreaming stories, the same forms traditionally depicted on the ground, bodies, and other props used when performing Dreamings.¹⁸

12. W. E. H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938–1973* (Australian National University Press, 1979), 64; see also W. E. H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Black Inc., 2009), 57–58; Peter Sutton, “Dreamings,” in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Peter Sutton (George Braziller, 1988), 13–32; Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming*, 23–40.

13. Christine Judith Nicholls, “‘Dreamtime’ and ‘The Dreaming’: Who Dreamed Up These Terms?” *The Conversation, Arts + Culture*, January 28, 2014, <https://theconversation.com/dreamtime-and-the-dreaming-who-dreamed-up-these-terms-20835>.

14. “From Above: Aboriginal Australian Art from the Bird Family.”

15. For an account of how the *altyerre* is performed, see Kemarre Wallace, *Listen Deeply*, 10–14.

16. McLean, *Rattling Spears*, 17–19.

17. For more on Aboriginal displacement, see Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming*, 1–22; Peter Sutton and Christopher Anderson, “Introduction,” in Sutton, *Dreamings*, 8–10.

18. McLean, *Rattling Spears*, 126; Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart, “Dreamings in Acrylic: Western Desert Art,” in Sutton, *Dreamings*, 97. The peoples present were primarily Pintupi, although there were also Luritja, Arrernte, Anmatyerr, and Warlpiri. Portraying their Dreamings for the public has required a negotiation of sacred symbols. While early artists at Papunya were freer in the images they painted, including

Since this first contact between Aboriginal artists and European media, a thriving art tradition has resulted. Many First Nations people who worked on cattle stations or in government-controlled population centers became economically independent due to this art market. With 1970s policy changes to self-determination and land rights, many Indigenous Australians returned to their ancestral lands.¹⁹ Art advisors helped navigate the art market from population centers like Mparntwe (Alice Springs) while the artists lived on their homeland. An art advisor (typically non-Aboriginal) would deliver primed canvases, paints, and payment to artists. Sometime later, the art advisors would return and gather the canvases, along with biographical and subject information, before selling the paintings in the city.²⁰ A number of Aboriginal-led organizations continue to safeguard the interests of Indigenous Australian artists, including the Papunya Tula Artists company, the Aboriginal Artists Agency, and the Keringke Arts Centre.

One important First Nations artist was Ada Bird Petyarre.²¹ Along with her sisters, Ada Bird Petyarre was from the central Australian area known as Urupuntja (Utopia) and was a member of the Anmatyerr

figural representations of the ancestral beings, current Dreamings painted in acrylic are carefully monitored by those in communities responsible for keeping the stories sacred; sometimes they remove some symbols. See Anderson and Dussart, "Dreamings in Acrylic," 93–95; Diane Bell, "Person and Place: Making Meaning of the Art of Australian Indigenous Women," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 1 (2002): 98–99.

19. For more on Aboriginal Australian self-determination and land rights, see Laura Rademaker and Tim Rowse, eds., *Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia: Histories and Historiography* (Australian National University Press, 2020), <http://doi.org/10.22459/ISA.2020>; "Aboriginal Land Rights Act," Defining Moments, National Museum Australia, accessed May 13, 2026, <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/aboriginal-land-rights-act>.

20. Peter Thorley, "Outstations Through Art: Acrylic Painting, Self-Determination and the History of the Homelands Movement in the Pintupi-Ngaanyatjarra Lands," in *Experiments in Self-Determination: History of the Outstation Movement in Australia*, ed. Nicolas Peterson and Fred Myers (Australian National University Press, 2016), 135–36, 156–57.

21. People from Aboriginal nations often have multiple names. They have a European first name and/or surname. Sometimes the surname refers to the pastoral station where they or their parents worked. They also have a skin name, which indicates a person's bloodline and conveys information about how generations are linked and how they should interact with each other. The skin name also indicates rights over certain Dreamings. For Ada Bird Petyarre, Bird is her European surname. Petyarre is her skin name. See Barbara Glowczewski, "In Australia, It's 'Aboriginal' with a Capital 'A': Aboriginality, Politics, and Identity," in *The Changing South Pacific: Identities and Transformations*, ed. Serge Tchekézo and Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon, trans. Nora Scott (Australia National University E Press, 2008), 139–41.

nation. She was taught “textile painting techniques” and became a founding member of the Utopia Women’s Batik Group. When the government returned land rights to her people in 1979, textiles became an important industry in Utopia. Once the Anmatyerr returned to their homeland, surrounded by “the conditions that have allowed their art practices to flourish,”²² Bird Petyarre began painting on canvas and soon began solo exhibits in Sydney, Australia.²³



FIGURE 2. Gary Bird Mpetyane. Photo by Noel Darris Howe, March 3, 2024.

Bird Petyarre’s inherited Dreamings included the markings women paint on themselves during *Awelye*, a ceremony when Indigenous Australian women teach other women of their nation about their land, customs, and Dreaming stories through song and dance. In the painting *Awelye for Arnkerrthe* (see fig. 1), Bird Petyarre depicts the markings that women apply to their chest, breasts, and shoulders during *Awelye* ceremonies.²⁴ These markings are patterns related to the Dreaming story for *arnkerrthe*, the mountain desert lizard whose Dreaming story is part of Bird Petyarre’s inheritance.²⁵

In the 1990s, Ada Bird Petyarre was residing in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). She met missionaries and was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Ada Bird Petyarre introduced those 1990s missionaries to members of her family. Many of her descendants joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, including her grandson Gary Bird Mpetyane (see fig. 2). In 2004, Gary Bird Mpetyane was of missionary age, and he served as a full-time, short-term missionary for four months in Adelaide, Australia. Since his return,

22. Geissler, *Dreaming the Land*, 202.

23. “Ada Bird Petyarre,” National Portrait Gallery, accessed April 24, 2026, <https://portrait.gov.au/portrait.php?portraitID=499&utm>; Anne Marie Brody, *Utopia: A Picture Story*; 88 Silk Batiks from the Robert Holmes à Court Collection (Heytesbury Holdings, 1990), 74.

24. See Brody, *Utopia: A Picture Story*, 12.

25. Geissler, *Dreaming the Land*, 204.

Gary Bird Mpetyane has taken on the role of shepherding his family, who have joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²⁶

There are several cultural practices that make traditional Church support difficult for Aboriginals. For one thing, Indigenous Australians are nomadic. First Nations people have obligations to a complex kinship system with implied land obligations. This requires them to move frequently.²⁷ The Bird family resides sometimes in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and sometimes two hours northeast in Akaye (Mulga Bore). Traditional Latter-day Saint fellowshipping activities prove difficult. Sometimes the Australia Adelaide Mission has called missionaries to support the Bird family.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, all institutional Church support was withdrawn from Akaye (Mulga Bore). So Gary Bird Mpetyane has led his family since. When asked about how it felt to take on such a significant role, Bird Mpetyane responded, “When I finished my mission [and] I came back, they [senior missionaries who served in Mulga Bore] told me I have to lead the church in Mulga Bore and Angkula. ‘You have to be a leader and keep the Church out there in Angkula’ (because we couldn’t go to church in Alice Springs; it was too far out). . . . I felt happy. I have to stand up and lead my family to God. I want to meet everybody in the world. Come to my church in Angkula. It makes us happy.”²⁸

Using Art to Teach the Gospel

In 2021, Adolf Johansson was called to be the mission president of the Australia Adelaide Mission. He was inspired by 3 Nephi 21:22. In the scripture, the resurrected Jesus Christ visits the Americas and promises, “If [my people] will repent and hearken unto my words, and harden not their hearts, I will establish my church among them.” As Johansson pondered these words, he recalled thinking, “It doesn’t matter whether you’re Indigenous or a white Australian living in a small town. That’s where you live. That’s where ‘my church’ will be established. And his church is his people. It’s not an organization. . . . We’re not talking about bricks and

26. Gary Bird Mpetyane, interview by author, March 3, 2024, Akaye (Mulga Bore), Australia.

27. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming*, 161. Stanner wrote, “The bands could be called ‘nomadic’ but it was a nomadism of a limited kind, bounded and even land-locked rather than unbounded and free-ranging, because of the bond between a band and its traditional territory.”

28. Gary Bird Mpetyane, interview.

mortar. We're not talking about things. We're talking about people's spirit[s], [their] connection with heaven. That's where he is."²⁹

Johansson began to brainstorm how to best establish The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints among Indigenous Australians. He determined to send Elder Jaren Anderson and Elder Paxton Hranicky to Mparntwe (Alice Springs) as "bush elders," or missionaries who would spend most of their time in the outback.³⁰ Hranicky taught some First Nations investigators in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). He taught in English (a second language for most Aboriginal peoples in Mparntwe) using the standard missionary pamphlets. "It was just really, really bad," he recalled. "They [were] looking off into the distance, not paying attention."³¹ Imagining there must be a better way to teach, Hranicky and Anderson went to the Alice Springs Public Library and optimistically googled "Mormon Aboriginal artwork."³²

Perhaps a bit surprisingly, the search was fruitful. In 2008, Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari (see fig. 3), one of Ada Bird Petyarre's daughters-in-law and Gary Bird Mpetyan's aunt, had submitted a work of art called *Coming of Christ* (see fig. 4) to the Eighth International Art Competition hosted by the Church History Museum and was accepted.³³ Wallace Nungari and her husband, Colin Bird Jungala, learned of the gospel from Ada Bird Petyarre and were the next members of the Bird family to be baptized members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the mid-1990s.



FIGURE 3. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari. Photo by Noel Darris Howe, March 3, 2024.

29. Adolf Johansson, interview by author, March 1, 2024, Mparntwe (Alice Springs), Australia.

30. Adolf Johansson, interview.

31. Jaren Anderson and Paxton Hranicky, interview by Brooks and Laurie Haderlie, October 11, 2023, Sydney, Australia.

32. Anderson and Hranicky, interview.

33. "Remembering the Great Things of God," 2008 International Art Competition, Church History, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 13, 2026, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/exhibit/2008-international-art-competition>.



FIGURE 4. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari (Eastern Arrernte, b. 1974), *Coming of Christ*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 59.625" × 36.375". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari was born in 1974 and was raised by the highly respected Indigenous artist Kathleen Wallace Kemarre.³⁴ Wallace Kemarre spent her adolescence at a Catholic mission school, where she incorporated Christian beliefs into her worldview. She stated, “I paint on canvas because it is a modern way to keep the [*altyerre*] stories alive and offer this knowledge to other people.”³⁵ Wallace Kemarre bridged these different mindsets—Christianity with *altyerre* and *altyerre* performative worship with European media. Wallace Nungari recalled, “I remember watching [Wallace Kemarre] paint when I was only three years old. She would sing Aboriginal songs and tell me the stories of the Dreamtime ancestors and the land.”³⁶ Wallace Kemarre also taught Wallace Nungari to paint.³⁷

When Wallace Nungari submitted the piece to the Church art competition in 2008, she wrote that Latter-day Saint missionaries read the Book of Mormon to her each week. She commented, “The Church has transformed my life. My favorite things are my family, the Book of Mormon, and painting stories.” Wallace Nungari’s art records that which is sacred to her, and she tries to pass on her spiritual and artistic heritage to her children. She wrote, “I illustrate the Dreamtime stories and the scripture stories when I paint. [My husband] Colin and I have five children we are raising in the Church. Now, I am teaching my daughter Ayara about the Book of Mormon and the stories of the Dreamtime as we paint together.”³⁸

Wallace Nungari uses the artistic language familiar to her to tell of Christ’s coming to the Americas as explained in the Book of Mormon (3 Ne. 11). Because acrylic paintings created by First Nations people in central Australia record the wanderings of *altyerre* beings through the land, they are painted from an aerial viewpoint, as if the viewer were looking at a map of the path that an *altyerre* being or ancestral spirit might take. In *Coming of Christ*, Wallace Nungari employs the same viewpoint; the viewer has a bird’s-eye view of the scene below. While

34. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari, interview by author, March 4, 2024, Mparntwe (Alice Springs), Australia.

35. Kemarre Wallace, *Listen Deeply*, 4.

36. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari, artist statement submitted for the eighth International Art Competition at the Church History Museum. Full statement in possession of the author.

37. Wallace Nungari, artist statement.

38. Wallace Nungari, artist statement.

iconography is individual to each place and *altyerre* being, some symbols are standard. Wallace Nungari includes several U shapes in the painting—one large U in the center of the piece with many smaller U's oriented around the central U. In acrylic paintings from central Australia, the U-shaped figures represent people sitting. Typical of acrylic art from this region, the viewer sees human tracks painted just as they might appear on the ground.³⁹ These tracks approach the central U from four directions, indicating the gathering of all peoples to Christ.

Plant species and other objects often show up in a stylized but figurative manner in the work of Indigenous Australian artists.⁴⁰ Wallace Nungari has included an *apantha* in each of the four corners of her painting.⁴¹ These shallow wooden vessels are made for carrying items and are often placed on one's head if one is traveling a great distance. A different sprig of medicinal plant, or "bush medicine," is inside each *apantha*: red river gum, a skin cleanser; rock fuchsia bush, used to ease cold and flu symptoms; a branch of a tea tree, a shrub that could be used to treat infection; and a flowering emu bush, an antiseptic.⁴² Thus, Christ's healing is carried and made available to all through the tangible symbols of the *apantha* and the medicinal plants.

The 2008 International Art Competition had been published online, so when Hranicky googled "Mormon Aboriginal artwork" in the Alice Springs Public Library, Wallace Nungari's work appeared, accompanied by a description of the symbolism. In addition, a student from Brigham Young University named Katie Loveless had written and published a research paper online in 2021 about Latter-day Saint Aboriginal artwork, which included an image of the First Vision and the Plan of Salvation.⁴³ Hranicky and Anderson printed off all the Aboriginal artwork they had found, put the images in a binder, and walked around Mparntwe (Alice Springs) to test the efficacy of this new art. "I remember the next day," Hranicky recalled, "we probably taught three or four lessons, and they went extremely better than the first day. You know, [the Indigenous

39. Anderson and Dussart, "Dreamings in Acrylic," 89.

40. Anderson and Dussart, "Dreamings in Acrylic," 89.

41. The Anglicized word for an *apantha* is *coolamon*.

42. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari, Facebook direct message to the author, December 28, 2022.

43. Katie Loveless, "Indigenous Australian Latter-day Saint Dot Art: A Convergence of Tradition and Faith," *Student Works* 308 (March 2021): 21, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub/308>.

people were] really paying attention. I could tell that they were retaining information more. I think that they really appreciated that we [were] trying to tie in their culture with the gospel.”⁴⁴

It was just a short time later that Hranicky and Anderson met two members of the Bird family at church services on Sunday: Gary Bird Mpetyane and his sister Maggie Bird Mpetyane. They visited the family at their home in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and told them of their success in teaching with artwork. The elders decided that since they were seeing success using *Coming of Christ* to teach the gospel, perhaps they could commission more works from the Bird family. Together, the Bird family and the missionaries decided on five more topics to paint. The missionaries and the Bird family would study and talk through a gospel subject, and Gary Bird Mpetyane and Maggie Bird Mpetyane would paint the scene. The result was a flip chart of lessons.⁴⁵ Gary Bird Mpetyane provided this assessment of the process: “Americans speak a little fast. But [Indigenous Australians] can understand the pictures.”⁴⁶

Missionaries in the Australia Adelaide Mission currently use flip charts of the Bird family’s art to teach First Nations investigators.⁴⁷ When asked how Indigenous art aided the teaching process, President Johansson of the Australia Adelaide Mission responded,

Because art is a language, a picture paints a thousand words. We just wanted them to not only paint but also speak the words of the scriptures. You know, it says in the scriptures that “angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore they speak the words of Christ” [2 Ne. 32:3]. And if the words of Christ can be depicted in art, according to the language of the people, as it says in Doctrine and Covenants [90:11], “In [that day], that every man shall [hear] the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language.” And if art be the language, so be it.⁴⁸

In Akaye (Mulga Bore), the elders do less of the teaching because the Indigenous members have taken on more responsibility. Gary Bird Mpetyane accompanies the elders and teaches much of the lesson in the Anmatyerr language and with art. To teach the lesson, Gary Bird Mpetyane simply explains his own images (see fig. 5).

44. Anderson and Hranicky, interview.

45. Anderson and Hranicky, interview.

46. Gary Bird Mpetyane, interview.

47. Johansson, interview.

48. Johansson, interview.

Gary Bird Mpetyane has observed how much more effective it is to receive the gospel message in one's own language: "And now I can read the stories and tell the story about it in the picture. 'Cause in [their] mind, [investigators] just can know it. [When hearing in English], when they're finished, they just forget it. That's why I speak in language. So they can know it. . . . In language, they feel it." Gary Bird Mpetyane continued to explain his motivations: "That's why I'm doing for my family and even people around the world. That's why I draw the canvas—all the symbols—so I can teach all my families and other families in other communities in other places. That's the easy

way I can do it—to teach. So I can say it in my language. It's easier. All my family doesn't understand in English a little bit because they understand in language much easier. Some old people, they don't understand. That's why I paint Jesus Christ and the Atonement of Jesus Christ."⁴⁹

Although the elders may not realize it, the complex kinship systems of First Nations people are supporting their missionary work. Indigenous Australian relationships are complex, yielding a more expansive view of what a family is.⁵⁰ The Bird family is large. As the Bird family introduces the missionaries to members of their extended family with whom they have kinship obligations, more Indigenous Australians are listening to Latter-day Saint missionaries. Between 2020 and 2023, convert baptisms in the Australia Adelaide mission rose 149 percent.⁵¹



FIGURE 5. Gary Bird Mpetyane. Photo by Noel Darris Howe, March 2, 2024.

49. Gary Bird Mpetyane, interview.

50. See "First Nations Family and Kinship Systems," January 21, 2025, Common Ground First Nations, <https://www.commonground.org.au/article/family>.

51. Johansson, interview.

In October 2023, twenty-three members of the Bird family visited the Sydney Australia Temple.⁵² Gary Bird Mpetyane explained what it meant to him: “I knew we were going to make it to the temple because I really wanted my family to be sealed for eternity. That’s what I really wanted. When I heard what we were going to do, I was really happy.”⁵³ The temple ceremony, with its story of divine ancestors who helped create the world and with rites that are told in a certain location to specific people who have completed the necessary requirements to hear the stories, likely feels very familiar to First Nations people. Anmatyerr *altyerre* sagas tell a story of creation and are passed on only at certain times, in certain locations, and to certain people.⁵⁴ Since October 2023, missionaries report that the First Nations people the Bird family has spoken to about their Latter-day Saint beliefs approach the full-time missionaries with a desire to go to the temple, seeing baptism as simply a hoop they must jump through before they can get to the temple.⁵⁵

With a doctrinal mandate to preach the gospel unto “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (Mosiah 15:28), art can be a tool. Among the Indigenous people of Australia, it is perhaps the only primary language gospel materials will ever be translated into, as there are over 250 Indigenous languages (with nearly 90 percent of them endangered),⁵⁶ and Eastern Arrernte (of which Anmatyerr is a dialect) represents one of the most widely spoken languages, with only about two thousand speakers.⁵⁷ It’s hard to imagine that the Book of Mormon will be translated into

52. Eileen Bird, Gary Bird, and Maggie Bird, interview by Brooks and Laurie Haderlie, October 12, 2023, Sydney, Australia.

53. Gary Bird Mpetyane, interview.

54. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Perspectives, “Inside and Outside Knowledge,” updated February 10, 2022, Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/about/k-12-policies/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-perspectives/protocols/inside-outside-knowledge>.

55. Kevin Jackson, email correspondence with the author, May 1, 2026.

56. “Languages Alive,” AIATSIS (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies), accessed May 9, 2026, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/languages-alive>; “National Indigenous Languages Report,” August 15, 2020, Indigenous Arts and Languages, Australian Government: Office for the Arts, <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/indigenous-arts-and-languages/indigenous-languages-and-arts-program/national-indigenous-languages-report>.

57. Angela Harrison, Kumalie Riley, Sam Osborne, Nyunmiti Burton, Brenda Muthamuluwuy, and Yasunori Hayashi, “Partnering in Teaching ‘Strong’ Aboriginal Languages at Universities,” in *Projecting Voices: Studies in Language and Linguistics in Honour of Jane Simpson*, ed. Carmel O’Shannessy, James Gray, and Denise Angelo (ANU Press, 2025), 938.

Anmatyerr or Eastern Arrernte. But among the nearly 984,000 Aboriginals living today,⁵⁸ the grammar of Indigenous Australian art clearly communicates in ways that neither spoken English nor academic naturalism can.

The “From Above” Exhibit

With the *From Above* exhibit at the Church History Museum, we hope to highlight knowledge given from above that the Bird family regards as sacred—both *altyerre* sagas and gospel truths. By helping visitors in Utah understand that the works are meant to be seen from an aerial view, we hope to inspire faith in patrons as they learn from new perspectives. While I organized and wrote the exhibition, Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari was a paid consultant and was devoted to making sure the exhibition accurately represented both the Indigenous and Latter-day Saint beliefs of her and her family.

In the gallery hang two works by Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari: *Arlatyeye Dreaming* (see fig. 6) and *Tree of Life*. Wallace Nungari is married to Colin, the son of Ada Bird Petyarre. Her country is Arnumarra in Australia, and she now lives with her husband’s family between Mparntwe (Alice Springs) and Akaye (Mulga Bore). She received the story of *Arlatyeye Dreaming*, painted in 2024, from her grandfather Bruce Wallace and later expressed it through her painting. The Dreaming pathway depicted in her painting extends from Urapuntja in central Australia to her homeland at Arnumarra. From an aerial perspective, the concentric circles at the center of the painting mark a site where *arlatyeye* (an edible yam) can be dug, either to be eaten raw or cooked in heated sand and ashes. Green vines spread outward across the ground from this central point. On the right side, the vines are shown with yellow summer flowers that are eaten by emu and kangaroo. This same area also depicts the plant after the flowers have withered, signaling that the yam is ready to be harvested. The curved, arc-like forms represent the digging places.⁵⁹

Next to this piece is a work by Wallace Nungari titled *Tree of Life*, painted in 2024 (see fig. 7). Seen from above, figures shaped like U’s cluster around a central tree. In this work, Wallace Nungari evokes God’s

58. “Profile of First Nations People,” October 16, 2025, First Nations People, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/profile-of-indigenous-australians>.

59. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari, interview by author, October 1, 2025, Mparntwe (Alice Springs), Australia.



FIGURE 6. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari (Eastern Arrernte, b. 1974), *Arlatyeye Dreaming*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 37.5" × 37.5". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

love through imagery drawn from the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi and his dream or vision of the tree of life (1 Ne. 8). Some figures move toward the tree while gripping an iron rod that guides their path. Others stray from the route and disappear into shadowy mists, losing their way. Still others gather around circular structures resembling watering holes in the central Australian landscape, distracted from the tree at the center.

The exhibition also features the work of Clifford Tilmouth Pengarte, Ada Bird Petyarre's grandson-in-law and Wallace Nungari's nephew-in-law. His homeland is Atoola (Bushy Park) in Australia. He learned to paint from his grandparents, who first taught him by drawing on the ground. He holds deep respect for sacred places and is passionate about sharing



FIGURE 7. Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari (Eastern Arrernte, b. 1974), *Tree of Life*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 61.5" × 37.25". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



FIGURE 8. Clifford Tilmouth Pengarte (Anmatyerr, b. ca. 1972), *Mulga Tree Dreaming*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 21.25" × 32.25". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

stories through his art. In his 2024 work *Mulga Tree Dreaming* (see fig. 8), Tilmouth Pengarte uses concentric circles to represent Corbula, a sacred site or watering hole near his country in Atoola. At this sacred site, those from Atoola (custodians of the mulga tree) and those from Ilkawerne (custodians of the mulga seed) gather to exchange and share their stories. The wavy lines symbolize this meeting, representing unity and the sharing of sacred knowledge. Clifford, from Atoola, and his wife Rosemary, from Ilkawerne, embody the unity found between these distinct places.⁶⁰

In *Worshipping in the Temple*, painted in 2024 (see fig. 9), Tilmouth Pengarte depicts another scene of his family uniting in sacred spaces. In October 2023, Clifford Tilmouth Pengarte was sealed to his wife, Rosemary Bird Tilmouth Mpetyane, and his three children, including his son Keaton Tilmouth, who recently completed a full-time mission to the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission. Being sealed to his family felt important to Tilmouth Pengarte. He remarked, "The Spirit led me to it. The Spirit leads me in good ways. . . . It feels really good in the temple."⁶¹

60. Clifford Tilmouth Pengarte, interview by author, October 3, 2025, Akaye (Mulga Bore), Australia.

61. Clifford Tilmouth Pengarte, interview by author, March 4, 2024, Akaye (Mulga Bore), Australia.



FIGURE 9. Clifford Tilmouth Pengarte (Anmatyerr, b. ca. 1972), *Worshipping in the Temple*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 21.25" × 32.25". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

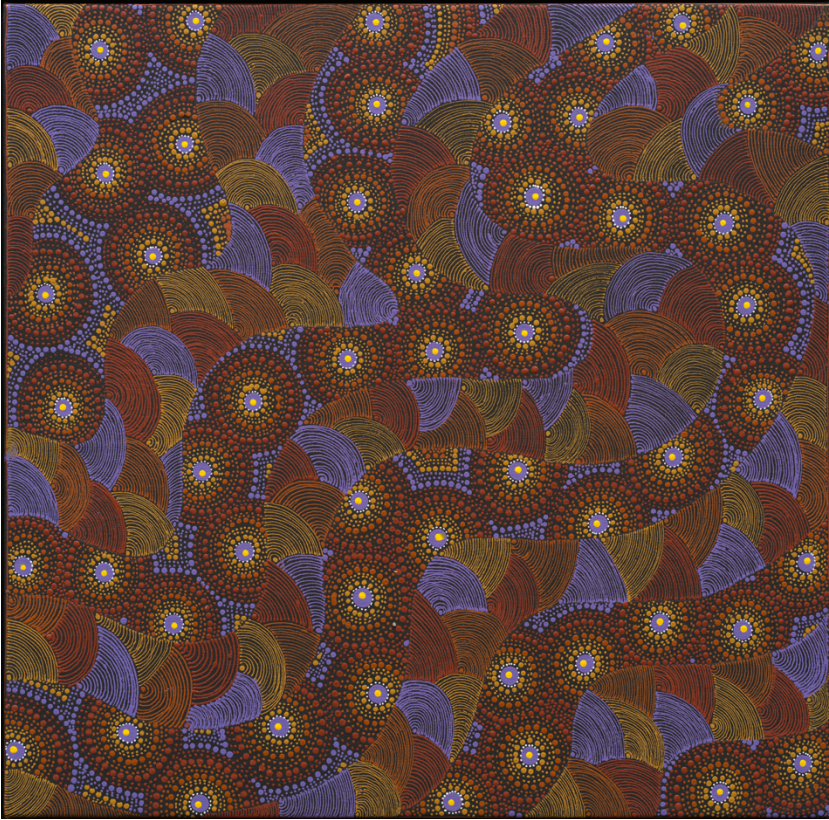


FIGURE 10. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte (Eastern Arrernte, b. 1966), *Yerrampe Dreaming*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 27" × 27.5". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

In this painting, Tilmouth Pengarte paints his family engaged in temple worship as they make covenants with Jesus Christ that enable them to be together beyond this life.

The exhibit also features Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte's art. Ryder Pengarte's country is Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa) in Australia, and she now lives with the Bird family at Akaye (Mulga Bore). Her mother, Therese Ryder Ngala, is a respected landscape painter known for her ground-level viewpoints, and Ryder Pengarte developed her own skills both at school and by observing her mother at work. The *Yerrampe Dreaming* (2024; see fig. 10) story she paints comes from her grandfather's country, Alkwepetye. She first encountered missionaries in the

mid-1990s and joined the Church more recently. She reflected, “I felt really good when I was baptized. I was together with my family.”⁶²

Ryder Pengarte’s story centers on *Yerrampe*, the honey ant, an important bush food that the Bird family seeks while hunting. They watch the movements of worker ants across the ground, noting where they disappear into the nest, which reveals where to dig. Honey ants are specialized workers that gorge on food until their abdomens swell, and they are found in chambers deep beneath the nest entrance. Women typically excavate them using long digging sticks. As Ryder Pengarte explained, “It’s really hard work but really sweet.”⁶³ In the painting, concentric circles symbolize watering holes associated with *Yerrampe* ancestors, while the linear patterns reflect the ceremonial body paint worn by women when telling the honey ant story.⁶⁴

Next to *Yerrampe Dreaming* hangs a four-part scene depicting Christ’s plan of salvation, Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the Second Coming of the Savior, and the baptism of Jesus Christ, as described in the Latter-day Saint faith (see fig. 11). In the upper left corner, Ryder Pengarte paints the



FIGURE 11. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte (Eastern Arrernte, b. 1966), *Plan of Salvation, First Vision, Second Coming, Baptism of Jesus Christ*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 38.5" × 60.5". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

62. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte, interview by author, March 4, 2024, Akaye (Mulga Bore), Australia.

63. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte, interview.

64. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte, interview.

plan of salvation. She gives particular emphasis to the physical forms of God and his children. Within the circle symbolizing the premortal life, the outlined U-shapes represent spirits who have not yet received bodies. After mortal life, God's children are separated into spirit prison and spirit paradise until the Resurrection, when they are given celestial, terrestrial, or telestial bodies. These differing states are suggested through her use of yellow, orange, and brown tones.⁶⁵

In the lower scene, Ryder Pengarte depicts the experience of Joseph Smith as he moves from one church to another. Shown from an overhead perspective, his footprints trace this search. His path leads to the Sacred Grove, where he prays to know which church to join. There, God the Father and Jesus Christ appear, their light surrounding the young prophet. Ryder Pengarte uses color to distinguish their divine nature—rendering Joseph in yellow, while God the Father and Jesus Christ are painted in white to signify their glorified state.⁶⁶

Continuing counterclockwise, Ryder Pengarte depicts the Second Coming of Christ. Her composition draws on Harry Anderson's portrayal of the scene,⁶⁷ which missionaries shared with her. Wanting an interpretation that aligned with her own visual language, she reimaged the event, representing Christ and his angels as U-shaped forms.⁶⁸

Finally, Ryder Pengarte depicts the baptism of Jesus Christ. Shown from an overhead perspective, a U-shaped figure representing Christ approaches U-shaped John the Baptist in the river while the Holy Ghost descends as a dove. Disciples encircle the scene as witnesses. The event serves as a model for Latter-day Saints, who also practice baptism by immersion.⁶⁹

The exhibit also includes Alpare Alvira Bird Manfong Mpetyane's art. Manfong Mpetyane, the daughter of Eileen Bird Nungari, comes from Ilkawerne, Australia. She learned to paint from her grandmother Ada Bird Petyarre, who passed on stories of women's ceremonies as she worked. Her brother Gary introduced her to Latter-day Saint beliefs, and in October 2023, she was sealed to her family in the Sydney Australia

65. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte, interview.

66. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte, interview.

67. Harry Anderson, *The Second Coming*, 1979, oil on canvas, 120" × 79", Book of Mormon Art Catalog, Intellectual Reserve, https://bookofmormonartcatalog.org/r_h_scripture/the-second-coming/.

68. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte, interview.

69. Marie Christine Ryder Pengarte, interview.



FIGURE 12. Alpare Alvira Bird Manfong Mpetyane (Anmatyerr, b. 1984), *Christ Visiting the Children*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 38.25" × 61.5". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Temple. She has expressed how meaningful the temple is to her, especially because it allows her family to be together.⁷⁰

As a mother, Manfong Mpetyane feels a deep affection for the biblical account of Christ welcoming and interacting with children. In a painting titled *Christ Visiting the Children* (2024; see fig. 12), Manfong Mpetyane presents two scenes that honor Christ, using radiating color from the U-shaped form that represents him. When his disciples tried to keep others from approaching, Christ rebuked them, saying, "Suffer the little children to come unto me" (Mark 10:14). She highlights this invitation by tracing the children's approach with a path of footprints leading toward Christ. A group of brightly colored children gathers around the Savior. In the left-hand scene, she makes the moment more personal by placing Christ and the children within a landscape reminiscent of the red desert where she and her family live.⁷¹

In *Awelye for Ahakeye*, painted in 2024 (see fig. 13), Manfong Mpetyane depicts an *Awelye* ceremony, in which women share Dreaming

70. Alpare Alvira Bird Manfong Mpetyane, interview by author, March 4, 2024, Akaye (Mulga Bore), Australia.

71. Alpare Alvira Bird Manfong Mpetyane, interview.



FIGURE 13. Alpare Alvira Bird Manfong Mpetyane (Anmatyerr, b. 1984), *Awelye for Ahakeye*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 48.75" × 36.75". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

stories through song and dance. U-shaped figures representing the women gather in a circle at the center, with their digging sticks and *apanthas* placed on the ground around them. This particular *Awelye* is performed for *ahakeye*, or bush plum—a story tied to her homeland of Ilkawerne and one frequently painted by her grandfather Lindsay Bird Mpetyane. *Ahakeye* is a sweet fruit that can be rehydrated when dried, making it a vital food source in desert environments. In the painting, Manfong Mpetyane includes the plant's small white blossoms as well as its fruit, shown first in yellow and then turning black as it ripens.⁷²

Members of the Bird Family honor the stories they have received. They respect the *altyerre* sagas shared with them in sacred ceremonies about the creation of the land and feel responsibility to care for this knowledge. They also honor knowledge of Jesus Christ and scripture narratives that teach them about life and death. Their Indigenous knowledge comes with an art language reserved for sharing sacred beliefs. When they started using that art language to proclaim their Latter-day Saint beliefs, members of the Bird Family were able to find success sharing their convictions with other Aboriginals. Through this exhibition, we hope patrons will feel the strength of those convictions and understand that a willingness to consider art styles and perspectives unfamiliar to them can enrich their own faith.

Laura Paulsen Howe is the art curator at the Church History Museum.

72. Alpare Alvira Bird Manfong Mpetyane, interview.



Eileen Bird, Nungari (Anmatyerr, b. 1956), *Arlatyeye Dreaming*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 61" × 37.5". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Intercultural Theology and King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's Voice in Alma 24

Nicholas W. Gentile

As a young missionary during elders quorum class in Gangneung, South Korea, I opened my *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood* manual to a familiar topic: fellowshipping. We read a quote that I had heard in my New Hampshire home ward: "Fellowshipping means encouraging and helping each other to enjoy the full blessings of the gospel. It is showing courtesy and kindness, sharing experiences, and extending service and love. We fellowship by being a good friend and neighbor."¹ I was ready to talk about shaking hands and raking leaves. Then the lesson took a turn I will never forget.

The elders quorum teacher continued, "What we're really talking about today is experiencing *jeong* with our brothers in the quorum. How can we cultivate a feeling of *jeong* among us?" The conversation that followed opened my eyes to dimensions of fellowshipping that I had not considered. The Korean quorum members were talking about fellowshipping, but it was fellowshipping with a uniquely Korean flavor. And, like bulgogi, it was delicious.

Seeing fellowshipping through the cultural lens of *jeong* meant nurturing a unique bond—not merely offering a seat in a meeting. It meant basking in the glory of a special relationship that fostered social responsibility—not only asking about how someone's children were doing in school. In a seminal article about *jeong*, Irene J. Kim, Luke I. C. Kim, and James G. Kelly explain what I learned in that discussion in Gangneung:

1. *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood: Basic Manual for Priesthood Holders, Part B* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 88.

“*Jeong* refers to emotional bonding, a special interpersonal bond of trust and closeness. . . . There is no English equivalent. *Jeong* encompasses the meaning of a wide range of English terms: feeling, empathy, affection, closeness, tenderness, pathos, compassion, sentiment, trust, bonding, and love.” To Koreans, fellowshiping is not simply a “priesthood responsibility” (as the manual called it in 2001); it is an expression of *jeong*, which they see as an “essential element in human life.” This type of fellowshiping promotes richer, deeper, longer, warmer, more unconditional, more sacrificial, more protective, and more genuinely other-centered relationships, such as the unique bond that two soldiers might develop after spending two years protecting each other in battle.² Koreans are so serious about putting *jeong* in their fellowshiping that even the Latter-day Saint word for fellowshiping (*oojeong jeungjin*, 우정 증진) includes *jeong*. I did not know it at the time, but what I experienced in Gangneung over two decades ago was a beautiful example of intercultural theology.

Intercultural Theology as a Missiological Instrument

In the 1970s, Hans Jochen Margull, Walter Hollenweger, and Richard Friedli helped pioneer the term “intercultural theology” to give expression to the appropriation, adaptation, and application of religious teachings by local actors.³ For the purposes of this article, “appropriation” refers to a member of a receiving culture (such as the Lamanites) choosing to borrow something offered by a member of a transmitting culture (such as the Nephites). Eminent intercultural theologian Henning Wrogemann has argued for this definition in mission studies.⁴

Pushing back against an outdated and problematic Western imperialist paradigm that focused on one-way transmission from Western nations, Margull, Hollenweger, and Friedli examined how people in

2. Irene J. Kim, Luke I. C. Kim, and James G. Kelly, “Developing Cultural Competence in Working with Korean Immigrant Families,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 34, no. 2 (2006): 152–53. Considering fellowshiping as a “priesthood responsibility” has fallen out of favor today because it conflates priesthood (God’s authority and power) with men ordained to priesthood offices. The phrase comes from *Duties and Blessings of the Priesthood*, 88.

3. Werner Ustorf, “The Cultural Origins of ‘Intercultural Theology,’” *Mission Studies* 25 (2008): 229–51; Henning Wrogemann, “Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, ed. Kirsteen Kim, Knud Jørgensen, and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga (Oxford University Press, 2022), 146.

4. Wrogemann, “Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology,” 160.

places like Asia and Africa received and translated theologies within their respective cultural contexts. To broaden mission studies, they acknowledged Western contributions *and* began investigating how receiving peoples understood and applied the message in ways that responded to local worldviews and practices. Subsequent academics like Wrogemann, Lamin Sanneh, Robert Schreiter, and Theo Sundermeier have plumbed the depths of interculturality to make it an even more compelling instrument for interrogating mission (an expansive academic term in missiology that means philosophies and practices related to what members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints often call “missionary work”) in doctrine, praxis, sacred texts, and ecclesiastical organizations.⁵

The ongoing systematization of intercultural theology has produced five major tenets of interculturality in the field of mission studies. As Wrogemann summarizes, first, theology is informed by its contexts. In other words, those teaching and those being taught perceive the gospel through their respective lenses. Second, a Western theology or theory cannot claim “privileged status” over theologies and theories found on other continents. Third, the expression and application of theology are at least as important as theology itself. Fourth, mission should be understood “less in the sense of mission actors delivering a message, and more as *local actors appropriating the Gospel*.” Fifth, local contexts include current religious traditions, and therefore “interreligious dialogue” is crucial.⁶

As it operates within the theoretical framework of these tenets, intercultural theology is a powerful academic tool for giving voice to people who are less heard or marginalized. Interculturality amplifies the cultural contexts of converts, situating them as agents who act—rather than as objects to be acted upon (2 Ne. 2:14)—in mission narratives. Rather than passively receiving someone else’s truth and reproducing it like a facsimile, local actors make it their own, adding a unique flavor influenced by their culture. As they operate within the Lord’s authorized framework, the effects of their agency are additive and enriching, bringing empowering diversity to the body of Christ and honoring the truth that “one being is as precious in [God’s] sight as the other” (Jacob 2:21).

For example, as President Dallin H. Oaks teaches, “Many African traditions are consistent with the gospel culture and help our members

5. Wrogemann, “Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology,” 146.

6. Wrogemann, “Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology,” 147 (emphasis in original).

keep the commandments of God. The strong African family culture is superior to that of many Western countries, where family values are disintegrating. We hope the examples of love and loyalty among members of African families will help us teach others these essential traditions in the gospel culture.”⁷ In this type of intercultural theology, local cultural influences enhance the reception, transmission, and application of the gospel without undermining orthodoxy.

Examining Interculturality in the Book of Mormon Through King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s Address

Examining interculturality in the Book of Mormon is one way to wring even more “wonder and amazement” (Mosiah 25:7) from the “keystone” text of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁸ This article investigates intercultural theology through the lens of Lamanite conversion during the fourteen-year mission (ca. 91–77 BC) of King Mosiah₂’s sons Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni in the land of Nephi (Mosiah 27:34; Alma 17:4). In Alma 17–26, Mormon crafts a narrative of Lamanite and Nephite experiences that appears to intentionally emphasize the agency, influence, creativity, and contribution of missionary *and* convert. In this narrative, mission is characterized by exchange and reciprocity. Through foregrounding both Nephite and Lamanite actors, Mormon’s telling of the conversion of “thousands” (Alma 23:5; 26:4, 13, 22) of Lamanites demonstrates a two-way street of cultural interchange in which both missionary and convert, especially converted Lamanites in royal households (Alma 18:40; 19:10, 16–17; 22:15, 23; 24:5–6), are empowered actors and catalysts of change. As Ammon exclaims, Mosiah’s missionary sons love the Lamanite converts “dearly,” and the converted Lamanites love the Nephite missionaries “so dearly” (Alma 26:9). Both groups give and receive.

Specifically, this article examines the give-and-take of possible Nephite-Lamanite interculturality through analyzing the rousing speech about conversion and retaining a remission of sins that King Anti-Nephi-Lehi (fig. 1) gives in Alma 24:7–16. This speech could be one of the “embedded documents” that Mormon occasionally inserts into his abridgement

7. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Gospel Culture,” *Liahona*, March 2012, 22–23.

8. “Remarks, 28 November 1841,” 112, The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed May 14, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/remarks-28-november-1841/1>; Introduction to *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013).

of Nephite records.⁹ In Alma 24:7, Mormon introduces the address by stating, “Now, these are the words which he [King Anti-Nephi-Lehi] said unto the people concerning the matter.” Thus, to find intercultural theology in the Book of Mormon, this article argues that King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s speech demonstrates both his unique literary voice and his unique doctrinal applications as a converted Lamanite—one who appropriated and adapted a Nephite message within the framework of his cultural context.



FIGURE 1. “Anti-Nephi-Lehi Waits for the Sons of Mosiah,” film still, *Ammon Leads the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to Safety*, scene 328, Book of Mormon videos, Alma 23–27, ©IRI.

Part I: King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s Unique Literary Voice

Less-Heard Lamanite Voices and Interculturality

First, in Alma 24:7–16, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi acts as an empowered agent in the mission experience by showcasing his unique literary voice. This voice is significant because it comes from the margins of a largely Nephite-centric Book of Mormon narrative, even though, as historian Richard Bushman argues, “in the end, the Lamanites triumph,” and they “emerge as God’s chosen people.”¹⁰

Though Mormon’s narrative in Alma 17–26 includes strong performances from Lamanites like Lamoni, Lamoni’s unnamed queen, Abish (one of only three named nonbiblical Book of Mormon women),

9. For an extensive list of possible primary sources that Mormon may have embedded, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 105. In particular, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s speech “may have been either reported verbatim or significantly edited or even reconstructed by Mormon” (105).

10. Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 98; Daniel Becerra, 3rd, *4th Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 37–38. Indeed, the title page of the Book of Mormon states first that the book was “written to the Lamanites,” and Moroni writes his now-famous promise, which encourages readers of the Book of Mormon records to pray to receive a witness from the Holy Ghost, to “my brethren, the Lamanites” (Moro. 10:1).

Lamoni's unnamed father, Lamoni's father's unnamed queen, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi, and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (whom Nephites call the "people of Ammon" starting in Alma 27:26), there are few other righteous Lamanites who are named in the remainder of the Book of Mormon. Perhaps this is because there were fewer Lamanite records or because Mormon had less access to them (see Hel. 3:15 for a potential clue, though it may not be representative).¹¹ Samuel, the Lamanite prophet (Hel. 13–16), is the major exception. Examples of unnamed Lamanite groups include the stripling Ammonite soldiers (Alma 53–58); the "more part of the Lamanites" in Helaman 6:1, whose "righteousness did exceed that of the Nephites"; and "a few of the Lamanites who were converted to the true faith" and remained steadfast even when the Church "began to be broken up" in 3 Nephi 6:14. These unnamed groups still inspire readers without providing any individual, named heroes to admire.¹²

Contrasting the list of named righteous Lamanites with the list of named righteous Nephites, including each of the twenty-four record keepers in the Book of Mormon, demonstrates how important and rare the voice of the named King Anti-Nephi-Lehi is in the narrative (though Mormon provides only his throne name and not his given name).¹³ In fact, among named Lamanites with primary sources embedded by Mormon in the Book of Mormon text, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's 565 words in the ten verses in Alma 24:7–16 are second in length only to Samuel's 3,791 words in the eighty-six verses in Helaman 13:5–39 and 14:2–15:17.¹⁴

That Mormon appears to quote King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's words is also noteworthy because it reverses traditional Nephite-Lamanite roles. Most narrated missionary efforts in the Book of Mormon follow the one-way

11. Grant Hardy, ed., *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 775. The others are Sariah and Isabel.

12. For more about righteous Lamanites in the Book of Mormon, see Richard O. Cowan, "The Lamanites—a More Accurate Image," in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman Through 3 Nephi 8, According To Thy Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 251–64.

13. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 843. Hardy states, "The new king, probably Lamoni's older brother, adopts a religiously influenced throne name." See Alma 24:3–5, 17 for the king being given the name Anti-Nephi-Lehi by his father.

14. See the list of embedded primary sources in Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 105. Ammoron, a Nephite turned Lamanite king, has a letter of 332 words in nine verses quoted by Mormon in Alma 54:16–24. Giddianhi, the leader of the Gadianton robbers in 3 Nephi 3–4, whose identity as a Nephite or Lamanite is unknown but who fights against the Nephites, has a quoted epistle of 508 words in nine verses in 3 Nephi 3:2–10.

transmission model: Nephites take the gospel to the Lamanites. Of course, there are exceptions even beyond the most obvious one in Samuel, who faces Nephite prejudice toward his preaching “because [he is] a Lamanite” (Hel. 14:10).¹⁵ Another exception is the converted Lamanites who travel to the land of Zarahemla to “declare unto the people of the Nephites the manner of their conversion, and . . . exhort them to faith and repentance” (Hel. 6:4). Though the mission of Mosiah’s four sons in Alma 17–26 certainly supports the Nephite-to-Lamanite model of transmission, Mormon’s rich narrative defies easy characterization. A close reading of the ways that Nephites and Lamanites experience mission together in these chapters demonstrates two-way exchanges between missionary actors and convert actors—not a one-way flow of missionary actors giving the gospel to convert objects who only receive.

Mormon’s narrative includes powerful teaching by Lamoni, Abish, Lamoni’s queen, Lamoni’s father, and (in the most densely concentrated example), King Anti-Nephi-Lehi. Each take what they receive from Mosiah’s sons, make it their own, and contribute valuable doctrinal pronouncements.

Lamoni. Lamoni testifies boldly of a vision that he receives of Jesus Christ, a vision that is not given (or not recorded in the Book of Mormon text as being given) to the sons of Mosiah, who saw only an angel at the time of their conversion (Mosiah 27:11–12, 18). Lamoni exclaims, “I have seen my Redeemer; and he shall come forth, and be born of a woman, and he shall redeem all mankind who believe on his name” (Alma 19:13).

Abish. When Ammon joins King Lamoni and the queen in sinking to the earth, secretly converted Abish acts powerfully in the role of a missionary by “making known unto the people what had happened among them.” She, not a male or a Nephite, “ran forth from house to house, making it known unto the people,” gathering a multitude to help them “believe in the power of God” (Alma 19:17, 28).

Lamoni’s Queen. After Abish touches her hand, Lamoni’s queen bears a unique testimony of Jesus Christ. She is the only person in the Book of Mormon text to call him “blessed Jesus” (Alma 19:29), and she is one of only three people (along with Nephi in 1 Ne. 15:29, 39, and Moroni the chief captain in Alma 54:7) to use the phrase “awful hell” to describe

15. For more about the prejudice Samuel faced for being a Lamanite, see Jan J. Martin, “Samuel the Lamanite: Confronting the Wall of Nephite Prejudice,” in *Samuel the Lamanite: That Ye Might Believe*, ed. Charles Swift (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2021), 107–52.

a place of postmortal punishment from which Jesus saves. Interestingly, there is no evidence that she was taught these terms by the missionaries.

Lamoni's Father. In his explanation of repentance, Lamoni's father, the king of all the Lamanites, is the only person in the Book of Mormon to "give up" or "give away" sin to know God, "receive this great joy" of eternal life, be born of God, root out "this wicked spirit," and "receive his Spirit," (Alma 22:15, 16, 18). As Mormon writes it, the king's authorial voice is creative, not derivative, which is also the case for King Anti-Nephi-Lehi in his inspiring address in Alma 24.

"The Goodness of God": Allusions to the Small Plates of Nephi

In recent years, scholars have commented on King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's significant literary contributions to the Book of Mormon. Matthew L. Bowen and Pedro Olavarria assert that the king's speech in Alma 24:7–16 "reveals multiple allusions to significant texts in Nephi's small plates record."¹⁶ These include an allusion to one of Nephi's themes: God's goodness. Bowen and Olavarria posit that this theme bookends 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi as an *inclusio* that unifies the books into one record of the "goodness" of God.¹⁷ For example, Nephi claims that he has "a great knowledge of the goodness . . . of God" in 1 Nephi 1:1 and warns people who "will not partake of the goodness of God" in 2 Nephi 33:14. He also writes of God's "goodness" seven more times in 1 and 2 Nephi (1 Ne. 1:14; 5:4; 2 Ne. 1:10; 4:17; 9:10; 26:28, 33).

Given that the sons of Mosiah use writings copied from the small plates of Nephi (as well as the plates of brass) as sources for their preaching to the Lamanites (see Alma 18:36, 38; 21:9; 22:12–13; 23:5), King Anti-Nephi-Lehi is likely familiar with the "goodness of God," though "nothing is known of [his] conversion."¹⁸ Did the king learn the gospel with his brother, Lamoni, from Ammon? Did he learn it with his father from Aaron? Though the Book of Mormon is silent on these questions, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi preaches that it was "our great God" who "in goodness sent these our brethren, the Nephites, unto us to preach unto us, and to convince us of the traditions of our wicked fathers" (Alma

16. Matthew L. Bowen and Pedro Olavarria, "'Our Great God Has in Goodness Sent These': Notes on the Goodness of God, the Didactic Good of Nephi's Small Plates, and Anti-Nephi-Lehi's Renaming," *Interpreter: A Journal for Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 97.

17. Bowen and Olavarria, "'Our Great God Has in Goodness Sent These,'" 101.

18. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 381.

24:7). When King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's newly embraced trust in God's goodness encounters his culture, he chooses to surrender inherited prejudices against the Nephites—an example of intercultural theology.

An Integral Part of a Macro-Chiastic Structure

Derek Squire situates King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's words within the macro-chiastic structure of Alma 23:16 through Alma 27:30.¹⁹ Squire argues that Mormon intentionally shapes a narrative with a nine-element chiasm in these verses and that the king's contribution is the repetition of a phrase about the past sins and murders of his people. This contribution is an example of intercultural theology because it demonstrates the creative impact and enrichment that a receiving culture can have on a transmitting culture. Rather than including only Nephite theological and literary contributions, Mormon includes a converted Lamanite's perspective in his chiastic structure, which readers can interpret as a local, underrepresented voice within the prominent voices of the transmitting culture.

In B of the chiasm, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi describes being “convinced” of “our sins” and “many murders,” “forgiven” of “our many sins and murders,” and committed to retaining a remission of “all our sins and the many murders” (Alma 24:9, 10, 11). In B' of the chiasm, the king laments that the Lamanites will destroy his people because of the “many murders and sins” they “committed against them” and that he is willing to offer his people as “slaves” for the Lamanites to “repair” the “many murders and sins which we have committed against them” (Alma 27:6, 8). Squire notes that B's chiastic language is unique in the Book of Mormon. Doing a keyword proximity search of the Book of Mormon that includes “sins,” “murders,” and “committed” (with all three words being within forty characters of each other) yields only these five instances from King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's address (Alma 24:9, 10, 11; 27:6, 8).²⁰

Unique Words and Phrases Used by King Anti-Nephi-Lehi

Grant Hardy examines what he calls King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's “unique voice in this passage” (Alma 24:7–16) by probing the text for other Book

19. Derek Squire, “The Literary Structure of Alma 23–27,” *Interpreter* 64 (2025): 1–2. A macro-chiasm indicates a larger-scale chiastic pattern spanning an extended narrative, just as a micro-chiasm can refer to a pattern across a few phrases. For more on macro-chiastic structures, see Stephen Kent Ehat, “The Roles of Words, Phrases, and Ideas in Macro-Chiasms,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 59, Supplement (2020): 319–42.

20. Squire, “Literary Structure of Alma 23–27,” 5–7.



FIGURE 2. “Anti-Nephi-Lehi Declares They Won’t Prepare for War,” film still, *The Anti-Nephi-Lehies Bury Weapons of War*, scene 306, Book of Mormon videos, Alma 23–27, ©IRI.

of Mormon language that is exclusive to the converted monarch. Hardy finds four phrases that appear only in the king’s speech.

“Great God.” First, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi speaks about a “great God” five times in Alma 24:7, 8, 10, 13, and 14. In a nod to the dynamic middle ground of intercultural theology, Hardy asserts that this phrase seems to be “a Nephite-influenced adaptation of the traditional Lamanite ‘Great Spirit,’” a phrase that appears eighteen times in the Book of Mormon, all during the mission of Mosiah’s sons to the Lamanites (Alma 18:2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 18, 26, 28; 19:25, 27; 22:9, 10, 11).

“I Thank My God.” Second, though it appears in the New Testament (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; 14:18; Philip. 1:3; Philem. 1:4), King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s phrase “I thank my God” (or a slight variation of it) appears in the Book of Mormon only in Alma 24:7, 8, 9, 10.

“Best Beloved Brethren.” Third, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s phrase “best beloved brethren” (Alma 24:12), which he employs to describe his repentant people, is also unique to him. It is interesting to note that, though the king calls Mosiah’s sons “our brethren” and “these brethren” (Alma 24:7, 8), he reserves the superlative expression “best beloved brethren” for his people.²¹

“Washed Bright.” Fourth, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi invites these most loved people to join him in “stain[ing] our swords no more with the blood of our brethren” (Alma 24:12; fig. 2). He then warns them that if they stain their swords again, these weapons “can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins” (Alma 24:13). The image of washing swords in Christ’s blood occurs only in these words from King Anti-Nephi-Lehi.²² Moreover, some form of the word “stain” appears

21. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 381.

22. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 381. Hardy suggests that the swords could be Mesoamerican *macuahuitl*. He describes *macuahuitl* as “wooden clubs with obsidian

only nine times in the Book of Mormon: twice in Alma's sermon to the Nephites in Zarahemla (see Alma 5:21, 22) and seven times in King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's speech (see Alma 24:11, 12, 13, 15).

Additional phrases that reveal King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's unique voice include the following:

"Opened a Correspondence." None of the sons of Mosiah preach about "open[ing] a correspondence" with the Lamanites (though Mormon employs the phrase in Alma 23:18), but King Anti-Nephi-Lehi uses that phrase twice in describing the intercultural exchange of gospel teaching and learning between Mosiah's sons and his people (see Alma 24:8, 9).

"Plan of Salvation." None of the Nephite preachers use the phrase "plan of salvation" in describing God's plan for his children, but the Lamanite monarch uses it in Alma 24:14. The phrase appears only two other times in the Book of Mormon in Jarom 1:2 and Alma 42:5.

"All We Can Do." Mormon does not record the sons of Mosiah using any similar phrase to "all we can do" (which appears only in 2 Ne. 25:23; the Nephite missionaries might have quoted it from the small plates of Nephi), but King Anti-Nephi-Lehi discusses his people's repentance as "all that we could do" and "as much as we could do" (Alma 24:11, 15).²³

Other Expressions. King Anti-Nephi-Lehi is also unique in using the following expressions: "taken away the guilt from our hearts" (Alma 24:10), "the merits of his Son" (Alma 24:10), "atonement of our sins" (Alma 24:13; phrases related to an atonement *for* sin appear in Mosiah 13:28; Alma 30:17; 34:12; and 42:15), "he loveth our souls" (Alma 24:14), and "go to our God" (Alma 24:16).

Phrases like "a portion of that Spirit," or "a portion of his Spirit," which appear in Ammon's words to King Lamoni (see Alma 18:35; see also Mormon's words in Alma 17:9 and Alma's words in Alma 40:13) and in King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's address (see Alma 24:8), suggest the influence of the Nephite missionaries on the converted king's articulation of the gospel. But clearly, many of King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's phrases do not derive from the language of Mosiah's sons.

blades" and states that "such weapons could be more easily stained with blood than metal swords" (381).

23. For possible meanings of "all we can do," see Joseph M. Spencer, "What Can We Do? Reflections on 2 Nephi 25:23," *Religious Educator* 15, no. 2 (2014): 24–39; Jared W. Ludlow, "After All We Can Do," *Religious Educator* 18, no. 1 (2017): 32–47; and Daniel O. McClellan, "2 Nephi 25:23 in Literary and Rhetorical Context," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 29 (2020): 1–19. McClellan argues that "all we can do" was a common idiom during the 1830s that meant "despite all we do."

Lamanite Teachings About Mercy in Alma 17–24

Furthermore, in another possible example of intercultural theology, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's language in Alma 24:7–16 emphasizes mercy, a concept that appears to have significant resonance with his people. When “mercy” and “merciful” appear in the Book of Mormon, from the beginning of the sons of Mosiah's mission in Alma 17 through the king's speech in Alma 24, they are always used by Lamanites and never by the Nephite missionaries. In Alma 18:41, King Lamoni begs the Lord to “have mercy; according to thy abundant mercy.” In Alma 19:29, Lamoni's queen cries, “O blessed God, have mercy on this people!” Perhaps due to Lamanite influence during the fourteen years of their missionary labors in the land of Nephi, the Nephite missionaries use “mercy” and “merciful” in Alma 26:16, 17, 20, 28, 35, and 37.

Lamoni's brother, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi, uses “mercy” or “merciful” three times in two verses. In his speech to the converted Lamanites, he testifies that “the great God has had mercy on us” (Alma 24:14). He then recalls that God, “in his mercy,” visited the Lamanites “by his angels” (Alma 24:14). This may refer to literal angels recorded in Alma 19:34, a figurative name for the sons of Mosiah (see Alma 27:4; King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's people treated the Nephite missionaries “as though they were angels sent from God to save them from everlasting destruction”), or both. After rejoicing that the “plan of salvation” has been “made known unto us as well as unto future generations” (Alma 24:14), the king exclaims exuberantly, “Oh, how merciful is our God!” (Alma 24:15).

This Lamanite emphasis on mercy in Alma 17–24 and its possible influence on the sons of Mosiah in Alma 26 appears to be a captivating example of interculturality. It seems to demonstrate at least three of the five tenets of intercultural theology, providing linguistic evidence for the two-way exchange of ideas in mission. First, rather than mission being a unidirectional (such as missionary-to-convert) flow of teaching, the Lamanite example shows that “*every form of theology is contextual.*”²⁴ Lamanites like Lamoni, Lamoni's queen, and King Anti-Nephi-Lehi hear the gospel from the sons of Mosiah, but they make sense of it within the framework of their unique cultural context—a context that appears to focus on God's mercy. Of all the sounds of the gospel's music, the sound of mercy appears to hold a special resonance for them. Granted, Mormon's account of Mosiah's sons' mission is a summary, and he may have

24. Wrogeemann, “Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology,” 147 (emphasis in original).

omitted their teachings about mercy. Perhaps missionaries like Ammon or Aaron emphasized mercy in their preaching, but the current text does not include these contributions. Without access to primary sources from the Nephite missionaries, there is no way to know.

However, it is true that the text, for whatever reason, teaches mercy only through Lamanite voices in Alma 17–24. Whether Mormon privileges Lamanite teachings about mercy or Lamanites are the only ones teaching about mercy, the text presents Lamanites—and not Nephites—as the preachers of mercy in these chapters, which can be read as a textual form of intercultural theology. This phenomenon leads to another tenet of interculturality: Examining the possible convert-to-missionary flow of theology is as important as interrogating the missionary-to-convert dissemination of doctrine. If readers view these chapters as simply what Nephites give to Lamanites, then they are privileging a one-way flow of theology and missing an opportunity to celebrate truth, whoever teaches it.

Finally, Alma 17–24's mercy-focused theology of the Lamanites provides an opportunity for what Wrogemann calls a "significant *change of perspective*."²⁵ The text conveys the converted Lamanites' translation of the message as original and additive. Readers inspired by these teachings on God's mercy from Alma 17–24 may not realize that they come through the voices of recent Lamanite converts, who contribute meaningfully to the understanding and application of doctrine. In this sense, as Peter C. Phan argues, intercultural theology or "inculturation" allows converts' cultures to influence the way missionaries learn and teach the gospel message.²⁶ As President Joseph F. Smith teaches, "No sect or religious denomination in the world possesses a single principle of truth that we do not accept or that we will reject. We are willing to receive all truth, from whatever source it may come."²⁷ Perhaps the Nephite missionaries consider God's mercy in new ways after seeing the Lamanite emphasis.

25. Wrogemann, "Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology," 147 (emphasis in original).

26. Peter C. Phan, "Mission as Inculturation: Contextualizing God's Message in Local Cultures," in Kim, Jørgensen, and Fitchett-Climenhaga, *Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, 422.

27. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, 8th ed. (Deseret Book, 1949), 1. Elder Dallin H. Oaks quoted these words from President Joseph F. Smith in a Church Educational System devotional for young adults. See Dallin H. Oaks, "Truth and Tolerance," devotional, Brigham Young University, September 11, 2011, BYU Speeches, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/truth-and-tolerance/>.

Part II: King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's Unique Doctrinal Applications

Burying Weapons to Retain Remission: A Covenant of Limited, Penitential Pacifism

Along with using a unique literary voice to apply what he learned to his own culture, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi makes several unique doctrinal applications in his Alma 24 address. First, he announces a covenant of limited, penitential pacifism (as opposed to universal or absolute pacifism) that is an astonishing departure from Lamanite and Nephite tradition, including the teachings and actions of the sons of Mosiah. The king's pacifism appears to be a choice to forsake personal sin associated with violence and not a philosophy that rejects all violence as a way to settle disputes.

In fact, war between Lamanites and Nephites is a common occurrence throughout the Book of Mormon. John W. Welch takes the "approximately one hundred instances of armed conflict in the Book of Mormon," some of which lasted for hundreds of years, and divides them into fifteen separate wars or series of wars. These hostilities begin with the "early tribal wars" of "fraternal hatred" between Nephites and Lamanites following their division in the sixth century BC and end almost a millennium later with the "final Nephite wars" (ca. AD 322–85) in which the "Lamanites annihilated the Nephite people." As Welch summarizes, "Wars were important to the people of the Book of Mormon. Not only were armed conflicts matters of life and death, but they were also matters of great political and religious importance. . . . Indeed, most Nephite leaders were both religious and military men."²⁸

Thus, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's injunction to "stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren" (Alma 24:12) flies in the face of culturally acceptable Lamanite and Nephite philosophy and practice. It is a unique moment in the text that leads to one of the Book of Mormon's most enduring and endearing scenes. As Mormon records, following the king's speech, all the Anti-Nephi-Lehies "took their swords, and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man's blood, and they did bury them up deep in the earth. And this they did, it being in their view a testimony to God, and also to men, that they never would use weapons again for the shedding of man's blood; and this they did, vouching and covenanting with God, that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they

28. John W. Welch, "Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Deseret Book; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 5–15, 3–4.

would give up their own lives” (Alma 24:17–18).

This extraordinary burying of weapons as a response to the king’s address (fig. 3), an act repeated in Alma 25:13–14, has led to spirited scholarly debate about the nature of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ pacifism.²⁹ Did burying their weapons of war mean that they decided, as early “conscientious objectors,” that all war is morally wrong and unjustifiable?³⁰ Should Anti-Nephi-Lehies be held up as paragons of

nonviolent ethics? Grant Hardy claims that the “pacifist Anti-Nephi-Lehies” “choose pacifism” and make a “covenant of nonviolence.” He explains that their “extraordinary vow, with restrictions not required for regular repentance, is perhaps akin to that of the Nazarites in Num 6” and “goes beyond pacifism to include generosity and diligence” (see Alma 24:18). In commenting on Alma 24:19, in which Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s people “buried the weapons of war, for peace,” he notes that “the custom among some northeastern Indian tribes of ‘burying the hatchet’ after concluding peace negotiations was widely known in 18th and 19th c. America.”³¹

Though there are elements in the king’s speech and subsequent actions of the converted Lamanites that parallel, or appear to be, absolute pacifism (for example, allowing themselves to be slaughtered rather



FIGURE 3. J. Kirk Richards, “*They Buried Their Weapons of War, For Peace*,” 2022, oil on panel. Courtesy the artist.

29. For an excellent discussion of these debates, see J. David Pulsipher, “Buried Swords: The Shifting Interpretive Ground of a Beloved Book of Mormon Narrative,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 1–47; David Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families and Love Your Enemies: A New Look at the Book of Mormon’s Patterns of Protection,” *BYU Studies* 60, no. 2 (2021): 163–83; and Duane Boyce, “Captain America and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension,” *BYU Studies* 60, no. 2 (2021): 127–62; see also “Why Did the Ammonites Covenant Not to Take Up Arms?,” Scripture Central, April 24, 2025, <https://scripturecentral.org/why/why-did-the-ammonites-covenant-not-to-take-up-arms>.

30. Welch, “Why Study Warfare in the Book of Mormon?,” 21.

31. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 381–82.

than break their covenant in Alma 24:21–22 and again in Alma 27:2–3; see also Alma 27:28–30), other scholars interpret these actions as manifestations of a covenantal commitment to retain a remission of sins by avoiding the repetition of past acts of personal violence, rather than a demonstration of an ideology of universal pacifism. This position views Anti-Nephi-Lehi's words as an extension, or expression, of the yearning expressed by Lamoni and Anti-Nephi-Lehi's father when he tells God, "I will give away all my sins to know thee" (Alma 22:18).

In burying their weapons, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies are likely motivated by a desire to forsake their personal sins, not necessarily by any philosophy that rejects war generally. As King Anti-Nephi-Lehi explains, "Since it has been all that we could do (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain—Now, my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren" (Alma 24:11–12). At least in these words, there appears to be no absolute renunciation of war on moral grounds and no philosophical case for nonviolent methods as the only justifiable way of settling disputes.

Instead, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi seems worried about staying forgiven and maintaining purity before the Lord. His motivation may be remaining unstained now that Christ has "washed" their swords (which represent their past sins, including "many murders" that spilled the "blood of our brethren") "bright through the blood of the Son of our great God" (Alma 24:11–13). He does not seem to describe universal pacifism as a motivation for the burying of weapons.

Regardless of King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's motivation, burying weapons is a stunning example of applying the gospel message to his culture in a way that the Nephite missionaries never suggest. Ammon focuses on the mighty change of heart that the converted Lamanites from seven cities (see Alma 23:8–12) experience and describes this change as their motivation for burying their weapons. Jesus Christ replaces the "guilt" that King Anti-Nephi-Lehi says had filled their "hearts" because of "many murders" (Alma 24:9–11) with what Ammon calls "great love" (Alma 26:33): "For behold, they had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of their enemy; and they have buried their weapons of war deep in the earth, because of their love towards their brethren," a love that Ammon seems to connect to "their [newfound] hatred to sin" (Alma 26:32, 34)—not their hatred of war in general.

The Anti-Nephi-Lehies' acceptance of others (such as the Nephites who protect them in Jerushon and their own sons who fight for Helaman₂) going to war in their place in Alma 27:21–26 and Alma 53:1–22 corroborate this position. Duane Boyce concludes, “These actions are straightforward contradictions of a complete and principled renunciation of war. . . . The actual reason the Ammonites renounced war and entered a covenant to eschew all conflict . . . was an act of penance—reparation (insofar as such was possible) for a past filled with aggression, violence, and hatred. Appreciating this explains why the Ammonites did not generalize their conduct to others.”³²

Indeed, as the “voice of the [Nephite] people [in the land of Zarahemla]” (Alma 27:22) explains, Nephites are willing to provide military protection for the converted Lamanites because the Anti-Nephi-Lehies “fear to take up arms against their brethren lest they should commit sin; and this their great fear came because of their sore repentance which they had, on account of their many murders and their awful wickedness” (Alma 27:23). The Anti-Nephi-Lehies appear to be against repeating sin—not the possibility of war. They later support their guardians in Jerushon and their own sons in pursuing war. This unique doctrinal application, whatever the motivation, is striking, and readers can see the buried Anti-Nephi-Lehi weapons as a memorable monument to the additive praxis of a receiving culture—an example of intercultural theology.

In encouraging the act of burying their weapons to retain a remission of sins, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi makes a unique contribution to the doctrine of repentance in the Book of Mormon. As Grant Hardy argues, “There is no indication that the Nephite missionaries initiated or recommended the remarkable course of action [the Anti-Nephi-Lehies laying down of weapons as ‘a testimony’ (Alma 24:16–19)],” and “certainly Ammon was not an example of pacifism in his service to King Lamoni” (see Alma 17:33–39).³³ From the Lehite exodus from Jerusalem (ca. 600 BC) to the king’s speech (ca. 90–77 BC), personal, limited pacifism is never a covenant other than when the Anti-Nephi-Lehies renounce using weapons to take human life to retain a remission of their personal sins (see Alma 23:7; 24:12–13, 16, 17–19; 25:14; 26:32–34; 27:3; 28–29; and 53:15–16). As Mormon exclaims, “They were firm, and would suffer even unto death rather than commit sin” (Alma 24:19; note that the verse focuses on sin and does not state that they would die to avoid war).

32. Duane Boyce, “The Ammonites Were Not Pacifists,” *Interpreter* 20 (2016): 298, 312.

33. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 381.

Prior to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' unique decision, Lehi₁, Nephi₁, Jacob₂, Benjamin, Mosiah₂, Abinadi, Alma₁, Alma₂, and Mosiah's sons do not teach burying weapons for retaining a remission of sins. Laying down weapons is not a condition for or symbol of conversion for anyone else in the text to this point. Both the Nephites and Lamanites have cultures that prepare for war, engage in war, and accept war as a way to settle disputes, gain power, or defend individuals, families, and ways of life. As Patrick Q. Mason notes, "Prior to the coming of Christ, war had featured prominently in the experience of God's covenant people in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. This changed, however, after Christ delivered a higher law of love (see Matthew 5; 3 Nephi 12). The New Testament and Book of Mormon jointly attest that nonviolence became a central component of Christian discipleship."³⁴

In fact, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies make a covenant of personal pacifism out of "great love" and a "hatred to sin" (Alma 26:33, 34) more than a century before Nephites and Lamanites experience "no contention in the land [including murder and war], because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people" (4 Ne. 1:15). Even after Christ's visitation, disciples do not formally renounce bloodshed in the way that these converted Lamanites do. As Kimberly Matheson asserts, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies "provide the Book of Mormon's best models for nonmilitary methods of achieving peace (Alma 24)."³⁵ Perhaps part of Mormon's goal in relating this story is for readers to appropriate aspects of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi's gospel of peace into their own culture.

A Unique Contribution to the Book of Mormon's Teachings About Forsaking Sin

King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's most striking doctrinal application may be his understanding of achieving peace by a complete and unyielding commitment to forsaking sin because of the belief that "if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son" (Alma 24:13). Among Book of Mormon teachers, the king places a unique emphasis on not returning to past transgressions. King Anti-Nephi-Lehi explains that he and his people were "the most lost of

34. Patrick Q. Mason, "Zionic Nonviolence as Christian Worship and Praxis," in *How and What You Worship: Christology and Praxis in the Revelations of Joseph Smith*, ed. Rachel Cope, Carter Charles, and Jordan T. Watkins (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2020), 252.

35. Kimberly Matheson Berkey, *Helaman: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 102.

all mankind” (Alma 24:11). Therefore, it took “all that we could do” and “as much as we could do” (Alma 24:11, 15) to “get our stains taken away from us” (Alma 24:15) through “the merits of [Jesus Christ]” (Alma 24:10). This dark past and the effort to escape it is so transformative that, as Mormon summarizes, “rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives” (Alma 24:18), and “they would suffer death in the most aggravating and distressing manner which could be inflicted by their brethren, before they would take the sword or cimeter to smite them” (Alma 27:29).

Perhaps “all that [they] could do . . . to repent” must include the act of burying their weapons of hate so deep into the ground that they could not retrieve them (fig. 4). The burial of their swords represents a complete surrender to God—a complete change to one element of their prior culture.

The Anti-Nephi-Lehies prostrating themselves on the ground in prayer while a Lamanite army (that included Amalekites and Amulonites; see Alma 24:28) ruthlessly murdered “a thousand and five of them” “without meeting any resistance” (Alma 24:21–22) is one of the most harrowing and evocative scenes in the Book of Mormon. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies “praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword” (Alma 24:23). Having witnessed such a scene, Ammon’s verses of praise for the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people may reveal a change in his own heart, one that demonstrates the impact that the receiving culture has had on him: “Has there been so great love in all the land? Behold, I say unto you, Nay, there has not, even among the Nephites” (Alma 26:33). With such a drastic change in a culture of hate, this is an example of intercultural theology at its best.³⁶



FIGURE 4. Dan Burr, *The Purifying Path of Obedience, Sacrifice, and Consecration*, digital. Courtesy the artist.

36. The author does not support any interpretation of this story suggesting that genuine repentance requires self-destruction or passivity in the face of abuse. For more

A Cautious Approach to Sin that Changes Culture

King Anti-Nephi-Lehi teaches, “Perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God” (Alma 24:13). The monarch’s use of “perhaps” modifies what follows to alert his hearers to the reality that he is not certain but seems to want to err on the side of caution, which ends up working for his people.³⁷ Not daring to come close to the same sins benefits his people immensely.

Following the burial of their weapons, their continual forsaking of sin leads to blessings like the following: (1) They remain so converted that they “never did fall away” (Alma 23:7); (2) they are reconciled to God so that “the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18); (3) they learn how to love even more than the Nephites do (Alma 26:33); and (4) they “have gone to their God [in death]” (Alma 26:34) and “never did look upon death with any degree of terror, for their hope and views of Christ and the resurrection; therefore, death was swallowed up to them by the victory of Christ over it” (Alma 27:28).

In short, they live in a way that distinguishes them “for their zeal towards God, and also towards men; for they were perfectly honest and upright in all things; and they were firm in the faith of Christ, even unto the end” (Alma 27:27). They are a “zealous and beloved people, highly favored of the Lord” (Alma 27:30; this is the only time in the Book of Mormon that Lamanites or converted Lamanites are called “highly favored”).³⁸ Thus, the way King Anti-Nephi-Lehi applies the gospel to his people’s culture, teaching repentance and love for enemy in his address, has a tremendously positive influence on the future of his people.

A Unique Focus on Christ’s Merits

Though King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s possible insinuation in Alma 24:13 that there may not be forgiveness for his people if they “stain [their] swords again” could be likened by readers in discouraging ways, a closer look

about righteous sacrifices that could be part of covenant-keeping discipleship, see the application questions in Nicholas W. Gentile, “The Martyrdoms of Ignatius, Polycarp, and Perpetua: Windows into Christian Discipleship in Ancient Rome,” *Religious Educator* 24, no. 2 (2023): 95–98.

37. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 381, claims that the king is “unsure whether Christ’s atonement will cover sins committed again after repentance.”

38. The term “highly favored” appears six other times in the Book of Mormon to describe others (1 Ne. 1:1; Mosiah 1:13; Alma 9:20, 13:23, 48:20; Ether 1:34).

at the king's speech reveals a more hopeful, Christocentric paradigm. Many parts of his address discuss the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' need to forsake sin, such as "all we could do to repent sufficiently," "stain our swords no more," not "stain our swords again," "as much as we could do to get our stains taken away from us," "that we have not stained our swords in the blood of our brethren," "hide away our swords," and "bury them deep in the earth" (see Alma 24:11, 12, 13, 15, 16). But the king's doctrine does not confuse who saves his people (Jesus Christ) with the actions that allow his people to come unto Christ.

Aaron teaches the king's people that "since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance, and so forth" (Alma 22:14). King Anti-Nephi-Lehi appears to take Aaron's teachings to heart in his remarks: "I thank my God, yea, my great God, that he hath granted unto us that we might repent" and "taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son" (Alma 24:10). The king is clear that God, through the merits of Jesus Christ, is the only one who can "take [sins] away from our hearts" to "take away our stain" (Alma 24:11; Alma 24:12 also states that it is God who "hath taken away our stains"). He does not see the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' acts of penance as justifying, sanctifying, or salvific.³⁹

Like Samuel the Lamanite (ca. 6 BC), King Anti-Nephi-Lehi differentiates coming unto Christ through the actions of repentance from being transformed by Christ (see Moro. 10:32). As Samuel teaches in Helaman 14:13, "If ye believe on [Christ's] name ye will repent of all your sins, that thereby ye may have a remission of them through his merits." In fact, Alma 24:10 is one of only five verses in the Book of Mormon (along with 2 Ne. 2:8; 31:19; Hel. 14:13; and Moro. 6:4) that specifically mention Christ's "merits" as being salvific. If there is a famine and only one store has food, does walking to that one store save—or does the food that only that store has save? King Anti-Nephi-Lehi seems to be teaching that it is the store with the food—not the walk—that saves. In Alma 24, he bears a

39. Regarding "good works" like acts of penance (such as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies burying their swords) and salvation, Richard Draper and Michael Rhodes explain, "As important as good works are, they do not make one perfect, and perfect is the requirement for eternal life. Perfection comes only in and through the power of Christ (see Col. 1:28; 1 Pet. 5:10; Moro. 10:32). People, however, must accept that power and apply it to themselves in order to be clean, thus opening the way to perfection." Richard D. Draper and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Revelation of John the Apostle*, BYU New Testament Commentary Series (BYU Studies, 2013), 847.

powerful witness that his people are saved because of Christ's grace—not by the actions that take them to him, including burying their weapons.⁴⁰ To King Anti-Nephi-Lehi, repentance is a process that takes individuals to Christ so he can change and save them.

Washing Swords in Christ's Blood

Similarly, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's image of washing swords in Christ's blood (which occurs in the Book of Mormon only in Anti-Nephi-Lehi's words in Alma 24:13) emphasizes that his people—like all of God's children—can be saved only through Christ's atoning sacrifice. That sacrifice, "infinite and eternal" (Alma 34:10, 14), requires the blood of the divine Son of God, not the blood of a man or woman (see Alma 34:11–14). Thus, the sacrificial Lamb of God⁴¹ had to die on the cross for God's children to be able to "wash" in the "blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins" (Alma 24:13).

King Anti-Nephi-Lehi teaches this powerful doctrine of washing in Christ's blood, which appears in only four other places in the Book of Mormon (Alma 5:21; 13:11; 3 Ne. 27:19; Ether 13:11). Though Aaron preached previously that "there could be no redemption for mankind save it were through the death and sufferings of Christ, and the atonement of his blood" (Alma 21:9),⁴² which may have influenced the king's doctrinal exposition in Alma 24, it is important to note the potential intercultural theology at work here. Though King Anti-Nephi-Lehi may have received the gospel message about "the atonement of [Christ's] blood" from Aaron, the converted monarch transmits the message to his people in creative and distinct ways that may resonate especially well with his people.

Analyzed through the lens of intercultural theology, the king's unique image of washing swords in Christ's blood demonstrates what

40. As Daniel Becerra states concisely, "All of our efforts to be righteous are not what ultimately save us." Becerra, *3rd, 4th Nephi*, 28. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf teaches, "We cannot earn our way into heaven; the demands of justice stand as a barrier, which we are powerless to overcome on our own. . . . Salvation cannot be bought with the currency of obedience; it is purchased by the blood of the Son of God." Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Gift of Grace," *Ensign*, May 2015, 109.

41. The "Lamb of God" is a title used for Christ in the New Testament only by John (twenty-eight times: twice in John 1 and twenty-six times in Revelation) and in the Book of Mormon mostly by Nephi (sixty-four times in 1 and 2 Nephi, three times in Alma, once in Helaman, three times in Mormon, and twice in Ether).

42. See also Aaron's teachings in Alma 22:14 about the "sufferings and death of Christ."

Phan calls “the ‘indigenizing principle’ (giving the Gospel its particular and local character),” while Aaron’s more general introduction to salvation through Christ’s blood demonstrates what Phan terms “the ‘pilgrim principle’ (giving the Gospel its transcultural and universal character).”⁴³ This beautiful doctrinal encounter between Aaron and King Anti-Nephi-Lehi shows the value of seeing mission as a dynamic, two-way, and additive exchange rather than as a unidirectional pouring of static theology from a missionary to a “missionized” person. It helps scholars of mission see local actors like King Anti-Nephi-Lehi as agents who produce and contribute while retaining their individuality and cultural autonomy, even as they choose to embrace truths that unify them with other disciples.

King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s local appropriation of Aaron’s message about Christ’s blood is also doctrinally significant because it emphasizes the cleansing, saving agent of Christ’s blood in a way that helps members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and others who read the Book of Mormon to pair the living, resurrected Christ with the atoning, dying Savior. As Patrick Mason writes,

In my church we don’t like to think very much about the crucified Jesus. We focus instead on the resurrected Christ. We like the glow, the glory, the happily ever after story. We don’t much like the mangled, tortured, bloody body hanging limply on the cross. But Jesus doesn’t want us to look away. When Jesus revealed himself after his resurrection, he showed the people the scars in his hands and feet and side. When you look at me, Jesus insists, don’t forget my murdered body on the cross. And don’t forget the violent system that did it. The resurrected, glorified Christ points us to the crucified Jesus.⁴⁴

Mormon invites Moroni to let Christ’s “sufferings and death, and the showing [of] his body unto our fathers⁴⁵ . . . rest in your mind forever” (Moro. 9:25). By drawing his people’s attention to “the blood of the Son” (Alma 24:13), King Anti-Nephi-Lehi helps his people focus their attention on the dying Christ, who gives salvific power to the living Christ. As the resurrected Redeemer explains at the temple in Bountiful, “Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also

43. Phan, “Mission as Inculturation,” 425.

44. Patrick Mason, “George Floyd and Jesus: A Eulogy,” Medium, June 5, 2020, https://medium.com/@pqmason/george-floyd-and-jesus-a-eulogy-b36c475d4694#_edn15.

45. Third Nephi 11:8–17 records this event, which Nephite leaders prophesy about in 1 Ne. 12:4–8; 2 Ne. 26:1, 9; 32:6; and Alma 16:20; 45:10.

that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Ne. 11:14). In this passage, one purpose of Christ’s resurrected body with its retained wounds (see Zech. 13:6) is to bear witness of his Crucifixion—that he was “slain for the sins of the world.”

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland testifies that Christ kept his wounds to show that “painful things happen even to the pure and the perfect” and are “signs that tribulation is *not* evidence that God does not love us.” He continues, “It is a significant and hopeful fact that it is the *wounded* Christ who comes to our rescue. He who bears the scars of sacrifice, the lesions of love, the emblems of humility and forgiveness is the Captain of our Soul. That evidence of pain in mortality is undoubtedly intended to give courage to others who are also hurt and wounded by life, perhaps even in the house of their friends.”⁴⁶

King Anti-Nephi-Lehi’s attention to Christ’s blood can also remind readers of a truth that Paul teaches: God’s children are “reconciled to God by the death of his son” (Rom. 5:10). They experience redemption only “through his blood” (Eph. 1:7; see also Mosiah 3:18 and Moses 6:62) and especially through the “blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20).⁴⁷ As John Hilton III points out, “The [Latter-day Saint] standard works focus heavily on Christ’s Crucifixion. There are fifty-two scriptural references to the salvific power of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ and two references to Christ’s suffering our sins in Gethsemane” (Mosiah 3:7 and D&C 19:15–18; Luke 22:44 describes Christ bleeding in Gethsemane but does not mention why).⁴⁸ By emphasizing Christ’s blood, which would be shed in Gethsemane and on Calvary’s cross in about one hundred years from the king’s speech, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi connects the “merits of [God’s] Son” (Alma 24:10) to his suffering and death—the parts of Christ’s Atonement in which his “blood” would be “shed for the atonement of our sins” (Alma 24:13). This connection is important for Latter-day Saints who may tend to shy away from a focus on the dying Christ in favor of the resurrected Savior.

46. Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Deseret Book, 1997), 259 (emphasis in original).

47. For more about the doctrine of the cross in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, see Gaye Strathearn, “The Crucifixion,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2019), 358–76.

48. John Hilton III, “Teaching the Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ,” *Religious Educator* 20, no. 3 (2019): 135.

King Anti-Nephi-Lehi mentions blood frequently in his speech (four times in three verses; see Alma 24:12, 13, 15), and blood appears to be a particularly meaningful symbol for the king and his people. When describing the “murders” that his people committed (Alma 24:9, 10, 11), he does not say that they “killed people” or “took people’s lives”; he says that they “stained” their “swords with the blood” or “in the blood” of their “brethren” (Alma 24:12, 13, 15). In a haunting paradox, the king teaches that the only way to wash away human blood is by washing in divine blood, the “blood of the Son of our great God” (Alma 24:13). This reframing of bloodshed in war to the healing blood of Christ may have helped the Lamanite culture change. Sometimes intercultural theology takes the same concept and provides converts with “a new way of understanding and living it.”⁴⁹ The king’s translation of the message inspires meaningful application for his people, and Mormon’s use of the king’s words, whether quoted or paraphrased, allow them to continue to change hearts today.

Conclusion

The hermeneutics of intercultural theology magnifies the unique literary voice and doctrinal applications of King Anti-Nephi-Lehi. Interrogating the Book of Mormon for interculturality expands the lens through which scholars can explore the text’s complexity and richness. Honoring two-way exchange in mission in sections of the text like Alma 17–26, which curriculum writers for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have traditionally viewed as “the missionary journey of the sons of Mosiah to the Lamanites,” foregrounds oft-marginalized (or simply less-heard) groups in the narrative—in this case, converted Lamanites who call themselves Anti-Nephi-Lehies.⁵⁰ Rather than seeing mission in these chapters as a one-way flow of enlightenment from Nephites to Lamanites, interculturality examines how receiving groups translate the gospel message, appropriate it for themselves within their own meaningful contexts, and then influence doctrine and praxis. This influence, wielded by local actors, allows for what Henning Wrogemann calls “significantly different local expressions” of faith within the bounds of

49. Phan, “Mission as Inculturation,” 422.

50. “Alma 17: ‘According to the Word and Power of God,’” *Book of Mormon Seminary Teacher Manual* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2024), accessed April 26, 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/book-of-mormon-seminary-teacher-manual-2024/27-alma-17-22/271-teacher> (emphasis added). Note that Mormon writes from a similar paradigm in the chapter heading for Alma 17, which states that Mosiah’s sons went to the land of Nephi “to preach to the Lamanites.”

orthodoxy,⁵¹ such as the inspiring Korean version of fellowshiping (*jeong*) mentioned at the beginning of the article.

King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's significantly different local expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Alma 24:7–16 exhibits both his unique voice in the Book of Mormon and his unique doctrinal applications to the text. First, his speech leaves a striking literary mark on the text. Second in length (in words and verses) only to Samuel's unparalleled contribution in Helaman 13–15, Anti-Nephi-Lehi's address moves a Lamanite voice from the margins of the Book of Mormon to center stage. Situated within Alma 18–24, in the context of other powerful teachings from Lamanites like Lamoni, Abish, Lamoni's queen, and Lamoni's father, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's words help readers experience the power of listening to and amplifying underrepresented voices.

Along with making inspiring allusions to the small plates of Nephi (by frequently referencing God's goodness) and sharing a unique perspective about committing sins and murders (that Mormon fits within the macro-chiastic structure of Alma 23:16 through 27:30), the converted monarch's speech contains language found nowhere else in the Book of Mormon. This unique language includes the enduring image of washing swords in Christ's blood and the following phrases: "great God," "I thank my God," "best beloved brethren," "taken away the guilt from our hearts," "the merits of his son," "atonement of our sins," "he loveth our souls," and "go to our God." It also includes phrases different from anything that the text records the sons of Mosiah saying, such as "opened a correspondence," "plan of salvation" (one of three times the well-known phrase appears in the Book of Mormon), "all we could do," "as much as we could do," and many references to seeing sin as "stain" (which appear only nine times in the Book of Mormon, seven of them in the king's speech).

Finally, the king's emphasis on mercy also appears to be noteworthy when considering interculturality because only Lamanites (Lamoni, Lamoni's queen, and Anti-Nephi-Lehi) mention "mercy" and "merciful" in Alma 17–24. In a possible example of intercultural exchange, the Lamanite language of mercy may demonstrate their linguistic or doctrinal influence on Nephite missionaries, as Mosiah's sons adopt similar language in Alma 26.

Along with showcasing King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's unique literary voice, the extraordinary address in Alma 24:7–16 contains unique doctrinal

51. Henning Wrogemann, "Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology," *Religions* 12, no. 11 (November 2021): 6 (for quote), 7 (for discussion of orthodoxy), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12111014>.

teachings from the converted Lamanite monarch. First, the king introduces the Book of Mormon's only explicit covenant of limited, penitential pacifism. This astonishing commitment to burying weapons of war and refusing to use them again to take human life comes because of a "hatred to sin" (Alma 26:34)—not a general renunciation of war. Without any clear textual direction from the sons of Mosiah, King Anti-Nephi-Lehi instructs his people to bury their weapons to retain a remission of their sins. His complete and unyielding desire to forsake sin is so great that he worries that backsliding might put his people in a position where receiving forgiveness again would not be possible. Thus, he advocates complete surrender, encouraging his people to suffer death, which they would do in harrowing fashion in Alma 24:21–22 and Alma 27:2–3, rather than break their covenant of personal nonviolence. These hauntingly profound doctrinal teachings lead the Anti-Nephi-Lehies down a path of careful and devoted discipleship that makes them paragons of conversion—what it means and what it looks like (see Alma 23:7, 18; 26:33, 34; 27:27, 28, 30).

Lest King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's people think that forgiveness and salvation are the result of righteous actions like burying weapons of rebellion, the king also bears a powerful witness of the "merits of [God's] Son" (Alma 24:10, one of only five places in the Book of Mormon that discuss Christ's "merits"). His unique image of washing stained swords in the blood of their Redeemer (Alma 24:13) emphasizes, in a creative and additive contribution to theology in the Book of Mormon, that the dying Christ gives salvific power to the living Christ. In the end, the king's most profound contribution has almost nothing to do with bloodstained wood in the shape of a weapon, deep in the ground, and almost everything to do with bloodstained wood in the shape of a cross, high in the air. The king knows that burying their weapons will not save the Anti-Nephi-Lehies but that Christ will. Christ has "made [them] clean" (Alma 24:15), and King Anti-Nephi-Lehi wants them to remain clean.

These unique literary and doctrinal teachings from King Anti-Nephi-Lehi matter. They matter because they are inspiring, memorable, insightful, and rich in academic and devotional potential. But they also matter because of what they represent: the empowering study of underrepresented voices. Individuals who experience marginality are often prejudicially caricatured by mainstream perspectives. Such is the case for the Lamanites prior to their dynamic gospel exchanges with the sons of Mosiah in Alma 17–26. As Ammon recounts, prior to his experiences teaching and learning with King Anti-Nephi-Lehi's people, Nephites in the land of Zarahemla ignorantly and harmfully label the

Lamanite people with sweeping generalizations like the following: They are “stiffnecked,” “delight in the shedding of blood,” spend their days in the “grossest iniquity,” and have followed “the ways of a transgressor from the beginning” (Alma 26:23–24). These dehumanizing judgments of people whom they do not know personally even lead prejudiced Nephites in Zarahemla to recommend preemptively destroying the Lamanites before they “destroy us” (Alma 26:25).

Listening with an open mind and heart to the words of a converted Lamanite like King Anti-Nephi-Lehi allows readers to appreciate his large-hearted humanity and unparalleled conversion, admire his image-filled literary style, and marvel at his doctrinal insights about the Savior’s unfathomable merits. Doing so—and being intentional about foregrounding other less-heard people and perspectives in the Book of Mormon—goes a long way in accomplishing what President Russell M. Nelson invited members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to do in a recent general conference: “Today I call upon our members everywhere to lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice. I plead with you to promote respect for all of God’s children.”⁵² Intercultural theology is a powerful tool that scholars can use to accomplish these noble objectives.

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52. Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign*, November 2020, 94.

A Powerful Tool for Good and Evil

An Extensive Review of Church Leaders' Teachings on Technology Use

Jenet Jacob Erickson and Anson Savage

In scripture, prophets of God are called “watchmen on the tower” (Isa. 62:6), a metaphorical reference to sentries stationed to look out for and warn of approaching dangers. As prophets, seers, and revelators, they are authorized to reveal things that are not known and bring hidden things to light (Mosiah 8:17). In doing so, prophets give inspired direction and timely warnings for people in their own time and place, with the inherent opportunities, challenges, and dangers. We should therefore not be surprised that prophets and the leaders who serve under their direction in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have addressed the issue of digital technology.

At the turn of the millennium, new technologies introduced products that have transformed human development and interaction “on an almost unimaginable scale.”¹ These new technologies, which were “far more portable, personalized, and engaging than anything that came before,” were, as noted by renowned social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, taken up without any real awareness of the potential effects.² There seemed to be much to celebrate. Few of us can imagine life without immediate access to the world of information and connection enabled through these technologies.

Yet a generation into widespread use of smartphones, social media, and other stunning advancements, we are in the midst of a global debate

1. Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (Penguin Press, 2024), 4.

2. Haidt, *Anxious Generation*, 3.

about their potential risks. Some scholars argue that the virtual world can crowd out or replace face-to-face interaction, depriving children, adolescents, and young adults of the experiences they need for relational maturity.³ Haidt argues that this “Great Rewiring of Childhood” and adolescence has interfered with social and neurological development, dramatically increasing loneliness, social contagion, social comparison, and perfectionism.⁴ The international increase in mental health challenges among adolescents has been linked with adolescent access to smartphones, triggering efforts to ban cell phone use in schools.⁵ The addictive nature of technology use is also a growing concern.⁶

Other research findings suggest that these risks are overstated and that an overemphasis on technology use may obscure the root causes of the mental health crisis.⁷ These scholars argue that the goal should not be limiting technology use; rather, the focus should be on teaching youth how to use technology.⁸

3. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2011); Jon Haidt and Zach Rausch, “Mountains of Evidence,” *After Babel*, Substack, January 14, 2026, <https://www.afterbabel.com/p/mountains-of-evidence>; Vera Skalická, Beate Wold Hygen, Frode Stenseng, Silja Berg Kårstad, and Lars Wichstrøm, “Screen Time and the Development of Emotion Understanding from Age 4 to Age 8: A Community Study,” *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 37, no. 3 (2019): 427–443, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12283>.

4. Haidt, *Anxious Generation*, 7, 21–45.

5. David Leonhardt, “Smartphones in Schools: How Educators Are Fighting Against Distractions,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/06/briefing/smartphones-in-schools.html>; Jean M. Twenge, Gabrielle N. Martin, and W. Keith Campbell, “Decreases in Psychological Well-Being Among American Adolescents After 2012 and Links to Screen Time During the Rise of Smartphone Technology,” *Emotion* 18, no. 6 (2018): 765–780, <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000403>.

6. Daria J. Kuss and Mark D. Griffiths, “Social Networking Sites and Addiction: Ten Lessons Learned,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 3 (2017): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14030311>; James Sherer and Petros Levounis, “Technological Addictions,” *Current Psychiatry Reports* 24, no. 9 (2022): 399–406, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-022-01351-2>; Alejandro L. Mujica, Charles R. Crowell, Michael A. Villano, and Khutb M. Uddin, “Addiction By Design: Some Dimensions and Challenges of Excessive Social Media Use,” *Medical Research Archives* 10, no. 2 (2022): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v10i2.2677>.

7. Elizabeth J. Ivie, Adam Pettitt, Louis J. Moses, and Nicholas B. Allen, “A Meta-Analysis of the Association Between Adolescent Social Media Use and Depressive Symptoms,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 275 (October 2020): 165–174, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2020.06.014>.

8. Sarah M. Coyne, “The Unintended Consequences of Banning Social Media,” *Psychology Today*, February 20, 2023, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-right-media-mindset/202302/the-unintended-consequences-of-banning-social-media>.

Parents, teachers, and other community leaders have similarly wrestled with how to view technology and how to guide their children and youth in its use. Two-thirds of parents in the United States identified “the impact of digital technology [and] the rise of social media” as key reasons parenting is harder today.⁹ Many are desperate for guidance, with no generational models to draw upon because no previous generation has experienced these changes.

Amid these seeming contradictions, what have Church leaders taught? How have those seen as “watchmen on the tower” viewed these remarkable technologies? What counsel have they offered? The purpose of this research study is to analyze and elucidate the direction given by Church leaders regarding the use of technology. This review confirms that Church leaders have provided clear, consistent warnings as well as encouraging principles to guide the use of technology. Their inspired direction provides a framework for understanding and responding to these life-changing technologies.

Methodology

To analyze and evaluate the focus of Church leaders on technology, we searched references to technology in general conference talks between April 2007 and April 2025. We started with the year 2007 because it was the year that Apple released the iPhone, which revolutionized smartphones and brought them into mainstream global use. We also focused specifically on messages from general conference because it is the semi-annual event organized under the direction of prophets, seers, and revelators when general Church leaders—including the President of the Church, Apostles, General Authority Seventies, and women leaders—share truth revealed by God for the entire membership that is relevant to current challenges. Other messages and training materials delivered and produced under the direction of Church leaders may also be considered revelatory from God, but they are not for a general Church audience. The brevity of general conference messages does not allow for a thorough discussion on a particular topic, but the messages do provide a clear window into the concerns and counsel of Church leaders for a general Church audience.

9. Brooke Auxier, Monica Anderson, Andrew Perrin, and Erica Turner, “Parenting Children in the Age of Screens,” Pew Research Center, July 28, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2020/07/PI_2020.07.28_kids-and-screens_FINAL.pdf.

To identify references to technology use, we searched all general conference messages between April 2007 and April 2025 using the following keywords: *online, internet, social media, technology, phone, smartphone, video game, texting, Facebook, app, Twitter, messaging, text message, Instagram, tablet, Zoom, YouTube, virtual reality, Snapchat, Pinterest, podcast, TikTok, blog, computer, screen, streaming, gaming, digital, artificial intelligence, AI, and algorithm* (as well as partial-word matches for *Google* [to include both *Google* and *googling*], *tech, video, device, and scroll*).

We initially found Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok in a Pew Research Center survey that featured major social media platforms.¹⁰ We iteratively added terms to this list as we began to better understand what technologies Church leaders have typically talked about in general conference. To be included in the analysis, a passage containing a keyword needed to discuss how the technology could be used effectively or ineffectively or provide an example where technology was used positively or negatively. We did not include references that mentioned keywords in passing. (For example, if a speaker told a story mentioning that a text was received but did not include any sentiment behind whether the use of technology was positive or negative, we did not include that reference.)

We identified 407 talks that mentioned at least one of our technology-oriented keywords out of the total 1,376 general conference talks from our dataset. From within those talks, 678 paragraphs matched the keywords. After filtering out paragraphs that mentioned technology only incidentally or without guidance regarding its use, we were left with 472 paragraphs from 292 talks.

We then used qualitative content analysis¹¹ to identify themes in the 472 sample paragraphs. Two researchers independently read and began jotting down potential codes for each of the relevant passages from the talks. They then met with the broader research team to discuss discrepancies and come to a consensus about how to code each passage.

10. Monica Anderson, Michelle Faverio, and Jeffrey Gottfried, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023,” Pew Research Center, December 11, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/>.

11. See Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. (SAGE Publications, 2018).

These codes were then organized into several overarching categories using thematic analysis.¹² The themes reflected principles taught by Church leaders about the use of technology. We then further analyzed each of these categories and identified subthemes (reported below). These categories were discussed with multiple authors and iteratively refined over several months of weekly meetings. Finally, we counted the frequency of each referenced category to evaluate the relative importance of each theme over time and identify trends. Codes were not mutually exclusive, so a single quote could show up in multiple categories. We placed many paragraphs into more than one category because the speaker addressed more than one theme regarding technology use within a single paragraph.¹³

Results

The analysis of each paragraph resulted in two major categories: Support for Positive Uses of Technology and Warnings Against Negative Uses of Technology. As seen in table 1, within the major category of Support for Positive Uses of Technology, there were four subcategory themes: (1) Increase Access to Truth; (2) Connect, Minister, and Serve; (3) Share the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and (4) Perform Temple and Family History Work. Within the major category of Warnings Against Negative Uses of Technology, there were seven subcategory themes: (1) Safeguard Our Relationship with God, (2) Protect from Negative Relational Effects, (3) Beware of Deception, (4) Protect Families, (5) Avoid Wasting Time, (6) Avoid Pornography, and (7) Use Artificial Intelligence Wisely.

We then compared the number of times each subcategory theme was mentioned within each major category. The comparisons provide a measure of the relative importance given to each subcategory theme. Table 1 lists each subcategory theme for the two major categories of positive and negative uses, the number of times each subcategory theme was mentioned, and the percentage of each subcategory theme within the major category.

12. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

13. All quotes and their categories are available here: “Conference Talk Database Export,” July 26, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/prophetic-teachings-technology>.

Table 1. Themes in General Conference for Positive and Negative Technology Use

Support for Positive Uses of Technology	Paragraphs	Talks
Increase Access to Truth	102 (21.6%)	87 (29.8%)
Connect, Minister, and Serve	74 (15.7%)	69 (23.6%)
Share the Gospel of Jesus Christ	72 (15.3%)	47 (16.1%)
Perform Temple and Family History Work	41 (8.7%)	24 (8.2%)
Other	12 (2.5%)	11 (3.8%)
Total (not including duplicates)	250	169

Warnings Against Negative Uses of Technology	Paragraphs	Talks
Safeguard Our Relationship with God	84 (17.8%)	69 (23.6%)
Protect from Negative Relational Effects	69 (14.6%)	56 (19.2%)
Beware of Deception	53 (11.2%)	47 (16.1%)
Protect Families	47 (10.0%)	34 (11.6%)
Avoid Wasting Time	44 (9.3%)	38 (13.0%)
Avoid Pornography (including 12 implicit references)	40 (8.4%)	38 (13.0%)
Use Artificial Intelligence Wisely	4 (0.8%)	2 (0.7%)
Other	5 (1.1%)	5 (1.7%)
Total (not including duplicates)	248	177

As described in the methods section, one paragraph could be categorized into multiple subcategories if it mentioned more than one subcategory theme. As a result, the percentages do not add up to 100 percent, though they provide a sense of the relative emphasis given to each subcategory theme. In the total number listed at the base of table 1, paragraphs that were categorized into multiple categories were counted only once to avoid counting a single reference multiple times.

We were somewhat surprised to find that the total number of unique paragraphs highlighting positive uses (250) nearly equaled the total number of unique paragraphs focused on warnings (248). Of those paragraphs, 52 paragraphs (from 41 talks) referenced both positive and negative uses of technology within the same paragraph. These findings illustrate that leaders did not frame technology as inherently good or bad but as a tool with dual qualities—“a blessing and a challenge, unique to our time.”¹⁴ In the words of Elder M. Russell Ballard, technological

14. Neil L. Anderson, “Following Jesus: Being a Peacemaker,” *Liahona*, May 2022, 17.

devices “can capture the attention of the human family of God for both great good and unconscionable ill.”¹⁵ Consistent with this framing, general conference talks identified positive uses of technology that members should seek as well as negative uses of technology that members should guard against. Remarkably, there was a balance in this dualistic orientation, emphasizing the positive uses and potential dangers of technology.

Support for Positive Technology Uses

Leaders consistently and strongly emphasized the positive uses of technology, highlighting its role in facilitating God’s work of salvation. Emphases included living the gospel of Jesus Christ, caring for those in need, inviting all to receive the gospel, and uniting all for eternity. Elder Quentin L. Cook summarized many positive uses of technology, stating that “it can be used to do missionary outreach, to assist with priesthood responsibilities, to find precious ancestors for sacred temple ordinances, and much more. The potential for good is enormous.”¹⁶

Increase Access to Truth

The most frequently mentioned support for technology focused on how it provides greater access to truth. During the earlier years of our study’s analysis (2007–2012), leaders expressed feelings like those captured by President Thomas S. Monson: “How grateful I am for the age in which we live—an age of such advanced technology that we are able to address you across the world.”¹⁷ Elder Ballard said, “These advances have helped to facilitate gospel growth and expansion throughout the world.”¹⁸ With a sense of awe, Elder D. Todd Christofferson said, “The words of prophets . . . flow to us almost constantly by television, radio, Internet, satellite, CD, DVD, and in print. I suppose that never in history has a people been blessed with such a quantity of holy writ.”¹⁹ Another leader said, “Right in the palm of your hand you have the wisdom of the ages—more importantly, the words of the prophets, from Old Testament days to President Thomas S. Monson.”²⁰

15. M. Russell Ballard, “The Greatest Generation of Young Adults,” *Ensign*, May 2015, 67.

16. Quentin L. Cook, “Choose Wisely,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 47.

17. Thomas S. Monson, “Welcome to Conference,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 4.

18. M. Russell Ballard, “Learning the Lessons of the Past,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 33.

19. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Blessing of Scripture,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 35.

20. Randall L. Ridd, “The Choice Generation,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 57.

Many leaders emphasized how this increased access to truth could help strengthen and uplift,²¹ bringing greater light and increased understanding of the gospel.²² One leader promised that subscribing to the Church's social media networks "will bring to your screen the content that is essential to deepen your searching and seeking of the Lord and His teachings, and it will strengthen your desire to understand the gospel. More important, this will help you remember what Christ expects of each of us."²³ Elder Richard G. Scott encouraged members to use technology to enhance scripture study.²⁴ President Russell M. Nelson encouraged young adults in a worldwide devotional to "immerse yourself in the rich reservoir of revelation we have at our fingertips."²⁵

Connect, Minister, and Serve

The second most mentioned positive use of technology focused on its power to facilitate how we connect with, minister to, and serve others. Several leaders shared personal examples of how technology had made family connections possible despite physical distance. One leader noted, "Modern technology can be [amazing] for . . . helping us stay connected to family and friends."²⁶ Another shared an example of a family who had been discussing *Come, Follow Me* with their adult children every Sunday over Zoom and how it had "literally been working miracles."²⁷ Another observed that "distances nowadays do not limit connecting, belonging, and ministering to and teaching the rising generation of our families." He then described his wife's efforts to love and teach their grandchildren from across the ocean, including reading to them.²⁸

Leaders also acknowledged the blessing of technology in enabling them to minister to members all over the world without needing to travel to those locations. Elder Ballard stated, "Although this is done without a

21. Richard G. Scott, "For Peace at Home," *Ensign*, May 2013, 29–31; Quentin L. Cook, "Adjustments to Strengthen Youth," *Ensign*, November 2019, 40–43; Ridd, "Choice Generation," 56–58.

22. José A. Teixeira, "Seeking the Lord," *Ensign*, May 2015, 96–97.

23. Teixeira, "Seeking the Lord," 97.

24. Scott, "For Peace at Home," 30.

25. Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity," Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, May 15, 2022, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson>.

26. Bonnie L. Oscarson, "The Needs Before Us," *Ensign*, November 2017, 25.

27. Jan E. Newman, "Teaching in the Savior's Way," *Liahona*, May 2021, 17.

28. Hugo E. Martinez, "Teaching Self-Reliance to Children and Youth," *Liahona*, May 2022, 96.

traditional face-to-face interview, technology and revelation combine to provide an experience that is remarkably intimate and personal.”²⁹ Some leaders encouraged members to similarly use technology to strengthen their ability to minister to others through calls, texts, and online messages, ensuring that those in need feel connected and supported, regardless of physical distance. Jean B. Bingham, a Relief Society general president, said, “I have heard countless stories of brothers and sisters who were blessed by a simple gesture of inclusion and welcome at church, a thoughtful email or text message, a personal contact at a difficult time.”³⁰ Another leader emphasized using technology to help with priesthood responsibilities, noting that “the Internet, social media, and other technologies are tools the Lord has placed in your hands to help you exercise your priesthood duties and extend the influence of truth and virtue.”³¹

Leaders also encouraged members to use technology to uplift others and spread the Light of Jesus Christ. President Nelson recognized the efforts of young women who, despite the prevalence of contention on social media, had “found ways to encourage others and share our Savior’s light.”³² Another leader said, “My high school daughter and a group of her friends use social media and text messaging to share scriptures with each other.”³³ Leaders noted that by sharing uplifting messages and engaging in virtuous online interactions, members fulfill their divine mandate to be “a light unto the world,” thereby impacting countless lives and strengthening the worldwide Church community. Examples of using technology to uplift included encouraging members to use the JustServe app, which “matches volunteers with service opportunities,” streamlining the process of finding and participating in meaningful acts of service.³⁴

Share the Gospel of Jesus Christ

The third most frequently mentioned support for technology use was in missionary work. As one leader described, “where generations past influenced their neighbors and their town, you have the power through

29. Ballard, “Greatest Generation of Young Adults,” 68.

30. Jean B. Bingham, “Ministering as the Savior Does,” *Ensign*, May 2018, 106.

31. Adrián Ochoa, “Aaronic Priesthood: Arise and Use the Power of God,” *Ensign*, May 2012, 57.

32. Russell M. Nelson, “Embrace the Future with Faith,” *Ensign*, November 2020, 73.

33. Devin G. Durrant, “My Heart Pondereth Them Continually,” *Ensign*, November 2015, 114.

34. Sharon Eubank, “I Pray He’ll Use Us,” *Liahona*, November 2021, 54.

the Internet and social media to reach beyond borders and influence the whole world.”³⁵ This category overlapped somewhat with the service category, which included serving by spreading the Light of Jesus Christ. But there were enough statements specifically about using technology for missionary work to justify creating a separate category.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf noted that “the Lord’s encouragement to ‘open [your] mouths’ might today include ‘use your hands’ to blog and text message the gospel to all the world!”³⁶ Elder L. Tom Perry emphasized the role of technology in enabling “ordinary people” to talk about and share the gospel “at all times of the day across the entire world, . . . on the Internet, on blogs and social networks, by people who have never written for a newspaper or a magazine.”³⁷ Elder Gary E. Stevenson promised, “Your tweets, direct messages, and posts will take on a higher, holier purpose when you also use social media to show how the gospel of Jesus Christ shapes your life.”³⁸

Church leaders specifically mentioned that social media apps are useful tools, including Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, who said, “There are many normal and natural ways to [share the gospel], from daily acts of kindness to personal testimonials on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.”³⁹ In another talk, he highlighted the value of these “normal” forms, noting that “sometimes a single phrase of testimony can set events in motion that affect someone’s life for eternity.”⁴⁰ Elder Stevenson similarly added, “These modalities have generated hundreds of millions of likes, shares, views, retweets, and pins and have become very effective and efficient in sharing the gospel with family, friends, and associates.”⁴¹ Leaders encouraged members to use the Book of Mormon and Gospel Library apps to share the gospel.⁴² Elder Stevenson encouraged youth to share the Church’s online video materials with friends as part of “hundreds of invitations we can extend to others” that allow them to “come and see.”⁴³

35. Ridd, “Choice Generation,” 58.

36. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Waiting on the Road to Damascus,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 76.

37. L. Tom Perry, “Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 41.

38. Gary E. Stevenson, “Nourishing and Bearing Your Testimony,” *Liahona*, November 2022, 112.

39. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Missionary Work: Sharing What Is in Your Heart,” *Ensign*, May 2019, 17.

40. Uchtdorf, “Waiting on the Road to Damascus,” 77.

41. Gary E. Stevenson, “Spiritual Eclipse,” *Ensign*, November 2017, 46.

42. Uchtdorf, “Missionary Work,” 17; Stevenson, “Spiritual Eclipse,” 46.

43. Gary E. Stevenson, “Love, Share, Invite,” *Liahona*, May 2022, 86.

Church leaders also spoke about missionaries using technology to share the gospel online. President Ballard congratulated the full-time missionaries that were adopting new technological methods as a result of COVID-19: “Even during these difficult times, the Lord has had a work for you to do, and you have done it wonderfully well. For example, you have used technology in new ways to find those who are ready to learn about the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ Other leaders noted how young adult missionaries, already adept at using social media, were effectively finding people through technological methods. Elder Gerrit W. Gong emphasized the importance of this expansion in a talk given outside of general conference, noting that wise missionaries “keep multiple lines in the water,” including in-person contact, technology interactions, and collaboration with Church members. This versatility allows missionaries to discover, with the help of the Holy Ghost, what methods are best suited to the people living in their areas.⁴⁵

Perform Temple and Family History Work

The fourth most frequently mentioned support for technology use focused on its role in temple and family history work. In 2010, Elder Nelson stated, “The Prophet Joseph Smith said, ‘The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead.’ New technology makes it easier than ever to fulfill that responsibility.”⁴⁶ He then quoted President Gordon B. Hinckley as follows: “We, therefore, have been engaged for some time in a very difficult undertaking. . . . The solution lies in complex computer technology.”⁴⁷ In 2014, Elder Cook noted, “The acceleration of technology is almost unbelievable. . . . Brothers and sisters, family history centers are now in our homes.”⁴⁸ Church leaders expressed awe at the sheer number of online records made

44. M. Russell Ballard, “Missionary Service Blessed My Life Forever,” *Liahona*, May 2022, 10.

45. Jason Swensen, “Wise Missionaries Keep ‘Multiple Lines in the Water,’ Teaches Elder Gong,” *Church Newsroom*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2022/6/29/23218785/elder-gong-seminar-for-new-mission-leaders-missionaries-fishing-lines-finding-people-teach/>.

46. Russell M. Nelson, “Generations Linked in Love,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 92–93; *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 475.

47. Nelson, “Generations Linked in Love,” 92; Gordon B. Hinckley, “Opening Remarks,” *Ensign*, November 2005, 6.

48. Quentin L. Cook, “Roots and Branches,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 46.

available to members of the Church across the world through technological advancements. In 2022, Elder Gong encouraged members to “connect your living memory family names with the 10 billion searchable names FamilySearch now has in its online collection and the 1.3 billion individuals in its Family Tree.”⁴⁹

Many Church leaders specifically called upon youth to lead out in doing family history work using new technological tools. As Elder Cook said, “The leadership of the Church has issued a clarion call to the rising generation to lead the way in the use of technology to experience the spirit of Elijah, to search out their ancestors, and to perform temple ordinances for them. Much of the heavy lifting in hastening the work of salvation for both the living and the dead will be done by you young people.”⁵⁰ Elder Bednar added, “Your fingers have been trained to text and tweet to accelerate and advance the work of the Lord—not just to communicate quickly with your friends. The skills and aptitude evident among many young people today are a preparation to contribute to the work of salvation.”⁵¹

Church leaders also emphasized the positive effect of using technology for family history work. Elder Scott quoted a young man who had been deeply involved in video gaming but later began doing family history work: “When I started indexing, I didn’t have time to play games. At first I thought, ‘Oh no! How can that be!’ When this project was over, I even lost interest in gaming. . . . Genealogical work is something that we can do here on earth, and it will remain in heaven.”⁵² Elder Bednar noted, “You also will count your many blessings as young people devote more time to family history work and temple service and less time to video games, surfing the Internet, and Facebooking.”⁵³

Warnings Against Negative Technology Uses

While leaders in general conference emphasized the positive uses of technology, they also provided clear and consistent warnings about the potential negative effects of its use. In fact, as noted earlier, the number of paragraphs with warnings was nearly equal to the number of paragraphs

49. Gerrit W. Gong, “We Each Have a Story,” *Liahona*, May 2022, 44.

50. Cook, “Roots and Branches,” 46.

51. David A. Bednar, “The Hearts of the Children Shall Turn,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 26.

52. Richard G. Scott, “The Joy of Redeeming the Dead,” *Ensign*, November 2012, 94.

53. Bednar, “Hearts of the Children Shall Turn,” 27.

referencing positive uses. As outlined in table 1, Church leaders' warnings focused on seven specific topics, including protecting ourselves and our families from the spiritual, moral, and relational dangers that come with technology use.

Safeguard Our Relationship with God

The most repeated warning emphasized technology as a distraction from our relationship with God. For example, "We live in a world of information overload, dominated by ever-increasing distractions that make it more and more difficult to sort through the commotion of this life and focus on things of eternal worth."⁵⁴ Leaders specifically addressed technology's potential interference with praying, being still enough to hear God, and turning to God for answers. In the words of one leader, "How sad it would be if the phone and computer, with all their sophistication, drowned out the simplicity of sincere prayer to a loving Father in Heaven. Let us be as quick to kneel as we are to text."⁵⁵ President Ballard stated, "If we do not find time to unplug, we may miss opportunities to hear the voice of Him who said, 'Be still, and know that I am God'" (Ps. 46:10).⁵⁶ Leaders cautioned that a reliance on technology in place of God and his truth will distract us from "fulfilling our divine potential."⁵⁷

Protect from Negative Relational Effects

The second most frequently identified warning in general conference messages focused on the negative relational effects of harmful technology use, including the replacement of in-person interactions, online social comparisons, negativity, and cyberbullying.

Protect In-Person Interaction. Elder Perry identified a growing trend among young people who are "isolating themselves from others by playing video games; wearing headphones; and interacting through cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, and so on instead of in person."⁵⁸ Elder Stevenson discussed how technology could "stifle the development of social skills."⁵⁹ One leader noted how excessive technology use carries with it the danger of leading some to "give precedence to relationships

54. Jack N. Gerard, "Now Is the Time," *Ensign*, November 2018, 108.

55. Ian S. Ardern, "A Time to Prepare," *Ensign*, November 2011, 32.

56. M. Russell Ballard, "Precious Gifts from God," *Ensign*, May 2018, 10.

57. Peter M. Johnson, "Power to Overcome the Adversary," *Ensign*, November 2019, 110.

58. L. Tom Perry, "Raising the Bar," *Ensign*, November 2007, 48.

59. Stevenson, "Spiritual Eclipse," 46.

with people [they] . . . have never met rather than [their] . . . own family!”⁶⁰ Another leader admonished that “electronic games and cyber acquaintances are no lasting substitute for real friends who can give an encouraging hug, who can pray for us and seek after our best interest.”⁶¹ Lastly, Elder Uchtdorf highlighted an additional risk with social media: “I believe that we are not headed in the right direction . . . when we connect with family or friends mostly by reposting humorous pictures, forwarding trivial things, or linking our loved ones to sites on the Internet. . . . If we fail to give our best personal self and undivided time to those who are truly important to us, one day we will regret it.”⁶²

To avoid these pitfalls, leaders have encouraged members to be present and aware of those around them. For example, one leader said, “When you are with your friends, give them the gift of your attention.”⁶³ Another exhorted, “Instead of picking up your phone to see what your friends are doing, stop, look around, and ask yourself, ‘Who needs me today?’”⁶⁴ These messages underscore the importance of relating to and caring for the embodied souls right in front of us rather than allowing technologies to distract us from these essential connections and relationships.

Avoid Online Social Comparisons. Leaders also emphasized protecting relationships from a social media world that “feeds on comparisons, labeling, and criticism.”⁶⁵ Elder Cook warned, “We tend to broadcast the smiling details of our lives but not the hard times.” In doing so, we “portray an incomplete life—sometimes in a self-aggrandizing or fake way,” and then we consume the similarly fake lives of our friends on social media.⁶⁶ This “fake” sharing and consuming of an idealized reality can lead to “debilitating comparisons.”⁶⁷

To counter these debilitating effects, leaders counseled members “to be authentic in the use of social media”⁶⁸ and avoid “debilitating comparisons” with others. Elder Stevenson said, “With so many appropriate and inspired uses of technology, let us use it to teach, inspire, and lift

60. Teixeira, “Seeking the Lord,” 97.

61. Ardern, “Time to Prepare,” 32.

62. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Of Regrets and Resolutions,” *Ensign*, November 2012, 22.

63. Ridd, “Choice Generation,” 58.

64. Oscarson, “Needs Before Us,” 26.

65. W. Craig Zwick, “Lord, Wilt Thou Cause That My Eyes May Be Opened,” *Ensign*, November 2017, 98.

66. Cook, “Choose Wisely,” 47–48.

67. Gary E. Stevenson, “Deceive Me Not,” *Ensign*, November 2019, 95.

68. Cook, “Choose Wisely,” 47.

ourselves and to encourage others to become their finest—rather than to portray our idealized virtual selves.”⁶⁹ Another leader encouraged members to “look inward for the godly attributes to which we each lay claim” instead of “seeing through the lens of social media.”⁷⁰

Warnings Against Negativity and Cyberbullying. Church leaders also warned of the negativity and hostility magnified by social media use. As Elder Ulisses Soares explained, “We often see people who engage in negative and even derogatory comments about the perceived characteristics, weaknesses, and opinions of others. . . . Unfortunately, social media encourages this kind of behavior in the name of relative truths and transparency. Without restraint, digital conversation often leads people to personal attacks and heated disputes, creating disappointments, wounding hearts, and spreading flaming hostility.”⁷¹

Leaders specifically focused on how Internet use can magnify negative peer pressure. For example, Elder Christofferson said, “This is a day of sometimes merciless attacks in social media and in person against those who seek to uphold the Lord’s standard in dress, entertainment, and sexual purity.”⁷² President Uchtdorf noted, “Many of you know how it feels to defend an unpopular truth. In the Internet slang of today, we talk about getting ‘flamed’ by those who disagree with us.”⁷³ Elder Christofferson also counseled, “How much better it is to have the unchanging law of God by which we may act to choose our destiny rather than being hostage to the unpredictable rules and wrath of the social media mob.”⁷⁴

Leaders further cautioned against cyberbullying. Elder Stevenson warned, “Now, for young men and young women, as you grow older, making fun of others can evolve very dangerously.” He then quoted social worker Frances Dalomba as follows: “While bullying is not a new concept, social media and technology have brought bullying to a new level. It becomes a more constant, ever-present threat—cyberbullying.”⁷⁵

69. Stevenson, “Spiritual Eclipse,” 47.

70. Zwick, “Lord, Wilt Thou Cause That My Eyes May Be Opened,” 98.

71. Ulisses Soares, “Followers of the Prince of Peace,” *Liahona*, May 2023, 86.

72. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Joy of the Saints,” *Ensign*, November 2019, 17.

73. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Be Not Afraid, Only Believe,” *Ensign*, November 2015, 76.

74. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Voice of Warning,” *Ensign*, May 2017, 110.

75. Gary E. Stevenson, “Hearts Knit Together,” *Liahona*, May 2021, 21; Frances Dalomba, “Social Media: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” *Harold News*, November 12, 2020, <https://www.heraldnews.com/story/lifestyle/2020/11/12/social-media-has-its-good-and-bad-sides-according-social-worker/6262605002/>. See also Frances Dalomba, “Pros and Cons of Social Media,” March 1, 2022, Brown Health University, <https://www.brownhealth.org/be-well/social-media-good-bad-and-ugly>.

Beware of Deception

The third most repeated warning focused on the risk of being deceived and distracted from divine truth because of technology. One leader warned, “With technology today, information on a myriad of subjects is available with the click of a keystroke. It is easy to get caught in the trap of looking to the ‘arm of flesh’ for advice on everything from how to raise children to how to find happiness. While some information has merit, as members of the Church we have access to the source of pure truth, even God Himself.”⁷⁶

Leaders additionally warned members to be careful with information found online because, as Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated, “not all of this information is true.”⁷⁷ President Nelson said, “We simply cannot rely upon information we bump into on social media.”⁷⁸ Elder Cook warned, “Many who are in a spiritual drought and lack commitment have not necessarily been involved in major sins or transgressions, but they have made unwise choices. . . . Some have immersed themselves in Internet materials that magnify, exaggerate, and, in some cases, invent shortcomings of early Church leaders. Then they draw incorrect conclusions that can affect testimony.”⁷⁹ Elder Ballard counseled members to seek spiritual guidance when looking for truth, noting that this process would require more time and effort than a simple Google search for answers.⁸⁰ Linda S. Reeves, a counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, reiterated, “We will be exceedingly blessed if we exercise faith and patience and go to our Heavenly Father, the source of all truth, with our concerns.”⁸¹

Protect Families

The fourth most repeated warning focused on parents protecting children from the potentially negative effects of technology. Elder Perry noted, “In such a media and Internet-dominated world, it has never been harder to raise responsible children and to keep marriages and families together.”⁸²

76. Kevin R. Duncan, “Our Very Survival,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 35.

77. Dallin H. Oaks, “Truth and the Plan,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 25.

78. Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 89.

79. Quentin L. Cook, “Can Ye Feel So Now?,” *Ensign*, November 2012, 7.

80. Ballard, “Learning the Lessons of the Past,” 34.

81. Linda S. Reeves, “Worthy of Our Promised Blessings,” *Ensign*, November 2015, 10.

82. L. Tom Perry, “Why Marriage and Family Matter—Everywhere in the World,” *Ensign*, May 2015, 41.

Protect Children from Exposure. Elder Uchtdorf encouraged parents to put safeguards in place to protect their children from exposure to dangerous media content, with the promise that “the Lord will help you to recognize and avoid those evils.”⁸³ President Monson warned that the messages shared through technology are “very often in direct opposition to that which we want our children to embrace and hold dear.”⁸⁴ Elder Cook counseled parents to “black out from [their] homes the lethal bombs that destroy spiritual development and growth,” including “pornography, in particular,” and “some TV programs and Internet sites.”⁸⁵ Elder Uchtdorf noted that “these dangerous traps are only a mouse click away.”⁸⁶

Linda S. Reeves counseled parents to “create a family plan with standards and boundaries, being proactive to protect [their] homes with filters on electronic devices,” particularly on “mobile devices.”⁸⁷ This included having “the big talks” with children “about the dangers of today’s media, the Internet, cyber technologies, and pornography.”⁸⁸ Leaders highlighted family councils as important settings to address the risks of technology. Elder Ballard promised that “a family council . . . will counter the impact of modern technology that often distracts us from spending quality time with each other and also tends to bring evil right into our homes.”⁸⁹

Protect Family Time. Parents were also cautioned to protect family time from the interference of technology. Elder Oaks counseled parents to “vigorously act to increase family togetherness and one-on-one time,” with the warning that “technology toys like video games and the Internet are already winning away the time of our children and youth.”⁹⁰ Primary General President Rosemary M. Wixom asked, “Why not choose a time each day to disconnect from technology and reconnect with each other? Simply turn everything off. . . . Then, as you give full attention to your children, a conversation will begin, and you can enjoy listening to each other.”⁹¹ Family dinner and family council were identified as uniquely

83. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “A Matter of a Few Degrees,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 59.

84. Thomas S. Monson, “Three Goals to Guide You,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 118–19.

85. Quentin L. Cook, “Let There Be Light!,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 28.

86. Uchtdorf, “Matter of a Few Degrees,” 59.

87. Linda S. Reeves, “Protection from Pornography: A Christ-Focused Home,” *Ensign*, May 2014, 15.

88. M. Russell Ballard, “Fathers and Sons: A Remarkable Relationship,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 49.

89. M. Russell Ballard, “Family Councils,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 63.

90. Dallin H. Oaks, “Good, Better, Best,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 107.

91. Rosemary M. Wixom, “The Words We Speak,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 82.

important to protect. One leader described a mother who would call out to her family at dinner and other family times, “Phones on the deck; let us have face time.” He added this mother’s witness that these efforts “strengthen[ed] their relationship as a family.”⁹² Elder Ballard stated, “In all of these family council settings, electronic devices need to be turned off so everyone can look at and listen to each other.”⁹³

Leaders also encouraged parents to model appropriate technology use. In the words of Elder Stevenson, “Let us also teach *and* demonstrate the righteous use of technology.”⁹⁴ Mary N. Cook, a counselor in the Young Women General presidency, said, “We must model that which is virtuous and lovely by our personal media choices. . . . By example we can help our children understand that spending long periods of time using the Internet, social media, and cell phones; playing video games; or watching television keeps us from productive activities and valuable interactions with others.”⁹⁵

Leaders also emphasized protecting marriages from the negative effects of technology, including online infidelity. For example, Elder L. Whitney Clayton said, “Prophets teach that successful marriage partners are ‘fiercely loyal’ to each other. They keep their social media use fully worthy in every way. They permit themselves no secret Internet experiences. They freely share with each other their social network passwords. They do not look at the virtual profiles of anyone in any way that might betray the sacred trust of their spouse. They never do or say anything that approaches the appearance of impropriety, either virtually or physically.”⁹⁶

Avoid Wasting Time

The fifth most frequently mentioned warning centered on not using technology to waste time better spent on more meaningful things. In 2008, Elder Ballard counseled, “Don’t allow yourself to be caught up in the time-wasting, mind-numbing things like . . . surfing the Internet.”⁹⁷ Elder Cook warned, “Some addictions or predilections, while not inherently evil, can use up our precious allotment of time which could otherwise be

92. Taniela B. Wakolo, “God Loves His Children,” *Liahona*, May 2021, 95.

93. Ballard, “Family Councils,” 63.

94. Stevenson, “Spiritual Eclipse,” 47, emphasis added.

95. Mary N. Cook, “Be an Example of the Believers,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 81.

96. L. Whitney Clayton, “Marriage: Watch and Learn,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 84.

97. M. Russell Ballard, “Daughters of God,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 110.

used to accomplish virtuous objectives. These can include excessive use of social media, video and digital games, . . . and many others.”⁹⁸

Several leaders highlighted replacing technology with “those things which bring a lasting reward,”⁹⁹ “productive activities and valuable interactions with others,”¹⁰⁰ and “quality or meaningful time with . . . children and grandchildren.”¹⁰¹ Elaine S. Dalton, a Young Women General President, warned, “What could be more deceptive than to entice the youth of this noble generation to do nothing or to be busy ever-texting but never coming to a knowledge of the truths contained in a book that was written for you and your day by prophets of God—the Book of Mormon?”¹⁰²

Avoid Pornography

Another significant warning mentioned across general conference talks involved the role of technology in increasing access to pornography. Multiple leaders spoke of the “dangers of the internet and the media in putting pornographic images before us,”¹⁰³ noting that “one of the most accessible sources of pornography today is the Internet.”¹⁰⁴ Another leader added that “mobile devices with Internet capacity, not computers, are the biggest culprit.”¹⁰⁵ Another highlighted “how easy it is in this Internet age for young people to almost inadvertently be exposed to impure and even pornographic images.”¹⁰⁶ Some leaders occasionally directed warnings at women,¹⁰⁷ but Apostles often directed them specifically at men.¹⁰⁸

In responding to the challenge of pornography, leaders focused on individual commitment to the principles of purity and the role of

98. Quentin L. Cook, “Lamentations of Jeremiah: Beware of Bondage,” *Ensign*, November 2013, 89.

99. Ardern, “Time to Prepare,” 32.

100. Cook, “Be an Example of the Believers,” 81.

101. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “We Are Doing a Great Work and Cannot Come Down,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 60.

102. Elaine S. Dalton, “A Return to Virtue,” *Ensign*, November 2008, 79.

103. Henry B. Eyring, “God Helps the Faithful Priesthood Holder,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 58; see also L. Whitney Clayton, “Blessed Are All the Pure in Heart,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 51–53.

104. Thomas S. Monson, “Standards of Strength,” *New Era*, October 2008, 5.

105. Reeves, “Protection from Pornography,” 15.

106. Cook, “Can Ye Feel So Now?,” 8.

107. Reeves, “Worthy of Our Promised Blessings,” 10.

108. Gordon B. Hinckley, “I Am Clean,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 60–62; Dallin H. Oaks, “Pornography,” *Ensign*, May 2005, 88; Richard G. Scott, “To Acquire Spiritual Guidance,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 8–9.

conversion to Jesus Christ, noting that society will not provide warnings or protections against pornography (in contrast to other vices like smoking or alcohol).¹⁰⁹

Use Artificial Intelligence Wisely

References to artificial intelligence in general conference were limited, but the counsel was specific and clear. Elder Cook emphasized that even a device “equipped with artificial intelligence will never be as important or significant as the spiritual guidance that comes from divine revelation.”¹¹⁰ In another general conference message, Elder Soares restated counsel given by Elder Bednar to “identify gospel principles that can guide [members’] use of artificial intelligence.”¹¹¹ Elder Soares also emphasized the care taken by the Church to avoid using AI “to generate content and images” that could distract from their sacred focus on Christ and his teachings. He warned members to be careful “not to weaken our connection with God and His Son by using AI-generated content and images inappropriately,” reminding members that “relying on a modern technological ‘arm of flesh’ is an inadequate and disrespectful substitute for the inspiration, edification, and witness that can be received only through the power of the Holy Ghost.”¹¹² Elder Soares’s teachings echoed prior counsel about other technological tools but added specific emphasis to this technology. Artificial intelligence will likely continue to be an increasing focus in general conference messages as its use expands.¹¹³

Trends in Church Leaders’ Emphases

Analyzing how frequently Church leaders mentioned each of these themes allowed us to identify trends. Over time, mentions of support for positive technology use increased slightly, while mentions of warnings

109. Cook, “Can Ye Feel So Now?,” 8.

110. Quentin L. Cook, “Sacred Scriptures—the Foundations of Faith,” *Liahona*, November 2024, 111.

111. Ulisses Soares, “Reverence for Sacred Things,” *Liahona*, May 2025, 109; David A. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are 2.0,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, November 3, 2024, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2024/11/13bednar>.

112. Soares, “Reverence for Sacred Things,” 109.

113. Elder Gerrit W. Gong also spoke about artificial intelligence at the Organized Intelligence conference in November 2025. See Organized Intelligence, OI2025 Recordings, December 10, 2025, <https://www.organizedintelligence.ai/p/oi2025-recordings>.

regarding negative technology use decreased slightly. Specifically, mentions about pornography dramatically decreased over time, while warnings about the use of artificial intelligence increased. Warnings about the potential negative relational effects of technology also increased, with a dramatic increase in warnings about negativity and hostility in social media. Encouragement for the use of technologies in sharing the gospel for both members and missionaries increased slightly across the eighteen-year period (between April 2007 and April 2025), peaking during the COVID-19 era. But there was a decrease in the mentions of technology use for temple and family history work over the eighteen-year period. These trends seem to indicate Church leaders' careful attunement to the most important issues facing Church members within any given year and the best way to address those issues.

Discussion

This analysis of the hundreds of references to technology in general conference over the past eighteen years highlights a striking polarity. For Church leaders, technology is a powerful, even miraculous, tool to be used for good as part of the Lord hastening his work in the latter days. However, it can also be profoundly destructive, even perilous, in its potential for evil. As Church leaders made clear, technology enables connections once only dreamed of—linking family members across any distance on earth and binding families eternally beyond the veil. At the same time, these new technologies can be devastating to relationships, replacing essential in-person interactions; interfering with family closeness; and opening the way for harmful comparisons, negative peer pressure, and bullying. Leaders also emphasized that these technologies allow access to a constant stream of prophetic truth and inspiring wisdom that can strengthen hearts and deepen personal conversion to God. But they also warned that these same technologies open the floodgates to false and deceptive ideas while offering tantalizing and time-wasting distractions that can replace the incomparable joy of a relationship with and reliance on God.

In response to this stark polarity, Church leaders have focused on intentionality, inviting members to understand technology's potential for both good and evil and to be purposeful in how these powerful technological tools are used. Many in society have similarly recognized the dual nature of technologies and proposed practical approaches to help ensure that they are not used in destructive ways—including advocating for legislation to protect users, requiring more accountability from tech

companies, and educating parents and teachers.¹¹⁴ Given the clear counsel of Church leaders, all those efforts may be important, even essential, for the well-being of individuals, families, and society.

Yet the restored gospel of Jesus Christ offers a far greater perspective on the meaning of these technological advancements and the eternally important need for intentionality in their use. For members of the Church, the use of modern technology must be evaluated according to whether it fulfills or undermines the sacred purposes for which we chose to come to earth. In a landmark address given to young adults, Elder David A. Bednar offered an important framework for evaluating the use of technology. Recognizing that technological tools can “(1) assist you in receiving magnificent blessings” or “(2) diminish and suffocate your *moral agency*,” Elder Bednar asked each listener to evaluate how the way they use these powerful technologies impacts their ability to act and not be acted upon, love and serve God and others, engage in the work of salvation, grow in light and truth, and honor and value their bodies.¹¹⁵

To better evaluate these realities, Elder Bednar asked two specific questions: (1) “Does the use of various technologies and media invite or impede the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost in your life?” and (2) “Does the time you spend using various technologies and media enlarge or restrict your capacity to live, to love, and to serve in meaningful ways?” Elder Bednar also advised, “To navigate the complex intersection of spirituality and technology, Latter-day Saints should humbly and prayerfully (1) identify gospel principles that can guide their use of artificial intelligence and (2) strive sincerely for the companionship of the Holy Ghost and the spiritual gift of revelation.”¹¹⁶

These are the same ideas highlighted in *For the Strength of Youth*,¹¹⁷ and they are grounded in the essential purposes of the plan of salvation. They provide an inspired response to the tremendous potential for good

114. “Recommendation of the Council on Children in the Digital Environment,” OECD Legal Instruments, OECD.org, accessed April 28, 2026, <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0389>; Haidt, *Anxious Generation*, <https://www.anxiousgeneration.com/>; Zach Rausch, Jonathan Haidt, and Lennon Torres, “Social-Media Companies’ Worst Argument,” *Atlantic*, September 12, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/social-media-lgbtq-teens-harms/679798/>; “Family Media Plan,” American Academy of Pediatrics, accessed April 28, 2026, <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx>.

115. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are 2.o,” emphasis in original.

116. Bednar, “Things as They Really Are 2.o.”

117. See *For the Strength of Youth: A Guide for Making Choices* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2026), 22–26.

and evil of the powerful technologies we use today. They also underscore the power of an individual's heart and mind to use these dual-nature tools in ways that can help fulfill the purpose of God rather than becoming a victim of worldly forces.

Changes in the frequency of mentions for each theme over time indicate Church leaders' remarkable level of attunement to the issues that are most important in a given period of time. For example, during the initial years of the release of the iPhone, there was a strong and consistent focus on avoiding pornography, as well as not wasting time. Church members were also warned more frequently about protecting children from exposure to negative content and protecting family time together. As members adjusted to the use of smartphones and other technologies, Church leaders gave those warnings less frequently. This does not suggest that protecting children from negative content or guarding against pornography somehow became less important. Rather, it suggests a shift from repeated cautions to a wider emphasis on helping members develop wise, faithful technology habits.

During the COVID-19 era, mentions about the use of technology in sharing the gospel increased dramatically. But prior to COVID-19, technology use for family history work had been a stronger focus. As technological advancements made it easier to access digitized records without individuals engaging in their own searching, encouragement to use technology for family history work seemed to diminish, while a focus on attending the temple increased. Leaders were attuned to the cultural realities shaping members and adjusted their focus to meet those needs, including the increase in polarization and negativity over time and the unique challenges presented with the onset of artificial intelligence. Yet, across the eighteen-year period, the frequency of warnings to beware of deception and avoid social comparison and the frequency of encouragements to use technology for strengthening relationships with God and others remained the same. These trends suggest a remarkable awareness among leaders of the most current needs for clear direction around technology use.

Conclusion

This review of every mention of technology in the past eighteen years (between April 2007 and April 2025) of general conference elucidates the inspired direction given by Church leaders for how to navigate the use of technology. Leaders have provided clear, consistent warnings and encouraged specific uses. In using technology, we leave neutral territory. The reality of "opposition in all things" (2 Ne. 2:11) becomes profoundly

apparent. We are invited to choose to use these technologies in ways that will invite the Light of Christ into our own lives and the lives of others and to establish safeguards that will help us avoid the perilous pitfalls of technology misuse.

Notably, leaders have not counseled an abandonment of technology use, though they have warned of its serious risks. Rather, leaders have provided clear direction about how and when it should be used, emphasizing its potential to bring goodness into our lives and enable the work of salvation to go forward in unprecedented ways. In their instruction, we can hear echoes of the Savior's counsel in Doctrine and Covenants 58: "For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; . . . Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves" (D&C 58:26–28).

In many ways, the stakes could not be higher regarding the use of technology. The potential for harm places a profound responsibility on all. It also implies a weighty responsibility for parents, leaders, and teachers to educate, protect, and guide children in the use of these devices so that they might be able to "act" in the use of these technologies and "not to be acted upon" (2 Ne. 2:13–14, 26). This will require the most thoughtful and devoted efforts of each of us to intentionally invite the Holy Ghost to guide our use of these tools for God's purposes. Such effort is more essential than ever as advanced technology offers both unprecedented potential for good and harrowing possibilities for evil.

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The Founding Father of the Joseph Smith Papers

Remembering Dean Jessee

Ronald K. Esplin

This article was originally given as remarks at the funeral service for Dean Jessee (1929–2025) on January 10, 2026, at the Chevy Chase Ward meeting-house in Murray, Utah. Jessee was a noteworthy and productive historian who spent much of his professional life working on the papers of Joseph Smith.

In December 2024, Dean asked me if I would speak at his funeral. Not feeling well, he was making plans to leave us. Fortunately, he stayed another year. During that year, I continued to interact with him by phone, email, and in person; to learn from him; and to continue to be blessed by his life. Now, a year later, I'm pleased to be able to fulfill his request.

Many of Dean's colleagues here today will know some, perhaps much, of what I will share. Most of his family probably will not, and I hope that what I will share will help his family understand the significance of his scholarly career.

Dean was first a family man. The large and wonderful family Dean and June Jessee¹ brought into the world and nurtured, here today, will be a lasting monument to them as faithful Latter-day Saint parents and believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ, in eternal families, and the importance of families. Their family will be their legacy forever.

1. Margaret June Wood Jessee was born on March 7, 1935, and passed away on September 15, 2013.

Not every man leaves so many who call him blessed, and very few leave a second legacy in a different realm that will also be lasting. Dean Jessee does. In addition to having a large family, Dean was also a scholar, and his contributions in that realm will also live on. I want to begin with comments from Dean's colleagues and end with a declaration from Dean. In between, I will share aspects about his meaningful, even remarkable, career.

Several of Dean's colleagues sent me brief notes when they learned of his passing.² One said, "He was a wonderful colleague." Another said that he was a "kind and humble man." Jill Derr wrote a note that speaks for all of us who worked with Dean: "Dean was a scholar without peer. His care and precision in editing the Church's most significant documents is an inestimable contribution. I respected Dean as a meticulous scholar and patient mentor and loved him as a friend. I admired his total lack of pretension and his understated wit. . . . My prayers are with his cherished family, and I am grateful that he and his beloved June will be reunited at last."

Another expressed sadness to see him leave but also optimism: "I believe that Joseph [Smith] was among the first to greet him." I suspect that is true.

Dean Jessee's influence on those of us who worked with him was profound, but the results of his love of Joseph Smith were broader than that and will be even more lasting.

Exploring history on the shelves of the University of Utah in 1970, an activity he enjoyed, Dean came upon *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*. These books were the early fruit of what became a decades-long effort to gather, transcribe, edit, and publish the literary output—the papers—of that founding father, making them available to the world. That impressive collection of history inspired in Dean Jessee something that has come to bless us all. He said to himself, "Joseph Smith, the founding prophet of the Restoration, deserves such a collection on the library shelves of the world so that his legacy can be better understood and be accessible to all."

Dean began gathering surviving manuscripts created by Joseph Smith and his associates during his lifetime. For three decades, this was Dean's personal passion, his personal mission—one man at work with occasional research assistants. From what he gathered, transcribed, and

2. Quotes without sources are from personal communications with the author.

organized, he eventually published two volumes of Joseph Smith's documents and drafted another.³

Then it became something bigger. Instead of one man working alone to fulfill that vision, eventually more than six hundred people were involved in the effort that Dean Jessee founded. More than half a century after his initial insight, Dean lived to see the twenty-seventh volume of the Joseph Smith Papers released to the public on June 27, 2023.⁴ That marked the completion of the Joseph Smith Papers print edition. It also constituted the shelfful of books that Dean first envisioned in 1970.

Those books are on the shelves of libraries all over the United States and elsewhere because we learned a lesson from Dean's first volume. We learned that even though Latter-day Saints will buy a book on Joseph Smith, if it is not on library shelves, scholars won't know about or use it. Thanks to Larry and Gail Miller donating the books to libraries that agreed to catalog and shelve them, they are everywhere. That is part of Dean's lasting legacy.

I once joked to a small audience that Dean Jessee was the grandfather of the Joseph Smith Papers. Dean immediately interjected and teased that if he was the grandfather, I was the den mother. It would have been more accurate had I said that Dean was the *founding father*, but it is true that I had a ringside seat to the great monument of Dean Jessee's vision. I can tell you that there would not be a Joseph Smith Papers today without Dean Jessee. The printed books; the massive, still-expanding website⁵; a TV series⁶ forever in reruns—they are a very big deal with far-reaching effects, all springing from Dean's vision and commitment to fulfill it.

The Joseph Smith Papers have changed our understanding of Joseph Smith and of early Latter-day Saint history. They have even changed the relationship of Church leaders to history and to historians.

3. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Deseret Book, 1984); Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (Deseret Book, 2002); Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Deseret Book, 1989–92).

4. *Documents, Volume 15: 16 May–28 June 1844*, ed. Brett D. Dowdle, Adam H. Petty, J. Chase Kirkham, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, David W. Grua, and Matthew C. Godfrey, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2023).

5. "The Joseph Smith Papers," The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed May 4, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/>.

6. *The Joseph Smith Papers: Television Documentary Series*, 2 seasons, Larry H. Miller Communications Corporation, aired 2008–10, <https://www.byutv.org/joseph-smith-papers/episodes>.

In 2007, PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) aired a documentary called *The Mormons* by Helen Whitney. Several of the clips aired in that national broadcast featured Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. When Whitney asked him if there was “tension between faith-promoting history and factual, scholarly history,” he answered, “I don’t know of any institution that has had complete peace with its historians, with its storytellers.”⁷ Five years after that broadcast, I had a chance to tease him about that comment when he spoke to the Joseph Smith Papers staff. He chuckled and said that he misspoke. What he meant and should have said was that he knew of no institution completely at peace with its *history*. Why? Because mortality is messy, and therefore, history is messy, including the Church’s history.⁸

In the 2007 PBS clip, Elder Holland added, “I am not afraid of history. Whatever our history is, that’s our history.” However, he wanted Church history to be taught to his children and to the children and youth of the Church by “friends,” not “enemies.” He hoped for teachers who knew the facts but also “are genuinely anxious to teach in a way that is appropriate and enlivening.”⁹

Dean Jessee was the kind of teacher and writer whom President Holland wanted to teach his posterity and the youth of the Church, and it is partly because of Dean that we have in the Church today a different relationship to our shared history than we had a generation ago.

I believe Elder David A. Bednar would second that. When the last volume of the Joseph Smith Papers was released on June 27, 2023, he personally thanked this indispensable “founding father” of the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Elder Bednar also urged those present that day to “relish the moment,” this “culmination of so many years of such excellent work by so many.”¹⁰

At a press event earlier in the day, Elder Bednar noted the broad benefits from what Dean set in motion. Even though the full value of the project is not yet visible, Elder Bednar said that “the reach of historians and scholars into the past ‘portends remarkable things for the reach into the future.’” The lessons learned and the work done with the documents

7. Jeffrey R. Holland, interview by Helen Whitney, *The Mormons*, PBS, May 4, 2006, aired April 30, 2007, <https://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/holland.html>.

8. See Ronald K. Esplin, Diary, June 5, 2012; see also Ronald Esplin to Mathew J. Grow, email, November 5, 2025.

9. Holland, interview.

10. Transcription of Elder Bednar’s remarks at the last Joseph Smith Papers social hosted by Gail Miller, June 27, 2023, in author’s possession.

“will only make us more effective in telling the story of the ongoing Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ in all the world as we move into the future.”¹¹ Though “remarkable blessings . . . have come” into “the lives of individuals and to the Church itself” because of the Joseph Smith Papers, Elder Bednar believed that this was only the beginning. Turning colloquial, he asserted, “‘You ain’t seen nothing yet.’”¹²

I will now describe some of the backstory about how all this came to be.¹³ Many played important roles, roles that, looking back, I see as heaven-blessed and often heaven-directed, as providential. Consider the metaphor of Assistant Church Historian Richard Turley, a colleague of Dean’s and mine. In his metaphor, each member of a great orchestra brings skills and comes prepared to contribute—so much so that sometimes each member may think that he or she is the music. But then he or she looks up and remembers that there is a conductor bringing it all together, creating what none of the musicians could do alone.

Because there is a conductor, we often end up playing a different role than the one we thought we prepared for, even doing something very different from what we expected to do. Dean was an example of that. He played a crucial role, but it is not the one he planned for or one that could have happened without an unwelcome, jolting course correction in his own life.

Dean was a man of many talents. His boyhood home in Springville, Utah, near the Springville Art Museum, influenced his love of art, but he also brought talent, enough to attend Brigham Young University (BYU) on an art scholarship. After his mission and his education, he decided that what he really wanted to do, something he loved even more than art, was to teach young people the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He landed a job as a seminary teacher, briefly at Payson High School and then in 1960, at West High School in Salt Lake City, where he settled in. At West High School, he found not only a job but a *career*. He saw himself as a career teacher, sharing the gospel he loved with students

11. Trent Toone, “After Two Decades, Church Celebrates Final Volume of the Joseph Smith Papers Project,” *Church News*, June 27, 2023, www.thechurchnews.com/history/2023/6/27/23759796/joseph-smith-papers-final-volume-published-hyrum-smith-martyrdom-elder-david-a-bednar/.

12. Toone, “After Two Decades.”

13. Dean and I worked together as colleagues and friends beginning in June 1972. Some of the following narrative he recounted to us over the years. From 2023 to 2025, I interviewed Dean and exchanged emails with him (for a chapter on his earlier career that I had not witnessed) to confirm details. I also relied on Dean’s 2023 autobiography, written for his family. Dean Jessee, “Reflections,” unpublished manuscript, 2023.

he loved. Students liked affable, friendly Brother Jessee, and if they paid attention, they always learned in his class. Even if they didn't pay so much attention, they felt his spirit.

For a time, things went well, very well, until it ended abruptly. His supervisor retired and was replaced by a younger man. As with the former, the new supervisor occasionally attended Dean's classes. In the absence of praise and criticism—no mention of deficiencies or suggestions of what he might do better—Dean had reason to think he was doing well. But the new supervisor apparently decided that quiet, unassuming Brother Jessee was not the best fit for rowdy high school students. As the 1963 school year drew to a close in the spring, with no forewarning, the supervisor informed Dean that his contract would not be renewed.

With five children and more on the way, this was a deep crisis for the Jessee household—not that Dean couldn't support his family. He had other talents: art, of course, and lithography (offset printing). He had a part-time job as a lithographer, which for a time became a full-time job. But now he had *no career*. The career he loved and expected to spend his life dedicated to was gone. Dean had a master's degree in Church history and a few graduate courses beyond that, but he had no opportunity (without jeopardizing his family) to return to full-time schooling for the PhD degree that would allow him access to the academic world. How could he support his family and go to school?

This was a crushing blow for Dean personally. But his perspective changed over time. "Eventually I . . . came to see that had this not occurred, I never would have known Joseph Smith."¹⁴ That is quite a statement—that this trauma was necessary for him to know Joseph Smith. But in retrospect, I, too, see that as a true statement.

While researching for his master's degree, Dean frequented the Church Historian's Office. His continuing interest in Latter-day Saint history took him back there again and again. Thinking that perhaps he could work there, in early 1964, he wrote a letter to the Church Historian, Elder Joseph Fielding Smith. Elder Smith's answer by return mail insisted that they had no job openings and that Dean was overqualified. The latter assertion was not a simple brush-off but a true statement. At the time, the Church Historian's Office employed clerks, not professionals.

Having been rebuffed by the top man, Dean didn't expect an affirmative answer when, in the Church Historian's Office that fall, he light-heartedly asked a young file clerk if there were any job openings. Her response that there might be one surprised him. "Go see that man,"

14. Jessee, "Reflections," 30.

she said, pointing to Earl Olson, the assistant Church historian and an important man in the Church Historian's Office.

Olson told Dean that they did have an opening: "Go see Elder Smith." [laughter] He did and once again was rebuffed—this time in person. Dean remembered being told, "You seem like a nice young man, but we don't have any openings," and "You're over-qualified."

He left the office disappointed. But he soon learned that there was indeed an opening; there had been a misunderstanding. Once that was sorted out, he had the job if he was willing to come work at a file clerk's salary in a file clerk's job. His first assignment was not just clerical but mind-numbingly tedious.¹⁵ Dean never told me this, but I'm certain that he started with a lower salary than he was making as a lithographer or that he could have made with his art. He was so committed to finding a place in history that he was willing to sacrifice. Bless June for supporting him in that.

But another challenge remained. The Church Historian's Office on the third floor of the Church Administration Building was jam-packed, and there was no office or even space for a desk. The only solution, Dean was told, was to squeeze another desk into "the cage." The cage was a large wire-mesh wall separating the library's other materials. Dean's desk would enjoy privileged space among the treasured manuscripts that Dean had sought but failed to see for his master's thesis. At the time, not only graduate students but even established scholars faced the same hurdle: They had no access to those manuscripts. And now, suddenly, as if he were Br'er Rabbit thrown into the briar patch, Dean found himself surrounded by manuscripts! Among them were the Joseph Smith documents that, to the benefit of us all, he later came to focus on.

Although Dean was hired as a clerk in November 1964, he, a curious young scholar, was soon poking around into this and that, learning from this manuscript and figuring out that document, learning more day by day about the records and about the early history they preserved. What he learned he kept largely to himself because he had no opportunity to write and publish. That was not his assignment nor that of others in the Church Historian's Office at the time, except for the Church historian.

15. Dean later wrote of his first assignment: "When I recall that my first three days' work at the HO [Historian's Office] in 1964 was spent in typing subject headings on library cards that read, 'Church, About,' it makes me shudder. When it was pointed out that every card in the library would fit that designation, the practice was stopped, after 1,500 cards had been typed." The incident "is a standard joke among the catalogers now," he wrote in 1970. But in 1964, it was for him a first-day introduction to what he later described as the painful "transition from the 19th to the 20th century in the HO." Dean Jessee, *Diary*, August 14, 1970.

That began to change in March 1968 when Truman Madsen asked Dean to contribute to special issues of *BYU Studies* on early Church history that Truman was overseeing. Though Dean was not yet a published scholar, Truman knew by reputation that Dean Jessee was the one man in the Church Historian's Office who could help him. He asked Dean to write, and Dean was soon publishing scholarly articles, exploring the very documents he had lived with for the past five years. These journal articles in *BYU Studies* (1969–71) launched Dean's illustrious publishing career as a scholar, historian, and documentary editor.¹⁶

During his first half dozen years working at the Church Historian's Office, Dean became a jack-of-all-trades. He filed and cataloged and tried to improve procedures. He followed up tips for acquisitions and conducted oral history interviews. He answered letters. He received research requests by General Authorities. He filled out reports for department leaders. Richard Anderson, Leonard Arrington, and other scholars asked Dean for help in locating sources, and they received it. As the only professionally trained historian on staff, Dean developed a broad portfolio—broad enough that by late 1970, he faced a choice.

In 1969 and again in 1971, Earl Olson hired professionals with archival training and experience: Jeffrey Johnson and Max Evans. For years, Dean had felt isolated and alone as he pushed for changes in an office with roots in the pioneer era. Now, he not only had allies but colleagues with more experience than he in things archival who could be expected to move matters in the right direction.¹⁷ With that changed landscape, Dean's answer when asked if he wanted to continue working on archival matters or focus on writing history was certain: *history!*¹⁸ However, there is no

16. Jessee's articles in *BYU Studies* during this period are Dean C. Jessee, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–94; Dean C. Jessee, "The Original Book of Mormon Manuscript," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 3 (1970): 259–82; and Dean C. Jessee, "The Writing of Joseph Smith's History," *BYU Studies* 11, no. 4 (1971): 439–73, which received the best article award from the Mormon History Association. However, in 1968, Jessee wrote nonacademic pieces about David O. McKay and Joseph Fielding Smith for Preston Nibley, *The Presidents of the Church* (Deseret News, 1968), 306–407, 408–21.

17. Dean confided to his diary his joy at no longer being alone in his effort to improve the way things were done in the "old" Church Historian's Office. The day Jeffrey Johnson arrived for work, September 8, 1969, Dean wrote that the old office "received an injection of hope for the future." He felt the same when Max Evans began on February 1, 1971. "What a blessing, to have another trained mind on board along with Jeff Johnson." The two became Dean's allies in prodding the institution to modernize, and both later made their mark on Utah's state institutions for history.

18. Jesse, Diary, December 16, 1970, and January 8, 1971.

question that Dean, along with Loraine Arnell (his first supervisor), Earl Olson, and especially Jeffrey Johnson and Max Evans, laid the groundwork for changing the Church Historian's Office from a pioneer institution set in its ways into the professional archive and library of today. The great atrium of the Church History Library proclaims in large gold letters, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1),¹⁹ a statement that extends an invitation to enter and use the treasured manuscripts therein.

Such an outcome was barely imaginable when Dean started at the Church Historian's Office. The prevailing perspective when Dean began working there was that the office existed to preserve precious documents of the Church's history with little concern for making them available to researchers or eventually the public. When the Church Historian's Office moved in late 1972 from the Church Administration Building to the East Wing of the new Church Office Building, archivist Jeffrey Johnson retrieved the brass plate above the door that had long proclaimed the rule of the office: "Library—No Admittance," it warned.

Dean and several associates, the small cadre of professionals working to modernize and professionalize the venerable repository, believed that the documents should be available to scholars and that it would benefit not only scholars but the Church if they were. Happily, not only young archivists but a few others held this view. President Howard W. Hunter, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles at the time, was appointed Church Historian in January 1970. He also believed that allowing scholars to study the records documenting the Church's singular history would result in good.

Popular imagination credits Leonard Arrington, called as Church historian in 1972, with "opening the archives"—that is, making the documents available for research. But he and his team were the beneficiaries of a process that began eighteen months earlier under the direction of Elder Hunter. Thanks to Dean Jessee's diary, we know the exact date the decision was announced to the Church Historian's Office staff. On June 9, 1970, Dean wrote that after a "supervisors meeting with Elder Hunter this morning[,] Earl [Olson] came in and announced that henceforth there would be no restriction on access to material or censoring of notes

19. A revelation dated April 6, 1830, the day the Church was organized, began with these words. Because this was viewed as a divinely mandated commission or injunction, members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are assigned to oversee the work of the Church History Department even today.

taken by those doing research in the H[istorian's] O[ffice]." Elder Hunter "stated that the material there could be used as freely as the age and condition of the material would permit."

To describe this as a sea change would be an understatement. Old-timers in the office were aghast. For many, after operating so long within a different paradigm, it was unsettling indeed. But not for Dean Jessee. The closing line of his diary entry expressed his joy: "There should be dancing in the streets." [laughter] Implementation was not immediate, but the process that began that day eventually saw the historical treasures available not only to Dean Jessee, now an insider, but to others too.

When professional historian Leonard Arrington became Church historian in 1972, he assembled a cadre of scholars to explore the incomparable records now open to scholars, to learn from them, and to publish what they learned. The only person from the existing staff of the Church Historian's Office he invited to join his new History Division scholars was Dean Jessee. Though Dean had been doing serious scholarly writing work for only a short time, he had assisted Leonard in some of his own research, and Leonard saw him as a fellow scholar. For nearly a decade, the History Division was Dean's professional home.

Ironically, as much as Leonard valued Dean's early work on Joseph Smith, he asked Dean to pause it for a time. He wasn't sure the Church was ready for an unlearned farm boy who didn't spell and write the same way educated people write in our day. Joseph's carefully transcribed words reproduced as he wrote them might be too jarring. Instead, he urged Dean to do something on Brigham Young.

Thus, Dean's first book was on Brigham Young, not Joseph Smith: *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons*, published in 1974.²⁰ Leonard intended that book as a landmark first volume of a grand series called the Heritage Series. The book did well and remains a treasure on many bookshelves. But it was the first *and last* volume in that series because, ironically, the Church was not ready for an unrefined, unfiltered Brigham Young either. [laughter]

In 1980, the History Division became the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History. In late 1982, the historians physically moved from the Church Office Building in Salt Lake City to BYU in Provo. Continuing their work from a distance as BYU professors had advantages. One benefit was that the Church would no longer be viewed as

20. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons* (Deseret Book, 1974).

responsible for the work of those historians, since they would not be writing from the Church's own downtown campus.

For most of us, there was no choice on whether to leave. If we wished to continue researching and writing with Leonard Arrington, we went with him to BYU. Because Dean had been in the Church Historian's Office before the creation of the History Division, he had a choice—a tough choice, as it turned out.

The original plan was for Dean to stay in the Church Office Building with the larger department. They needed someone with his skills and wanted him to stay as the “resident historian,” a role much like the one he had come to play before the creation of the History Division. Also, more committed than ever to a project on Joseph Smith's papers, he wanted to stay in Salt Lake City with the documents he loved. As he told Leonard a few months earlier, it was not acceptable that “there [was] not yet an edition of the papers of the founding prophet of this dispensation after 150 years.”²¹ The Historical Department,²² not BYU, held the documents.

However, Dean could also read the tea leaves. As it became increasingly clear that Historical Department leaders intended no more publishing under their auspices for the foreseeable future, he reconsidered. Reluctant as he was to leave the documents, as Dean expressed to me at the time in a typical Dean Jessee witticism, “What is the use of staying with the pantry and all its ingredients if you aren't allowed to cook a thing? Better to work as a cook with less ingredients and do what you can.” My reaction was unequivocal: “[Dean] has decided to join us! Which will be an important boost for the Institute. We are all pleased, indeed. His addition will greatly strengthen the Institute.”²³

But was it too late? When Dean asked Leonard three months earlier about the possibility of going to BYU, the best Leonard could offer then, after other transfers had been finalized, was a promise to bring Dean aboard if there was an opening. However, Elder G. Homer Durham, to whom Dean now reported, honored Dean's decision to leave. By the end of March 1981, Elder Durham made arrangements for Dean to be transferred to BYU.²⁴ When Dean made that momentous decision, he could

21. Jessee, *Diary*, February 7, 1980.

22. The Church Historian's Office later became the Historical Department. Today, it is known as the Church History Department.

23. Ronald K. Esplin *Diary*, March 5, 1981. Before this conversation, I thought Dean might “dig in and stay even if he couldn't pursue his writing and research as he wanted to. For now.”

24. Jessee, *Diary*, December 1, 1980, and March 30, 1981.

not have foreseen a return to Salt Lake City a quarter of a century later, back home, as it were, with full access to the documents—even to manuscripts he only dreamed of seeing in the 1980s. And when we returned, it was to a very different attitude about publishing than when we left.

Even though Dean did not have a PhD like many of his colleagues, he belonged at BYU, and he served there for twenty years. Recognizing his skills and contribution, BYU awarded him the academic rank of associate professor. Dean was as capable as any of his colleagues of earning a PhD, but he never had the opportunity. This concerned him enough that he asked Leonard about a leave of absence to get the degree. Leonard replied, in essence, “Dean Jessee, what are you thinking? You know your craft. The Church will be better served if you stay here and apply it than if you leave us to go after a credential.” Leonard saw seeking a credential at that stage in Dean’s productive career as an unnecessary distraction. In Leonard’s view, it was better for Dean to continue researching, writing, and publishing important scholarship. And he did.

When Dean retired from BYU in 2000, I was director of the Smith Institute. That made me his nominal boss even though he still mentored us all. “I will retire whenever you need the slot,” he told me. That is, he would retire whenever I thought it best to free up a faculty position so that we could hire a young scholar. “But only on one condition,” he added. “Nothing changes except where I get my paycheck.”

Dean chose to keep working in retirement. He continued traveling to BYU, where we kept a place for him until 2005. When the Joseph Smith Papers moved north to the Church Office Building, he joined us there, coming into the office until 2008. When the Joseph Smith Papers moved to the new Church History Library, once again, he continued to contribute and mentor. Dean kept his end of the bargain, and we kept ours: For many years, nothing changed except where he got his paycheck.

During his BYU years, Dean turned his uninterrupted attention to Joseph Smith. He published his second book—his first book on Joseph—in 1984: *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*.²⁵ Though it was Dean’s first book, one might think of it as the last book in the Joseph Smith Papers Project because, conceptually, it pulls from all the volumes every letter and diary entry Joseph Smith wrote in his own hand or dictated. Dean helped us understand that Joseph’s *personal* writings, often the most intimate and revealing ones, are among the most important. The book was an immediate success, eventually selling twenty thousand

25. See note 3.

copies in two editions,²⁶ and it is likely the best-selling scholarly history book Deseret Book published in the twentieth century.

Leonard Arrington worked with Dean on *Personal Writings* both before and after the move to BYU. Once Dean finished that project, he planned a papers of Joseph Smith project that would contain between nine and twelve volumes modeled on *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* he first saw on library shelves in 1970. These were to be Dean Jessee's books—aided (he would always add) by talented research assistants. But this was *his* project.

When I replaced Leonard Arrington as director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute in the summer of 1986, one of my priorities was to see that Dean received needed permissions to access sources and to publish his work, both complicated now that we were at BYU and no longer part of the Historical Department. It was possible only because of the cooperation and strong support of the Church History advisers from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Boyd K. Packer and Elder Dallin H. Oaks.²⁷ Elder Neal A. Maxwell, who, with Elder Oaks, met quarterly with scholars overseeing religious scholarship at BYU, also played an important role.

I first discussed the papers of Joseph Smith with Elder Maxwell and Elder Oaks when they visited BYU in late September 1986, and by November, Dean had a formal proposal ready to present to them. Only one month later, record time compared to our later experience, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles authorized Dean Jessee to publish the “journals and diaries” of Joseph Smith with “the possibility of the remainder of the papers project to follow.”²⁸ While not endorsing the larger project, their approval for Dean's initial proposal implied that further approvals would come if all went well with the publication of Joseph's diaries. Their approval also implied Dean could access documents in the First Presidency's possession that were needed to complete the diaries project. Dean eventually had access to all that he needed, but

26. A revised edition was published by Deseret Book in 2002.

27. The Church Historian's Office, known today as the Church History Department, has two advisers from the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who represent the department to the First Presidency. At this time, Elder Packer was the senior adviser and Elder Oaks was his associate. One reason that Elder Packer and other Apostles favored Dean's proposal was that they were pleased with *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* and hoped to see more such materials in the hands of Church members. See Dean Jessee Diary, November 13, 1986.

28. Jessee, Diary, September 23, 1986, November 17, 1986, and December 18, 1986.

that proved more complicated and required longer than receiving the initial project approval.

The First Presidency's initial explicit approval for publication of only the diaries created a dilemma. Because Joseph Smith did not put pen to paper on any diary until November 1832, publishing only his diaries meant omitting foundational backstories—no First Vision, no Moroni, no Book of Mormon, and no priesthood restoration. Dean's solution was to make volume 1, published in 1989, a book of *Autobiographical and Historical Writings*.²⁹ The first half of the journals, those for 1832 to 1842, would constitute volume 2, published in 1992.³⁰ As with Dean's prior two books, both received the Mormon History Association award for best documentary publication in the years they were published.

Dean's idea was a good, a necessary solution. But pausing the publication of Joseph's diaries to prepare an introductory history volume pushed publishing Joseph's later Nauvoo diaries well into the 1990s, years after the First Presidency's initial approval, which brought new challenges. Dean forged ahead, but publication stalled. Immediately after providing all of volume 2 of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* to Deseret Book in May 1992, Dean set to work on volume 3. By September 1993, he finished an early draft of the book for my review. Dean hoped to publish it by 1994, the sesquicentennial of the martyrdom, but Deseret Book told him that it could be done no sooner than 1995.³¹ And then things got complicated.

Multiple issues delayed progress. To ensure the volume was as accurate and complete as possible, Dean needed permission to refer to and hopefully include information from the Nauvoo diaries of William Clayton, Joseph's clerk and close associate. But those were in the First Presidency's custody and were opened only occasionally and to specific scholars. We considered seeking permission to combine Clayton's diaries with those of other Nauvoo clerks in a volume called *The Nauvoo Clerks of Joseph Smith*. Dean could then refer readers there. Even though Dean and James B. Allen, Clayton's biographer, had worked on those texts, preparing them for publication would cause even more delay—if approval could be obtained.³²

29. See note 3.

30. See note 3.

31. Jessee, Diary, September 14, 1993, and April 20, 1994.

32. Yale University Press will soon release a scholarly edition of William Clayton's Nauvoo journals edited by scholars in the Church History Department who worked on the Joseph Smith Papers Project.

Another hurdle was that the diaries in the draft of volume 3 of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* included almost every issue in Church history that might be considered problematic or sensitive: the Council of Fifty, the temple, plural marriage, and tensions between Joseph and Emma over plural marriage. None of those were issues in volume 2. Dean's permission from the First Presidency to publish Joseph's journals came almost a decade prior, and there was now a different First Presidency. Before publishing volume 3, all this would have to be revisited. There was also the matter of final access to important sources in the First Presidency's custody, and though permission came in due course, access to the records was much slower.

These challenges delayed the approval and publication of volume 3. From 1990 to early 2005, Elder Maxwell was the senior adviser to the Church History Department, and Elder Oaks was his associate until early 2000. They supported the publication of volume 3 and, I believe, expected to guide it through the approval process. However, although the book was never formally turned down, it was never approved for publication during their tenure.

The advisers' regular meetings with the First Presidency about Church history and department matters often had lengthy agendas, and Elder Maxwell did not want the publication of this important and potentially controversial book to be one in a long list of items to be quickly or routinely considered. He did not want it to be summarily turned down and didn't expect it to be summarily approved. This volume needed time for discussion. I remember being in Elder Maxwell's office discussing matters of history—including this volume—when he informed Elder Oaks that he now had "Brother Jessee's work" on the calendar in a way that would allow for such discussion and, hopefully, approval. Elder Oaks responded that the planned date was when he would be on a two-week assignment in the Philippines. Elder Maxwell chuckled, said he was not prepared to discuss the volume alone, and took it off the agenda.

The book was still awaiting approval in early 2000 when Elder Holland was assigned to work with Elder Maxwell as a Church History adviser, replacing Elder Oaks. When he learned that Dean's volume 3 had not yet received publication approval, Elder Holland asked for a review copy so that he could be fully informed about its contents and hopefully assist us. To ensure that Elder Holland had the best possible version, Richard Jensen, Dean Jessee, and I read every page, every footnote, making improvements where we could. Dean then consolidated our changes into a final version. At the same time Elder Holland received it, a copy also went to leaders in the Church Archives so they could be informed

and assist us in gaining approval. That copy landed on the desk of Ron Barney, who put it on top of his file cabinet.

The new printouts of that unapproved, unpublished volume proved to be the catalyst that changed everything. The copy that landed on Ron Barney's file cabinet became part of the inspirational story of how Larry and Gail Miller came to fund the Joseph Smith Papers Project after Larry's own spiritual experiences convinced him that he was to do something to support "the work of Brother Jessee."³³

That unpublished draft was not only the catalyst for the funding of the Joseph Smith Papers Project beginning in March 2001. It was also the catalyst for a renewed discussion among relevant Church leaders about the "work of Brother Jessee" to publish the papers of Joseph Smith more broadly. In April 2001, only five weeks after the Millers' funding commitment, the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles approved, subject to final review, a larger project (including but not limited to volume 3) to publish the papers of Joseph Smith.

The frustrating delays seemed interminable. However, in time, Dean came to see it as providential that he had not been allowed to push ahead as originally planned. Only later, for example, did we gain access to the minutes of the Council of Fifty, a necessary record for annotating the last months of Joseph Smith's Nauvoo diary. And only later did we learn of and gain access to the Book of Commandments and Revelations, the very book that John Whitmer carried from Kirtland, Ohio, to Missouri in late 1831 to be used for publishing the Book of Commandments.³⁴ Dean's long experience with revelation manuscripts was key to understanding what that manuscript was when we finally gained access to it. Had we proceeded as planned to publish the early revelations, it would have been necessary to redo the work once we had access to much earlier manuscripts. Also, as Dean was the first to admit, as diligent as he was, as careful as he was—and I will add as good as he was, and he was excellent—he could not do alone what a team could do together.

With funding from Larry and Gail Miller, with renewed authorization from the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, no longer would this be a one-man project, with only Dean Jessee and research assistants. Jed Woodworth, the first full-time scholar to work

33. Larry H. Miller, interview by Ronald O. Barney, August 2, 2006, Conference Center Studio, Salt Lake City, video and transcript in Church Archives.

34. "Series Introduction: Joseph Smith as Revelator and Translator," in *Revelations and Translations, Volume 1: Manuscript Revelation Books*, ed. Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2011), xxv.

on the project, began in July 2001, and many more followed. Dean oversaw the reshaping of his original plan of nine to twelve volumes of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* into a much larger Joseph Smith Papers Project of at least two dozen volumes. When completed in 2023, the print edition totaled twenty-seven volumes.

Still to come are the volumes of the Joseph Smith Legal Records series. Legal papers figured in both Dean's original plan and the revised, more ambitious plan. In the 1990s, aware that Gordon Madsen was searching in courthouses in the East for original legal documents dealing with Joseph Smith, Dean asked Gordon to work with him to prepare a volume of such documents. Later, Gordon mentored Attorney Jeffrey Walker in nineteenth-century law, and they began working on a larger legal series to be part of the expanded plan. Their work was blessed by additional documents located by Church History Department employee Scott Bradshaw, who was sent into the field by Richard Turley in the 1990s to locate documents in local repositories.³⁵

In 2017, the Legal Records series became a separate project, coordinating with but outside of the Joseph Smith Papers Project in the Church History Library. Today, it is under the umbrella of the project authorized by the First Presidency to produce, based on new research (from the Joseph Smith Papers and more), a new biography of Joseph Smith. The several volumes of the Legal Records series will join the current twenty-seven volume print edition as fruits of Dean Jessee's vision and ambition.

None of these publications could have occurred without trust. Dean was one key to that trust. Elder Maxwell was also essential. Elder Maxwell trusted the historians, including Dean Jessee—perhaps especially Dean Jessee—and his Brethren trusted Elder Maxwell. The same could be said of Elder Packer, who knew about Dean's work and interacted with him personally. That trust was a prerequisite to gaining formal approval for the Joseph Smith Papers Project in 2001.

As noted, Dean's later access to the sources necessary to ensure accuracy before publication was slow in coming. Even after the First Presidency had approved, the keeper of the records was hesitant to open them to outsiders. If you were responsible for the impressively titled *Book of the Law of the Lord*,³⁶ perhaps you would feel the same! On more than

35. Scott Bradshaw to Richard Turley, February 10, 2026, copy in possession of author. Some of the documents located and photocopied by Bradshaw and Madsen in the 1990s have since been lost or stolen from local repositories.

36. For more information about the *Book of the Law of the Lord*, see "Introduction to the *Book of the Law of the Lord*," Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press,

one occasion, I witnessed the intervention of Elder Packer and Elder Oaks to directly open the path for the access Dean needed to finish his work on that source and others.

I also witnessed what happened later with the Book of the Law of the Lord, an experience that demonstrates how completely Dean gained the trust of the careful keeper of records. In early 2005, when Dean needed one final look at the portion of Joseph Smith's diary inscribed in the Book of the Law of the Lord to verify his transcription before publication, he asked me to accompany him to the Church Administration Building to assist. On his first visit years earlier, he was given photocopies of the relevant pages with people overlooking what he did with them. On this occasion, January 14, 2005, the secretary took a heavy volume under his arm, marched us up to the fifth floor, placed us in a room, set the book on the table, and left us to our work. "Have fun," he said warmly as he turned to leave. "And if [you] leave the building with it, you're dead," he added jokingly.³⁷

Not only did the man not return, but he trusted Dean so much that he left the building before we did. After hours of verifying the transcripts, we carried the book downstairs, and he was nowhere to be found. When the man at the security desk declined to be responsible for it, we had difficulty finding someone to safeguard the volume so we could go home.

Dean was an essential part of earning the trust required for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. Permission, cooperation, and access were all facilitated because of the man Dean Jessee was.

Richard Bushman, Joseph Smith's biographer, once said that one reason for Joseph's power was that he had the revelations "at his back." According to Bushman, no one believed the revelations more than Joseph Smith.³⁸ Perhaps. But I can tell you that Dean Jessee believed the revelations and he loved the revelations—especially the manuscripts (of which he was a foremost expert).

One of the documents Dean published in the first volume of *The Papers of Joseph Smith* was an interview by a newspaper editor who traveled from Pittsburgh to interview Joseph Smith. "Speaking of revelations, he stated that when he was in a 'quandary,' he asked the Lord for a revelation, and when he could not get it, he 'followed the dictates of his

accessed May 4, 2026, www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/introduction-to-the-book-of-the-law-of-the-lord/1#facts.

37. Esplin, *Diary*, January 14, 2005.

38. Richard Lyman Bushman, with Jed Woodworth, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 173.

own judgment.’ . . . But he never gave anything to his people as revelation, unless it was a revelation, and the Lord did reveal himself to him.”³⁹ Joseph believed that. Dean Jessee believed that. And Dean helped us know and better understand Joseph and his revelations.

I want to close with Dean, the scholar, talking about his faith. After decades of studying the life, work, and documents of Joseph Smith, Dean said that what mattered most to him was that Joseph helped us understand the revelations from heaven and to come closer to the Savior, of whom Joseph testified and taught.

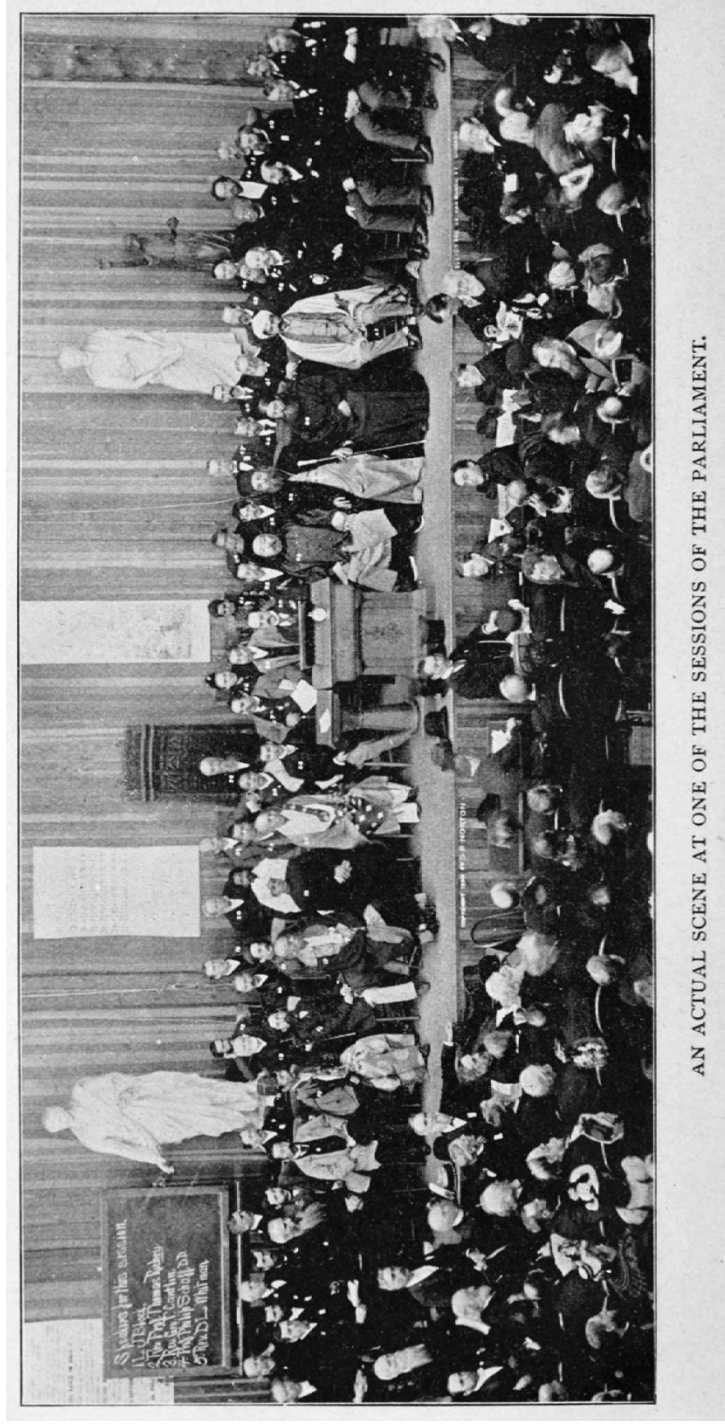
To a news reporter in 2008, Dean expressed one way his scholarship strengthened his faith. As a writer and editor, he knew that the process of creating a coherent, readable manuscript included writing multiple drafts and editing, refining, and improving those drafts. His deep study of the original manuscripts of the Book of Mormon showed none of that. Instead, the manuscripts were often “one continual sentence,” without punctuation. This testified to Dean that the Book of Mormon was what Joseph Smith said it was: a revealed text from God. “I could tell, this man was telling the truth,” Dean said. “This is a dictated record,” a record Dean believed in and a record that matters because it teaches us about Christ. “In my estimation, the thing that’s the most important contribution of Joseph Smith to mankind is the understanding he gave of the atonement of Jesus Christ that comes in the Book of Mormon.”⁴⁰ Amen, Brother Jessee!

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Ronald K. Esplin was Dean Jessee’s colleague in the History Division of the Church Historical Department in the 1970s and then in the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University in the 1980s. From 1986 to 2002, Esplin was director of that institute. He retired from BYU as a professor of Church History in 2005 when the Joseph Smith Papers Project moved to the Church History Department in Salt Lake City. Esplin served as a managing editor of the Joseph Smith Papers Project from 2000 to 2012, after which he continued as a general editor until the project was completed in 2023. He retired from the Church History Department in 2016 and presently serves as director of the Brigham Young Papers.

39. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:443.

40. Aaron Shill, “Testimony Drives Dean Jessee’s Work,” *Deseret News*, August 15, 2008, <https://www.deseret.com/2008/8/15/20379461/testimony-drives-dean-jessee-s-work/>.



AN ACTUAL SCENE AT ONE OF THE SESSIONS OF THE PARLIAMENT.

FIGURE 1. The main assembly of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, Columbus Hall, Chicago, September 1893. From John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the World's Columbian Exposition*, 2 vols. (Parliament, 1893), 1:frontispiece.

“Oriental Religious Faiths”

Elder B. H. Roberts,
the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions,
and the Beginnings of Latter-day Saint
Interreligious Engagement in the *Improvement Era*

Reid L. Neilson

In 1893, and for the first time in United States history, representatives from many religions gathered in Chicago, Illinois, to present their ideas and beliefs. As part of the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (fig. 1), local religious leaders aimed to feature religions in America and called their conference (or “congress”) the World’s Parliament of Religions, held September 11–27. They invited representatives from many Protestant denominations, Catholicism, Judaism, and from Eastern religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Though interfaith gatherings are common today, this was a momentous occasion at the time. Two religions were excluded from the event: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a group called the Secularists. In this article, I will show how the Church’s exclusion from this event sparked Elder Brigham Henry “B. H.” Roberts’s awareness of other faiths and his significant effort to engage with other religions while still defending his own.

After seventeen days of presentations from each religion, Charles Carrol Bonney (president of the World’s Congresses at the World’s Columbian Exposition) gave the closing speech. While congratulating all those involved, he declared, “These Congresses have been successful far beyond anticipation. . . . They have transformed into enduring realities the hopes of those who organized and conducted them . . . and they will exercise a benign and potent influence on the welfare of mankind through the coming centuries.”¹

1. Charles Carroll Bonney, *World’s Congress Addresses* (Open Court Publishing, 1900), 77.

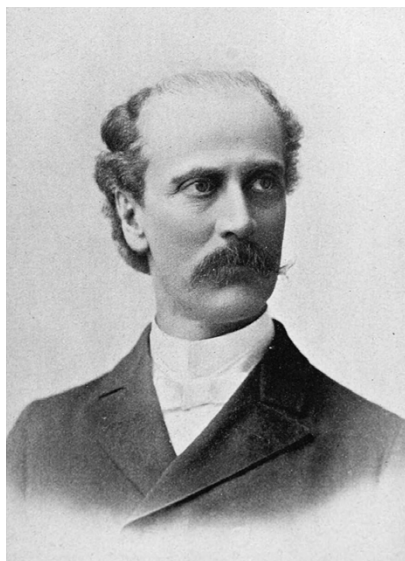


FIGURE 2. John Henry Barrows, chairman of the General Committee on Religious Congress Auxiliary, 1893. From Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:41.

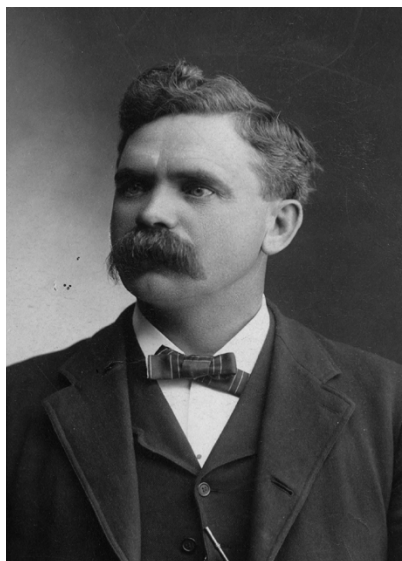


FIGURE 3. Brigham Henry "B. H." Roberts, the Church's representative at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, circa 1895. Courtesy Church History Library.

Bonney also used his closing remarks to justify why their committee excluded the two groups from participating. For the Secularists, he said, "if the so-called Secularists or Freethinkers were denied admission to the Religious Congress, it was not from any personal ill-will, but because they had no religious faith to affirm, and no religious achievements to set forth." For The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter the Church), Bonney used a different argument. Three years earlier, the Church had issued the Manifesto (D&C Official Declaration 1), which ostensibly ended its longstanding practice of plural marriage, but polygamy persisted. Bonney argued, "If the Mormon Church was not admitted to the Parliament of Religions, it was not because of any discrimination against its religious faith, but for the reason that its disclaimer of a practice forbidden by the laws of the country had not become sufficiently established to warrant such admission." Bonney claimed that, in both cases, "the action of the World's Congress Auxiliary was in conformity with the highest rules of charity and justice."²

2. Bonney, *World's Congress Addresses*, 81; see also Reid L. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 172–75.

Despite the lack of invitation, Church leaders sent Elder B. H. Roberts to Chicago. During the gathering, Roberts warned Bonney and John Henry Barrows (fig. 2), the chairman of the General Committee on Religious Congress Auxiliary, that he would "plead his religion's case before the court of public opinion."³ The afternoon after Bonney's closing statement, Roberts (fig. 3) contacted Chicago's leading newspapers and convinced the *Inter-Ocean* to publish his grievances in the following day's newspaper. Written as an open letter to Barrows and Bonney, Roberts wrote,

Gentlemen, you should have extended a hearty invitation to the "Mormon" Church to participate in your Parliament, and give her representative a full and fair hearing, not in some out-of-the-way corner, but in general Parliament. You should have done that if for nothing else than to have had the joyful news proclaimed that polygamy had been discontinued by the "Mormons." If you thought us in error, as Christian ministers, you should have been anxious to learn and have the world find out wherein we were in error, that you, as lovers of human souls could find out where we were wrong, and then in kindness and for our good show us our error—and what could have been better for you Christians than to have exposed our error from our own statement of our faith, and then reclaimed us? But you have missed your opportunity.⁴

"Roberts's public denunciation of Bonney, Barrows, and the Parliament made waves in a sea of faith. A condensed version of his letter was distributed nationally by the Associated Press, which garnered a good deal of editorial attention, particularly in Chicago's newspapers."⁵ Many editorials objected to the Parliament's decision to exclude the Latter-day Saints. On October 3, the *Chicago Herald* published, "This was most discourteous treatment. . . . The gathering at the Art Institute [fig. 4] is a parliament of religions—not a parliament of Christians or a parliament of monogamists. The people in attendance knew what they might expect when they accepted invitations to the congress. If they desired to hear only what was entirely agreeable to them they might better have stayed away. The slight put upon Roberts was unjustified and will detract from the value and reputation of the whole gathering."⁶

3. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 173.

4. B. H. Roberts, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Parliament of Religions: III. Christian Treatment of Mormons," *Improvement Era*, August 1899, 765–66.

5. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 174.

6. *Chicago Herald*, October 3, 1893; reprinted in "The 'Fairness' of It," *Deseret News Weekly*, October 7, 1893, 491.



FIGURE 4. The Art Institute of Chicago, 1892, where the World's Parliament of Religions was held in 1893. Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHi-o85800.

The *Chicago Daily Tribune* also reacted: “All the religions of the world—oriental [Eastern] and occidental [Western], known and unknown, white and black, from idolitry [*sic*] to atheism—have been heard . . . but the doctrine of the Latter Day Saints, as preached under the anti-polygamy laws of the United States, were completely ignored by the officials of the Congresses at the Art Institute.”⁷ Although “there is no known record of Bonney or Barrows responding in newspaper print to Roberts’s charges,” Bonney did send President Woodruff a private letter of explanation that November.⁸

Thus, though the Church was not recognized at the 1893 Parliament of Religions, the media and some American Christians appeared willing to embrace them. Women representatives from the Church and the Tabernacle Choir “enjoyed international acclaim and commendation,” with women being welcomed into the Women’s Congress, and the choir earning second place in the choir competition. Though specific parts of Church culture were accepted, and though the media revealed the discrimination, there were clear “limits of religious tolerance in late nineteenth-century America. . . . Nevertheless, the Mormon

7. “Mormon Church Is Aggrieved,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 28, 1893, 2.

8. “Letter from Charles Carroll Bonney, 18 November 1893,” 1, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed November 17, 2025, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/PQMA>.

successes—and struggles—at the Chicago World's Fair pushed church leaders to escape those imposed confines."⁹

In the coming years, Roberts ensured that other religions were allowed to represent themselves to the Latter-day Saints within the pages of the Church's fledgling *Improvement Era* periodical. Having been slighted himself in Chicago, he invited the leaders of other spiritual traditions—both Christian denominations and non-Christian faiths—to chronicle their own histories and present their own theologies. This represented a move beyond *ecumenical* education (engagement with fellow Christian faiths) to *interreligious* engagement (discussions with other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism). Roberts's resulting "Religious Faiths" series in the *Improvement Era* represents perhaps the earliest Latter-day Saint ecumenical engagement with their fellow Christians and interreligious engagement with world religions. This is not to suggest that Roberts totally abandoned his exclusivist views of the Restoration—for which he was an apologist and outspoken defender—but it does suggest that his mixed experiences at the World's Parliament of Religions compelled him to a more nuanced and inclusivist view of other religious traditions.

Elder B. H. Roberts and the *Improvement Era* Periodical

B. H. Roberts (1857–1933) was born into tragic poverty in Warrington, Lancashire, England, the son of an alcoholic gambler. After both parents joined the Church, his mother separated from his father and gathered with the Latter-day Saints in Utah Territory in 1862. She was financially unable to bring all her children to Zion at that time. Four years later, at the age of nine, Roberts left England for the United States, crossed the American plains by foot, and was reunited with his mother in Utah in 1866. He was baptized a member of the Church in 1867.¹⁰

Blessed with a gifted intellect as a young man, he received a scholarship, excelled at the University of Deseret in Salt Lake City, and graduated in 1878.¹¹ Roberts served several proselyting missions, including stints in the Southern and Eastern States Missions. He was called to lead

9. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 175; see also Neilson, "Mormon Matriarchs: LDS Ladies at the World's Congress of Representative Women," and "Sweet Singers of Zion: The Mormon Tabernacle Choir at the 1893 Welsch Eisteddfod," in *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 75–140.

10. John Sillito, *B. H. Roberts: A Life in the Public Arena* (Signature Books, 2021), 4–14.

11. Sillito, *B. H. Roberts*, 22–23.

the Southern States Mission in 1883, where he dealt with violence and persecution of the missionaries serving there.¹² Beginning in 1888, he served as a General Authority member of the First Council of the Seventy until his death more than four decades later.¹³ Like many other Latter-day Saint men in the late nineteenth century, Roberts practiced plural marriage, marrying three times, and served a five-month sentence in the Utah Territorial Penitentiary in 1889 because of it.¹⁴ Roberts was also active in Utah politics. He was elected to the House of Representatives for the Democratic Party in 1898, but the United States Congress deprived him of his congressional appointment due to anti-Mormon prejudice. Roberts was also a historian who assembled a multivolume history of the Church and defended the Book of Mormon.¹⁵ He was well known as a “defender of the faith”¹⁶ and “Mormonism’s blacksmith orator.”¹⁷

In May 1896, several years after attending the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, Roberts’s professional prospects were waning. To supplement his meager living allowance from the Church for his ecclesiastical service as a member of the First Council of the Seventy, he also worked as editor of *The Salt Lake Herald*. But Utah silver-mining magnate Robert C. Chambers had recently purchased the paper and made it clear that he would exercise editorial independence from the Church and its presiding quorums. Uncomfortable with this change in leadership and new editorial voice, Roberts resigned as editor of the newspaper.¹⁸

Clearly in need of income to support his plural families, Church leaders determined to find a new opportunity for Roberts to continue to serve full time in the Church and receive a salary. That June, Church

12. Sillito, *B. H. Roberts*, 75.

13. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Bookcraft, 1980), 180.

14. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith*, 186–96.

15. Truman G. Madsen, “B. H. Roberts,” in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Deseret Book, 2000), 1034–35; and “B. H. Roberts,” Church History Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/b-h-roberts>.

16. B. H. Roberts, “Venerable Dignitary of the ‘Mormon’ Church Is Summoned,” *Logan Herald-Journal*, September 28, 1933, 1.

17. Reid L. Neilson, “Mormonism’s Blacksmith Orator: B. H. Roberts at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 12, no. 1 (2011): 53–84; Sillito, *B. H. Roberts*, 167.

18. Sillito, *B. H. Roberts*, 257; “The Herald,” *Salt Lake Herald*, May 10, 1896, 4; Don Maguire, “R. C. Chambers, President of the Ontario Silver Mining Company,” *Mines and Minerals* 21, no. 11 (June 1901): 504.

officials assigned him to help administer the Eastern States Mission (all the states east of Utah to the Atlantic coast) as a public relations missionary.¹⁹ Moreover, he "was sent to assess the condition and organization of the [neighboring] Northern States Mission, reinvigorate or create local units, encourage baptisms, and bolster the faith of missionaries and members alike," according to his biographer John Sillito.²⁰

On the night before his departure for the mission field, June 21, 1896, Roberts gave a memorable speech titled "Mormonism: The Force Which Unites and Blends All Truth" at the Eighteenth Ward Chapel in Salt Lake City. He recalled attending the Parliament three years earlier in Chicago, where he learned about "nearly all the religions," including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. Roberts admitted to being "very much astonished at the amount of truth to be found in all these systems of religion" and explained the astonishment of many other Christians in attendance. He related how skeptical philosophers like Robert Ingersoll, David Hume, and Voltaire concluded "that Jesus Christ copied his precepts, his ordinances, and the religious and fundamental truths of his religion from the religions of the orient." In contrast, Roberts argued that the expanded Latter-day Saint scriptural canon reveals "the antiquity of the Gospel" and explains the "fragments of Gospel truth held by the religions of the Orient, of India, Persia, Egypt and some portions of Japan and of China."²¹ This would not be Roberts's last word on Eastern religions to his fellow Latter-day Saints.

While laboring as a public relations missionary in the Eastern states that July, Roberts received word that Elder Abraham H. Cannon of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles had passed away at the young age of thirty-seven. His unanticipated death led to the demise a few months later of *The Contributor*, the periodical managed by Cannon that represented the Young Men's and Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Associations (YMMIA and YLMIA respectively), the Church's youth organizations.²² On December 3, 1896, Roberts returned to Utah, and on the 7th, he reported to the First Presidency on his public relations mission back East and received a new publishing assignment.²³ On

19. Sillito, *B. H. Roberts*, 257–58.

20. Sillito, *B. H. Roberts*, 259.

21. B. H. Roberts, "Mormonism: The Force Which Unites and Blends All Truth," *Salt Lake Herald*, July 11, 1896, Church and Farm Department, 6–7.

22. The *Contributor* ran from 1879 to 1896. Petrea Gillespie Kelly, "Contributor," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (Macmillan, 1992), 1:320.

23. "This, That and the Other," *Lehi Banner*, December 8, 1896, 8.

December 10, Roberts met with Church leaders, including Apostles Francis M. Lyman and Joseph F. Smith, to discuss the creation of a new Church periodical to take the place of the now defunct *Contributor*.²⁴

In hindsight, November 1897 was a memorable time to launch the *Improvement Era* for the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA). That year, the Latter-day Saints were celebrating the golden jubilee of the pioneers' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley five decades earlier. By this time Joseph Smith had been dead for fifty-three years, and Wilford Woodruff was now the Church's president. The Church had nearly forty stakes and a membership over 225,000.²⁵ According to one of the later editors of the *Improvement Era*, top Church leaders implemented the new magazine because they "were concerned that a line of communication no longer existed between leadership in Salt Lake City and the young men throughout the Church."²⁶ The *Improvement Era* was part of a long history of Latter-day Saint periodicals. It would outlast all its earliest editors and contributors and continued to be published until 1970.

Together with President Joseph F. Smith of the First Presidency, Roberts served as coeditor of the *Improvement Era* from November 1897 until July 1899. In its official "Prospectus," they previewed the Church's latest publication: "It will be the aim of the publishers to present their readers with a high quality of literature, doctrinal, historical, and intelligent treatment of current topics, it will be a valuable annual addition to the libraries of our young men." More specifically, they described the anticipated contents of its inaugural yearlong volume, including "The Past of Mutual Improvement," "Young Characters in History," "Bible Studies," "An Age of Wonders," "Pioneer Journey," and "Statehood and How It Was Achieved." Future issues would also feature "Religious Faiths," an informative "review of existing religions and religious sects in the world; comparison and contrast of the same, and the trial of all by the standard of revealed truth. In a community so especially interested in religion as ours, this series of articles will be of absorbing interest," its editors promised.²⁷

24. John Sillito, "Shaping Mormonism's Public Image and Building the Faith: B. H. Roberts's Mission to the Midwest, 1896," *Journal of Mormon History* 45, no. 1 (2019): 83.

25. N. Eldon Tanner, "To Those Searching for Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1979, 15.

26. Doyle L. Green, "The *Improvement Era*—the Voice of the Church (1897–1970)," *Improvement Era*, November 1970, 13; see also Jay M. Todd, "Improvement Era," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:678.

27. "Prospectus of *Improvement Era*, 1897–98," Susa Young Gates Papers, circa 1870–1933, Separation List: Printed Materials Removed from Papers, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The Religious Landscape in Territorial Utah, 1847–1895

What was the religious landscape in Utah Territory in the years leading up to statehood?²⁸ "Not surprisingly, the Utah Territory was inextricably linked to the Church during its first five decades. The fortunes of both organizations rose and (more often) fell with the same tides of American public opinion." By 1870, about 85,000 Latter-day Saints were living in the Utah Territory, accounting for 98 percent of the total territorial population.²⁹

By 1884, Church membership in Utah had jumped to about 106,000, against a total population of 168,000. This dropped the Latter-day Saints to only 63 percent of the total Utah population, but still 96 percent of the total Utah religious denomination/church membership for the year. According to the 1890 US census, there were 118,201 Latter-day Saints in Utah out of a total of 210,779 (about 56 percent of the total population), which accounted for 92 percent of the total number of religionists in Utah.³⁰

As part of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, every American state was given a building in Chicago to present their state's contributions. The Utah Board of Lady Managers decided to present a religious history of Utah territory. The volume "reveals the power structure of religion in Utah," with half the book written about the Church by Latter-day Saint historian Andrew Jenson. The Utah Board of Lady Managers also invited women from ten other denominations to write their religious history in Utah.³¹ "Their resulting *World's Fair Ecclesiastical History of Utah* was featured prominently in the Utah Building."³²

28. See T. Edgar Lyon, "Religious Activities and Development in Utah, 1847–1910," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1967): 292–306. This article was later expanded and published as T. Edgar Lyon and Glen M. Leonard, "The Churches in the Territory," in *Utah's History*, ed. Richard D. Poll, Thomas G. Alexander, Eugene E. Campbell, and David E. Miller (Brigham Young University Press, 1978), 317–35.

29. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 51–52.

30. See "Table H: Membership of Religious Denominations in Utah, 1870–1975," in Poll and others, *Utah's History*, 692–93. For more on the number of religionists in Utah, see Lee L. Bean, "Religious Membership in Utah: Growth Without Change," in *Utah at the Beginning of the New Millennium: A Demographic Perspective*, ed. Cathleen D. Zick and Ken R. Smith (University of Utah Press, 2006), 127–34.

31. *World's Fair: Ecclesiastical History of Utah*, comp. Representatives of the Religious Denominations (Salt Lake City, 1893), vi–vii.

32. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 66.

Early Ecumenical Dialogues with Other Christians

Four years since Elder B. H. Roberts had tried to represent the Church at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, he was still angry about his treatment by its Protestant organizers. Given his new role as coeditor of the *Improvement Era* beginning in 1897, he determined to publish a series of descriptive articles about other churches. But instead of writing the articles himself, he invited the leaders of other Christian traditions to tell their own stories and teach their own theologies. In short, he wanted his fellow Christian clergymen to represent themselves, something that the Parliament leaders had not allowed him to do in Chicago. Beginning in November 1897, Roberts would publish eleven articles on other Christian "Religious Faiths" in the *Improvement Era* over the next nine months. This represents the earliest and most comprehensive Latter-day Saint ecumenical dialogue with fellow Christians.

Referencing the periodical's prospectus, Roberts explained to his new YMMIA subscribers that "it is the intention of the Editors of the *Era* to make this series of articles 'a review of existing religions and religious sects in the world,' giving an opportunity for 'comparison and contrast of the same,' and finally 'the trial of all by the standard of revealed truth.' We begin, of course, with the Christian religion." He further disclosed to his Latter-day Saint audience that he had "extended an invitation to prominent ministers of the churches represented in our State [Utah] to contribute statements of their doctrine and claims to the *Era*, in order that each of the prominent churches, at least, might present its doctrine from its own standpoint, and by its own representatives." As coeditor of the *Improvement Era*, Roberts expressed his pleasure that "there have been already several favorable responses by prominent ministers, and the series, we are of opinion, will be of incalculable value and intense interest to our readers."³³

Introducing Other Christian "Religious Faiths" to the Latter-day Saints

In the first issue of the *Improvement Era* (November 1897), Roberts featured "The Doctrine and Claims of the Roman Catholic Church," written by the Right Reverend Lawrence Scanlan.³⁴ The Catholic bishop of Salt

33. Lawrence Scanlan, "Religious Faiths, I. The Doctrine and Claims of the Roman Catholic Church," *Improvement Era*, November 1897, 11.

34. Scanlan, "Doctrine and Claims of the Roman Catholic Church," 11–25.

Lake City began his article by thanking Roberts and his editorial team for the generous opportunity to characterize his own denomination.³⁵ Bishop Scanlan then spent fifteen pages outlining Catholic history and theology for his Latter-day Saint audience. This was an unprecedented offer of interreligious cooperation for the Church to extend to Catholics in the pages of its periodical for Young Men.

In December, Roberts published his second article in the "Religious Faiths" series, "The Doctrine and Claims of the Greek Catholic Church [Eastern Orthodox Church]."³⁶ Unlike the other articles in the series, Roberts prepared the article, since that denomination "has no representative in this state [Utah]."³⁷ He then devoted ten pages of the periodical to outlining the tenets of their faith tradition.³⁸

During the first half of 1898, Roberts continued to feature monthly articles on other "Religious Faiths" in the *Improvement Era*, letting the Utah clergy of Christian denominations tell their own history and theology. In January, Reverend J. B. Halsey contributed "The Doctrine and Claims of the Episcopal Church."³⁹ In February and March, Reverend N. E. Clemenson, minister of the Presbyterian Church in Logan, Utah, contributed "The Polity of the Presbyterian Church"⁴⁰ and "The Doctrinal Position of the Presbyterian Church."⁴¹ Reverend Alfred H. Henry, Pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Salt Lake City, wrote the article "Spirit and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church" for the April issue.⁴² In the May issue, Roberts featured a piece by Reverends R. A. and M. T. Maynard of the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, "The Principles and Polity of the Unitarian Church."⁴³

In the June 1898 issue of the *Improvement Era*, Roberts informed his Latter-day Saint readers that he had unfortunately been unable to collect

35. Scanlan, "Doctrine and Claims of the Roman Catholic Church," 11.

36. "Religious Faiths, II. The Doctrine and Claims of the Greek Catholic Church," *Improvement Era*, December 1897, 94–108.

37. "Doctrine and Claims of the Greek Catholic Church," 94.

38. "Doctrine and Claims of the Greek Catholic Church," 94–103.

39. J. B. Halsey, "Religious Faiths, III. The Doctrine and Claims of the Episcopal Church," *Improvement Era*, January 1898, 172–85.

40. N. E. Clemenson, "Religious Faiths, IV. The Polity of the Presbyterian Church," *Improvement Era*, February 1898, 258–68.

41. N. E. Clemenson, "Religious Faiths, V. The Doctrinal Position of the Presbyterian Church," *Improvement Era*, March 1898, 340–53.

42. Alfred H. Henry, "Religious Faiths, VI. Spirit and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church," *Improvement Era*, April 1898, 385–90.

43. R. A. and M. T. Maynard, "Religious Faiths, VII. The Principles and Polity of the Unitarian Church," *Improvement Era*, May 1898, 501–8.

written responses from additional Christian denominations. As he had explained in his inaugural “Religious Faiths” article the previous November, he had invited Christian clergymen in Utah to contribute doctrinal statements to be published in the *Improvement Era*. However, the Lutheran, Congregational, and Baptist representatives did not respond to the request. But Roberts felt that “it is important, however, that these churches be represented in this symposium, and that, too, by sympathetic writers; and we have, therefore, selected statements of the faith and doctrine of these churches from papers presented by representative ministers of those respective faiths at the World’s Parliament of Religions, held at Chicago, 1893, in connection with the World’s Columbian Exposition.”⁴⁴

In the aftermath of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, Roberts had access to several printed proceedings of the spiritual congress. “There are two published editions of the Parliament speeches that can be considered authoritative,” historian Richard Hughes Seager explains.⁴⁵ These are *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s Parliament of Religions*, edited by John Henry Barrows,⁴⁶ and *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions*, edited by Walter R. Houghton.⁴⁷ Barrows’s volume is the most comprehensive, though it was heavily edited. Houghton’s collection relies “on stenographic notes taken during the proceedings,” as well as some authors’ manuscripts, many of which were condensed and edited. Seager summarizes, “Both Barrows and Houghton contain valuable descriptive material, a variety of impromptu remarks, and secondary addresses and speeches.”⁴⁸

In the absence of submitted papers from Lutheran, Congregational, and Baptist denominations, Roberts would select and reprint several articles from both Barrows’s and Houghton’s published collections of Parliament speeches in the coming months. In the June 1898 issue of the *Improvement Era* he published four articles in this manner: Professor F. A. Schmidt, “The Faith of the Lutheran Church”;⁴⁹ Reverend J. N. Kildahl,

44. See starred editors’ note in F. A. Schmidt, “Religious Faiths, VIII. The Faith of the Lutheran Church,” *Improvement Era*, June 1898, 550.

45. Richard Hughes Seager, *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World’s Parliament of Religions, 1893* (Open Court, 1993), 1.

46. John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1893).

47. Walter R. Houghton, ed., *Neely’s History of the Parliament of Religions and Religious Congresses at the World’s Columbian Exposition* (Chicago, 1893).

48. Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 1.

49. Schmidt, “Faith of the Lutheran Church,” 550–52; F. A. Schmidt, “The Faith of the Lutheran Church,” in Barrows, *World’s Parliament of Religions*, 2:1473–74.

"Significance of Confirmation and Baptism in the Lutheran Church";⁵⁰ Reverend Simeon Gilbert, "What Congregationalism Is";⁵¹ and Reverend George C. Lorimer, "The Presentation of the Baptist Churches."⁵² Using these published reports from the 1893 Parliament allowed these Christian churches to describe themselves in their own printed words. With the publication of these final four statements of faith, Roberts and his *Improvement Era* editorial team had featured eleven overviews of much of American Christianity.⁵³

Introducing "The Claims, Doctrines, and Organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" to Other Christians

Having provided other Christian traditions with a platform to explain and defend their religious beliefs, Roberts next determined to tell the story of his own religious tradition within the pages of the *Improvement Era* as a continuation of his "Religious Faiths" series of articles. "The time has now come to state the claims, and doctrines, and the organization of The Church," Roberts began, "and we confess that the main object we have had in view from the commencement has been that side by side with what may be regarded, not only as a sympathetic, but authoritative statement of the claims and doctrines of the respective churches of Christendom, there might also be placed a similar statement of the claims and doctrines of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."⁵⁴

During the monthly issues between July and October 1898, Roberts published a four-part series of essays titled "The Claims, Doctrines, and Organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." His first essay, "The Relationship of the Church to the Christian Sects,"⁵⁵ began with an editorial footnote staking out Roberts's doctrinal position. "Since

50. J. N. Kildahl, "Religious Faiths, VIII. Significance of Confirmation and Baptism in the Lutheran Church," *Improvement Era*, June 1898, 552–53; J. N. Kildahl, "Confirmation and Catechetical Instruction in the Lutheran Church," in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:1474–76.

51. Simeon Gilbert, "What Congregationalism Is," *Improvement Era*, June 1898, 553–56; Simeon Gilbert, "The Congregational Church Congress," in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:1429–33.

52. Geo. C. Lorimer, "The Presentation of the Baptist Churches," *Improvement Era*, June 1898, 556–62; George C. Lorimer, "The Baptists in History," in Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 832–38.

53. B. H. Roberts, "Religious Faiths, IX. The Claims, Doctrines, and Organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: I. The Relationship of the Church to the Christian Sects," *Improvement Era*, July 1898, 665.

54. Roberts, "Relationship of the Church to the Christian Sects," 666.

55. Roberts, "Relationship of the Church to the Christian Sects," 665–80.

the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is recognized by its members as the only true Church of Jesus Christ on earth, in this and the succeeding articles, it will be called *The Church*, by which it will be understood as the true and only Church of Jesus Christ, in contradistinction to all other organizations claiming to be such church,” Roberts began, shedding some of his earlier ecumenicism and reverting to apologetics. “The writer might go further and say that in such manner the term will be quite generally used in this publication, and he hopes the time will come when in all our literature the words, *The Church*, will always be known to mean the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This in the interest of brevity.”⁵⁶

Some outsiders claimed that the Latter-day Saints had ducked opportunities to be thoughtfully examined by representatives of other religious traditions, and Roberts sought to refute this criticism. “Among many other false charges that have been made against The Church has been that of shunning such opportunity for comparison and contrast. It has been falsely alleged that ‘Mormonism’ thrives only where ignorance is most profound; that its doctrines appeal to the baser passions of man, not to his reason, nor to his moral or spiritual nature,” he wrote to his Latter-day Saint readers.⁵⁷ He took this occasion to reference the exclusion of the Church and its representatives from the 1893 Parliament, continuing to be frustrated after his humiliation there. Roberts expressed his hope “that this present opportunity for comparison and contrast, deliberately sought and found, may tend to prove that the charge of shunning such opportunities is false.”⁵⁸ Roberts then launched into a defense of the Restoration and the Church for fifteen pages.

That August, Roberts published his second article outlining the Latter-day Saint position of faith, “The Doctrine of the Church in Respect of the Godhead,” which numbered fifteen pages.⁵⁹ That September, his third article, “The Doctrines of the Church in Respect of Man and the Gospel,” was featured at nine pages.⁶⁰ And Roberts’s fourth article, “The

56. Roberts, “Relationship of the Church to the Christian Sects,” 665n.

57. Roberts, “Relationship of the Church to the Christian Sects,” 666.

58. Roberts, “Relationship of the Church to the Christian Sects,” 667.

59. B. H. Roberts, “Religious Faiths, X. The Claims, Doctrines, and Organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: II. The Doctrine of the Church in Respect of the Godhead,” *Improvement Era*, August 1898, 754–69.

60. B. H. Roberts, “Religious Faiths, XI. The Claims, Doctrines, and Organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: III. The Doctrines of the Church in Respect of Man and the Gospel,” *Improvement Era*, September 1898, 826–35.

Church," was published that October across thirteen pages.⁶¹ On the cover of this same October issue, Roberts and his editorial team stamped the following in bold red ink: "Papers on Oriental religious faiths begin in November no. of the *Era*."⁶²

Introducing Asian and Middle Eastern Religious Faiths to the Latter-day Saints: Six Papers from the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions

As promised on the cover of his October 1898 issue of the *Improvement Era*, Elder B. H. Roberts continued his year-long series of articles on "Religious Faiths" that had thus far focused solely on Christian denominations. As the periodical's coeditor, he now turned his attention to highlighting Asian and Middle Eastern religious faiths for his Latter-day Saint readership, a shift to interreligious engagement with non-Christian world religions. Most nineteenth-century Church members isolated in the Intermountain West knew little about religions from the East (with the exception of Christianity), especially those originating from the regions of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, historically referred to as "the Orient."⁶³

61. B. H. Roberts, "Religious Faiths, XII. The Claims, Doctrines, and Organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: IV. The Church," *Improvement Era*, October 1898, 914–27.

62. *Improvement Era*, October 1898, cover. Roberts used the contemporary adjective and noun *oriental* to describe those religions and peoples "situated in the east," or "proceeding from the east." See American Dictionary of the English Language, *Webster's Dictionary* 1828, "oriental," accessed May 13, 2026, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/oriental>. But the current *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* clarifies: "The adjective *oriental*, which carries strong associations with Western colonialism and with language that treats people as exotic or 'Other,' is usually considered offensive when used by non-Asian people to describe people of various Asian identities. The same is true of the related noun. The adjective as used to describe elements of Asian culture often has a dated feel, and is increasingly regarded as offensive." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 12th ed. [2025], under *Oriental*.

Accordingly, I have substituted *Asian* for *oriental* in this essay whenever possible. It is important to acknowledge that Roberts and other North American Latter-day Saints whose lives and quotes are presented here sometimes participated in the stereotyping of Asian people and cultures. The racialized language and tropes they employed were all too common in their day. In more recent times, President Russell M. Nelson has called on Church members to "lead out in abandoning attitudes and actions of prejudice" and to "promote respect for all of God's children." Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Ensign*, November 2020, 94.

63. See Reid L. Neilson, "Joseph Smith and Nineteenth-Century Mormon Mappings of Asian Religions," in *Joseph Smith, Jr.: Reappraisals After Two Centuries*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Terryl L. Givens (Oxford University Press, 2009), 210.

These short, limited articles about East Asian religions represented the extent of knowledge for many Utah-based Latter-day Saints and show the importance of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions as their way to learn. Prior to the Parliament, "early Latter-day Saint missionary opportunities to observe Asian cultures and religions firsthand ended prematurely in the 1850s. The China Mission closed after a month of struggle in 1853, and the East Indian mission was a losing battle that same decade."⁶⁴ The Church did not send missionaries to Asia between 1856 and 1901.⁶⁵ "It was also difficult to find in-depth materials on Asia and its religious traditions in pioneer Utah libraries."⁶⁶

Beginning with the November 1898 issue, Roberts began publishing articles on Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Islam (all Middle Eastern and Asian spiritual traditions) in the *Improvement Era*. It should be noted that Roberts himself was not an expert on Asian and Middle Eastern religions. Moreover, he did not have ready access to Asian religion adherents in his social or intellectual circles in the Intermountain West in the 1890s. He was likely not aware of the variety of Asian religious sects and offshoots, as within Christendom. Therefore, he had to rely on the published statements of a handful of Asian religious representatives in Chicago. Rather than soliciting faith statements from the clergy of these non-Christian religions as he had from Christian clerics in Utah for his previous articles, he instead decided to reprint six articles from the published reports featured in Walter R. Houghton's edition, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*. This resulted in a limited representation of these Asian faiths. Still, Roberts's series of articles signaled an unprecedented Latter-day Saint engagement with these non-Christian religions.

64. Reid L. Neilson, *Early Mormon Missionary Activities in Japan, 1901–1924* (University of Utah Press, 2010), 33; see R. Lanier Britsch, "Church Beginnings in China," *BYU Studies* 10, no. 2 (1970): 161–72; R. Lanier Britsch, "The East India Mission of 1851–56: Crossing the Boundaries of Culture, Religion, and Law," *Journal of Mormon History* 27, no. 2 (2001): 150–76.

65. Gordon Irving, *Numerical Strength and Geographical Distribution of the LDS Missionary Force, 1830–1974* (Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1975), 11–14.

66. Neilson, *Early Mormon Missionary Activities in Japan*, 33. See Alma O. Taylor to Nishijima Kakuryo, June 14, 1901, as found in Alma O. Taylor, Journal, July 28, 1901, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, published in Reid L. Neilson, "A Mormon and a Buddhist Debate Plural Marriage: The Letters of Elder Alma O. Taylor and the Reverend Nishijima Kakuryo, 1901," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2014): 99.

**Article 1: Henry Pereira Mendes, "Orthodox or Historical Judaism,"
World's Parliament of Religions, Day 4, September 14, 1893**

For his first of six articles on Asian and Middle Eastern religious faiths, Roberts familiarized his Latter-day Saint readership with Judaism.⁶⁷ To do so, he reprinted the Parliament paper of Henry Pereira Mendes (fig. 5), "Orthodox or Historical Judaism," in the November 1898 issue of the *Improvement Era*.⁶⁸ A Jewish leader, Mendes (1852–1937) was born in Birmingham, England, and later served as rabbi of the Sephardi congregation in Manchester for several years. He then moved to New York City, where he served for many decades as rabbi of the Congregation Shearith Israel, a prominent Spanish and Portuguese synagogue. "Mendes was the leading spokesman for Sephardi Jewry in the United States, a founder and first president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America in 1898, and acting president of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America from 1897 to 1902," writes Marc D. Angel. "He was a leader in Zionist and humanitarian causes. A prolific author, he promoted traditional Jewish

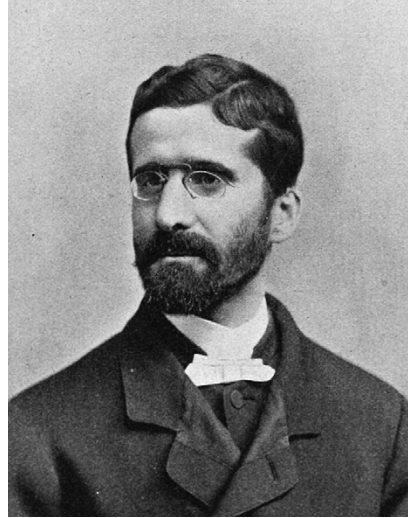


FIGURE 5. Henry Pereira Mendes, an American Jewish rabbi, 1893. From Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:531.

67. For an excellent overview of Judaism, see Stephen Prothero, *Religion Matters: An Introduction to the World's Religions* (W. W. Norton, 2020), 173–223. To read thoughtful Latter-day Saint perspectives on Judaism, see Roger R. Keller, *Light and Truth: A Latter-day Saint Guide to World Religions* (Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2012), 207–29; and Spencer J. Palmer, Roger R. Keller, Dong Sull Choi, and James A. Toronto, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View*, rev. (Brigham Young University, 1997), 163–85.

68. H. Pereira Mendes, "Oriental Religious Faiths. I. Historical Judaism," *Improvement Era*, November 1898, 28–37. For official transcripts of Mendes's speech at the Parliament, "Orthodox or Historical Judaism," see Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 211–18; see also H. Pereira Mendes, "Orthodox or Historical Judaism," in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:527–35.

observances and values in the modern context.”⁶⁹ Mendes later authored *The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented*.⁷⁰

Mendes represented his strain of Judaism, “Orthodox or Historical Judaism,” on the fourth day of the Parliament. At this time, Judaism in America was dividing into Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform camps. According to Seager, “The Jewish delegation, comprised entirely of American Jews, was heavily slanted toward the moderate and radical Reform camps. . . . But individuals who would come to represent the emergent Conservative and Zionist movements,” Mendes among them, “were also present.”⁷¹

In John Henry Barrows’s published proceedings of the Parliament, he referenced Mendes’s remarks several times. Barrows summarized the rabbi’s paper by claiming that Judaism promoted “an ideal of universal peace.” He wrote, “Human brotherhood was conceived as the law of human society, and the happiness of all under one common Father made the ideal of all effort, that ‘from the greatest to the least’ one level of blessing might lie on all the sons of men, not alone the brother and neighbor and friend, but the stranger and alien and enemy.” According to Barrows’s summary, Mendes concluded that God’s mercy would one day “wipe out the record of man’s straying and errors, the sad story of unbrotherly actions.”⁷²

Article 2: Anagārika Dharmapāla, “The World’s Debt to Buddha,” World’s Parliament of Religions, Days 8 and 9, September 18–19, 1893

Over the next several months, Roberts reprinted four articles covering South and East Asian religious traditions, which were likely less familiar to Church members than Judaism was. In December 1898, he introduced Buddhism⁷³ to his Latter-day Saint readership by reprinting the Parliament presentation of Anagārika Dharmapāla (fig. 6), “The World’s Debt to Buddha,” in the *Improvement Era*.⁷⁴

69. Marc D. Angel, “Henry Pereira Mendes,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Adele Berlin (Oxford University Press, 2011), 486; see also Eugene Markovitz, “Henry Pereira Mendes: Architect of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (1966): 364–84.

70. H. Pereira Mendes, *The Jewish Religion Ethically Presented* (Press of Philip Cowen, 1904).

71. Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 6, 209.

72. Barrows, *World’s Parliament of Religions*, 1:232; see also 1:196, 224.

73. For an excellent overview of Buddhism, see Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 79–127. To read thoughtful Latter-day Saint perspectives on Buddhism, see Keller, *Light and Truth*, 63–89; and Palmer and others, *Religions of the World*, 49–71.

74. [Anagārika] Dharmapāla, “Oriental Religious Faiths. II. Buddhism,” *Improvement Era*, December 1898, 81–89. For official transcripts of Dharmapāla’s speech at the

A Buddhist reformer, Dharmapāla (1864–1933) was born in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as David Hevāvitārana to a Buddhist family but was educated by Christian missionaries. After encountering theosophy in 1880, he forsook his European name and moved to Madras, India. There he studied the teachings of Buddhism and learned the Pāli language. He managed the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka until 1890. Thereafter, he traveled throughout Asia and the United States to promote Buddhism. Dharmapāla established the Mahabodhi Society in 1891 to reclaim control of the location of the Buddha's enlightenment (Bodhgayā) and to support Sinhala Buddhist monasteries beyond Sri Lanka.

He became well known as the organizer of "Protestant Buddhism."⁷⁵ Seager writes,

Just a few days after the Parliament, Anagarika Dharmapala officiated at what is reputed to be the first formal initiation of an American into Buddhism. He then returned to Ceylon, where he took up his life-long work of revitalizing Buddhism through the work of his Mahabodhi society. He made two subsequent trips to the United States, during which time he lectured on Buddhism in many American cities, met with old acquaintances from the Parliament, and visited Tuskegee Institute, where he studied industrial and self-help techniques that he hoped to utilize in his work in Ceylon. Dharmapala is regarded as one of the

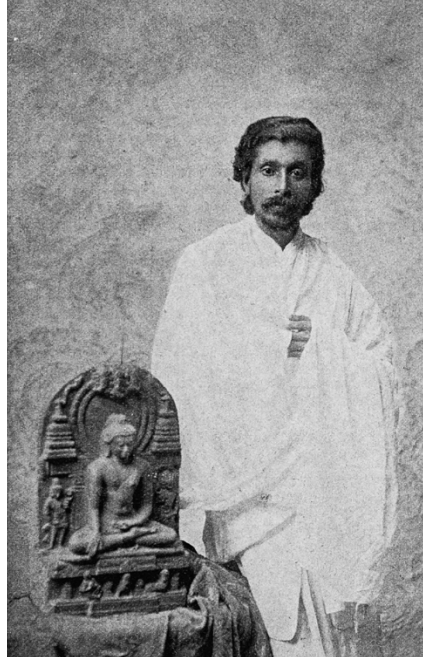


FIGURE 6. Anagarika Dharmapāla, a Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalist, 1893. From Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:861.

1893 *World's Parliament of Religions*, "The World's Debt to Buddha," see Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 406–9 (September 18) and 445–49 (September 19). Note that the *Improvement Era* editors only featured Dharmapāla's remarks from September 19. See also Dharmapāla, "The World's Debt to Buddha," in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:862–80.

75. "Anagārika Dharmapāla," in *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Damien Keown (Oxford University Press, 2003), 12; see also Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

leading lights of modern Sri Lankan religious history. He was ordained a Buddhist priest just before his death in 1933.⁷⁶

Dharmapāla offered his paper, “The World’s Debt to Buddha,” on days eight and nine of the Parliament. He cut a striking figure in Chicago and quickly became a favorite speaker in the Hall of Columbus, according to Seager. “With his black curly locks thrown back from his broad brow, his keen, clear eye fixed upon the audience, his long brown fingers emphasizing the utterances of his vibrant voice, he looked the very image of a propagandist, and one trembled to know that such a figure stood at the head of the movement to consolidate all the disciples of Buddha and to spread ‘the light of Asia’ throughout the civilized world,” wrote one newspaper reporter.⁷⁷

Dharmapāla also had a linguistic advantage: Since the exposition occurred in an Anglo-American setting, presenters who spoke English tended to be the most successful, and, according to Seager, “Anagarika Dharmapala, a Sinhalese who spoke English with an accent that recalled to many an Irish brogue, was the most popular and charismatic representative of Buddhism.”⁷⁸

John Henry Barrows’s proceedings highlighted Dharmapāla’s many contributions to the Parliament. He noted that Buddhist ethical principles “create a peculiar contrast with Christianity, and enforce the law of inevitable results (Karma), instead of permitting man to seek easy deliverance through an externally provided redemption.”⁷⁹

Article 3: Vivekānanda, “Hinduism as a Religion,” World’s Parliament of Religions, Day 9, September 19, 1893

In January 1899, Roberts introduced Hinduism⁸⁰ to his Latter-day Saint readership by featuring the Parliament speech of Vivekānanda (fig. 7), “Hinduism,” in the *Improvement Era*.⁸¹ An Indian Hindu monk and philosopher, Vivekānanda (1863–1902) was a devout disciple of mystic Ramakrishna

76. Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, unnumbered insert immediately before p. 271.

77. Barrows, *World’s Parliament of Religions*, 1:95.

78. Richard Hughes Seager, *The World’s Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Indiana University Press, 1995), 109–10.

79. Barrows, *World’s Parliament of Religions*, 1:200.

80. For an excellent overview of Hinduism, see Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 29–77. To read thoughtful Latter-day Saint perspectives on Hinduism, see Keller, *Light and Truth*, 17–39; and Palmer and others, *Religions of the World*, 17–33.

81. Swami Vivekānanda, “Oriental Religious Faiths. III. Hinduism,” *Improvement Era*, January 1899, 176–86. For official transcripts of Vivekānanda’s speech at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, “Hinduism as a Religion,” see Houghton, *Neely’s History*

and creator of the Ramakrishna Mission. Influenced by social reformer Keshab Chandra Sen, he united with the Brahmo Samāj, a reformist movement popular during the Bengal Renaissance in India.⁸² B. B. Nagarkar, another Hindu speaker at the Parliament, defined the Brahmo Samāj as "universal love, harmony of faith [and] unity of prophets. . . . The reverence we pay the other prophets and faiths is not mere lip-loyalty, but it is the universal love for all the prophets and for all the forms and shades of truth by their own inherent merit."⁸³ In the years following the Columbian Exposition, Vivekānanda worked to bring Hinduism to the United States by establishing the Vedanta Society in America and the Ramakrishna Mission Association, and he also defended Hinduism in India against Christian missionaries. He died in that country in 1902.⁸⁴

Vivekānanda delivered his paper, "Hinduism as a Religion," on the ninth day of the Parliament in the Hall of Columbus. Like Anagārika Dharmapāla, he was another "charismatic Asian with great influence and appeal," explains Seager. Moreover, Vivekānanda was beloved by the American newspapermen and audiences in Chicago. "Barrows recalled that when Vivekānanda appeared in his ochre robes and turban, greeting the audience as his sisters and brothers in America, he received several minutes of tumultuous applause. To his American audience, Vivekānanda's physical presence evoked a sense of both familiarity and difference, like Dharmapala's Sinhala-Irish brogue."⁸⁵

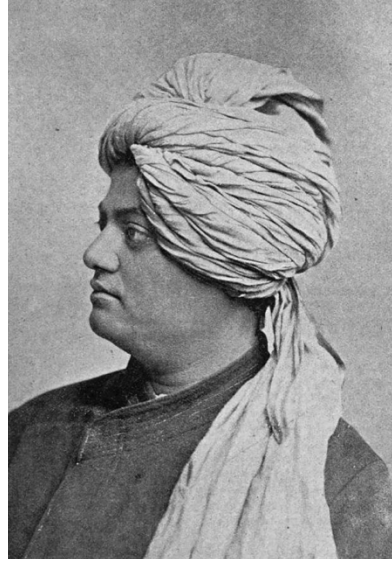


FIGURE 7. Swami Vivekānanda, an Indian Hindu monk, 1893. Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:973.

of the Parliament of Religions, 438–45; Vivekānanda, "Hinduism," in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:968–78.

82. "Vivekānanda," and "Brahmo Samāj," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, ed. John Bowker (Oxford University Press, 2000), 631, 97; see also William Radice, ed., *Swami Vivekānanda and the Modernisation of Hinduism* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

83. Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:106.

84. Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, unnumbered insert between pp. 270 and 271.

85. Seager, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 111.

Observers were anxious to describe the memorable Hindu monk in their writings. One Chicago newspaper described Swami Vivekānanda as “a large, well-built man, with the superb carriage of the Hindustanis, his face clean shaven, squarely molded regular features, white teeth, and with well-chiseled lips that are usually parted in a benevolent smile while he is conversing.” The article added, “His finely poised head is crowned with a lemon colored or red turban, and his cassock (not the technical name for this garment), belted in at the waist and falling below the knees, alternates in a bright orange and rich crimson. He speaks excellent English and replied readily to any questions asked in sincerity.”⁸⁶

Another Chicago reporter described the excitement that Vivekānanda generated at the Parliament: “Great crowds of people, the most of whom were women, pressed around the doors leading to the Hall of Columbus an hour before the time stated for opening the afternoon session, for it had been announced that Swami Vivekānanda, the popular Hindoo [*sic*] monk who looks so much like McCullough’s Othello, was to speak. . . . Ladies, ladies everywhere, filled the great auditorium. They gave no outward sign of impatience through the delivery of three classic essays.”⁸⁷

In his proceedings volume, John Henry Barrows summarized “that it was a Hindu principle to recognize all faiths as expressions of truth, and that from [Vivekānanda’s] earliest boyhood he had repeated a sacred text, used daily by millions in India, which says that as the different streams, having their sources in different places, all mingle their water in the sea, so the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, and crooked or straight, all lead to the one Lord.”⁸⁸

Article 4: Kung Hsien Ho, “Confucianism,”

World’s Parliament of Religions, Day 5, September 15, 1893

Roberts presented Church members with an overview of Confucianism⁸⁹ in the March 1899 issue of the *Improvement Era*. He featured the Parliament remarks of Kung Hsien Ho titled “Confucianism.”⁹⁰ Little is

86. *Chicago Transcript*, September 30, 1893, as quoted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 337.

87. *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 20, 1893, as quoted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 337.

88. Barrows, *World’s Parliament of Religions*, 1:242–43; see also 1:198, 200.

89. For an excellent overview of Confucianism, see Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 343–89. To read thoughtful Latter-day Saint perspectives on Confucianism, see Keller, *Light and Truth*, 123–43; and Palmer and others, *Religions of the World*, 99–109.

90. Kung Hsien Ho, “Oriental Religious Faiths. [IV.] Confucianism,” *Improvement Era*, March 1899, 338–46. For official transcripts of Kung’s speech at the 1893 World’s

known about Kung's life. The religious congress's organizing committee had solicited scholarly papers on Confucianism and Taoism in local Chinese newspapers and offered "a premium in gold for the best productions on these subjects. The essay of Kung Hsien Ho was the result of this call."⁹¹ His resulting discourse on Confucianism was read by William Pike, who was present in Chicago, unlike Kung, who was not.⁹² His paper had been translated from Mandarin Chinese into English by Reverend Timothy Richard of the English Baptist Mission in China for presentation at the Parliament.⁹³

John Henry Barrows was quite taken by Kung's remarks and highlighted his contributions to mankind's understanding of morality in his proceedings of the Parliament. According to a Confucian text cited by Kung, "from the emperor down to the common people the fundamental thing for all to do is to cultivate virtue.' This finds its first expression in proper maintenance of the relations of sovereign and minister, father and son, elder brother and younger, husband and wife, and friend with friend." Kung's essay then clarified that "next to the five relations named Confucian teaching lays great stress on the five constants, benevolence or love, righteousness or fitness, worship or principle, wisdom or thorough knowledge, and faithfulness or what one can depend upon. The influence of these is very great, and all living things are subject to them."⁹⁴ Pung Kwang Yu, First Secretary of the Chinese Legation in Washington, DC, was the only other speaker on Confucianism at the Parliament.⁹⁵

Article 5: Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, "Voice from New India," World's Parliament of Religions, Day 3, September 13, 1893

The following month, March 1899, Roberts reprinted a second Parliament paper on Hinduism, "Brahmo-Somaj," this one by Protap Chunder Mozoomdar (fig. 8).⁹⁶ Roberts prefaced this essay by highlighting its

Parliament of Religions, "Confucianism," see Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 252–58; Kung, "Confucianism," in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:596–604.

91. Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 227.

92. Sun Jiang, "Representing Religion: 'Chinese Religions' at the 1893 Chicago World Parliament of Religions," *Oriens Extremus* 54 (2015): 67–68.

93. Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 252.

94. Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:225; see also 1:202.

95. Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 52.

96. Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, "Oriental Religious Faiths. [V.] Brahmo-Somaj," *Improvement Era*, April 1899, 401–8. For official transcripts of Mozoomdar's speech "Voice from New India" at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, see Houghton,

relevance to the Latter-day Saints. “The Editors of the *Era* are of the opinion that the following article detailing a great reform movement in India will be interesting to the young men of the Church not only on account of the light it throws upon religious affairs in India, but especially because it describes a movement in India that may be said to be contemporaneous with that of ‘Mormonism’ in the western world,” Roberts explained to his readership. “Moreover, [it] was a movement began by a mere lad, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who, after completing the organization of the Brahmo-Somaj, died young.”⁹⁷ Ending his introductory paragraph with this fact, perhaps Roberts encouraged his readers to relate Raja Ram Mohan Roy to Joseph Smith.

A Hindu reformer, Mozoomdar (1840–1905) was born in Bengal, India, and studied at Presidency College. In 1859, he joined the Brahmo Samāj and served as one of its missionaries, which led to his caste excommunication. After the death of his spiritual mentor Keshub Chunder Sen, Mozoomdar created and led his own Samāj.⁹⁸ He authored *The Oriental Christ*⁹⁹ and *The Spirit of God*.¹⁰⁰ Mozoomdar believed in a “Spirit of God” that animates all things and that Christ and Christianity were part of this Spirit. One scholar explains that he “envisioned the emergence of a universal religion of the spirit and declared that the Brahmo Samaj is itself that universal religion of the spirit.”¹⁰¹ According to Seager, Mozoomdar



FIGURE 8. Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, an Indian Hindu reformer, 1893. From Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:349.

Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions, 134–38; Mozoomdar, “The Brahmo-Somaj,” in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:345–51.

97. Mozoomdar, “Brahmo-Somaj,” *Improvement Era*, 401.

98. Parimal Roy, “P. C. Mozoomdar,” in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity*, ed. Roger E. Hedlund, Jesudas M. Athyal, Joshua Kalapati, and Jessica Richard, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2012), 2:461.

99. P. C. Mozoomdar, *The Oriental Christ* (Boston, 1883).

100. P. C. Mozoomdar, *The Spirit of God* (Boston, 1894).

101. Roy, “P. C. Mozoomdar,” in *Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity*, 2:461; see also Sunrit Mullick, *The First Hindu Mission to America: The Pioneering Visits of Protap Chunder Mozoomdar* (Northern Book Centre, 2010).

"was the only Asian at the Parliament to have visited America before the Parliament. In 1883, in his widely noted *Oriental Christ*," he had argued "that because Jesus was a Palestinian, he was an Asian, and Asians therefore most clearly understood the message of his gospel. He proposed, for example, that the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan reflected the Hindus' love of ritual purifications and holy rivers, such as the Ganges."¹⁰²

Mozoomdar offered his paper on the Hindu reform group Brahmo Samāj titled "Voice from New India" on the third day of the Parliament in the Hall of Columbus. At the end of the nineteenth century, "the Brahmo-Somaj was the premier religious reform and revivalist group among progressive Hindus. Unitarians saw in it an organ for social and religious reform, while more traditional Christians hoped that it would serve as the vanguard for the Christianization of India," explains Seager. Mozoomdar's expressed views, "with all their theological, doctrinal, and creedal ambiguities, can in many respects be considered a quintessential statement of late nineteenth-century religious liberalism."¹⁰³ A Chicago newspaper reporter described the Hindu reformer's participation that day as follows:

Mr. Mozoomdar is a magnificent specimen of a cultured, physical, and intellectual manhood. His Indian swarthinness forms an impressive contrast to his iron grey beard. He was without the turban, and, save his complexion, there was nothing to indicate but what he was the most highly cultured Caucasian prelate. His language, though extempore, was of the choicest, his articulation and gestures most perfect and impressive, and the zeal with which this distinguished scholar advocated the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man carried the Christian of the new world back to India for a genuine specimen of a true Christian faith.¹⁰⁴

John Henry Barrows's account of Mozoomdar's remarks explained that the Brahmo Samāj published a compilation of "all scriptures" in 1861, "thus carrying out the principle of the unity of prophecy and harmony of faiths."¹⁰⁵ Barrows also emphasized that Mozoomdar attempted "to improve the conditions of Hindu family life," in part by "removing to some extent caste restrictions upon marriage."¹⁰⁶

102. Seager, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 114. Though Seager spelled this Hindu scholar's name "Majumdar," Mozoomdar's books use the spelling "Mozoomdar" on the title page.

103. Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 359.

104. *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 14, 1893, quoted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 450.

105. Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:207.

106. Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:213.



FIGURE 9. Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, an American Muslim convert, 1893. From Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:965.

Article 6: Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, "The Spirit of Islam," World's Parliament of Religions, Day 10, September 20, 1893

Lastly, Roberts familiarized his Latter-day Saint readers with Islam¹⁰⁷ when he reprinted the Parliament remarks of Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (fig. 9), "The Spirit of Islam," in the May 1899 issue of the *Improvement Era*.¹⁰⁸ This was his sixth and final article on Asian and Middle Eastern religious faiths.

Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916) was an Anglo-American Muslim convert born in Hudson, New York.¹⁰⁹ Webb encountered Islam while living in Asia, where he worked as the United States Consul to the Philippines. After studying the writings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Mirza, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, he converted to Islam in 1888. Four years later, he traveled throughout India, Egypt, and Turkey to continue his religious studies. He traveled to America in 1893 to represent Islam at the Parliament in Chicago.¹¹⁰ He founded *The Moslem World*, a fleeting periodical on Islam in America.¹¹¹

107. For an excellent overview of Islam, see Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 293–339. To read thoughtful Latter-day Saint perspectives on Islam, see Keller, *Light and Truth*, 269–87; and Palmer and others, *Religions of the World*, 213–41.

108. Mohammed Webb, "[Oriental Religious Faiths. VI.] The Spirit of Islam," *Improvement Era*, May 1899, 490–96. For official transcripts of Webb's speech at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, "The Spirit of Islam," see Houghton, *Neely's History of the Parliament of Religions*, 459–64; and Webb, "The Spirit of Islam," in Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 2:989–96.

109. Umar F. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 22.

110. Herbert Berg, "African American Islam," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. John Corrigan, 3 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 2:84.

111. See Brent D. Singleton, "The Moslem World: A History of America's Earliest Islamic Newspaper and Its Successors," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2007): 297–307.

He also published *Islam in America*,¹¹² which "explained why he became a Muslim and sought to dispel the negative stereotypes Americans had of Islam rather than to convert Americans to Islam. Perhaps most significant was his assertion that his Muslim identity and his American identity were not at odds," according to Herbert Berg.¹¹³

When Webb presented his paper, "The Spirit of Islam," on the tenth day of the Parliament, his defense of Muslim polygamy created tension at the Columbian Exposition. According to John Henry Barrows, "The reading of this paper was an exceptional event in the proceedings of the Parliament, for the fact that it was attended with strong and even violent and impatient expressions of disapproval on the part of the hearers. At the outset of the paper," Barrows wrote, "these demonstrations, in the form of hisses and cries of 'Shame!' were so emphatic that the speaker seemed deterred from pursuing the line of discourse on which he had entered."¹¹⁴ (Barrows was so offended by Webb's defense of polygamy that he would omit it from his official proceedings volume.) But the editor of one of Chicago's major newspapers critiqued the official Parliament response to the representative of Islam. "The whole spirit of the Parliament of Religions is that of toleration. The most widely divergent theological ideas are allowed free scope. The audience is eminently liberal. But when ex-Consul Webb, who claims to be a convert to Mohammedanism, tried to speak a good word for polygamy he was hissed so vigorously that he lost no time to switching off to something else."¹¹⁵

Webb was brought up Presbyterian, and in his remarks, he admitted the judgments he made about Islam prior to his conversion. According to Seager, "Webb's paper was designed to be a corrective to common misconceptions about Islam." In Webb's paper, he wrote, "Do you suppose that any active religionist who has studied only his own system of religion, who knows nothing about any other system, can write fairly of any other system?"¹¹⁶ This was the idea of Elder B. H. Roberts: to allow members of other religions a way to present their beliefs. Rather than tolerating the false assumptions of those who have not studied that religion, he allowed

112. Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, *Islam in America: A Brief Statement of Mohammedanism and an Outline of the American Islamic Propaganda* (New York, 1893).

113. Berg, "African American Islam," in Corrigan, *Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, 2:92.

114. Barrows, *World's Parliament of Religions*, 1:127, see also 1:202.

115. *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 22, 1893, as quoted in Seager, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism*, 279.

116. Houghton, *Neely's History of The Parliament of Religions*, 460.

representatives from each religion to speak for themselves—the very thing Roberts felt that he was not allowed to do at the World’s Parliament of Religions.

Conclusion: Elder B. H. Roberts and the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions

With the reprinting of Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb’s presentation on Islam in the May 1899 issue of the *Improvement Era*, Elder B. H. Roberts completed his promised series of articles on many of the world’s “Religious Faiths.” Roberts and his staff had published eleven articles on Christian denominations, four articles on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and six articles on Asian and Middle Eastern religious faiths between November 1897 and May 1899. For ten of these twenty-one total essays (48 percent), they reproduced transcripts from the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions.

Across the cover of the same May 1899 issue of the *Improvement Era* ran an advertisement in red ink promising an article about “The Mormon Church at the Parliament of Religions by B. H. Roberts” the following month. That June, he published “The Origin of the Parliament,” his first of five consecutive articles on the Church’s involvement with the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions six years earlier.¹¹⁷ His initial essay provided Latter-day Saints with a general overview of the genesis of the religious congress but said nothing about the Latter-day Saints’ participation therein.

In contrast, Roberts’s second article, “Preliminary Agitation” at the Parliament, was published in the July 1899 issue and began his airing of grievances against its organizers.¹¹⁸ “There was a very general opinion that the Church ought not to be admitted to representation for the reason that it would doubtless prove to be a disturbing element in the Parliament, and it was doubtful in their minds if any good would come from its admission,” Roberts wrote, displaying the prejudice the Church faced in Chicago due to its public practice of plural marriage.¹¹⁹

117. B. H. Roberts, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Parliament of Religions: I. The Origin of the Parliament,” *Improvement Era*, June 1899, 584–89. This marked Roberts’s final issue as coeditor of the *Improvement Era*; he was replaced by Edward H. Anderson beginning with the July 1899 issue.

118. B. H. Roberts, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Parliament of Religions: II. Preliminary Agitation,” *Improvement Era*, July 1899, 673–85.

119. Roberts, “Preliminary Agitation,” 678.

Roberts's third scathing article on the Parliament's unfair conduct toward the Church, "Christian Treatment of Mormons," appeared in the August 1899 issue.¹²⁰ He reprinted some letters and correspondence that the Chicago *Inter Ocean* newspaper published in the autumn of 1893. Roberts then berated the Protestant organizers of the Parliament, stating that they were "distorted by the wrinkles of narrow-mindedness, intolerance and cowardice."¹²¹

Roberts's fourth article, "The Paper on Mormonism," featured his prepared paper of about forty-three hundred words describing the Church—the paper he was not allowed to give in Columbus Hall during the Parliament.¹²² Although written for the occasion in 1893, this was the first time it had appeared in print. Roberts explained that it was identical to the paper given to Barrows, except that it had an addition about God having "witnesses even among the aboriginal inhabitants of this western hemisphere [the Book of Mormon], as well as in other lands."¹²³

Roberts's fifth and final article on the Parliament, titled "Woman's Place in 'Mormonism,'" appeared in the *Improvement Era* in October 1899.¹²⁴ Roberts wrote, "The Woman's Auxiliary to the Parliament of Religions extended an invitation to some of the prominent women of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to participate in their deliberations, and speak upon some subject of interest connected with 'Mormonism.' Since there had been much misunderstanding of the position of woman in the 'Mormon' Church, and as it was generally believed that in 'Mormon' theology woman occupied a very inferior station compared with that assigned to man, it was decided that the subject treated should be" the status of females within the Church.¹²⁵

In the spring of 1893, the First Presidency had assigned Roberts the task of preparing the roughly six-thousand-word essay for Emily S. Richards, an official Latter-day Saint representative and president of the Utah Board of Lady Managers at the Columbian Exposition, to read

120. Roberts, "Christian Treatment of Mormons," 750–66.

121. Roberts, "Christian Treatment of the Mormons," 766.

122. B. H. Roberts, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Parliament of Religions: IV. The Paper on Mormonism," *Improvement Era*, September 1899, 831–40.

123. Roberts, "Paper on Mormonism," 831.

124. B. H. Roberts, "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Parliament of Religions: V. Woman's Place in 'Mormonism,'" *Improvement Era*, October 1899, 893–906.

125. Roberts, "Woman's Place in 'Mormonism,'" 893.

at the religious gathering later that summer.¹²⁶ “While in Chicago she appeared before the woman’s branch of the Parliament of Religions and gave a carefully prepared paper on the Women of Mormondom and also a talk on Organization,” chronicled Richards’s biographer Annie Wells Cannon. “This was really a remarkable incident, for though the Parliament of Religions had refused admission to the male representatives of the Church [Roberts], yet this gracious lady found opportunity for a hearing through the auxiliary, and she gave a fine and sincere talk which carried its truths to the heart of her audience.”¹²⁷

Roberts never did get over the humiliation of being sidelined from participation in the 1893 Parliament. Fourteen years later, when he published the first volume of his *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, he opened with a rehearsal of his thwarted involvement to represent his religious tradition in Chicago: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not invited to participate in the proceedings of that Parliament, although Mormonism is the most distinctively American religious movement yet developed in our country; and as such the position and doctrine of the Church should have been of special interest in such a gathering as the Parliament purported to be.”¹²⁸ Moreover, when Roberts published his multi-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church*, he felt compelled to rehearse the Parliament organizer’s unfair treatment of the Church once again.¹²⁹

126. B. H. Roberts, Diary, May 29 and 31, June 12 and 21, 1893, 205–6, 211, 215, holograph, B. H. Roberts Papers, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah; see also Andrea G. Radke-Moss, “Monogamy on Display, Plurality Behind the Curtain: Emily S. Richards, May Booth Talmage, Susa Young Gates, Posthumous Sealings, and the Politics of Marital Representation at the 1893 World’s Congress of Representative Women,” *Journal of Mormon History* 52, no. 2 (2026): 1–37.

127. Annie Wells Cannon, *In Memoriam: Emily Sophia Tanner Richards* (n.p., 1929), 24–25. Historians have been unable to identify when and where this address was given in Chicago. For her other Columbian Exposition address on Latter-day Saint women that May, see Emily S. Richards, “The Legal and Political Status of Woman in Utah,” in *The World’s Congress of Representative Women* [. . .], ed. May Wright Sewall (Chicago and New York, 1894), 913–15. See also Andrea G. Radke-Moss, “Mormon Women, Suffrage, and Citizenship at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair,” in *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World’s Fairs*, ed. Tracey Jean Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 97–112.

128. B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Deseret News, 1907), 1:5–6.

129. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One*, 6 vols. (Corporation of the President, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1965), 6:236–41.

The World Fellowship of Faiths in 1933

Forty years after the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, the World Fellowship of Faiths organized its First International Congress. Also called the Second Parliament of Religions, it was timed to coincide with the 1933 Century of Progress International Exposition held in Chicago.¹³⁰ Three hundred people served on the committee for the World Fellowship, with Charles Weller and Das Gupta as general executives. Comparing the 1933 Parliament with the 1893 Parliament, Bishop Francis J. McConnell of the Methodist Episcopal Church wrote, "Instead of a comparative parade of rival religions, all faiths are challenged to manifest or apply their religion by helping to solve the urgent problems which impede man's progress."¹³¹

The World Fellowship of Faiths lasted twenty-two days, from August 27 to September 17, with twenty-seven gatherings and forty-four thousand people in attendance. Nearly two hundred representatives from different global faiths gave 242 public addresses on the world's various religious traditions and philosophies.¹³² "In contrast to the original World's Parliament of Religions, this congress's planning committee went out of its way to include the Latter-day Saints in the larger conversation. . . . Roberts, then seventy-six years old and crippled by diabetes, accepted their request and traveled to Chicago by train to participate. There he presented to the religious congress delegates two papers entitled 'The Standard of Peace' and 'Economics of the New Age.'¹³³

Roberts "came away from the World Fellowship encouraged at the great feeling of tolerance and goodwill and at the number of Orientals who had come to the session, but he was troubled that the veneer of goodwill arose less from a confluence of conviction than from its absence, a lack of assurance," his biographer Truman G. Madsen notes. "He was troubled that not just the world, but Christianity itself, had 'ceased to believe that the redemption of the world will be through

130. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 199–200.

131. Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision: A History of the World Congress of Faiths, 1936–1996* (Oneworld, 1996), 15.

132. See Charles Frederick Weller, *World Fellowship: Addresses and Messages by Leading Spokesmen of All Faiths, Races and Countries* (Liveright Publishing, 1935), v; Braybrooke, *Wider Vision*, 15.

133. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 200. See Weller, *World Fellowship*, v–vi, 870–82; Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (SCM Press, 1992), 114–16; Madsen, *Defender of the Faith*, 378; Sillito, *B. H. Roberts*, 489–90.

Christ.' He observed and rejoiced in the marvels of technology in the hall of science but lamented its contrast to the great decline in religious understanding."¹³⁴

Moreover, Roberts noted that the 1933 religious congress "was not as adequately housed or as properly publicized" as the 1893 Parliament. Rather than the 1893 papers that "carried full reports of the parliament's proceedings, printing many of the speeches in full," the 1933 press "gave only brief account of the sessions."¹³⁵ "Clearly people were not as interested, and the platform upon which he stood was no longer as contested."¹³⁶

Given the Church's treatment forty years earlier, Roberts was pleased that the Church received "a place at the conversation table."¹³⁷ Soon after the 1933 congress, Roberts died on September 27, 1933, "having lived to see his church finally represented at an American Parliament of Religions."¹³⁸ Just three weeks earlier, Roberts had "remarked that he believed the greatest change in that time [between 1893 and 1933] was not in his reactions to the two exhibits, but within himself."¹³⁹

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134. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith*, 378.

135. "Tolerance Marks Religious Session," *Deseret News*, September 7, 1933.

136. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 201.

137. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 200.

138. Neilson, *Exhibiting Mormonism*, 201.

139. "Tolerance Marks Religious Session."

Color Vision and Perception of the Sacred

Scott R. Parkin

I've always assumed that given equivalent access to the same facts, reasonable people will tend to come to similar conclusions—perhaps differing in details or approach, but not in core concept. All that's required is a desire to learn, a willingness to listen, and a modicum of goodwill. As such, I've watched with dismay as discussions of politics, public agencies, general priorities, and belief structures often seem devoid of that necessary goodwill. We're so busy justifying our own thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions against supposed antagonists that we often stop exercising curiosity about the origins of our personal perspective.

In other words, we often know *what* we believe, but seem less interested in exploring *why*. We stop considering the other person's perspective and stop challenging our own. Charity and respect for differing experiences can break down, and once the lines are drawn, we can't help but see others as enemies, rather than co-seekers after truth.

As I explored that idea, a series of my own experiences came together in my mind to cause me to consider perception in general, and perception of the sacred in particular.

Anomalous Trichromacy, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Deuteranomaly

At the age of ten, I was diagnosed with a mild form of color blindness called deuteranomaly, or green weakness, which is common to about 8 percent of males. I could see green just fine, but some of the subtler shades blended together for me and appeared as the same color. Back in

those days, they used something called the Ishihara test that featured colored dots of varying hues and sizes. The goal was to identify the one- or two-digit number presented amid the dots. My point of failure came on the dot-blob that allegedly contained the number 45. I could see neither shape, shade, nor shadow of a number. Just . . . dots.

At first, I was fascinated by the idea that there was a whole world hiding in plain view that I had never considered possible, and I took it as an opportunity to expand my ability to comprehend the world. So I went to the library and checked out the dot-book.¹ I would stare at those dot pattern tests for hours and will myself to see the hidden number. I analyzed dot size, shape, shade, and proximity to other dots with the hope that I might learn to see the color. I worked under incandescent and fluorescent lights, as well as sunlight. I was going to *teach* myself to see that 45 if it killed me.

Of course, I failed. The problem was not unwillingness to see—it was organic incapacity. My eyes could not physically perceive certain colors, and thus, my brain could not parse the absent signal and my mind could not interpret the missing result.

What followed was a sort of panic, a sense that *not* seeing 45 in the dots somehow meant that my perception of the world was inadequate. I sought people who could see it and asked them to trace the digits. I asked them to explain how they were seeing it and put that explanation in terms that made sense to my green-weak, color-blinded state.

Of course, that effort failed as well. They had no concept of what I could or couldn't see and no vocabulary to describe those nuances of color to someone who didn't have a comparative reference. There was no native guide who understood both my perception and their perception to translate the concept.

Even if there had been, it probably wouldn't have mattered—a clearer understanding of what I was not seeing still wouldn't give me the ability to see it. Ultimately, the best I could hope for was a set of clues to help me know when an image contained color information I could not comprehend. I was despondent. No act of will or study could cause my eyes to see the full diversity of those colors. I was inadequate. Substandard. Broken.

Despondency passed relatively quickly when I realized that my ability to function had not changed, and that expanded knowledge about color blindness had not suddenly removed something from my view. I had lost

1. S. Ishihara, *Tests for Colour-Blindness* (Kanehara Shuppan, 1972).

nothing; I had only gained recognition of a greater possibility: I became aware of the absolute fact of a real, yet unseen world that I could never have discovered on my own but that people all around me simply took for granted.

The realization left me necessarily sad but also more open to the idea that my inability to see certain hues did not in any way imply their nonexistence. Like infrared or ultraviolet, they were simply real spectra beyond my ken. My perception was demonstrably incomplete—a simple fact that carried no moral judgment.

The metaphor here to perception of the sacred is obvious, if necessarily incomplete. Perception of the sacred is not an organic trait, but I think for many of us the instruments for that perception either don't exist or they remain functionally undiscovered (to the same effect). This begs a question.

If I get along fine without a perception (of the sacred, hues of green, a political ideology, or any other thing), then why should I concern myself with it? The thing will remain functionally worthless to me no matter how much insight or entertainment it provides for other people. Shaking the thing in my face with a cry of "It's right there; why can't you *see* it?" is demeaning, and ultimately, fruitless. Other peoples' consistent insistence does not magically give me the tools to see or comprehend—no matter how real it may be. Their exasperation serves only to diminish my interest in the conversation and create a social and emotional divide, in addition to the perception gap.

Conversely, the fact that I cannot perceive a thing does not mean it doesn't exist and that those who do claim to see it are irrational, dupes of the establishment, or part of a conspiracy to mock me. The number 45 is in the dots (I tested against a reasonably large and diverse sample when I was ten years old). I just don't have the visual apparatus to perceive it.

I suppose that's the very definition of faith—accepting the reality of that which cannot be seen but is nevertheless true and directing my own actions based on the fact of that unseen thing.

Wow, that's hard. Those who can see 45 have no idea how difficult it can be for us deuteranomates to accept their word for it, no matter how many claim it's there in the dot pattern. Some days that claim is easier to take than others, and I often wonder what value there is in even talking about it when I see no reason (no pun intended) to believe that I will ever see that 45, or that, upon seeing it, my life will be vastly improved.

That's the thing—they see an ephemeral thing that I don't. They see an inability in me that I don't recognize as anything but an unprovable

assertion. Occam's Razor suggests that the simplest explanation is most likely, and it's much, much easier to believe that other people are imagining things. In any case, I quite literally don't know what I'm missing.

Discovering Fluorescents

On a hot summer day in 1981, when I was seventeen years old, a guy in a tent-pavilion booth, just past the cow pens at the Illinois State Fair, hawked a pair of glasses that he claimed would cure color blindness. Only one hundred dollars!

He had a reasonable explanation. One lens was tinted red (the other was clear; both were mirrored on the front to hide the difference) to counterbalance the green deficiency of deuteranomaly. Basically, it was the same theory as those red/blue glasses they used to supply for 3D movies: mask the color entering only one eye to force the brain to reinterpret or recalibrate the visual signal and restore effective color balance.

Okay . . . it couldn't cure deuteranomaly; rather, it would simply counteract the perceptual imbalance—less brightness, more contrast, same functional result.

When I tried them on, the effect was startling. As I looked up and down the rows of booths, I was especially aware of two things: green and red colors really did pop, and the orange price tags on merchandise absolutely leaped out at me. I was sold and happily plopped down the cash to buy them (after negotiating the price down to sixty dollars).

I spent the rest of the day with the glasses resting halfway down my nose so I could look through and look over the lenses to compare the different images. It was an exhilarating experience to feel my sense of limitation lifted. Though I had come to peace with green-deficient color blindness years earlier, that sense that I was physically substandard had been a passive weight on my ego the whole time—one more bit of background noise interfering with my concentration.

But the biggest surprise happened on the way home. It was twilight when I headed out for the forty-five-minute drive, just in that gap when all color seems to leech out the world and neither headlights nor streetlamps help. I noticed it first when I looked at the traffic signal on the way out of town; the color of the lit green lamp was deeper and more vivid than I had ever seen. I figured it was an effect of twilight and didn't think too much about it, though I thought it was kind of cool.

Night falls quickly in Illinois; when there's nothing but flat ground between you and the horizon, sunlight winks out very suddenly when the sun drops out of sight. I automatically pulled on my headlights, and

nearly drove off the road from surprise at all the lights that suddenly appeared in the new night.

It turns out that the lines painted on the street glow—or more accurately, they actively sparkle with reflected light from headlights. Same with the little reflectors on the top of the steel road markers, the numbers on the mile posts, and the white text on those green road signs. I had never known that. To me, they were just white or yellow paint, no different than house paint, if maybe a little more durable and slightly brighter—presumably because they were painted on metal.

I was seeing fluorescents for the first time in my life at the age of seventeen.

I knew about fluorescent colors but always assumed that meant colors that glowed under a black light. In normal room light, a fluorescent color was no different to me than any other. The idea that a paper price tag was actually an entirely different class of color had never occurred to me; the idea that reflector tape was more than a strip of highly contrasting color (and thus, white tape against a white background might still be visible) was new and startling.

When I hit the next traffic light (nearly thirty minutes later; the state fair was way out in the farm belt), I finally saw that the three colors were very distinct and different. From a distance, I had always seen them as essentially the same washed out color, differentiated primarily by the brightness of the lit lamp; for me, colors didn't appear until I got much, much closer to them.

For two weeks, I discovered colors and contrasts and brightness, and I reveled in it. Except for fluorescent color, none of the new colors had a meaningful impact on me, but it was fun to see shades I had never known. I discovered that I had always seen night shadows as greenish—or rather, dusty green and shadowed gray were the same color to me. Unfortunately, the mirroring on those glasses was cheaply painted on; it rubbed off after two weeks, leaving the red lens clearly visible within a frost-like rime of mirroring around the edges. I could not find anyone to paint new mirroring on, and I refused to walk around with one red and one clear lens. It looked really dumb. It also turns out that I still couldn't see 45 in the dots. Ultimately, all the “new” colors I was seeing were just tricks of contrast from the colored lens—much like BluBlockers or those yellow lenses that help you find white golf balls against green grass by filtering out certain wavelengths of light.

But I had honestly seen fluorescents. And strangest of all, I kept seeing them after I stopped wearing the glasses. To this day (more than forty

years later), I can still see the difference between fluorescents and mundane colors—perhaps not as vividly as during those first two weeks but more than at any time prior to wearing those glasses. In other words, with the glasses as a temporary aid, I learned to perceive something that I had always been capable of but had never found reason or inclination to exercise. Having learned that there was more to see, I was able to awaken a latent faculty that was already there.

Just as interestingly, I learned a conceptual vocabulary for describing the differences between my old and new perceptions. I could bridge the experience gap and explain a lack of fluorescent perception to those who could already see it. Sadly, the reverse was less true; those with more expansive vision could easily imagine paleness, but those without the apparatus to perceive fluorescents could only dimly imagine what it was like to see them. Ultimately, one needed some level of direct experience to truly understand.

Still, this analogue to full color vision boosted both my willingness and my ability to believe in things that had been previously invisible. I still had to take the existence of 45 on faith, but since I now had direct experience with discovering new ways of seeing, it became far easier to accept both the fact and the usefulness of seeing 45. My faith was more fully qualified than it had been before, and I became open to other possibilities as well.

Perhaps this is magical thinking (in the pejorative sense of irrational imagination). In my case, it's founded on an accidental discovery of a new way of perceiving that has continued to inform my approach to learning. I now firmly believe that anyone can learn anything if they can find the trick that reveals just enough of the new idea to draw them into a new perception where they learn to see and understand differently than before. Ultimately, the trick may be a temporary stepping stone or even a counterfeit of the real thing; but it can still be useful as a transition to new perception.

Again, the metaphor to perception of the sacred is obvious. Even when one is inherently capable of perceiving a thing, one may never find the hook, goad, or guide that draws them down the path to actual perception. This suggests that we ought to be less concerned about how that person over there perceives their world except as a guide to helping us perceive our own. There ought to be less moral judgment going on about who sees (or doesn't see) what, and more attempt to simply share the insights each of us gathers for the benefit of those willing to reach out with honest curiosity—a desire to learn and a willingness to listen.

That's why an expansive and diverse art and literature is so critical; it's a common ground where we come specifically in order to perceive the world through someone else's eyes, whether that world is familiar or new. In seeing others' perceptions of things sacred to them, in context of their own culture, history, or religious covenants, we gain that first glimpse into a new way of thinking, imagining, and resonating with useful and important ideas, which we might never have seen without a guiding hand.

Ultimately, our perception determines our frame of reference. Like color vision, perception of the sacred may be a gift that not all of us possess—not because of unwillingness but because we're not properly equipped at this time and in this place. Thus, the need for faith (acceptance of that which cannot be seen, but is still true), hope (a desire to pursue faith), and charity (willingness to grant that the other person isn't goofy for having faith and hope in the unseen—or for being unable to perceive the sacred as you do). It's the only way fundamentally incompatible perceptions can peacefully co-exist: I have faith that the 45 actually exists and you understand that I honestly can't see it, we both have the charity to accept that difference without judgment, and we hope that we can co-operate despite that fundamental difference to gain greater light and wisdom through shared curiosity on the topic.

Enduring in Hope

I wanted to believe that given access to the same set of facts people will tend to derive similar conclusions. But, even when shown the same view, some of us simply cannot see what others do, and as a result, we cannot easily or honestly come to the same (or even substantially similar) conclusions.

In this life, some of us will never see 45 in the dots, fluorescent orange price tags, or the intimate resonance with certain covenant practices. This means some conversations will always be somewhat confusing and some conclusions will always seem like leaps of logic.

At first, that realization made me very, very sad. I hate the idea of fundamental incompatibility, and I rage against the possibility that some arguments simply can't be won. But it turns out that there is literally no way to bridge the gap between opposite poles of perception. For example, either the sacred is real and worthy of reverence, or it's not and the whole idea is just a metaphor like any other. As our certainty of one of those poles increases, the ability to accommodate the other pole decreases in direct relation. Each side literally cannot accommodate the other. Thus,

as much as I hate the idea of fundamental incompatibilities, in this life, they are quite real.

This fact does not excuse us from trying to share with those who disagree or from showing charity to those who just don't share our perception. But it does take some of the fear and judgment out of one's own inability to perceive certain things. It's not the current perception itself that limits us; rather, it's our openness to new potentials that determines if and how we progress in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding.

I believe that the concept of eternal progression gives us time to learn how to perceive many things beyond our current abilities. Whether we make progress depends on whether we can discover and exercise the *willingness* or faith to pursue what is utterly alien to our current mode of understanding in the hope of gaining something valuable. To embrace faith and proceed as if the unseen is real and true, and choose to move forward in our pursuit of more complete understanding. When we eventually gain more perfect perception and can finally observe all things directly, how great will be our joy at seeing our faith made real. Ultimately, that kind of faith can be a choice we make now, despite our inability to perceive. Because we *all* see as through a glass, darkly (1 Cor. 13:12), until we face the one who can finally remove the scales from our eyes (Acts 9:18) and show us all the colors of creation in their true glory.

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A Latter-day Saint View of Free Will

Thomas S. E. Hilton

At the base of the Christian God's relationship with us humans are his will and ours:¹ commandments, obedience, and sin; blessing and punishment; repentance and forgiveness; rebellion and damnation; discipleship and salvation.² Personal moral responsibility underlies every Christian commandment, from choosing to reverence God through behaving charitably toward one's fellows to controlling one's thoughts. The necessity of free will to Christianity (at least in moral choices) is so fundamental that the Atonement of Christ whereby he redeems the

1. See Aristotle, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford University Press, 1986); see also Thomas Hobbes, "Of the Interior Beginnings of Voluntary Motions; Commonly Called the Passions; and the Speeches by Which They Are Expressed," in *Leviathan* (National Geographic Books, 2017); Keith Lehrer, "Freedom of Preference: A Defense of Compatibilism," *The Journal of Ethics* 20, no. 1 (2016): 35–46.

In this essay, "free will" refers to "libertarian" free will, the idea that humans have genuine ability to make choices independent of external influences. Libertarian free will stands in contrast to determinism, the idea that human choices are not free but rather are determined by external influences. Note that "compatibilist free will" is a form of determinism. Also called compatibilism or soft determinism, it is the idea that humans can make choices in accord with their preferences, but those preferences are determined by external influences.

2. See Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Dover Publications, 2012); and Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Self and the Dramas of History," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton (Library of America, 2015), 847–67.

fallen penitent is meaningless without it.³ Imputing sin to humans who do not have free will is like imputing malice to a virus or hatred to a wildfire. Certainly, we can kill the germ or douse the fire, but just as certainly, we do not impute sin—willful rebellion against God—to either one. In just that way, the absence of moral agency collapses the concept of sin, which in turn obviates the Atonement of the Son of God.⁴

Christian predestinarian assertions in the tradition of John Calvin and others are thus shown to be at odds with the whole rationale for Christianity. Calvinist conceptions of the absolute sovereignty of God place us humans merely among his effects, thereby placing both credit and blame for our behavior on him—hence the “unconditional election” and “irresistible grace” of Calvinism.⁵ Salvation of the penitent and damnation of the rebel are thus predetermined by God’s inscrutable creation of some of us for joy and others for misery, and God sending his Son to die for the sins of the elect becomes an arbitrary filicide.⁶ Some have said God made us free, not evil.⁷ However, this helps not at all: as if cutting the strings of the marionettes somehow makes the puppeteer not the crafter of their every ability and their whole environment.

Thus, the question of whether we are morally free⁸ (and hence morally culpable) is so important that it cannot be ignored, and, indeed, it has not been. For thousands of years the human race has debated the nature of human agency. Aristotle, Paul the Apostle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, William James, and a host of others have considered the question at length.⁹ The trouble

3. See C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (Harper Collins, 2001), 47–51, especially 47–48.

4. “If ye shall say there is no sin, ye shall also say there is no righteousness. . . . And if these things are not there is no God” (2 Ne. 2:13). See also Leigh Vicens, “Christianity and the Problem of Free Will,” in *Cambridge Elements: The Problems of God* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), abstract.

5. Loraine Boettner, “Section I: Statement of the Doctrine,” and “Section II: The Five Points of Calvinism,” in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Gideon House Books, 2017), 63–171.

6. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebeca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Beacon Press, 2001), 19.

7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (Everyman’s Library, 1993), 182–83.

8. See Sam Harris, *Free Will* (Simon & Schuster, 2012), 1.

9. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 42–51; Romans 8; Ephesians 1; Thomas Aquinas, “The Will of God,” in *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the Dominican Province (Christian Classics, 1981), 1.19.10; David Hume, “Of Liberty and Necessity,” in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*; [with] *Hume’s Abstract of A Treatise of*

is that no one seems to have laid it to rest. Hence, in this essay I propose to entirely reconceptualize free will via the Latter-day Saint canon.

This essay is mainly about one application of free will: moral agency. I use Kant's definition, the ability to freely choose between right and wrong that establishes moral culpability.¹⁰ While moral agency is a sub-type of free will, in this essay I follow Kant's lead: "A free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same."¹¹ That is, I do not emphasize a distinction that, though important and useful in many contexts, would distract from this essay's focus. I mainly use the term *free will* when referring to philosophy and *moral agency* when referring to scripture.

Centrality of Free Will in Latter-day Saint Scripture

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints joins other Christian sects in affirming our moral agency. In fact, the Church goes further, placing moral agency at the foundation of human happiness both in this mortal world and in eternity (see 2 Ne. 2:25; Alma 29:4). The Church characterizes earth's Creation, Adam and Eve's Fall, and Christ's Atonement as fundamental to the human condition because it is through them that individual moral agency that we mortals enjoy is created and maintained (see Gen. 1:26, Gen. 3:22, 2 Ne. 9:7–8; Moses 7:32–33). What then are Latter-day Saint doctrines of moral agency, and how do they compare with human experience and philosophic thought?

The unique Latter-day Saint conception of free will flows from a number of doctrines.¹² Central is the belief that each mortal is, at base,

Human Nature; [and] A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh, ed. Eric Steinberg, 2nd ed. (Hackett Publishing, 1993), §8; Immanuel Kant, "Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals to the Critique of Pure Practical Reason," in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 56–72; John Stuart Mill, "Chapter III: On Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being," in *On Liberty*, ed. Kathy Casey (Dover Publications, 2002), 46–62; William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 1–15. See also Robert Kane, *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011); Robert Kane, "Making Sense of a Free Will That Is Incompatible with Determinism: A Fourth Way Forward," *Journal of Philosophical Theological Research* 23, no. 3 (2021): 5–28.

10. Kant, "Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals," 52–66.

11. Kant, "Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals," 52.

12. I do not presume to speak for the Church; these thoughts are my own understanding of scripture. I look to God's living prophet to pronounce official doctrine (see D&C 1:24–28; D&C 21:1, 4–5; D&C 28:2, 5–7).

uncreated and eternal with a will that exists independent of God. To appreciate this and other Latter-day Saint contributions to the reconceptualization of free will, I discuss each word in the assertion “I can choose freely,” which contains and relates the core concepts in the debate.¹³

Latter-day Saint “I”

In Latter-day Saint thought, “I” is the self who chooses, a dual being of spirit and body created by God: “The spirit and the body are the soul of man” (D&C 88:15). At first glance, this appears consistent with typical definitions of the self.¹⁴ However, Latter-day Saint scripture adds three crucial distinctives to the conception of the self.

Entirely Material. First, “there is no such thing as immaterial matter” in the Latter-day Saint universe;¹⁵ “All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure, and can only be discerned by purer eyes; We cannot see it; but when our bodies are purified we shall see that it is all matter” (D&C 131:7–8).

This is a complete departure from common conceptions of the self (a material body inhabited by an immaterial spirit) on which many people base their understanding of free will.¹⁶ This body-spirit dualism is important to such thinkers as the way to preserve a logical belief in free will. They see the material human body as bound by deterministic laws of nature and so hypothesize an immaterial spirit that is independent of those material laws.

Unfortunately for adherents of this view, this hypothesis raises two unanswerable questions. First, if the material world is disconnected from

13. This sentence is my own. I present it as containing and relating the core concepts of every extant approach to the debate: the nature of the chooser, the choosing, and the choice.

14. See René Descartes, “Meditation VI: Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real Distinction Between Mind and Body,” *Meditations on First Philosophy: In Which the Existence of God and the Distinction of the Soul from the Body Are Demonstrated* (Hackett Publishing, 1993), 47–58.

15. See American Dictionary of the English Language, under “Immaterial” and “Matter,” accessed June 26, 2026, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/immaterial> and <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/matter>; Isaac Newton, *The Principia: The Authoritative Translation and Guide: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. I. Bernard Cohen, Anne Whitman, and Julia Budenz (University of California Press, 2016).

We may ask if the term *immaterial matter* meant to Joseph Smith what it means today. This is appropriate since many aspects of nineteenth-century Newtonian reality are now considered invalid. Fortunately, Webster’s 1828 American English definitions of *immaterial* and *matter* are functionally identical to those I use in this essay.

16. See Descartes, “Meditation VI,” 47–58; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (Project Gutenberg, 2004), 5.

our immaterial spirit, how can our immaterial spirit be connected to the material world, such as animating our body? Second, if our spirit is immaterial, how can we ascertain its existence—that is, what evidence of its existence can we ever find? Fortunately, these questions do not trouble Latter-day Saints because this material-immaterial split does not exist in Latter-day Saint doctrine. For Latter-day Saints, spirit is material the same as body, only finer and purer.¹⁷

Eternal “Intelligence.” The second distinctive Latter-day Saint belief regarding the self is that each God-created spirit is the habitation of an intelligence (Abr. 3:21–22)¹⁸ of “light and truth” (D&C 93:36) that was “not created or made, neither indeed can be” (D&C 93:29). So clear is this doctrine that it is thus unmistakably written: “Man was also in the beginning with God” (D&C 93:29).¹⁹ God is infinitely more powerful than us humans, but he is no older, for we are both eternal; thus “I,” in my essence, am coeternal with God, not created by him (see Abr. 3:18–19).²⁰ This is another radical departure from typical conceptions of the self as one of God’s *ex nihilo* creations.²¹

17. Doctrine and Covenants 29:34–35 makes this same point, though in reverse. Here God says, “All things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created. Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself.” This scripture rejects the material-immaterial split from the other direction, but whether everything is material or everything is spiritual, Latter-day Saint scripture rejects a fundamental difference in composition between spirit and matter.

18. I sympathize with those who find this a hard read. I believe its meaning becomes clear in the context of verses 23–26. In verse 23, Abraham notes that God “stood among those that were spirits.” Verse 24 describes “these” spirit children of God as being clothed in “these materials” (mortal bodies). In my view, then, “intelligences that were organized” in verse 22 must mean “intelligences that were organized into spirits.” Finally, this is the only way to make sense of the reference to first and second estates in verse 26.

19. See James E. Faulconer with Susannah Morrison, “The King Follet Discourse: Pinnacle or Peripheral?,” in “Yet to Be Revealed,” ed. Eric A. Eliason and Terryl L. Givens, special issue, *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 85–104. Here, Faulconer and Morrison trace evolution of this understanding over the century or so after the scripture was first given.

20. See David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2006): 192–93 with n. 51; James E. Faulconer, *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2010), 45, 50. I understand Paulsen’s position that intelligences are uncaused, uncreated, and eternal as consistent with my view. I also understand Faulconer’s emphasis on covenantal response in our lived (material) context offering similarly sympathetic grounds for identifying our intelligences as the fount of our free will, though he takes pains to point out that we have free will whether or not we articulate a cogent rationale for it.

21. See, for instance, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1.16.8–9, 1.18.1–4.

Innate Good and Evil. The third Latter-day Saint distinctive belief regarding the self is that each person's primal intelligence, each essential self, is innately inclined toward both good and evil. After Doctrine and Covenants 93:29 explains that intelligence "was not created or made" but is eternally self-existent, verses 30–31 explain that all intelligence "is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself. . . . Behold, here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man because . . . they receive not the light." In other words, God empowers us intelligences to act for ourselves—not that he created our inclinations, only that he enables us to enact them—and we do not always incline toward the right.²² Similarly, Doctrine and Covenants 58:28 notes that "the power is in [humans], wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as [they] do good they shall in nowise lose their reward." We have the potential for agency innately within us—the power *is in* us, and we are agents *unto ourselves*. This is yet another departure from common conceptions of the self as totally depraved and incapable of choosing good.²³

For Latter-day Saints, then, each human self is at base (1) entirely material and thereby fully engaged with the material world, (2) eternally independent of God or anything else for its existence and will, and (3) innately inclined toward both good and evil.²⁴

22. To the age-old question of why God would thus unleash evil in the world, Latter-day Saint theodicy offers a uniquely satisfying answer: God empowers us to express our innate good and evil in order to develop us to our greatest eternal joy (see D&C 93:33–34; 88:29–33; 2 Ne. 2:25). Joy is a function of agency—without agency, there is no joy (2 Ne. 2:23; Mosiah 2:41; D&C 88:32–33). And since letting us express our innate nature means letting us choose to "take happiness in sin" (Morm. 2:13) as well as in virtue (Moses 7:32–33), God let his Beloved Son freely choose to atone for our evil choices (Abr. 3:27; Heb. 12:2; 2 Ne. 26:24) so that freeing us to exercise our moral agency would not doom us to "an endless duration" of corruption (2 Ne. 9:7). God's grace expressed through Christ's Atonement lovingly frees us from the damning consequences of our evil choices and magnifies the saving consequences of our good choices.

23. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.12–27; Boettner, *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 63–82.

24. Since God revealed the existence of eternal intelligence/s, Latter-day Saint thinkers have speculated widely on its/their nature. To maintain focus I do not delve into that here, but I recommend the following to interested readers: Faulconer, *Faith, Philosophy, Scripture*; Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Deseret Book, 1976); Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Deseret Book, 1985); Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (University of Utah Press, 1974); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God* (Greg Kofford Books, 2001); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, vol. 2, *The Problems of Theism and The Love of God* (Greg Kofford Books, 2006); Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought*, vol. 3, *Of God and Gods* (Greg Kofford Books, 2008); Paulsen, "Joseph Smith Challenges the Theological World;" David L. Paulsen, "Divine Determinateness and the Free-Will Defense," *Analysis* 41, no. 3 (1981): 150–53; Orson

Latter-day Saint “Can”

Latter-day Saint scripture agrees with common conceptions of “can” in the exercise of moral agency as denoting ability.²⁵ Consistent with this, philosophers generally agree that it entails awareness of options, capacity to act, and conscience.²⁶ To this, Latter-day Saint thought adds that, though all human destiny depends on the exercise of moral agency, yet we humans cannot independently generate options (see Moses 4, especially vv. 1–4). Rather, we must be attracted by competing alternatives that already exist in our environment: “It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. . . . Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other” (2 Ne. 2:11, 16). Thus, for Latter-day Saints, “can” is inextricably bound up in responding to external influences.²⁷ This contradicts Aristotelian conceptions of free will as based on independence from external influences.²⁸

Latter-day Saint “Choose”

Latter-day Saint thought is consistent with the typical view that to “choose” means to commit to one option from a group and includes intention to actually perform the choice.²⁹ The idea that a choice is not real until we commit to it emerges in such Latter-day Saint expressions as this often-quoted scripture: “Men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will” (D&C 58:27–28). Another influential Latter-day Saint scripture reads, “Except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing” (Moro. 7:6). Yet another illustrates the Church’s definition of choice as a duet of thought and action: Speaking of God’s

Pratt, *The Seer* (Seagull Book and Tape, 1993); Orson Pratt, “Great First Cause,” in *The Pamphlets of Orson Pratt*, ed. David Hammer (CreateSpace, 2017), 404–28; Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology* (Wentworth Press, 2019); B. H. Roberts, “Immortality of Man,” *Improvement Era*, April 1907, 401–22; B. H. Roberts, “Intelligence or Mind and Minds,” in *The Truth, The Way, The Life*, 2nd ed. (BYU Studies, 1996), 164–73; Joseph Smith Jr., “The King Follett Sermon,” *Ensign*, April 1971, 12–17; May 1971, 13–17; John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Hassell Street Press, 2021).

25. *Oxford English Dictionary*, under “can (v.1),” accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/can_v1?tab=meaning_and_use#10266561.

26. See Kant, “Transition from the Metaphysics of Morals,” 66–68.

27. Another implication of “can” is that not all choices need to be free for some choices to be free. To say “I can choose freely” implies that I may sometimes choose freely without necessarily always doing so. Thus, detractors of free will who show that one choice was made deterministically have not shown that all choices are the same.

28. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 3.2–5.

29. *Oxford English Dictionary*, under “choose (v.),” accessed April 29, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/choose_v?tab=meaning_and_use#9559999.

Final Judgment, a Book of Mormon prophet explains, “If their works were good in this life, and the desires of their hearts were good, . . . they should also, at the last day, be restored unto that which is good” (Alma 41:3). Thus, choice is not choice for Latter-day Saints until it is desired, selected, and enacted.

However, expressing and committing does not mean there can be no purely internal choices. On the contrary, we have this from the Book of Mormon: “If we have hardened our hearts . . . we shall be condemned. For our words will condemn us, yea . . . our thoughts will also condemn us” (Alma 12:13–14). Thus, the Latter-day Saint canon asserts both the possibility and the virtue of controlling one’s thoughts. While the devil can tempt us with thoughts we would not conceive on our own, we are morally obligated to choose to dismiss them (2 Ne. 9:9; Mosiah 4:30).

Latter-day Saint “Freely”

We now see how heavily the first three words in “I can choose freely” influence our discussion of the fourth, “freely.” Integrating the foregoing and a host of other scriptures, I find that the Latter-day Saint canon defines choosing “freely” as the God-given ability to enact the self-existent, nonderivative will of our eternal, uncreated intelligence in our moral choices (see also 2 Ne. 2:11, 14–16; Moses 7:32–33; Abr. 3:24–25).

Complete Departure from Common Definition of Free Will

This is completely different from common definitions of free will.³⁰ Many (libertarian) free will advocates join Aristotle in defining choosing “freely” as choosing independently of influences external to the self. However, I (and others) see a fatal problem with this definition: If a choice is independent of external influences, the choice is by definition unconnected to those externalities.³¹ To admit any degree of connection is to admit that same degree of influence. How can we choose “freely” among (right and wrong) alternatives in our surroundings if our freedom is conditioned on disallowing influence from the very alternatives among which we are to choose? It is a logical contradiction; it is impossible.

30. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (MIT Press, 1990), 40–59. I perceive some distant similarity to Dreyfus's description of Heidegger's *eigentlich*, or “ownmost potentiality-for-Being,” but I do not believe *eigentlich* is a common conception of free will.

31. See Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Bradford Book, 1984), 23–29; see also Moritz Schlick, “When Is a Man Responsible?,” in *The Problem of Free Will: Selected Readings*, ed. Willard Van Orman Quine (Scribner's Sons, 1967).

Thankfully, the Latter-day Saint definition of “freely” that I give here not only dispenses with the material-immaterial split I described in the section above on intelligence; it also eliminates this contradiction between independence and connection.

Like God’s Freedom

At first glance, this definition of “freely” may appear so radical as to be entirely unique. However, it turns out that the great medieval scholastic Saint Thomas Aquinas defined God’s freedom in similar terms. God, he reasoned, is free not because he can choose independent of external influences but rather because he can act in complete accord with his own nature. Aquinas taught that God cannot sin, but this is not because he is not “free” to sin; rather, it is because the will to sin is not in his nature.³² Since God’s nature is self-existent and nonderivative (that is, not caused by any antecedent), acting in accord with his nature is the very quintessence of freedom. Aquinas does not speak for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but I find his explanation of divine agency consistent with Latter-day Saint scripture (see Deut. 32:4; Prov. 30:5; compare Matt. 5:48 with 3 Ne. 12:48; 2 Tim. 2:13; James 1:13; 1 Ne. 7:12; Mosiah 4:9; 5:2; Ether 3:4; D&C 61:1; 121:4; Abr. 3:17; and so forth).³³

Latter-day Saint Free Will Foundering?

Here is a distillation of the concepts undergirding the Latter-day Saint view of moral agency:

- I** the self, an uncreated, eternal, material intelligence with a self-existent, nonderivative will that includes innate good and evil inclinations; augmented by a God-given material spirit and further empowered by a God-given material body to interact with the entirely material world
- Can** the self’s awareness of options, the ability to enact them, perception of each option’s moral valence, and the inherent attraction of the self to various extant alternatives
- Choose** the self’s real commitment to perform one action in a group of alternatives
- Freely** the self’s God-given ability to express its self-existent, nonderivative will in its moral choices

32. Aquinas, “The Will of God,” in *Summa Theologica*, 1.19.10.

33. Finding truth in another faith tradition should not worry Latter-day Saints in the least since a tenet of our religion is that “the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8).

We now must consider a crucial question: Doesn't this definition of *freely* negate freedom in moral (and all other) choices? That is, haven't Latter-day Saints enmeshed the self entirely in material cause and effect? In effect, doesn't Latter-day Saint doctrine say that human choices are deterministic as in figure 1 below?³⁴

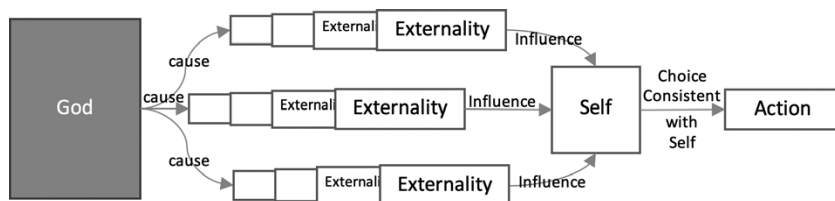


FIGURE 1. A(n inaccurate) view of Latter-day Saint determinism.

Self-Determinism

The answer to the above questions is, probably surprisingly to many, yes. Church scripture does place the self squarely in the material world and thus squarely in the cause-effect web of natural law along with everything else in the material world.

With one crucial difference.

Latter-day Saints understand our essential self, our intelligence, to be uncreated, eternal, and self-existent. To illustrate this, I offer in figure 2 the same diagram as in figure 1 but with a slight change.

34. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007); Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (Basic Books, 2007); John Jamieson Carswell Smart, "Sensations and Brain Processes," *Philosophical Review* 68, no. 2 (April 1959): 141–156; Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 1 (1971): 5–20; Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Shambhala, 1992); Gregg D. Caruso, *Free Will and Consciousness: A Determinist Account of the Illusion of Free Will* (Lexington Books, 2012); Marco Masi, "An Evidence-Based Critical Review of the Mind-Brain Identity Theory," in *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023), article 10641890, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1150605>, accessed September 15, 2025.

Figures 1 and 2 may appear simplistic since they do not explicitly reflect (1) implications of quantum uncertainty for free will and (2) emergent-materialist conceptions of the self. I grant that the figures are simple, but they do not prevent readers who wish to do so from understanding them in terms of quantum uncertainty and emergent materialism. Since complicating them would not further clarify my point, I believe the diagrams as-is are sufficient for my present purpose.

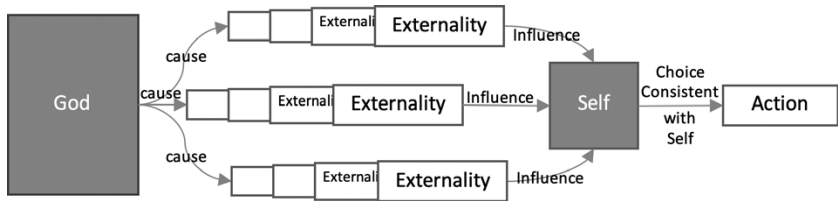


FIGURE 2. A(n accurate) view of Latter-day Saint determinism.

In this second figure, the self is the same color as God. This is to communicate that, as God is free by virtue of his ability to enact his self-existent, nonderivative will, so also each human is morally free: We can each make moral choices consistent with our self-existent, nonderivative will. To be sure, that ability is a gift from God: Being infinitely more powerful than any of us (or all of us together), he could run us like robots. But he loves us, and so he lets us express our essential selves. In fact, he has ordered the world to that very end (Mosiah 2:21; Alma 32:17–20).³⁵ And we do have essential selves to express.³⁶ Thus, while externalities in the material world do influence our choices, those externalities interact with our uncaused, primordial (material) intelligence. Our choices *are* determined, but the determinant is our *selves*.³⁷ What

35. Our wills are weak compared to God's all-powerful will (Job 38–41) and compared to the gargantuan forces of the cosmos in which we live (Ps. 8:3–4). Therefore, God delicately arranges our lives with enticements to good and evil that balance us on the razor's edge of our puny agency. This is why God is in the details of our lives—not to control us but to free us.

36. This is key to my thesis. It is why this is not just another form of compatibilism (apologies to Robson; see Kent E. Robson, "The Foundations of Freedom in Mormon Thought," *Sunstone* 7, no. 5 [September–October 1982]: 51–54). Compatibilists present free will as illusory because our choices ultimately boil down to triggers outside us; this Latter-day Saint view acknowledges free will as genuine, seated in our self-existent, nonderivative intelligence.

37. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, xxxi, 60–71; Plato, "Phaedo," in *Plato: Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, 2nd ed., trans. G. M. A. Grube (Hackett Publishing, 1997); Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. R. B. Haldane, J. Kemp (Digireads Publishing, 2021). Interestingly, none other than the great Immanuel Kant seems to have had a somewhat similar notion. He founded his argument for human moral agency on the existence of a "noumenal self" of the Platonic ideal sort for us "phenomenal selves" here in mundane reality. The problem with Kant's approach, as has been pointed out by minds brighter than mine (for example, Schopenhauer), is that he places the noumenal self outside the material world and so falls back into the trap of pitting free will against influence.

could be more free than such “self-determinism”? It is (nearly) the same kind of freedom God enjoys.

From Freedom of Choice to Freedom of Will

Doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints clearly imply that we mortals enjoy the same type of moral agency as God: the ability to enact our will.³⁸ However, the standard works draw an all-important distinction between divine agency and mortal agency.

Mortal Agency Is Dependent

Mortal “man [cannot] act for himself save it should be that he [is] enticed . . . to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Ne. 2:16, 27). We mortals must be presented with choices in order to exercise our agency. We are not able of ourselves to create the alternatives among which we choose. God presents us with alternatives that he lovingly customizes to fit each individual’s current state of agency.³⁹ (I will say more on this below.) We decide which most entices us within that set of God-given alternatives.

Divine Agency Is Independent

God’s agency is different in this respect from our mortal version: “There is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it” (Abr. 3:17). That is, God has the power to create whatever he chooses. God does not need externally provided alternatives as mortals do. He knows his will, and he enacts it. Being omnipotent and

38. I consider this one way in which human beings are created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27).

39. Second Nephi 2:24 shows that God’s wisdom permeates every aspect of creation, including the circumstances in which we mortals make our life choices; nothing is purposeless. Second Nephi 26:23–24 shows that all God’s work in the world is motivated by his love for us and is for our benefit. Alma 7:11–13 shows that God intimately mediates our mortal pains and sicknesses through Christ’s Atonement (and those who would limit Christ’s mercy and grace by defining “his people” as only the faithful should remember 2 Ne. 26:23–24.). Doctrine and Covenants 121:7, 25; and 122:7–9 show God lovingly, tenderly comforting and counseling one of his imperfect children, telling him that God is with him every step of the way. Alma 36:3 is a general statement extending to each of the faithful the intimate comfort God gives to one suffering servant in Doctrine and Covenants 121 and 122. Romans 8:28 is a clear, comprehensive statement that all things are woven by divine providence; this certainly includes the circumstances of our life choices.

omniscient, he does not consider alternatives as mortals do. We humans weigh externally provided opposition and alternatives through the lens of our limited awareness, but God simultaneously comprehends every alternative (D&C 38:1–2).⁴⁰

From Dependent Choice to Independent Will

As children of God, we have the potential to become like him (see Rom. 8:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:4; D&C 76:58–61; 132:19–20). To me, this means our agency can become like God’s. Here is one conception of how that happens. We start out not knowing our own minds or potential, so God, who does know our minds and potential, develops our self-awareness as we grow.

The Process. As his premortal spirit children, we were presented with two alternatives: agency through Jehovah or slavery through Lucifer (see Abr. 3:27–28). Everyone born into mortality chose agency, and because of this choice, we are said to have “[kept our] first estate” (Abr. 3:26). As infants newly born into our mortal “second estate” (Abr. 3:26), we are presented with the relatively small (but still enormous) set of choices regarding learning to use our bodies. As toddlers, we begin choosing in the larger context of imitating family members and interacting with toys and other objects in our home. Then our choices multiply again with neighbors, then church, then school. Then God gives our choices huge boosts with adolescence, adulthood, job, marriage, children. Then come old age, death, and the spirit world, each with its characteristic set of choices to help us identify our desires and develop awareness of our will.

And so it goes. God continually asks us what we want, what we really want, what we still want. The Book of Mormon puts it this way: God “granteth unto men according to their desire . . . decrees which are unalterable, according to their wills” (Alma 29:4). This even continues in the world of spirits after our mortal death: “The gospel [is] preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh but live according to God in the spirit” (1 Pet. 4:6; see also D&C 138:57–59).

40. This idea of God perfectly knowing his own mind extends to other divine attributes as well. For example, God does not exercise faith as mortals do. Mortal faith is born of uncertainty, but God suffers no uncertainty; he does not believe, trust, expect, hope, forecast, or guess as we mortals use those words because he knows everything. Another example is “trying.” Mortals attempt, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding. God does not attempt, he does; he always succeeds.

This proving and improving of our own desires comes to fruition in our resurrection when God fits us with a tailor-made immortal body exactly customized to do our will as developed and revealed to us in pre-mortality, mortality, and the spirit world: “I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts” and “ye shall receive your bodies, and your glory shall be that glory by which your bodies are quickened . . . to enjoy that which [ye] are willing to receive” (see Abr. 3:25; also compare Abr. 3:26 with D&C 88:28, 32; 93:36; 137:9).⁴¹

Our Potential. Some have wondered how God can nourish us to be more like him if our potential is delimited by our self-existent, nonderivative intelligence. That is, we may erroneously infer that uncreated intelligence is unmalleable intelligence. I do not know how God adds intelligence to intelligence, but latter-day scripture tells us that he can and has and does and will. Here are some examples:

“They who keep their first estate shall be added upon . . . and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (Abr. 3:26).

“The Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent . . . has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2).

“He that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

“Ye who are quickened by a portion of the celestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And they who are quickened by a portion of the terrestrial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And also they who are quickened by a portion of the telestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness. And they who remain shall also be quickened; nevertheless, they shall return again to their own place, to enjoy that which they are willing to receive, because they were not willing to enjoy that which they might have received” (D&C 88:29–32).

“If . . . thine eye be single to the glory of God, thy whole body shall be full of light” (JST Matthew 6:22).

41. Note that our resurrected bodies will be exactly customized to do our will *in its full maturity through Christ's grace*: “Every man shall receive according to his own works, his own dominion, in the mansions which are prepared; And *they shall be servants of the Most High*” (D&C 76:111–12, emphasis added). God will not empower our “natural man” to forever remain “an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19, except see D&C 76:31–39 regarding the sons of perdition).

Latter-day Saint scripture thus clearly shows that one trait of human intelligence (that is, “the light of truth”) is that God can magnify it with additional intelligence (see D&C 93:29). Some of us accept these divine offers as King Benjamin’s people did (see Mosiah 1–6). However, the Book of Mormon joins the rest of holy writ in showing that the degree of acceptance varies widely.⁴² Thus the scriptures cited throughout this essay show that the “fulness” (potential) of additional intelligence, glory, light, truth, and joy each heart receives varies according to individual will (see also D&C 76:5–10, 16–17, 40–44, 50–89, 98–106, 109–12; 88:1–3, 21–24, 28–40).

Centrality of Christ’s Atonement

At the start of this article, I noted that determinism obviates Christ’s Atonement. This in turn undercuts the whole rationale for Christianity since there is no point in God commanding repentance or offering forgiveness for sins he predetermined we would commit. We must here ask, then, if Latter-day Saint self-determinism does the same thing. If our choices are determined by our eternal, uncreated, material intelligence’s nonderivative, self-existent will, what is the point of Christ’s Atonement? Doesn’t our uncreated, eternal nature immutably fix our eternal destiny?

Interactive Material Relationship

The answer to that question, probably surprisingly to many, is (partly) yes: Our self-existent, nonderivative wills do determine our choices. However, the answer does not end there. Being part of the material world, our self-existent, nonderivative wills interact with numerous external influences in determining those choices, and—thanks be to our (wholly material) Father in Heaven—central among those influences is the (wholly material) atoning Savior. “From all eternity to all eternity,” he exerts his redeeming and sanctifying influence upon us (Moses 6:67; Moses 4:2; John 1:1–5; D&C 19:1–4). He does this by innumerable means (D&C 88:7–13), four of the more prominent being the Light of Christ, the Spirit of the Lord, the scriptures, and the prophets (see D&C 93:2; 19:23–24; 130:23; Amos 3:7). Thus, it simply is not true that our eternal

42. See Jacob 5 for a graphic example of the variation in human responses to divine nurturing.

destiny would be the same with or without Christ. We might as well say the planets would move in their same orbits with or without the sun.

Internal, Not External, Determinism

There is yet more to the difference between typical determinism and Latter-day Saint self-determinism. The reason typical determinism obviates Christ's Atonement is not that it is deterministic, per se; after all, the prior paragraph about Christ's effect on our eternal destiny is just as true in typical determinism as it is in Latter-day Saint self-determinism. The difference is that in typical determinism, we are not our own determinant. An external determinant, God (or the universe or chance or the laws of physics or whatever), rules our destiny. His creation *ex nihilo* bakes into us our moral (and all other) choices. Christ comes, but our response to him is determined not by an independent will within us but by God, the Uncaused First Cause. In typical determinism, God alone is free; all else is predestined.

Latter-day Saint self-determinism undoes this by showing that the determinant of our choices is our selves. God, who could run us like robots but who lovingly lets us do our own will, gives his beloved Son for us to interact with, thereby freeing us from the otherwise damning effects of our baser natures so we can choose whatever degree of salvation we will (John 3:16–17; D&C 76:51–58, 74–79, 82–112, 31–38; 88:22–24; 138:58–59).⁴³ As Paul put it, “To will [good] is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:18–19, 24–25).

Again, what Christ frees from sin and death is my very own, self-determined self—not a self determined by God or other outside forces.

Opportunity Versus Will

God adds upon each of us the glory each of us is willing to receive. God gives all his children the *opportunity* to receive exaltation; to do otherwise would be unjust. But that does not mean all his children have the *will* to

43. Just as God lets us mortals exercise our own wills, so he lets Jehovah exercise his own will (Abr. 3:27; D&C 93:10–13). That is, the Father did not force the Son into his mortal life; rather the Father freed the Son to live mortality in accord with the Son's own will (John 10:17–18; 2 Ne. 2:7).

receive exaltation; the existence of degrees of heavenly glory as described in Doctrine and Covenants 76:25–112 makes this abundantly clear. Doctrine and Covenants 88:28–32 makes the same point just as clearly and more succinctly.

Latter-day Saint doctrine is not universalist: Not every child of God will receive the same glory in the resurrection—each receives the glory she or he is “able to abide” (D&C 88:22–24; Morm. 9:4). The canon is clear on this. However, the canon is also clear that every child of God is capable of being glorified to some degree beyond his or her native state; each of us is capable of being “added upon with glory” (Abr. 3:26; Moses 4:2; 6:67; John 1:1–5; D&C 19:1–4; 19:23–24; 93:2; 130:23; Amos 3:7).

God Does Not Fail

Abraham 3:26 notes that God’s premortal spirit children who chose determinism through Lucifer do “not have glory in the same kingdom with those who” chose agency through Jehovah.⁴⁴ We mortal Christians often cluck our tongues and speak of these unembodied damned as God’s failures: “God lost a third part of his children in the war in heaven” or similar sentiments. However, Latter-day Saint self-determinism clarifies that God did not lose them. Rather, he empowered them to enact their self-existent, nonderivative wills to the end that they enjoy that which they are willing to receive (see D&C 88:28–32).

Grasping this is crucial because we hereby understand that God did not—does not—fail. Though the fate of Satan’s minions rightly horrifies us, they nevertheless used their God-given agency to obtain the “fulness” (D&C 88:29) of their will, all that they “are able to abide” (see D&C 88:22–24). And he is nurturing each of us to that same end: We, too, will each enjoy that which we are willing to receive. God does not fail; God *always* succeeds (D&C 3:1–2).⁴⁵

44. See also Moses 4:1–4, especially verses 3 and 4, for a contrast of Lucifer’s determinism and Jehovah’s agency.

45. In asserting that God always succeeds, Latter-day Saints find themselves in general agreement with Leibniz’s argument that this earth is “the best of all possible worlds,” though they might put it something like, “This earth is perfect for God’s purposes.” This stands in stark contrast to Voltaire’s picaresque mockery of that idea. G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Huggard (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 228; Voltaire, *Candide* (Electronic Scholarly Publishing Project, 1998), <http://www.esp.org/books/voltaire/candide.pdf>.

Celestial Savior or Deist Watchmaker?

Another set of questions may arise when considering Latter-day Saint self-determinism: Can we rightly consider Christ our Savior and Redeemer if the plan of salvation is mechanistic? Where are the miracle of salvation and the love between Savior and saved? Doesn't Latter-day Saint self-determinism drop us into Matthew Tindal's lonely deism where God creates the universe, then turns away and lets it run?⁴⁶ As one friend put it to me, "How could God's loving plan of salvation turn out to be nothing but deterministic unfolding?"

Mere Mechanism?

This question relies for its impact on aesthetic connotation rather than analytic denotation.⁴⁷ That is, "mechanistic" conjures images of (ugly, even inhuman) cranking cogs, clanking levers, iron pistons, screeching steam, and oozing oil. Its actual meaning includes none of these things. "Mechanistic" means "relating to theories which explain phenomena in purely physical or deterministic terms."⁴⁸ This unabashedly does relate to Latter-day Saint self-determinism. We may be surprised, even shocked, by Latter-day Saint self-determinism. However, its initial strangeness does not mean it is ugly or inhuman. Indeed, I hope growing familiarity brings more and more gratitude for the release it gives from fatally flawed arguments we must otherwise rely on to make sense of our moral responsibility and the need for Christ's Atonement.

Miracles and Love Lost?

In a similarly aesthetic vein, some of us may wish for more miracles or love in the cosmos than we perceive in Latter-day Saint self-determinism. For us who long for "the God of the gaps," I point out that seating our choices within our eternal intelligence is plenty miraculous and lovely.⁴⁹

46. Matthew Tindal, "Chap. III. That the Perfection and Happiness of All Rational Beings, Supreme as Well as Subordinate, Consists in Living Up to the Dictates of Their Nature," in *Christianity as Old as the Creation: or, The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (London, 1732), 18–30.

47. I do not write this pejoratively. I willingly grant that the aesthetic appeal of an argument—how it "strikes me"—influences its cogency as well as does its logical validity.

48. Oxford English Dictionary, under "mechanistic (*adj.*)," accessed February 10, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1206576706>.

49. Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God* (Free Press, 2007), 93. Here Collins, a Christian and the former director of the Human Genome Project and the National

Where were our intelligences when God found us (see Abr. 3:21)? Are our intelligences eternally discrete entities, or are they plucked from an undifferentiated eternal mass (compare Abr. 3:21 with D&C 93:29)? Do nonhuman intelligences exist (see Moses 7:48–49)? Why did God love our undeveloped intelligences enough to decide to make our immortality and eternal life his work and glory (see Moses 1:39)? What is it about our intelligences that makes us capable of magnification and increasing joy (see 2 Ne. 2:25; D&C 93:33–34)? And on and on!⁵⁰

Self-Determinism and Deism

Some strains of Christianity conceive of God as deistically aloof, creating the universe akin to a complex clock that automatically runs without divine intervention after its initial creation.⁵¹ Deists thus assert the absence of recurring divine intervention in human affairs (or in anything else), but Latter-day scripture (and hence Latter-day Saint self-determinism) specifically asserts the opposite, positioning God as the ongoing, moment-to-moment enabler not only of human agency but of human life (see Mosiah 2:21).

Salvation Unfolding?

Continuing the appeal to aesthetics, my friend protested in dismay that God's loving plan of salvation could not be just an unfolding, every outcome known to God from the beginning. I reply simply, Why not? Do not we Latter-day Saints confess God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence? If so, how could his plan of salvation be otherwise? I submit this essay as evidence that surprise (or shock) at Latter-day Saint self-determinism is no rationale for rejecting it. On the contrary, I present Latter-day Saint self-determinism as arguably the consummate example that "mine house is a house of order, saith the Lord God" (D&C 132:8).⁵²

Institutes of Health, chronicles his ongoing awe at the wondrous miracles—the "gaps" as he calls them—of the human genome and other unanswered questions of science. Though he did not originate the term, Collins gladly acknowledges "the God of the gaps."

50. I did not make up these wonderful questions. Latter-day Saint thinkers have reasoned and dreamed about them and more since the nineteenth century. Note 24 lists some of these references.

51. Oxford English Dictionary, under "deism (*n.*1)," accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/deism_n?tab=meaning_and_use#7235313.

52. Could there be a clearer statement than this of God's orderliness? See Genesis 1, as the entire chapter is about God organizing order from chaos. See also the repeated use of "organized" and "ordered" in Abraham 4:1, 7, 9, 11–12, 14–16, 18, 25, 27, 30–31. Isaiah

The word *unfolding* has too sterile an aesthetic for the beauty of Latter-day Saint self-determinism. To me it is the blooming and blossoming of your eternal self and mine into the full flower of our perfection under the loving hands of heavenly parents. Let us celebrate that beauty! Let us see Christ's invitation to "be ye therefore perfect" not as a daunting command so much as a comforting assurance, God's promise that he *will* bring us to become our truest, fullest selves (Matt. 5:48; see also the exquisitely nuanced 3 Ne. 12:48).

Conclusion

To sum up, then, Latter-day Saint scripture pertaining to questions of free will, moral agency, and personal responsibility transcends fruitless arguments by showing that they arise primarily from a mis-definition of the self. In the Latter-day Saint world, selves are essentially uncreated and eternal, added upon by a loving God "to act for themselves"—that is, to express their self-existent, nonderivative wills in God-curated moral (and other) choices (Abr. 3:26; 2 Ne. 2:26). Each of us is thus a tiny, God-beloved uncaused first cause in the image of the Great Uncaused First Cause. Latter-day Saints situate this self-as-free-agent within the cause-effect laws of the material world. Indeed, the Latter-day Saint standard works admit no other kind of world. This means the self is entirely relevant to and involved in both actions and consequences. In other words, we are affected by and have effect on the (entirely material) world. This material self-existence, coupled with God's loving willingness to let us enact our wills (within the protective embrace of Christ's Atonement), makes us morally culpable for the good and bad we choose.⁵³

As the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi concluded, "[We] are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or

48:3 shows that God has ordered the progression of history from its start to its end. Acts 2:23 shows that God planned and appointed both the trials of Christ and their eventual happy outcome. Romans 9:18–23, so often a proof-text for Calvinist-style determinism, appears via Latter-day Saint self-determinism in its true light as a straightforward statement that God honors our primordial natures. First Nephi 9:6 shows that God's omniscience and omnipotence—his orderliness, if you will—are absolute. Given this, how else could we mortals enjoy moral agency than by Latter-day Saint self-determinism? Abraham 2:8 shows that the whole history of creation from beginning to end was known to God before it started. This surely evidences divine orderliness. Doctrine and Covenants 38:1–2 shows that God knows everything everywhere all at once.

53. Luke 4:18–19. Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61:1–2 in his inaugural address to the Nazarenes. It is his mission statement, the thesis of his ministry, his promise to save us from ourselves. Marvelously, Mosiah 3:11, Alma 7:9–12, and other scriptures reveal that Christ also atones for the evil we *unwittingly* cause.

to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself. [Therefore,] look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit” (2 Ne. 2:27–28).⁵⁴

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54. Some may wonder why God would inspire Lehi (and every other prophet) to plead with us to choose Christ if we are just going to do what our self-existent, non-derivative wills determine we will do. But this is falling into the flawed thinking of herein-discredited misconceptions of free will. Remember we exist in the material world, affecting and being affected by it. This means externalities do influence our choices, and so (for instance) Lehi remonstrating with his sons (and us by extension) is entirely appropriate because it does affect them (and us). Exactly what that effect is, is a function of their (and our) self-existent, nonderivative wills.

The Bees Were Saved

last week. Twenty-five million of them
were saved in the Beehive State, saved
by firefighters who cooled overheating hives,
saved the week I learned about festooning
(how bees form their living garlands).
Bless the firefighters. Bless the bees.
Last week, too, I saw smoke rise
from a mountainside aching with drought.
By my feet, dragonflies, bees,
and ladybugs landed on yellow yarrow.
Every living creature, ever-dwindling water,
I garland my words for you (for protection
and for praise). Bees, may you keep
making honey that will outlast us all.

—Anabella Schofield

Missionary Husbands

The Decline of Calling Married Men as Proselytizing Missionaries

Matt Lund

From the 1830s to post–World War II, trends in Church missionary culture changed dramatically. This article seeks to build on past studies that have highlighted changing demographics of proselytizing Latter-day Saint missionaries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—from older married men to younger single men and women.¹ By utilizing the Church History Biographical Database compiled by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, this study provides more precise demographics relating to the marital status of those called to proselytize and explores the socioeconomic forces, ecclesiastical changes, cultural currents, and doctrinal teachings that shaped how and why these missionary demographics changed over time.² The three generations of missionary activity in the Lyman family highlight some of the ways Latter-day Saint proselytizing evolved and changed from its beginnings in the 1830s to the end of the nineteenth century.

1. Three studies in particular: Rex T. Price Jr., “The Mormon Missionary of the Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1991); William E. Hughes, “A Profile of the Missions of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1849–1900” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1986); Gordon Irving, “Survey of LDS Missionary Work, 1830–1973” (Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1974), 16–23.

2. “Church History Biographical Database” at history.churchofjesuschrist.org. I am indebted to the staff at the Church History Library in Salt Lake City for making this data available to me in easily searchable spreadsheets. The data included the names of missionaries; their birthplace, marital status, and age when called; where they served; and the start and end dates of their missionary service.

The Lyman Family Missionaries from 1830–1900

When Amasa Lyman first grasped the hand of the Prophet Joseph Smith in the summer of 1832, he felt the peace of heaven permeate his soul, and the still, small voice of the Spirit whispered its living testimony that Joseph Smith was “the man of God.” One evening, after a prayer meeting in Kirtland, Ohio, the Prophet approached Amasa. “Brother Amasa,” he said, “the Lord requires your labors in the vineyard.” Amasa understood this as a call from the Lord to go out and preach the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. He had been a member of the Church for four months and had heard only five sermons preached. Yet, fired with conviction in his newfound faith, Amasa replied without thought, “I will go.” Within days, he started for southern Ohio and Virginia on his first mission.³

Amasa served as many as seventeen missions for the Church—five when he was single, seven while monogamously married, and five while plurally married.⁴ His proselytizing spanned three decades. He served more missions than most men, though it was not uncommon for men of his generation to serve multiple missions. Amasa Lyman’s early missions lasted months at a time, and he often left within days of his call to go preach without purse or scrip like the ancient Christian disciples (see Luke 10:4). His missionary companions were converts like himself from the Northeastern and Midwestern states. Of all his missions, only his last was to a foreign country.⁵

In contrast, Amasa’s son Francis Marion Lyman never served a domestic mission. Francis was called as a missionary to Great Britain in 1860 and again in 1873.⁶ Before leaving on his first mission, he constructed a small cabin for his pregnant wife, Rhoda, and one-year-old daughter, Alice. It was their first home. “I had not a cent of money to start with,” he later wrote, “and [I] borrowed the coat I wore.” He left his wife and daughter with “no money and nothing for one meal to live upon.”⁷ He was absent

3. Amasa Lyman, “Amasa Lyman’s History,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 27, no. 30 (July 29, 1865): 472–73; no. 31 (August 5, 1865): 487–89.

4. “Amasa M. Lyman,” Church History Biographical Database, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed July 28, 2024, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/amasa-mason-lyman-1813?lang=eng&timelineTabs=allTabs>.

5. “Amasa M. Lyman,” Church History Biographical Database.

6. “Francis Marion Lyman,” Church History Biographical Database, accessed July 30, 2024, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/francis-marion-lyman-1840>. After becoming an apostle, Francis Marion Lyman served a third mission to Great Britain as a mission president from 1901 to 1904.

7. Stephen J. Sorenson, *Francis Marion Lyman: A Rock in the Faith* (pub. by author, 2020), 82–83.

from them for over two-and-a-half years. He received news of his second mission call in October 1873 while attending the Church's semiannual general conference in Salt Lake City. To his surprise, his name and seven others were announced from the pulpit to prepare to leave in ten days for a mission to Europe. This time, he left Rhoda and his plural wife, Clara, for over two years to proselytize once again in Great Britain.⁸

Like his father's generation, most of the men Francis served with were married, but now, more than a third of the missionaries had plural wives. Missionaries of Francis's generation were more likely to serve foreign missions than domestic ones, with about half of the missionaries being foreign-born converts. Latter-day Saint evangelism was becoming more global and diverse. While many stateside missions still lasted months, international missions could last several years. For missionaries like Francis, this meant lengthier separations from their wives and children.

George Albert Lyman was born one month after his father, Francis, left on his second mission. Like his father and grandfather, George also served a mission. He left in December 1896 to proselytize for three years in the American South. Figure 1 shows an image of George toward the end of his mission, pictured with other elders of the Southern States Mission in Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁹

Most of his fellow missionaries were second- and third-generation Church members, many of them the sons of immigrant parents. Their youthful faces reflect a significant shift in Latter-day Saint evangelism at the end of the nineteenth century. Twenty-six of the forty men were single, with an average age of twenty-four. This stood in sharp contrast to the average age and number of married missionaries just a few decades earlier, when George's father served his second mission. The decade between 1870 and 1880 stands out as having the oldest missionary force, with an average age of forty-one, and the highest percentage of married missionaries—84 percent.¹⁰

Nineteenth-Century Missionaries

Missionaries during the nineteenth century ranged in age from as young as fourteen to as old as eighty-two. However, the average age of a nineteenth-century missionary was about thirty-five years old. It seems

8. Sorenson, *Francis Marion Lyman*, 143.

9. "George Albert Lyman," Church History Biographical Database.

10. Based on statistics compiled using the Church History Biographical Database and the FamilySearch website at <https://www.familysearch.org>.



FIGURE 1. Southern States Mission, Chattanooga, Tennessee, June 19, 1899. Courtesy of the Church History Biographical Database, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

that Church leaders, for much of the century, preferred missionaries with more experience and mature faith. Consequently, most missionaries were married men. They filled two-thirds of all mission calls during the nineteenth century.

Church doctrine designated evangelism as a divine calling and the responsibility of male priesthood holders.¹¹ While Church leaders emphasized men's familial responsibilities as patriarchs and providers, they taught that men had a higher duty, when called upon, to leave their families to proclaim the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, a call to proselytize often required married men and women to subordinate the immediate needs of their families to the interests of building God's kingdom.¹²

During the nineteenth century, thousands of married men left their families to proselytize. However, by the end of the century, a shift had occurred: Missionaries were increasingly younger and single, and a few single women were called to proselytize.¹³

Socioeconomic Changes

With the expansion of industrial capitalism, more and more Latter-day Saint men became wage earners. One of the most profound shifts in family life and gender roles in the United States stemmed from the rise of the market economy and the Industrial Revolution during the nineteenth century.¹⁴ As more people began earning wages, family life underwent substantial changes. On farms, every family member contributed to the household's income by working in the fields, assisting with the harvest, tending gardens, and producing goods to feed and clothe the family. Parents and children spent most of their time together, blending work, play, and rest. However, as men increasingly took on wage-earning jobs outside the home, employment became unstable, leading to periods without work or pay.¹⁵

11. David Golding, "Gender and Missionary Work," in *Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, ed. Taylor Petrey and Amy Hoyt (Routledge, 2020), 169–86.

12. See Chad Orton, "Those They Left Behind: A Look at Missionary Wives and Children," *BYU Studies* 58, no. 4 (2019): 4–47.

13. Matthew McBride, "Female Brethren': Gender Dynamics in a Newly Integrated Missionary Force, 1898–1915," *Journal of Mormon History* 44, no. 4 (2018): 40–41, 56–67.

14. Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (Free Press, 1988), xvii–xix.

15. Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions*, xii–xix; Steven Ruggles, "Patriarchy, Power, and Pay: The Transformation of American Families, 1800–2015," *Demography* 52, no. 6 (2015): 1797–1800.

Following national trends, a growing number of Latter-day Saint men became wage laborers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁶ If Church leaders called these men on missions, the men lost their positions and wages and therefore could not adequately provide for their families while they served. Additionally, by the end of the nineteenth century, fewer missionaries proselytized without purse or scrip,¹⁷ making missions more expensive. Consequently, local Church leaders did not want to see family providers called on missions, as it became more challenging for congregations to help support families in their absence. The Church's approach to mission calls changed to accommodate the shifting socioeconomic models in the United States, where most missionaries originated.

Changing social attitudes and practices in the early twentieth century accelerated the trend of calling younger, single missionaries. Still, thousands of married men continued to leave home and family to serve missions. Yet, sending married men on missions increasingly clashed with widespread prescribed American ideals of home and family. Church leaders taught that young men should go on missions prior to getting married and starting families. At the same time, with an increasing number of single women joining the missionary force, Church leaders renegotiated its traditionally male-centered view of evangelism to reflect the growing presence of young single female missionaries.¹⁸ By the eve of World War II, calling married men to leave home and family to proselytize had become the exception.

Early Latter-day Saint Evangelism

Missions as divine callings grew out of the Latter-day Saint conviction that their prophet and other Church leaders received the word and will of God through revelation. Many of the earliest mission calls, including one to Thomas B. Marsh, came as men asked the Prophet Joseph Smith for God's will concerning themselves. Shortly after Thomas joined the Church in September 1830, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation that commanded Thomas to "lift up your heart and rejoice, for the hour of your mission is come; . . . declare glad tidings of great joy unto this generation."

16. Donald H. Dyal, "Mormon Pursuit of the Agrarian Ideal," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 4 (1989): 19–20.

17. Richard L. Jensen, "Without Purse or Scrip? Financing Latter-day Saint Missionary Work in Europe in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Mormon History* 12 (1985): 3–14.

18. McBride, "'Female Brethren,'" 40–67.

The revelation instructed Thomas to leave his family “only for a little time” to preach. In his absence, the Lord promised to bless his family. Unlike later mission calls, Thomas was not assigned a specific location to evangelize. Instead, the revelation promised that the Spirit would help him know what to do and where to go.¹⁹ Thomas served six missions during the 1830s, leaving his wife, Elizabeth, and their children for many months at a time to preach the restored gospel.²⁰

While Thomas Marsh asked for and received a revelation through the Prophet that would call him to proselytize, others felt an internal call to go preach. Initial evangelism was often informal, with new converts going forth on their own accord like itinerant preachers for several weeks or months to share the news of the restored gospel with others—particularly family and friends.²¹ This approach allowed men to proclaim the good news of the gospel while still attending to their farms during planting and harvest seasons.

However, during the 1830s, Latter-day Saint men were increasingly called to formal missionary work and assigned a field of labor by Church leaders. Whereas American Protestants considered evangelism optional, Latter-day Saints “called to the work were expected to fulfill the assignments regardless of their personal, financial, or physical conditions.”²²

Family Separation

Early missionaries tended to serve multiple, shorter missions that frequently took them away from their families. For much of the 1830s, missionaries preached in the Northeastern and Midwestern states and in Upper Canada, with some evangelism in the Upper South. A watershed moment came in the summer of 1837 with the first transoceanic mission when Elder Heber C. Kimball of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was called to proclaim the restored gospel in England. He departed with other missionaries bound for England, leaving his wife, Vilate, to

19. “Revelation, September 1830–F [D&C 31],” in *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 194–95.

20. “Thomas Baldwin Marsh,” Church History Biographical Database, accessed July 28, 2024, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/thomas-baldwin-marsh-1799>.

21. Hughes, “Profile of the Missionaries,” 1–3.

22. Reid Neilson, “Mormon Mission Work,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (Oxford University Press, 2015), 186.

care for herself and their three small children. Heber's mission marked the beginning of Latter-day Saint evangelism in western Europe.²³ Six years after Heber crossed the Atlantic, Addison Pratt and three other elders were the first missionaries called to the Pacific Islands. During the nineteenth century, Church leaders assigned 53 percent of missionaries to proselytize throughout the United States and Canada, with another 40 percent called to evangelize in Europe, particularly in England and Scandinavia. The remaining 7 percent were appointed to proclaim the gospel in Asia and the Pacific.²⁴

Whereas early domestic missions lasted weeks and months, transoceanic foreign missions could last years. Heber C. Kimball's first mission to England took him away from his family for about a year. He was home sixteen months before departing on his second mission to England in the fall of 1839. This time, he was gone for almost two years. Men called to the Pacific Islands were gone even longer. Addison Pratt left his family in Nauvoo, Illinois, in the summer of 1843 and did not return until five years later, after his wife and daughters had migrated to the Salt Lake Valley.²⁵ One of Pratt's mission companions, Benjamin Grouard, did not return to the United States until December 1852, over nine years after he left his wife Caroline to proselytize in the Pacific.²⁶

In contrast to nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries, who evangelized as single men and women or, if married, typically took their wives and children with them into the mission field, most early Latter-day Saint missionaries were married men who left their families at home.²⁷ Figure 2 shows the percentage of missionaries from 1830 to 1900 who were married at the time of their mission. Of the more than 14,200 recorded missions, about 9,470 were filled by married men.²⁸

23. See James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J. Whittaker, *Men with a Mission: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles* (Deseret Book, 2009), 20–53; Matthew L. Rasmussen, *Mormonism and the Making of British Zion* (University of Utah Press, 2016), 50–68.

24. Statistical information has been compiled using the Church History Biographical Database.

25. S. George Ellsworth, ed., *The Journals of Addison Pratt* (University of Utah Press, 1990), 358–59.

26. “Benjamin Franklin Grouard,” Church History Biographical Database, accessed on July 29, 2024, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/benjamin-franklin-grouard-1819>.

27. Neilson, “Mormon Mission Work,” 183.

28. This figure is based on information compiled from the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch website. The marital status for a majority of nineteenth-century missionaries was not listed in the biographical database, which included 14,220 missions between 1830 and 1900. Utilizing the marriage records at FamilySearch, I researched the

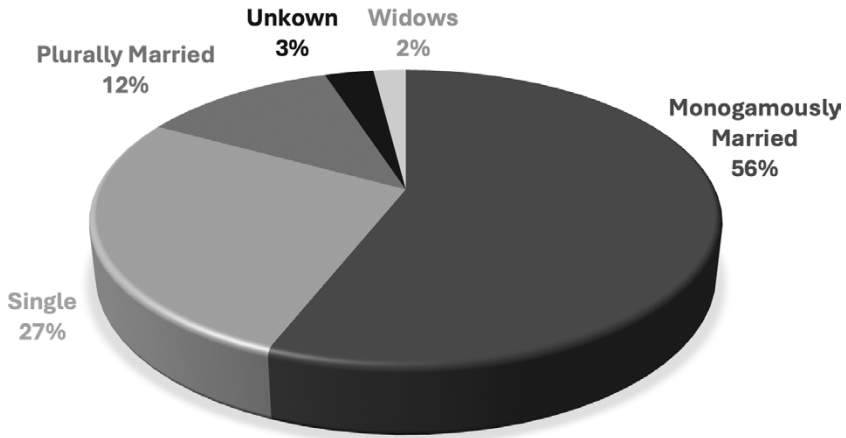


FIGURE 2. Marital status of Latter-day Saint missionaries called from 1830 to 1900. Note: At least six missionaries were divorced. These statistics were compiled from the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch website.

Very few of these men took their wives or families with them into the mission field. This was largely due to the Latter-day Saint missionary model: While Protestant missionaries typically served as “lifetime salaried professionals,” Latter-day Saint missionaries followed the New Testament model of traveling without purse or scrip when evangelizing. These missionaries largely relied on the kindness and generosity of people and Church members in the areas where they served for their lodgings and meals.²⁹

In 1837, when Heber C. Kimball received news from his wife, Vilate, that some elders planned to bring their wives with them to England, he cautioned against it. He wrote, “If they do they had better bring money to support them,” explaining that the local members often invited the missionaries to eat with them, “and they frequently divide their last loaf with us.”³⁰ It was challenging enough for missionaries to find lodging and food without compounding the problem by bringing families into the mission field with them.

From 1830 to the end of the century, only about two hundred wives accompanied their missionary husbands (or about one out of every

marital status for thousands of nineteenth-century missionaries. The resulting data set includes the marital status for men serving 13,812 missions from 1830 to 1900. The marital status for missionaries called on 408 missions could not be determined based on available historical records.

29. Neilson, “Mormon Mission Work,” 190.

30. Orson F. Whitney, *The Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Deseret Book, 1945), 154.

forty-eight missions served by married men).³¹ In these instances, children would often accompany their parents, but sometimes they were left behind with family members or friends.³² For these families, mission life became family life. While the family could be incorporated into mission life, married men sometimes found it difficult to fulfill their duty to proselytize while maintaining a family. They experienced the tug between mission and family priorities.³³

The Rise of Foreign Missions

After the martyrdom of Joseph Smith in 1844, the number of mission calls sharply declined over the next several years. As conflict mounted between Latter-day Saints and their neighbors, Brigham Young focused efforts first on completing the temple in Nauvoo and then organizing the mass migration of Latter-day Saints to the Salt Lake Valley. Within a few years of their arrival in Salt Lake in 1847, Brigham Young turned his attention once more to the commission to proclaim the gospel in all the world (see D&C 124:2–3) and to gather Israel to Zion in the American West (see D&C 136). At the Church's general conference in October 1849, President Young announced his plan for expanding global evangelism. In addition to sending missionaries again to England and the Society Islands in the Pacific, he sent Apostles and other missionaries to open new missions in Sweden, Italy, Denmark, and France.³⁴ The following year, additional missionaries were sent to Switzerland and Hawaii.³⁵

At a special mission conference held in August 1852, Church leaders called over one hundred men to missions in Europe, Australia, Nova

31. Statistics are based on data compiled from the Church History Biographical Database.

32. For example, Samuel and Julia Ann McMurtrey took their baby daughter with them to the Society Islands but left their other five children, ranging from one to sixteen years old, with family members or friends. "Samuel C. McMurtrey," LB7F-NZ6, FamilySearch, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed on July 30, 2024, <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/LB7F-NZ6/samuel-c.-mcmurtrey-1797-1873>.

33. Joseph Fielding, "Book 2: Diary Joseph Fielding," 45, 68 [images 47, 70], holograph, Joseph Fielding Journals, 1837–1859, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter cited as CHL); Francis Asbury Hammond, Francis A. Hammond Journals, 1852–1857, November 4, 13, 28, 1853, holograph, CHL; Transcription of Philip B. Lewis journal by Glade Tew, November 11 and 16, 1853, and January 23–24, 1854, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

34. "Minutes of the General Conference," *Millennial Star* 12, no. 9 (May 1, 1850), 131–35.

35. "The Sandwich Islands' Mission," *Millennial Star* 20, no. 13 (October 15, 1851), 318–19; Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Deseret News, 1884), 173–75.

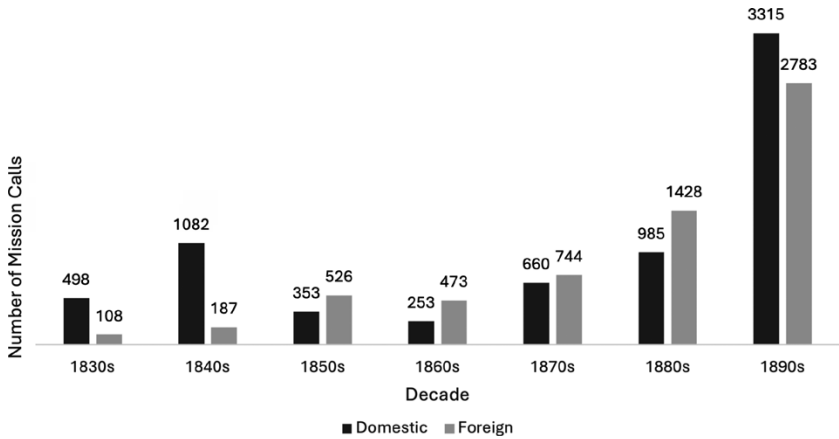


FIGURE 3. Domestic and foreign Latter-day Saint mission calls. The data were compiled from the Church History Biographical Database.

Scotia, India, the West Indies, the Pacific Islands, South Africa, Jamaica, China, Siam (Thailand), and other places across the globe. Serving a mission was not only a duty men owed to their God, Elder George A. Smith taught the Saints at the conference, but also to their families. He explained that no faithful Latter-day Saint woman would stand idly by and permit her husband to refuse to go on a mission. Why? Because a man helped bring salvation to his family by going forth to “magnify his priesthood in proclaiming the fullness of the gospel to the nations of the earth.” Consequently, families should feel honored that their husbands and fathers were considered worthy to go forth as missionaries. Generally, the missions called for during the conference were not to be very long ones, Elder Smith assured the congregation, “Probably from 3 to 7 years will be as long as any man will be absent from his family.”³⁶

Though this length of absence was only for foreign missions, mission calls outside of the US were soon more common. Figure 3 shows the number of domestic and foreign missions by decade during the nineteenth century. While about 16 percent of missions served in the 1830s and 1840s were to foreign countries, in the 1850s, about 60 percent of mission calls were to foreign countries. Domestic conflict surrounding the Civil War in the United States during the 1860s further increased the percentage of missionaries sent to foreign lands. During the four decades after the Latter-day Saints migrated West, missionaries were more likely

36. “Minutes of Conference,” *Deseret News*, September 18, 1852, 1.

to serve foreign missions than domestic missions. This uptick in foreign missions meant longer separations for married missionaries from their wives and children that could result in heavier emotional and financial tolls on families. On average, missions to the United States during the 1860s lasted about a year. Missions overseas lasted a few years, with missionaries in the Pacific serving the longest at an average of three years.³⁷

Plural Marriage and Missionary Service

This period during the 1860s and 1870s also stands out for the number of men practicing plural marriage called to evangelize. On August 29, 1852, the day after Church leaders called over one hundred men to missions throughout the world, Elder Orson Pratt publicly announced the practice of plural marriage.³⁸ Church leaders instructed newly called missionaries to teach the principle of plural marriage, along with other gospel teachings. Benjamin Johnson, a prominent Latter-day Saint pioneer and polygamist, wrote, “Our mission was to carry to the world the revelation on plural marriage, to advocate and defend it.”³⁹ Of the 107 missionaries called at the conference, at least 40 of them had married one or more plural wives.⁴⁰

Table 1 shows the percent of total mission calls between 1830 and 1900 filled by polygamists. During the 1840s, about 5 percent of missionaries were polygamists. After Elder Orson Pratt publicly announced the practice in 1852, new plural marriages increased considerably. In the 1850s, about 24 percent of those called to evangelize had married more than one wife. By the 1870s, one-third of all missionaries practiced plural marriage.⁴¹ Scholars estimate that by 1870, about 25 to 30 percent of the Latter-day Saint population lived in polygamous households.⁴² With wives and children included in this figure, only a small percent of men practiced polygamy.

37. Information compiled from the Church History Biographical Database.

38. Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, 1855–86), 1:53–66 (August 29, 1852).

39. Benjamin F. Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Zion's Printing & Publishing, 1947), 141.

40. Statistics compiled using the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch website.

41. Statistics compiled using the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch website.

42. Lowell C. Bennion, “Plural Marriage, 1841–1904,” in *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Brandon S. Plewe, 2nd ed. (Brigham Young University Press, 2014), 122–25; see also Kathryn Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 100–105.

Table 1. Latter-day Saint Men with Plural Wives Called on Missions in the Nineteenth Century

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Number called</i>	<i>Percent of total mission calls</i>
1830s	0	0
1840s	68	5%
1850s	207	24%
1860s	235	32%
1870s	473	34%
1880s	496	21%
1890s	188	3%
1900	14	2%

The data were compiled from the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch.org.

Perhaps polygamists were disproportionately called on missions because they, along with their wives, had already proven their commitment to and willingness to sacrifice for their faith by embracing this unconventional marriage practice. Whatever the reason for their disproportionate calls to evangelize, a polygamist's mission meant that multiple wives and families were impacted by his absence.

Missionary Age Changes

During the 1860s and 1870s, the average age of missionaries became increasingly older. When Church leaders called men to missions across the globe in the 1850s, the average missionary age was thirty-one years old. Two decades later, the average age had increased to forty-one years old.⁴³ Sermons from Church leaders reflect their preference for calling older men with more mature faith and experience. In fact, few young men were ordained to the priesthood, and "Church leaders expressed caution about ordaining unmarried men [and inexperienced] 'young men.'"⁴⁴

During the 1850s, 77 percent of called missionaries were married men. By the 1870s, 84 percent of missionaries were married.⁴⁵ The 1870s

43. Based on data compiled from the Church History Biographical Database.

44. William G. Hartley, "From Men to Boys: LDS Aaronic Priesthood Offices, 1829–1996," in *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (BYU Studies, 2010), 50–51; Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:89 (October 6, 1854).

45. Based on data compiled from the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch website.

stand out as the decade with the oldest missionary force and the highest percentage of married men called on missions. However, by the time of Brigham Young's death in 1877, changes were already underway that would eventually reverse this trend.

Missionaries in the Late Nineteenth Century

Months before his death, Brigham Young initiated widespread reforms to local priesthood organization and leadership which would have a significant impact on seventies quorums. Joseph Smith taught that seventies were to be “travelling Quorums, to go into all the earth, whithersoever the twelve Apostles should call them.”⁴⁶ They were the primary missionary force of the Church for much of the nineteenth century.

Brigham Young's priesthood reorganization in 1877 depleted seventies quorums as hundreds of men were made high priests and called to presiding positions in their local congregations. A few years later, Church leaders reorganized the seventies quorums to function at the ward and stake level and instructed that their ranks be filled.

By the 1880s, the remaining members of the various seventies quorums had become older in age, with many not physically able to serve missions abroad. Vacancies were filled with younger men, and older seventies aged out and became high priests. Church leaders also lowered the cutoff age for missionaries from fifty-five to forty-five.⁴⁷

The Struggle to Fund Missions

Yet, even with the decreased average age of seventies, the First Presidency expressed concern about seventies “so embarrassed by debt” that they could not serve proselytizing missions. Debt, family responsibilities, and challenges in financing missions deterred many men from serving.⁴⁸

46. “History, 1838–1856, Volume B-1 [1 September 1834–2 November 1838],” 577, The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-b-1-1-september-1834-2-november-1838/31>.

47. William G. Hartley, “The Seventies in the 1880s: Revelations and Reorganizing,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 16, no. 1 (1983): 62–88; see also William G. Hartley, “The Seventies in the 1880s: Revelations and Reorganizing,” in *My Fellow Servants*, 265–300; James Baumgarten, “The Role and Function of the Seventies in Latter-day Saint Church History,” (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1960), 52–66.

48. “Instructions to the Twelve Apostles—Missionary Work, November 12, 1885,” in *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1833–1964*, comp. James R. Clark, 6 vols. (Bookcraft, 1965–75), 3:42.

For much of the nineteenth century, Church leaders extolled the New Testament missionary model of preaching without purse or scrip. Missionaries largely relied on the generosity of people and Church members for their basic needs. Yet mission leaders in Europe found that many new converts struggled to contribute to missionary expenses while also paying tithing. In some instances, these members considered contributions and hospitality given to missionaries as tithing donations. In other instances, donations designated as tithing were expended for missionaries, much to the dismay of Brigham Young, who wanted tithing funds to be used to help European converts emigrate to the American West.⁴⁹

In 1869, Albert Carrington, president of the European mission, noted a growing tendency for elders to bring their own money from home. "Many are now paying their own way to a considerable extent," he wrote Church leaders in Utah.⁵⁰ Still, Church leaders continued to instruct departing missionaries and mission leaders to adhere to the old ways of preaching without purse or scrip.⁵¹ Despite such counsel, mission presidents found that missionaries supplied with financial resources from home could spend more time proselytizing potential converts and less time begging for aid. They could also undertake systematic tracting in new areas where no members resided.

With the economic downturn in Europe throughout the 1880s, Elder John Henry Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles reported in 1882 that missionaries could seldom find food and lodging among new converts or those to whom they proselytized. Moreover, vagrancy laws threatened to penalize "those found asking assistance in any form." Elder Smith concluded that missionaries would have to "get means from home, or starve, for the saints can not feed them."⁵² In 1890, Brigham Young Jr., president of the British mission, reported that "every Elder in the Mission, wholly or in part, draws his support from home." By this time, missionaries "almost universally in Britain, and presumably throughout Europe, used their own resources to support themselves."⁵³ A similar trend extended to missions

49. Amasa Lyman and Charles C. Rich, "Instructions to the Saints Throughout the European Mission," *Millennial Star* 22, no. 47 (November 24, 1860), 744–45; Brigham Young to Amasa Lyman and Charles C. Rich, November 8, 1860, holograph, Amasa M. Lyman collection, 1832–1877, CHL; Jensen, "Without Purse or Scrip?," 6–10.

50. *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 31, no. 7 (February 13, 1869): 116.

51. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:89 (January 2, 1870); John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:34 (January 21, 1883).

52. "John Henry Smith to John Taylor, December 7, 1882," in Jensen, "Without Purse or Scrip?," 11.

53. Jensen, "Without Purse or Scrip?," 12.

throughout the United States. By the late nineteenth century, married men called on missions had the double burden of raising enough capital to finance their own missions while also having sufficient resources for their families to subsist on during their absence.

Consequently, heavy financial burdens fell on their families. Some missionary wives had to labor and prudently manage family finances to support not only themselves and their children but also their husbands in the mission field. In the early 1880s, with their resources so small, plural wives Lorena Larsen and Julia Larsen struggled to provide for their families as well as supply their husband, Bent, with money for his missionary expenses.⁵⁴ William Rigby's letters and journal entries contain numerous references to money he asked for and received from his wives while serving a mission to England in the 1880s. In one letter, William expressed gratitude for money his wife Ann had sent him. On another occasion, William recorded he had received money from home that had enabled him to get out of debt.⁵⁵ Willard Hansen also relied on his plural wives to send him money regularly to finance his mission in Denmark. In 1887, his wife Maria wrote, "I will try to bea [sic] as saving as I can [in order] that you may have A better living."⁵⁶ In another letter, she suggested the family went without—or at least without some of the nicer things, such as new clothes—to help finance his proselytizing.⁵⁷

Myra Neal sacrificed her schooling to work to support her missionary husband. Six weeks after Myra married William Neal in June 1896, he departed on a three-year mission to Germany. To help finance his mission, Myra decided to leave her studies at the University of Utah and work in her father's general store and meat market.⁵⁸ Alice Spendlove wrote about her gratitude for having enough to financially support her family and her husband, William, who had left on a mission in 1899 (fig. 4).

54. *Autobiography of Lorena Eugenia Washburn Larsen* (Brigham Young University Press, 1962), 44–46, 50.

55. Cathryn Hendricks Housley, *William F. Rigby: "The True Aim of a Noble Man"* (Agreka Books, 2000), 175–76, 178, 249.

56. Maria Hansen to Willard Hansen, January 9, 1887, holograph, image 1, Incoming Correspondence: Maria Hansen, Willard S. Hansen Papers, 1886–1888, CHL.

57. Maria Hansen to Willard Hansen, January 13, 1887, holograph, image 8–11, Incoming Correspondence: Maria Hansen, Willard S. Hansen Papers.

58. Myra W. Neal, Journal, 1898 April–1899 April, 1 April 1898, holograph, image 5, CHL; Margaret Ada Neal Anderson, "Memories of My Mother Myra Matilda White Neal," FamilySearch, accessed July 27, 2024, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/memories/KWC4-JB9>.

Alice raised a garden, sewed five days a week, and made and sold yeast to provide for herself and her children. “The Lord blessed us,” she wrote, “and we did not go into debt. I always had money to send my missionary when he needed it.”⁵⁹

To an extent, these missionary husbands became dependents and had to rely on the labor and wise financial management of their wives to provide for some or much of their needs. Thus, missionary wives laboring at home to govern and provide for their families in the absence of their husbands enabled the gospel to be preached throughout the world, thus building God’s kingdom.



FIGURE 4. William and Alice Spendlove. Courtesy Daren Heslop.

The Effects of Increasing Wage Labor

The rise of wage labor in the second half of the nineteenth century coupled with growing urbanization was transforming the American economy. Whereas working for wages had been more of a transitory stage in life for younger men, by the 1870s, wage labor was becoming the norm for a large segment of American society.⁶⁰

Historians have argued that the emergence of a market economy and wage labor during the nineteenth century increasingly drew married men out of the home to labor in support of their families. Latter-day Saint settlements in the West began as rural agricultural communities. However, by the dawn of the twentieth century, “mining, railroads, statehood

59. “Autobiography of Alice Isabelle Isom Spendlove,” KWN5-SRL, FamilySearch, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/memories/KWN5-SRL>.

60. Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 237–38.

and the accompanying market economy were transforming Utah from an overwhelmingly rural polity to an increasingly urban one. In 1890, Utah had a rural/urban population mix of roughly 65/35 percent. By 1910, the mix was almost fifty-fifty.”⁶¹ These changes reflected national trends. In the late nineteenth century, America was becoming less agrarian and more urban and industrialized. By 1900, agriculture’s share of the national workforce had declined to 40 percent, from a majority in 1860. America progressively became a nation of wage laborers.⁶²

Whereas scholars have pointed to this seismic shift as pulling men out of the home and diminishing their domestic role, the change appears to have kept more and more Latter-day Saint husbands and fathers at home with their families. Dependence on wage labor and lack of financial security made leaving home and family for years at a time to evangelize increasingly unfeasible.

Debt and the inability to finance a mission while also providing for a family were prevalent concerns running throughout letters to the First Presidency. While men with land and farms could leave their families with a way to provide for themselves, wage earners would lose positions and sources of income for their families. The loss of salary coupled with debt and the need to finance their own missions made accepting mission calls increasingly difficult for married wage laborers.

Letters from prospective missionaries to Church leaders during the last two decades of the nineteenth century are replete with concerns over how to finance their missions while also leaving enough money for their families. In response to his mission call, Emil Hasler told of his recent marriage and scanty means. “I haven’t anything but a little [a]dobe house and a team,” he wrote. He worked “for days wages” and was in debt on his home. Therefore, he felt it was impossible to think about a mission at the time, yet he hoped to serve one someday.⁶³

In September 1887, John Timpson responded to his call to New Zealand by expressing concern at leaving his wife and two children, who depended on him for support. “I have a home,” he wrote, “but I am owing several hundred dollars on it.” He worked for a leather manufacturing company and had “no source of revenue only the labor of my hands.” Yet, if Church leaders said to go, John believed the Lord would open up a way

61. Dyal, “Mormon Pursuit of the Agrarian Ideal,” 19.

62. White, *Republic for Which It Stands*, 213–52.

63. Emil Hasler to George Reynolds, undated, images 1–2, First Presidency Missionary Calls and Recommendations, CHL, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/04ff259c-8a7f-4205-8337-a762dea76eb1/0/0> (hereafter cited as FPMCR).

for him to respond to the call. In response, Church leaders postponed his mission.⁶⁴

Royal Pope responded to his mission call by expressing his desire to go, but he explained that his circumstances prevented it, at least for a few years. He had married his wife, Alice, three years previous, and they had a little girl. They had recently moved onto a piece of land but had not made improvements to it or fenced it yet. He explained that he did not have an income or any way to support his family except by his “days wages.”⁶⁵

Missionary Families’ Financial Dependence on Local Congregations

Recognizing the financial strains missionary service placed on families, Church leaders repeatedly taught that members had a religious duty to help assist missionaries and their families.⁶⁶ Congregations were expected, when called upon, to help finance a missionary’s departure into the mission field and help support his family in his absence. Organized Church efforts included a missionary fund (to which members could donate goods) and Church-owned missionary farms (to which members could volunteer their time to help plant, grow, and harvest food for missionary families in need).⁶⁷ It was not uncommon for a congregation to organize dances, dinners, and farewell parties to raise money to help departing missionaries and their families.⁶⁸ Local Relief Societies also provided aid to missionary families. Under the heading of “Disbursed to the Poor,” the Spanish Fork Ward Relief Society minutes for 1876 record items given to missionaries and their families. Among

64. John H. Timpson to Wilford Woodruff, September 17, 1887, image 1, holograph, FPMCR, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9a7ace3b-df8c-417a-9479-5598535df959/0/0>.

65. Royal Pope to George Reynolds, July 10, 1899, image 1, holograph, FPMCR, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/120fc33a-aa4f-486a-8f02-65d7979528e9/0/0>; Royal Robert Pope, KWCB-6HF, FamilySearch, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/KWCB-6HF/royal-robert-pope-1877-1955>.

66. See Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 8:169 (September 16, 1860); George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:42 (April 21, 1867).

67. Daniel H. Wells, in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:182–83 (September 29, 1861); Heber C. Kimball, in *Journal of Discourses*, 10:168 (April 6, 1863); “Instructions to the Twelve Apostles—Missionary Work,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 3:42–44.

68. Oliver R. Smith, ed., *Six Decades in the Early West: The Journal of Jesse Nathaniel Smith, 1834–1906* (Jesse N. Smith Family Assn., 1997), 184; New Zealand 1889–1892: missionary journals kept by Oliver Cowdery Dunford (six journals) and Ida Ann Osmond Dunford (two journals), 3, CHL; *Diary of Frederick William Hurst*, compiled by Samuel H. and Ida Hurst, 1961, 195.

the items distributed were socks, groceries, a pig, wool quilts, shirts, shoes, calico fabric, and cash disbursements.⁶⁹ In addition to organized Church efforts at the general and local levels, missionary wives recorded many instances of friends, neighbors, and family members coming to their aid when in need.⁷⁰

With an expanding missionary force, rising costs of missions, and economic changes that left more men in debt and reliant on wage labor to support their families, local congregations could become overtaxed with calls to aid missionaries and their families. For example, after Niels Pearson received a mission call to Scandinavia in 1890, his bishop, Stephen Walker, wrote to the stake president (who forwarded his letter on to the First Presidency) asking that Niels be released from his call. “Bro[ther] Pearson is a man of about 40 years of age. he has a wife and 7 children the oldest is 13 years of age,” his bishop explained. “They live from hand to mouth or worse than that they run in debt.” Bishop Walker estimated that if Pearson served a mission, the ward would have to pay \$300 to \$500 to pay his debts and send him off. Then, his family would be left destitute and dependent on Church members for support. The bishop concluded, “Financially [*sic*] Bro Pearson is the worst prepared man with one exception in this whole district of country to fill a distant mission.”⁷¹ The bishop’s feedback appears to have led Church leaders to reconsider, as there is no record of Pearson serving a mission.

After receiving his mission call to Great Britain, Joseph Rees asked for his bishop’s endorsement to accept the call. Bishop George Snell of Spanish Fork, Utah, wrote Church president Wilford Woodruff explaining Rees’s financial circumstances: “Should he fill this mission at the presant time it will devolve upon the Ward to support his Familie, furnish him means to take him to his field of Labor, and pay a large portion of his indebtedness a[l]ready incurred, and now due.” Bishop Snell informed President Woodruff that the ward was already supporting the family of one elder in Iceland and the family of another missionary in

69. Spanish Fork Ward Relief Society minutes and records, 1857–1892, Volume 1, 1857–1889, CHL.

70. Life and Journal of Eliza Maria Partridge Lyman, 47, CHL; Olive Smoot Bean’s June 1934 Autobiographical Letter, Family Circular Letter, 175–76, FamilySearch, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://www.familysearch.org/en/tree/person/memories/KWCG-KSX>; Autobiography of Alice Isabelle Isom Spendlove, FamilySearch, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/memories/KWN5-SRL>.

71. W. W. Cluff to Wilford Woodruff, March 18, 1890, holograph, FPMCR, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/78468c10-83e0-4c11-968e-a08dd7bbdd84/0/2>.

England. They also provided minor relief to the families of ten other elders preaching abroad. With three more elders departing on missions, the ward would have fifteen in all who had “to have aid abroad as well as at home.”⁷² Church leaders presumably released Joseph Rees from his call because there is no record of his mission. Snell’s letter shows how one local congregation aided missionary families in their community. It also shows the heavy toll such support could have on a congregation and why their bishop might petition Church leaders to rescind a mission call if a man was financially ill-prepared to leave his family.

Missionary Age and Marital Status Changes

Rather than leave their families in precarious financial circumstances, some married men, like Benjamin Porter, offered an alternative solution: sending their young single sons on missions. When called to the Southern States Mission in 1899, Benjamin outlined the reasons he should be excused from serving. “My circumstances are not very good for me to leave home,” he wrote, “as my wife is a very sickley [*sic*] weak woman who cannot stand on her feet any length of time.” His two oldest children, a son aged nineteen and a daughter aged sixteen, were attending Brigham Young College in Logan, Utah. “If I go away they most likley [*sic*] would have to come home and [lose] the very valuable teaching and training they [receive] there,” he feared. Benjamin felt that if his son could remain in school, he would outgrow some of his “foolish ideas” and “make a good Missionary.” Because of his circumstances, Benjamin suggested it would be better for him to stay at home and prepare his son to serve a mission.⁷³ Church leaders granted his request, releasing him from his mission. Two years later, his son answered a mission call to the Southern states in his father’s place.⁷⁴

Benjamin Porter’s letter reflects two significant shifts in evangelism at the end of the nineteenth century. First, an increasing number of prospective missionaries prioritized family over proselytizing. In this case, Benjamin placed the need to care for his sick wife and the schooling

72. George D. Snell to Wilford Woodruff, February 25, 1889, holograph, FPMCR, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9e5e520a-7a6d-49bb-a4c9-6793811ef5ae/0/0>.

73. Benjamin B. Porter to George Reynolds, February 3, 1899, images 1–3, holograph, FPMCR.

74. “Benjamin Jerome Porter,” Church History Biographical Database, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/benjamin-jerome-porter-1879>.

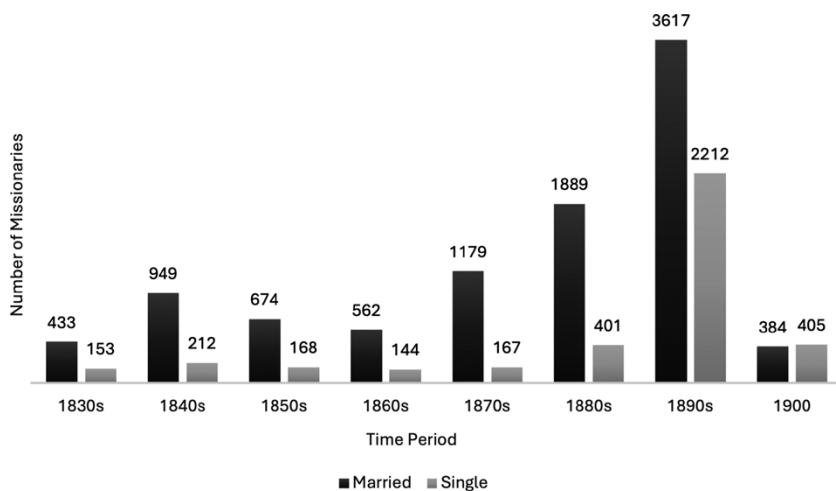


FIGURE 5. The number of married and single Latter-day Saint missionaries by decade. These numbers do not include missionaries whose marital status at the time of their mission is unknown. These statistics were compiled from the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch website.

of his children ahead of evangelism. Other men declined missions or asked for delays due to home mortgages, pregnant wives, the need to care for aging parents, or the inability to leave families in good financial circumstances.⁷⁵

Second, as more married men declined missionary service, more single men accepted the responsibility to evangelize, demonstrated by Benjamin Porter's request to be excused from a mission to prepare his son to serve. Increasingly, fathers remained at home and helped finance missions for their sons. Figure 5 shows this change over time in the marital status of missionaries.

Speaking at the Church's annual conference in April 1902, Elder J. Golden Kimball of the First Council of the Seventy, extolled the men

75. Jens Jensen to John Taylor, March 12, 1886, holograph, FPMCR, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/08a080f7-944c-4150-b5c2-95743f13ce8d/0/0>; Daniel H. Snarr to Wilford Woodruff, November 7, 1887, holograph, FPMCR, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/dacf5844-bdb6-402c-9861-6a546cf335af/0/0>; David M. Tribe to John Taylor, October 22, 1886, holograph, FPMCR, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a64a51d5-4700-4d16-b8b2-b158fab38e74/0/0>; George Foster to Wilford Woodruff, November 23, 1885, holograph, FPMCR, accessed June 24, 2026, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/893cc3f9-11b7-4588-814f-d5d77e80b6b5/0/0>.

in previous generations who had the resolute faith to preach the gospel without purse or scrip. He pointed to the belief of many Latter-day Saints in his day that missionaries could no longer preach the gospel without purse or scrip even in countries where custom still permitted it. Elder Kimball believed that men were becoming impoverished trying to pay for their sons to serve missions and that when Church leaders did call married men with families on missions, “the Bishops do not want them to go, because it means the support of a wife and perhaps thirteen children.” Elder Kimball did not blame the bishops. He acknowledged the heavy burden of supporting missionary families. He pointed out that few men in the country, and even fewer in the cities, had money in the bank to finance missions and care for their families while they were gone. He told of his recent interviews of prospective missionaries in Salt Lake City, where he heard thirty men in one evening say in substance, “If I go on a mission, I lose my position, there is no income, and my family are helpless.”⁷⁶

By the late nineteenth century, Church leaders increasingly called younger, single missionaries, who could proselytize without having to leave behind wives and children. For example, in the 1880s, the average age of missionaries was about thirty-seven years old, and married men made up 78 percent of the missionary force. By the 1890s, the average age had dropped to thirty-one years, and married men made up 59 percent of the missionary force. In 1899, of the 1,040 missionaries called, 527 were married men, representing about 51 percent of those called on missions. This was the last year that married men made up a majority of called missionaries. In 1900, Church leaders called 810 missionaries, of which at least 405 were single men and a few were single women.⁷⁷

After the Manifesto publicly ended plural marriage (see OD1) and Utah gained statehood in 1896, the Church shifted away from being a closed community.⁷⁸ Improved relations with the United States led to a burgeoning of missionary work in the 1890s. During the final decade of the century, over 6,000 missionaries received calls to proselytize, more than the four previous decades combined. Married men continued to

76. J. G. Kimball, in *Seventy-Second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Deseret News, 1902), 9–10.

77. This figure is based on information compiled from the Church History Biographical Database.

78. Klaus Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 176; Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (University of Illinois Press, 1986), 3–15.

leave wives and children to answer the call to preach. However, whereas Latter-day Saint evangelism in the previous century consisted mostly of married men, Church leaders in the twentieth century increasingly turned to younger, single men and even single women to preach the restored gospel, with their parents and families helping to finance their missions to gather Israel. Over time, young men in elders quorums replaced the seventies quorums as the primary missionary force of the Church. More and more, seventies with family responsibilities remained at home and served stake missions while helping to finance full-time missions for their sons.⁷⁹

Missionaries in the Early Twentieth Century

For much of the nineteenth century, Church leaders considered older, married men of more mature faith and experience better suited for missions. Yet, by the end of the century, perceptions were shifting. Still, with an increasing number of younger men serving missions in the 1890s, Church and mission leaders worried about their inexperience and lack of knowledge of Church teachings and history.⁸⁰

Formal Missionary Training

The introduction of formalized missionary training at the turn of the century helped alleviate some of these concerns. In December 1899, Church leaders announced an experiment with a missionary training program designed to better qualify young men for missions.⁸¹ With the recommendation of their local leaders, missionary candidates were asked to attend academies or colleges and take a one-year preparatory course “to better fit them for their missionary labors.” The training course instructed prospective missionaries in principles of the gospel, a system of studying the scriptures, good manners, and how to approach and converse with people in a “proper and gentlemanly manner.”⁸² After hearing positive reports from

79. Rulon S. Wells, in *Eighty-Fifth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Deseret News, 1915), 135; Baumgarten, “Role and Function of the Seventies,” 66–69, 80–83.

80. R. M. Stevens, “Our Missions and Missionary Work,” *Contributor* 15, no. 9 (July 1894): 558–59.

81. “Missionary Training—Seventies, December 27, 1899,” in *Messages of the First Presidency*, 3:323–24.

82. Seymour B. Young, in *Seventy-Second Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Deseret News, 1902), 16. See also Hughes, “Profile of the Missionaries,” 44.

mission presidents, Church leaders felt the missionary training courses proved successful.⁸³

To meet the needs of more young men who could not attend a Church school because of distance or due to work responsibilities, Church leaders created a correspondence course in 1912. All the work in the training course could be done by prospective missionaries in the evenings at home without interfering with their earning capacities.⁸⁴ With young Latter-day Saints having more opportunities to receive education and formalized missionary training, Church leaders felt more confident in calling young men on proselytizing missions.⁸⁵

The Priesthood Ordination of Young Men

By the early twentieth century, some Church leaders argued that young men would be better prepared for missions if, when as youth, they had more opportunities to serve in their local congregations by receiving priesthood offices. In the Church's early history, few Latter-day Saint youth received priesthood ordination. Adult men typically performed the ecclesiastical work and service requiring priesthood ordination. As part of the ecclesiological changes in 1877, the First Presidency issued a circular letter to leaders regarding Church government. They announced a new policy: "It would be excellent training for the young men if they had the opportunity of acting in the offices of the lesser" or Aaronic Priesthood.⁸⁶ Under this policy, every boy would receive at least one priesthood office, usually that of deacon, and serve as an apprentice companion to more experienced adult men ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood.⁸⁷

Between 1908 and 1922, the Church began to systemize ordinations to priesthood offices linked to age.⁸⁸ Young men in each congregation

83. "Missionary Course in Church Schools, August 5, 1904," in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:86; see also "Experimental Missionary Training Courses, June 8, 1900," in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 3:326–27.

84. "Missionary Training Correspondence Course, March 2, 1912," in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 4:267–68.

85. Though young Latter-day Saints received more education and formalized missionary training, as late as 1930, some Church leaders and mission presidents remained concerned about the level of education among missionaries. See Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 214–15.

86. "Circular of the First Presidency, July 11, 1877," in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 2:283–95.

87. Hartley "From Men to Boys," 106–7; Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 111–12.

88. Hartley, "From Men to Boys," 112–20; Matthew Bowman, "Mormon Gender in the Progressive Era," in Petrey and Hoyt, *Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, 132–34.

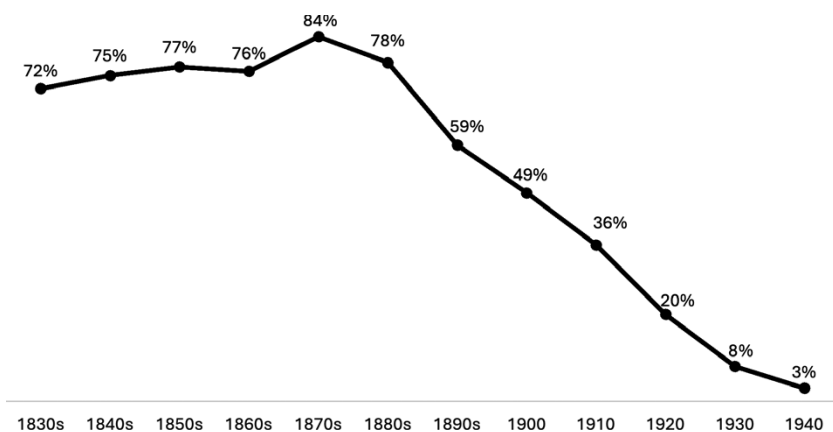


FIGURE 6. Percentage of Latter-day Saint missionaries who were married men. These numbers do not include missionaries whose marital status at the time of their mission is unknown. These statistics were compiled from the Church History Biographical Database and FamilySearch website.

were ordained to the lesser priesthood at age twelve and then advanced through the priesthood ranks according to age requirements until they became elders in the Melchizedek Priesthood at age twenty-one. Elders had the primary responsibility to serve full-time proselytizing missions. Charles W. Nibley, a Church leader advocating for youthful ordination, believed this systematic advancement and training in priesthood service would silence the “complaint which we sometimes hear that young boys are sent upon missions who are not prepared, and even, sometimes, not worthy of the authority of the higher priesthood.”⁸⁹ Ordaining men at younger ages and having them advance through the ranks of priesthood offices provided years of training in public speaking, teaching, and service and instruction in priesthood theory, practice, and mission responsibility.

Average Missionary Age

The trend in the final decade of the nineteenth century of calling younger, single men on missions accelerated in the early decades of the twentieth century (see fig. 6). In 1910, the average age of those called on missions was 26.8 years old, and about 36 percent of them were married men. By 1920, the average age had dropped to about 25 years old, and married men

89. Hartley “From Men to Boys,” 113.

made up 20 percent of those called that year. In 1930, about 8 percent of mission calls went to married men, and the average age of missionaries was 23.8 years old. By 1940, the average age dropped to 22.8 years old, and only about 3 percent of mission calls that year were to married men.⁹⁰ Thus, for most of the twentieth century, the age of missionaries declined and the percentage of single men serving steadily increased. So too did the number of single women called to serve missions.

The Rise of Female Missionaries

While women had for decades accompanied their husbands into the mission field, only at the end of the century did Church leaders assign single female missionaries to proselytize alongside men in the mission field.⁹¹ Changing circumstances in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, including the end of polygamy and women claiming a more public voice, led to women's expanding role in missionary work in the early twentieth century.

Latter-day Saint women had taken an active part in the women's suffrage movement, which helped break down long-standing prejudice toward women's roles. After receiving the vote in 1869, women in Utah Territory found greater voice in the public sphere. Latter-day Saint women organized and spoke out in opposition to the federal prosecution of plural marriage. At the same time, female-led Church organizations for women, youth, and children developed and grew, providing women with expanding leadership and teaching opportunities.⁹²

Additionally, the abandonment of plural marriage coupled with a demographic shift in women's age at marriage increased the pool of

90. Statistics were compiled using the Church History Biographical Database. I used a sampling to approximate statistical data for marital status in the twentieth century. For the year 1910, the dataset included the marital status of 386 missionaries out of more than 900 called that year according to the Church History Biographical Database. For 1920, it was 367 of 852 missionaries. The dataset for 1930 included the marital status of 505 out of 936 missionaries called, and for 1940, it was 1,006 out of 1,105 missionaries.

91. McBride, "Female Brethren," 40–41; Calvin S. Kunz, "History of Female Missionary Activity in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976).

92. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (Vintage Books, 2018), xi–xxv, 361–88; "Part 3: 1867–1879," in *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History*, ed. Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow (Church Historian's Press, 2016), 235–434; Carol Cornwall Madsen, ed., *Battle for the Ballot: Essays on Woman Suffrage in Utah, 1870–1896* (Utah State University Press, 1997).

young, unmarried women who were at the ideal age for missionary service. In response to anti-Mormon campaigns in England, the European mission president requested that Church leaders call articulate, educated women as full-time proselytizing missionaries to defend the Church and dispel false notions about the Latter-day Saints and polygamy. In April 1898, Amanda Inez Knight and Lucy Jane Brimhall accepted calls as the first single women to serve full-time missions. The integration of women into the missionary force in the early twentieth century compelled the Church to adjust its understanding of women's role in proclaiming the gospel.⁹³

While preaching the gospel continued to be seen as a male priesthood responsibility, attitudes toward full-time female proselytizing missionaries increasingly became more favorable. Church and mission leaders soon believed that women could make a valuable contribution.⁹⁴ Of the more than 37,000 missionaries who served between 1900 and 1940, about 12 percent were women. However, this percentage spiked during both world wars. As men were called away to military service, women helped fill the gaps. During World War II, when the Church discontinued calling men of draft age on missions, female missionaries made up a large portion of the missionary force. The year 1945 marked the first and only year that mission calls to women outnumbered those to men.⁹⁵

Married Missionaries in the Twentieth Century

Though an increasing number of missionaries were younger and single, married men by the thousands continued to accept mission calls in the early twentieth century. From the 1830s to 1870s, mission calls could come suddenly and unexpectedly, often announced over the pulpit and in newspapers. In the twentieth century, prospective missionaries were typically consulted prior to their calls, so they had more time to prepare. Yet, for some men and their families, it still came as a surprise. Like their nineteenth-century forebearers, prospective missionary wives could have conflicting feelings about their husbands leaving to proselytize.

93. McBride, "Female Brethren," 42–43.

94. Joseph W. McMurrin, "Lady Missionaries," *Young Woman's Journal* 15, no. 12 (December 1904): 539–41.

95. Statistics were compiled using the Church History Biographical Database. By the end of World War I, in 1918, female missionaries made up 38 percent of the missionary force. See Andrea Radke-Moss, "Pragmatism and Progress: Sister Missionary Service in the Twentieth Century," *Pioneer Magazine* 63, no. 1 (2016): 41.



FIGURE 7. Sarah Benson and children, 1912. Courtesy Lauralee Law Lester.

For example, President Ezra Taft Benson recounted his mother's reaction to the mission call of her husband, George Benson, in 1912 (fig. 7). As his father and mother traveled home from a Church meeting in a one-horse buggy, his mother "opened the mail, and to their surprise there was a letter from Box B in Salt Lake City" with a mission call. No one had asked George if he was "ready, willing, or able," President Benson recounted. As George and his wife, Sarah, "drove into the yard," President Benson observed that "they were both crying." After telling the children about their father's mission call, Sarah revealed her conflicted feelings: "We're proud to know that Father is considered worthy to go on a mission. We're crying a bit because it means two years of separation. You know, your father and I have never been separated more than two nights at a time since our marriage."⁹⁶

Mission calls to married men in the early twentieth century continued to come at great sacrifice to the family. George Benson had just over six weeks to prepare for his departure.⁹⁷ He and Sarah had seven children ranging in age from ten months old to thirteen years old. Sarah was also about three months pregnant. To finance his mission, George sold

96. Ezra Taft Benson, "Godly Characteristics of the Master," *Ensign*, November 1986, 46.

97. George T. Benson Jr. to Joseph F. Smith, March 8, 1912, holograph, FPMCR.

a portion of the family's farmland in Whitney, Idaho. He also moved a married couple into their home to help tend the crop on the farm. Presumably, the couple worked the land and gave a portion of the produce to George's family while he was away. Sarah and the children took care of the hay, pastureland, and dairy cows.⁹⁸

Looking back on his father's decision to accept a mission call, President Benson voiced a sentiment shared by many nineteenth-century missionary families: "I suppose some in the world might say that his acceptance of that call was proof he did not really love his family."⁹⁹ However, the Benson family believed that sacrifice brings forth the blessings of heaven and that all things, even a two-year separation from their father and husband, would work together for their family's good. Gathering as a family to hear their mother read aloud their father's missionary letters and sacrificing to build the kingdom of God imbued the Benson home with "a spirit of missionary work that never left it."¹⁰⁰ The legacy of evangelism in the Benson family is evident in the fact that all seven of George and Sarah's sons served missions.

The Benson family reflects the shifting dynamics of missionary work in the early twentieth century. Whereas George Benson served a mission at age thirty-six as a married man in 1912, leaving seven children and a pregnant wife, his sons were all single men in their early twenties or late teens when they served missions in the 1920s and 1930s. While George had no formal training to prepare him for missionary work, his son Ezra was a product of the Church academy system. The year after George returned from his mission, Ezra enrolled in the Oneida Stake Academy in Preston, Idaho. The curriculum included classes in the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, Church history, public speaking, and debate.¹⁰¹ While the primary aim of the academy was to prepare students for vocations and college, it also helped equip young men and women to serve missions. The old model, represented by George Benson, of calling married men to leave their wives and children to proselytize continually gave way in the early twentieth century to the new model, represented

98. Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Deseret Book, 1987), 34; Benson, "Godly Characteristics of the Master," 48.

99. Benson, "Godly Characteristics of the Master," 47.

100. Benson, "Godly Characteristics of the Master," 48.

101. The Oneida Academy Annual Catalog, 1916–1917, 9–20, CHL; see also Floyd W. Peterson, "A History of the Oneida Stake Academy" (master's thesis, Utah State Agricultural College, 1957), 43–51.

by Ezra Taft Benson, of calling younger, single men and women with more formal education and training to serve missions.

Senior Missionary Couples

The practice of calling senior couples (those without young children at home) to supplement the evangelism of young men and women seems to have had its beginnings during World War II. With the outbreak of the war, the number of young men serving missions dramatically declined. Church leaders eventually suspended full-time mission calls to draft-eligible men.¹⁰² In July 1943, the First Presidency issued a circular letter calling on “older couples” and young women to serve missions to replace the depleted missionary force.¹⁰³ In calling couples on missions, Church leaders wanted older men not subject to the selective service draft, which meant men above the age of 44.¹⁰⁴ As older married couples filled the ranks of missionaries alongside young single women, the average age of the missionary force dramatically rose from 22.8 years old in 1940 to about 45 years old between 1942 and 1945.¹⁰⁵

Postwar Missionary Work

Some young men already serving missions before the United States entered World War II returned home and enlisted or were drafted into military service. Shortly after Marvin Sabin returned from his two-year mission in 1942, he enlisted in the Navy. While in the service, he befriended Dale LaVerne Maddox, who had grown up in Southern Oregon with an unfavorable view of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When Dale heard Marvin was a member of the Church, he

102. “Position of the Church on Current Issues such as War, Military Service, False Political *Isms*, Church and State, etc., April 6, 1942,” in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6:153–55; “Older Couples Called for Missionary Service, July 26, 1943,” in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6:197; “Recommending of Missionaries During the War, November 20, 1943,” in Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6:204–6.

103. Clark, “Older Couples Called for Missionary Service,” 6:197; Tally S. Payne, “‘Our Wise and Prudent Women’: Twentieth-Century Trends in Female Missionary Service,” in *New Scholarship on Latter-day Saint Women in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Carol Cornwall Madsen and Cherry B. Silver (Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for LDS History, 2004), 131.

104. After the United States entered the war, all men between the ages of twenty and forty-five became liable for military service. “Selective Service and Training Act of 1940,” *World Affairs* 103, no. 3 (1940): 179–86.

105. Statistics compiled using the Church History Biographical Database.

intended on setting him straight, but instead, Marvin helped convert Dale to the faith. Dale corresponded with his fiancée, Mary Olive Snarr, about his new religious beliefs, and eventually she joined the faith, too. They married in May 1946, a year after Mary Olive's baptism (fig. 8). Around this time, Dale heard a talk from a Church leader about how married men could still go on missions. Desiring to serve a mission like his friend Marvin Sabin, Dale volunteered to go. Six months after his marriage, and with Mary Olive pregnant, he departed for his mission to the Eastern states, proselytizing mostly in Massachusetts. Their parents could not understand why he would leave his pregnant wife or why she would support him in going on a mission for the Church.¹⁰⁶



FIGURE 8. Dale and Mary Olive Maddox, 1946. Courtesy Mary Jentzsch.

In Dale's absence, Mary Olive lived with her mother. She went to work for the 4-H extension service while her mother took care of the new baby. Mary Olive labored to support herself and her baby while also sending money to finance her husband's mission. Her labor, together with the help she received from her mother, made Dale's mission possible. The sacrifice Dale and Mary Olive Maddox made for the missionary cause strengthened their commitment to their new faith. Their children grew up hearing stories of their father's mission and their mother's support of him. The couple passed on to their nine children a fervor for evangelism. All nine of them would serve missions for the Church.¹⁰⁷

By the late 1940s, married men leaving their families to proselytize became more of the exception in the missionary force. Young married men, like Dale Maddox, who desired to serve a mission had to take the initiative in asking and volunteering for missionary service. For example,

106. Matthew Dale Maddox, interview by Matt Lund, June 14, 2017, American Fork, Utah.

107. Maddox, interview.

in 1946, LeRoy and Esther Heaton went to visit Elder Spencer W. Kimball for a mission interview. They had only been married a few months when LeRoy volunteered for missionary service. Elder Kimball said to LeRoy, “I’m happy that you’re going on a mission, but your first responsibility when you get married is to have a family.”¹⁰⁸ This statement from a senior Church leader is expressive of shifting attitudes in the postwar years toward young married men serving missions. If a married man volunteered for missionary service, Church leaders permitted him to go. But more and more, the expectation was that missions would precede marriage and family for young men.

During their visit with Elder Kimball, LeRoy and Esther did not know that she was expecting. LeRoy found out a few months into his mission to the Eastern states. In volunteering to serve a mission, he missed the birth of his firstborn child. Esther moved in with LeRoy’s mother, who helped finance her son’s evangelism. During LeRoy’s absence, Esther worked to pay off her medical bills and support herself and her baby. By the time of LeRoy’s mission in 1946, the number of young married missionaries had dwindled. He was one of only six married men in a mission of about two hundred missionaries.¹⁰⁹

Postwar Emphasis on the Ideal Home

In the decade that followed Dale Maddox’s and LeRoy Heaton’s missions, the practice of calling married men on missions seemed more and more out of harmony with postwar views of the ideal home and family life. Historian Jessica Weiss argues that postwar middle-class couples played a critical role in social change. While “they did not disrupt fundamental assumptions about the division of labor” in the family, they did help “create a more egalitarian marriage pattern.” According to Weiss, “postwar women joined [family] experts in beckoning men to partake more fully in parenting and domesticity.”¹¹⁰ “With the advent of the twentieth century,” one scholar noted, Latter-day Saints “came to match, and then out-strip, the American ideal of domesticity and companionate marriage.”¹¹¹

108. LeRoy Heaton and Esther Heaton, interview by Matt Lund, May 27, 2017, Orem, Utah.

109. Heaton and Heaton, interview.

110. Jessica Weiss, *To Have and To Hold: Marriage, the Baby Boom, and Social Change* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 84, 223.

111. Terryl L. Givens, “Mormonism and the Family,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 23, no. 1 (2013): 1–2.

Church leaders increasingly spoke of the “ideal home,” emphasizing the nuclear family as the cornerstone of religious and civil society, with fathers devoting more of their attention and time to domestic leadership and responsibilities.¹¹² Speaking to Latter-day Saints in 1935, President David O. McKay of the First Presidency warned against encroaching dangers that threatened the “ideal home,” including the tendency to shift responsibility for teaching children to schools and churches. These could never take the place of the preeminent influence of a mother and father laboring together in companionship and love to train and raise their children. Quoting a popular writer, President McKay emphasized a theme that would become one of his hallmark teachings in the years to come: “No other success can compensate for failure in the home.”¹¹³

During World War II, President McKay’s fellow Apostle Elder Stephen L Richards taught Latter-day Saints that “the home has an enlarged significance that is subordinate to nothing else in life.”¹¹⁴ Whereas early Church teachings emphasized the need for individuals to subordinate the needs of their families to the interests of building God’s kingdom, Elder Richards and other Church leaders stressed the preeminence of family relationships in the Latter-day Saint community.

Sending husbands and fathers off on missions for years at a time was progressively at odds with not only societal views but also Church teachings about the centrality of marriage, family, and parenthood. It was in the “exalted institution of the home” that Elder Richards found “the greatest opportunity and mission for men and women.”¹¹⁵ The ideal home consisted of a father who presided and provided for his family in strength and courage and a mother who nurtured with tenderness, unselfishness, patience, and love. While married men were to prioritize

112. See Coleen McDannell, *Sister Saints: Mormon Women Since the End of Polygamy* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 92; Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *A Kingdom Transformed: Early Mormonism and the Modern LDS Church*, 2nd ed. (University of Utah Press, 2016), 83–86, 111–12.

113. David O. McKay, in *One Hundred Fifth Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1935), 110–16, quoting J. E. McCulloch, *Home: The Savior of Civilization* (The Southern Co-operative League, 1924), 42.

114. Stephen L Richards, in *One Hundred Twelfth Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1941), 107.

115. Richards, in *One Hundred Twelfth Semi-Annual Conference*, 107; see also Brent Corcoran, *Multiply and Replenish: Mormon Essays on Sex and Family* (Signature Books, 1994), 263–69.

family, young single men were to place missions ahead of family formation. Church leaders urged young men to not get too serious in their romances until after their missions.¹¹⁶

The ideal Latter-day Saint home described by Church leaders in the middle third of the twentieth century came to reflect and then epitomize American family values. For postwar Latter-day Saint couples, family and home life were to be preeminent as Church teachings moved away from the nineteenth-century model of calling married men to leave wives and young children to proselytize. Yet, it stood in stark contrast to the disruptions that the practice of calling married men on missions had on home and family life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1950s, few groups emphasized breadwinning fatherhood, homemaking motherhood, and family togetherness as much as the Latter-day Saints, an ideal that necessitated a father present at home rather than absent on a mission.

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116. For example, see Spencer W. Kimball, *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Deseret Book, 1982), 304.



Rose Coleena Wallace Nungari (Eastern Arrernte, b. 1974), *Plan of Salvation*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 60.5" x 38.25". Courtesy Church History Museum. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

The Untold Story of Mission Plaques

Fifty Years of Selected Scriptures

*Scott L. Howell, Maclane E. Heward, Gregory L. Snow,
Annalyn Sorensen, and Emmalia Cieslewicz*

For many young adults in the Church, receiving a missionary plaque is an essential part of the missionary experience, and choosing which scripture to feature on that plaque is part of that tradition. In fact, one of the authors of this article recalls spending much of high school looking for and marking potential plaque verses. However common this experience is now for young adults in the United States, missionary plaques as we see them today have only been around for fifty years.

This article will briefly highlight the development of the modern missionary plaque, explore what scriptures were selected most for missionary plaques, and discuss what effect the practice of selection and the scriptures themselves have had on missionaries for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. To collect information on why missionaries chose the scripture they did and the effect it had, we asked returned-missionary students primarily at Brigham Young University which missionary plaque verse they selected, the reasons for that selection, and the effects of that scripture over time. We also collected and analyzed the scripture selections for over 11,000 missionary plaques. In summary, we found that spiritual experiences were often the impetus for choosing a particular scripture. We also found that the plaque scripture provided inspiration and direction for their missionary service and their life after.

We employed a mixed-method approach to this study.¹ First, we collected data on 11,573 scriptures on missionary plaques from 2019 to the

1. This study was cleared by the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Brigham Young University on November 10, 2023, since it does not meet the regulatory definitions of human subjects research according to 45 CFR 46.102(e)(1)(i) or (ii).

present, with the assistance of two companies that prepare these plaques today.² Second, we surveyed 779 returned missionaries primarily at BYU about their experience in selecting the scripture for their mission plaque.

Some of the questions we sought to answer included the following: What are the most frequently cited scriptures from this sample of 11,573? How many respondents chose scriptures from a list of the top twenty scriptures selected overall? Who, if anyone, influenced their selection of the scripture? How long did it take for them to choose their scripture? Did the selection of a scripture represent an important spiritual experience, motivate one, or some combination of both? How important was this scripture across time: before, during, and after their mission? And why (and how) did they come to choose their particular scripture?

The Origin of Missionary Plaques

In 1975, a bishop from Alpine, Utah, came into Jesse McGee's Central Utah Rubber Stamp and Co. (now known as McGee's Stamp and Trophy) in Provo, Utah with a question: How can I encourage the young men in my ward to keep their sights on a mission? Part of his solution was to explore the possibility of creating plaques to feature the missionaries currently serving from his ward.

Before the development of the current missionary plaque, some missionaries would send an announcement of their call to family and friends, which often included a favorite scripture chosen by the missionary. Jesse McGee recalls his mission announcement card from 1957, and despite more than sixty-five years having passed, he remembers his scripture reference suggested by a friend: 1 Nephi 3:7.

Similar to the announcement cards, the original design for the plaques included the location in which the missionary was to serve, their picture, and a favorite passage of scripture. The initial plaque had a permanently mounted picture, but now there is a place to slide in a picture so a plaque can be sent to the ward without McGee receiving a picture (fig. 1).

With the bishop's original 1975 missionary plaque order, McGee recognized that this product could fill a need for Church leaders and future missionaries. After moving the business from Provo to Orem, Utah, and changing the store name to McGee's Stamp and Trophy in the early 1980s, Jesse began to advertise these mission plaques. It did not take long

2. A special thanks to Brandon Young, owner of LDS Bookstore, who shared a spreadsheet of scriptures selected by missionaries for their plaques, and to Jesse McGee, founder of McGee's Stamp and Trophy, who allowed one of the authors of this article to spend many hours in his office entering data into a spreadsheet from their paperwork orders.



FIGURE 1. Jesse McGee with a son's and a grandson's mission plaque. Courtesy Scott L. Howell.

for members of the Church to take an interest. McGee is eighty-nine years old, and his sons have largely taken over the operation of the three McGee's Stamp and Trophy locations which, combined, create approximately 7,500 plaques each year. His success did not go unnoticed, however, and it didn't take long for competition to emerge.

Shannon Taysom Passey returned from her Toronto, Canada, mission in 1988, about the same time her father purchased a trophy company in Cedar City, Utah, from an older couple leaving to serve a senior mission. Her family had been in the jewelry and engraving business, but Shannon decided to expand their services by creating missionary plaques. She had seen McGee's plaques in Orem soon after returning from her mission and felt there was a real business opportunity in southern Utah. She went about making her own version of mission plaques, which included an etched shape of the mission's geographical boundary in brass as seen in figure 2.

As part of her marketing strategy, Passey created a plaque of her mission to show local bishops. She suggested that a missionary could be called up to the podium on the day of their missionary farewell and have the plaque revealed to the missionary and audience, with the explanation that the plaque would hang on the ward bulletin for the members to



FIGURE 2. Shannon and Jacob Passey with Gem Awards mission plaques. Courtesy Shannon Passey.

remember, support, pray for, and write to the missionary throughout the duration of their mission. Then, when the missionary returned, she suggested to bishops that they could present the plaque to the missionary as a reminder of their service. Today, Passey's company, Gem Awards, is owned by her son Jacob Passey and creates approximately 550 missionary plaques each year in southern Utah. Other companies have arisen to compete with McGee and Passey, all of which create a similar missionary plaque. LDS Bookstore creates approximately 8,000 plaques a year. This trend has moved internationally as plaques have been created for missionaries originating from Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore.

Survey Results

This article presents our study of the effects these plaques have had on the young adults we surveyed, especially the process of choosing a scripture to include on their plaque. As will be shown, the scriptures selected for plaques vary widely and are often connected to a meaningful spiritual experience. The following subsections contain information gathered from 11,573 missionary plaques, as well as the results of a survey administered to 779 returned missionaries primarily attending Brigham Young

Table 1. The Twenty Most Chosen Verses on Mission Plaques

Ranking	Scripture	Frequency	Percent of Total (11,573)
1	Alma 26:11–16	411	3.55%
2	Ether 12:25–28	402	3.47%
3	Alma 29:5–10	367	3.17%
4	3 Nephi 5:12–15	350	3.02%
5	1 Nephi 3:7	344	2.97%
6	Helaman 5:12	262	2.26%
7	Proverbs 3:3–7	214	1.85%
8	2 Nephi 31:19–21	201	1.74%
9	Mosiah 2:15–18	196	1.69%
10	2 Nephi 22:2–6	186	1.61%
11	D&C 6:33–37	163	1.41%
12	D&C 4:1–7	140	1.21%
13	Alma 37:33–37	131	1.13%
14	Isaiah 41:9–10, 13	120	1.04%
15	D&C 18:10–16	118	1.02%
16	Joshua 1:7–9	113	0.98%
17	Moroni 10:30–33	111	0.96%
18	Philippians 4:13	107	0.92%
19	2 Nephi 25:23, 26	103	0.89%
20	Doctrine & Covenants 84:87–89	103	0.89%
Total		4,142	35.790%

University. Of the 779 survey respondents, 654, or 84 percent, reported they received a missionary plaque with a scripture on it.³

The Most Frequently Cited Scriptures on Mission Plaques

In table 1, the top twenty scriptures selected by outgoing missionaries are reported along with a frequency count and percentage. The authors hypothesized that most missionary plaque scriptures would come from the top twenty overall, but as the research revealed, this was not the case.

3. The survey asked respondents, “Did you receive a mission plaque with a scripture(s) on it?” Forty-one responded with a no, three responded with “can’t remember,” and eighty-one left the question blank. These responses were excluded from the study.

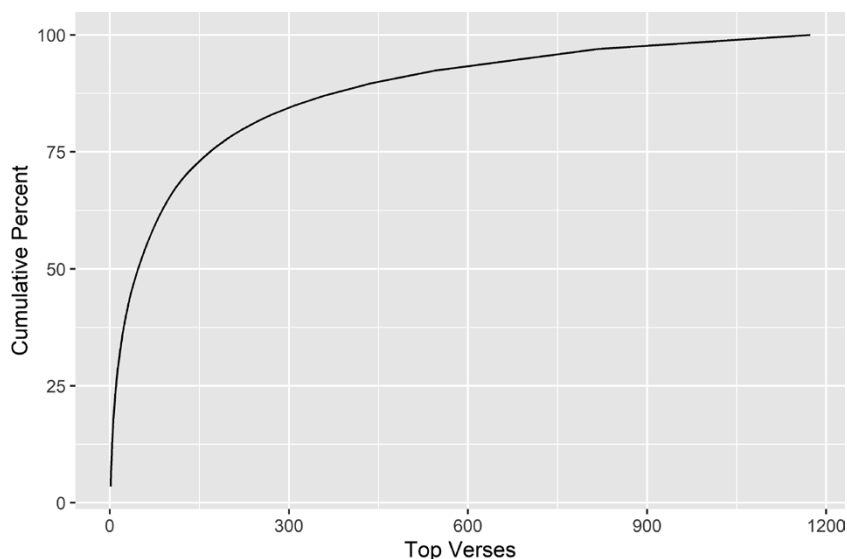


FIGURE 3. Cumulative percent of verses chosen.

From the sample of 11,573 scriptures placed on mission plaques, 64.9 percent of responders chose a verse outside the top twenty.

In figure 3, we see the cumulative percentage of common scriptures chosen over the number of unique scriptures. This figure shows the total number of verses used on plaques in the study (main axis) against their frequency for a cumulative effect. As reported in table 1, 36 percent (4,142 out of 11,573 plaques) of missionaries picked from these twenty verses, and in figure 3, this explains why there is such a steep rise or slope at first. But then, interestingly, the line rises far more gradually after that initial dramatic climb. This pattern suggests that some scriptures had broad appeal, but the remaining selections were spread across many verses. With the majority being unique scriptures, this points to the personal significance of an individual's selected verse.

Plaque Scripture Distribution Across the Standard Works

With past and present emphasis on the Book of Mormon and its role as the keystone of the Church, it is no surprise that more people selected passages from the Book of Mormon than from the other three works of scripture, as reported in figure 4. From the earliest days of the Church, the Book of Mormon has been emphasized. Joseph Smith showed the importance of the Book of Mormon, calling it “the keystone of our

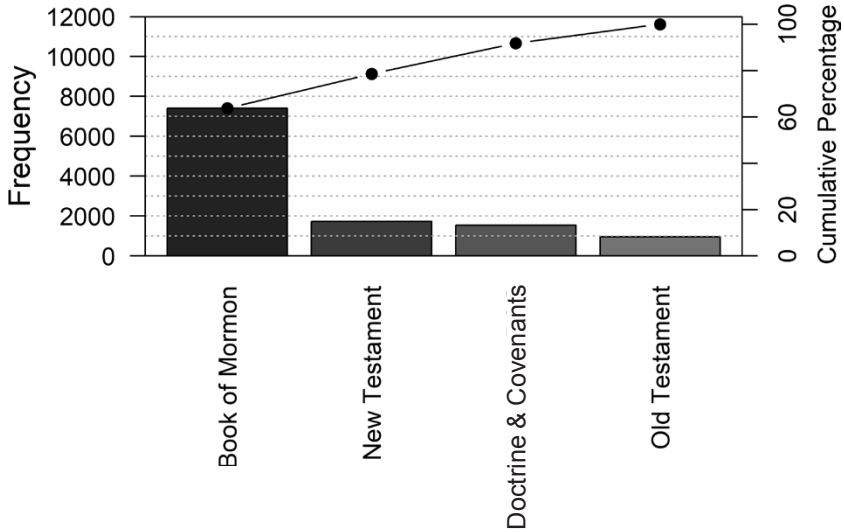


FIGURE 4. Plaque scripture distribution by standard works.

religion.”⁴ He also taught that “a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts than any other Book.”⁵

Other leaders have invited Latter-day Saints to read the Book of Mormon daily. In 2017, when many of the respondents were youth, President Thomas S. Monson invited daily Book of Mormon study with these words: “I implore each of us to prayerfully study and ponder the Book of Mormon each day. As we do so, we will be in a position to hear the voice of the Spirit, to resist temptation, to overcome doubt and fear, and to receive heaven’s help in our lives.”⁶ Also in 2017, President Russell M. Nelson promised, “As you prayerfully study the Book of Mormon *every day*, you will make better decisions—*every day*.”⁷

4. “Remarks, 28 November 1841,” 112, The Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed April 29, 2026, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/remarks-28-november-1841/1>. The phrase was popularized in the Church in the 1980s by James E. Faust and President Ezra Taft Benson. See James E. Faust, “The Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November 1983, 9–11; and Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 4–7; see also *Preach my Gospel: A Guide to Sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 113–22; and Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon: What Would Your Life Be Like Without It?,” *Ensign*, November 2017, 60–63.

5. “Remarks, 28 November 1841,” 112.

6. Thomas S. Monson, “The Power of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, May 2017, 87.

7. Nelson, “Book of Mormon,” 62.

In addition, the Church's teachings on how the Book of Mormon will lead to conversion are made clear in the official training guide for missionary service, *Preach My Gospel*. Chapter five explains that the Book of Mormon is keystone of religion in three ways: (1) our witness of Christ, (2) the fulness of doctrine, and (3) the foundation of our testimony. Quoting Ezra Taft Benson, it emphasizes that "if the Book of Mormon is true . . . one must accept the claims of the Restoration." It also instructs missionaries that "the Book of Mormon, combined with the Spirit, is your most powerful resource in conversion," and that missionaries should "use the Book of Mormon as [their] main source for teaching the restored gospel."⁸ With instruction so clear to the missionaries we surveyed, it seems likely that they immersed themselves in the Book of Mormon. The prophetic emphasis and the emphasis of *Preach My Gospel* may explain the skewed distribution of plaque scriptures.

How long did it take to select your plaque scripture?

We asked how long it took respondents to choose their scripture (fig. 5). Out of the 631 individuals who responded to this question, 258 (41 percent) reported that they knew almost immediately what their scripture choice would be. Another 312 respondents (49 percent) reported that they took days, weeks, or even months to select their scripture.

Who or what influenced your choice of plaque scripture?

Among the 654 survey respondents who received a plaque with a scripture, the authors expected influences to be seminary or institute teachers, parents, and Church leaders. Surprisingly, most respondents reported that no one influenced them. As seen in figure 6, we found that 73.5 percent reported that no one influenced their choice, while 24 percent (156 students) reported one or more influences and 2.5 percent (17 students) did not answer the question.

Of the 156 respondents⁹ who indicated that others had influenced their plaque scripture selection, 78 identified parents as an influencer, with 39 of the 78 reporting their parents as being the only influencer. Fifty-eight respondents indicated that a Church leader played a part in their choice, 57 said a friend, and 55 a teacher (seminary, institute, or religion).

8. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 2nd ed. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2023), 109–10.

9. These 156 respondents gave 270 responses since they could select more than one influencer.

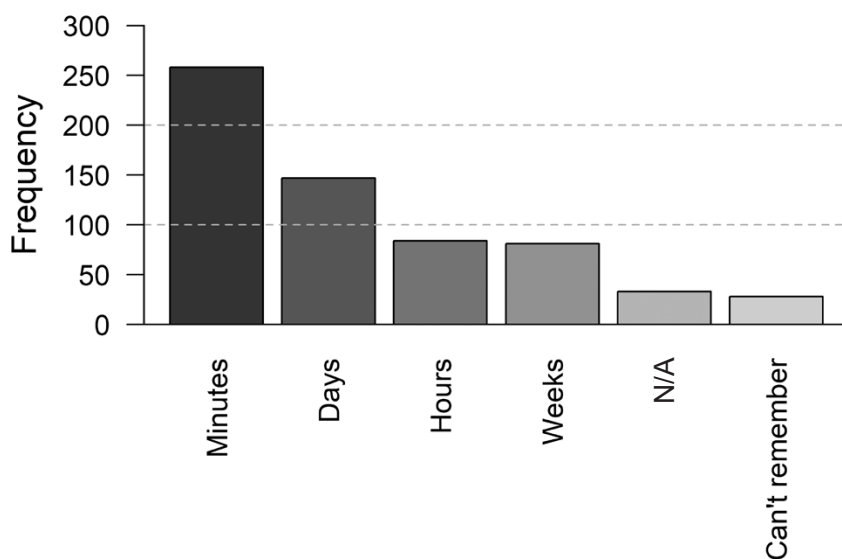


FIGURE 5. How long participants took to select their mission scripture.

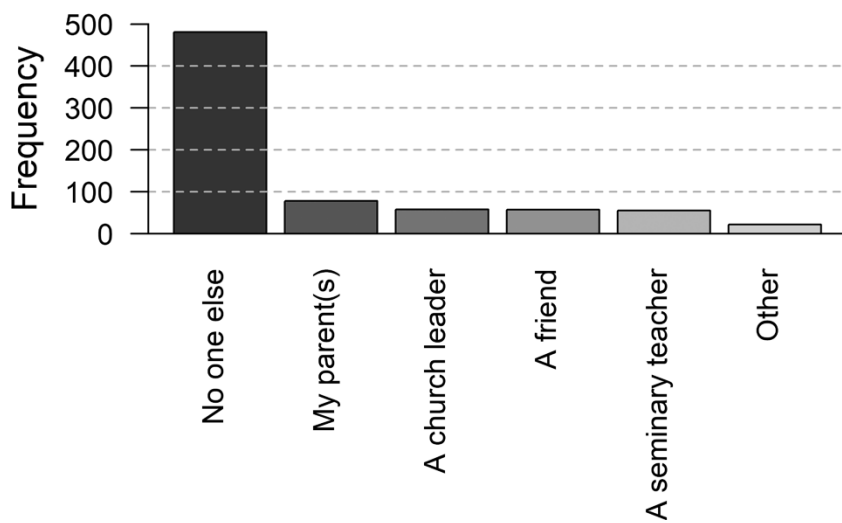


FIGURE 6. Influences on missionary scripture selection.

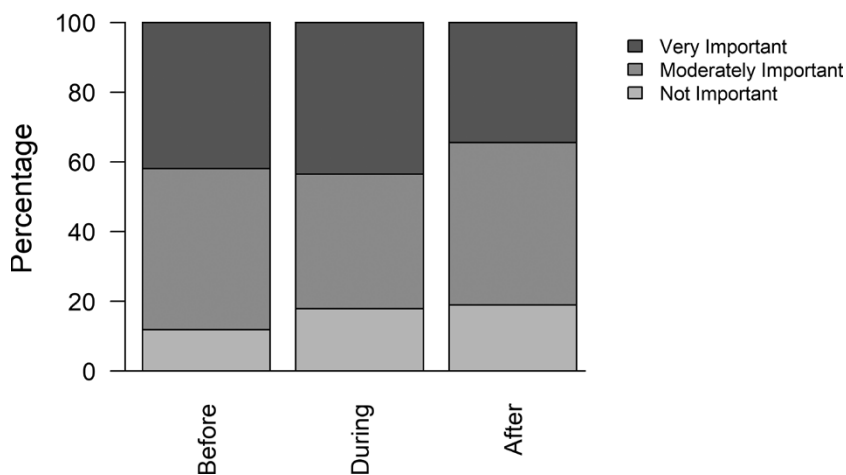


FIGURE 7. Importance of missionary plaques before, during, and after the mission.

The “other” category received 22 responses, which included some of the following: siblings, grandparents, missionary companions, Especially for Youth counselors, Missionary Training Center teachers, and, to a much lesser extent, hymns, Google searches, and even *The Mandalorian* television show.

How important was your missionary plaque scripture before, during, and/or after your mission?

The authors were interested to know if the selected scriptures continued to hold importance for the respondents during and after their missions. We asked respondents to choose between *not important*, *moderately important*, and *very important* during the time before, during, and after their mission.

As shown in figure 7, the most notable changes came in the *not important* category, which increased from 11.9 percent before, to 17.9 percent during, and 18.9 percent after. The *very important* category also varied, increasing from 41.9 percent before, to 43.6 percent during, and dropping to 34.5 percent after.¹⁰ However, over 80 percent of respondents

10. McNemar’s chi-squared test was used to compare importance before, during, and after a mission. McNemar’s test was used because we have three answers from each person, rather than one answer from each of three groups. This test considers changes

held steady in finding their scripture either very or moderately important during and after their mission.

Analysis

Of the 11,573 plaques, we identified 1,173 unique scripture verses. As shown in figure 3, the twenty most used scriptures were selected by 4,142 people (36 percent). Surprisingly, 358 (30%) of the 1,173 scriptures were completely unique and selected by only one person. This diverse and unique selection suggests a more individual and personal experience with the scripture selected and perhaps with the scriptures in general. Respondents often indicated that the scripture selected had personal meaning and came to them individually and uniquely.

In addition, many of the scriptures were outside the Church seminary doctrinal mastery list,¹¹ again suggesting a personal experience with the scriptures for each missionary. These findings suggest that Latter-day Saint youth may still be among the most scripturally literate young people in America, as has been reported in past literature and suggested by contemporary research.¹² While the Church has a very

over time (such as before, during, and after a mission) within a single individual. The test shows statistically significant differences between before, during, and after at a p-value less than 0.0001, which was well below the threshold of significance for a p-value (less than 0.05). Whether the changes are practically important are more subjective. For more information about this statistical test, see Alan Agresti, *Categorical Data Analysis* (John Wiley and Sons, 1990), 350–54.

11. Doctrinal mastery is a part of the Church's seminary program that replaced the scripture mastery program in June 2016. It includes teaching students to master the content of key doctrinal passages in each book of scripture and additionally to understand key principles in acquiring spiritual knowledge. For Church produced material on the doctrinal mastery program, including a list of doctrinal mastery passages, see "Doctrinal Mastery Core Document," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 1, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/doctrinal-mastery-core-document-2023>. For an overview of the doctrinal mastery program and its beginning, see Marianne Holman Prescott, "New Doctrinal Mastery Program Is Replacing Scripture Mastery for Seminary Students," *Church News*, published by *Deseret News*, June 2, 2016, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/2016/6/2/23222426/new-doctrinal-mastery-program-is-replacing-scripture-mastery-for-seminary-students/>.

12. Most respondents to our survey were adolescents and teenagers in the early to mid 2010s. There are two publications that discuss teenage religiosity and scripture study contemporary with our target audience, one in 2005 and one in 2010. Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 45–46, 53, 55. Smith and Denton used data from the National Study of Youth and Religion to discuss the religious habits and experiences of youth. They report that 74 percent of Latter-day Saint youth indicated

uniform curriculum for teaching children and youth, the diversity of scriptures selected for the plaques suggests that these young people learned how to search out meaning in the scriptures on their own. To substantiate this possibility, many of the open-ended answers suggested that those surveyed found their plaque scripture in their own personal study.

Another surprise came in the findings about selection times (fig. 3) and how meaningful the verse was to the missionary. Initially, the authors hypothesized that those who selected their missionary verse within minutes probably thought little of the experience and were less impacted by the verse compared with those who invested more time in the selection process. The survey results tell a different story. By comparing the selection time with the respondents' later comments on why the scripture was chosen, we found that a shorter time spent selecting a scripture often aligned with the verse being more meaningful, not less.

For example, one respondent indicated that it had taken them minutes to select the verse. They explained that it was a scripture they

that their "family talks about God, the scriptures, prayer, or other religious or spiritual things together" either a few times a week (24 percent) or every day (50 percent). They also reported that 42 percent of Latter-day Saint youth reported having "taught a Sunday School or religious education class," and 50 percent indicated that they are a part of a "scripture study or prayer group." Seventy-three percent indicated that they attend a religious Sunday School almost every week (11 percent), once a week (27 percent), or more than once a week (35 percent). See this list for more articles from the National Study of Youth and Religion (accessed May 28, 2026): <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/research-findings/articles/>.

Additionally, see Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Dean, an associate professor of youth, church, and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary, stated that "Mormon teenagers tend to be the 'spiritual athletes' of their generation, conditioning for an eternal goal with an intensity that requires sacrifice, discipline, and energy." Lyman Kirkland, "Book Details Mormon Teens' Sacrifice, Discipline and Energy," Newsroom, August 26, 2010, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/book-details-mormon-teens-sacrifice-discipline-and-energy>.

Though this research is dated, contemporary research indicates that Latter-day Saint scriptural literacy is still without compare. In the 2023–24 Pew Research findings, 59 percent of Latter-day Saints (25 percent were ages 18–29, the rest of respondents were older) report reading the scriptures at least once a week, the highest among any religious subcategory, Christian or otherwise. According to the Pew research, 33 percent of Christians in the United States read scripture at least once per week. Specific statistics regarding religious groupings are available at "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

had memorized and that helped to “center” them before their mission. Another respondent wrote: “I remember when I first read this [verse], I could barely get through because of my tears. It touched my soul.” For this individual, it seems that the spiritual power brought by their first reading of the verse made the later selection of a plaque scripture simple and quick. Another respondent indicated that they had selected the verse within minutes because they had a “personal spiritual experience with it.”

Yet another unexpected finding came with the lack of outside influences on missionaries’ scripture choice. Even the group that acknowledged outside influences also seemed to have a personal experience with their verse. One respondent said, “[My] seminary teacher read it to us and it clicked in my brain that it was important to my missionary purpose.” Another one described their verse by saying, “My dad first read me this scripture after I had a nightmare when I was a little girl, and it’s stayed with me ever since and has been a great source of comfort for me.” After looking at multiple examples, it became clear that even when others influenced or pointed missionaries to their plaque scripture, the missionaries still found deep and personal meaning in their selected verses.

We also looked at the impact of selected missionary plaque scriptures before, during, and after missionary service. The period when the scripture had the most impact was before missionary service, with 88 percent saying the scripture was moderately or very important. Since scriptures are typically chosen prior to mission service, this finding makes sense.¹³

During the mission, that number slightly declined, with 82 percent still describing the scripture as moderately or very important.¹⁴ After the mission, the pattern remained nearly the same: Over 80 percent continued to describe the scripture as moderately or very important. This suggests that, for most respondents, the meaning of the plaque scripture

13. In the open response of very few surveys, respondents indicated they selected their scripture while serving as a missionary, usually because the ward was slow to order their mission plaque.

14. The changes were statistically significant since the p-value is < 0.0001 (much less than 0.05) using McNemar’s test for all the changes. The percentage of people who said the scripture was “not important” increased from 12 percent before the mission to 18 percent during the mission, a significant enough increase that it is not due to chance. In other words, the *not important* increase is significant with $p = 0.002$, which is less than 0.05. But the *not important* change from during the mission to after the mission was not statistically significant (18 percent to 19 percent change), since $p = 0.566$, which is greater than 0.05.

endured beyond the moment of selection. One missionary said, “Before I decided to go on a mission I loved that scripture. . . . Now that I’m home it’s a guiding principle.” This was just one of several responses that mentioned the continued importance of the scripture long after the missionary returned home.

Open-Ended Survey Responses

At the end of the survey, the respondents were asked this open-ended question: “Do you remember why you selected this particular scripture at the time? What is the story of this scripture being selected?” We identified four themes from these responses.

First, the passage was connected to a powerful spiritual experience. Second, the verse exemplified their missionary purpose or goal in serving a mission. Third, the verse provided comfort and peace and helped them see an eternal perspective. And fourth, the verse promised strength from the Lord and gave an assurance that he can be relied on. Each of these four areas is explored below.

Powerful Spiritual Experience

For many of the respondents, the chosen plaque scripture was connected to a powerful spiritual experience. One respondent, who selected 1 Nephi 3:7, wrote, “I had a very personal experience so I hold that scripture dear to my heart.” Many respondents described their scripture and the spiritual experience that accompanied it as an important part of their testimony.

For many, the spiritual experience associated with their plaque verse helped them decide to serve a mission. One respondent who selected Doctrine and Covenants 4:3 wrote, “My experience with it was so profound and personal in that moment and I think it was when I decided to serve a mission.” Another shared how President M. Russell Ballard had quoted the very scripture, Doctrine and Covenants 128:22, which they were considering, in general conference: “It confirmed to me that I should serve a mission.”¹⁵ Many others shared similar stories, explaining

15. This respondent could not remember the exact verse but gave a description which most closely matches Doctrine and Covenants 128:22. They described their verse with these words: “Courage, fear not, onward brethren.” The talk that matches the timing and description is President M. Russell Ballard’s April 2020 general conference address “Shall We Not Go On in So Great a Cause?,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 8–11.

that the power of the scripture and the accompanying spiritual witness were instrumental in helping them decide to serve a mission.

Another stated that their selected verse, 1 Nephi 3:7, not only increased their faith but was also a catalyst for their return to the Church. They wrote, “It has been the foundation of my faith. Everything that I have confidence in, both temporally and spiritually, stems from my faith and knowledge in the truth of this scripture. It was the start of my return to the church, it was my rock during my trials, and it will forever be my guide.” This response illustrates the transformative experience had by this individual through scripture and its power to motivate change.

Mission Purpose or Goal

The fourth most common scripture in the data set was 3 Nephi 5:13, which reads, “Behold, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I have been called of him to declare his word among his people, that they might have everlasting life.” This and similar scriptures perfectly exemplifies the reason many respondents chose their scripture: It reminded them of their purpose or goal as a missionary.

One respondent shared, “I just remember that this [scripture, Doctrine and Covenants 123:17,] encompassed all that I hoped my mission would be and the outlook I wanted to have about my mission.” Another said, “At the time, I had just gone through the repentance process myself and decided to serve a mission because of the joy I felt from repentance. I felt that this scripture [Alma 29:1–2] captured exactly why I wanted to serve a mission, as well as the great purpose that missionaries have.” And another described how this reminder of their goal as a missionary helped them throughout their mission: “It was a scripture [Alma 26:12] that always stuck out to me and helped remind me of my purpose as a missionary.” For the young adults we surveyed, the plaque scripture helped them understand their purpose as they looked forward to their mission and helped them focus on their purpose as they served.

Comfort and Peace

People often chose their plaque scripture because it provided comfort and peace. Helaman 5:12, the sixth most commonly chosen scripture in our data set, exemplifies this with its promise “that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you.” This and other scriptures provided respondents with

peace. “It is [the] scripture . . . I always turn to when I’m in need of comfort and feelings of peace,” one missionary said of their selected verse. Another person explained that their chosen scripture “gave [them] hope when things seemed sad or bleak.” Another respondent stated, “It helped me stay on the mission and comforted me.”

For some, this comfort came in the form of giving an eternal perspective. Many missionaries described finding comfort in the assurance that God had a plan for them or that everything would be okay. One respondent, who selected Doctrine and Covenants 6:36, explained: “I like to think that as long as I don’t fear and [I] trust in God, that everything will work out. I do my best and God will place me where I am supposed to be.” Another respondent who selected 2 Nephi 2:24–25 said, “I felt like God had a plan for me. The scripture clearly states that purpose.” Another respondent described how their scripture, Doctrine and Covenants 24:8, gave them hope: “I just knew how hard a mission could be and knew that if I was just patient through those hard times then everything would be okay so I thought that scripture could help me do that.” This eternal perspective gave comfort and peace to these missionaries both before and during their mission.

Strength from the Lord

The final reason many respondents chose their verse was that it reminded them that they could find strength in the Lord. This was exemplified in both the first and second most frequently chosen scriptures. Alma 26:12 states, “Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things.” And in Ether 12:27 we read, “I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.” Many missionaries were encouraged by the reminder that, despite their weaknesses, God would strengthen them.

For example, one participant explained, “I love the concept of weak things becoming strong and that I didn’t need to be strong before I went on a mission. All I needed to do was to be humble and rely on God.” Another said, “I feel like I’ve been humbled a lot in my life and been through a lot of trials and I’ve had to learn that I’m nothing without my Savior. But through Him I can do miraculous things.” Another one explained how their verse gave them strength not just on the mission

but beyond: “I liked Ether 12:27 because it talked about how the Lord turns our weakness into strength and I felt like I had a lot of weaknesses. The scripture has actually become more meaningful to me this past year (after being home for five years) than ever before, even before or during my mission. I feel I am actually just starting to understand it, and I relate to it more now.” Many respondents chose a scripture that helped them remember that their strength and success on the mission came not from their own strength but from relying on the strength and grace of Jesus Christ.

Therefore What?

President Jeffrey R. Holland remembered President Boyd K. Packer using the phrase, “Therefore what?” at the end of presentations he would give to the Twelve Apostles in their meetings. In essence, he was asking for the speakers to cut through the details of their presentation and speak to the implications of the materials presented. His phrase seems to be the shorthand version of the following question: How is the information meant to change our behavior or thoughts in beneficial ways?¹⁶ This final section is intended to answer that very question.

Elder Quentin L. Cook recently discussed the foundational role of scripture in faithful discipleship in Christ. He said, “Combined with the teachings of living prophets, these sacred scriptures provide doctrinal direction for us in today’s world. These scriptures are most powerful when they give instruction, correction, comfort, and consolation to individuals and families who seek guidance from the Lord. The scriptures, combined with spiritual inspiration from the Holy Spirit, continue to be the primary source that facilitates the conversion of those who have broken hearts and contrite spirits and desire to follow Jesus Christ. The scriptures help build a foundation that can withstand the adversary’s constant efforts to undermine faith.”¹⁷ President Oaks recently taught that “we are given the scriptures to direct our lives.”¹⁸ But how can scriptures give us direction?

16. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Therefore What?,” Gospel Courses: Teaching Seminary, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 12, 2026, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teaching-seminary-preservice-readings-religion-370-471-and-475/therefore-what>.

17. Quentin L. Cook, “Sacred Scripture—the Foundation of Faith?,” *Liahona*, November 2024, 111–12.

18. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Teachings of Jesus Christ,” *Liahona*, May 2023, 102.

Many respondents in the missionary plaque survey mentioned how the scripture they selected was a source of instruction, correction, and comfort. Priesthood leaders and parents can show to future missionaries and others that as they study the scriptures, they will experience personal interactions with God and the Holy Ghost. Because the scriptures contain powerful truths that will alter the way they see themselves and others, readers can receive a vision of their potential and direction on how to achieve it. Teaching them to be open to these experiences can help the scriptures direct their lives as President Oaks taught.

Many respondents selected scriptures that provided a purpose for their mission. When we have a clear purpose, we often transform into a person who fulfills that purpose. As we face different seasons of our life, could we find a chosen scripture, in like manner, that could give that season a purpose and capture the type of person we want to become? Is there a passage or story that showcases the type of parent, spouse, friend, employer, or employee we would like to be? One such respondent described why they had selected their plaque scripture by saying, “I wanted a scripture that encompassed who I wanted to become.” Could parents teach and lead their children to find a scripture that describes who they want to be during a school year or while playing on a particular sports team or musical group? Is there a scripture that can direct our development in a Church calling? For example, one teacher decided that their vision scripture for their teaching calling was Mosiah 23:14: “Trust no one to be your teacher nor your minister, except he be a man [or woman] of God, walking in his ways and keeping his commandments.” This scripture provided direction and guidance for who they were trying to become.

The respondents’ experiences and narratives found in this research suggested that we can think about and connect with the scriptures in multiple ways. Like the missionaries in this study who were anticipating their missionary service, we can find a scripture or a scripture story to provide peace and strength for any challenge ahead of us.

Elder Richard G. Scott said that scriptures understood and even memorized can become “stalwart friends” that can give us help in times of need. Of course, we still need physical friends, but these scriptural friends “are not limited by geography or calendar. They are always available when needed.”¹⁹ In a similar vein, Elder Ronald A. Rasband

19. Richard G. Scott, “The Power of Scripture,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 6.

encouraged seminary and institute teachers to “help students identify a ‘protection scripture,’ one they can call to mind when they are in a perilous situation or need the strength to step away.”²⁰ It can very be beneficial to have one or two favorite verses on hand, ready in times of danger or discouragement—moments which all of us, including missionaries, will surely face during our mortal service.

President Spencer W. Kimball and President Gordon B. Hinckley’s teachings about studying the scriptures are a timeless reminder. President Kimball said, “I am convinced that each of us, at some time in our lives, must discover the scriptures for ourselves—and not just discover them once, but rediscover them again and again.”²¹ President Hinckley said, “I am grateful for emphasis on reading the scriptures. I hope that for you this will become something far more enjoyable than a duty; that, rather, it will become a love affair with the word of God. I promise you that as you read, your minds will be enlightened and your spirits will be lifted. At first it may seem tedious, but that will change into a wondrous experience with thoughts and words of things divine.”²²

Conclusion

For fifty years, choosing a scripture for a missionary plaque has been part of the process of preparing to serve a mission for many prospective missionaries, first along the Wasatch Front and now extending throughout the global Church. In this study, the authors found that this tradition of selecting a plaque scripture has had a significant impact on the many young missionaries who have participated in this practice. While there are scriptures that were selected more frequently, there was a surprising variety in the scriptures chosen, suggesting that many of the prospective missionaries searched the scriptures carefully to find one special verse or verses for their mission plaque. The results also showed very little outside influence, again suggesting that the prospective missionaries found the scriptures through personal scripture study.

These young men and women tended to have one of four reasons for choosing their mission scripture: (1) they had a powerful spiritual

20. Ronald A. Rasband, “Jesus Christ Is the Answer,” An Evening with a General Authority, broadcast with CES religious educators, February 8, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2019-02-1020-elder-ronald-a-rasband>.

21. Spencer W. Kimball, “How Rare a Possession—the Scriptures!,” *Ensign*, September 1976, 4.

22. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Light Within You,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 99.

experience with the scripture in the past, (2) the verse captured their missionary purpose or goal and how they wanted to serve their mission, (3) the verse provided comfort and peace and helped them see an eternal perspective, or (4) the verse promised strength from the Lord and gave an assurance that he can be relied on. In each situation, the scripture acted as a trusted friend, providing them strength and vision in times of need, not only before and during but also after their mission. May we all find needed support, comfort, and direction from God's word throughout life.

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*Prepare Me for Thy Use:
Lessons from Wilford Woodruff's Mission Years*
by Kristy Wheelwright Taylor

Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2025

Reviewed by Alexander L. Baugh

In *Prepare Me for Thy Use*, Kristy Wheelwright Taylor, board secretary for the Wilford Woodruff Papers Foundation, offers a faith-promoting narrative of Wilford Woodruff's missionary experiences, primarily from the time of his baptism (in late December 1833) through his service as president of the European mission (ending in 1846). Drawing extensively on Woodruff's contemporaneous journal entries, Taylor highlights key lessons of discipleship learned during each of his missions, showing how these experiences shaped both his personal spiritual growth and his later leadership in the Church.

Taylor sets the stage for the reader by discussing Woodruff's conversion to the restored gospel, followed by biographical information and several vignettes from his life that illustrate his determination and conviction, amidst much adversity, to remain faithful to his testimony throughout his life. Then, in keeping with the book's focus—namely, Woodruff's "mission years" (8)—she provides a "Mission Service Timeline," outlining what she categorizes as seven missions Woodruff served between 1834 and 1846 (9). Each of those missions, Taylor maintains, shaped his spiritual character, beginning with the march of the Camp of Israel (later called Zion's Camp) to Missouri and concluding with his service as president of the European mission.

Before diving into each of the respective missions, Taylor acknowledges Woodruff's legacy of recordkeeping, noting how he kept a continuous detailed journal from the time of his conversion (the last day of 1833) until his death (in 1898)—a span of nearly sixty-five years. Woodruff acknowledged that he felt this effort to be a spiritual obligation and part of his stewardship (7, 13). That impulse led Woodruff to include not only his day-to-day activities, travels, and personal religious experiences but also a substantial body of the public and private discourses of Church leaders,

thereby preserving their words and teachings for future generations (13–14). Remarkably, through the years and despite his many travels, Taylor notes that Woodruff succeeded in preserving his journals and most of his letters—a remarkable feat for that particular era (13, 19–20). She also provides the reader with a systematic and insightful analysis of Woodruff’s writing process, something she familiarized herself with while transcribing the journals for the Wilford Woodruff Papers website (17–18).

In the longest section of the book, chapter 3, the author focuses on Woodruff’s participation in Zion’s Camp (May 1834–July 1834), presenting it as his first mission and as a formative experience that taught him the principle of consecration and solidified his lifelong commitment to the restored gospel (23–24, 26–28). However, as a historian, I take exception to Taylor’s inclusion of Zion’s Camp as one of Woodruff’s missions, since it was not conducted for proselytizing purposes; rather, it was a quasi-military expedition organized to aid and support Church members in reclaiming their property after they had been driven from Jackson County, Missouri. Granted, the expedition was a life-changing experience for young Woodruff, but it was not a mission in the traditional sense.

After Zion’s Camp was disbanded in early July 1834, Woodruff remained in Clay County (28), where he worked for Michael Arthur, a local landowner. Then, in November 1834, Woodruff was officially called to missionary service by Bishop Edward Partridge to labor in the Southern states (29). For the next twenty-two months, Woodruff traveled largely on foot through Arkansas, Tennessee, and Kentucky (29, 33, 35–36, 38). Taylor provides scattered glimpses of his missionary service in the upper South (32–38). His tireless labors as a missionary established his reputation as a devoted laborer in the kingdom while also preparing him for future leadership opportunities. At the conclusion of his mission, he assisted several newly baptized families residing in Kentucky to relocate to Kirtland, Ohio, where they sought to unite with the main body of the Church and participate in the spiritual life centered on the Kirtland Temple (37–38).

In Kirtland, the young Wilford Woodruff received the washing and anointing ordinances associated with the Kirtland Temple (44–45) and his patriarchal blessing from Joseph Smith Sr. (112). During this period, he also commenced a brief courtship with Phebe Carter, a recent convert from Scarborough, Maine, which culminated in their marriage on April 13, 1837 (43, 45). Notably absent from Taylor’s discussion in this portion of her book (chap. 4) is any substantive treatment of the economic instability and widespread apostasy that afflicted the Kirtland

community in 1837. However, she does mention (in a later chapter) that around this time, several prominent Church leaders and close associates of Joseph Smith—including Warren Parrish, then one of Woodruff’s closest friends—publicly dissented from the Prophet (56).

Also in chapter 4, the author devotes extended attention to Wilford Woodruff’s mission to the Northeastern United States, initiated in the early summer of 1837 (47). Taylor notes that in a priesthood blessing pronounced on January 3, 1837, by Zebedee Coltrin, then one of the seven presidents of the First Quorum of the Seventy, Woodruff was promised that he would preach “upon the islands of the sea” (45). In her narrative, however, Taylor inaccurately states that Coltrin simultaneously ordained Woodruff to the priesthood office of Seventy (44). However, Woodruff had previously been ordained to that office on May 31, 1836, by David W. Patten and Warren Parrish during his Southern states mission, at which time he had been assigned to the *Second* Quorum of the Seventy. The January 1837 priesthood ordination constituted Woodruff’s placement in the *First* Quorum of the Seventy rather than an initial ordination to the office itself.

On April 15, 1837, Joseph Smith Sr. pronounced a patriarchal blessing upon Woodruff, reaffirming the promises pronounced upon him three months earlier by Zebedee Coltrin, including the promise that Woodruff would have power to “preach to the nations of the earth & to the inhabitants upon the Islands of the sea.”¹ Woodruff subsequently fulfilled this charge by devoting ten months (August 1837–May 1838) to missionary labors on the Fox Islands (48), situated approximately twelve to fifteen miles off the eastern coast of Maine, while Phebe resided for much of that period with her family in Scarborough (48, 51–52). During the summer of 1838, he also preached in Connecticut, where he baptized his father, stepmother, and half-sister, Eunice (112). Prior to returning to the Fox Islands, he visited Scarborough and witnessed the birth of his and Phebe’s first child, Sarah (52).

In the next three chapters (chaps. 5–7), the author covers a wide range of incidents in Woodruff’s life, beginning with Woodruff receiving a letter on July 14, 1838 from Thomas B. Marsh, President of the Quorum of the Twelve, informing Woodruff of his call to the apostleship (55). The author then backtracks to discuss the difficulties faced by the Latter-day Saints in northern Missouri in late 1838 and early 1839 (57–58)—a section that

1. Wilford Woodruff, “Journal (December 29, 1833–January 3, 1838),” January 3, 1837, Wilford Woodruff Papers, accessed May 19, 2026, <https://wilfordwoodruffpapers.org/p/AQ7>.

feels somewhat unnecessary and distracting. More attention could have been devoted to the Woodruffs' nearly fifteen-hundred-mile journey from Maine to western Illinois, accompanied by eight families Woodruff had converted (83). Although the author revisits this trek in chapter 7, it would have been more appropriately placed in chapter 5. However, chapter 5 gives solid attention to the return of seven members of the Twelve to Far West, Missouri, on April 26, 1839—including Woodruff, who was ordained an Apostle on that occasion—in fulfillment of the revelation recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 118 (58–60). Notably, although Taylor does not mention it, Woodruff's journal entry for that day remains the only firsthand account of the early morning events surrounding this historic gathering.

After returning to their families in Montrose, Iowa, the Twelve made final preparations for their collective mission to Great Britain, as instructed by revelation (D&C 118:4–6). Taylor offers a vivid and moving account of the well-known, heart-wrenching scene (often retold in Latter-day Saint publications) of Woodruff and his fellow Apostles bidding farewell to their wives and children, many of whom were sick and living in poverty, as the brethren embarked on their overseas mission (62–64). Structurally, the last section of chapter 5, “Sacrifice and Rescue in the Work of the Lord,” feels somewhat misplaced. In it, Taylor recounts the challenges Phebe faced while Woodruff was serving in Great Britain (64–66). Though the material is both poignant and insightful, it would have fit more naturally in other chapters (chaps. 6 or 7).

During his mission in Great Britain, Wilford Woodruff labored in Staffordshire, Herefordshire, and briefly in London (69, 71). Chapter 6 focuses primarily on his work in Herefordshire, especially among the United Brethren, a religious group that had broken away from the Primitive Methodist movement in the 1830s (71–76).

In chapter 7, titled “Trust in the Lord's Protection,” Taylor emphasizes Woodruff's recognition of divine protection throughout his life (79–83). She also extends this theme to Phebe, recounting the 1839 incident during their journey from Maine to Illinois when Phebe appeared to die but Woodruff administered to her and she revived (83–85).² A significant portion of the chapter also addresses the hardships Phebe endured while Woodruff served in Great Britain, including loneliness, the death

2. For an interesting account of this experience, see Jason Godfrey, “‘Not Because You Have Done Wrong, or Because the Lord Does Not Hear Your Prayer’: Wilford Woodruff's June 22, 1883, Letter to Eliza Dana Gibbs,” *BYU Studies* 65, no. 1 (2026): 141–48.

of their eldest daughter, Sarah, delayed and unreliable mail delivery with Woodruff, and her longing to be with her husband (86–91). The chapter concludes with a moving account of their joyful reunion after a two-year separation (91).

In chapter 8, Taylor draws on episodes from Woodruff's 1835–1836 mission to the Southern states, which, in my opinion, would have fit better chronologically in chapter 3 (97–98), his 1844 mission to the East to promote Joseph Smith's presidential candidacy (99), the Twelve's efforts to secure Church leadership after the martyrdom (99–100), his service in 1845–1846 as president of the British mission (100–104), and his ongoing commitment to journaling (104–6). Through these examples, she illustrates Woodruff's unwavering faithfulness as a laborer in the Lord's kingdom. While the chapter is inspiring and well written, it reads more as a collection of historical anecdotes rather than a tightly structured historical narrative.

In chapter 9, Taylor emphasizes the importance Woodruff placed on the covenantal ordinances he received, which she maintains prepared him for his eventual role as President of the Church. She highlights the following aspects: (1) his lifelong commitment to his baptismal covenants and his desire for his family to receive the restored gospel (111–12), (2) the preparatory temple ordinances and the spiritual education he received in the Kirtland house of the Lord and his personal zeal and desire to perform the vicarious ordinances of baptism and confirmation for the dead (114–16), (3) the conferral of all the priesthood keys by Joseph Smith upon the Twelve in March 1844 (114–16), and (4) Joseph's encouragement for the Saints to gather to the temple to receive their own ordinances and perform vicarious ordinances for the dead (116–22). Given Woodruff's deep understanding of the sacred nature and purposes of the temple ordinances, it is understandable why the aging Brigham Young appointed him to be the first president of the St. George Temple and authorized him (and others) "to record and organize the temple" endowment and sealing ceremonies (117–18). Woodruff's work towards developing and standardizing temple worship made it possible for all worthy Latter-day Saints to receive their temple ordinances and act as proxies on behalf of the dead (122–23).

The final chapter, chapter 10, focuses on Wilford Woodruff's presidency of the Church (1889–1898). Readers may be surprised to learn that Woodruff established the principle that following the death of the prophet, the senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve holds the authority of Church President—a concept not fully understood before his tenure

(130–32). Taylor clearly explains how this understanding developed under Woodruff’s careful guidance and notes his success in resolving tensions between younger and senior members of the Twelve (130–35). The chapter also highlights three other major milestones of his administration: the cessation of plural marriage (135–39), the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple (139–41), and Utah’s achievement of statehood (141).

In my view, *Prepare Me for Thy Use* will not have much appeal to scholars and historians. Thomas G. Alexander’s comprehensive biography, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Signature Books, 1991), still stands as the premier historical treatise on Woodruff’s life. In addition, scores of published scholarly articles and book chapters have been written that discuss events of Woodruff’s life. Nonetheless, Taylor’s work has merit, and she is to be commended for her extensive use of Woodruff’s journal entries in her narrative. These journals are now transcribed and freely available through the Wilford Woodruff Papers Foundation on the Wilford Woodruff Papers website. While *Prepare Me for Thy Use* suffers from some degree of redundancy and the need for a tighter sequential historical narrative, readers will nevertheless come away with a deeper understanding and appreciation for Woodruff’s lifelong discipleship, dedication, and devotion to the restored gospel.

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Views from the Iowa Side of the Mississippi River



*Contemporary Accounts
from the Nauvoo Years (1839–1846)*

Edited by
John W. Welch and Brooke R. LeFevre

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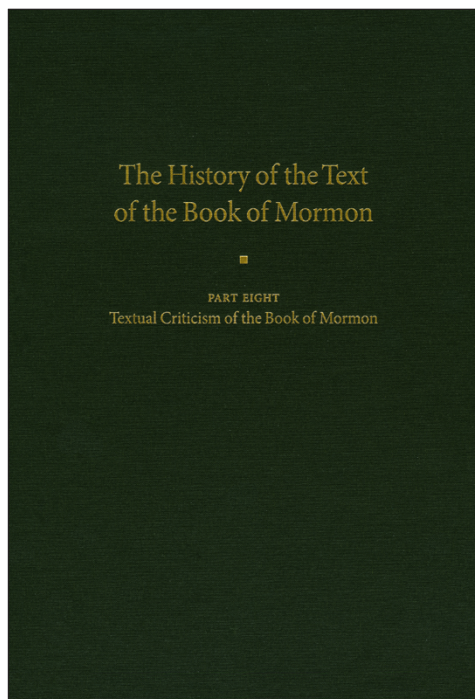
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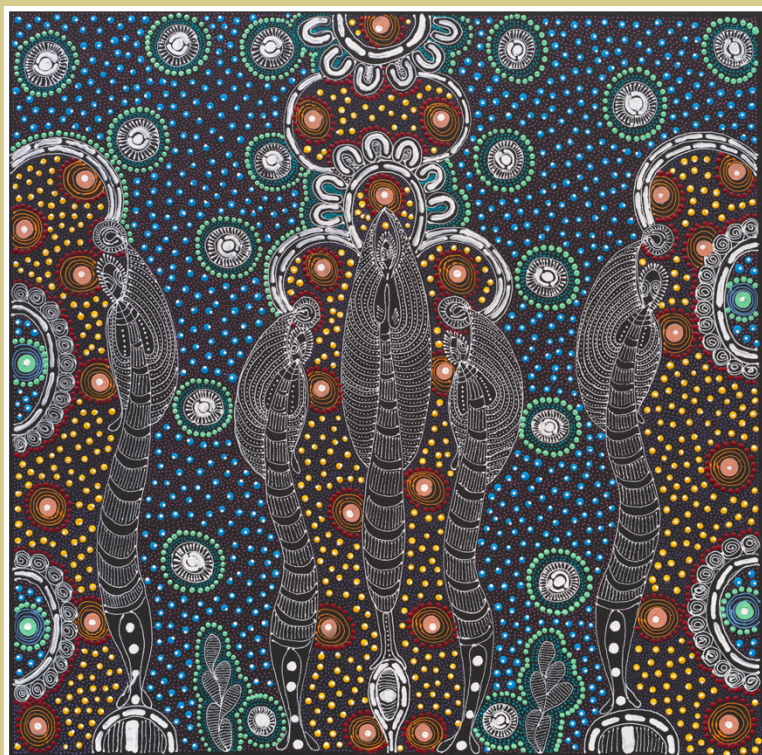
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