

The early Saints would have found solidarity with Shylock, the Jewish merchant of Venice, I think as I watch the violence of forced baptism on the recorded Globe Theatre stage. Jonathan Pryce as Shylock is forced to his knees, the water of baptism dripping over his pained brow and into tear-filled eyes. He looks towards heaven for a God that seems to have abandoned His covenanted child. Shylock is left to repeat Latin phrases that burn heretically on his tongue as persecution robs him of his freedom and his faith. I am reminded of Liz Lemon Swindle's *Joseph in Liberty Jail*, as Joseph kneels, too; He like Shylock, looks heavenward and pleads for God to reveal Himself to His covenanted child: "O God, where art thou?"¹ The language in Doctrine and Covenants is almost Shakespearean, or perhaps Shakespeare wrote in near-scripture. Shylock, too, must have wondered and prayed akin to "O Lord, how long shall [I] suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before...thy bowels be moved with compassion?"²

Shakespeare's prolonged meditation on compassion's oft-times twin, mercy in Act IV, scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice* reads as Paulinian. Portia is a converted Saul who burns with passion for the Christian interpretation of law, thus countering Shylock's perceived Pharisaical reading of a "pound of flesh" within his bond. She waxes poetic about the "quality of mercy"³ as Shakespeare's famed monologue lifts Deuteronomy 32:2 into English prose. Mercy "drop[s] as the gentle rain from heaven"⁴ the same as the Lord's "doctrine" and "speech" in the Pentateuch. But when the opportunity presents itself, mercy is denied to Shylock, and Antonio walks away the richer for their sanctioned theft. Persecution is supported by the law; Shylock returns to the redlined ghetto in Venice but remains in possession of a rightful, unfulfilled bond.

To hold an unfulfilled bond is not a foreign thing to followers of the Hebrew God. The Israelites waiting for the promised land of Canaan, the house of

¹ D&C 121:1

² D&C 121:3

³ Shakespeare, William. "The Merchant of Venice." *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 2nd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2008, pp. 1121-1175, line 179.

⁴ *Ibid.*, line 180

Israel carried captive into Babylon, the Jews under the thumb of Herod, the kingdom of heaven for a life given in Christ's name, the promised Second Coming of a Messiah after centuries of darkness and turmoil—all are examples of waiting in faith for the fulfillment of a bond. But how white-knuckled and tenuous waiting can become, for in the waiting, life and its cruelties occur. For the early Saints, the promised Zion was a bond due “near, even at the doors,”⁵ but twenty-five years of mob violence and a hunted flight into the wilderness gave near infinitude to “near” and left deeds to property and livelihoods in the hands of their persecutors. Unfulfilled earthly bonds litter the trail to Salt Lake City; social justice remains unserved to the Saints.

These unfulfilled bonds are, of course, incomparable to the primary claimants of reparations: Black citizens of the United States of America. Theirs is a case that extends beyond the frontier days of the Mormons' faith, to the ships that brought the living in chains and the dead in sail-made shrouds; to the theft of black-owned lands in the Antebellum period; and to the enslaved Black people sold wholesale and dragged screaming from their families. Their case includes the grievances of redlining and the horror of forced sterilization, Jim Crow signs and white-hooded terrorism. Theirs is a “dream deferred,” a “raisin in the sun” and a “fester[ing]...sore.”⁶ The prophet of Harlem prophesied of the summer of 2020, but we did not listen. The world exploded, and with it, any sense that separation exists between the world's struggles and our Christian own. What, then, is the modern Christian's task, we who beg mercy and preach justice in the same breath?

The Greek scholar Ceslas Spicq writes that “mercy” in the New Testament “refers to a feeling, namely, the feeling of one who is moved by the sight of another's suffering and...shares in it.”⁷ To show mercy is to bear another's burden, which is *our* fellow bond, a contract entered into upon willing baptism. When another's suffering is caused by social injustice, to act in mercy—to bear the Othered's burdens—is to act against social wrongs. Ta-Nehisi

⁵ D&C 110:16

⁶ Hughes, Langston. “Harlem.” *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Poetry Foundation.

⁷ Spicq, Ceslas, and James D. Ernest. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1994, pp. 471.

Coates describes the act of reparations as a “national reckoning that [will] lead to spiritual renewal.”⁸ But perhaps, it is first spiritual renewal that will lead to national reckoning and the restoration of all things—social justice and overdue bonds alike. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy”⁹ for themselves and for others. What would it mean if we viewed active participation in the struggle for social justice as an essential clause in our baptismal bond, an opportunity to bear our Black brothers’ burdens—as well as those of our LGBTQ, disabled, and Indigenous brothers and sisters—that they may be made light?

What, then, of the humanities, and their role, if bearing another’s burden is the key to social action? Perhaps the power of the humanities lies in the ability to write of it, and to see within close readings of scripture and Shakespeare that to seek for social justice is essential salvific action for the Latter-day Saint. To study the humanities is to search for knowledge out of the best books, by study and also by faith, to then gain the Lord’s bond: the “doctrine...shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven,”¹⁰ just like Shakespeare’s mercy, which “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath.”¹¹ With this rain, we shall water the parched ground.

⁸ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The Case for Reparations.” *The Atlantic*, 2014.

⁹ Matthew 5:7

¹⁰ D&C 121: 45

¹¹ Line 180