

NINETEENTH- CENTURY MORMONS: THE NEW ISRAEL

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THE MORMONS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY saw themselves as a new Israel very much like the old. They appropriated ancient Israel's sentiments and traditions, and its special status as God's covenant people. For a Christian group, Mormons had an unusual affinity for the Old Testament. But did their use of Old Testament scripture prove their fondness for it? Mormons further asserted that they accepted this and all other scripture literally. Yet to what extent can this claim be justified? Did their actions and their stated beliefs justify their conception of themselves as Israel, and was that self-conception accurate according to what the Old Testament actually contained?

Early Mormons used scripture in the same way that their contemporary Protestant religions did. Using a proof-text method, their writers and preachers collected isolated scriptures that supported a point, with little regard for context. Gordon Irving counted the number of Old Testament scriptures used in early Mormon publications and discovered that fifty-three specific passages account for 54 percent of the Old Testament passages used. Mormons quoted scripture selectively, using the same scriptures again and again.¹ A study of Biblical parallels to the collection of Mormon revelations canonized as scripture, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, shows that in spite of its strong apocalyptic flavor, there are well over twice as many parallels to the New Testament as to the Old Testament. This is startling considering the bulk of the Old Testament in comparison with the New Testament.² These studies do not support the idea that the Mormons were especially fond of Old Testament scripture.

Some praised the scripture of the ancients, as did the writer of an unsigned

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article in the *Millennial Star*, who stated, "Whatsoever was written beforetime was written for our profit and learning that we, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, might have hope."³ But others played down the worth of those scriptures. Brigham Young qualified his endorsement of the Old Testament saying, "I am a believer in Jesus Christ, in God the Father, and in the doctrines of salvation as they are taught in the Old and New Testament, though, not so pointedly in the Old as in the New."⁴

Mormons were reminded that scripture was given through imperfect men subject to passion.⁵ Orson Hyde and John Taylor expressed rational reservations about relying too closely on the Bible as a guide for their times, probably to distinguish themselves from those who claimed that the Bible contained all the words of God that people needed:

The words contained in this Bible are merely a history of what is gone by; it was never given to guide the servant of God in the course he should pursue, any more than the words and commandments of God, given to a generation under one set of circumstances, would serve for another generation under another set of circumstances The Bible is not a sufficient guide. It is only a history of the people who lived 1800 years ago.⁶

[Scriptures] are good for example, precedent, and investigation, and for developing certain laws and principles; but they do not, they cannot touch every case required to be adjudicated and set in order; we require a living tree. . . . No matter what was communicated to others, for them, it could not benefit us. . . . Adam's revelation did not instruct Noah to build his ark. . . . I do not wish to be understood as despising those books, for they are good and there are a great many useful revelations in them. . . . But I speak of them as I would of children's school books, which a child studies to learn to read; but when it has learned to read, if its memory is good, it can dispense with. But I would here remark, that we are most of us children as yet, and therefore, require to study our books.⁷

This attitude is not like most fundamentalist approaches to scripture. It claims that the Bible, both testaments, is not only *not* the only word of God; it is not even the best one. Modern revelation is clearly more important.

But the early Mormons clung tenaciously to a belief that scripture was truth. The stories it contained were history, not fiction; the prophecies of the future would come to pass as presented. They were opposed to the allegorizing tendency of their day to make scripture spiritual and to find hidden meanings in it. Parley P. Pratt catalogued at great length the factual occurrence of the dramatic events of the Old Testament. He pointed out what would have been the woeful results to the people in those accounts had they not accepted as literal fact the warnings of what would befall them.⁸ Mormons believed that what the Bible said happened in the past *did* happen and that what the Bible said would happen in the future *would* happen just the way the scripture foretold it. The millennialist strain in Mormon doctrine was built upon the belief in what was considered the literal fulfillment of the prophecies in Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah, and frequent use was made of these scriptural books.⁹

This claim to literalism was frequently coupled with a criticism of all Protestant sects that insisted upon their own interpretation of the Bible rather than believing

it as it was. Brigham Young said that while most Christian sects believed the Bible *as they interpreted it to be*, "I believe in it just as it is. I do not believe in putting any man's interpretation upon it, whatever, unless it should be directed by the Lord himself in some way."¹⁰ It was in accord with this last clause that most Biblical passages appeared in Mormon usage.

New revelation, "directed by the Lord himself," provided Mormons with material to embellish and fill in the "holes" in Biblical scripture. Most who preached or wrote for Mormon audiences were unable to use the Old Testament without expanding the Biblical accounts in light of newer words from the Lord, recorded in the *Pearl of Great Price, Doctrine and Covenants* and Joseph Smith's new translation of the Bible. For non-Mormons the same end could be reached by using Mormon logic and selected New Testament scriptures which commented on the Old Testament.¹¹ According to Mormon doctrine, the gospel was as unchanging as God himself. "For let us find a revelation of God, it matters not to whom it was given, or by whom it came, it will teach the same doctrines, inculcate the same principles, and testify of the same religion."¹² Though many others read Christianity backwards into the Old Testament, only Mormons claimed an authoritative source other than the Bible for doing so.

Genesis, as amended by Mormons, showed that Adam and his sons, Abraham, and Enoch were all believers in Christ as Savior. By implication, all the other prominent Old Testament figures were also awaiting a Christ about whom they had explicit knowledge, as did the pre-Christian Nephites in the *Book of Mormon*. Mormons reasoned that it would be strange that Enoch "could prophecy of the second coming of Christ and of his judging the world [Jude 14-15], and yet not know of his first coming, and of his dying for the world. And what would be stranger still would be that men could be saved by faith, and yet never hear nor know, of the way of salvation thro' the blood of the Lamb."¹³ "How could Abel offer a sacrifice and look forward with faith on the Son of God for the remission of sins and not understand the gospel?"¹⁴ The gospel taught to Adam instructed him:

Turn unto me, and harken unto my voice, and believe, and repent of all thy transgressions, and be baptized even by water, in the name of mine only begotten son, which is full of grace and truth, which is Jesus Christ, the only name which shall be given under heaven, whereby salvation shall come unto the children of men.¹⁵

The gospel, according to nineteenth-century Mormons, was obviously a continuation of the eternal gospel present on the earth whenever there were righteous men.

The Mormons' assertion that they held a literal, non-interpretive belief in the Bible is impossible to substantiate. They saw scripture in their own peculiar way, just as the other Protestant sects did, the only difference being that the Mormons claimed that their interpretation was not theirs at all, but was given them by God. They concluded that, "It cannot be a matter of dispute that these [Old Testament] men were made acquainted with the mission of Christ into the world, and if so, they were acquainted with the gospel or plan of eternal life."¹⁶ Their affinity for Adam, Abraham, Moses and all other Israelites was for them as Christians, not as

Hebrews as they are presented in the Bible. Because God's people were always the same, this ancient people could be adequately understood by comparing them with nineteenth-century Americans.¹⁷ Thus, in their conscious imitation of the Old Testament people and in their understanding of themselves as the new Israel, they were aligning themselves with a people of their own imagining rather than the people of the book as the Judaeo-Christian world knew them.

The way the early Mormons used ancient scripture and their stated attitudes toward it do not go far toward supporting the contention that Mormons were closer to the Old Testament traditions than their contemporary Christians. They quoted it infrequently (except those prophecies of the future which they saw as relating directly to them and their time), imposed Mormon doctrine upon it, and subordinated it to latter-day revelations. But does this evidence disprove the claim that Mormons were a people who were similar to the Israelites of the Old Testament? There is evidence to be weighed in the realm of applied theology rather than stated theology.

One of the most distinguishing features of the Old Testament people was their firm belief in "a God who acts." Their God was not merely a being, he was a doer. He was not to be understood by contemplation of his nature or his creation, but by what he had done in history for his people. He was the God who promised to redeem his people from the tyranny of Egypt (Ex. 6:6) and then did it (Ex. 15: 13). He was the God who raised up a deliverer for his people when they cried out to him (Jud. 3:9, 6:7-8). He was the God who respected the request of Joshua and caused the sun to stand still so that the battle could be won (Josh. 10). This God was the orchestrator of historical events and was to be known by experience, not by speculation.¹⁸ He responded to Israel's specific crises with specific direction and blessings.

Joseph Smith's dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple in 1836 expresses the same kind of trust in a God who manifested himself in historical events, saying, "If [any people] shall smite this people thou wilt smite them; thou wilt fight for thy people as thou didst in the day of battle, that they may be delivered from the hands of their enemies."¹⁹ In this same military vein, the *Doctrine and Covenants* records promises from the Lord that he "would fight their battles and their children's battles, and their children's children's until they had avenged themselves on all their enemies to the third and fourth generation" (98:37).

The *Millennial Star* kept a close watch on the hand of God in nature in its regular feature "Signs of the Times." It recorded that the Lord had said that if the persecution of the Saints in America continued, He would "COME OUT OF HIS HIDING-PLACE, AND VEX THAT NATION IN HIS FURY, AND IN HIS HOT DISPLEASURE. . . . The Lord has begun to vex that Nation and he will continue to do so, except they repent."²⁰ After a summary of the disasters in America, including the unexpected death of President William Henry Harrison, an editorial concluded:

The whole put together is certainly a striking manifestation of Providence, and seems to whisper that the Lord is beginning to vex that nation for their wickedness, and because of the wrongs of the saints which still go unredressed.²¹

A military event from Mormon history plays up another important aspect of the nature of the Mormon God. In *Doctrine and Covenants* 103 (1834), the Saints were told to go and reclaim their lands in Jackson County, Missouri, by force, with the promise that God was raising up a leader like Moses for them and that his angel would precede them. After the Saints had organized a motley army and had marched some distance toward their Zion, they were told through revelation to abandon their campaign because, as a result of the people's disobedience, it would be unsuccessful (*D&C* 105). The New Testament provided no precedent for a God who would have given the revelation of section 103 about using military means to regain lost property, because the New Testament God was unconcerned with things of this world. Most contemporary Christians would not have recognized or respected this God of section 105 who changed his word and promised things that did not come about.

Yet an Israelite would not have found this to be strange behavior for his God. He would remember that God gave Joshua a commandment to take the land of Canaan for the Israelites, and promised to be with him to secure it for them (*Josh.* 1:2-3). When the Israelites went up against the men of Ai they were miserably defeated. When Joshua asked why, he was told that Israel had sinned and disobeyed the commandments of the Lord. This is typical of the God of the Old Testament, whose promises are often conditional, depending upon the the righteousness of God's people for their fulfillment. "A prophetic forecast, far from being inevitably fulfilled with literal exactness, can be modified or withdrawn altogether."²² Things would go well for Israel when she obeyed, but when she did not, she could expect no blessings.²³

Mormons also had reason to expect things to go well when they were obedient and could expect nothing when they were not. *Doctrine and Covenants* 97:15ff. records that if they built up a temple and a holy city, that city would prosper and become great. But if they did not, the Lord would "visit her [Zion] according to all her works, with sore affliction, with pestilence, with plague, with sword, with vengeance, with devouring fire." The conditions of God were succinctly declared in, "I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say, but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise" (*D&C* 82:10). This God who acted in the lives of his people could only be expected to do so favorably when it was merited by their obedience.

The New Testament tended to support a philosophy of detachment from this mundane world, from the normal living of life, favoring a higher, spiritual existence. The Christian was exhorted to abide in the word of God and believe in Jesus as Savior. This did not make any action necessary on the part of the believer. He was to take no thought for what he should eat or drink or what he should wear, but was to seek the kingdom of God and those things would take care of themselves (*Matt.* 6:31-34).²⁴ The Beatitudes (*Matt.* 5:1-11) promised the earth to the meek, the kingdom of God to the persecuted, comfort for the mourner, the kingdom of Heaven to the poor in spirit, and satisfaction for those hungry for righteousness. The promises seem to speak of a future time far different from this one, after this world passes away.

In contrast, the God of the Old Testament made promises to Israel that there would be no poor (*Deut.* 15:4-5). He removed his persecuted people from Egypt and fed them real, not spiritual, bread for their hunger in the wilderness. He gave

them material blessings of lands, cities and vineyards. (Josh. 24:12). The Israelite, to demonstrate his belief in God, obeyed the ethical and ritualistic demands of the law. He worked his fields and tended his flocks, believing that his worldly prosperity was his reward from God for his righteousness, and that in payment, God wanted some of it returned in sacrifice. The prophetic exhortation to repent, believe, and clean up the mode of worship was always accompanied by the ethical admonition to treat one's neighbor with compassion. There was no room for passive belief in the religion of Israel; the Israelite had a promised land to conquer, a holy city and temple to build and maintain, and brothers and even strangers who needed care. Israel's God was "working to realize goodness in the life experience of individuals and of a people."²⁵ In the Old Testament, God and man both act. God was not passive, to be apprehended only by faith, but he moved in history and Israel knew him by what she saw him doing for her. Israel was not saved merely by faith, but by obedient action, by serving her God.

Mormons in the nineteenth century also had a responsibility to actively demonstrate their belief. There was little time to contemplate the nature of God or his attributes because there were always houses to build and crops to plant. Even the highest church leaders supported themselves. While the early Mormons' contemporaries also had these responsibilities to sustain life, to them they were affairs of this world and had nothing to do with religion and worship. These Mormons, whether living in a communitarian or cooperative society, or merely giving 10 percent of their increase or labor to the church, believed in the sacredness of their mundane concerns. The purpose of all their wealth and labor was the building up of the kingdom of God. God was directing his kingdom and naturally was willing "to improvise politically and economically, to enter the world of land speculation, to be entrepreneur, business executive, and political manipulator."²⁶ All life was spiritual, and all matters of life were acceptable interests for God and man.²⁷ Mormons had revelation telling them that "All things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given you a law which was temporal" (*D&C* 29:34). Not only did they *take thought* for the morrow, they repeatedly took bricks and mortar and land, and built the future in material terms.

The Mormons were like their spiritual ancestors, the Hebrews, in their concern for a holy land and a holy city.²⁸ God promised the Hebrews that they would possess the land of the Canaanites, a good land, flowing with milk and honey. Their possession would be obtained by the efforts of the people in battle, with the Lord's assistance, so long as the people were righteous. The Mormon promise echoed this, offering a land of milk and honey for an inheritance never to pass away (*D&C* 38:18–20). Some, such as John C. Bennett, accused the Mormons of having designs to conquer their promised land, as the Israelites had conquered theirs:

Their leaders had formed, and were preparing to execute a daring and colossal scheme of rebellion and usurpation throughout the Northwestern States of the Union . . . conquering the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa and Missouri, and erecting upon the ruin of their present governments a despotic military and religious empire, the head of which, as emperor and Pope, was to be Joseph Smith.²⁹

This effectively alarmed neighbors of the Mormons in the Midwest. Though this was gross distortion, Mormons increased antagonism toward themselves by their public preaching of their divine right to the land, including the land on which their neighbors lived:

The Lord has said, it is a good land, and . . . I will give it you: who then . . . would not join Joshua in saying, let us go up and possess the good land, for we are well able! And when you bid your native land farewell . . . and set your face towards the land that the Lord has blessed, may the same principles that bore up the mind of Moses in his afflictions yield comfort to you . . . And what would be the feelings in his heart when he with such emotion says . . . "We are journeying to the land that the Lord our God hath said he will give us!"³⁰

However, the Mormons were commanded to acquire their land by purchase, not by conquest (*D&C* 57:1–5). Still they were told that if they were prevented from occupying their lands, they would be guiltless if they took their inheritance by violent means (*D&C* 105:30).

The land was important to both Israelites and Mormons because it was God's land and his presence was in his holy cities. The prosperity of the city was proof of the victory of this God over any other God or any other people's notion of God. When the Lord returned to Jerusalem, it was commanded in Isaiah 52:9–10 to:

Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

In Zion, goodness would reign because the land was God's and he would care for it. Its prosperity was due to him (*Levit.* 25:23, *Josh.* 24:13). The Mormons were promised that their "Zion shall flourish, and the glory of the Lord shall be upon her" (*D&C* 64:41). They were further promised that if they built a temple there to God, and kept it undefiled, "My presence will be there, for I will come into it, and all the pure in heart that shall come into it shall see God" (*D&C* 97:16). Their city inspired reverence because God's glory would be upon it making it prosperous, peaceful and beautiful.

Regardless of how similarly the two groups may have felt about their promised inheritance, the experience of possession of the promised land was quite different for the early Mormons than it was for the Israelites. The Israelites were promised a land and gradually were able to become dominant in that land, eventually building a sacred city, Zion, for their religious and political center. This city thrived as the only Zion for almost half a millennium. It was the hope of the captive exiles to return to this city and rebuild it, which they did. This sacred place continues to be the geographical focal point of the Jewish religion even now, after almost three thousand years.

The Mormons' concentration was on cities, rather than on a whole land. They attempted to build a city of Zion first in Kirtland, then in Independence, then Far West, Nauvoo and finally Salt Lake City, each time with a revelation sanctioning the new location of Zion.³¹ The faithful saints, with astonishing perseverance,

began to build up Zion wherever they were driven, regardless of how many former Zions had been abandoned. They believed that when the time was right for the Lord and they had done their share of work, the Lord could intervene and make their inheritance secure.

Because both groups' Zions proved vulnerable, the people experienced similar crises of faith. When Jerusalem was besieged in 700 B.C., it was miraculously delivered (2 Kings 19). This was consistent with the promises that had been given that the kingdom and the dynasty of David would be established forever and the Israelites would be forever free from affliction (2 Samuel 7:10-17). In light of this promise and this precedent, the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. was devastating to the faith of the people. Some Israelites decided that their God was no longer powerful enough to preserve them and turned their allegiance to the Queen of Heaven, Goddess of the Babylonians, who proved her strength in the Babylonian's victory (Jer. 44:15-19). Others tried to find some reason for the devastation, in the behavior of this people of God (Ez. 1-10, and the final redactor of Deuteronomy, Samuel and Kings). There were still others who reinterpreted the theology of Israel and found a reason for the destruction in a larger plan of God, rather than a fault within themselves (Isaiah 40-66).

The Mormons, even as they were driven out of the Zion that was in Independence, were told that Zion would not be moved, that its inhabitants would return and build it up again. There was no other place which the Lord had appointed or would appoint to be Zion (*D&C* 101:16-22). Joseph Smith's revelation that Nauvoo was Zion³² seemed inconsistent with this prior revelation. Here was an example of an unchanging God changing. He had given assurances that were valueless; they did not prove true. Some Mormons must have considered changing their allegiance, thinking that Joseph and his God were not worth following either in general or in regard to this commandment to go to Nauvoo and build it up.³³ Others were probably satisfied with the answer in this same revelation that declared the fixed site of Zion, explaining that because of their iniquities they deserved to be driven from their promised land (*D&C* 101:1-9). Those who went to Nauvoo to build up Zion there must have accepted Joseph Smith's theological reinterpretation that the incidentals could change in order to accommodate the larger plan of God. He complained that some people were not accepting this:

A man would command his son to dig potatoes and saddle his horse, but before he had done either he would tell him to do something else. This is all considered right; but as soon as the Lord gives a commandment and revokes that decree and commands something else, then the Prophet is considered fallen.³⁴

Those who did not believe Joseph fallen were able to push hope of the return to Zion at Independence to a distant future and put their efforts into this interim measure of building up Zion at Nauvoo.

The Israelites believed what was told them about their Zion being a city where God could dwell because they had a special relationship with him; they were his people, the Chosen. Their salvation at the Red Sea was proof of their

status. The reasons for choosing Israel were varied, some complimentary, some not:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God: The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers.³⁵

The initial choosing was unmerited, for Israel was not chosen for her righteousness, but because other nations were more wicked than she was (Deut. 9:4). Staying in favor would take effort because, "The Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love *with those who love him and keep his commandments*, to a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9, emphasis added).

There were other responsibilities in being God's chosen. The people were required to be God's servants (Is. 41:8, Levit. 25:55). Isaiah 42:1, 6-7 explains what this service meant:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. . . . I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

It is notable that in the history of Israel, she is never seen acting in this capacity; the only interaction she seems to have with other nations occurs when she is coerced. However this chapter in Isaiah apparently refers to a future period, and the servant referred to is not necessarily all of Israel.

The Mormons, in bearing the responsibilities of being chosen, took seriously this admonition to be servants of God. They applied it first in terms of the Book of Mormon scripture which said, "When ye are in the service of your fellow-beings, ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17). They saw all their communal endeavors, all their charitable actions as fulfilling this responsibility. But they also saw themselves in the servant role spoken of by Isaiah, that they were a light to the nations. They were inheritors of the promise to Joseph in Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the Bible, that he would be "a light unto my people to deliver them in the days of their captivity and bondage; and to bring salvation unto them, when they are altogether bowed down under sin."³⁶

They were to serve God by serving the world. The kingdom of God that they were beginning to set up would eventually become the millennial kingdom of Christ and thereby benefit all people. Therefore, all their efforts to build their Zion were acts of service for God. They were to spread the gospel to all nations of the earth and invite their converts to come to Zion to engage in the service of God there. Proselytizing was their main service for God. They identified themselves as the hunters and fishers of Jeremiah 16:16, sent out to bring Israel back to God and to their land. Excerpts from the Mormon hymn, "Ye Elders of Israel," typify this sense of mission:

Ye Elders of Israel, come join now with me,
 And search out the righteous, wherever they be;
 In desert or mountain, on land, or the sea,
 And bring them from Babylon to Zion so free.

O Babylon, O Babylon, we bid thee farewell,
 We're going to the mountains of Ephraim to dwell.

We'll go to the poor, like our Captain of old,
 And visit the weary, the hungry and cold;
 We'll heal up their wounds, and we'll dry up their tears,
 And lead them to Zion to dwell there for years.³⁷

God expected much from those he singled out, declaring, "Of him unto whom much is given much is required" (*D&C* 82:3), and "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (*Amos* 3:2). Those who were inclined to see the hand of God in these peoples' histories saw that they were often punished for failing to meet the terms of God's covenant. The *Doctrine and Covenants* recorded (95:1):

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you whom I love, and whom I love I also chasten that their sins may be forgiven, for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things out of temptation, and I have loved you.

God could very well pour out his wrath upon his people, not as revenge, but as holy intolerance of that which was hostile to man's best interests.³⁸

For neither group was it merely a relationship of responsibility without reward. They were often reminded that they were God's people and that he loved and cared for them:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. . . . When you pass through the water I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior. . . . Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.³⁹

The only response to this love could be the awe and gratitude expressed in *Deuteronomy* 4:7: "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?"

The making of this covenant was different for Mormons and Hebrews. Abraham, the great ancestor of the Hebrews, was given a blessing in reward for his righteousness. The covenant that the Lord made with him extended to his descendants. Because of this covenant, the Lord saved those descendants in the crossing of the Red Sea. After this salvation he made them this offer: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all the peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."⁴⁰ Israel periodically renewed this covenant and cemented her unique relationship with her God. She was already a nation when God chose her, but a nation who, thereafter, formed her identity around the fact of her being chosen by this particular God.

There was no historical moment at which the Mormons were singled out and designated as God's people. At the time that Joseph Smith was chosen by God there were no Mormons. Each convert after him became one of the New Israel, the latter-day Chosen, because he *chose* God, as understood by this group, rather than was *chosen by* God, as his spiritual ancestors were. God ratified this choice because:

It was ever the purpose of the Lord in every age to classify his people by themselves—to separate them from the wicked of the earth, and so to organize and establish them, that he might be able to bestow upon them the blessings of the spirit.⁴¹

The Mormon baptismal covenant was considered adoption as a son or daughter of God.⁴²

A collection of these children of God constituted a family. As children of God they were brothers and sisters of one another, tied inseparably to those working to build up the kingdom of God. This sense of family tended to equalize the Mormons because it gave the most humble member the same title that was commonly used for even the president of the church, "Brother." It also did something to destroy the aura of importance due to age:

Our fathers and grandfathers in this world are our brothers—that is, our spirits are brothers. . . . They will not be ahead of us for being our fathers in this world because we will all be brothers and all have one father.⁴³

The New Testament teaches a sense of brotherhood, but only among Christian believers. There is no place for those who do not believe, regardless of blood ties to those believers, as shown in Matthew 12:46–50, where Jesus proposes that the believers, rather than his literal family, are his brothers, sisters, and mother.

This feeling of unity with all believers is just one aspect of the sense of family manifested in the Old Testament. The prophets referred to God as the Father of Israel, and therefore, the Israelites were brothers and sisters with moral and social responsibility for each other. Ideally, Israel was a family of families.⁴⁴ The social responsibility that the Israelites and Mormons took for others in their group was often more a matter of necessity than a matter of voluntary obedience. Frequently survival depended on pooling material and emotional resources. It was utilitarian to see those within the group as a family whose safety and prosperity depended upon the whole group.⁴⁵ But added to this was a deep sense of blood ties. They were the literal offspring of the patriarchs, and the epithet, "children of Israel," expressed blood relationship.⁴⁶

The importance of fathers and lineage in the Old Testament is apparent in the number of tediously extensive genealogies it contains. (The only genealogy of any length in the New Testament is that of Jesus.) Literal family ties were emotionally important since reputation was largely a matter of family and tribe, and a person's good name would live on through his children, granting him some measure of immortality. But literal ties were even more important religiously and legally. Brothers had responsibility to father children who would be raised as the seed of their deceased, childless brothers (Gen. 38:7–26; Deut. 25:5–10). Whatever household a person belonged to could be a matter of life or death, since

punishment for guilt could extend from the guilty person to his wife, children, servants and all his possessions (Joshua 7, Numbers 16).

The religious responsibility to kin was different for Mormons than for Israelites, though it was no less important. In Israel, the responsibility was "this worldly," for doing things in this mortal state. Mormons focused on the eternities and acted in order to save themselves and their dead in the world to come. Not only were Mormons unable to leave the dead to bury the dead (Matt. 8:22), they baptized their dead in order to take them with them to salvation. There were also "sealing" ordinances which bound the living to each other and to their children yet unborn.⁴⁷ Joseph Smith emphasized the importance of their actively showing concern for their extended families:

The greatest responsibility in this world that God has laid upon us is to seek after our dead. . . . I say to you, Paul, you cannot be perfect without us. It is necessary that those who are going before us and those who come after us should have salvation in common with us. . . . Hence, God said, "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."⁴⁸

This sense of family drew together those within the church just as it drew together the Israelites. Both groups kept histories of God's dealings with them in order to keep alive in the memory the knowledge that they were the family with whom God was concerned. They saw each other as brothers and all those outside their group as the enemy. The histories of both peoples justify this attitude because these people were often in a state of war with their neighbors, declared or undeclared, fought with military hardware or merely emotional and verbal harassment. Their common suffering made them dependent upon one another and suspicious of all outsiders. A natural result of having a common object of hate was that those within their exclusive circle became objects of love.⁴⁹

These people suffered and prospered as a group *because of* their peculiar identity. They were to separate themselves from their neighbors, having no intercourse with them beyond what was unavoidable, in order to have their minds and their worship uncontaminated by the beliefs or practices of the people around them. The continual message of the Old Testament prophets was that the people were adopting the idolatrous practices of those among whom they lived, "whoring after other gods"; they needed to remove themselves from the wicked influence of the Canaanite Ba'al worshippers. They were forbidden to marry foreigners, for wives with different gods had a habit of drawing away their husbands' loyalties from the one true God.⁵⁰ Israel needed to be faithful to her God, and the chances of her compromising were always far greater the more she had contact with non-Israelites.

Some of these reasons motivated the Mormons to remain separate, and to these they added some peculiar to their own situation and beliefs. They too desired to keep their environment pure to aid the Saint in righteous living, an endeavor made easier when surrounded by others with the same desire. The Mormons, like the Israelites, were attempting to be a nation not subject to the political and religious control of any other people.⁵¹ They needed to band together

and, at times, to remove themselves from geographical proximity to others for their own physical protection.⁵² Because the sealing ordinance of marriage was a prerequisite to salvation in the highest heaven and these ordinances were only performed for members of the church in good standing, marriage to someone outside of the Church jeopardized the salvation of the Saint just as it jeopardized the daily faith of the Israelite. The believer in God, concerned with his relationship to him, would not want to take any action that would compromise that relationship. Withdrawal was a wise measure if the groups and their individual members hoped to remain faithful.

There are many similarities between the Mormons of the nineteenth century and the Israelites of the Old Testament. This is true in spite of the distortion that resulted from Mormons reading their own religion back into and overlaying their own theology on top of the Old Testament. They saw the Old Testament as a Christian document written by people very much like themselves. Scholarship does not support their view of Israelites as Christians, yet the two groups were very much alike. They shared a view that God acted in history, concerning himself with the temporal prosperity and preservation of a special people. This people had a mission of service for their God which had worldwide implications. Each group saw itself as the Chosen People, a family with God at its head. He would assist them in doing his work if they obeyed the ritual and ethical demands of his law. Given the completely different historical, social and geographical situation of the nineteenth-century Mormons and the Israelites, it is surprising that these peoples share so many common concerns. Whether or not God chose the early Mormons to be his new Israel must be taken on faith. But in their actions and beliefs, the early Mormons demonstrated a strong resemblance to those Israelites whose spiritual descendants they were.

NOTES

¹ Gordon Irving, "Mormonism and the Bible, 1832-1838," Senior Honors Project, University of Utah, 1972, pp. 2, 5, 18, 58, 61, 63.

² Ellis Rasmussen, "Textual Parallels to the Doctrine and Covenants and Book of Commandments as Found in the Bible," Master's Thesis, BYU, 1951, pp. 6, 3, 262, 342, 344.

³ *Millennial Star*, 1 (May 1840), 30.

⁴ Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses* (hereafter *JD*) 1 (July 1853), 237.

⁵ Oliver Cowdery in *Times and Seasons*, 2, p. 212.

⁶ Orson Hyde in *JD*, 2 (Oct. 1854), 75.

⁷ John Taylor in *Millennial Star* 9, pp. 323-24.

⁸ Parley P. Pratt, *A Voice of Warning* (Manchester, England, 1846), reprint.

⁹ See *Millennial Star*, Vol. 1, pp. 3, 5, 6, 29; Vol. 2, pp. 103, 126, 141, 179. See also the table in Irving, "Mormonism," showing the scriptures frequently used in Mormon writings.

¹⁰ Brigham Young in *JD* 1 (July 1853), 237. See also Brigham Young in *JD*, Vol. 11, p. 340; Wilford Woodruff in *JD*, Vol. 18, p. 111; *Elders Journal* (July 1838), p. 42.

¹¹ The New Testament scriptures used were Eph. 1:4, Gal. 3, Jude 14-15, Matt. 23:34-35, and Romans 4:11-13.

¹² *LDS Messenger and Advocate* 1 (Jan. 1835), 52. See also 1 (June 1835), 131; Wilford Woodruff in *JD* 16 (1873), 263-64; Irving, "Mormonism," pp. 2-10, 19, 63.

into the House of Israel.

⁴⁷ See Irving, "Adoption," for a fuller explanation of the special ordinances that sealed people together in family relationships.

⁴⁸ Joseph Smith, "King Follett Discourse," in Smith, *History* 6 (April 1844), p. 313.

⁴⁹ Erickson, *Group Life*, p. 83.

⁵⁰ Gen. 24:3-4; Ex. 34:12-17; 1 Kings 11:1-8; Ezra 10:10-11; Deut,7:2-4.

⁵¹ See Klaus J. Hansen, *The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of 50 in Mormon History: Quest for Empire* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1974).

⁵² *Millennial Star* 5 (June 1844), p. 44.

