INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY IN MORMON THOUGHT AND HISTORY, 1830-1900

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This thesis illuminates the “social construction” theory of disability—that disability is not simply an inherent condition in individual persons but rather a socially constructed phenomenon—by analyzing the changing meaning of intellectual disability within the institutional discourse of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Throughout its history, Mormonism has represented disability in its official publications and sermons in a variety of ways. This thesis examines these shifting conceptions from the Church’s founding in 1830 to the turn of the twentieth century by focusing on three questions: How has intellectual disability been constructed in Mormonism’s public discourse? How were these representations informed by Mormonism’s larger cultural context? What uniquely Mormon ideas were brought to bear on the subject? Throughout the nineteenth century, people with intellectual disabilities were conceived of as being akin to innocent little children or as being representative of the degeneration of the human race—constructions which influenced Mormon theological positions about “idiocy.” Initial Mormon discussions about idiots centered on their moral accountability. Critics of Mormonism employed disability as a supposed product of Mormon polygamy to justify discrimination against Mormons, while defenders of Mormonism argued polygamy would perfect the human race. This thesis explains the ways Mormons drew on their particular theological tools and broader cultural beliefs to confront an issue (intellectual disability) that affects each religious tradition, every community, and potentially any family.
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And to that little baby Ksenia.
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INTRODUCTION

It may readily be assumed, from the paucity of reliable and trustworthy information on idiocy, that hasty generalizations, baseless assertions, and captivating theories should abound; nor is it likely to be doubted that the first steps of the truthful inquirer, when brought into contact with the objects of his study, are retrogressive. To unlearn is to take a great step in this, as in many other pursuits.

–Martin Duncan, “Notes on Idiocy,” 1861.¹

“Idiocy,” as intellectual disability was commonly referred to in the nineteenth century, has always been a contested category. English physician Martin Duncan’s 1861 remarks on the state of his field signal his recognition of the power that popular assumptions and cultural representations have in constructing what it means to be intellectually disabled. While the medical profession has made much headway exploring physiological dimensions, intellectual disability is also part social construct, making it what one philosopher on the subject has identified as a fundamentally “unstable classification.”² People move in and out of the classification over the human lifespan, but more importantly, underlying assumptions about etiology, category criteria, public policy, what it means to be disabled, and other questions have shifted over time and within different contexts. Even labels themselves become part of charged debates, as the “idiots” “feeble-minded” or “morons” of the past have given way to the “mentally retarded,” a term which itself has recently taken on pejorative connotation.³ These labels became

¹ Cited in Patrick McDonagh, Idiocy: A Cultural History (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 5.


³ Throughout this work I employ contextually-appropriate terms which may seem offensive to present sensibilities. “Idiocy,” “feeble-minded” and the like could be employed pejoratively in the nineteenth century, but these were also the terms used by medical practitioners, social reformers, and others to refer to what we presently call “intellectual disability.” I also employ the short-hand label of “disability” with recognition that it typically includes more than intellectual impairments.
taboo precisely because those most interested in caring for people identified as intellectually disabled were aware of the power which cultural representations have in shaping the lives of those so labeled. As Duncan observed over a century ago: “To unlearn is to take a great step” for the truthful inquirer on the topic of intellectual disability. Historical analysis provides one of the best ways to learn by unlearning.

In 1965 Michel Foucault opened a floodgate when he published *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* which focused primarily on the social construction of insanity.⁴ Historical and analytical scholarship on mental illness has since flourished, but Foucault’s work also inspired studies on the related topic of intellectual disability in the fields of history, philosophy, law, and even theology.⁵ The emerging field of Disability studies has produced works demonstrating that conceptions of intellectual disability have been bound together with notions of class, race, gender, and ethnicity. Assumptions about what constitutes and causes disability, or what ought to be done in response to it, are largely contingent upon the particular discourse undertaking the consideration, be it legal, medical, social, or religious. The changing meanings of disability can be located in the ways people with disabilities

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⁵ The division between mental illness (lunacy, insanity, etc.) and intellectual disability (idiocy, feeble-mindedness, etc.) is a long-standing point of controversy dating at least as far back as thirteenth century British law regarding land occupancy, ownership, and inheritance. See McDonagh, *Idiocy*, 79–91. Legal, philosophical and medical approaches to this question typically base the division on the presumed etiology of a condition, its potential for curability, and whether or not the condition was present at or near the time of birth. See James C. Harris, *Intellectual Disability: Understanding its Development, Causes, Classification, Evaluation, and Treatment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 140-187. As a historical analysis, this thesis accepts the historical dichotomy by focusing mainly on intellectual disability without addressing the problematic nature of the dichotomy between it and mental illness. These categories sometimes blur herein, especially in Chapter Three’s discussion of “delusion.” Studies of mental illness in Mormon thought and history include Lester E. Bush, *Health and Medicine Among the Latter-day Saints: Science, Sense, and Scripture* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Eric G. Swedin, *Healing Souls: Psychotherapy in the Latter-day Saint Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).
are depicted in medical research, institutional structures, film, literature, and even religious texts. To the present, however, practically no studies have been done regarding how various religious traditions have approached the issue of intellectual disability. This thesis will illuminate the “social construction” theory of disability—that disability is not merely an inherent physiological condition in individual persons but rather a socially defined and enacted phenomenon—by focusing on the changing meaning of disability within the institutional discourse of a religious tradition, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The ways which religious traditions have represented people with disabilities over time and the implications of such representations have not gone entirely unnoticed by various Disability organizations. For example, the American Association of People with Disabilities honored the LDS Church with its 2013 “Image Award for outstanding work in mass media which positively change public perceptions and opinions about people with disabilities.” The Church received the award in recognition of the “I’m a Mormon” PR campaign. It featured various practicing Mormons in advertisements, videos, and internet profiles—including people with various disabilities—talking about their life experiences, interests, and religious faith. Of the nine representative profiles provided in the Church’s official press release about the award, only one highlights intellectual disability: Rochelle, a mother of children with intellectual disabilities.

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6 For a general introduction to Disability studies, see Lennard J. Davis, The Disability Studies Reader, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010).

7 Throughout the thesis I employ titles including the LDS Church, the Church, Mormons and Mormonism when referring to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.


Rochelle talks about the difficulties of raising her children alongside elements of her faith which have sustained her in the process. An examination of Mormon history suggests that Rochelle’s positive portrayal is not representative of the full course of Mormon views on intellectual disability, although the absence of the voice of people with intellectual disabilities themselves is. Mormons have not always merited the sort of recognition they received in 2013.

Throughout its history of nearly two centuries, Mormonism has understood intellectual disability in a variety of ways. This thesis illuminates these shifting conceptions from the Church’s founding in 1830 to the turn of the twentieth century by focusing on three questions: How has intellectual disability been represented or constructed in Mormonism’s public discourse? How have these representations been informed by Mormonism’s larger cultural context? What uniquely Mormon ideas have been brought to bear on the subject?

First, with regard to Mormonism’s public discourse. The spirit of Mormon theology initially materialized in a cacophony of claimed revelations, internally directed sermon preaching, and externally directed proselytizing. It took bodily shape in a variety of published scriptures, tracts, newspapers, journals, and histories. Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s founder was seen by his people as a “prophet, seer and revelator”; as the representative voice of God to God’s people on earth.\(^\text{10}\) Alongside the Bible, Smith’s own teachings and the records he produced served as primary resources which other Mormons used to construct their theologies. I focus primarily on the published record Joseph Smith initiated and the works of his more immediate and prominent disciples. From 1830 onward, dissemination of Mormon teachings, regulations, warnings, assignments, etc. was done via the press. Smith and those who led the institutional Salt Lake-

\(^{10}\) See The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet, with Some Additions by His Successors in the Presidency of the Church (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), D&C 100:11; 107:92; 124:125; cited throughout the thesis as D&C, one of the Church’s four canonical books.
based church following his death used publications to craft and consolidate both theology and authority to maintain community cohesion. For the most part, my analysis is grounded in discussions of intellectual disability in the main publications of the LDS Church, from its canonized scriptures, to official newspapers like the *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, to full-blown theological books like Parley P. Pratt’s *A Key to the Science of Theology*.11

Of course, Mormon theology was not constructed in a vacuum, which leads to my second question: How have representations of disability been informed by Mormonism’s larger cultural context? Mormon publications were not meant for internal consumption only. Mormons used their publications to engage the wider social world, which in turn impacted the questions Mormons asked about their own beliefs and thus the theological reflections they recorded. One historian has described the development of early Mormon theology as “dialectical,” in that it “evolved through dialogues within Mormonism but also between Mormons and non-Mormons.”12 As a result, I also look to representations of Mormons and disability which appear in a variety of nineteenth-century non-Mormon publications. Mormons were aware of and responded to such works. Additional comparative insight is gained by situating Mormon constructions alongside those of various social reformers and writers who helped shape general public views about intellectual disability during the nineteenth century.

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11 This thesis is thus constrained by a sort of institutional bias, as the Salt Lake-based LDS Church is only one, albeit the numerically largest, of restorationist Churches which trace their origins to Joseph Smith. I hope it provides steady footing for those who wish to study intellectual disability in Mormon history going forward with an eye toward the experiences and voices of Mormons with disabilities themselves, in addition to that of their families and friends.

Finally: What unique Mormon ideas have been brought to bear on the topic? Perhaps the most surprising outcome of this historical analysis is the extent to which the theology of early Mormonism (often perceived by outsiders as a heretical sect and by insiders as a uniquely true religion) actually aligned with wider cultural assumptions about disability in general. In a significant sense, Mormon ideas about disabilities weren’t particularly Mormon, but rather were shared with and informed by wider American and British culture—the primary locales in which the institutional Church arose. Throughout the nineteenth century, people with disabilities were conceived of alternately as being akin to innocent little children, or as being representative of the degeneration of the human race due to immoral or unnatural human action. Nineteenth-century Mormon theological positions about intellectual disability indicate absorption of both of these prominent strains. The unique contribution which Mormon theological thinkers made was their adoption of idealistic concepts of fit human bodies and minds into their beliefs about the eternally-progressing characteristics of all humans. Mormon views on the origin, nature, and potential of humanity left less space within God’s created order for the presence of intellectual disabilities—a theological problem which did not receive direct attention until the twentieth century.

Chapter One begins to connect Mormon views of idiocy to wider cultural thought on the subject by looking at *The Idiot Witness*, a play performed at the Mormon city of Nauvoo in the 1840s. The earliest printed discussions of idiocy in Mormon history occurred in the mid-1830s, and they bear the imprint of the same legal and social constructs of idiocy which informed *The Idiot Witness*. These discussions draw out distinctions from nascent Mormon theology surrounding the purpose of life and human relation and responsibility toward God. Mormons preached an Arminian theology which offered salvation through Christ’s grace as contingent on the acceptance of and obedience to God’s laws. This left people with intellectual disabilities in an
ambiguous place, given their apparent inability to comprehend the gospel. To the limited extent that Mormons addressed this issue directly, they tended to adopt the explanations that were, in fact, conventional in the larger American culture.

Chapter Two describes how anti-Mormons scrutinized the mental state of Joseph Smith and the Mormon people more broadly. From 1837 through 1844, Joseph Smith’s theological developments regarding the importance of embodiment and intelligence raised the stakes for Mormonism’s “best-case anthropology.” Chapters Two and Three draw on the writings of another influential Mormon leader, Parley P. Pratt, who built upon Smith’s teachings to compose Mormonism’s most direct discussion of intellectual disability through its first two decades. Pratt saw the afterlife as the place and time where limited mortal bodies would become perfected, thus allowing the unfettered expansion of the power of the mind, including for people with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, Pratt downplayed the mortal existence of people with disabilities. They did not fit into his theological vision which depicted mortal life as the time during which humans become godlike by increasing in intelligence and producing and raising posterity—two tasks seemingly beyond the reach of people with disabilities.

Chapters Three and Four argue that the advent of Mormon polygamy and the theological and social justifications for the practice were the key factor in marginalizing the place of intellectual disability in Mormon theology. Mormons faced outside criticism due to their peculiar practice; their bodies and minds became fit subjects for public scrutiny. At the same time, Mormons held many of the same assumptions about the causes of disability. It was thought to be the result of inferior heredity or immoral procreative habits. Mormons believed their religion, including polygamy, could provide a way to perfect the human race on earth, ultimately making disability a moot consideration. In fact, the Mormon preoccupation with vindicating and defending polygamy displaced any effort—theological or otherwise—for the rest of the
nineteenth-century that could have led to a more coherent, humane, or useful theology of disability.

As these chapter summaries suggest, this thesis ultimately tells the story of the diminishment of Mormon theology in regards to intellectual disability from the 1830s to the turn of the twentieth century. I do not examine disability as an objective biological condition, but rather as a contested and changing social representation which can tell us much about what Mormons believe it means to be human, and the extent to which Enlightenment ideas about intelligence and rationality impacted the ways people with intellectual disabilities were represented in a particular religious setting. It also serves as another reminder of how the wider American public employed disability as constituting a category fit for discrimination. The personal religious lives of people with intellectual disabilities were entirely overlooked in early Mormon discourse. The voices and experiences of actual historical people with intellectual disabilities and their family members receives scant attention in this thesis largely due to the scant attention they received in Mormon publications of the period under discussion. In fact, the absence of perspectives on disability from people with disabilities themselves is representative of how absent disability was from published Mormon thought in the period under consideration. Follow-up studies must look to the archives for examples of personally-recorded lives and experiences.

Despite their checkered past, contemporary practicing Mormons might take heart in the developments which have happened over the twentieth century leading up to their recent national Image Award. This is a story I hope to tell in the future. In the meantime, the present thesis provides a historical account of the foundations of Mormon theology in regards to intellectual disability and suggests Mormons need not be locked in to any particular theological view, given the malleability of theology on the topic over time. This work also suggests that Mormons don’t
have a static theology, but rather dynamic theologies which develop in relation to the environments in which they grow up. Outsiders to the tradition will gain a better understanding of the general development of Mormon theology in the nineteenth century. In particular, this thesis explains the ways Mormons themselves drew on their particular theological tools and broader cultural beliefs to confront an issue (intellectual disability) that affects every religious tradition, every community, and potentially any family. Ultimately, I hope an understanding of this history will provide inspiration for future historical, philosophical, and theological projects related to intellectual disability and religion.
CHAPTER ONE
“HE THAT HATH NO UNDERSTANDING”:
IDIocy IN MORMONISM, 1830-1837

It took Joseph Smith and his religious followers a mere four years to convert the swampy, mosquito-infested land of Commerce, Illinois into the city of Nauvoo.\(^1\) It became one of the most booming cities on the Mississippi River, second only to Chicago in state population. By April 1844 Nauvoo’s civic and religious life was embodied in the many new buildings lining its orderly streets. Even before their magnificent Temple was completed, the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith’s brother dedicated a three-story Masonic Hall on the corner of Main and White streets. In addition to Nauvoo Lodge meetings, the building hosted a variety of social gatherings and entertainment. Far from desiring a Puritanical society, the Mormons enjoyed music, literature, art and curiosity exhibits, as well as theatrical exhibitions. Mormon taste in popular culture seemed to share a good deal with the wider American society in which they endeavored to build up their church.\(^2\)

A mere month before the city mourned the shocking assassination of their prophet, the Masonic Hall’s ground floor was “fitted up with very tasteful scenery” by tragedarian and Mormon convert Thomas A. Lyne, an actor/director whose new Nauvoo Dramatic Company performed—among others—a play called *The Idiot Witness, or A Tale of Blood*. One of Nauvoo’s two newspapers endorsed the “refined taste” of Lyne’s company and assured theatergoers of their intention “to present the public with nothing that is not strictly moral...those who patronize them

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will reap great benefit if they will profit by the sublime contemplations which such performances never fail to inspire in the meditative mind." This pious endorsement slightly clashed with the actual content of *The Idiot Witness*, written in 1823 by John Thomas Haines. The play was the first and most popular of the approximately twenty-five “blood-and-thunder” melodramas written by the Englishman. His depiction of Gilbert the idiot—a role he originally played—provides a good example of the culturally acceptable stereotypes attached to people with intellectual disabilities in mid-nineteenth century England and America. These stereotypes connected in interesting ways with developing Mormon theological beliefs. While only a few hundred of Nauvoo’s approximately 11,000 citizens could have been in attendance during the two performance nights, the play provides a useful point of comparison to, as the *Neighbor* put it, “inspire the meditative mind” on Mormons and intellectual disability. Before describing the play itself, I will describe the context in which the play appeared.

*The Idiot Witness in Nineteenth-Century America*

The concept of “idiocy” underwent substantial transformations between 1800 and 1900. Psychologist and physician John Haslam’s 1923 claim that “lunacy” (mental illness) was impenetrable by contrast to the “well understood” nature of idiocy is belied by the variety of

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3 n. a., “Nauvoo Theatre,” *Nauvoo Neighbor* 105, no. 1 (May 1, 1844): 2. Several years later, notice of the play was included in the Church’s official history. See Joseph Smith, Jr. and B.H. Roberts, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1980), 349-350. Though written in the voice of the prophet, the entry on the production is not found in Smith’s own journals, but was drawn from the *Nauvoo Neighbor* several years later by church historian Willard Richards or George A. Smith. My thanks to William Smith for checking these sources.

images and terms permeating public and professional discussions. Labels like idiot, imbecile, natural, simpleton, and feebleminded, were sometimes used in pejorative ways, but they were also the accepted technical terms used by a growing body of physicians, educators, politicians, and Americans in general. From the early 1800s, “simpletons” in the United States generally “found no great obstacle to day-to-day living,” spending their time with their families and living day-to-day as a normal part of the community. Lacking family, an idiot might be placed with neighbors or in an almshouse. They were more likely to be pitied or occasionally teased than feared.

Idiots also offered some an opportunity for aesthetic contemplation, as in William Wordsworth’s 1798 poem “The Idiot Boy” which paints a romantic view. During a midnight rescue ride on behalf of his mother, a young idiot is distracted and entirely wrapped up in the wonder of his natural surroundings. His devoted mother grows worried at his prolonged absence. The poem was criticized for dwelling on such a pitiable creature. One reviewer complained that the scene provided the reader no opportunity to enter into the feelings of the idiot or the mother, as such sympathy “disgusts us.” To Wordsworth, such criticism sprung from a “false delicacy.” His poem should allow readers to begin “stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves to[ward men] who lead the simplest lives, and those most according to nature” readers might overcome the “false refinements” infesting the urbanizing culture. Wordsworth’s much-

5 Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 2. The division between mental illness (lunacy, insanity, etc.) and intellectual disability (idiocy, feeblemindedness, etc.) is a long-standing point of controversy. See my Introduction, fn5.


7 McDonagh, *Idiocy*, 26–27.
criticized *Lyrical Ballads* in which the poem appeared was an effort to resuscitate a romantic view of the low or vulgar rural life, which included the child and the idiot.\(^8\)

Neither Wordsworth nor the critic would likely have cared much for Haines’s play *The Idiot Witness*. The hope expressed by the *Nauvoo Neighbor* that the play would “inspire the meditative mind” resonated with Wordsworth’s view of the opportunity afforded by poetry; in each case the role of the arts was presumably to elevate and enlighten. But this shared purpose broke down at the level of execution. The play had nothing Wordsworth would likely have found worthy of meditation. The reason for its popular appeal becomes evident by analyzing the way it played upon the audience’s understanding of the legal ramifications of idiocy. The cultural assumptions which the play highlights also provide the backdrop for the earliest Mormon discussions of idiocy.

In *The Idiot Witness*, a scheming uncle wishes to murder his nephew in order to become sole benefactor of his dead brother’s large estate. The uncle’s son and his idiot servant Gilbert are privy to the plot. The son, who also stands to gain, is unlikely to rat out his father due to familial loyalty. And Gilbert is an idiot. The plot thickens when the uncle accidentally kills his own son rather than the nephew. The uncle tries to exonerate himself and still win the inheritance by pinning the murder on his nephew. He would have gotten away with it, too, were it not for that meddling Gilbert who rushes in just as the uncle accuses the nephew of murder: “‘Tis false! I, Gilbert, your idiot slave, was witness of your guilt, and am here to crush thee. … I am not an idiot, nor ever was one. Villain, the hour of retribution has arrived; and that heaven which saw

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\(^8\) For more on Wordsworth’s project and idiocy, see Ibid., 24–49. I thank Terryl Givens for his observations on the cultural context of Wordsworth’s works.
you perpetrate your crime, makes me an instrument to hurl its thunders on you.” The uncle is convicted, the nephew goes free and the idiot’s long ruse has paid off. This last-second exoneration was a common “theatrical conceit” common at the time by which an unexpected witness—an idiot, ghost, or some other figure—saves an innocent party from conviction.10

Far from being a *deus ex machina*, however, this plot resolution was powerful precisely because it played upon common social expectations. An audience would be aware that as an idiot, Gilbert was incompetent and untrustworthy in such a crucial matter—the irony is captured by the play’s oxymoronic title “The Idiot Witness.” British and American law long assumed the incompetence, dependence, or deviance of people with disabilities while creating legal structures which ensured what one legal scholar has called a “formal deprivation of rights” alongside a weak “series of legal protections.”11 The word “idiot” itself (a private person or non-citizen) was adopted from the Greek into the English language through England’s *Prerogativa Regis*. Statutes from 1540 and 1542 asserted the crown’s authority to “survey, govern and order all and singular idiots and natural fools….”12 While idiots were exempted from military service and other civic obligations, they also could not enter into contracts, marry, manage inheritances, or play a determinative role in a court of law. The place of idiots in relation to wider society in social and economic matters were dominant concerns. Of course, at the play’s conclusion these considerations became irrelevant when Gilbert revealed he was pretending all along—no doubt to

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9 John Thomas Haines, *The Idiot Witness, or A Tale of Blood, a Melodrama in Two Acts* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacy, 1823), 20. Portraying a person with an intellectual disability as being an “instrument” of God (a utilitarian construction) appears in later Mormon discourse beyond the timeframe of this thesis.

10 McDonagh, *Idiocy*, 105, 255.


12 McDonagh, *Idiocy*, 83.
The delight of Nauvoo audiences. Wordsworth’s “idiot boy” was employed to invert social conceptions of the lowly and natural, but Haines’s Gilbert spared the audience the indignity of reckoning with a real idiot by springing from his disguise at the play’s climax. In order for the audience to take him seriously he must become one of them after all. Still, even before he threw off the disguise his simple and happy manner made for a likeable enough character.

*The Idiot Witness* almost certainly had little impact on Mormon theological views of disability, but the play’s reliance upon assumptions about the legal aspects of disability for dramatic effect was in tune with the Church’s earliest printed discussions of idiocy. An analysis of interpretations of disability in this religious context provides an instance in which law served as a handmaiden to theology. It also provides a glimpse into the ways Joseph Smith’s followers sometimes drew upon, reformulated or expanded his particular growing body of revelations to answer pressing questions Smith himself had not directly approached. The next section explores Smith’s developing theology in its wider American context and examines the ways other Mormons adapted the prophet’s new scriptures and teachings for use in discussions about intellectual disability. Although Smith himself said practically nothing directly in regards to intellectual disability, his words provided theological material other Mormons could use to fill in the lacuna. The first two decades of the growing Mormon movement provided the theological materials which have been used throughout the Church’s history. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the earliest Mormon discussions of intellectual disability between 1830 and 1837, and briefly describes some of Smith’s pre-1844 theological developments which would only later impact discussions on intellectual disability.

13 Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow discuss other ways which Smith, Pratt and others “incorporated deeply ingrained political values...into religious views” in *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 126. It is in this sense that I suggest the legal discourse about “idiocy” informed the ways Mormons constructed their theology.
God’s Laws and “He That Hath No Understanding”

The earliest explicit discussion of intellectual disability (specifically in this case, idiocy) within Mormonism appeared in the January 1836 issue of the Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate. The unsigned editorial, “Let every man learn his duty,” approached the perennial question of what one must do in order to be saved. The answer was simple: Learn and then obey God’s laws. “God deals with us upon rational and intelligent principles, he condemns us not for what we knew not, but for what we know and observe not,” the author observed, placing primacy upon rationality for humans in relation to God. He pointed to the Mormon scriptures—“the bible, the book of Mormon, and Book of Covenant”—as the sources where God’s expectations were outlined and invited readers to learn and obey in order to find joy in this life and salvation in the next. Those who fail to do so would be held accountable. In addition to listing a roster of biblical prophets who received revelation from God and the consequences of the reception of their words, the editorial included several unattributed references drawn from at least three of Joseph Smith’s early revelations. The author’s lack of attribution to the Mormon prophet stands out, given that his listing of ancient prophets rhetorically indicated the importance of such figures in God’s communication with humans.

14 n. a., John Whitmer, ed., “Let every man learn his duty,” Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 2, no. 4 (January 1836): 248–250. Whitmer possibly authored this piece, as he edited this issue of the newspaper. The Messenger and Advocate was published at Kirtland, Ohio from October 1834 to September 1837. See Peter Crawley, A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church Vol. 1, 1830-1847 (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1997), 47–49.

15 Whitmer, ed., Ibid. The “Book of Covenant” refers to the Doctrine and Covenants, a collection of Joseph Smith’s revelations published for the Church in 1835. It expanded upon a prior collection of Smith’s revelations called The Book of Commandments, published in 1833. Several of the revelations had also appeared in Mormon periodicals. The references in this chapter refer to the modern edition of these scriptures, The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Containing Revelations Given to Joseph Smith, the Prophet, with Some Additions by His Successors in the Presidency of the Church (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), cited herein as D&C.
First, the editorial’s title, “Let every man learn his duty,” is found in D&C 107.\textsuperscript{16} Addressing the church’s male-only lay priesthood, that revelation promoted the idea of individual responsibility to learn and obey God’s commandments in cooperation with other priesthood holders. Second, the editorial’s conclusion praised the United States Constitution with ideas drawn from D&C 101, an American exceptionalism-tinged section which asserts the importance of a government established by God which allows for “the freedom of the soul and liberty of conscience,” so that individuals can freely obey God’s commands.\textsuperscript{17}

These two components are reflective of the nascent Mormon soteriology which made salvation contingent upon accessing the grace of Jesus Christ through individual obedience to laws within the community of the faithful. One would be either saved or damned according to one’s response to God’s commands.\textsuperscript{18} But such obedience would only be meaningful if the exercise of non-coerced agency is possible. The editorial asserted every person must be their own judge regarding religious matters. If you “deny a man this privilege, his agency is destroyed.”\textsuperscript{19}

The editorial’s third reference to Smith’s revelations occurred during an aside by the author listing reasons some people fail to obey God’s commands to their own condemnation.


\textsuperscript{17} D&C 101 was received on December 16-17, 1833. See Ibid., 579.

\textsuperscript{18} This “saved” or “damned” dichotomy would soon give way in Smith’s revelations to a graduated heaven of at least three degrees: Telestial, Terrestrial, and Celestial, to which various peoples would be assigned in the eternities. See Jensen, et. al., \textit{Manuscript Revelations}, 243-255. The revelation was recorded on February 16, 1832 and had already been published in an earlier Mormon newspaper but had not yet become a commonly-invoked teaching of Mormonism. See Grant Underwood, “‘Saved or Damned’: Tracing a Persistent Protestantism in Early Mormon Thought,” \textit{BYU Studies} 25, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 85–103.

\textsuperscript{19} n.a., “Let every man learn his duty,” 250.
“Stubbornness, willfulness and tradition” certainly hinders to the condemnation of an individual, but importantly, not “ignorance.” The direct reference to idiocy followed an unattributed quote from D&C 29:

Know ye not, that he who has no understanding it remaineth with God to do with them as seemeth him good? If God has created a being and has not given it intelligence would he be just to condemn it upon the same principle, that he would one whom he had endowed with intelligence? no; for an individual, or nation that has no law given to them, become a law unto themselves.

In Smith’s original revelation, “he that hath no understanding” appears to refer primarily to little children who are said to be “redeemed from the foundation of the world through [Jesus]; Wherefore, they cannot sin, for power is not given unto Satan to tempt little children, until they begin to become accountable before me; For it is given unto them even as I will, according to mine own pleasure, that great things may be required at the hand of their fathers.” Rather than children, the editorial’s author interprets “he who has no understanding” more broadly: “But the law by which God judges idiots he has not revealed to us: we can only judge from the principle upon which he has said that he would judge the world….”

In sum, by drawing on Joseph Smith’s revelations, the author of this editorial outlined a soteriological story in which humans receive commandments from God that they are obliged to

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20 Note the ambiguity. Does the author mean a being to whom God had not “given” intelligence, i.e. information (did not reveal the laws to him)? Or did it refer to a being who was not “endowed” with intelligence as an ability, i.e. who would be considered incapable of understanding? Perhaps both? This question becomes more complicated when considering Joseph Smith’s developing thought in regards to the nature of humans as discussed in Chapter Two.

21 Ibid., 248, emphasis mine, referring to D&C 29. “Law unto themselves” echoes Romans 2:14 (King James Version).

22 What does “it” refer to here? Power? Agency? Intelligence?


24 n.a., “Let every man learn his duty,” 248.
obey in order to receive salvation. Those who reject God’s commandments are damned. Those who do not know, or especially who do not understand, God’s commandments will not be held to the same level of expectation. D&C 29 specifically exonerates “little children” from damnation based on Jesus’s sacrifice and their own inability to sin or even be tempted to sin. By contrast, the editorial reworked the revelation’s statement about little children into one pertaining to idiots. God had not revealed the law by which he judges idiots more broadly, the author concluded. He resorted to reasoning their situation out based upon other things God previously revealed—specifically assertions made about little children being unable to sin. An idiot or a child’s “legal” accountability was the chief concern in this first published discussion of idiocy. Idiots are not center stage in this discussion, but rather serve as a rhetorical foil against which rational readers of the editorial should compare themselves so as to reaffirm their own responsibility to act on God’s commands, given their ability to comprehend them.25

“If He Had Peopled the World With Idiots…”

The Messenger and Advocate ran another article referring to idiocy the following year, 1837. The paper’s new editor, Warren Cowdery, brought up idiocy during an interpretation of a biblical verse rather than using Smith’s revelations as the previous article had done. But as with

25 I base this conclusion on a close reading of the revelation’s internal referents. I argue that the revelation was referring specifically to “little children” when it mentions “he who hath no understanding,” although the editorial applies the descriptor to idiots. The revelation says it remains God’s prerogative to do “as it is written” with those who have no understanding, referring to the assertions made within that same document about children being redeemed without baptism, and possibly to the Book of Mormon text which also exonerates little children. See Moroni 8 and Mosiah 15:25 in the LDS Church’s modern edition, The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981). All Book of Mormon references throughout this thesis refer to this 1981 edition. An uncanonized revelation from Smith in January 1836 specifically said “all children who die before they arrive at the years of accountability are saved in the celestial kingdom of heaven.” The revelation was canonized in the 1981 edition, D&C 137:10.
the previous article, legal considerations provide the discussion’s foreground. The reference occurred during a digression in a discussion about national and local money speculations and attendant hardships at the Mormon settlement of Kirtland, Ohio.Could the Mormons attribute their financial difficulties to the chastening hand of their just God?:

God...chasteneth every son whom he receiveth....[He] deals with all as rational, accountable beings to him. If he had peopled the whole world with idiots, he certainly would not condemn them for a noncompliance with a law given for the government of wise, intelligent men. Why? because they could not understand it; therefore, since he is a just God and requires much only where much is given, it is easy to see that it could not be obligatory upon them....

According to Cowdery’s reading of Hebrews 7:11, God chastens those he loves—especially those who do not comply with his commands—in order to teach the importance of humble submission. Peopling the world with idiots would be counter-productive to God’s purposes of correcting and schooling, things which Cowdery believed idiots were not capable of experiencing. (Note the “all” whom God deals rationally with already excludes idiots.) Thus, compliance with God’s laws is required only of those who can understand God’s expectations and can properly learn from God’s chastening should they deserve correction. The outcome of a person’s decisions as constrained by their intellectual capacity is filtered through Hebrews 7 and Luke 12:48: Where much is given, much is required, and much chastening can be expected in this life if requirements are not met. Little could be required of idiots in terms of obedience.

26 A good overview of the period is Mark L. Staker, Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelations (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2009).

27 Warren A. Cowdery, “A train of causes,” Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 3, no. 9 (June 1837): 522. Notice the tautology: God “deals with all as rational, accountable beings to him,” but the “all” only refers to rational, accountable beings, thus excluding idiots from consideration.

28 The claim that “Where much is given much is required” is also implicit in the Book of Mormon’s discussion of little children in Moroni 8 (see vv. 28-29). A group of people who once understood God’s commandments were now directly disobeying them with dreadful consequences due to their once having known better.
Similar to the unsigned editorial, Cowdery discussed idiocy in the context of human capability to understand and obey God’s commands. In both cases, the writers invoked idiocy primarily for the way it affected a person’s ability to understand the will of God, whether it be made known through God’s commandments, or in the trials God sends upon them.\(^\text{29}\) In both cases the status of idiots is not argued, but assumed from the outset in order to bolster a larger rhetorical point about agency and responsibility. Cowdery expands the temporal element of discussion to an eternal scope: Will God condemn those who do not know God’s will or who are incapable of understanding it? “Where the word of God is not known, where it is not understood, mankind cannot be expected to comply with it.”\(^\text{30}\)

**Mormons and Campbellites**

Cowdery, who claimed his views were based solely on scripture and the proper application of “common sense,” also asserted that his doctrines would “come in direct contact with the opinion of a great mass of the professing Christian world.”\(^\text{31}\) Cowdery may not have been aware that this great mass did not include Alexander Campbell, whose “Disciples of Christ” movement (or Campbellites) competed with Mormons over converts thirsty for a restoration of the primitive Christian faith. Campbell was well aware of the Mormon movement—one of his more prominent disciples, Sidney Rigdon, left his flock to join the Mormon faith taking over one

\(^{29}\) Neither of the writers address etiology, or the origins of disability. In both cases they avoid attributing it to the displeasure of God, which is especially interesting in Cowdery’s discussion, as idiocy itself would preclude an individual’s benefitting from God’s displeasure or even from such tutelage in his view. This educative sense of life’s purpose becomes a more important component of Mormonism’s teachings about the purpose of mortal life as discussed in Chapter Two.

\(^{30}\) Cowdery, “A train of causes,” 522.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
hundred members of his congregation with him. He also published the first extended critique of the Book of Mormon. Like the Mormons, Campbell taught the necessity of believer’s baptism commanded by God, which created a theological pressure point regarding those who lack the opportunity to learn about—or the ability to understand—baptism.

Like the Mormons, Campbell situated people with intellectual disabilities alongside children and people with other disabilities: “[H]ow many infants, idiots, and deaf and dumb persons” will ultimately “attain to the resurrection of the just,” Campbell would not say. But the “sacrifice of Christ” would be the grounds of their salvation, even though they would almost certainly not be aware of it. Campbell’s writings, like Smith’s revelations, were more specific about children than idiots—although unlike Smith, Campbell explicitly placed them in the same category. Still, Campbell’s main emphasis was placed upon the status of little children: “I have much reason to think that infants dying will be citizens of the kingdom of glory, without, in this life knowing, or believing” or being baptized. In fact, Campbell more explicitly collapsed the categories elsewhere by referring to infants as “imbecile.” They would, however, grow out of this

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32 Campbell attributed Rigdon’s apostasy to “instability” caused by an unspecified “peculiar mental and corporeal malady.” See Alexander Campbell, “Sidney Rigdon,” The Millennial Harbinger 2, no. 2 (February 7, 1831): 100–101. Chapter Two discusses the impact of such accusations on Mormon views of religiosity and intellectual disability.


35 Ibid., 165. Campbell situates idiocy and infants within a citizenship model, invoking membership in the kingdom. Legalistic assumptions of responsibility, citizenship, etc. also informed Mormon views.
imbecile state according to the quality of Christian education they received.\textsuperscript{36} Campbell did not address whether education could assist in the intellectual or moral advance of idiots as nineteenth-century specialists on idiocy would soon claim, but his line of argument seems to suggest he did not see them as requiring baptism regardless of such possibilities—baptism was only required of believers who had both heard and understood the word.\textsuperscript{37}

In these discussions, neither Campbell nor the Mormons expressed concern about the etiology of idiocy, or the lived experiences of people with intellectual disabilities and their capacity for spiritual experiences, or even their place within a day-to-day Christian organization. Instead, the primary concern was the question of accountability and baptism with eternal salvation in mind. Of course, these priorities spoke to wider theological questions about the relationship of grace and works. But on a more practical level, the two religious movements were seeking increased numbers and baptism was the gateway to membership. Theological ideas about idiocy were pertinent because they held direct implications for religious practice with regard to people with disabilities joining religious communities.\textsuperscript{38} For these religious movements, idiocy was, as it had long been legally, a “citizenship” issue. Idiocy became a problem to the extent that it raised questions about one’s ability to enter into a contract—in the religious context, a covenant with God through baptism in order to join a church and ultimately be saved.

While Joseph Smith did not speak directly to the issue of idiocy, then, his early revelations included two components which shaped discussions regarding idiocy (and intellectual

\textsuperscript{36} Alexander Campbell, “Education—No. 2,” \textit{The Millennial Harbinger} 1, no. 6 (June 7, 1830): 251–254.

\textsuperscript{37} Campbell, “Reply to C.F.,” 163.

\textsuperscript{38} Licia Carlson’s primary objective in “unmasking” different representations of disability is to show the practical outcomes which theoretical constructs create in \textit{The Faces of Intellectual Disability}, 120.
disability thereafter) within Mormonism: first, the context in which idiocy would be addressed—Smith’s revelations were created for a proselytizing Church claiming sole access to God’s authority to teach and baptize—and the content which would be applied—legalistic terms about accountability in order to qualify for repentance and baptism for inclusion in that community. At this early stage, there was evidently little theological pressure in a church composed mainly of first generation converts to develop pastoral approaches for families with children with intellectual disabilities.39

Campbell was forced to reckon with the established biblical canon to formulate his position on baptism and idiocy, while as the unsigned editorial shows, Mormons interpreted the word of God with the addition of Smith’s growing body of revelations, many of them being directly informed by the Bible.40 The apparent vacuum in Smith’s revelations regarding the place of idiots was rapidly filled by other Mormons using his teachings about children, accountability, and baptism. Whereas Campbell gave some leeway for the good intentions of “Paidobaptists,”41 a chapter of the Book of Mormon which Smith dictated in 1829 expressly condemned the practice as a “solemn mockery” and as “awful wickedness.” Requiring baptism of such would constitute a denial of the “mercies of Christ.” Repentance and baptism should be taught “unto those who are

39 Such concerns were not manifest in official Mormon discourse until the twentieth century.


41 Paedobaptism, or pedobaptism, refers to the practice of baptizing infants to remove the effects of original sin. Campbell granted leeway largely on the grounds that those advocating the practice had themselves been baptized, and that they simply misunderstood the meaning and design of baptism. See Campbell, “Reply to C.F.,” 165.
accountable and capable of committing sin,” which does not include “little children.” Adults must “humble themselves as their little children, and they shall all be saved with their little children” through baptism. This framework was adopted into the Church’s first formal statement of procedure written by Joseph Smith between March and June, 1830, now canonized as D&C 20: “No one can be received into the church of Christ unless he has arrived unto the years of accountability before God, and is capable of repentance.” The requirement of baptism and the qualities one must possess in order to make the ordinance necessary thus became the magnet issue around which Campbell’s and Mormonism’s discussions of idiocy collected.

**Legal, Philosophical, and Religious Traditions about Accountability**

Accountability was a recurring theme in Smith’s early revelations before and after the formal organization of his Church. This is the framework in which the 1836 editorial and Cowdery’s article approaches salvation. The question was rarely addressed in print in these early years and was not a prominent theme in ongoing doctrinal debates between Mormons and other Christians. The rare instances when the subject was raised reflected a long tradition of

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42 Moroni 8: 9-12, 19-20.

43 D&C 20:71. This section bears a strong relation to a document written in June 1829 by Smith’s associate Oliver Cowdery. Cowdery’s version draws heavily on the Book of Mormon manuscript and other revelations from Smith, but omits discussion of accountability, although the requirements for baptism assume accountability. See Scott H. Faulring, “An Examination of the 1829 ‘Articles of the Church of Christ’ in Relation to Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants,” **BYU Studies** 43, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 68.

44 See D&C 18:42 (June 1829), D&C 20:71 (April 1830), and D&C 137:10 (January 1836).

45 As I hope to show in a future work, accountability is the main concept Mormons again applied in the twentieth century when intellectual disability received the explicit attention of Mormon leadership.

46 Alexander Campbell had criticized the ostensibly-ancient Book of Mormon’s attempt to resolve “all the great controversies” brewing in nineteenth-century America, including “infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation” and a
discussing idiocy in regards to accountability and citizenship. These discussions of idiocy amongst the primitivist Campbellites and Mormons appear to be as much informed by centuries of legal jurisprudence on the culpability of idiots as by centuries of religious and philosophical tradition, although influences from each of those legacies can be detected.

Erasmus’s 1511 *Praise of Folly* surmised that idiots and fools were “the happiest group of people” in spite of their similarity to “dumb animals.” After all, “the theologians tell us they can’t even sin….They are indeed under the protection of the gods.” Not all theologians felt that way—Martin Luther famously advocated killing an idiot boy on the basis that he lacked a soul. His body was merely a vessel housing the devil. Mormons and Campbell were closer to the theologians mentioned by Erasmus than to Luther. Representations of disability as demon possession did not appear in their publications. On the contrary, Smith’s claim that children

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47 McDonagh, *Idiocy*, 129.

48 Ibid., 131–2. Stefan Heuser tries to rehabilitate Luther’s reputation by reading other elements of his theology against his harsh position on idiocy. See “The Human Condition as Seen From the Cross: Luther and Disability,” in Brian Brock and John Swinton, eds., *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 184-215.

49 Accounts of a man who was thought to be “possessed with the devil” in the 1830s appeared in several Mormon publications in the 1880s. The man suffered from “raving spell[s]” and was sometimes kept “chained in a tight room” to prevent violent outbursts. The church elders had some success in casting out the devil, but it would return, which Mormons attributed to the family’s disobedience to the Mormon health code called “the Word of Wisdom.” The man “died a raving maniac,” and intemperance was to blame. See W. Paul Reeve, “‘As Ugly as Evil’ and ‘As Wicked as Hell’: Gadianton Robbers and the Legend Process among the Mormons,” in W. Paul Reeve and Michael Van Wagenen, eds., *Between Pulpit and Pew the Supernatural World in Mormon History and Folklore* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2011), 48–49. The descriptions of the man’s behavior seem to indicate what today would be called a mental illness rather than an intellectual disability. However, attributing the cause to intemperance during this late period bears striking resemblance to Mormon claims that obedience to the Word of Wisdom would prevent idiocy. As I will discuss in a future work, the Word of Wisdom filled an etiological gap left by the cessation of polygamy in regards to disability.
could not even be tempted by the Devil echoed the same claims which earlier theologians made about idiots. William Langland’s fourteenth-century visionary poem, *Piers Plowman*, distinguished between artificial and natural fools. The former knew better and were inspired by the Devil, the latter were innocent: “But with children and fools the field has no power / Over any acts they perform, which might otherwise be wicked.” At the same time, neither Mormons nor Campbellites advocated the view of Thomas à Kempis and other humanist-leaning theologians and philosophers who constructed a view of the “holy fool,” that fools had the ability to offer penetrating truths, a view which also informed the festive and professional fools of the Middle Ages.  

Mormon views appear to have been informed by the legal heritage the United States received from England as much as from such theological traditions. British law dictionaries had long determined the incapacity of idiots to manage inheritance or produce proper offspring—the chief motivations for initially classifying idiocy were social and economic. To such limiting statutes, Giles Jacob’s 1729 *New Law Dictionary* added the provision about “ideots” that “such a one ought not to be prosecuted for any Crime, because he wants Knowledge to distinguish Good from Evil.” An analysis of colonial and post-revolutionary legal approaches to intellectual disability uncovers no systematic effort to identify or restrict people with intellectual disabilities. Rather, laws were enacted in a piecemeal fashion, generally following in the footsteps of English law. Statutes and their actual application varied from state to state, but all dealt generally with contract relationships regarding business, marriage, or other institutions. The competing goals of

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50 McDonagh, *Idiocy*, 138.
51 Ibid., 133-149.
52 Ibid., 86.
protecting the rights of people with disabilities and protecting wider society from such people became a central source of legal tension to the present.53

Of course, these issues were also the conceptual means by which playwright Haines was able to wow his audiences—including those of Nauvoo—with *The Idiot Witness*. But the specific religious discussions of the Mormons and Campbellites focused less on temporal matters such as valid business contracts or the permissibility of idiot witnesses, and more on the underlying assumptions about moral responsibility and individual capability which informed such regulations. In short: personal accountability was contingent upon the ability to recognize good from evil. The lack of this ability was a factor in the exclusion of idiots from certain social contracts and benefits, or as justification for the protection of wider society from them. This legal framework bears obvious resemblance to the soteriological framework of the Kingdom of God as outlined by Campbellites and Mormons, which also focused on the issues of competence and incompetence, and accountability or the lack of it, as the basis for being expected to understand and obey God’s commands.54 In this framework, idiots did not fit easily into a theology based on rationality and obedience to coherent commandments in order to obtain salvation; they lacked a specific salvation narrative, but provided a way for writers to rhetorically impress upon readers their obligations to obey God, given their rational abilities to understand God’s requirements. The cultural attitudes about intellectual disability—idiots as private persons, unaccountable, ineligible for certain legal and social considerations—were implicitly adopted into the theological realm. Instead of asking theodicy-directed questions (why the presence of disabled people?, etc.) or


54 I found no evidence of direct influence of these particular legal sources upon Mormons. That is, they did not develop this theology by studying law books or by deliberately borrowing from existing legal structures in these matters. Rather, I argue that such legal and cultural assumptions were part of the broader historical currents in which Mormonism was swimming.
allowing idiots to challenge their beliefs about what it meant to be created in the image of God (is rationality the key?, etc.), early Mormons—like Campbellites—simply situated disabled people within a soteriological matrix of agency, rationality, responsibility, and accountability before the law in the few instances in which idiocy was discussed.

The general paucity of discussion on the matter of intellectual disability suggests it was not a demanding concern for early Mormons, including Joseph Smith. The unsigned editorial and Cowdery’s piece are the only two explicit discussions from Mormonism’s formative years between the founding of the Church, Smith’s death, and the exodus of the main body of the Church to the west.55 They were published at a time when Mormon theology was still developing and before key components of Joseph Smith’s religious vision had been fully articulated or widely disseminated. While these earliest attempts to account for idiocy spoke to the needs of a proselytizing Church proclaiming the importance of baptism and immediate obedience to God’s commands, Smith’s still-developing theological vision would soon create new theological pressure points.

**Joseph Smith’s “Plan of Salvation”**

Strikingly, many of the theological concepts which came to dominate Mormon views on intellectual disabilities in later years appeared D&C 29—the same revelation referred to in “Let every man learn his duty,” the anonymously penned article discussed above as the first example of specific discussion of idiocy in Mormonism. But these elements were not applied to

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intellectual disability at the time the revelation was received or initially published, nor were they applied to disability in the same way throughout Mormon history. The revelation, recorded in September 1830, is somewhat scattered.\textsuperscript{56} It reads like a “rough draft” of what Mormons have come to call the “Plan of Salvation,” containing many of the theological elements Smith expanded upon for the rest of his life. I give only a brief overview here, while the remaining chapters flesh out their development in regards to disability in Mormon theology.\textsuperscript{57}

D&C 29 is presented as a revelation describing the impending millennial return of Jesus Christ and that event’s attendant calamities. As with other eschatological texts which tie the eschaton to the primeval origins of the world, it begins by invoking the Creation (vv. 1-29).\textsuperscript{58} It declares that God’s creation proceeded first spiritually, then temporally. This exegetical move bore similarities to Platonic reconciliations of the dual creation accounts in Genesis,\textsuperscript{59} but also presaged Smith’s later collapse of the spiritual and physical realms (vv. 31-34). It describes an encounter prior to Adam’s placement on earth wherein the devil and his angels rebelled against

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\textsuperscript{56} Richard L. Bushman, historian and biographer of Joseph Smith, described some of Smith’s revelations, primarily those dealing with his doctrine of “exaltation,” as “tangled and spontaneous…They stand alone, energetic and illuminating, disorderly. Interpretation involves piecing together the parts into a coherent whole and must be undertaken provisionally with no assurance that even believing Mormons will concur.” See \textit{Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling} (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 196.

\textsuperscript{57} One sub-theme of this thesis regards the process of Mormon theological development more broadly. Understanding the early development of theology about intellectual disabilities sheds light on the ways subsequent Mormons—lay and leadership—have selectively drawn on scripture and tradition to confront questions unasked by earlier Mormons. Such a retrospective method can be problematic to the extent that one assumes Smith had identical concerns to the present, or when a shifting view of Smith’s is assumed to have been static. Thomas G. Alexander makes similar observations in “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology,” \textit{Sunstone} 5, no. 4 (August 1980): 24–33.


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God and were thrust out of heaven (vv. 36-37). While this revelation does not specifically place Adam or other humans into this premortal scene, its declaration that all things were created spiritually then temporally set the stage for this claim which Smith subsequently articulated. His later revelations declared that the human race existed premortally as spirits, or “intelligences,” the implications of which are discussed in Chapter Two.

“Agency” is the point at issue for the devil and his angels, who used theirs to rebel against God and are forced to suffer the consequences. Agency here is the possibility of making choices between alternative options. It assumes rational, thinking entities. In the revelation, the scene shifts from Millennial battles back in time to the Garden of Eden narrative, where the devil tempts Adam to abuse his agency by choosing to partake of the fruit. After Adam partakes, he and his “seed” suffer a spiritual death, or separation from God (v. 41). This separation is not permanent; they are granted days of “probation” in which they can learn of the redemption provided for them by God’s “Only Begotten Son” prior to a “temporal death” (v. 42). Embodied existence will allow them to experience the “bitter,” else they could not appreciate the “sweet” (v. 43).

In this revelation, the casting out of the devil and his angels apparently mirrors the end-times judgment depicted in apocalyptic biblical texts. Michael the archangel will “sound his trump” and awake the dead, with the righteous gathered to God’s right hand and the wicked on the left. They will then be told “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire,” as the premortal devil and his angels were commanded (vv. 26-27; cf. Matthew 25:41; Jude 1:9; Revelation 12:7). Mormon doctrine about a premortal “War in heaven” seems influenced by Mormonism’s millennialist exegesis of the Bible.

This revelation states that the devil was “before” Adam, although it is unclear whether this is a temporal or special reference (v. 36).

As a future work will show, the premortal life has become a primary theological tool Mormons use to account for the presence of intellectual disability, even though it was absent from these early discussions.

Again, in this revelation, the casting out of the devil and his hosts parallels the millennial defeat of the same by Michael, the archangel. Smith’s millennial views resonated with his developing views on premortal life.
39). If they choose not to obey God’s commands they will suffer a second spiritual death at the last day when God says “depart, ye cursed” (v. 41).  

By connecting the traditional Garden story to a New Testament millennial judgment scene, the revelation rhetorically places humans on the same footing with Adam—mortal life is understood to be a probationary state where one exercises agency. Redemption from the abuse of agency (disobeying the commands of God) is made available through God’s Only Begotten Son (Jesus). In this way, all decisions are ultimately “spiritual” rather than “temporal” in that they impact one’s eternal salvation (v. 34). Humans will receive the “wages of whom they list to obey” during their lives according to whether their deeds are “darkness rather than light” (v. 45). After death, the godly will be raised “in immortality unto eternal life” (v. 43).

The revelation appears to refer to humanity in general as the “children of men” (v. 34). The closing lines, however, addresses actual “little children.” Within this overall schema, the revelation takes care to exempt them from Satan’s temptations “until they begin to become accountable before me” (v. 47).  

This is the section of the revelation, cited in the *Messenger and Advocate* editorial’s discussion of idiocy. This revelation is perhaps the earliest and most detailed overview of what Smith and Mormons would come to refer to as “the plan of salvation.”  

64 This same expression, as well as this overall soteriological outline, is found in the Book of Mormon’s account of the Fall of Adam in 2 Nephi 2. The Book of Mormon does not explicitly teach the preexistence of human spirits, although some passages have later been interpreted as teaching such. See Harrell, “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844.”  

65 A November 1831 revelation specified the age of eight as the appropriate time to baptize children. See D&C 68:25-27.  

66 The revelation was first published in the September 1832 issue of the *Evening and Morning Star*. It appeared with revisions as chapter 29 in the 1833 Book of Commandments, and the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants. Publication of the revelation was significant in that it contained claims which were also found in Smith’s inspired translation of the Bible (now canonized as Moses 1). That translation contained a warning that its contents not be published for a time. Thus, D&C 29 is the first published overview of the “plan of salvation.” For the original manuscript, see Jensen, et. al., *Manuscript Revelations*, 43.
remaining chapters I will present a more in-depth analysis of these theological developments and their impact on the place of people with intellectual disabilities within Mormonism.

Conclusion

Early Mormon thought on intellectual disability was largely informed by shifting cultural assumptions about the place of idiots within society—their capabilities and culpability. The missionary impulse of early Mormonism is detected in Smith’s revelations as well as Mormon print publications in the ways they discussed and disseminated the new church’s doctrines concerning the requirements for eternal salvation. By 1836, Mormons were categorizing idiots together with young children, even though this connection did not explicitly appear in the revelations or recorded sermons of Joseph Smith or their other scriptures. The accountability of idiots is assumed to be like that of “little children.” During these early years, children came to be seen more as paragons of innocence (as per Wordsworth) as opposed to being reprobates tainted with original sin.

Associating idiots and children worked on the assumption that, in either case, understanding—and thus responsibility—was limited. Justification for the exoneration of such people from damnation was predicated upon their lack of accountability, and thus their essential innocence, rather than any decision or action on their part.67 Rational (thus capable) humans experience a mortality of temptation and trial which, through the merits of Jesus Christ, they can overcome in order to fulfill God’s purposes. Over the next decade, Smith began to organize and develop these chaotic elements into a more systematic theological system he referred to as “the

67 This apparently included any pre-mortal action, as this concept was not yet applied to people with intellectual disabilities as a justification for their condition. A future work will explain how this doctrine addressed a theological pressure point caused by the continuing presence of people with disabilities among the Mormons.
Such elements include a premortal existence, life as a probationary state, the eternal and spiritual nature of matter, human relationship to divinity, the importance of agency, and other issues. That these ideas were not invoked in the earliest discussions of idiocy amongst Mormons is partly explained by the years in which the editorials appeared. Smith’s expansive doctrines had not yet taken root within his growing Church. To that point in time, Smith’s revelations were silent in regards to one particularly pressing question: the etiology of intellectual disability.

This question regarding the origins of idiocy was briefly raised in Haines’s *The Idiot Witness*. One of the characters explains that although Gilbert was unfortunately an idiot, he “was not always so.” He became an idiot after witnessing “some deed of darkness” committed by the wicked uncle which “robbed him of his senses.” The uncle then took the idiot in as a servant. Far from describing the disability as being a curse placed upon poor Gilbert by God, or even as a simple accident of nature, the play suggested a Providential purpose for the disability by reminding viewers that “Heaven is all sufficient, and in its allwise time, will hurl retribution on the guilty.” Of course, that retribution comes when Gilbert actually bursts from disguise and foils the wicked uncle’s plot. By contrast, Smith’s Book of Mormon contained an account in which a

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68 In January 1841 Smith declared that human spirits were present at a premortal organization to sanction “the plan of salvation” when the Savior was foreordained. See Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 60. He used the same phrase in the 1842 “Wentworth letter,” a public statement of the basic beliefs of Mormonism. See *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (March 1, 1842):706-710. This phrase performed a similar function that “economy of God” performed in earlier Mormon discussion.

69 A related question regards the fairness of some humans (children who die) escaping the obligations of agency, accountability and thus the temptations of the devil during a probationary mortal state while others face the possibility of being tempted and eventually damned.

man was struck dumb—disabled in communication, made an idiot or “private person” in legal parlance, as the result of, or as a sign of, his wickedness.71

However, Smith himself challenged the view that disability was a sign of God’s displeasure during an impromptu funeral sermon preached at Nauvoo. “It is an unhallowed principle to say that such and such have transgressed because they have been preyed upon by disease or death for all flesh is subject to death,” Smith declared. He reminded his people that “all flesh is subject to suffer—and ‘the righteous shall hardly escape’...many of the righteous shall fall a prey to disease to pestilence &c by reason of the weakness of the flesh and yet be saved in the kingdom of God.”72 Smith’s theological developments through 1844 made the question of etiology even more pressing for Mormons. Outside pressures placed upon the Church also contributed to developing Mormon views. In fact, over the next century etiology became the central concern during rare Mormon discussions about intellectual disability, as their initial millennial hopes gave way to temporal concerns about building up a heaven on earth comprised of healthy minds and bodies. As Chapter Two suggests, Mormons themselves became subject to scrutiny in regards to their own intellectual capacities. At the same time, Joseph Smith’s developing plan of salvation was infused by contemporary confidence in the power of human thought to direct the world aright. His theology moved in that direction without much attention to people with intellectual disabilities.

71 See Alma 30.

CHAPTER TWO

“THE GLORY OF GOD IS INTELLIGENCE”:
EMBODIMENT AND INTELLIGENCE IN MORMON THEOLOGY, 1837-1844

In Memory of An
Infant Son of
Joseph And Emma
Smith June 15th, 1828

This inscription can still be found on a little gray headstone at the McCune Cemetery near Oakland, Pennsylvania—once called Harmony, the town where Emma and Joseph Smith resided during the early stages of the translation of the Book of Mormon. The baby, whom they may have named Alvin after the prophet’s deceased older brother, died hours after it was born. But this wasn’t the only tragic loss the Smith’s sustained during that dark month in 1828.

Days before the birth, Smith allowed his scribe Martin Harris to take pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript from Harmony to show his wife in Palmyra, New York. Smith was reluctant to let the precious transcript leave his sight, but Harris convinced him to petition God for allowance. The answer was no. Harris persisted until repeated prayers resulted in God’s assent—with the proviso that Harris only show them to a few select family members. Harris did not uphold his end. The manuscript was lost. Smith spent two weeks nursing Emma back to health following the death of the baby then made the 150 mile journey to Palmyra where he learned why Harris had not returned. Smith feared informing Emma, lest the shock of the loss

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2 The name was apparently recorded in a family Bible. See Dan Vogel, ed., Early Mormon Documents, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996), 584. Editors of the Joseph Smith Papers Project note the name was recorded years after the death but not by the hand of Joseph or Emma. See http://josephsmithpapers.org/back/joseph-smith-pedigree-chart (accessed March 2013).
“should kill her at once.” He feared he’d forfeited his prophetic commission through his impertinence. Soon he dictated a revelation which sternly called him to repentance, but which also extended mercy: “[T]hou art still chosen,” the revelation asserted, “and [the Lord] will only cause thee to be afflicted for a season” (D&C 3:10). The revelation seems to make no reference to the devastating loss of Smith’s child the previous month.

The loss of the manuscript has overshadowed the loss of the child in subsequent accounts of Smith’s life. This is likely due in part to the limitations of the historical record—no specific description of the child appears in the revelations, journal entries or other voluminous records Smith himself oversaw after 1828, or in the accounts of his faithful followers. Comments on Smith’s immediate psychological reaction and the event’s effects on his later life appear


4 The remark that Joseph was “afflicted for a season” appeared in the first published version of the revelation in the 1833 Book of Commandments but has been removed from recent editions. The revelation’s tense has also been changed from telling Smith he would eventually be given his ability to translate back to telling him it has been given back. See Robin Scott Jensen, Robert J. Woodford, and Steven C. Harper, eds. Manuscript Revelation Books. Facsimile edition. Vol. 1 of the Revelations and Translations series of The Joseph Smith Papers, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2009), 9; Robin Scott Jensen, Richard E. Turley, Riley M. Lorimer, eds. Published Revelations. Vol. 2 of the Revelations and Translations series of The Joseph Smith Papers, edited by Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 19-20.


6 The sole exception is Lucy Mack Smith, who later described the child as a “dear little stranger” who was “very soon snatched from [Emma’s] arms and borne aloft to that world of spirits before it had time [to] learn good or evil…,” thus situating the child in the Mormons’ general view of the death of innocent children (see Chapter One) rather than disability. See Anderson, Lucy’s Book, 412. Lucy also spent considerable space in her account extolling the good qualities of the Smith family progenitors.
speculative at best.\(^7\) A few troubling descriptions of the child do appear in critical affidavits collected in the 1830s and thereafter. These descriptions provide one detail that serves as a possible partial explanation for the Mormons’ lack of attention to the baby: it evidently bore the marks of disability. In Smith’s nineteenth-century environment, a deformed baby could serve as evidence of the diseased souls of the parents.

This chapter examines a strain of anti-Mormon discourse which was focused upon the mental competency of Mormonism’s founder and then upon the people who joined his movement during the 1830s and 1840s. From the early published affidavits which merely mention Smith’s deceased child’s deformity in a list of Smith’s dubious activities and character flaws to a 1903 Yale graduate’s “Psychological Study”\(^8\) which offers it as evidence of Smith’s own pathological deficits, disability functioned as a way to dismiss Smith’s religious claims. Criticism of Smith’s mental and physical fitness segued with anti-Mormon attacks regarding the mental competency of his followers.

Mormons were aware of these criticisms and published responses to them. Additionally, Mormonism’s developing theology of the “plan of salvation” was informed by the same assumptions underlying the criticism of their own mental and physical makeup. Smith’s theology departed from a run-of-the-mill soteriological schema (saved or damned) by focusing on the

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\(^7\) Two psychological biographies about Smith speculate about the event’s effects on Smith’s life and theology, but do not base their speculations on Smith’s own statements or those of his contemporaries. See Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 125; Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 90. Samuel Morris Brown focuses on the child’s name as an example of a waning Protestant necronym tradition. See *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56. Brown’s observation that Smith blamed himself for the death may be true, but it isn’t directly supported by Lucy’s account.

importance of physical embodiment and increasing intellectual competence during mortal life in preparation for an expansive eternity. These developments deserve attention because people with intellectual disabilities did not fit well into this framework. Smith’s most articulate disciples built on his theological themes of premortal existence, the eternal nature of spirit and matter, the nature of God, and the ultimate destiny of the human race in ways that would exacerbate the problem of disability in the Mormon worldview. The theological developments described in the second half of this chapter set the stage for the ultimate disappearance of theology about intellectual disability from Mormon discourse during the rest of the nineteenth century.

Anti-Smithism

There is no record of Joseph Smith directly speaking or writing about the 1828 loss of his firstborn son. His mother Lucy Mack Smith included the death in a memoir written after his death, but she omits an important claim made by others. In 1834 Sophia Lewis reported that she “was present at the birth of this child, and that it was still-born and very much deformed.” The description was not intended to evoke sympathy for the bereaved. Rather, it was included in an affidavit attacking the character of the Mormon prophet which appeared in multiple newspapers and the first full-length anti-Mormon book. Decades later another woman claimed Emma “had a child which was still-born and much deformed.”

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9 This term is borrowed from J. Spencer Fluhman, who describes the development of anti-Mormon criticism as initially focusing on the faith’s founder himself, then enveloping his followers. See A Peculiar People, 23.

10 Lewis was likely a cousin of Emma Smith, related through her mother Elizabeth Lewis Hale.

11 See n. a., “Mormonism,” Susquehanna Register, and Northern Pennsylvanian 9 (May 1, 1834): 1, reprinted in the New York Baptist Register 11 (June 13, 1834); Eber D. Howe, Mormonism Unvailed: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time
If such an insult seems like a gratuitous swipe today, an 1834 genealogically Calvinist audience might have connected the description with the longstanding “monstrous birth” tradition whereby a defective child represented God’s curse upon unworthy parents. Anne Hutchison and Mary Dyer were both banished from Massachusetts in 1638 due to charges of heresy. Both women had also delivered one or more “monstrous births,” according to Governor John Winthrop, who had one of the infants exhumed and exhibited. He attributed the deformity to the “wisdom of God” which brought judgment on Hutchison, “as she had vented misshapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monsters.”

This disability-as-God’s-curse motif was not universally believed even at that time, and was mostly on the wane by the 1830s. This might account for why the affidavits do not explicitly employ it, although readers could still connect those dots. As noted in the last chapter’s conclusion, Smith was familiar enough with such views to necessitate his direct denunciation of them shortly before his own death.

Instead of explicitly attributing the deformity and death to the just judgment of God, the affidavits mention it alongside claims about Smith’s character, swearing, glass-looking, story-telling, and other alleged deceptions and blasphemous remarks. Eber D. Howe said he published a collection of such affidavits about Smith because they were “illustrative of his character and

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12 n. a., “Prophet Smith’s Family Relations,” Salt Lake City Daily Tribune 18 (October 17, 1879): 2; Vogel, Early Mormon Documents, 4:320.


conduct.” The goal was to evoke contempt; the dead child was the natural product of degenerate parentage. The quality of the physical offspring sent a message about the parents’ character. Calling attention to the tragic element of a deformed baby was not the point of the affidavits about Smith. The child filled one line in the long list of reasons why Smith was not to be taken seriously, let alone trusted. Societal views would shift to more naturalistic explanations of disability over the course of the nineteenth century. Throughout this period such beliefs might be mapped on a Venn diagram with heredity and morality on one side and interventionist views of earlier Puritans on the other, morality remaining the shared center.

The combination of natural and providential causation is especially obvious in the case of intellectual disability, as evinced by the claims of leading social reformers. Samuel Gridley Howe, one of the nineteenth century’s most prominent leaders for reforming views of and approaches to intellectual disability, paradoxically challenged and reaffirmed the view that God’s providential decisions could explain the presence of disability. In his landmark “Report Made to the Legislature of Massachusetts, upon Idiocy” (1848) he wrote that it would be “impious to attribute to the creator any such glaring imperfection in his handiwork.” But he was “certain that the existence of so many idiots in every generation must be the consequence of some violation of the natural laws,—that where there was so much suffering, there must have been sin.” Howe injected his medical report with Puritan providence. If God was not directly involved, violation of God’s natural laws nevertheless resulted in defects. For Howe and other like-minded reformers of the mid-1800s, conditions such as intemperance, promiscuity, ignorance and poverty filled the

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15 Howe, Mormonism Unvailed, 267.

etiological gap as the natural causes of increasing idiocy, a condition that could be passed on to
the next generation to the overall detriment of the nation.\textsuperscript{17} The morality of the parents was
impressed on the bodies and minds of offspring. Mormons would adopt such perspectives in the
coming decades.

The deformity and death of Smith’s child, then, can be understood as one part of a larger
effort to discredit the prophet on the basis of mental and moral deficiency. By biologizing Smith
they could discount his religious claims. One critic asserted that the young Smith exhibited “little
expression of countenance, other than that of dullness [sic]; his mental powers appear to be
extremely limited,”\textsuperscript{18} another that he was “possessed of less than ordinary intellect.”\textsuperscript{19} One
second-hand report recalled that “Jo from a boy appeared dull and utterly destitute of genius.”\textsuperscript{20}

Of course, alternative explanations for Smith’s prodigious religious output—the Book of
Mormon, his community building, etc.—were required in order to sustain the Smith-as-Idiot
theory. Smith was alternately presented as a new Mohammad, a shiftless and immoral man, a
money-digger, an occultist, or generally out to gain money, fame, and political power. In some
cases the idiot theory was actually challenged by Smith’s critics. An 1855 book purporting to be

\textsuperscript{17} Such concerns were an impetus behind the rise of institutionalization in the United States during
the nineteenth century according to Trent, \textit{Inventing the Feeble Mind}. Mormons had moved west by the
time the institutional movement got off the ground, and the institution did not catch up with them until the
turn of the century.

\textsuperscript{18} n. a., “Gold Bible, No. 3,” \textit{The Reflector} (Palmyra, New York) 2, no. 12 (February 1, 1831): 92–93.

\textsuperscript{19} Orasmus Turner, \textit{History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase and
Morris’ Reserve} (Rochester, New York: Alling, 1851), 213.

\textsuperscript{20} John A. Clark, \textit{Gleanings By the Way} (Philadelphia: Simon, 1842), 225. This line of argument
was only one of multiple contradictory threads in the tapestry of nineteenth-century anti-Mormonism.
Fluhman’s \textit{A Peculiar People} outlines alternating charges of imposition, delusion, fanaticism, barbarism,
and heresy, all raised by various parties for various political, economic, and religious reasons. Mormon
apologist Hugh Nibley collected a number of competing claims about Joseph Smith’s character to comic
effect in \textit{The Myth Makers} (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961).
based upon “the authentic records of the Prophet’s family” noted: “It has been customary among all classes, except his adherents, to denounce Joseph smith as being imbecile and ignorant….” On the contrary, Smith’s “natural talents…were superior to those of the common endowments of men.” A comparison between Smith and an “idiotic individual” would easily show the former superior to the latter. Smith managed to fool so many into thinking he was a prophet, he himself could have been no fool. Smith himself may have been exonerated here even if the purpose was to attribute culpability, but his mother did not escape unscathed. The author introduced Lucy Mack as “the lackadaisical delicate head” of the Smith family, complete with stereotyped idiot turns of phrase: “La, me!” she exclaims when Smith tells the family of his plans to turn prophet. “I wonder what folks would say if our Joe should take to preachin’?”

Over time the Smith-as-Idiot theory was jettisoned as Smith increasingly became a noted public figure, but in 1838 it still had enough appeal to go transatlantic. When Mormon missionaries arrived in Liverpool the previous year they caught the attention of one “Lord M.” who quickly alerted Queen Victoria of the proselytizing arrivals. Her journal describes Lord M. as being “in a great fright” about the “Mormonites,” a new American sect founded by “an Idiot.” By Lord M.’s account, the Idiot had revelations and spoke to angels, he gathered “7000 followers,” required a “Community of Goods,” and forbade marriage so as to share the women around. Smith’s name is never mentioned in the Queen’s account, but his label of “Idiot” was

21 Orvilla S. Belisle, The Prophets; or, Mormonism Unveiled (Philadelphia: Wm. White Smith, 1855), 44–45.

22 Ibid., 46. “Oh, la!” was the repeated refrain of Gilbert in The Idiot Witness.

23 This is a particularly interesting claim, as Smith didn’t advocate against marriage at all and would later come to be known as the initiator of plural marriage amongst the Mormons, information which was not public knowledge in 1838. Lord M. may have been confusing elements of Mormonism with other religious sects at the time which advocated a variety of counter-cultural marital practices.
likely more than mere insult—apparently the “Mormonites” took his condition as a point of pride if their sect’s name was any indication. Lord M. claimed that “Mormon is Greek for Idiot.” Of course, “idiot” itself was actually a loan-word from the Greek idiota. Lord M. had evidently performed his own etymological interpretation by reading into “Mormon” the Greek word moros, meaning dull, sluggish, stupid, or foolish—words also loosely associated with “idiot.” It is unclear from the Queen’s brief description in what precise sense she considered Smith an Idiot, but the lack of jest in the Queen’s clinical tone suggests they were not merely poking fun, nor was Lord M. simply coining new Greek-inspired insults.

Innuendo and speculation about Smith’s cognitive state did not dominate published considerations of the Mormon prophet, but they still proved resilient. By 1903, a young Yale graduate named I. W. Riley had entirely pathologized Smith’s religious experiences in his doctoral work. Riley searched historical records for a diagnosis to account for the Mormon prophet’s experiences and successes. He acknowledged his diagnosis was made “difficult” by the lack of direct evidence via examination of Smith’s “cranial malformations,” so he resorted to

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24 Patrick McDonagh points to the difficulty even nineteenth-century theorists had in trying to find equivalencies in the multiple terms used to describe intellectual disabilities in different countries. See Idiocy: A Cultural History (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 60-61.


27 Ann Taves traces the wider interpretive shift from the nineteenth to twentieth century when religious “enthusiasm” was increasingly studied in the realm of secular psychology in Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). Riley’s work didn’t catch Taves’s attention, but it certainly sustains her thesis.
studying portraits and Smith’s descriptions of his experience for evidence of mental defects. His diagnosis was simple: Smith’s visions were caused by epilepsy. Riley dressed up folksy accounts of Smith’s boyhood in complex medical terminology. Smith’s boyhood fever and subsequent infection and leg operation became “nervous diathesis, an infectious fever, and an ulceration,” which were “likely predisposing causes” for his alleged seizures. But the “exciting causes” of Smith’s heavenly visions were “fright” and “protracted religious excitement,” not to mention the “ophthalmic migraine” which made him believe he saw Jesus Christ standing at God’s right hand. That Riley didn’t see Smith’s condition as one-off case of mental illness is suggested by his “examination of Joseph’s neuropathic antecedents” and his analysis of Smith’s “progeny” for evidence of disorder. The “chronic intoxication” and supposed “fits” of his forefathers did not bode well, nor did the fact that Smith’s firstborn died shortly after birth and was rumored to have been “a monster.” Riley had given Smith the most common diagnosis placed upon people with intellectual disabilities at that time: epilepsy. He used the most common diagnostic tool to substantiate it: family history.

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28 Riley, The Founder of Mormonism, 347.

29 Ibid., 350–352.

30 Ibid., 347. To reflect his objectivity, Riley noted that his reliance for this claim on the “perjured apostate ‘Dr.’ Bennett, eight years the prophet’s body physician [who] claims that it was a monster.” John C. Bennett, who published an exposé of Mormonism after his falling out with Joseph Smith, had merely included the same affidavits referenced above on that point. Riley, through Bennett, is still relying on Howe’s old affidavits. See John C. Bennett, The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 84.

31 By Riley’s time, “feeble-minded” had become a preferred medical term. He did not directly call Smith feeble-minded, but his diagnosis would not have failed to communicate the implication to contemporary physicians. On epilepsy as a common diagnosis for the feeble-minded in the early 1900s see Trent, Inventing the Feeble Mind, 90–91. For the use of family history in intellectual disability diagnosis, see Leila Zenderland, “The Parable of the Kallikak Family: Explaining the Meaning of Heredity in 1912,” in Noll and Trent, Mental Retardation in America, 165–185.
Mormons largely ignored Riley’s work, but it added an academic veneer to decades of criticism about Smith’s mental makeup, and is representative of a larger shift in language about how Americans talked about religion at the turn of the century. His study was especially relevant, he said, because “The rise and growth of Mormonism is one of the most remarkable phenomena of the nineteenth century.”32 Such praise lacked the alarmed urgency of the Queen’s journal entry. Rather than dwelling on Smith’s supposed idiocy, she and Lord M. marveled at the fact that “this Idiot” managed to gain adherents at all. It reminded them of Hume’s analysis of “those troublesome times of Charles I’s reign,” when millennial fervor led to an outbreak of fanaticism: “[I]t wasn’t only wild and foolish people who followed these absurd doctrines, but people of good sense and deep thought; which is very true,” the Queen added.33

Queen Victoria was willing to extend the benefit of doubt to Smith’s followers by attributing their duplicity to social unrest. But others were not so charitable. Accusations against Smith didn’t stem the tide of his growing community of followers whose presence increasingly demanded explanation by the critics. As the Mormon movement continued to attract converts it became less possible to dismiss it as being the scheme of a mere “spindle shanked ignoramus.”34 The growing Mormon people “posed an interpretive challenge” to the critics, and thus their intellectual abilities increasingly came under scrutiny as Smith’s movement spread.35

32 Riley, The Founder of Mormonism, vi.

33 Parshall, Ibid. Within the next five years the Queen received two copies of the Book of Mormon from Lorenzo Snow who became President of the LDS Church decades later. Although Snow noted the event in his journal and his sister Eliza memorialized it in poem, evidently the Queen did not think it worthy of notice. See Eliza R. Snow Smith, Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884), 63–64.


35 Fluhman, A Peculiar People, 51.
Anti-Mormonism

As was the case with criticism of Smith, mental competency was one of the points critics focused on when assessing Mormon converts. The criticism increasingly prompted attentive responses in the Mormon press as Mormon theology continued to develop. Mormons increasingly emphasized education as part of God’s intended plan for humans, thus leaving people with intellectual disabilities further away from direct participation. Criticism spurred responses which led to more criticism, creating a feedback loop in which it is difficult to pinpoint direct influence or to determine the precise moment when any particular Mormon belief was first expressed. What is certain is that charges of “delusion” was one of the most frequent accusations against the growing sect. This served as a sort of “catch-all category” to dismiss Mormons as “emotionally overwrought,” or as suffering from “a perfect hallucination of mind,” or even simply as being “superstitious” or merely “deceived.” Such claims fit more closely in the category of mental illness than disability, but the two categories were not so neatly separated in the minds of accusers who felt such cognitive deficiencies were also heritable.

For instance, one of the more specific quasi-clinical attacks was aimed at Sidney Rigdon, a Campbellite preacher who converted to Mormonism in late 1830. Alexander Campbell announced Rigdon’s defection in his Millennial Harbinger along with speculation as to why Rigdon had “fallen into the snare of the Devil.” Rigdon had previously been wavering in the faith as preached by Campbell and others:

His instability I was induced to ascribe to a peculiar mental and corporeal malady, to which he has been subject for some years. Fits of melancholy succeeded by fits of enthusiasm accompanied by some kind of nervous spasms and swoonings which he has,

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37 Fluhman, A Peculiar People, 52.
since his defection, interpreted into the agency of the Holy Spirit, or the recovery of
spiritual gifts, produced a versatility in his genius and deportment which has been
increasing for some time…. He acted in this instance more like one laboring under some
morbid affection of mind, than like one *compos mentis* [of sound mind].

Perhaps, Campbell suggested, Rigdon’s apostasy was caused by some mental malady, which was
“the only hope I have in his case,” as it would be less damnable than if Rigdon made the switch
under fully functioning faculties.

One reason Campbell singled Rigdon out was the latter’s prominent position in the new
Church. Perhaps more alarming to Campbell was that Rigdon had “led away a number of
disciples with him.” If a single Mormon like Rigdon was merely a deluded soul, a collection of
them represented a greater threat. Rigdon was aware of this criticism and shared Campbell’s
aversion to ignoramuses. He identified intelligence as being the “great object of our holy
religion” and encouraged intelligent people to gather into the “compact societies” of Mormon
converts:

> The great God when he began to work for his name’s glory, never thought of doing so, by
raising up a society of ignoramuses, but of men and women of intelligence, of first
intelligence. Of intelligence as high as human nature was susceptible; and by this means
glorify himself.

He justified the gathering impulse of the Mormons on the grounds that it would allow them to
support schools with equal access for all: “One of the principal objects then of our coming
together, is to obtain the advantages of education.” Rigdon’s catch-all words are addressed to a

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38 Campbell, “Sidney Rigdon.” One recent historian proffered a retroactive diagnosis of Rigdon as
experiencing some sort of “manic-depressive” disorder, although such an attempt is fraught with problems
and tinged with contemporary political interests. See Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait
of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994).

39 Campbell, “Sidney Rigdon.”

40 Ibid.

general audience without regard to different academic capabilities of Mormons or potential converts to Mormonism.

The Mormon geographical gathering played a large role in the opposition the movement faced in America. Attacks reached fever pitch especially where Mormons formed communities as directed by Smith’s revelations, and the attacks usually included mention of Mormon intellectual capacity. In July 1833 a group of Missouri citizens formed a committee and passed resolutions to expel the Mormons from their vicinity. Some “twelve hundred [Mormon] souls” had already gathered, the Missourians explained, with more “swarms” from “the very dregs” of society pouring into the settlement by the month. “Elevated, as they mostly are, but little above the condition of our blacks,” the committee asserted, the Mormons were “characterized by the profoundest ignorance, the grossest superstition, and the most abject poverty.”

Employing a little folk psychology, Eber D. Howe noted that one’s “moral faculties are always improved by embracing simple philosophical truths,” whereas rejecting such things makes one “depraved, and less capable of discriminating between falsehood and error.” On the other hand, Mormon beliefs in spirits, angels, revelations and other such “falsehood and error, will sink [a person] deeper and deeper in the vortex of folly and madness…and thus we find him enveloped in the fatal cords of fanaticism.”

As with Riley’s later critique of Joseph Smith, these earlier criticisms focused more upon what is now referred to as mental illness than on intellectual disability. Nevertheless, whether in personal exchanges with the Queen of England or in academic analysis by a recent Yale graduate,


the mental status of the Mormons was an important question for people wondering how anyone could believe in new revelations “in the age of newspapers, railways, and the electric telegraph,” as one writer put it. Critical attention was directed at Mormonism as the movement’s numbers increased. Mormon growth through this period resulted more from missionary work than procreation.

As I will discuss in Chapters Three and Four, disability became a more problematic issue for Mormons after 1852, when polygamy and its implications for the hereditary fitness of the Mormon people captured critical attention. Nevertheless, these early accusations about their mental state were not overlooked by Mormons. Smith knew his people were drawn from a variety of backgrounds and, as indicated by his developing theology, he intended to elevate all of them, even to the very weakest Saint. He would do so by articulating a higher state of human origins, a higher purpose for mortal existence, and a higher ultimate destiny. Several of his fellow leaders in the Mormon movement would draw from and build on Smith in the same direction.

**Joseph Smith’s Theological Developments Regarding the Body and Mind**

As I suggested in Chapter One, Smith proposed a number of interrelated theological claims now collectively referred to as “the plan of salvation” which can be brought to bear on the

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45 It is unclear whether Smith himself intended to include “idiots” in his claims about the “weakest Saints.” If not, contemporary Mormon theologians might still benefit from playing Smith off against himself to create more productive models of intellectual disability in Mormon thought.

46 I speculate that the theological developments described in this chapter were not explicitly thought to apply to people with intellectual disabilities because Mormons considered such people inculpable, thus not needing Mormon teachings or ordinances. Criticism of Mormon mental fitness increased Mormon reluctance to directly discuss disability.
issue of intellectual disability. Initially, this plan presented mortal life as “probationary state” during which humans receive a physical body and the opportunity to overcome sin through the proper employment of agency. Human experience was patterned after Adam’s experience (see D&C 29). This initially seemed like standard Arminian fare, which led Mormons to situate “idiots” alongside little children as outliers—exonerated from original sin because of their inability to work to overcome its effects. But Smith’s revelations became more expansive as D&C 29 pushed Adam’s history into a pre-mortal existence. He being the pattern, mortal life was not merely a time to repent to overcome sin, but a time in which preexistent beings would grow in greater light and knowledge to overcome ignorance and gain power. Smith’s developing teachings on the nature of matter, spirit, and God held direct implications for the nature of humankind—in body and mind.\textsuperscript{47}

Smith’s canonized revelations and uncanonized sermons declared that a human consists of a physical mortal body, but also an eternal “intelligence” (collectively as “intelligences”), a “spirit,” or a “mind.”\textsuperscript{48} All humans, Smith taught, were “in the beginning with the Father,”\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} The sporadic development of Mormon theosis can’t fully be addressed here. Benjamin E. Park provides one of the best overviews in “Salvation Through a Tabernacle: Joseph Smith, Parley Pratt, and Early Mormon Theologies of Embodiment,” Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 1–44. These developments have important implications for Mormon approaches to disability compared with other Christian traditions. Smith’s theological amendments are distinct enough to cause difficulty for Mormons who would otherwise wish to adopt one of the few theologies of disability already articulated by other Christian traditions. Mormonism has much to offer in such conversations, but a constructive theological project needs to be undertaken using Mormon perspectives in order to facilitate such dialogue.

\textsuperscript{48} Joseph Smith appears to have used these labels interchangeably and in a variety of ways, making it difficult to determine precisely what he meant by them. Referring to a spirit as an “intelligence” was not entirely unique to Smith or the Mormons. Charles Buck’s Theological Dictionary, influential in antebellum Protestantism, defined “SPIRIT” as “an incorporeal being or intelligence; in which sense God is said to be a Spirit, as are angels and the human soul. His entry for “MIND” describes “a thinking, intelligent being; otherwise called spirit, or soul.” See Charles Buck, A Theological Dictionary (Philadelphia: Edwin T. Scott, 1823), 284, 559. Smith’s differing uses of “intelligence” or “intelligences” is examined in Charles R. Harrell, “The Development of the Doctrine of Preexistence, 1830–1844,” BYU
composed of eternal or “self Existent principles.” Smith’s revelations depicted gradations of intelligence amongst these beings. God was the “most intelligent” of these pre-existent beings, and he instituted a plan whereby lesser intelligences could progress as he had. Smith’s prophetic expansion on the book of Genesis and his translation of a lost Book of Abraham depicted a pre-mortal council in which a gradation of intelligences existed, and where certain roles were assigned accordingly, including Jesus Christ’s role as Savior of the world. Smith repeatedly taught that gaining a mortal body was a step forward for pre-existent spirits. One of the reasons he gave has dropped from contemporary Mormon discourse: the mortal body protects a spirit against the devil and his fallen angels. Smith claimed disembodied spirits “had Not power to Defend themselves” whereas “all beings who


Ehat and Cook, Words, 68.


See Moses 1-3; Book of Abraham 3. All references to these two books herein are from the LDS Church’s modern edition of The Pearl of Great Price: A Selection from the Revelations, Translations, and Narrations of Joseph Smith, First Prophet, Seer, and Revelator to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

On this point perhaps more than any other Smith differed from others who believed in a pre-mortal existence of souls. Plato, Origen, Gnostics, and others viewed the descent of souls into gross physical matter as something to be overcome, the body was a sort of prison house more than an advancement. Terryl L. Givens relates a history of these ideas in When Souls Had Wings: Pre-mortal Existence in Western Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
have bodies have power over those who have not." Further underscoring the importance of the mortal body in God’s plan, Smith taught that the devil’s punishment for his pre-mortal rebellion consisted of denying him a physical body and thus the opportunity to progress. The devil’s rebellion itself revolved around the place of “agency” in God’s plan: in order to ensure that all of the spirits would return in a pure state to God, Satan would force compliance with God’s commands. Smith articulated other justifications for mortal embodiment by teaching that “The great principle of happiness consists in having a body.” Further, in addition to giving a person power over lesser, perhaps dangerous, others, having one’s spirit placed in a mortal “tabernicle” was calculated to “create sympathy for their fellowman.”

Ultimately, Smith would audaciously assert that God the Father was also a being who “has flesh and bones,” that Jesus’s incarnation followed in the Father’s pattern, and that humans themselves were to go and do likewise. Humans were not merely seeking salvation from sin and

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54 Joseph Smith, Sermons from January 5 and March 28, 1841, in Ehat and Cook, Words, 60, 68. This particular element of the theological matrix has largely disappeared for contemporary Mormons. Smith taught that disembodied devils sought to possess humans’ mortal bodies, but that they could be exorcised using God’s authority. As talk of demon possession declined amongst Mormons, so did this element of the importance of the body as protection against the devil disappear. The body’s importance and the denial of a body to Satan are vestigial remnants of these earlier teachings; the fact that the two ideas were initially connected—the mortal body as a protection against evil spirits—is no longer widely known. Thus, more recent Mormons have postulated disabled bodies as being a protection against the devil, based on the apparent inability of such people to be responsible moral agents.

55 Joseph Smith, Sermon, May 14, 1843 in Ibid., 201.

56 Smith, An Intimate Chronicle, 516.

57 Joseph Smith, Sermon, March 28, 1841, in Ehat and Cook, Words, 68, misspelling of "tabernacle" in original. This observation could prove useful for those who claim that disability evokes such beneficial sympathy, although it would single out people with disabilities as primarily being opportunities for such. This risks reducing their mortal experience to the evocation of sympathy and overshadowing their own development.

death, but *exaltation*: an elevation to godlike existence. Material embodiment thus became a central focus of Mormon theology. In fact, Smith’s followers expanded upon these views by employing the metaphor of family—humans are the *offspring* of God and as such they inherit the potential to become like God just as a mortal child may become like their parents. This hereditary analogy held deep implications for considerations about intellectual disability. But before discussing these implications directly, another strain of Smith’s developing teachings deserves attention based on its potential to marginalize people with intellectual disabilities in Smith’s plan of salvation: His focus on “intelligence” in the sense of knowledge, his connecting the life of the mind to the eternal nature of humans.

“The Glory of God is Intelligence”

The factor which tied one’s eternal identity together in Smith’s plan of salvation—from premortal existence through mortal embodiment, leading to death and a subsequent glorious resurrection—consisted of the self-aware entity called an “intelligence” referred to above. A theological problem arises when one considers the fact that the embodied experience (intended to provide a place in which to exercise agency) of some humans seems restricted precisely by their embodiment. The fact that not all mortal bodies were equal in regards to cognitive acumen apparently received no direct attention from Smith. In Smith’s view, anyone at any time could

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59 Today Mormons are more likely to refer to “exaltation” than “salvation” when discussing eternal life after the resurrection. The word was used by Smith and several other prominent Mormons on occasion, but did not enter the Mormon canon until it was included in Smith’s revelation regarding plural, or Celestial, marriage (D&C 132).

become subject to disease, disaster, or suffering. What really mattered was one’s response to such circumstances. Of course, this requires a level of cognitive awareness of one’s conditions and the ability to consciously direct one’s response—requirements seemingly lacking in some people with intellectual disabilities.  

Despite this theological gap, Smith’s optimistic views of the intellectual potential of all people would have segued well with the beliefs of cutting-edge educators and theorists who challenged old stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities during the 1840s through the rest of the nineteenth century. In this section I will outline Smith’s teachings on intelligence (in the sense of knowledge) and provide some examples wherein his disciples expanded upon them. I will set their views alongside the shifting approaches to intellectual disability in the nineteenth century, despite the fact that Mormons themselves did not join the optimistic bandwagon in regards to the rehabilitation of people with intellectual disabilities. In fact, rather than applying his optimistic views of knowledge and education to people with intellectual disabilities as many American reformers did, Smith did not broach that issue at all, resulting in a dearth of attention to people with disabilities in Mormon discourse of the period.

Smith was attuned to accusations that he was an uneducated simpleton. At times he could use such characterizations to his advantage, even if he also resisted the stereotype by seeking education and encouraging his followers to do the same.  

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61 This was the point Warren Cowdery made in his article, “‘A Train of Causes,’” Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate 3, no. 9 (n.d.): 522, discussed in Chapter One. Idiots wouldn’t benefit from divine schooling. Later discussions of intellectual disability affirm the idea that people with intellectual disabilities are at least fulfilling one part of the purpose of life simply by becoming embodied. The exercise of agency seems restricted for them, however. This theological pressure point led to twentieth century folkloric attempts to account for disability.

62 One critic reported a confrontation with the Mormon prophet: “‘Are you not ashamed, of such pretensions? You, who are no more than any ignorant plough-boy of our land! Oh! blush at such abominations! and let shame, forever cover your face!’ He only replied, by saying, ‘The gift, has returned
pervasive anti-clericalism as frontier preachers had great populist appeal. Add these cultural factors to Smith’s claims of prophetic and charismatic authority and one might expect the development of a less intellectually inclined theology. Instead, Smith’s sermons were effuse with encouragement to seek education: “A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge.”63 “The principle of knowledge is the principle of Salvation…for any one that cannot get knowledge to be saved will be damned.”64 “It is impossible for a man to be saved in ignorance.”65 One such maxim was even canonized years after Smith’s death: “Whatever principle of intelligence we obtain in this life will rise with us in the resurrection: and if a person gains more knowledge in this life through his diligence & obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.”66 Premortal intelligences were sent to earth not merely to receive physical bodies, but also to become more intelligent intelligences!

Smith did not address how people with intellectual disabilities might benefit without the apparent ability to increase in knowledge.67 But as one scholar observed, Smith proposed “a thoroughgoing interpenetration of sacred and secular truth” which he actively sought through back again, as in former times, to illiterate fishermen.”” Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated, in the Experience of Nancy Towle in Europe and America*, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, N.H.: John Caldwell, 1833), 157.


64 Joseph Smith, Sermon, May 14, 1843, in Ibid., 200. This statement appears alongside Smith’s claims about the importance of physical embodiment as a means to gain greater power over evil spirits. According to this sermon, knowledge and embodiment were both needed for that same end.

65 Joseph Smith, Sermon, May 17, 1843, in Ibid., 202.

66 Joseph Smith, notes from a conversation with William Clayton, April 2, 1843, in Ibid., 169, canonized as D&C 130:18-19.

67 The first leader to approach the issue of premortal intelligences and disabled mortal bodies was Orson Hyde, see Chapter Four.
practical means. His revelations instituted a “school of the prophets” where believers were instructed to learn about “things both in heaven and in the earth,” national and international concerns, and to “become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people” (D&C 88:79; 90:16). Despite critical claims about Mormon mental abilities, at least one observer in 1835 depicted the Mormon people as “very eager to acquire education,” and added that “They are by no means, as a class, men of weak minds.” The Nauvoo charter included provisions for a University which, Smith declared, would enable the Mormons to “teach our children wisdom, to instruct them in all the knowledge and learning, in the arts, science, and learned professions.” Education would provide “practicable utility” for “the public good, and also for private and individual happiness.” Such happiness was not merely to be had for the duration of mortal life, but it nevertheless required the ability to become educated to begin with—something which people with intellectual disabilities were widely assumed to lack. One of Smith’s most eloquent and puzzling revelations boldly affirmed: “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36).

Parley P. Pratt on the Material Body and Mind in Time and Eternity

Joseph Smith’s theologically exhilarating scriptures and sermons infused his people with an elevated sense of origin, present purpose, and future destiny which challenged claims that the Mormons were incapable of (or even uninterested in) improving the mind or body. Such

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69 Ibid., 73.

70 From a letter written by James H. Eells to one “Br. Leavitt,” Kirtland, Ohio (April 1, 1835), cited in Ibid., 76.

71 Ibid., 83.
developments had the unintended consequence of ignoring or downplaying the place of intellectually disabled people in the overall mortal scheme of things. Smith’s most prolific publishing disciples, brothers Orson and Parley P. Pratt, enthusiastically endorsed and extended Smith’s claims. Orson Pratt exulted in the democratizing impact of the Mormon belief in continuing revelation. New revelations were given to the faithful “in great plainness” to ultimately make all latter-day saints “perfect in one” by their “possession of all knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence” which would make them like unto God.72 Salvation and knowledge were completely intertwined. Parley P. Pratt initially focused on knowledge as the key attribute of God’s power which believers themselves would increasingly receive from God in order to reach exaltation.73

Pratt combined this emphasis on knowledge with his developing views on materialism—that all matter is spirit and vice versa—to compose Mormonism’s most direct discussion of disability through its first two decades of existence. In 1844 Pratt published a collection of speculative and personal essays on nascent Mormon theology, the first publication of its kind.74

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72 Orson Pratt, A [sic] Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and Late Discovery of Ancient American Records (Edinburgh, Scotland: Ballentyne and Hughes, 1840), 30.

73 Citing John 10:34, Parley promoted a “doctrine of equality” whereby followers could become one with God and Christ so as to “obtain all truth and become equal with God in knowledge and power.” See Pratt, Mormonism Unveiled: Zion’s Watchman Unmasked, and Its Editor, Mr. L.R. Sunderland Exposed: Truth Vindicated: The Devil Made Mad, and Priestcraft in Danger!, 3rd ed. (New York: O. Pratt & E. Fordham, 1838), 27. This was one of the earliest published expressions of a developing Mormon theosis as described in Jordan T. Watkins, “‘All of One Species’: Parley P. Pratt and the Dialectical Development of Early Mormon Conceptions of Theosis,” in Armstrong, Grow, and Siler, Parley P. Pratt and the Making of Mormonism, 201–218.

74 David J. Whittaker, “Parley P. Pratt and Early Mormon Print Culture,” in Grow and Siler, Ibid., 120. It wasn’t the first of Parley’s many “firsts” in Mormon publication history. The aforementioned Mormonism Unveiled was the first printed sustained response to anti-Mormon publications and marked a shift in Mormon reactions to the same. He also published the first work of Mormon satire, fiction, and poetry (see Whittaker, Ibid., 105, 116, 120).
Two particular essays in this collection strikingly exhibit Mormonism’s dual emphasis on the material body and the life of the mind.

*Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body*

In the first, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” Pratt defends an entirely material view of the resurrection using Jesus as the prototypical resurrected being consisting of “FLESH and BONES.” During the “life to come” resurrected believers will receive “a material inheritance on the earth...and they will eat, drink, converse, think, walk, taste, smell and enjoy. They will also sing and preach, and teach, and learn, and investigate; and play on musical instruments, and enjoy all the pure delights of affection, love, and domestic felicity.” Pratt said intellectual pursuits would be a core part of eternal life: “[We] will be able to receive and impart that finish of education and knowledge which only buds in time; but blossoms and ripens in eternity.”

*Intelligence and Affection*

Pratt’s assertion that intellectual development only buds in time, thus presently consisting of an imperfect or incomplete reflection of future possibilities, is the key to understanding his second essay, “Intelligence and Affection”—which contains the most direct and sustained approach to the subject of disability published during Mormonism’s first two decades, slight as it is. The stirring essay described these two particular attributes as constituting the “foundations of

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75 Parley P. Pratt, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” in *An Appeal to the Inhabitants of the State of New York: Letter to Queen Victoria, (Reprinted from the Tenth European Edition,)* The Fountain of Knowledge: Immortality of the Body, and Intelligence and Affection (Nauvoo, Ill.: John Taylor, Printer, 1844), 28, 30, 35. Interestingly, Pratt does not cite Joseph Smith in these essays, but rather employs logical reasoning, Biblical citations, and rhetorical flourishes to outline his theological vision, which is nevertheless fully informed by Smith’s revelations.
enjoyment, the main-springs of glory and exaltation, and the fountains from which emanate a thousand streams of life, and joy, and gladness.” Pratt describes the human mind as being limited during infancy. It cannot feel affection because it does not contain the knowledge on which affection is built. The mind grows as it receives knowledge, just as the body grows by receiving food. It also develops according to the social environment in which it is raised. “The human mind, then, is capable of a constant and gradual expansion to an unlimited extent. In fact, its receptive powers are infinite.” Pratt tempers this optimistic view by observing that such growth is “gradual,” and more importantly, is liable to be “obstructed in various ways.” These ways include contextual factors like tradition, superstition, temptation, cares and troubles, and bad company. But Pratt also noted that the mind’s “organs are weakened by disease, or worn with age, till it sinks into a backward tendency.”

Pratt is specifically describing the loss of mental acuity in old age, but by discussing the physical body as one possible obstacle to the mind’s progress he perhaps inadvertently included people with intellectual disabilities in his description. The mind itself wasn’t limited, but being “connected with” and in some sense “dependent on” bodily circumstances meant that it would be “compelled to partake of their weaknesses,” much like “a strong traveller [sic] with a weak companion.” Pratt composed an awkward “parable” of a child with weak teeth which prevent him from eating proper food, resulting in “general weakness and disorder in the system.” With a “more strong and durable” new set of teeth, the child is enabled to eat again, thus making “rapid progress towards perfection.” Mortal bodies, like the child’s teeth, will eventually be “plucked by death, and the mind set free.” After the resurrection it will be “renewed in all the fresh vigor of

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76 Ibid., 36.
77 Ibid.
eternal life; with organs fresh and strong and durable as the powers of eternal intellect.” Pratt’s pen ran wild with enthusiastic hope for eternal progression beyond the resurrection:

And the mind, thus provided with organs, fully adapted to its most ardent powers of action, will find itself no longer constrained to linger on the confines of its former limits, where impatient of restraint, it had struggled in vain for freedom. But like a prisoner, suddenly freed from the iron shackles and gloomy dungeons of a terrible tyrant, it will move nimbly onward with a joyous consciousness of its own liberty. It will renew with redoubled vigor its intellectual feast, and enlarge its field of operations amid the boundless sources of intelligence, till earth, with all its treasures of wisdom and knowledge, becomes too small, and the neighboring worlds too narrow to satisfy a capacity so enlarged. It will then, on wings of faith, and by the power of the spirit waft itself far beyond our visible heavens, and “far above earth’s span of sky” and explore other suns, and other systems; and hold communion with other intelligences more remote than our weak minds can possibly conceive.78

For Pratt, embodiment and intelligence went hand in hand. Together they provide the foundation for the eternal development of divine affections—the love of family, friends, God, and the created world itself.79 Despite present bodily limitations, every human being is capable of progressing in time, but more importantly and more perfectly, in eternity:

Our intellect and our affection, only buds in time, and ripens in eternity. There we shall know and love our kindred and our friends: and there we shall be capable of exercising all those pure emotions of friendship and love, which fill our hearts with such inexpressible delight in this world. And not only so, but our love will be far more strong and perfect in many respects. First, because we shall know and realize more. Secondly, because our organs of thought will be more strong and durable. Thirdly, because we shall be free from those mean, selfish, groveling, envious and disagreeable influences which disturb, and hinder the free exercise of our affections in this world. And lastly, because we shall be associated with a more extensive and numerous society, of those who are filled with the same freedom of spirit and affection that we are; and therefore are objects truly worthy of our love.80

78 Ibid., 37.

79 Smith was similarly focused on community and relationship as being fundamental to eternal life. His 1843 observation that the “same sociality which exists among us here [on earth] will exist among us there [in Heaven], only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy” was later canonized as D&C 130:2.

80 Pratt, “Immortality and Eternal Life of the Material Body,” 37, emphasis mine.
Disabilities in such a view are something to be overcome. Mormonism thus takes part in broader Christianity’s longstanding “best-case anthropology” of humans, but elevates it all the more by centralizing it precisely in the human body—as created literally in the image of God—and the mind which can infinitely be filled with God’s knowledge.81

From Pratt’s time to the present, Mormons have looked to a future bodily resurrection as the time when all the limitations of mortal life will be overcome, including intellectual and other disabilities. Despite such an optimistic long view, the idea that such people could also develop important attributes in the present has been largely absent in Mormon discourse to the present. In Smith’s most famous sermon, the “King Follett Discourse,” he laid out the plan of salvation in more clear terms than ever before. Before this earth was created, God was “in the midst of spirit and glory [and] because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.” The earth would provide a place for their embodiment and growth. Most importantly: “All the spirits that God ever sent into this world are susceptible of enlargement.”82 Pratt’s “Intelligence and Affection” interestingly did not include discussion of premortality, but he would include that factor in later publications.

A mere four years following Pratt’s article and Smith’s sermon, social reformer Samuel Gridley Howe published an important assessment of idiocy in Massachusetts. His approach


combines Smith’s optimism regarding human potential for growth with Pratt’s assessment of social factors which tend to inhibit such growth and primarily seeks an earthly advancement of all people. Howe addressed lawmakers and the general public rather than potential converts. He declared that idiots were “badly treated and cruelly wronged” by a neglectful society. Weak-minded individuals thus “sink…into entire idiocy; so that, though born with a spark of intellect which might be nurtured into a flame, it is gradually extinguished, and they go down sinking into the grave.” Howe pointed out that efforts at institutions and schools in other countries like France demonstrated that “idiots may be trained to habits of industry, cleanliness, and self-respect.”

Thus he advocated for tax-supported systematic housing, education and training of idiots—the beginning of what became America’s institutional movement.

**Conclusion**

From the outset, Joseph Smith and his Mormon people faced criticism with regard to their intellectual acumen. Mormons held many of the same beliefs about the importance of the intellect. Joseph Smith and his disciples formulated an optimistic theology in which humans are to advance in intelligence toward an eternal future of joy and education. Their optimism about humans’ ability to increase in knowledge during mortality did not encompass people with intellectual disabilities. By contrast, from the 1840s on, more secular-minded reformers saw idiots and the feeble-minded as potentially improvable. They set up institutions to that end. Over the next sixty years the optimism of the reformers faded as institutionalization shifted from a habilitative model to a custodial model. Initial desires to return idiots to society as productive contributors proved too difficult while post-Civil War competition for work impacted the most

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vulnerable more than any other group. At the same time, Mormons had relocated from the edge of the United States to their own settlement in the west, thus missing out on these institutional developments and their attendant theories about idiocy. Geographical distance and the difficulties of settling a new Territory are the likeliest reasons why Mormonism didn’t take part in the movement of institutionalization until the end of the nineteenth century.

But these weren’t the only reasons for the disappearance of theological discussion about intellectual disability among Mormons during this period. Another clue is found in Pratt’s “Intelligence and Affection,” in which he describes how “indulgence” in “unnatural passions and affections” results in the loss of the “holy and pure principles of virtue and love.” Such perversion, Pratt lamented, had already resulted in the downfall of civilizations like Canaan, Greece, and Rome. He worried that America faced a similar fate, as did reformers like Howe, to whom the prevalence of idiocy was easily explainable:

[A] very large class of persons ignore conditions upon which alone health and reason are given to men, and consequently they sin in various ways; they disregard the conditions which should be observed in intermarriage; they overlook the hereditary transmission of certain morbid tendencies, or they pervert the natural appetites of the body into lusts of diverse kinds…and thus bring down the awful consequences of their own ignorance and sin upon the heads of their unoffending children.

Reformers realized their initial hopes to improve feeble minds were too often dashed and so began articulating justifications. Heredity and vice proved the most durable explanations for the rest of the century. Such explanations found their full application to Mormonism in Riley’s 1903 diagnosis of Smith as an epileptic born of inferior stock. One particular Mormon

84 This decline is outlined in Trent, Inventing the Feeble Mind.

85 Pratt, An Appeal, 38.

86 Samuel Gridley Howe, “Seventh Annual Report,” cited in Noll and Trent, Mental Retardation in America, 65. Such worries were greatly exacerbated by the Mormon practice of polygamy as discussed in Chapter Four.
development deeply impacted how intellectual disability was represented in Mormonism’s public discourse during this period: The practice of polygamy. Parley P. Pratt and other Mormon leaders would take advantage of a burgeoning publishing industry to expand upon their earlier articulations of the plan of salvation in order to accommodate plural marriage. Initial charges of Mormon enthusiasm and delusion would meld with charges that Mormons were creating a degraded people and threatening the health of the body politic through plural marriage. Mormons held similar assumptions about the impact of heredity and vice upon the next generation, only they argued that their peculiar system was not an instigator of decline but rather a superior way to prevent it.

In sum: Mormon views on intellectual disabilities initially focused on God’s exoneration of idiots from the soteriological requirements demanded of the mentally able. As Mormons emphasized the importance of intellectual development during mortality, people with intellectual disabilities were left by the theological wayside. By the time the first Mormon catechism was published in 1877, people with intellectual disabilities were absent from the discussion on accountability, which referred only to little children.\(^87\) The next two chapters account for why such soteriological considerations lay dormant for the rest of the century as Mormons developed and articulated a plan of salvation that would improve the saints on earth as they would eventually be perfected in heaven.

CHAPTER THREE

“GODS, ANGELS AND MEN ARE ALL OF ONE SPECIES”:
THE FAMILIAL PLAN OF SALVATION MODEL AND THEOLOGY ABOUT
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, 1850-1860

POLYGAMY . . . dissolves the vigour of their intellectual as well as active faculties, producing that indolence and imbecility, both of mind and body....¹

So argues the entry on polygamy in Charles Buck’s nineteenth-century Theological Dictionary.² Aside from theological objections, fears about the practical effects of polygamy upon the intellectual and physical constitution of rising generations constituted an important part of nineteenth-century anti-Mormon argumentation. Buck’s Theological Dictionary, which clothed the spirit of evangelical piety in the body of Enlightenment rationality, was actually published several decades before the Mormons publicly announced their peculiar practice of plural marriage, and was not itself a direct assault on Mormonism. Buck passed away several years before Joseph Smith founded the Mormon movement, although the convicted Calvinist certainly would have viewed the Mormons as a heretical sect at best. The Mormons shared Buck’s expressed awareness of the power of print to engage the minds and hearts of nineteenth-century Americans: “This work...will not only be of use to inform the mind,” Buck’s preface asserted,


“but [to] impress the heart; and thus promote the real good of the reader.”\(^3\) The feelings and the intellect were to be engaged (which assumed, of course, an audience for which they could be engaged.)

The *Theological Dictionary* gained wide popularity for its apparent comprehensiveness and its rhetorical approach borne of the Scottish Enlightenment’s Common Sense theology—not to mention its publisher’s effective marketing technique of relying on itinerant ministers to spread the *Dictionary’s* word alongside the Bible.\(^4\) Various Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, even some Quakers, cited the work with approval. Proponents of the American evangelical movement were well-aware of diversity infusing their erstwhile united front, but many theological differences could be overlooked in the face of intruding outsiders like Catholics or Shakers.

Even Mormons occasionally turned to the book. An 1835 catechism, overseen if not actually written by Smith, opens by citing the first paragraph of Buck’s entry on “THEOLOGY.”\(^5\) Smith and the Mormons made no known reference to the entry on polygamy, but such selective reading of Buck’s book was typical for readers more interested in placing themselves inside the circle of orthodoxy than questioning their own tenets.\(^6\) One analysis of the *Theological Dictionary* argues that its popularity can best be explained by its usefulness in marking the

\(^3\) Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 4.

\(^4\) One American publisher claimed 50,000 copies had sold by the early 1830s with no end in sight. See Bowman and Brown, “Reverend Buck’s Theological Dictionary and the Struggle to Define American Evangelicalism, 1802–1851,” 442–443.

\(^5\) Ibid., 469. The catechism is found in the *Lectures on Faith*, originally the “Doctrine” portion of the Church’s new Doctrine and Covenants (Kirtland, OH: F.G. Williams & Co., 1835), 9.

boundaries of an increasingly diverse American evangelicalism. Ironically, this boundary-policing function of the book eventually helped bring about its demise, as “representatives of marginal groups” could use it “prove their own legitimacy” by either discrediting it or by using it to play the same boundary-drawing game to draw themselves inside. In the meantime, more than scrutinizing “theological detail,” readers preferred to highlight issues of “religious temperament and practice” in order to define outsiders according to the “contours of the religious landscape that [the book] laid out.”

Buck’s book was popular in part due to its ability to create the patina of a unified evangelical coalition in the face of internal diversity. The issue of polygamy itself served just such a function in nineteenth-century opposition to Mormonism, with important implications for how disability became situated within Mormon discourse. From the 1850s on, polygamy provided the meeting ground where a diverse crowd could gather under the same banner to confront a social issue despite other sectarian differences. In fact, Buck included his “Polygamy” entry in the Dictionary for that very purpose. His initial definition is straightforward enough—“the state of having more wives than one at once”—but he continues: “Though this article, (like some other we have inserted,) cannot be considered as strictly theological, yet, as it is a subject of importance to society, we shall here introduce it.” Buck’s task was to discredit the practice in spite of its presence in the Bible. His disjointed argument can be boiled down to two main points. The first was theological. Buck pointed to the biblical narrative to show that polygamy was contrary to

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7 Bowman and Brown, Ibid., 461, 464–467. Mormons also employed Buck for this purpose, in one case denouncing the enthusiasm of the “French Prophets” and in another, denouncing the persecutors of “Nestorian Christians.” See n. a., “Try the Spirits,” Times and Seasons 3, no. 1 (April 1, 1842): 745; n. a., “Massacre of the Nestorian Christians,” Times and Seasons 4, no. 22 (October 1, 1843): 345.

8 Ibid., 457, 459.

9 Buck, Theological Dictionary, 457.
“the designs of Deity… [who] at first created only one woman to one man. Had God intended polygamy for the species, it is probable he would have begun with it” in Eden. Sure, Biblical patriarchs practiced polygamy, Buck acknowledged, but this was due to God’s indulging “the hardness of their heart.” Buck’s second point was social and physiological. He reasoned that there was a fairly even ratio of men to women being born in the world. More ominously, polygamy “produces…bad effects…to the parties themselves, and to the public.” For instance, it “dissolves the vigour of their intellectual as well as active faculties, producing that indolence and imbecility, both of mind and body, which have long characterized the nations of the East.”

Thus, years before Mormons arrived on the scene, Buck articulated what would become the two primary objections to polygamy—theological and social/physiological. These objections were brought to bear against Mormons for the rest of the century, which in turn impacted Mormon defenses of, and even their underlying theology regarding, the practice. In regards to the social/physiological angle, Mormon bodies and minds would become a fit subject for public scrutiny. Mormons had already been accused of being drawn from the dregs of society, of being mentally deficient and morally suspect. Polygamy raised the stakes in regards to the well-being of the rising generation. Mormons were well-attuned to these criticisms. They developed sustained responses proclaiming the superiority of the polygamous marriage system based on social and physiological considerations. In regards to the theological angle, Buck had pointed to the Genesis

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10 Note that Buck naturally combined these effects without needing to justify the move—a point which has important bearing on public responses to Mormon polygamy and views about intellectual disability, as discussed below.

11 Buck’s reference to “the East” is representative of general claims about the relative superiority and inferiority of certain world cultures. Eventually it would be brought into medical theories. In a future work I hope to explore how such theories relate to views of Mormons as consisting of a distinctive ethnicity. See David Wright, “Mongols in Our Midst: John Landon Down and the Ethnic Classification of Idiocy, 1858–1924,” in Noll and Trent, Mental Retardation in America, 92–119.
narrative. But as the last two chapters have outlined, Mormons were developing a more expansive cosmogony than was depicted in the basic Garden of Eden story. Most crucially, Mormons rejected Buck’s division between the theological and the social/physiological. In fact, Mormon social and physiological assumptions informed their defense of polygamy in ways that can still be detected in elements of the Mormon plan of salvation.\(^\text{12}\)

At first glance, these considerations may seem peripheral to the topic of intellectual disability in Mormon thought and history. But consider Buck’s specific reference to *imbecility* in his entry on polygamy. Mormons were criticized for their mental abilities as well as their beliefs and practices even before their practice of polygamy was widely known, and such scrutiny would only increase afterward.\(^\text{13}\) For the rest of the century, some critics imagined Mormonism as a dangerous web, trapping idiot women who would then produce a degraded race. A few outsiders contested these views on behalf of the Mormons, but disability still functioned for such defenders—as for all concerned—as a marker against the social acceptability and truth content of the Mormon faith.

Mormons responded to such criticism in a variety of ways depending on the context in which responses were undertaken, whether for internal purposes or external justifications. An

\(^{12}\) David J. Whittaker refers to chapter three and four’s timeframe (app. 1852-1900) as Mormonism’s “period of advocacy” for polygamy, and notes that “it has not been easy to abandon some of the doctrinal underpinnings” so constructed at this time. He does not specify what underpinnings, however. His work and this thesis provide glimpses into the non-linear, sporadic, always incomplete, contextually contingent development of religious belief. See Whittaker, “The Bone in the Throat: Orson Pratt and the Public Announcement of Plural Marriage,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (July 1987): 293–294.

\(^{13}\) Ironically, “imbecility” is also mentioned in Buck’s entry on “INJURY,” or the willful “violation of the rights of another.” Buck reminded readers that they might injure someone “in his name and character” by lying about them, or, say, by “exposing another for some natural imbecility either in body or mind,” which could have devastating consequences for a person’s social or legal standing (Buck, *Theological Dictionary*, 267). The imbecility Buck claimed was the result of polygamy would come to injure the Mormon people by this definition. Although mental abilities were not the dominant or most important criticism of Mormons, the issue was an integral part of the larger body of anti-Mormonism.
analysis of their published responses in sermon and editorial sheds light on how the Mormon
“plan of salvation” was increasingly led by the analogy of family and heredity toward a “best-
case anthropology,” thus marginalizing the mortal presence of people with intellectual
disabilities.

In other words, during this period Mormon discussions of disability turned further away
from soteriological considerations of idiocy (discussed in Chapter One) toward its eventual
eradication amongst God’s chosen people on earth through proper adherence to religious
principles.14 Things become more complex as several theological streams combine, with
unintended consequences. Chapters Three and Four outline the consequence most pertinent to this
thesis—the disappearance of direct discussions about intellectual disability in Mormon theology
between the late 1840s until after the turn of the century. Disability was not an object for
theological contemplation in its own right during this period.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on theological developments impacting views of
disability in Mormon thought immediately preceding and following the death of Joseph Smith,
alongside the rise of the Mormon practice of polygamy. The next chapter describes how the
emergence of Mormon polygamy affected criticism of Mormons and Mormon defenses. This
overview sheds light on the theological developments pertaining to intellectual disabilities which
resulted from this dialectic.

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14 This is not to say that the earliest understanding of idiocy—as a condition which exempts one
from moral agency—was forgotten. It likely served as a sufficient place-holder until its full reemergence in
the twentieth century. What is striking is that such discussions drop from the public record throughout this
period. I explain this lacuna as the result of Mormon sensitivity to criticism, combined with their
increasingly progressive vision of the plan of salvation. Future studies should closely analyze population
statistics, as the presence of people with disabilities can create a theological pressure point leading to
theological reflection, development, and expression.
Blueprinting the Plan of Salvation

As described in Chapter One, the plan of salvation was initially understood by Mormons through a legalistic framework, similar to broader Arminian soteriologies. Chapter Two showed how Smith and other Mormon leaders added theological elements which bent the arc of the plan of salvation toward a more optimistic view of humanity. Specifically, the purpose of mortal life was about more than qualifying for salvation or damnation. Through it, premortal intelligences, which in some sense existed eternally, are provided the opportunity to grow, prove themselves, and increase in intelligence through the proper exercise of agency and control of the physical body.

Beginning in the early to mid-1840s the plan of salvation was increasingly tied to a familial model alongside the rise of the Mormon practice of polygamy. Mormon articulators combined various biblical proof-texts with Smith’s growing body of revelations which depicted humans as the actual “offspring of God” (Acts 17:29). Mormon leaders began describing their relation to God using the model of heredity. This theological development created tension with some of Smith’s other claims about the nature of matter and the origin of humans. I focus on these elements here by analyzing the words of two of the main architects of early Mormon theology—Joseph Smith and Parley P. Pratt. Pratt’s writings in particular provide the best published material for analyzing the ongoing development of Smith’s plan of salvation and its impact on how Mormons represented intellectual disability.
Unanswered Questions about Joseph Smith’s Eternal Intelligences

One of the biggest theological puzzles Joseph Smith left in his wake is the question of the nature of the human spirit, or the “intelligence,” and its origin. Hand-written fragments of Smith’s oral sermon contain this bold claim: “God never did have power to create the spirit of man at all. He could not create himself–Intelligence exists upon a selfexistent principle–is a spirit from age to age & no creation about it.” Further, God found himself “in the midst of spirit and glory because he was greater saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.”

In notes from a subsequent sermon, Smith spoke of humans as “Sons of God” who, like Jesus, “can cry Abba Father.” These claims create an apparent tension in Smith’s theology. Intelligences were in some sense eternal and self-existent, but also sons and daughters of God the Father. Joseph Lee Robinson, an associate of Smith, reported confusion on this point was in the air shortly after Smith’s death. Smith had taught “that our spirits existed

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15 One of the main problems in later attempts to systematize Smith’s thought on these matters is that historical investigations have often been implicitly informed by “the mythology of coherence.” Quentin Skinner observes that although any given historical figure may not have been “altogether consistent,” it becomes “dangerously easy for the historian to conceive it as his task to supply or find…the coherence which they may appear to lack.” Skinner was referring to approaches to political/philosophical figures, but the same problem arises when assessing religious figures. In Smith’s case the problem is multiplied in that Smith claimed to reveal texts of other authors in addition to making his own claims. See Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 16.

16 Smith himself did not record this sermon. These quotes are from notes taken by multiple onlookers. See the “William Clayton Report” of Smith’s King Follett discourse (April 7, 1844) in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center Monograph, 1980), 360. As early as 1839 Smith taught that “The Spirit of Man is not a created being.” To complicate matters, he added that “earth, water &c” all “had their existence in an elementary state from Eternity,” although it is unclear if he intended to say elements of the spirit of man also existed in “an elementary state” which differed from their state as spirits. See Ehat and Cook, Ibid., 9.

17 Ibid., 381. Smith is ostensibly playing on Romans 8:15, but Smith also recognized and employed multiple meanings for “father.” For example, Smith referred to Adam as “the Father of the human family [who] presides over the Spirits of all men,” but that Adam himself is presided over by the “Son of Man” (Christ) who acts under the authority of God the Father, all of whom are uncreated beings. See Joseph Smith, Sermon, August 8, 1839, in Ibid., 9.
eternally with God,” Robinson reported, which led church elders to ask “How is God the Father of our spirits?” … There was not a person that could or that would even try to explain the matter.”18 Contrary to Robinson’s recollection, a few did try to explain the matter. Robinson and others made use of Smith’s claim that all spirit is matter, and that all matter is in some sense eternal, to posit that the human spirit was at some point “organized or begotten or born” from inchoate eternal matter.19

Differing schools of thought on this question exist in the contemporary Mormon Church, but virtually all parties are agreed on three key points: First, that Smith taught that all spirits or intelligences are in some sense eternal. Second, that there existed some level of cognition, self-awareness, or personal volition at some point in time prior to mortal birth. And third, that intelligences were in some sense organized by God before the advent of this particular earth. The key division amongst the variety of views revolves around the third point: In what sense were intelligences “organized before the world was” (Abraham 3:22)? Was this an organization in terms of the creation of their individual personhood, or an organization in terms of calling a group of persons together to counsel? The description in Abraham, combined with other statements made by Smith, suggests the latter.20 But that would still not preclude some sort of ontological organization of spirits prior to that time. As of yet, no single study has fully fleshed out Smith’s teachings on matter and intelligences, but these questions are particularly pressing when

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19 Ibid.

20 Smith described a pre-mortal “Grand Council” in multiple sermons beginning in 1839. See Ehat and Cook, Ibid., 9, 60, 341, 359, etc. Perhaps the confusion arose because Smith, in decrying ex nihilo creation, taught that God created the earth by using chaotic matter, even that of prior worlds, which led some to equate that type of creation with that of the human spirit. See Ehat and Cook, Ibid., 341, 345, 351, 359, 361, etc.
considering intellectual disability. The Abraham account speaks of grades of intelligences similar to grades of stars, some brighter than others, some more intelligent than others, one more intelligent than all (Abraham 3:16-19). Are these levels determined ontologically, or are they the result of conscious work and decision-making on the part of individual agents? Was there some sort of spirit birth process, or perhaps an adoption process of already-existing entities? Are particles eternal while the mind itself has some kind of origin or emergence as said particles congregate by a birthing process or even their own volition? 

These particular issues were evidently not publicly engaged by Smith or others in the early years of Mormon theological development. Depending on how one answers these questions, intellectual disabilities could be attributed to inherently faulty eternal intelligences, a “defect” caused by a hypothetical “spirit birth” process, or a merit-based lag in premortal progression. God could be viewed as the creator or direct cause of disabilities, or as a being who must work with inherently limited intelligences, which includes some not as advanced as others, perhaps eternally so. Or perhaps natural processes which are involved in the creation of mortally-embodied beings could be blamed. These are only some of the questions which must be approached in working toward a fully fleshed out Mormon theology of intellectual disability.

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21 For a recent discussion on the possibility of Joseph Smith himself advancing claims about “spirit birth” see Brian C. Hales, “A Continuation of the Seeds’: Joseph Smith and Spirit Birth,” Journal of Mormon History 38, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 105–130.

22 Such speculations took decades to appear in Mormon publications. This folk doctrine has gone the other direction with the view that intellectually disabled people don’t require the same level of mortal testing due to their premortal advancement. In another iteration, Satan wished to exact revenge on certain intelligences so God directed their birth into disabled bodies as a protection against temptation.

23 One might also ask about the ultimate implications of such beliefs in the face of contemporary neurosciences and other theories of human intelligence and consciousness. A constructive Mormon theology of intellectual disability will require revisiting questions about human and divine anthropology, the extent of God’s power, the nature of the pre-mortal life, the implications of mortal embodiment, the nature of free will, and other fundamental Mormon theological points.
This thesis simply traces the historical expression of Mormon theologies as they relate to intellectual disability during a period in which these questions were not yet publicly brought to bear on Smith’s teachings. Other Mormons would use Smith’s developing theological ideas to advance a variety of perspectives, all of which have implications for how intellectual disabilities might be viewed through a Mormon lens.

**Parley P. Pratt and the Exaltation or Degeneration of the Human Race**

The shift from a plan of salvation with the goal of intellectual and moral advancement toward one informed by the analogy of family is perhaps most easily identifiable in the writings of Mormon apostle Parley P. Pratt. Continuing his theme of intellectual and moral advancement as discussed in Chapter Two, Pratt wrote an 1838 pamphlet describing the ultimate fate of “the redeemed,” who “return to the fountain, and become part of the great all, from which they emanated,” becoming filled with the same knowledge God possesses.24 Soon thereafter, Pratt began teaching that humans possessed buds of godlike intelligence and affection which would blossom and bear fruit in eternity. By 1845 he boldly wrote that humans had not simply emanated from God, but that “men are the offspring or children of the Gods, and destined to advance by degrees, and to make their way by a progressive series of changes, till they become like their Father in heaven, and like Jesus Christ their elder brother.” Pratt began employing the concept of heredity to prove his point—humans could become like God because he is “of the same species” and is the “modlle [model], or standard of perfection.”25

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The fact that Pratt was cashing in on popular scientific assumptions about heredity in his articulation of Mormon theosis is apparent from the title of his 1855 book, *A Key to the Science of Theology*. In this systematic culmination of Pratt’s theological development he wrote “Gods, angels and men, are all of one species, one race, one great family,” which makes it possible for humans to become like God “in every respect, physically, and in intellect, attributes or powers.”

Literalizing the analogy, Pratt explained that “[t]he very germs of these Godlike attributes, being engendered in man, the offspring of Deity, only need cultivating, improving, developing, and advancing by means of a series of progressive changes.” Humans literally inherit the ability to grow and become like God as a heavenly parent in the same sense that children literally inherit the ability to become like their earthly parents. This theological move ultimately collapsed the ontological distinction between humans and God, but it also raised questions about the different levels of ability seen among the human race during mortal life.

Pratt addressed that particular problem in a sermon delivered two years prior to publishing *Key*. He took issue with the Declaration of Independence’s claim that “all men are created equal” by observing the “fact that all beings are not equal in their intellectual capacity, in their dispositions, and in the gifts and callings of God. It is a fact that some beings are more intelligent than others, and some are endowed with abilities or gifts which others do not

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possess.” This was so even premortally, Pratt argued, citing as evidence Smith’s Book of Abraham translation. In that account, God saw many “noble and great ones” in a pre-earth life whom were elected to be rulers on earth. Pratt noted that the world “noble” had been “greatly abused, in Europe and elsewhere, being applied to those titled, and to those who inherit certain titles and estates, whether they are wise men or fools, virtuous or vicious. A man may even be an idiot, a drunkard, an adulterer, or a murderer, and still be called a nobleman by the world.”

By contrast, the Lord predicated his election of the noble ones according to their “superiority of intellect, or nobleness of action, or of capacity to act” premortally, which entitled them to be born through the “lineage” of particular individuals like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and now through the lineage of stalwart Mormons. God was not to be blamed for unequal intelligence because “He did not create their intelligence at all. It was never created, being an inherent attribute of the eternal element called spirit, which element composes each individual spirit [and] exists in an infinitude of degrees in the scale of intellect.” All could nevertheless be considered “equal” in the sense that God expects all to do the best with what they have; “the greater and the less may both be innocent, and both be justified, and be useful, each in their own capacity; if each magnify their own calling, and act in their own capacity, it is all right,” Pratt

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30 Ibid., 257-258, emphasis mine. Note how idiocy functions as a boundary-drawing condition.

31 Ibid., 258. Here Pratt has settled on a position regarding Smith’s seemingly conflicting models of eternal spirits versus created spirits. He posits a sort of spirit atomism—that some sort of eternal matter possessing inherent abilities were at some point organized into a spirit personage. Whether this is a faithful improvement on Smith is debatable, but it has largely been the position of Mormons to the present. A more theologically constructive approach to this matter would question Pratt’s line of thought further, and perhaps challenge it.
reasoned. Thus, he was aware that some people were worse off with regard to physical or intellectual abilities in the present, but ultimately all could succeed in the plan of salvation by “magnifying their own calling” to the best extent possible. Pratt depicted disability as a minor setback in an eternal schema of progression. He looked forward to the thousand year millennium and an eternal future during which everyone could ultimately form a “perfect union…with Jesus Christ and his Father in worlds without end.” Nothing in Pratt’s sermon expressly precluded people with disabilities from reaching this eventual exalted status, but he presented a marginalizing (abilities-based) anthropology to the extent that certain favored abilities exclude certain people from present participation.

Pratt was much more specific about his theology’s exclusionary elements in Key to the Science of Theology, a book which was not simply a theological treatise. As the lengthy subtitle suggests, Pratt sought to articulate the First Principles of Spiritual Philosophy, Religion, Law and Government...for the Final Development of Universal Peace, Truth and Knowledge. Pratt’s theology had practical applications for current law and governance. The cosmic plan of salvation played out in earthly policy. Pratt’s Key was as much social program as theology, collapsing Buck’s distinction between the theological and the social/physiological. This had troubling implications for people with disabilities which historical treatments have often overlooked while exploring the apparently progressive aspects of Pratt’s theology, especially in regards to the subject of sexuality and marriage: “The object of the union of the sexes is the propagation of their

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32 Ibid., 258.

33 Ibid., 263.

34 As I will suggest in a future work, Pratt left an explanatory gap in Mormon theology with regards to the mortal worth of people with severe disabilities which was subsequently filled by a variety of official explanations and folkloric speculations.
species, or procreation,” Pratt observed, but this was not all. Such unions are “also for mutual affection, and the cultivation of those eternal principles of never-ending charity and benevolence, which are inspired by the Eternal Spirit; also for mutual comfort and assistance in this world of toil and sorrow, and for mutual duties towards their offspring.” Sexual “perversion,” on the other hand, proves “subversive of health, of pure, holy and lasting affection; of moral and social order; and of the laws of God and nature.” Proper sexual expression is a “positive command of Almighty God, binding on all persons of both sexes, who are circumstanced and conditioned to fulfill the same.”\textsuperscript{35}

Pratt articulated the exclusionary element of his theology in his qualifying assertion that only those “circumstanced and conditioned” should fulfill God’s command to multiply and replenish the earth. Specifically: “A man who obeys the ordinances of God, and is without blemish or deformity, who has sound health and mature age” and “A woman, under similar circumstances, is designed to be the glory of some man in the Lord.”\textsuperscript{36} Here, at the culmination of Pratt’s theological \textit{magnum opus}, his vision of the eternal progression of God’s offspring merged with a justification for the practice of polygamy. Charles Buck’s \textit{Theological Dictionary} argued that the ratio of women to men in the world was relatively equal, but Pratt narrowed the playing field: “It frequently happens, in the course of human events, that there is, in a community, a majority of females.” That is, the ratio of righteous women to righteous men was not equal,

\textsuperscript{35} Pratt, \textit{A Key to the Science of Theology}, 165. Again, we see a breakdown of Buck’s dichotomizing of the theological versus social/physiological.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 166, emphasis mine. Pratt is employing Pauline categories in regards to man being the head of woman as Christ is head of the Church (Ephesians 5:23).
contra Buck. Pratt blamed this inequality for rampant immorality in the form of mistresses, illegitimate mothers, and prostitutes. He proposed a solution:

A wise legislation, or the law of God, would punish, with just severity, the crimes of adultery or fornication, and would not suffer the idiot, the confirmed, irreclaimable drunkard, the man of hereditary disease, or of vicious habits, to possess or retain a wife; while, at the same time, it would provide for a good and capable man, to honourably receive and maintain more wives than one. Indeed, it should be the privilege of every virtuous female, who has the requisite capacity and qualifications for matrimony; to demand either of individuals or government, the privilege of becoming an honoured and legal wife and mother; even if it were necessary for her to be married to a man who has several wives…

Like Buck, Pratt was concerned with the effects of marriage systems on participants and offspring. But he turned Buck’s claims around. The institutions of “Christendom,” Pratt asserted using italics and scare quotes, had become false and corrupt to the extent that they overlooked the importance of proper sexual expression even while criticizing Mormons for their peculiar practice. Such institutions, he wrote,

have had a downward tendency in the generations of man for many centuries. Our physical organization, health, vigour, strength of body, intellectual faculties, inclinations, &c., are influenced very much by parentage. Hereditary disease, idiocy, weakness of mind, or of constitution, deformity, tendency to violent and ungovernable passions, vicious appetites and desires, are engendered by parents; and are bequeathed as a heritage from generation to generation.

With his characteristic dispensationalist gloss, Pratt argued that the antediluvians, the Sodomites, and the Canaanites had become so degenerate that “God, in mercy, destroyed them, and thus put an end to the procreation of races so degenerate and abominable; while Noah, Abraham,

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37 Such charges did not go unchallenged. Wrote one former Mormon: “To blame Christianity because bad men encourage prostitutes, is ridiculous…It is just as unfair as it would be to say Mormonism countenanced indiscriminate thieving, because William Nobody stole a horse.” See John Hyde, Jr., Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs (New York: W.P. Fetridge & Company, 1857), 301.

38 Ibid., 167, emphasis mine.

39 Pratt, A Key to the Science of Theology..., emphasis mine.
Melchesidech [sic], and others, who were taught in the true laws of procreation [ostensibly polygamy], ‘were perfect in their generation.’ \cite{40} The same was true in the place now “peopled by the Latter-day Saints,” where “[t]he restoration of these pure laws and practices has commenced to improve or regenerate a race.” \cite{41} Such regeneration would continue, according to Pratt, “in and after the resurrection.” \cite{42}

**Conclusion**

Charles Buck’s division of the theological considerations from the social and physiological in his criticism of polygamy could not account for the ways Mormon theology combined these elements together. Joseph Smith provided theological elements which other Mormon leaders used to develop views about the plan of salvation, which set Mormons apart from other Christian traditions of the nineteenth century. Parley P. Pratt in particular composed an influential interpretation of Mormonism’s plan of salvation in which humans were the offspring of God and thus of the same species, capable of progressing to a similar mode of existence in a perfected, resurrected material body. According to Pratt, God would direct certain intelligences into particular lineages based on premortal attributes and achievements—lineages which would favor their own continued advancement and ultimately the overall advancement of the human

\cite{40} Ibid., 168, emphasis in original.

\cite{41} Ibid., 169-170.

\cite{42} Ibid., 171. This is perhaps Pratt’s clearest expression of eternal procreation, but the concept was suggested and perhaps rooted in his earlier millennial-themed arguments of the late 1830s. See my forthcoming article, “Millennialism and the Celestial Kingdom in the development of Early Mormon Doctrine.”
race on earth through an ever-improving posterity. As Mormons represented a numerical minority, and as there seemed to Pratt to be more righteous women than men, God instituted polygamy as a means to facilitate the proper distribution of premortal spirits and their subsequent development toward perfection. Idiocy, weakness of mind, deformity, and other undesirable traits were viewed as obstacles to God’s plan to advance the human race. More importantly, such things were asserted to result from immorality and improper breeding habits. Pratt argued that those who carried such traits should be restricted from procreating, and to the extent that such traits were heritable, polygamy would eventually overcome them. In Pratt’s theology, then, the potential for disabilities to hamper one’s eternal development received greater notice than the soteriological concern about idiots being less accountable like children, as was the focus of the earliest Mormon discussions about disability.

A public battle between Mormons and their critics over polygamy in regards to perfecting or degenerating a generation would ultimately drown out any other theological considerations about intellectual disabilities in Mormon thought through the rest of the nineteenth century. Mormon bodies and minds came under increased scrutiny by critics after the practice of polygamy was announced. The final chapter further demonstrates that Mormons were aware of the scrutiny and that they responded with defenses which aligned with many of the same underlying assumptions regarding health and procreation. These assumptions informed Mormonism’s developing theology which continued to further marginalize intellectual disability.


44 Pratt thus anticipated Francis Galton’s eugenic theories and propositions of legal means to regulate procreation particularly amongst those with various disabilities by several decades. The relationship between Mormonism and the eugenics movement remains to be fully explored.
CHAPTER FOUR

“LEAN AND WEAK OF BODY, DEPRAVED OF MIND”: DISABILITY IN THE DIALECTIC OF PUBLIC DEFENSES AND CRITICISMS OF POLYGAMY, 1850-1900

Nineteenth-century Americans of all stripes could agree with one Mormon leader’s declaration that “a true and effective reform [of society] must begin in the marriage bed.”¹ In the most explicitly eugenic piece ever published by a Mormon, George Q. Cannon made the case for Mormon polygamy by harnessing popular thought on health and procreation. In the process, he further marginalized people with intellectual disabilities in Mormon theology. Perhaps the only unique contribution Mormons made to these proto-eugenic arguments was in the way they used them to criticize monogamy.² Cannon said the same “laws of generation, development, sustenance and health which apply to the lower orders of animals” also apply to humans, and “the stock will degenerate” if these laws are disobeyed.³ This degeneration threatened the very spiritual nature of humans, which for Cannon, included intellectual ability:

The rational principle of man is spiritual. Yet so intimately is that spirituality connected with his physical nature, that the full exercise of the one depends materially upon the perfect development of the other. A mal-formed man will have a mal-formed mind. A

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² I am indebted to Stirling Adams for this observation. I call the arguments “proto-eugenic” because they occurred decades before Francis Galton coined the term.

well developed intellectual brain will produce a philosophic mind. …[O]ur mental nature is a superstructure built upon the foundations of our physical structure.⁴

Like Parley P. Pratt before him, Cannon said society should frame laws forbidding the disabled from marrying and requiring the fit to marry. This would certainly offend “novelists, libertines and fools,” but the production of “a superior race of men and consequently a purer state of society” should be government’s goal. Cannon folded biblical citation into social theory—a mixture he boldly if inaccurately attributed to the first Mormon prophet in a stunning passage worth quoting at length:

This is precisely what the Saints in the valleys of the mountains are endeavoring to accomplish. Joseph Smith had penetration enough to know, that so long as the bodies of men are weak, degenerate, and tainted with impurities inherited from their fathers for a thousand generations, it is impossible to accomplish with them any great moral improvement, or indoctrinate them with many divine truths. Therefore, being divinely aided, he introduced a system which commenced precisely where the Christian dispensation began—“Behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.” Luke, 1:21. He taught that none but healthy men should marry—that a man should know his wife for the purpose of procreation and for that only—that he should keep himself apart from her during the carrying and nursing periods—that it is lawful and right, God commanding, for a man to have more than one wife—that adultery should be punishable with death—that whoredom should not be tolerated under any consideration—and that by observing these roles and the general laws of health, their posterity would become healthy and vigorous, and the prophecy of Isaiah which says, “As the age of a tree, so shall the age of my people be,” will be fulfilled. This theory is reduced to practice in Utah Territory; and it is remarked by immigrants passing through Salt Lake City, that the proportion of children is unusually great, and they are uncommonly robust and healthy. Who cannot see that the mental vigor of those children will be in proportion to their physical perfection? And that a generation is rising in the American interior who will make their mark upon the history of their times? This is what the Gentiles with the priests at their head call “Mormon abomination,” and other hard names: but the question arises, Which is the better? The Mormon, or the Christian practice in relation to this matter?⁵

“Which is the better” was the key question for Mormons and their critics. According to Cannon, Mormon polygamy “laid the foundation for a healthy generation.” The rest of the so-called

⁴ Cannon, Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
Christian nation’s monogamy resulted in “bastardy, whoredom, and degeneracy…and also their concomitants, irreligion, intemperance, licentiousness and vice of every kind and degree.”

While Mormon leaders like Orson Pratt marshaled scriptural evidence to support plural marriage, Cannon boldly appropriated widely-accepted assumptions about intellectual ability and procreation to gain rhetorical advantage in the realm of secular discourse. He ultimately claimed that the physiological dimensions of Mormon polygamy constituted “one [of], if not the strongest, source of argument in [polygamy’s] favor.” Of course, critics of Mormonism disagreed. The immigrants Cannon referred to who passed through Utah territory published accounts about the Mormons, some of which refer to matters of physiology and mental fitness, although they hardly employed Cannon’s glowing terms. As polygamy became a prominent locus of contention between Mormons and their critics, a multi-faceted defense emerged. Mormonism’s insider discourse, however, suggested ongoing discomfort with the continuance of disability even among the Mormon faithful. Critics, for their part, scrutinized Mormon offspring at the same time they crafted legislation and engaged in newspaper wars. The present chapter follows this back-and-forth as critics and Mormons argued about the effects of polygamy on the brains and bodies of the rising generation. Polygamy became the magnet to which virtually all discussions of intellectual disability during this period would cling.

The first public announcement of Mormon polygamy was delivered on August 29, 1852 by Mormon apostle Orson Pratt. His speech occurred during a special conference of the Church calling for renewed vigor in Mormon missionary work. Orson grounded his defense of the

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6 Ibid.

7 George Q. Cannon, “Celestial Marriage,” October 9, 1869, Journal of Discourses (Liverpool and London: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855-84), 13:207. Cannon was not only referring to the fitness of polygamous offspring, but also to physiological considerations such as differences between male and female fecundity.
practice in biblical accounts of polygamy, thus establishing the main scriptural justifications which Mormons would use for the rest of the century. Another line of argumentation arose alongside Pratt’s proof-texts which eventually led to Cannon’s mode of defense. During the 1852 conference when polygamy was first announced publicly, Brigham Young—Joseph Smith’s successor to the presidency of the LDS Church—highlighted the social and physiological effects of plural marriage on the present generation. Young predicted that the Mormons’ superior system of marriage would ultimately “be fostered and believed in by the more intelligent portion of the world as one of the best doctrines ever proclaimed to any people.” Intelligence and right behavior were correlated. Young quoted a supportive but unnamed U.S Senator:

If the United States do not adopt that very method [plural marriage] their generations will not live until they are 30 years old. They are going to destruction; disease is spreading so fast among the inhabitants of the United States, that they are born rotten with it, and in a few years they are gone….Joseph has introduced the best plan for restoring and establishing strength and long life among men, of any man on the earth; and the Mormons are very good and virtuous people.

8 Orson Pratt’s first public defense was delivered three years before his brother Parley published his ideas about sexual regulation in Key to the Science of Theology. Orson “set the tone and direction” for all subsequent Mormon defenses of the practice by situating it theologically so as to justify its constitutionality under the First Amendment. See Whittaker, “The Bone in the Throat,” 302. Orson chronologically reinituated the Eden narrative between the premortal life, where God’s spirit children were created, and the promise God made to Abraham regarding a numberless posterity, thus setting up a lineage through which the “noble and great” spirits would be sent to earth. Orson was less specific in regards to the physical and mental health of Mormon offspring than were Parley or Cannon. For Orson’s sermon and the full conference were published as “A Special Conference of Elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” Deseret News, September 14, 1852, Extra edition; The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star 15 (1853): 1-36; Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” August 29, 1852, Journal of Discourses, 1:53–66.

9 A “succession crisis” occurred after Smith’s death because he never publicly laid out a plan for leadership succession. Multiple groups emerged, including the Salt Lake City-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS), now called the Community of Christ. This thesis focuses on the numerically larger LDS Church. For more on these Latter-day Saint groups see Newell G. Bringhurst and John C. Hamer, Scattering of the Saints: Schism Within Mormonism (Independence, Mo.: John Whitmer Books, 2007).

10 a., “A Special Conference of Elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” 25.
The cessation of polygamy at the turn of the twentieth century meant that Mormons could not ultimately prove the claim that plural marriage would establish strength and long life for the human race, but that goal is one of the most frequent and overlooked reasons Mormons gave for their peculiar institution. Mormon justifications for polygamy wove multiple threads together, some more scriptural and theological, some more social and physiological. For Mormons, these categories were not entirely separable. Still, “for many Mormons nothing was more essential than [polygamy’s] supposed hygienic effects.”¹¹ Defenses of polygamy consisted of two interconnected thrusts: Mormons interpreted biblical scriptures through the theological lens crafted by Joseph Smith at the same time they articulated arguments about the improvement of the human species on earth by coopting wider American views on health and procreation. These discourses merged together over the next several decades as the Church became established in the Utah Territory.¹²

**Mingling Moral Admonition with Medical Theories**

Brigham Young relied on the testimony of a politician. Orson Pratt appealed to biblical precedent. Parley P. Pratt rhetorically associated his theological project with science, thus trading on the positive reputation which medical and scientific developments held in the minds of his

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¹¹ B. Carmon Hardy explores “hygienic” and “naturalistic” Mormon defenses of plural marriage and demonstrates Mormon reliance on non-Mormon sources on issues of sexuality and physical and mental health in *Solemn Covenant: The Mormon Polygamous Passage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 84-86. Mormons implicitly reaffirmed Charles Buck’s division between the theological and the practical even while bridging these categories.

¹² These discourses slowly separated as Mormonism moved into an accommodationist mentality during the twentieth century as described in Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994). Even then, Mormons continued to make claims about their religion’s superior effects upon human health and procreation. Without polygamy, other Mormon tenets provided the naturalistic, divinely sanctioned means of regenerating the race.
coreligionists and countrymen. This last tactic extended beyond Pratt. An unsigned “Dialogue between Father and Son, on Physiology,” which appeared in the Church’s official newspaper in 1853, provides an excellent example of the way Mormons waged a “campaign of superior virtue” even while appropriating wider popular beliefs on matters of health.\textsuperscript{13} A son overhears his father talking to “the Doctor” about “Physiology” and asks his father what the word means. The father explains that a proper understanding of physiology, or “the nature of man,” would result in a long life for vigorous, healthy and handsome bodies with finely tuned senses, good memory, “and great understanding.” With some resonance to James’s instruction on faith and works, the father says hearing about physiology is different from “practic[ing] upon the instructions which you hear.”\textsuperscript{14} The son can’t “obtain a perfect celestial exaltation” unless he will “live up to every principle of light and virtue” as taught by religion \textit{and} science.

The son wonders why “the Gentiles are so much ahead of this church in teaching this principle” in their common schools. “This church began to teach physiology when it was first organized,” the father assures him, only Mormons started with revelation, whereas the Gentiles “commenced by dint of their own wisdom and by human learning.” God inspired them without their knowing it in order to “help on the great work of restitution.”\textsuperscript{15} Since transgression is simply acting against the laws of physiology, Gentiles incidentally benefit from a proper understanding of physiology. But the Mormons also “received the Spirit to help their infirmities,” to understand the “laws by which their mental and bodily powers could be perfected.” Significantly, the father

\textsuperscript{13} n. a., “Dialogue Between Father and Son, on Physiology,” \textit{Deseret News}, (December 1, 1853): 2. The phrase “campaign of superior virtue” is from Terryl L. Givens, \textit{The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17.

\textsuperscript{14} See James 2:14-26.

\textsuperscript{15} Mormons frequently connected their restoration movement with the prophecy in Acts 3:21 regarding a “restitution of all things.”
doesn’t guarantee that the son himself will live “to great age,” but by “observing the laws of nature in all things, there would be brought about in course of time, a restoration of that long, and useful, and happy life that very ancient people were blessed with.”

In a follow-up dialogue, the son recalls the Mormon belief that “the spiritual and intelligent portion of man is a substantial and material substance” and wonders whether it, like the material body, can die. The father reassures him that in the resurrection the spirit and body will reunite and that “[t]he grosser body will be conformed to the designs and acts of the spiritual organization that controls it” during mortality. “If the brain, or controlling power aims diligently to control all the acts and deeds of the body” to righteous ends during mortality, “the spirit or governing power will have a right in the resurrection to choose such a bodily organization as will conform to its wishes.” Those who follow the “Holy and All-wise Spirit… [will] reap that beautiful and noble bodily organization, and that high and noble mental endowment which it is the prerogative, and promise, of the Holy One to give.” Bodily perfection mirrors moral perfection.

16 n. a., “Dialogue Between Father and Son, on Physiology,” 2.
18 The brain, spirit, and controlling power are intermingled without distinction, making it difficult to decipher the author’s exact view on the relationship between the brain, mind and spirit other than that they are all somehow related. As discussed in the previous chapter, Parley P. Pratt looked to the resurrection when confronting the problem of disability. Relying on the resurrection for resolution of bodily problems has a long history in the broader Christian tradition as discussed in Candida R. Moss, “Heavenly Healing: Eschatological Cleansing and the Resurrection of the Dead in the Early Church,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 79, no. 4 (December 2011): 991–1017.
When the son asks whether “handsome persons male and female, of much intelligence, that continually work iniquity” will still be smart and attractive in the resurrection, the father responds with a description of eternal disability:

You may depend upon it, my son, that there will be no handsome persons in hell, or homely, ill-featured ones in heaven. It is the living spirit in man that distinguishes the lineaments of his face and form from the lifeless image in wax or from the evil doer. The latter has no beauty….The spirit of disobedience…is in no way inviting or comely in the eyes of a pure spirit; neither does true intelligence pertain to such a spirit. Foolishness is written on the frontlets and in the eyes of such a spirit…and it cannot conceal its true hideousness and deformity. …The tendency of disobedience is invariably to disfigure, deform, defile, degrade, and make wretched and vile, all who cherish it; and such as sow to this spirit, will reap a fullness of that which they sow.20

According to this fictional father, such deformities and “foolishness” were not always apparent in mortal bodies, although they could be, as part one of the Dialogue asserted. Regardless, the father relies upon the negative connotation of deformity and disability to uphold his wider observations about morality and natural law. Polygamy is conspicuously absent in these two pieces, but observations about the age of the ancients could easily serve as dog-whistle references to the practice, as published defenses of the practice elsewhere relied upon the same point in depicting the ancient patriarchs’ plural marriages.

Medical theories mingled with moral admonition throughout these dialogues, echoing claims in the work of the most influential theorists and physicians focusing upon disability in the nineteenth century. Samuel Gridley Howe taught that sexual overindulgence, incest, abortion and masturbation often produced an idiotic child who was “deformed, or halt, or blind, or deaf” as the tragic result of “a violation of natural laws.”21 Edouard Séguin promoted “physiological and

20 Ibid. Compare this discussion to one between another father and son on matters of mortality and eternal life in the Book of Mormon, Alma 42.

sensory training” for the cure of idiocy while also warning couples against indulging in the condition’s “intimate, even criminal, causes,” the “hereditary punishment” of which being “set forth in the Bible.”

As one historian summarized, Mormons “recycled non-Mormon thought into their own armory, using it to defend the principle,” including American societal views of “sexuality, health, and home life.” They connected such common assumptions with peculiar Mormon doctrines such as the material nature of spirit or the purpose of polygamy. However, the assumptions were contestable on grounds other than the religious. By justifying polygamy through an appeal to its social effects, Mormon leaders opened the door to criticism from a wider range of antagonists than religious opponents, including federal appointees to the Utah Territory, former Mormons, medical specialists, social commentators, and even popular novelists. As the practical outcome of polygamy was scrutinized, disabilities in general served as a cudgel either side could use to browbeat the other. The rest of this chapter shows how intellectual disability received attention in this back-and-forth, resulting in the theological marginalization of people with such disabilities and their families. It concludes by highlighting several anxieties about disability which Mormons discussed internally apart from the public gaze.

George Q. Cannon and the Disabled Utah Legislature versus Amicus Curiae

Overland travelers frequently passed through the new Territory of Utah on the way to California, many of whom published descriptions of their time amongst the Mormons in newspapers and books for a growing reading public. Accounts were largely positive prior to the

22 Edward Seguin, New Facts and Remarks Concerning Idiocy (1869), cited in Ibid.

23 Hardy, Solemn Covenant, 84.
announcement of the practice of polygamy. This changed after various federal appointees who
did not get along with Mormon president and Territorial Governor Brigham Young initiated a
public awareness campaign about Mormon “degradation and wretchedness.” 24 Mormons were
eager to have the public’s ear to defend themselves from such charges and to promote their
doctrines. Following the public announcement of polygamy, Brigham Young dispatched
prominent Mormon leaders to establish newspapers in various states throughout the nation. An
exchange in the Western Standard, a Mormon paper published at San Francisco, is representative
of the polemical back-and-forth.

In 1856 an anonymous author called Amicus Curiae published a list of the members of
Utah’s new territorial Council and House of Representatives, including a tally of their wives. In
order to apprise San Francisco Herald readers of the quality of Mormon stock, each name was
followed by a short description sometimes describing a profession, but in most cases identifying a
disability: “cross-eyed,” “near-sighted,” “a small man,” “old and deaf,” “old and homely.” A
quarter of the men were listed as being a “cripple.” 25 As the report circulated in various other
newspapers around the country and even overseas, 26 it received a direct reply from Western
Standard editor George Q. Cannon. “Sober, truthful” articles about the Mormons were hard to
find, Cannon observed, while reports that the Mormons were “imbecile and near-sighted” and
otherwise physiologically inferior were in abundance. Cannon couldn’t resist employing a bit of
sarcasm to defend the health of his coreligionists: “It is really cruel for this ‘Amicus Curiae’ to
cripple and make purblind so many hale, hearty, active, farseeing men in one communication; if

Dialogue: a Journal of Mormon Thought 12, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 64.
26 Ibid.
he had no mercy for them, he ought at least to have spared the feelings of their 328 wives.” Those who pointed to the degeneracy of the Mormons in order to predict their ultimate downfall would “certainly prove [themselves] to be dullards in descrying what the future would bring forth.” The Mormons weren’t imbecile, and those who thought otherwise were, themselves, simply dullards.27

John Hyde, Jr.: A Former Mormon’s View

Less than a year after Cannon and Curie exchanged barbs about Utah’s “disabled” leadership, John Hyde, Jr. published one of the most popular anti-Mormon books of the nineteenth century. Hyde recounted joining the Mormon faith at age fifteen in his native England. Following his 1848 baptism he was ordained to the priesthood in the office of a “seventy.” He was sent on a mission to France from 1851 until 1853. Next he migrated to the Territory of Utah where he lost his faith upon seeing the degraded condition of the people. But in a bid to rekindle his faith he accepted another mission call to the Sandwich Islands in 1856. His bid failed; he was formally excommunicated from the Church in 1857. In order to appease his conscience for having previously promulgated Mormonism, Hyde set out to expose his former faith.28 Hyde’s criticism was sweeping, but no other subject received as much attention as polygamy. He devoted two full chapters—“Practical Polygamy” and “Theoretical Polygamy”—to the peculiar practice. In the first chapter, Hyde laid out the salacious practical details of Mormon marriage—sleeping


arrangements, wife selection, jealousies, neglect, adultery, and other lived aspects. “The only correct method of judging a cause, is by the effects that result from its operation,” Hyde reasoned, and “the most confounding argument against the Mormon doctrine of polygamy, is the Mormon practice of polygamy.”

But perhaps, despite its practical failings, polygamy might yet be “theoretically true.” In the second chapter, “Theoretical Polygamy,” Hyde contended it failed on those grounds as well, being “anti-scriptural,” “anti-natural,” “irrational,” and even “anti-Mormon.” 

Employing similar reasoning to Charles Buck’s, Hyde contended that the ratio of women to men was almost equal, thus Nature herself proved polygamy unnatural. Moreover, the practice was irrational in the sense that the intended ends described by Mormons were not served by the means: “[O]ne object of marriage is not only the procreation, but also the elevation of children,” a test which Hyde said the offspring of Mormons failed. Of course, Mormons made the same claim about the object of marriage. The Pratt brothers, Young, Cannon, and other Mormon leaders had defended polygamy on the grounds that it would elevate the rising generations. Here Hyde countered their claims by relying on William Paley and others. They supported Hyde’s contention that the world’s best civilizations (Greece, Rome, etc.) were monogamist, while the worst (Persia, Turkey, India, etc.) were “degraded” due to polygamy. Paley’s views on

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29 Hyde, Jr., Mormonism, 51.
30 Ibid., 284.
31 Ibid., 285.
32 Ibid., 295, emphasis in original.
33 William Paley (1743-1805) was a Christian apologist who famously articulated the watchmaker analogy to argue for the existence of God in his 1805 book Natural Theology.
34 Hyde, Jr., Mormonism, 296–297. See also J. Spencer Fluhman, A Peculiar People, 113–117.
population were influenced by political economist Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), who’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* warned utopian thinkers about the dangers of population growth.

Malthus said the earth had limited resources which kept human population and vice in check.\(^{35}\) Malthus’s influence on the history of science, politics, and economic theory can’t be overstated; his theories impacted figures from Charles Darwin to Charles Dickens.\(^{36}\) Hyde added gravitas to his work by citing Paley and company to discredit Mormons on the grounds that their peculiar marital practices “would favor the gross and animal,” which according to Malthus’s logic, would ultimately weaken and then extinguish any population.\(^{37}\) Hyde preached the prophecies of more secular-minded theorists to predict the mental and physical degeneracy of the Mormon people.

**Dr. Bartholow on Mormons as a “New” and “Inferior” Race**

Hyde’s amateur reflections were buttressed by discussions about Mormons in the developing fields of science and medicine. U.S. Army assistant surgeon Roberts Bartholow


accompanied federal troops to the Utah Territory during the Utah War in the late 1850s.\textsuperscript{38} He compiled a report on the Territory’s geography, climate, flora and fauna, but spent more ink on “medical topography, productions, and upon the social customs of its inhabitants.”\textsuperscript{39} Using a division similar to Charles Buck’s, Bartholow claimed to avoid discussing “anything of the political and religious aspects of Mormonism,” but approached it as a “great social solecism [or deviation from the proper order] affecting the physical stamina and mental health” of the Mormon people. Whether due to their geographical isolation or their “grossly material” religion, the “physical and mental condition” of the Mormon people had rapidly degenerated, as evidenced by a high infant mortality rate (unspecified), the “preponderance of female births” (uncounted) and by “the large proportion of albuminous and gelatinous types of constitution” (unintelligible!). To their credit, Mormon women were “remarkable for fecundity,” while their male offspring—the few who survived—displayed much “genital weakness” and a “striking uniformity in facial expression and in physical confirmation”—standard features in depictions of disability.\textsuperscript{40}

Bartholow had to account for the problem of heredity since Mormons were mostly comprised of white European stock, even if critics claimed they were the dregs of that more advanced race. Wouldn’t they pass sturdier traits on to their offspring? Bartholow’s response to this problem underscores the extent to which morality, heredity, and health mixed together in the minds of professionals and the public during the nineteenth century. Intellectual disability was a

\textsuperscript{38} The best overview of Bartholow’s interaction with Mormonism is in Bush, “A Peculiar People,” 61-83.


\textsuperscript{40} Bartholow, “Sanitary Report—Utah Territory,” 301-302.
definite marker of inferiority. The fact that the “ignorant and fanatical” Mormon mothers hailed from progressive eastern states only further degenerated their posterity. Of all people, they should know better than to participate in such degrading practices. As mothers “recognize their wide departure from the normal standard in all Christian countries,” Bartholow explained, their anxiety is impressed upon the bodies and minds of their children: “[F]rom the degradation of the mother follows that of the child, and physical degeneracy is not a remote consequence of moral depravity.”  

He asserted that degenerate offspring, as evidenced by physical and mental disability, was the ultimate product of Mormon polygamy.  

Most striking of all was Bartholow’s description of the Mormon “countenance,” or “expression and style”:

The yellow, sunken, cadaverous visage; the greenish-colored eye; the thick, protuberant lips; the low forehead; the light, yellowish hair, and the lank, angular person, constitute an appearance so characteristic of the new race, the production of polygamy, as to distinguish them at a glance. The older men and women present all the physical peculiarities of the nationalities to which they belong; but these peculiarities are not propagated and continued in the new race; they are lost in the prevailing Mormon type.  

The advent of a new degenerate race could be a threat to the burgeoning nation, but true to his stated intent, Bartholow did not venture into the realm of social program or political policy. Instead, he predicted that Mormonism “would eventually die out” as conversions to the religion inevitably tapered off. To those who might point to longstanding polygamy in other parts of the world as cause for concern, Bartholow responded that the weak Mormon birthrate was unable to keep up with America’s, let alone that of other nations. Most importantly, because Mormonism

41 Ibid.

42 For an overview of the history of such claims in the wider American context, see Janice Brockley, “Rearing the Child Who Never Grew: Ideologies of Parenting and Intellectual Disability in American History,” in Noll and Trent, Mental Retardation in America, 130-164.

was born into a surrounding society that did not countenance such depravity, “its decadence must follow more speedily” than in other parts of the world.44

Others were less reluctant than Bartholow in drawing policy measures from his observations.45 Dr. Samuel Cartwright (1793-1863) requested leave to publish excerpts of it alongside his own commentary during a meeting of the New Orleans Academy of Sciences in 1861. Cartwright was an antebellum physician who worked to improve sanitary conditions in southern encampments during the Civil War. He was also something of a specialist when it came to medically justifying inequality through a new field called ethnology. During the early 1850s Cartwright examined the ethnic composition, physical features, and behavior of various black slaves. His research resulted in his discovery of a convenient mental illness called Drapetomania, which he said caused slaves to flee their owners. This defender of the “peculiar institution” of slavery turned his sights on the other “peculiar institution,” that of Mormon polygamy, in 1861—only five years after the Republican party officially declared slavery and polygamy the “twin relics of barbarism.”46 Perhaps attacking Mormon polygamy would help legitimate his defense of slavery while disassociating the two institutions in the minds of the public.

44 Ibid. Various anti-Mormon works including Bartholow’s represent efforts to “otherize” Mormons using ethnic and racial stereotypes. These stereotypes often combined with the concept of disability, as non-white non-Europeans were sometimes understood as being disabled or inferior by comparison. Terryl L. Givens suggests this otherization was a product of American pluralists’ hypocritical dismissal of a marginal home-grown faith in Viper on the Hearth, 136-137.

45 Dr. Bartholow’s report appeared only a few years after Mormon leader George Q. Cannon wrote that “License to marry should not come from the priest but from the physician,” in “The Improvement of Our Species,” The Western Standard 2 (August 7, 1857): n.p.

46 This declaration is found in the third Resolution of the official Republican platform of 1856. See http://www.ushistory.org/gop/convention_1856republicanplatform.htm (accessed January 1, 2013).
Cartwright’s request to publish Bartholow’s report was not greeted with unanimous enthusiasm by other Academy members.47 Dr. James Burns took exception to labeling Mormons a “new race.” Although Burns “could entertain nothing less than great respect” for Cartwright and Bartholow, his paper lacked the crucial statistics and in-depth research required to “satisfy the rigorous requirements of science.”48 Despite these objections, a “Mr. Thomassy” observed that Mormons recruited “the very worst specimens” of each nation in their missionary efforts and a “Prof. Riddell” said further research was warranted. The paper was published with the proviso that “the discussion which ensued on the reading of the paper” be published at the same time.49

The discussion appeared in the popular journal *De Bow’s Review*. Cartwright’s own speculations about polygamy were based entirely on Bartholow’s report. If other doctors needed more evidence than Bartholow provided, Cartwright pointed to the people of other polygamous “nations and tribes” who were “most deficient in physical prowess,” thus providing corroboration. Drawing on his work with black slaves, he claimed Mormon women were overburdened with “course, rough, negro work,” which deadened their “moral sense” and blunted their “finer feelings.” As a result, polygamous white women lacked the “charms and attractiveness” found amongst the “weaker sex” of his Southern states.50 Cartwright previously

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47 Previous discussions of the Bartholow report have overlooked the mixed reaction it received from other professionals. Givens focuses on nineteenth century fictional representations of Mormons and presents Bartholow’s report as “‘scientific’ assent to a fictively constructed racial category.” It is important to remember that Bartholow’s assertions did not pass without criticism. See Givens, *Viper on the Hearth*, 136-137.

48 n. a., “Art. VIII - Heredity Descent; or; Depravity of the Offspring of Polygamy Among the Mormons,” *De Bow’s Review* 30, no. 5.2 (February 1861): 207.

49 Ibid., 208. Bartholow’s paper ultimately received wide distribution in a number of medical periodicals throughout the United States, and even in London. See Bush, “A Peculiar People.” 79.

50 “Remarks by Dr. Cartwright,” Ibid., 212.
employed images of disability to depict blacks as constitutionally inferior to whites in order to defend slaveholders. Now he employed the same tactic to attack Mormons with the added bonus that his attack also justified slavery.51 Slavery was suited to the physical and moral constitution of blacks (in fact, setting blacks free caused their “mental and physical degeneration”52) and it allowed Southern women to develop “delicacy, gentleness, and refinement,” whereas polygamy had “a blighting influence upon the mind and morals of the white race.”53

Adding theological support to his claims, Cartwright asked the group to compare the “debasing effects of polygamy upon the mind and heart of the White or Adamic woman” with the “true scientific principles and the fitness of things” endorsed in the Southern states, where the women “give birth to no such degenerate beings as those described by Dr. Barthelow as a new race in Utah.”54 The fact that “inferior colored races” in other nations could sustain polygamy only proved their racial inferiority when considering how the practice “blights the physical organism [and] the moral nature of the white or Adamic woman to so great a degree as to render her incapable of breeding any other than abortive specimens of humanity.”55

52 Baynton, Ibid., 39.
53 “Remarks by Dr. Cartwright,” 212-213.
54 Ibid., 213.
55 Ibid., 214. Cartwright also advanced the idea here that “colored” races were actually a part of God’s creation of plants and animals prior to the creation of the Adamic race on earth. Professor C.G. Forshey worked with Cartwright in this endeavor to publish the Barthelow report. He used the study to support his own theory about the man could be divided into “several distinct species” (Ibid., 211, emphasis in original).
Cartwright gauged morality according to the physical form of parent and child—the outward reflected the inward—56—in order to rationally account for human inequality. American civilization rested upon a social order which required menial labor of those most suited to its performance—non-whites. While Bartholow and others were content to wait out the self-destruction of the Mormon people, Cartwright was much less sanguine. The “debasing influence of Mormonism” and the “debasing influence of abolitionism” both threatened to overturn this delicate distribution of labor which would ultimately result in an America overrun by “a race of fierce uncontrollable savages.”57 After all, Mormonism had grown from a handful of initial members in 1830 to a group of about sixty-four thousand by the time Bartholow visited the Territory of Utah in the 1850s despite predictions of their imminent demise.58 Could their degeneracy—mental and physical—overrun America?

**Novelists and Social Commentators**

Of course, not all people castigated the Mormons or felt threatened by their polygamous presence on the American scene. Famed writer Horace Greeley passed through Utah in 1859, giving him the opportunity to visit a “common school [which] was thinly attended” by very young children “of the most rudimentary attainments.” Greeley thought their phrenological development poor, but reassured readers: “I am told that idiotic or malformed children are very

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56 Ibid., 212. Cartwright and Bartholow both adhered to the “popular dictum that physical degeneracy was a direct—and inheritable—consequence of moral depravity,” a view sometimes referred to as “moral physiology.” See Bush, “A Peculiar People,” 62–63. Mormons advocated the same concept, only their views of what counted as “moral” included polygamy.

57 Ibid., 216.

rare, if not unknown here.” Mormons were apparently desirous of putting their best feet (and minds) forward.

When Charles Dickens climbed aboard the ship Amazon in 1863 to sail for America with a group of immigrating Mormons, he fully expected to “bear testimony against them.” Twenty years earlier Dickens had suggested throwing “a Mormonist or two” into an insane asylum along with some other social undesirables. His attitude toward the Mormon people softened over time. By the 1850s his journal Household Words published multiple articles praising the “immense practical industry” of the Mormon people even while scoffing at the “absurdity of seeing visions in the age of railways.” When Dickens finally surveyed eight hundred Mormons aboard the Amazon in person he found them to be, despite his expectations, “the pick and flower of England.” He later told one Mormon: “I think it would be difficult to find Eight hundred people together anywhere else, and find so much beauty and so much strength and capacity for work among them.” Dickens made no mention of idiocy or degeneracy among the Mormons, which is striking considering his personal interest in those subjects. He had written an article called “Idiots” for Household Words which assessed conditions at the new National Asylum for Idiots.


60 Charles Dickens, Uncommercial Traveller (Cambridge: Giberside Press, 1869), 326.

61 Hannay, “In the Name of the Prophet—Smith!” This quote is often attributed to Dickens himself, but his correspondence reveals Hannay as the author, while Dickens himself offered a few suggestions and approved of the article’s publication. See Richard J. Dunn, “Dickens and the Mormons,” BYU Studies 8, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 328.

62 Dickens, Uncommercial Traveller, 316.

63 Ibid., 317–318.
Several of his novels—*Barnaby Rudge*, and *Little Dorrit*, for example—featured idiots in lead roles. Dickens favored social programs for the assistance of idiots, as well as proper procreative habits to ensure healthy posterity. But there is no hint of concern about intellectual disability amongst the Mormons he met.64

Dickens’s positive assessment placed him in the minority side of public opinion about Mormonism, especially amongst novelists. The religion proved a tempting target for a burgeoning dime novel market eager to exploit the sensational by attracting the prurient interest of a widening reading public.65 Popular assumptions about the impact of a mother’s mental state on a baby in the womb, as described in Cartwright and Bartholow’s reports, found their way into *Boadicea; The Mormon Wife* (1855). The title character relates her heartache upon seeing her husband Hubert ride away with his other wives—wives she was not aware of until after discovering her pregnancy: “My health, at that time delicate—I was, indeed, about to become a mother—suffered severely from what I had been called upon to bear,” Boadicea records in her journal. “Such was the secret grief which I endured that I almost feared that the child I was about to bring into the world would be an idiot.”66 The mere stress brought on by prospective polygamy was enough to cause idiocy.

Maria Ward’s *Female Life Among the Mormons* (1857) depicted Mormons as being callously uncaring for idiots. She reports a conversation about “Brother Weatherby,” who

64 See Patrick McDonagh, *Idiocy: A Cultural History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 159. McDonagh refers to Dickens throughout the book, including an in-depth literary analysis of his idiot characters.

65 Terryl L. Givens tells the fascinating story of these literary developments, briefly touching on the portrayal of Mormon women as mentally insufficient, even fit for asylums in *The Viper on the Hearth*, 134, 145, 148.

deserted his wife and ten children, one of whom was an idiot unable to care for himself. In another scene, “Brother Flitter” arises during a meeting to share his missionary experiences. Flitter was “a little, puny, withered creature, who, to judge from his phrenological developments, was only a few degrees removed from the idiot.” In a dumb dialect he addressed the meeting while Joseph Smith and other Mormons have a laugh at his expense. In a third scene, Ward’s “hussy” hair style frightens a “half-idiot woman…bearing a huge tub of water,” who proceeds to spill it all over the dress of her mistress. Ward depicts idiocy amongst the Mormons as something to be deserted, mocked, or exploited for labor.

In Salt-Lake Fruit: A Latter-day Romance (1884), an innocent young woman is summoned by the head of her school. There she is told that God is pleased with her enough to inspire love for her in the heart of “one of the great and good men of the church.” Where the “disgusting and absurd formula” of the Mormon temple and wedding ceremony failed to open her eyes to Mormonism’s falsehood, her new husband succeeded:

But when, with tears of humility, I stood trembling before a tall figure, not daring to raise my eyes; when, in the sacred light of my new home, I fell at his feet, and, not yet looking in his face, said “I am not worthy to be the wife of a saint,” a cross voice replied, “Get up. Don’t be a fool. I don’t want an idiot: I’ve four already. I married you because I believed you had some mind, and might be able to bear me a son, who could be somebody, not a brainless doll like the other brats.” … This cross voice, this peevish face, and, above all, these unworthy words, shattered my faith in religion and man.


67 Maria Ward, Female Life Among the Mormons: A Narrative of Many Years’ Personal Experience. By the Wife of a Mormon Elder, Recently From Utah (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857), 47.

68 Ibid., 96–98.

69 Ibid., 160.

In these fictional accounts idiocy is never invoked to generate pity for willingly polygamist Mormons, but to depict Mormons as the uncaring or unscrupulous absentee caregivers of people with disabilities. Such fictional depictions aimed to entertain and incite moral indignation in the reading public in general, but some found their way into the Congressional record during hearings on “the Mormon Question.”

Mormon Leaders on the Ongoing Presence of Disability in their Midst

Public scrutiny was brought to bear on the physiology and mental state of Mormons at the same time Mormons publicly depicted themselves as eradicating disability through their practice of polygamy. However, within the Mormon community there was recognition that disability was in fact not disappearing as quickly as had been hoped. As a result, Mormon leaders developed internally-directed discourses regarding the remainder of disability within the community. Isolated fragments of sermons provide evidence suggesting that the Mormon project of perfecting the race was getting off to a rocky start. Inadequate faith, immodest fashion, and improper sexual intercourse filled the etiological gaps.

In an 1855 sermon on faith, Brigham Young observed that even Jesus didn’t heal everyone he might have healed. “The sick, the blind, the deaf and dumb, the crazy, and those possessed with different kinds of devils were around him, and only now and then could his faith have power to take effect, on account of the want of faith in the individuals.” Young recognized that Mormons were a “good people” in general, but largely put the onus on them and their lack of

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71 Aaron Harrison Cragin, a Senator speaking on the anti-polygamous Cummins Bill referred to fictional depictions of Mormons while making his case against the practice. See n.a., Congressional Globe, 41st Cong., 2d sess. (18 May 1870): 3576-3577, cited in Givens, The Viper on the Hearth, 118.
faith for the continuance of sickness and disability. Young also situated himself within mainstream opinions on education and physiology when he cautioned that too much philosophizing would upset the delicate balance between spirit and body, potentially leading to derangement of the mind: “Let the body work with the mind, and let them both labor fairly together, and, with but few exceptions, you will have a strong-minded, athletic individual, powerful both physically and mentally.”

In 1857, apostle Heber C. Kimball warned against “nasty fashions” of the world which were creeping in. He described a dangerous article of clothing which Mormon boys had begun wearing, which he called “hermaphrodite pantaloons.” These clothes were “weakening their backs and their kidneys…destroying the strength of their loins and taking a course to injure their posterity.” Wearing these “fornication pantaloons,” as one unnamed voice called out during the discourse, would “destroy the fruit of your loins” by rendering offspring “impotent and imbecile,” a claim which seems entirely unique to Kimball during this period. The perceived outward feminization of men was presented as a threat to the mental and physical capacity of offspring.

In the most telling warning to prevent the birth of children with disabilities, Mormon apostle Orson Hyde instructed a Springville, Utah congregation on the subject of proper procreative habits. The sermon occurred during the “Mormon Reformation,” a revival movement

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initiated by Mormon leaders in the late 1850s with the goal of rekindling commitment to the faith. This reformation was accompanied by an uptick in the number of contracted plural marriages.\textsuperscript{75} At least in Springville, Hyde felt things may have been getting out of control, reminding the congregation that “no man should use his priesthood to force a girl [to marry] against her will.” More importantly, God instituted marriage and procreation for the purpose of replenishing the earth with healthy people. The “spirits in the eternal world” deserved fit bodies, but the presence of disease and early death suggested Mormons were not fully obeying God’s laws. In fact, “secret sins” crept in—men were having sex with pregnant wives. This “over indulgence” had disastrous results: “How often do we see cripples born into the world. And why is it, that some are born idiots? It is because the laws of nature have been interfered with; and they were not let alone, in their mother’s womb.”\textsuperscript{76} A spirit being born in such a condition “returns to the God that gave it and there makes its complaint that it has been wronged in its mission and disappointed in its intention.” So many of the first generation of polygamous offspring, Hyde reminded them, were “destroyed, died and were cut off from the earth; because of evil concupiscence and the gratification of our lusts.” They had sinned in ignorance before, but now the Mormons were duly warned and stood accountable before God.\textsuperscript{77}

These insider-directed discourses suggest that Mormon leaders recognized the ongoing presence of disability within their flocks and that they sought various means to ameliorate it. Only


\textsuperscript{76} This claim echoes Cannon’s, that sexual intercourse during pregnancy can result in idiocy.

in the case of remarks about pantaloons were Mormon leaders outside of mainstream views about proper intercourse and healthy offspring. Overall, people with disabilities themselves were not discussed as objects of God’s care or salvation in their own right, although Orson Hyde begins to move the conversation in that direction by imagining the reactions of pre- and post-mortal spirits. According to Hyde, spirit children of God would complain of a mortal experience cut short due to the sinful actions of their earthly parents. This is the first recorded instance in Mormon discourse which explicitly discusses disability with reference to the pre- and post-mortal perspective of humans. Such intelligences or spirits would appeal to God for being “wronged in [their] mission and disappointed in [their] intention,” but Hyde seems to be encouraging a sense of responsibility on the part of prospective parents rather than discussing such unfortunate spirits in their own right. It would be decades before Mormon publications would return again to the idea of pre- and post-mortality to account for or justify disability.

In the meantime, Mormon leaders continued to publicly portray their people as physiologically, spiritually and mentally exemplary, citing polygamy as a leading cause. In 1883 George Reynolds, a secretary to the Church’s First Presidency, published an overview of Utah’s census report in The Contributor, a magazine for the Church’s youth groups. In the report’s conclusion he proudly added that “The percentage of lunatics, idiots, paupers and criminals is also much lower than that of the average of the whole country.” A few years earlier Reynolds had provided himself as the Church’s test case for the constitutionality of the practice of polygamy in the landmark 1879 Supreme Court decision, Reynolds v. United States, which placed

78 Ibid.

polygamy beyond the protection of the First amendment. His grouping of idiots with paupers, criminals and other undesirables reflects the late nineteenth-century focus on ameliorating social burdens which placed people with intellectual disabilities together with others who did not pull their economic weight.

**Conclusion**

Ten years after Bartholow had written his famous report on the new Mormon race he returned to the topic of Mormon physiology, aware that some commentators had actually complimented the quality of Mormon stock. Bartholow, by 1867 a professor at the Medical College of Ohio, had not been back to Utah in a decade. Still, he felt confident enough with his initial assessment to claim, contra Greeley and other recent eye-witnesses, that “idiotic and the congenitally deformed [children] are painfully numerous” amongst the Mormons. He also maintained that a “Mormon type” was yet in the making. “If the future of Mormondom were left to the offspring of polygamy, it would, indeed, be short lived. Lean and weak of body, depraved of mind,” the flawed products of polygamy would surely put an end to the Mormon people, were it not for “constant infusions of new blood” in the bodies of Mormon coverts.

For the rest of the nineteenth century, critics sometimes employed the concept of disability to justify inequality and to question the legality of Mormon practices. This tactic was more widely apparent in struggles over slavery, women’s suffrage, and immigration in America.

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but as Cartwright’s arguments suggest, efforts to marginalize Mormons also included the attribution of disabilities.82 Mormon persecution by critics transitioned from violent mobbing to the more civil approaches of passing legislation and leading petition drives. Through it all, the health and makeup of the Mormon people remained a point of contention. “Rarely,” one historian of disability observes, “have oppressed groups denied that disability is an adequate justification for social and political inequality. … Rather than challenging the basic assumptions behind the hierarchy, they instead work to remove themselves from the negatively marked categories…knowing that such categorization invites discrimination.”83 This certainly held true for Mormons.

As the theological developments of Parley P. Pratt suggest, Mormons were already working to justify their physical, moral, and intellectual fitness as evidence of the truthfulness of their religious beliefs. Even before the date of their first unsuccessful bid for Utah statehood, Mormons were running their “‘campaign of superior virtue,’ by which they intended to persuade their compatriots that they were not social deviants [or intellectually defective], but rather more American than apple pie [and fitter, to boot].”84 Mormons publicly justified their practice of polygamy in the face of an incredulous American public by appealing to the example of pious biblical patriarchs like Abraham. They also affirmed that their God-sanctioned practice would actually lead to the birth of an exalted nation in spirit, body and mind. But that ideal, grounded in their scriptures and expounded upon in public editorials, was not experienced in their homes and at their fire sides. Within their own ranks, Mormon leaders recognized the ongoing presence of

82 Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” 33.
83 Ibid., 34, 51.
84 Givens, The Viper on the Hearth, 17.
disability. They occasionally chided Mormons for not living up to their ideals, for being too unfaithful, too fashionable, or too lustful, which resulted in the ongoing presence of disability in the community.

To critics, the presence of disability both signaled and perpetuated Mormon depravity; to Mormons, the melioration of disability could prove that Mormonism was next to Godliness. Disability functioned for all concerned as a marker of inferiority—as something to be overcome. Mormonism’s detractors were just as concerned with practical social organization as Mormons were, and they all agreed that proper marital relations were crucial to the health of the mind, body, and thus the state. On the whole, critics and Mormons alike were concerned with the social effects of polygamy. But Mormons had tied their theological edifice to the practice and claimed it would ultimately do away with disability, thus complicating the practice’s eventual cessation.

Terryl Givens describes the complexity of nineteenth century anti-Mormonism, which impacted Mormon thought as “the church has passed through a number of stages in its own theological and institutional development. It is clear” he adds, “that the conflict has too many variables to admit of reductive explanations.”

Givens is right to point out that critics had a vested interest in framing their objections in non-religious terms, given the American desire to be a people of tolerant religious pluralism. But the fact that polygamy was identified alternately as a cause or preventative of disability has been underexplored in historical studies of Mormonism. Concerns about intellectual ability were not the ultimate root of criticisms or defenses of the Mormon marriage system, but such concerns nevertheless received a good deal of attention—enough to serve as the single magnet point to which practically all discussions of disability within Mormonism adhered throughout the nineteenth century. Most importantly, in this area perhaps

85 Ibid., 42.
more than any other, Mormons shared many of the exact same underlying presuppositions with their critics. They had similar views on health and procreation with regard to disability and the production of the fittest and least disabled offspring possible. For the Mormon people, this resulted in the ultimate diminishment of theological discussion about intellectual disability.
This question from an 1857 sermon by Mormon apostle Orson Hyde has been at the root of Mormon theological reflections on intellectual disability since the advent of Mormon polygamy and even after that practice’s cessation. Initial discussions through the 1830s focused on the lack of accountability such persons possessed, or in other words, their inability to understand, and thus obey, God’s commandments or receive required ordinances. From the 1840s onward this approach was subsumed in claims about the causes of disability. Critics of Mormonism pointed to a peculiar, unnatural or immoral marriage system (polygamy) as the precipitator of undesired and threatening mental conditions, while Mormons did precisely the same in criticizing monogamy. Despite claims about their beneficial practices, disability did not rapidly disappear among the Mormons, leaving leaders with the task of accounting for its presence. Initially, they did so by citing some of the common cultural assumptions of their time—in Hyde’s case, sexual relations with pregnant women. Ideas about the accountability of “idiots” or the “feeble-minded” remained in the background for Mormons, but for the most part they focused on practicing a way of life that would ultimately make disability a distant memory—its absence signaling the superiority of life lived according to God’s laws. Children would be healthier, happier, and importantly, more intelligent than their non-Mormon counterparts in order to build up a pure society in anticipation of the return of Jesus Christ.

The narrative that polygamy would eventually perfect the human family was so central to Mormonism that it could not simply be done away with after the gradual cessation of plural marriage at the turn of the century. What was ahead for Mormon thought on intellectual disability, given that it had previously been overridden by criticism and defense of polygamy? Scholars like Jan Shipps have noted an increased emphasis at that time placed by the Mormons upon their health code, known as the Word of Wisdom. While Shipps notes the sociological boundary-making function of having one peculiar practice replace another, she does not point out that the underlying logic for both doctrines suggests they filled the similar function of encouraging practices suited for the benefit of Mormon offspring. Mormons were in the mainstream of thought on causes of disability in the United States. Around the turn of the century, the national temperance movement pointed to feeble-minded children as being the unfortunate products of intemperate parents. The Word of Wisdom forbade the use of tobacco and alcohol, and with polygamy out of the picture Mormon leaders were quick to note the benefits such abstention would have on the rising generation—including the prevention of intellectual and other disabilities.

At the same time, national consciousness began to shift with regard to people with disabilities. Soldiers returning from war—many with disabilities—were heralded as heroes. Proponents of the progressive new field of social work paid greater attention to people with disabilities and their families. Mormons themselves began to recognize the humanity and value of people with disabilities in their own congregations as evidenced by the way their publications began highlighting such people in positive ways for the first time. A congregation was established for people with mental disabilities at the Utah State Hospital. The Church’s “Deseret Industries”

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stores began employing people with disabilities for the purposes of education and training on the model of organizations like Goodwill. Positive public portrayals of Mormons with disabilities have continued to the present, leading up to the 2013 “Image Award” given to the Church by the American Association of People with Disabilities.³

With this increased attention to disabilities amongst the Mormons, new folk theologies began to develop to answer that old question, “why is it, that some are born idiots?” The question itself is reminiscent of the ninth chapter of John, wherein the disciples ask Jesus why a man was born blind. Was it because of a sin on his part, or the sins of his parents? Mormons had long used these verses as a proof-text for their doctrine of premortal existence—the disciples had asked about the man’s own sins which he may have committed before mortal birth.⁴ Folk theologies drew on the doctrine of the premortal life, that disabilities were somehow chosen or assigned during premortality, for the first time in the twentieth century.⁵ The idea that disability was chosen in order to provide an educative trial for certain individuals—people with disabilities themselves or their caregivers—seems common amongst contemporary Mormons. Another view holds that God created intellectual disability as a way to shield certain pre-mortal spirits from an over-aggressive Satan during mortality. These attempts to account for disability are not without


⁴ For instance, Mormon apostle James E. Talmage casually refers to John 9 as indicating an “antemortal” existence in Jesus the Christ: A Study of the Messiah and His Mission According to the Holy Scriptures Both Ancient and Modern (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1915), 412–415. He also notes that humans might cause injury or disability through dangerous or inadvertent action.

⁵ As I hope to show in a future work, such beliefs are referred to here as “folk theologies” because they did not explicitly originate in the LDS canon or from a prophetic authority in the Church, but rather swelled from the ground up and never ultimately received expression in official LDS publications despite their prevalence among certain of the laity.
theological problems, however. Even so, the Mormon “plan of salvation” is the most common framework in which disabilities are theologically situated. Mortal life is understood as constituting a test. Disabilities, like other tragedies, obstacles, and trials, can serve as opportunities for humans to learn, serve, give and receive charity in the sense of love and compassion.\(^6\)

In a way, framing disabilities in such terms seems more in line with Jesus’s response to the disciples’ question about the man born blind. Did he or his parents deserve his apparently tragic condition? “Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him” (John 9:3). In context, the verse is likely invoking “the works of God” based on the evangelist’s emphasis upon the eschatological nature of Jesus’s ministry—that is, the man provided an opportunity for the performance of miracles by Jesus as signs of his prophetic status and the coming of the Kingdom of God.\(^7\) But Mormons might understand “the works of God” in terms of the sort of action exemplified by Christ which they are expected to undertake during their own mortal lives as part of their own eternal progression. This still leaves the problem of cause unsettled, though. Did God, nature, humans, some combination of these, or something else entirely cause the disability? Is disability a net positive in the plan of salvation schema? A recent addition to the LDS Church’s official Handbook of Instructions (2013) seems to indicate an awareness on the part of Church leaders

\(^6\) For example, in a recent address to the general Church membership, Elder Ronald A. Rasband related personal stories about his grandson Paxton who was born with intellectual disabilities. Pastoral and personal stories such as this are the most common way disabilities are addressed in current official magazines and church conferences. See Ronald A. Rasband, “Special Lessons,” Conference Report, April 2012, http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/special-lessons (accessed February 2013).

\(^7\) John Paul Meier, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Vol. 2, Mentor, Message, and Miracles (New York: Doubleday, 1994). Meier situates the John 9 account within the general Gospels depiction of Jesus as an eschatological prophetic figure, but does not address the “which one sinned” element, thus the question of premortality, on pp. 694-698.
that weak attempts to resolve these questions theologically may be detrimental to faith: “Leaders and members should not attempt to explain why the challenge of a disability has come to a family. They should never suggest that a disability is a punishment from God (see John 9:2–3). Nor should they suggest that it is a blessing to have a child who has a disability.”

The Handbook, focused largely on Church procedural policies, refrains from offering an affirmative theological resolution to the presence of disability in the world, but denies that it is necessarily either a curse (an attribution which has practically no historical precedent in Mormon theology) or a blessing (which has become one of the most frequent ways to frame disability in twentieth-century Mormonism). Such ambiguity actually marks a return to the initial published discussions about disability by nineteenth-century Mormons: “But the law by which God judges idiots he has not revealed to us,” an unsigned editorial from 1836 explains, “we can only judge from the principle upon which he has said that he would judge the world….”

Crucially, this ambiguity leaves open a variety of theological questions only indirectly related to whether disability is a blessing or curse. Contemporary Christian theologians including Nancy Eiesland, Amos Yong, Thomas Reynolds, and Molly Haslam have constructed theological analyses of intellectual disability which challenge some of the underlying and long-standing assumptions of their own religious traditions. No such project has yet been undertaken within

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Mormonism, a void which is perhaps explained by the absence of professional theologians or an explicit school of theological development within the LDS Church. Mormon theology contains enough distinctive material from other Christian traditions so as to complicate any attempt to adopt wholesale theologies of disability from other traditions. At the same time, Mormonism has inherited enough from historical Christianity to warrant close attention to other theologies of disability. Mormonism has unique contributions to make for approaching theological questions raised by intellectual disability. By laying out the history of Mormon thought on the subject—a project which I want to eventually bring up to the present—I hope to provide a backdrop and catalyst for future discussions about disability within Mormonism, and a conceptual space in which we might begin to better understand the complex social construction of disability in religious settings.


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