

# BRIGHAM YOUNG'S GARDEN COSMOLOGY

*Jonathan A. Stapley*

ON DECEMBER 11, 1869, FREDERICK KESLER stepped out into flurries of snow and made his way to the regular meeting of the School of the Prophets held in Salt Lake City. Kesler was fifty-three years old and had been bishop of the Sixteenth Ward for thirteen years. Two years earlier he received a card inviting him to join the school, where church leaders discussed, and even sometimes debated, church policy and teachings. He joined and attended as he was able. On this day, after the group gathered, Wilford Woodruff opened the meeting with prayer. President Brigham Young then fielded questions from those in attendance.

After noting some of the implications of divorce upon marriage sealings, Young discussed the necessity of having children sealed to parents, and the aspiration of creating a sealed chain back to Adam and Eve. Woodruff recorded Young's brief aside: "Some have thought it strange what I have said Concerning Adam."<sup>1</sup> This was perhaps an understatement. Kessler interrupted his sparse journal to record a detailed summary of Young's subsequent teachings that day: before entering the Garden of Eden, Adam "had received his exaltation" and he "assisted in organizing this earth." He recorded that by eating "of

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JONATHAN A. STAPLEY is a scientist and historian. In 2018 Oxford University Press published his *Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology*. This work was in large part made possible by the dedication and hard work of LaJean Purcell Carruth who has transcribed the shorthand records produced by George D. Watt and others. I'm grateful for her friendship and scholarship. I also am grateful for the journal's reviewers and friends who gave helpful and constructive criticism of the article manuscript.

<sup>1</sup> Wilford Woodruff, Journal, December 11, 1869, digital images of holograph, MS 1352, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter Church History Library).

sometimes dramatically, for dissemination. But even shorthand was not a perfect record, and it is therefore best to have multiple witnesses of individual events, as in the King Follett Sermon discussed previously, and multiple sources over time. As we shall see, the documentary evidence is overwhelming—Brigham Young clearly and repeatedly taught the details of Adam and Eve and his garden cosmology from 1852 to his death in 1877.<sup>27</sup> The balance of this article is a walk along that garden path, highlighting several key facets of this cosmology, and presenting a coherent analysis.

Young's cosmology was a significant departure from the sacred texts of the church as well as Joseph Smith's teachings. There was no need to worry, Brigham Young claimed, the scriptures and other related sources did not offer a reliable narrative of creation. They were, bluntly, "babystories."<sup>28</sup> When confronting the teachings of the bible, he reverted to claims of natural law and biological imperative.

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in the *Journal of Discourses*," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2015): 24–118. Many of Carruth's shorthand transcripts are available in CR 100 912.

<sup>27</sup> Brigham Young may have discussed this cosmology with church leaders at a prayer circle meeting on March 14, 1852. He made his first public declarations on April 9, 1852, at general conference. Contemporaneous documentation for both of these events was kept by Thomas Bullock in mixed shorthand. The conference address was then published in the Great Britain in 1853 and 1854. See Historian's Office Journal, March 14, 1852, digital images of manuscript, CR 100 1, Church History Library; Brigham Young, Sermon, April 9, 1852, CR 100 318, mixed shorthand transcript by Ghosh, Church History Library; Brigham Young, "Adam, Our Father and God," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 15, no. 48 (November 26, 1853): 769–70; Brigham Young, Sermon, April 9, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:46–53. See also content summaries in Woodruff, Journal, April 9, 1852; Juanita Brooks, ed., *On the Mormon Frontier: The Diaries of Hosea Stout*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1964), 1:435. The shorthand transcript of Brigham Young's February 15, 1852, sermon is somewhat unclear, but could be indicative of an antecedent discussion of these ideas.

<sup>28</sup> Brigham Young, Sermon, October 23, 1853, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912 (cf. *Journal of Discourses*, 2:1, which differs significantly). See also Brigham Young, Sermon, March 25, 1855, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912 (cf. Thomas Bullock's mixed shorthand minutes in CR 100 318); Brigham Young, Sermon, October 8, 1854, digital images of manuscripts, Historian's Office Reports of Speeches, 1845–1885, digital images of manuscripts, CR 100 317, Church History Library (hereafter CR 100 317).

Take, for example, the shorthand account of his sermon of June 18, 1865. Speaking of the creation of Adam and Eve, he stated: "God created he him male and female created he them . . . this is my view[:] he created him [Adam] just as you and I created our children[.] precisely for there is no other process in heaven or earth[,] under it or in all the eternities that is[,] were or ever will be[,] there are certain laws[,] rules[,] regulations to govern and control the elements and control the intelligence that is formed from the elements[,] and this process is from everlasting to everlasting."<sup>29</sup> Brigham Young asserted that sexual procreation is a foundational law of the cosmos. Thus Adam was not created from the dust of this earth, or from "adobe" as Young frequently mocked.<sup>30</sup> Adam was no mere golem. He and Eve were born the same way every other human is born. Young explained that this process happened not on this earth, "but another earth" where Adam lived, died, and from which "he was exalted to thrones and kingdoms and principalities and powers." Then he "came here and commenced a work."<sup>31</sup> According to Young, Adam and Eve were resurrected beings from another planet.

Today many religious people confidently declare that all human beings are children of God. This is, however, a relatively recent theological development. Traditional Christian theologians have generally disagreed with such claims. When Joseph Smith was translating the Book of Mormon, Universalists were just beginning to wrestle with more liberal conceptions of *imago dei* to find a universal fatherhood of God.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and

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<sup>29</sup> Brigham Young, Sermon, June 18, 1865, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912 (cf. *Journal of Discourses*, 11:119, which differs significantly). Young described these ideas as "natural philosophy." Sermon, March 25, 1855.

<sup>30</sup>Young, Sermon, October 23, 1853; Young, Sermon, October 8, 1854, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912; Brigham Young, Statements to the Quorum of the Twelve, April 4, 1860, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth; L. John Nuttall, Diary, February 7, 1877, Vault MSS 790, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Provo, Utah.

<sup>31</sup> Brigham Young, Sermon, September 5, 1866, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912 (no transcript was published). See also Young, Sermon, October 8, 1854; Young, Sermon, March 25, 1855; Nuttall, Diary, February 7, 1877.

<sup>32</sup> William Ellery Channing, Sermon, 1828, "Likeness to God," in *The Works of William E. Channing*, rev. ed. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1891), 291–302.

for Young did not mean metaphorical or immaterial. The idea that the spirits of all humanity are biologically born to heavenly parents was an important feature of Young's cosmology, and he often included it in his teachings.<sup>37</sup>

After fathering all human spirits, Young declared, Adam engaged in a work of creation and organization that yielded this physical world—earth. Once formed, he colonized this world with plants from another earth. And as Eve and Adam consumed these earthly fruits, they themselves became of the earth. As they “ate and ate and ate,” Young said, they became “charged with the elements that pertains to this world.”<sup>38</sup> “His [Adam's] seed that flows from that substance . . . forms the body” in the mother.<sup>39</sup> Consuming the material food of this earth enabled Adam and Eve to bear bodies that were materially of this earth for their spirit children.

The transcripts of Brigham Young's teaching lack some clarity on the matter, but it appears that Young taught that this process of filling their resurrected bodies with material from this planet rendered Adam and Eve forgetful.<sup>40</sup> However, regardless of how they had changed—fallen even—Young claimed that after they fulfilled their progenerative roles, they shook off the dust of this earth and

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<sup>37</sup> For examples, see Brigham Young, Sermon, September 25, 1853, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912; Brigham Young, Sermon, February 19, 1854, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912 (cf. Watt's longhand transcript in CR 100 317, box 2, folder 29, and Woodruff, Journal, February 18, 1854); Young, Sermon, October 9, 1859; Orson Pratt, Statements to the Quorum of the Twelve, April 4, 1860, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth; Brigham Young, Sermon, August 25, 1867, transcripts of Watt's shorthand by Carruth, CR 100 912 (no transcript was published); Woodruff, Journal, April 9, 1852, and December 11, 1869; Kesler, Journal, December 11, 1869; Nuttall, Diary, February 7, 1877.

<sup>38</sup> Young, Sermon, March 25, 1855. See also Young, Sermon, August 28, 1852, Thomas Bullock mixed shorthand record, CR 100 317 (cf. manuscript transcript in CR 100 318 and *Journal of Discourses*, 6:75); Young, Sermon, October 8, 1854; Young, Statements to the Quorum of the Twelve, April 4, 1860; Young, Sermon, August 25, 1867; Nuttall, Diary, February 7, 1877.

<sup>39</sup> Young, Statements to the Quorum of the Twelve, April 4, 1860.

<sup>40</sup> Young, Sermon, March 25, 1855; Young, Sermon, August 25, 1867.

this cosmology closely. He later suggested that he had perhaps been too liberal in disseminating the ideas, and he even sometimes taught ideas regarding Adam and God the Father that could be read more traditionally. But even when speaking in a more traditional vein, Young complicated narratives with strains of his heavenly biology.

Young's garden cosmology—garden because it is focused so intensely on the generative fecundity of life—was adopted by many church leaders for four decades, and certain aspects of it—viviparous spirit birth and the physical fatherhood of Jesus—became mainstream beliefs at least for a time. Bits and pieces persist to the present.<sup>48</sup> Today church leaders boldly proclaim to the world that every human being is a child of “heavenly parents,” with many believers understanding this to mean viviparous spirit birth.

Let us then return to Nauvoo. It is a powerful temptation to attribute cherished beliefs to Joseph Smith, and to locate them by extension in the temple liturgy. Theologians, church leaders, and lay members have sought to find a Mother God, spirit birth, or generative cycles in Joseph Smith's teachings. In doing so, some like Brigham Young have simply rejected or ignored aspects of the Nauvoo cosmology that were incongruous with their beliefs. Others, like B. H. Roberts sought to harmonize the Nauvoo cosmology with later teachings and created new cosmologies that irritated many church leaders and energized the membership.<sup>49</sup> All have generally elided possibilities that are not rooted in the biological reproduction of a fallen world. What are a father and mother if not biologically fecund? This is the question that they failed to ask, and what modern theologians should now ask in order to understand Joseph Smith and his cosmology.

With both Joseph Smith's Nauvoo cosmology and Brigham Young's garden cosmology, scholars can use the best critical tools at hand to approach them. Joseph Smith consistently taught the details of the relationship between God, Christ, and spirits. For Smith, uncreated spirits and a God who once lived as Christ did were central to his

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Samuel R. Weber, “‘Adam, Which Was the Son of God’: Persistent Fragments of the Adam-God Theory within the Church Educational System,” *Sunstone* (January 8, 2019), <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/adam-god-ces/>

<sup>49</sup> On B. H. Roberts's now popular tripartite cosmology, where intelligences are born as spirits that are then born as humans, which are ultimately resurrected, see Smith, *The King Follett Sermon*.

universe. Approaching Brigham Young is aided by the advancement in shorthand technology available in Utah. With the best transcriptions, and often with multiple witnesses attesting to the details of his instruction, we find Young to have also been consistent as he taught about the history of God, Christ, and spirits. Young's center, however, was on the biological reproduction of all beings, and God who was Adam—a resurrected mortal man.

This article began by pointing to a contemporary recasting of Eve and Adam. One chapter in that volume was "What Adam and Eve Can Teach Us about Relationships." This is indeed an important consideration. I asked why Brigham Young would have departed so radically from Joseph Smith's Nauvoo cosmology and in a manner so aggravating to traditional renderings of the garden narrative. As discussed here, the basis of Young's garden cosmology was biological reproduction—a significant revision of Smith's exalted and gendered dyad of kings and queens, priests and priestesses. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Young began teaching his garden cosmology at the same time he publicly announced plural marriage. Perhaps his garden was a refraction of eternity through plural marriage's prism—a way to render on the grandest of scales the procreative relationships that occupied the Saints' greatest sacrifices. In doing so, he gave a narrative history to queens, priestesses, and a Mother god, and he unified humanity within the family of God. Young's garden cosmology has been formally deprecated by church leaders, but these topics still pull at Latter-day Saint thinkers of all sorts, who can perhaps empathize with the power and perils of creative theology.

#### APPENDIX

The chart on the facing page catalogues a source criticism for primary documents that evidence Brigham Young teaching his "garden cosmology." There are other sources that document particular aspects of Young's cosmology, many of which are cited in this article. This chart focuses on the most detailed and descriptive sources. Primacy is given to shorthand transcripts, with a descending order of reliability from manuscripts to published accounts. Where multiple accounts of a particular event exist, they are listed for researchers to compare. Complete bibliographic citations for these sources are included in the footnotes of this article.