The Translation of a Mormon Alien in "That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made"

Dale J. Pratt

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints would like to believe their religion would remain vibrant even if their wait for Christ's Second Coming were prolonged many centuries into the future. SF writers ranging from Robert A. Heinlein (*Stranger in a Strange Land*; "The Menace from Earth") to the duo called "James S. A. Corey" (the *Expanse* series) make reference to future Mormons who as a people have maintained faith in the Book of Mormon, temple-building, missionary work, and general cultural status as a "peculiar people" (King James Version 1 Pet. 2.9). Eric James Stone's Nebula-winning novelette, "That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made" (2010; hereafter, "That Leviathan"), depicts how Harry Malan, president of the tiny Sol branch of the LDS Church, serves Neuter Kimball, an alien convert to the faith many centuries from now. Although the setting of the story—a human-built space station near the center of the Sun—presupposes currently inconceivable leaps in human technological capabilities, Harry's thoughts and conduct are easily recognizable as those of a believably "faithful Mormon protagonist in a high-tech future," the creation of which was one of Stone's motivations for writing the story (Stone, "Mentioning Mormons"). The greater triumph of "That Leviathan," though, is that it produces a believable portrayal of a faithful Mormon *alien*, the solcetacean ("swale") Neuter Kimball, without explicitly teasing out all of the changes in Mormon theology and practice that would be necessary to accommodate such dramatic otherness. The story takes for granted this momentous evolution; it details neither LDS translation and policy-making, nor missionary efforts, nor swale conversions. Instead, it sketches out how mutual bonds of belief and community unite Mormon humans and already-converted Mormon swales. In the "now" of the story, difficulties in translating interspecies cultural expectations and beliefs fade in the light of mutual understanding arrived at through scriptural storytelling. When the flawed-yet-earnest Harry stumbles into an epic confrontation with an alien "god," he struggles to translate his strong moral certainty into terms intelligible to non-believing human scientists and aliens alike. Ultimately, Christ's famous dictum, "greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (King James Version John 15.13), conveys Harry's motives and meaning: "He [Christ] was willing to die for the least of us, while you [Leviathan] are willing to kill the leas–" ("That Leviathan" 26). In its matter-of-fact acceptance of successful translation, "That Leviathan" celebrates resilience and flexibility in Mormon theology and religious practice, pitting acts of faith, personal revelation, and the fellowship of the saints against programmatic doctrinal rigidity, incomprehension, and hyperawareness of otherness.

Mormonism is replete with translation and translation theory. Founder Joseph Smith claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates shown to him by the angel Moroni.

Within the book itself, we find accounts of prophets translating records from other plates and stones, peoples whose language "has become corrupted" (Book of Mormon, Omni 1.17-20), and an account of a group who maintained their language in the aftermath of Babel. Joseph Smith also reworked portions of the KJV Bible in a process the Church calls "translation" (Matthews, 763-69). When Old Testament prophet Enoch and the people of the city of Zion, as well as Elijah and figures from the Book of Mormon, are taken up into heaven and become immortal, they are called "translated beings" (McConkie 1485-86). The traditional rite-of-passage for faithful LDS young women and men (the eighteen-month to two-year missionary experience) frequently entails learning foreign languages on the fly as they attempt to teach and people from disparate cultures and traditions. Even the monthly testimony meetings have members struggling, very often with cliched language, to translate their deepest spiritual feelings into words.

The brevity and straightforward plot of "That Leviathan" understate its broad conception of Mormonism. Harry Malan's congregation includes six humans and forty-six solcetaceans––gigantic plasma beings that live within stars. When Harry learns (through an awkward confessional interview with Neuter Kimball) that smaller swales are often forced to participate in non-consensual sex, he sets out to inform swale "authorities" (7; 16-17), heedless of human warnings about respect for swale culture and Neuter Kimball's explanation that there is no swale law against such behavior. Accompanied by Neuter Kimball and Dr. Juanita Merced (a "solcetologist" working at the station), Harry meets Leviathan, the ancient, original swale who believes herself to be a god. Neuter Kimball worries the encounter parallels the Book of Mormon confrontation between the prophet Abinadi and the wicked King Noah, which ends with Abinadi's martyrdom. Harry suggests that no, better to ponder another Book of Mormon story, that of Ammon who successfully converts the Lamanite King Lamoni. The proud Leviathan, offended by Harry's impudent attempt at ethical debate and his intimation that there are greater things in the universe than Leviathan, rebuffs him and condemns Neuter Kimball to death. When Harry and Juanita desperately attempt to rescue their friend, Leviathan becomes curious and questions Neuter Kimball about why aliens would sacrifice themselves for a swale. Neuter Kimball transmits the Bible and the Book of Mormon to Leviathan (swales have the capacity to "read" entire texts instantaneously) (29-30). Finally understanding, Leviathan pardons Neuter Kimball and decrees that Mormon swales are not to be forced into sexual activity. Mirroring Neuter Kimball's scripture-laden conversations with Harry, Leviathan instructs Harry to remember what King Agrippa said to Paul. Harry explains the biblical reference to Juanita: Agrippa, sitting in judgment over Paul, declares "almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28); Leviathan citing the passage conveys to Harry her acceptance of Harry's request and also her understanding about the role of scriptures in Mormonism's view of Christianity.

Throughout the text, understanding does not depend on the semantic charge of specific words, each encased in layers of untranslatable nuance. Rather, overt allusions to scriptural stories function as a verbal shorthand that bypasses normal translation; Harry, Neuter Kimball, and finally Leviathan communicate and reach understanding by merely mentioning each story as an

analogue to their current situations. Just as the phrase "Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra" imparts a tremendous amount of information both to Captain Picard when his universal translator proves inadequate, and to fans who know and love the "Darmok" episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*,[1] scriptural allusions in "That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made" (including the title itself) facilitate mutual true understanding between the characters and also communicate the authentic "Mormon-ness" of the tale.

The story also illuminates contemporary Mormonism's sometimes equivocal efforts to overcome semantic incommensurabilities between its discourse and that of traditional Christianity. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints believe themselves to be Christians, but their version of who God is, what God is like, and how God should be worshiped differs immensely from traditional Protestant and Catholic theology and practice. Should they be accepted by the broader religious community as Christian, or shunned (or embraced) as something else? The current institutional unease with the term "Mormon" and how it underscores differences with traditional Christianity (Jarvis 941-42; see Nelson, "The Correct Name of the Church" and "The Name of the Church") must be balanced against the notion, canonized in LDS scripture, that the church founded by Joseph Smith is "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased" (Doctrine and Covenants 1: 30). Mormonism's *raison d'être* is its difference from mainstream Christianty, but it proclaims that its difference consists in the greater authenticity of its Christianity. Mormonism purports to be "more Christian" than Christianity.

Michael Collings argues that Mormonism cannot be represented well in SF, because the extrapolation and speculation about the future so fundamental to SF often becomes subordinated to doctrinal exposition of a revelatory religion (116). Science fiction (or indeed any fiction) about Mormonism must deal with the inherent strangeness of Mormonism. Despite twentieth-century Mormonism's quixotic attempt to become a mainstream Christian denomination, Mormonism has dwelt on the frontiers of acceptability since its founding. Its claims of ongoing revelation to prophetic leaders, new canonical scriptures, required temple ordinances for salvation, teachings about polygyny (at least for a time), and its millenarianism constitute doctrinal strangeness from other Christian denominations. Its (now disavowed) proscription of priesthood ordination for Black males and its continued conservative sexual and gender politics cast Mormonism against mainstream advances toward racial and gender equality. Loving acceptance of LGBTQ+ members in the LDS Church, although a stated goal, seems to be a vague, unrealized dream. Here, then, lies a suitable test for Collings's argument that the cognitive estrangement of an SF story representing future Mormonism is bested by the estrangement accompanying Mormonism in general. If the story can depict future Mormonism without being specifically *about* future Mormonism, then the wonders of cognitive estrangement and extrapolation engendered by good SF become possible. The trick would be to make "future Mormonism" recognizable as Mormonism to contemporary readers (both members and nonmembers of the LDS church), without trudging through a preachy "info dump" or recitation specifying evolutionary changes in doctrine and practice. "That

Leviathan" shows it is possible to translate Mormon practice and discourse to science fiction's literary page; Harry Malan is convincing as a futuristic (human) Mormon, and even an alien Mormon, a figure embodying multiple degrees of otherness, becomes intelligible.

In Stone's future, Mormons are still a fringe group; Mormon swales doubly so (or even triply so, because they are queer). The story elicits myriad unanswered questions about how Mormon theology and practice have been translated and expanded to make the swales "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (King James Version Eph. 2.19). For instance, for swales to be considered official members of the LDS Church, references in scripture and Church policy would have to be retranslated to expand their meaning. When "Adam fell that men might be," did the effects of the Fall include the swales and the strange new worlds they inhabit? The continuation of that verse—"and men are, that they might have joy" (Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 2.25)—can be taken to include "women," but does the verse also contain promise for swales? How are swales redeemed through the Atonement of Christ? Are male swales ordained to the priesthood, given that no laying on of hands by those in authority is possible?[2] Are swales, who have three sexes (male, female, and neuter), separated by gender categories during Priesthood and Relief Society meetings, the way human Mormons are (see note 6 below)? What about temple endowments, the covenants required for salvation that currently are administered only in physical LDS temples which swales could never visit? And what of sins that only swales can commit, because of their environment or physiology?[3] Somehow, in the Mormonism of "That Leviathan," these questions have been answered or made irrelevant. The multifarious queerness of faithful Mormon swales does not in any way isolate them from other Mormons. It presents obvious challenges to Harry as he seeks to serve Neuter Kimball as a member of an exotic, mostly inscrutable alien culture, but not because Harry or his Mormonism of the future is xenophobic or homophobic.

Readers such as Abigail Nussbaum, David Moles and others who have been harshly critical of this story would likely dispute this charitable reading and want explicit answers to the aforementioned questions about how swales fit into (contemporary) Mormonism. David Moles, for instance, fumes about the Nebula awarded to a story that "put[s] forward no fantasy, unless the fantasy that the world is an uncomplicated place populated chiefly by straw men and contrived examples is a fantasy" (Moles, Blog post). Abigail Nussbaum concurs and adds: "The premise of proselytizing to aliens raises a lot of questions, but Stone is more interested in giving definitive answers, ones that shut down all objections to missionary work, among humans and aliens alike" ("The 2011 Hugo Awards"). These critiques share unhappiness with "dodgy politics" in contemporary Mormonism (Nussbuam's phrasing); "That Leviathan" was published in the wake of the LDS Church's 2008 campaign in support of California Proposition 8, banning same-sex marriage in the state. But they also share an unwillingness to admit that the story is not about proselytizing aliens nor how future Mormonism came to be.[4] Nussbaum claims that Stone sets up a thought-experiment carefully tailored to avoid dealing with the problematic issues of Christian evangelizing so that he can say "under these conditions, it's totally OK to impose Christian

values on aliens" ("The 2011 Hugo Awards"). Without mentioning any sort of Prime Directive, Nussbaum seems to project an idealized model of interspecies contact in which cultural exchanges between groups are limited to science and technology, and perhaps art. Anything religious, though, somehow smacks of colonialism or economic exploitation.

Stone recognizes the delicacy of the evangelized aliens and broaches the topic from the start: upon their first meeting, Juanita orders Harry to "stop interfering with my studies..." because "you're teaching them human myths that have no application for their society" (3). Later, we learn that before becoming a member of the Church, Neuter Kimball had gone by the name Pemberly; Juanita does not seem upset that her swale friend had "read" and enjoyed *Pride and Prejudice* (another swale had transmitted it to them). The objectionable "Christian value" that Harry seeks to impose on swale culture is a prohibition against rape, supposedly a concept that swales do not recognize. Several of the "solcetologists" studying the swales denounce Harry's attempt to protect the lesser swales from sexual assault; Harry protests: "You scientists who study the swales have strict rules about interfering with swale culture, and you try to avoid offending them. To me that smacks of condescension—you presume that swale culture is weak and cannot withstand any outside influence" (15). While Harry's headstrong approach to the solving the problem—inform "the authorities" and have them prohibit the behavior––assumes that swale culture follows a human paradigm, his desire to change swale sexual conduct is well-meaning and analogous to contemporary Western abhorrence of voluntary female genital cutting.[5] Moles's and Nussbaum's objections to the story are mostly about perceived preachiness and the pervasive silence about the differences between contemporary and futuristic Mormonism. However, the story must not be read as an allegorical heuristic towards achieving open-mindedness in future Mormonism. Instead, that open-mindedness is a given, as a representation of the community all Mormons want to enjoy, despite their differences.

The story's unwillingness to document the almost infinite evolutionary steps from contemporary Mormonism to its own version of LDS theology mirrors the utopian ideals inherent in Mormonism, but also those of an important strain of SF. Mormon theology includes numerous latter-day missions for the Church: spreading the restored Gospel throughout the Earth, recovering and cataloguing the genealogy of the entire human family, performing baptisms and temple ordinances for all who ever lived, and in general preparing the world for the Second Coming of Christ. Faithful Mormons believe that through faith, energetic discipleship, and continuing revelation (to leaders of the Church but also to individuals), the path towards completing these projects will become increasingly clear. Yet, questions abound. What of the Neanderthals? Does "world" mean "entire cosmos"? Are artificial intelligences, androids, aliens and other members of the posthuman panoply children of God and hence eligible for salvation? Answers to these speculative questions, should their practical need arise, will come through revelation and protracted wrestling with details and with recalcitrant members and leaders. Much SF never deals with the nuts and bolts of achieving the transition from contemporary problems to future ideals. For example, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* depicts Captain Picard debating

the finer points of the ethics of the Prime Directive on numerous occasions, yet it does not detail (at least, on screen) the struggles required for disparate alien civilizations to unite behind the doctrine. The utopian ideals (or the dystopian nightmares) of such SF provide the backdrop for the tale; the achievement of the ideal is a different (and untold) story. "That Leviathan" requires readers to consider if star-dwelling plasma space whales really are more plausible than an LDS Church that accepts them as members. It remains to be seen whether the LDS Church will negotiate its multifarious contemporary struggles, but if the Church can make room for Neuter Kimball, perhaps it holds a place for women with priesthood callings, Black apostles and prophets, and LGBT+ members in loving relationships.

Neuter Kimball's choice of their name underscores how far the LDS Church has evolved. Harry believes that the alien took the name from "a 20th-Century prophet of the Church" (5)—i.e., Spencer W. Kimball, remembered chiefly for his revelation ending the racist ban against Black men holding the priesthood. Following the story's logic, it seems likely that the alien once known as Pemberly has "read" a transmitted copy of Kimball's influential *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. The book contains several chapters sternly specifying numerous "diabolical crimes of sexual impurity" (61), including "The Sin Next to Murder" (sex outside marriage) and "Crime Against Nature" (homosexuality). Concerning the victim of rape, although President Kimball teaches that "there is no condemnation where there is no voluntary participation," he also declares, in a case of victim-blaming, that "once given or taken or *stolen* [chastity] can never be regained" and that "it is better to die in defending one's virtue than to live having lost it without struggle" (195; emphasis mine). For President Kimball, chastity equals virtue. At the start of "That Leviathan," Harry speaks in church on forgiveness, and the following hour's Sunday school lesson addresses chastity.[6] The next day, Neuter Kimball tries to confess to sexual sin: "a female merged her reproductive patterns with mine" (6) (note that the Neuter Kimball does not transmit "rape"). The conversation illustrates many of the pitfalls of translation: capturing emotional tone, addressing cultural and ceremonial norms, expressing nuances (in this case, distinguishing varieties of sexual behavior), and false assumptions of shared understanding or worldviews. More importantly, Harry summarizes Mormon thinking about swale sexual sin: "In applying the law of chastity to the swales, Church doctrine said that reproductive activity was to be engaged in only among swales married to each other, and only permitted marriages of three swales, one of each sex" (6). This bald declaration of how swales should behave would probably make Moles, Nussbaum, and many other critics of Mormonism gnash their teeth, but the most interesting feature of Neuter Kimball's confessional interview is Harry's reaction: he insists that the alien has not sinned, because they were raped. There is no hint of victim-blaming, no intimation that Neuter Kimball is any less virtuous than before. Quandaries may have arisen in the past from the reconfiguration of human theology and religious practices to accommodate alien members, but in the "now" of the story, Harry has no doubt. Whatever the imperfections in today's LDS leadership, in Stone's future Mormonism, a young, inexperienced branch president is willing without hesitation to sacrifice his life for a queer member of the Church. Harry acts the way today's LDS Church leaders ought to act, were they successfully and completely translating Christ's Gospel into their practices.

In a sense, Neuter Kimball's behavior can be read as "translating" Mormonism into the language(s) of the swales. They chose to become a member of the Church because "I do not want her [Leviathan] as my god" (18). They stand prepared to die for their faith: "I will have faith in God and go with you" (18). Their faith precedes the miracle of Leviathan's mercy (which is ultimately rooted in the native curiosity all swales exhibit), and facilitates communication with her about Mormonism's sacred texts. Humans, too, learn a lot about swales because of Neuter Kimball's faith; Juanita's adventure with Harry and Neuter Kimball gives her an unparalleled perspective on swale behavior. On a broader level, as a faithful Mormon alien, Neuter Kimball makes futuristic Mormonism mean more than some random odd detail in a futuristic story otherwise unconcerned with the religion. When Harry welcomes his congregation with "My Dear Brothers and Sisters . . . and Neuters," the episode opens wide the themes of translation and religion far beyond the silly wink at the possibility of "alienating" one-third of the swales (2). Instead, it trumpets the power of future Mormonism's successful embrace of the queer aliens.

Queerness itself lays bare the high stakes of translation. A queer person approaches the question of their identity (for themselves and for others) through language. They perform their identity through myriad discursive transactions in fields dominated by patriarchal or otherwise ideological discourses. The offensive question "what *are* you?"—meant to underscore otherness—announces the perils of communicating identity through always-already imperfect language. A queer person's translations of their internal experiences as an individual (human) being into language simultaneously constitute their identity, liberate them from the bonds of heteronormativity, and alienate them from their past selves and from many of the persons that surround them. But they also can spark changes in attitudes and behavior in their interlocutors. In a strange yet evocative way, a queer person's journey through contemporary discourse resembles those of young LDS missionaries struggling to articulate in a foreign language the spiritual witness they wish to share. Incomprehension, rejection, persecution, indifference, and sometimes––how rare a possession––understanding and acceptance. Part of the childhood's end of the LDS Church will come when these queer journeys are made intelligible.

"That Leviathan, Whom Thou Hast Made" is a story about the acceptance of queerness that neither denies problems currently faced by Mormonism, nor translates or projects contemporary Mormonism's gender and sexuality difficulties into the future. Rather, it shows that future Mormonism, miraculously, has left those issues in the past; "for with God, nothing shall be impossible" (King James Version Luke 1: 37). The story posits that understanding is based not on semantic content of specific words, but on the nuanced meaning of stories. In his diatribe against "That Leviathan," David Moles admits that "whatever our political and religious differences have been," most of the Mormons he has known are "good-hearted, level-headed people whose unassuming natures often concealed a wry humor and a wealth of well-observed stories" (Blog post). Moles is correct that Mormons, individually and collectively, have a wealth of stories to tell. Today's LDS children sing Primary songs about Nephi, the army of Helaman, Book of Mormon stories, and about pioneer children who sang as they walked and walked across the Great Plains.

Although Moles may never recognize it, Stone created Neuter Kimball, a faithful Mormon alien, to be just such a "good-hearted, level-headed" person of faith. Stone's futuristic Mormonism is intelligible and compelling, in the same way that stories from different cultures in the distant past can speak to Mormons of today. Someday, perhaps, a real-life extraterrestrial analogue to Neuter Kimball will be translated and immortalized in Mormon story and song, and take its place alongside the scriptural stories of Moses and Pharoah, Abinadi before King Noah, Paul and Agrippa, Joseph Smith in Carthage Jail, and Job before God. Until then, the story of Harry and Neuter Kimball's audience with Leviathan can represent faith and hope that the meaningfulness of Mormonism can be translated into future, even alien, contexts.

Notes

1. *Star Trek*'s universal translator almost unfailingly translates the languages of alien races into standard English (and also from English to the alien language). In the "Darmok" episode, however, Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise learns a different way to communicate with a new alien race when he is forced by those aliens to confront a monster alongside the alien commander. Their shared experience unlocks for Picard the language of the aliens, who, instead of using subject-verb-object sentences, communicate by making references to mythological or historical episodes.
2. "We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof" (Articles of Faith 1: 5; emphasis mine).
3. As Father Peregrine, Ray Bradbury's missionary to the Martians, reminds us: "if there are new senses on Mars, you must admit the possibility of unrecognizable sin [on Mars]" (113).
4. When Einstein asks what the universe would look like if one were traveling at the speed of light, the proper response is not: "no one will ever travel the speed of light." Stone is no Einstein, but the proper response to his story cannot be merely to denigrate it and insist that Mormonism could never, for any reason, become the Mormonism depicted in "That Leviathan."
5. Even the adoption of the term "female genital cutting" over "female genital mutilation" displays the thorny problems involved in debating cultural relativism, traditional cultural or religious practices, human rights and ethical imperatives. For a detailed discussion of FGC and cultural relativism, see Cassman.
6. At the time the story was written, LDS Sunday meetings consisted of a seventy-minute "Sacrament" meeting (substituted on the first Sunday of each month with "Fast and Testimony" meeting) involving the entire congregation. During the following Sunday School hour, adult members attended "Gospel Doctrine" or occasional specialized classes, youth attended classes according to their year in school, and children under twelve attended Primary (which lasted two hours). During the third hour, adult and youth members separated

according to gender: adult males attending "Priesthood" and adult females attending "Relief Society" with the youth attending "Young Men" or "Young Women." Smaller congregations adapt the schedule as best fits their needs (i.e., it makes no sense to separate two or three young people into different Sunday School classes). In 2019, the schedule was shortened to a two-hour block, with Sacrament meeting occurring every week, followed by Sunday School or Priesthood/Relief Society on alternate Sundays (Primary continues on a weekly basis, although it has been shortened to less than one hour each week). In "That Leviathan," Harry mentions only Sacrament meeting and Sunday School, which could imply that the tiny branch holds both meetings for the entire congregation, dispensing with Priesthood/Relief Society meetings because of the meager makeup of the branch. More likely, and more importantly, the omission of references to Priesthood/Relief Society meetings allows the story to avoid the issue of which meetings the three different genders of swales attend. I recognize that some critics believe this deafening silence controverts the story. However, I find that the story's silence on this and other gender matters reflects a more upbeat spin on the possibility of Mormonism evolving and adapting to the future.

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