

“Ver tu cuerpo”: Embodiment, Suffering, and Salvation

Jenny Webb

There is a sonnet that I first encountered some years ago in my Spanish literature textbook. I carefully copied it down and carried it into that Mormon space dedicated to ending the limitations of time: the laminator room in the copy center. Firmly encased in plastic, the sonnet traveled with me for some years around campus, around the world, and eventually was lost somewhere between New Mexico and Alabama. Let me share it with you (and please forgive me for reading in Spanish, but it is a poem ... there are English translations on the handout so that all may follow along):

Soneto a Cristo crucificado (Anónimo)

No me mueve, mi Dios, para quererte
el cielo que me tienes prometido,
ni me mueve el infierno tan temido
para dejar por eso de ofenderte.

¡Tú me mueves, señor! Muéveme el verte

clavado en una cruz y escarnecido;
muéveme ver tu cuerpo tan herido;
muévenme tus afrentas y tu muerte.

Muéveme, en fin, tu amor, y en tal manera
que aunque no hubiera cielo, yo te amara,
y aunque no hubiera infierno, te temiera.

No me tienes que dar porque te quiera,
pues aunque lo que espero no esperara,
lo mismo que te quiero te quisiera.

First published in 1638, this sonnet serves as a classic example of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish mysticism, which is notable for its expressiveness, its attempts at both linguistic transcendence and mystic union, and its close relationship with the Counter-Reformation. In particular, this poem serves as an example of *recogimiento* (gathering in), an interior meditative practice designed to focus on the human nature of Christ and His resulting pain during the passion and the cross in order to provoke one's compassion and love (and thus ensure that the meditator moves towards

Christ to salvation). The strong feelings of love expressed here are meant to reflect the results of such a practice.

I think that part of what grabbed my attention all those years ago was in part how distinct I felt this depiction of Christ to be from my rather ordinary, orthodox Mormon experiences. The passion and emotion behind the poet's declarations felt uncomfortably raw and vaguely ecstatic. And the poet's insistence on being moved not by the abstractions of Christ's love, or his forgiveness, or his words, but rather instead by seeing his physical suffering on the cross focused on an aspect of Christ that I had rarely noticed in my Sunday lessons.

This sonnet provides a potent picture of the embodied, suffering Christ. His body is "clavado" (nailed) and "herido" (wounded), an object scorned and shamed before finally dying. The finality of the death of Christ on the cross in the 8th line leaves the reader at the midpoint of the poem faced with a staggering amount of flesh: the body, which just lines earlier suffered both physical pain and emotional humiliation, is stripped of Christ's spirit, leaving behind in death a body exposed. In death, we no longer see the animating force, which disguises in part the complete physicality of the body

as flesh. Instead, we encounter here midway the thematic gravity of Christ's death underscored by the literal weight of Christ's broken body. The pauses indicated by the punctuation at the ends of lines 6 and 7 gradually slow the readers until we come to rest at the period that marks the end of both line 8 and Christ's life.

While the sonnet does eventually pick itself up, gaining a gradual momentum through the final six lines through the use of liquid consonants and lilting rhythm of the subjunctive verb forms (*hubiera, amara, temiera, etc.*), the succeeding imagery is vague: love, heaven, hell, and hope appear pale in contrast to the physical suffering of an embodied Christ, whose body has been evoked in graphic terms of nailing, wounding, and death.

Ultimately, the reader leaves the poem with two things: we are moved by love for Christ, and the image of His suffering body collapsed against the cross. While the sonnet's literary beauty may feel familiar, its painful liturgy falls strange on Mormon ears.

The relationship between suffering and embodiment in Mormon theology is something that, at first glance, appears rather straightforward. We are taught that our life on Earth is the result of a prior decision to accept our need for both body and Savior. Our desire to become like our Heavenly parents is fundamentally rooted in our implicit understanding of the importance of flesh and bone; a desire for salvation and exaltation is simultaneously a desire for eternal embodiment. With our bodies thus centrally situated, our acceptance of our embodied state thus implies our acceptance of suffering. The consequences of flesh circle around unending needs that, left unmet, result in pain. And pain, unsoothed, over time turns to suffering. But beyond our own physical requirements, we also encounter suffering in response to the actions of others: others may injure us, intentionally or unintentionally, and provoke a suffering over which we have no immediate control.

However we relate the story, the result of our decision to accept our Parents' plan implies our foreknowledge of suffering in our lives on Earth. In studying the various teachings of LDS apostles and prophets on the nature of suffering, a specific orientation toward suffering emerges: we suffer here in order to be taught, in order to grow closer to God, and in order to be tested.

Suffering is thus didactic in Mormon theology: it is seen as a tool through which we are refined and through which our ultimate position is improved.

In 2008, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland gave a CES Fireside entitled “Lessons from Liberty Jail,” in which he examined Joseph’s experiences and suffering as catalyst for divine revelation, known today in D&C 121, 122, and 123. Following the Mormon orientation toward suffering discussed above, Elder Holland presented mortal challenges in a didactic light: “You can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord in the most miserable experiences of your life—in the worst settings, while enduring the most painful injustices, when facing the most insurmountable odds and opposition you have ever faced.” He makes the case that our own suffering connects us in an experiential way to Christ himself—as followers of Christ, we promise “to go where that divine path leads us. And the path of salvation has always led one way or another through Gethsemane. So if the Savior faced such injustices and discouragements, such persecutions, unrighteousness, and suffering, we cannot expect that we are not going to

face some of that if we still intend to call ourselves His true disciples and faithful followers.”

Elder Holland’s understanding of suffering appears to follow the vein of standard Mormonism. He highlights added dimensions to the concept of suffering available in scripture that point towards Christ’s own suffering and the lessons we can gain from it, citing D&C 122:8 and Isaiah 49:14–16, among others.¹ Yet the theological significance of this talk lies not in its treatment of suffering as didactic, but in its linking of such suffering to the temple. Quoting the fourth verse of the hymn “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” he focuses on the second half of the verse: “Out of my stony griefs Bethel I’ll raise; So by my woes to be Nearer, my God, to thee.” Elder Holland’s explication of this hymn is striking: “We are not alone in our little prisons here. When suffering, we may in fact be nearer to God than we’ve ever been in our entire lives. That knowledge can *turn every such situation into a would-be temple*” (my emphasis). The equation here between suffering and the temple experience is clear, and on the surface appears to align with the standard didactic understanding of suffering: we learn in our suffering, and we learn in our temples.

What is it that we learn in our temples? Temple rites and ceremonies have always centered on the atonement.² Ancient altars were stained with the blood of innocent sacrifice to foreshadow Christ's own bloody sacrifice. The temple in Jerusalem was built to provide annual order and structure through animal sacrifice. And our current endowment ceremony, while eschewing the sacrifice of actual bodies, points us repeatedly to the atonement as an embodied sacrifice with startling sharpness.

The connection between the ideas of suffering, embodiment, and salvation in Mormonism lies in the temple endowment's focus on the atonement. On one level, the endowment ceremony presents the familiar ideas that we have come to earth to obtain a body; that our present suffering results from the Fall; and that our salvation lies in the power of Christ to crush the serpent, overcoming sin and effecting the resurrection. On another level, however, the endowment ceremony consistently interrogates our assumptions that our bodies are our own, that we are the ones suffering, and that salvation arrives through displays of power.

1. Embodiment

There is no doubt that the divine plan taught in the endowment centers around our ability to obtain a body here on earth. But the very structure of the endowment ceremony itself, as a kind of universalizing play in which we are each instructed to take on the appropriate corresponding roles of either Adam or Eve, works against our tendency to understand our embodiment as a highly individualized event. Instead, our bodies enter a shared space in which communal actions inscribe our bodies within the binding and blending lines of ritual. What affects one affects another; what one receives is received by all. Movements and voices are unified, further emphasizing the importance of the embodied community over the embodied individual. And as we return to the temple time and again to participate in the endowment ceremony, we do so in order to serve as a proxy—in order to allow our bodies to act in the necessary ordinances for the benefit of another person. From this perspective, while our embodiment is doctrinally necessary, it is not necessarily theologically as discrete and finite as we might first suppose.

2. Suffering

I believe that an individual, embodied concept of suffering is essential to Mormonism and a key element in the construction of and passage through the endowment ceremony. And while we are told that Adam will suffer as he toils against the earth for his survival, I do not believe that the main idea we are to take from the endowment is that of our own personal suffering.

Rather, I see the endowment ceremony as building upon a set of physical actions designed both to instruct and to bodily induct us into an understanding of the atonement as wrought by an embodied, suffering Christ. The tokens given and received within the temple begin in fraternity, building upon each other until they end in a plain and pressed experience of the physical demands of the crucifixion itself. We should be shaken to the core each time we experience the weight of Christ's suffering; we should quake as the reality of our contribution to his physical pain impresses itself upon our souls.

3. Salvation

In the end, in all ends, salvation arrives through Christ. But the specific embodied experience of salvation at the end of the endowment ceremony is markedly distinct from its earlier indicators in the experiences of Adam and Eve. In Moses 4:21 we find God speaking the first Messianic prophecy in

terms that clearly point towards themes of battle and conquest: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed; and he shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” Salvation in this thematic context is connected to Christ’s power to subdue whatever enemies seek our destruction, whether through sin or death. In the end, however, salvation is experienced not in terms of power, but in terms of charity. We are only able to pass through the veil and into the celestial room if we embrace the reality of an atonement grounded in charity. Our salvation arrives in the moment we simply accept it and allow its charity to pull us onward into God’s presence.

The rites and rituals of the Mormon temple gift us with an understanding of Christ’s atonement and our participation in that sacrifice as embodied, as suffering, and as ultimately salvific. The endowment ceremony presents this thematic nexus with nuance and care for our spiritual and physical edification. The point here is very much like the point of the sonnet with which we began: at the center of our experience—literary or physical—lies the suffering body of Christ. The temple endowment serves, if we allow it, as a participatory *recogimiento*, a practice of gathering in, receiving through our flesh the truth of Christ’s pierced palms and speared side. As we sing

prior to another sacred ordinance: Christ was “Bruised, broken, torn for us / On Calvary’s hill— / Thy suff’ring borne for us / Lives with us still” (“Jesus of Nazareth,” Hymn 181).

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¹ E.g., “As the prophet Isaiah wrote, the Lord has “graven thee upon the palms of [His] hands,” permanently written right there in scar tissue with Roman nails as the writing instrument. Having paid that price in the suffering that They have paid for you, the Father and the Son will never forget nor forsake you in your suffering. (See Isaiah 49:14–16).” Other scriptures, particularly in the Doctrine and Covenants, do focus on the physical suffering of the Savior:

D&C 18:11

11 For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him.

D&C 19:16–19

16 For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

17 But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

18 Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit--and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink--

19 Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.

I am not suggesting that the concept of an embodied Christ physically suffering is foreign to or absent from LDS theology, only that in practice Mormons tend to emphasize other aspects of Christ’s life, perhaps in part as a reaction to the institutional emphasis on the resurrection versus the cross (e.g., the absence of the cross in Mormon houses of worship).

² See Nibley. While it is commonly taught that LDS temple ordinances are centered on Christ and the atonement, the connection between the temple ordinances and the Mormon doctrinal understanding of the atonement as encompassing the suffering in Gethsamene, the crucifixion, and the resurrection was first pointed out to me in a blog post by Steven Faux [S.Faux] entitled “Temple Symbols Surround Us.”